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**The affective resonance of personal narratives:
Creating a deeper experience of identity, empathy
and historical understanding**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Museum Studies

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Abstract

As the world plunges into the depths of a modern state of ‘anti-tradition’ (Trueman, 1998), there is a pervasive fear of a future void of empathy (Manney, 2008). The latter, believed to be partially propagated by a decline in exposure to diverse narratives, can be ameliorated through the identification and dissemination of genres which generate affect and humility (Berlant, 2008).

The key question this thesis aims to address is; how do personal narratives create affective resonance which encourages the propagation of advantageous outcomes. I argue that personal narratives have the capacity to generate strong affective resonance within their recipients and tellers. Affective resonance, born from universality which create ‘intimate publics spheres’ (Berlant, 2008), has a potent ability for self-reflection and identity growth (Abrams, 2010, Sklar, 2009), empathic responses and action (Gallese & Wojciehowski, 2011; Fiske, 2008), and for developing rich multi-dimensional landscapes of historical understanding (Kosyaeva, Rowe and Wertsch, 2002).

The research is based, firstly, on a broad transdisciplinary theoretical framework which comprises literature from diverse disciplines: oral history (Thompson, 2009), literary theory (Weinstein, 2007), philosophy (Benjamin, 1936; de Certeau, 1984) and neuroscience (Gallese & Wojciehowski, 2011). Secondly, *Heritage New Zealand’s* storytelling website *High Street Stories* provides the case study through which to investigate participant responses of affect, self-reflection and historical understanding. Through synthesis and analysis of the framework, in conjunction with the case study, a rich expository illustration of personal narratives and their cache of positive outcomes is presented.

This dissertation is located in Museum Studies opening a space for the consideration of this multi-disciplinary literature and its connection to affect theory. Furthermore, as a crucial tool for museological practice, personal narratives, through their ‘germinative powers’ (Benjamin, 1936), have the propensity to impart a holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of history, rendering ordinary people as agents and subjects.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vii
List of Illustrations	xiii
Definitions	xv
Preamble: Vignette One	xvii
Chapter One - Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Research objectives	1
Background to the study	2
Scope of the study	2
Key themes of the study and theoretical framework	4
<i>History and the place of personal narrative</i>	5
<i>Personal narrative, self and identity</i>	6
<i>Narrative empathy</i>	6
<i>Inclusivity and prosocial behaviour</i>	7
Preview of chapters	8
Methodology	10
The research aims and objectives	10
Case Study (High Street Stories)	11
Research ethics	12
Literature Review	14
Current Literature - Gaps and Convergences	14
Key themes emerging from the literature	15
<i>History and the place of personal narrative</i>	15

<i>Personal narrative, self and identity</i>	16
<i>Narrative empathy</i>	16
Summary	18
PART ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	21
Chapter Two - History and the place of personal narrative	23
Introduction	23
A brief history of personal narratives	24
The power structures of historical narratives	27
Political agendas and personal narratives	29
‘Anti-tradition’, marginality and oral history	30
The creation of an ‘intimate public sphere’	32
The historical value of the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of personal narratives	34
Personal narratives and official histories within cultural institutions	36
Summary	37
Chapter Three - Personal narrative, self and identity	39
Introduction	39
The necessity of a chronological life narrative	40
Anti-tradition and the narrated self	42
Literary fiction, autobiography and affect	43
Listening to the stories of others	45
Protagonist status and subjectivity	47
Learning from the stories, mistakes and the <i>counterfactual thinking</i> of others	47
Summary	49

Chapter Four - Narrative Empathy	51
Introduction	51
Information versus narrative	52
The role of personal characteristics in empathic responses to literary fiction	53
The role of literary fiction in the development of real world understanding	55
The affective qualities of first person dialogue	57
Personal narrative as generator of humility and pro-social behaviour	57
‘Neurohumanism’ - The science of narrative empathy	61
Mirror Neurons - ‘The Gandhi Neurons’	62
‘Embodied Simulation’ - the embodiment of narrative affect	62
‘Feeling of Body’ phenomena	63
‘Liberated Embodied Simulation’	64
Summary	64
PART TWO: HIGH STREET STORIES CASE STUDY	69
Chapter Five - Case Study - <i>High Street Stories</i>	71
Introduction	71
Project Context - The Canterbury Earthquakes and the High Street Precinct	71
<i>My role in the production of High Street Stories</i>	73
<i>The Project: High Street Stories (www.highstreetstories.co.nz)</i>	74
<i>The importance of High Street Stories as a digital heritage tool</i>	76
<i>Historical understanding - the vernacular vs. the ‘official</i>	77
<i>Loss - the impetus for storytelling</i>	78
<i>Collective Identity and universality</i>	81
The current research - Research design and Methodology	82
<i>Participant Profiles (High Street Stories)</i>	82

<i>Potential bias</i>	84
<i>The interview questionnaire</i>	85
<i>Limitations</i>	85
Summary	86
Chapter Six - Discussion and Analysis	87
Introduction	87
The Theoretical Framework	88
<i>'Anti-tradition' and making humans the agents and subjects of history</i>	88
<i>Narrative empathy</i>	90
<i>Inclusivity and pro-social behaviour</i>	92
Case Study - <i>High Street Stories</i>	92
The Theoretical Framework and the Case Study – convergences and divergences	93
<i>'Anti-Tradition', loss and narrative</i>	94
<i>Vernacular and historical narratives</i>	96
<i>The self and the collective</i>	100
<i>Counterfactual narrative</i>	104
<i>Narrative appropriation</i>	106
<i>The 'intimate public sphere' and 'fictive kinship'</i>	108
<i>Narrative empathy - 'standing in the shoes of others'</i>	109
<i>Personal characteristics and narrative empathy</i>	111
Further study	113
Summary	114
Chapter Seven – Conclusion	117
Afterword: Vignette Two	123

Reference List	125
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Appendices	135
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List of Illustrations

- Fig 1.** 141-149 Manchester Street, Christchurch, 2011.
Photo: Becker Fraser Photos 72
- Fig 2.** High Street precinct laneways post demolition, Christchurch 2013.
Photo: Becker Fraser Photos 73
- Fig 3.** The author using the *High Street Stories* augmented reality app in lower High Street, Christchurch, 2013. Credit: Heritage New Zealand.
Photo: Guy Frederick 75
- Fig 4.** The *High Street Stories* augmented reality app. Showing High Street from Tuam Street, Christchurch, 2013. Photo: Heritage New Zealand.
Photo: Guy Frederick 76
- Fig 5.** Text from *High Street Stories*, *We did a lot of odd Repairs*.
Tony Kennett. Interview. <http://www.highstreetstories.co.nz/stories/76-we-did-do-a-lot-of-odd-repairs-%E2%80%A6> 78
- Fig 6.** Screengrab from *High Street Stories* showing the diversity and use of High Street images - from illustrations to old photographs of business owners (left hand side image).
Photo: Zoe Roland. <http://www.highstreetstories.co.nz/> 79
- Fig 7.** Nick Paris at Alice in Videoland. Image from *High Street Stories*.
Photo: Zoe Roland. <http://www.highstreetstories.co.nz/> 80

Definitions

Terms appearing throughout the thesis which benefit from definition are as follows:

Affective resonance

The state of affective resonance refers to the processes of social interactions, ‘whose progression is dynamically shaped in an entanglement of moving, and being-moved, affecting and being-affected’ (Mühlhoff, 2014, p. 1001).

Empathy

Manney (2008, citing Webster’s 1979 Dictionary) writes that empathy is ‘the projection of one’s own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him better’ (para 4).

Narrative

According to oral history theorist Lynn Abrams (2010), narrative is an ‘ordered account created out of disordered material’, providing the means to communication, experience, knowledge and emotion (p. 176).

Oral history

Paul Thompson (2009) writes that oral history is a method which can be used by many scholars, however, he says it is difficult ‘to mark any clear boundary around the work of a movement which brings together so many specialists’ (p. 82). Within this thesis I have used the term ‘oral history’ when paraphrasing where it has been used by the original author or in relation to the wider practice of recording or disseminating unedited life story interviews.

Official history

Appropriated from the article, *Linking Little Narratives to Big Ones: Narrative and Public Memory in History Museums*. By Kosyaeva, T. Y., Rowe, S.M. and Wertsch, J.V. (2002), the terms ‘official’ and ‘vernacular’ are used to demarcate historical texts and information formulated and produced by sanctioned published Historians, to

vernacular narratives which are locally focused and contain social and historical first person accounts.

Personal narratives

The term ‘personal narratives’, as used within this thesis, pertains to all first person narratives. I also use the term ‘vernacular narrative’ interchangeably. These ‘aestheticised’ recorded personal narratives, curated or edited, for the purpose of cultural interpretation are differentiated from the raw unedited interviews or text, which I will term ‘oral histories’.

Self

For the purpose of this thesis I will define ‘self’ through oral history theorist Lynn Abram’s (2009) definition. She writes that the self is usually seen as ‘mediated between cultural discourses and material experience’, and ‘constructed by culture’ providing a ‘unique identity, distinguishable from others’ (p. 177).

Socio-historical narrative

A narrative, either vernacular or official in nature, which deals with or extrapolates on the social realities of lived history.

Preamble

Vignette One

*Affect and learning ‘tactics for future use’ through family parables
(de Certeau, 1984)*

As my children have no grandparents, or other active relatives providing a sense of generational stability, the personal and historical narratives my husband and I share with them act in lieu of those which significant others may have imparted. They provide a sense of past, present and future. I find compelling the notion that through family storytelling, an individual can be imbued with ‘a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will sometimes survive their own death’ (Thompson, 2009, p. 2). I find it interesting in that, through telling family stories we not only develop, bolster and protect our identity through the integration of family stories, but we also have the opportunity to use imparted knowledge from these stories of our ancestors as ‘tactics for future use’, to enhance our lives, the generations to come and future decision-making (de Certeau, 1984).

My grandparents fought in the Hungarian Resistance. They hid their Jewish friends in their attic, whilst plotting to undermine the work of the Nazis. In 1946, after refusing to live under a Communist dictatorship they escaped across the Austrian border under supplies being transported by a Jewish friend. They were shot at but given refuge by the Austrian borderguards. After a number of years in camps around Central Europe they finally settled in Australia under a refugee programme.

This story, worlds away from my own childrens’ comfortable middle-class lives, provides them with understanding, empathy and tools for future use. Firstly, they understand the immense bravery of their great-grandparents; my grandmother pregnant with two small children, their desperation to live free from the oppression of a totalitarian regime, desperation so great that to be killed while escaping was no worse than to be sent back to live under an ‘unacceptable’ rule of Communism (J. S. Roland personal communication, December, 1989). Secondly, the story broadens their experience of the world and its people - they now know when they hear about ‘those refugees’, those nameless, faceless dehumanised refugees, when people refer to the

millions of Syrians flooding Europe, that they are in fact ‘just like us’ and their predicament is not self-inflicted nor is it to be ignored. Thirdly, and possibly most importantly, this story illustrates to my children the power that individuals have to create change. These stories are not only about passing on family history, they are a tool to encourage collective strength through affect, and to instil in the next generation the pride and self-determination of their ancestors. This ‘tactics for future use’ coupled with their disdain of prejudice creates a transformative potential.

During the same war, on the other side of the European continent, my father-in-law also experienced the Second World War. He once told me the story of his mother and her twin sister running with him to the air raid shelters in London during the Blitz. What he recalls most vividly whilst running through the streets with his mother and aunt, was not their distress and alarm or the bombs or the fear, but the fact that they concocted games to lessen his fear. Listening to this story it is difficult not to feel emotional, not solely because it is emotionally wrenching for my father-in-law Robert to recount but because of the bravery and selflessness of putting one’s own fears aside to protect another human being. The depth of his appreciation to them is evident in his emotion when he tells the story, consequently creating a strong affective resonance in those listening to the story.

The universality of this story is manyfold: compassionate trickery, motherhood, sisterhood, fear, the veil of childhood innocence, survival and of the pleasures and protection of childhood naivety. This story resonated with me the first time I heard it. However, later it became the story I drew upon when, during the many violent earthquakes in Christchurch, I had to put my own fears aside to preserve a sense of calm and normality for my two young children; I played games with them and soothed them during the earthquakes and as we held onto the legs of the table I laughed and told them that the earth must be cross but once it has shaken off its anger it will feel better. Robert’s story had given me an historical picture of London during the Second World War, and he had passed on to future generations a profound and affecting moment from his childhood, yet most importantly, his story instills in listeners a value, a practical tool of self-preservation and protection for the future to add to one’s ‘repertory of tactics for future use’ (de Certeau, 1984). In relation to this, Shuman (2005) writes that by choosing not to subvert ‘oppressive situations’, ‘appropriation

can use one person's tragedy to serve as another person's inspiration and preserve' (p. 5).

Together these stories work to provide strength in times of difficulty. Although the two stories come from opposing sides of the European continent and their tellers spoke different languages, were of different religious denominations and from very different socio-economic backgrounds, their stories unite them in our minds as our brave and determined ancestors. They are both stories which present the universal experiences of war, childhood, protection, fear and parenthood and are stories which I am proud to tell my children, and which they will carry with them in times of difficulty, and when confronted with difference and prejudice. They are personal narratives which provide examples of universality, historical understanding, identity and deep affective resonance, whereby the characters, our family, have become luminous heroes, providing a deeper meaning to our existence; connecting past, present and future.

