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## **OHAA Communities of Memory Conference**

### **Proposal for 20 Minute Standard Paper Presentation**

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**Title:** Stories of Cross-Dressing and the Body: Family Memories in Fiction

**Sub-themes:** Memory work in creative and fictional writing

#### **Abstract:**

Ruth Finnegan (2006, 179) describes how family myths have the power to provoke images that recur throughout generations. This paper will document my own encounter with such persistent images in the stories of a mother and daughter. Both mother and daughter told stories about encountering cross-dressing men in the streets of Brisbane, and both showed similar anxiety over their own body size. As a creative writer working with oral histories, I found these stories of the disguised body compelling. By drawing on the storytelling strategies and preoccupations present in the interview, I used imagination and fictional techniques to investigate the possibility of symbolic resonance of memories across generations.

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison (1987) uses the notion of 'rememory' to describe how characters actively make and suppress meanings in their recollections. Like Morrison, my writing speaks to notions around the way stories are remembered and told.

#### **Introduction**

This paper will provide a specific instance of my practice-led research to demonstrate how the process of fictionalising oral histories can be one means of exploring memory in oral histories. The paper represents the result of my working through two questions:

Can notions about memory in oral history be explored in fiction? If so, how?

Can I use these notions to understand the stories I had gathered as part of my own creative practice of fictionalising oral histories?

### **Researcher background**

My current practice-led PhD project involves an investigation of how oral histories can inform works of fiction. It consists of two outcomes: a novel set in Brisbane and based on oral histories and an exegesis documenting the problems and potentials of fictionalising oral histories. In order to write the novel, I conducted several oral history interviews with residents in Brisbane.

After interviewing Denise (name changed) about growing up in the Brisbane suburb of Breakfast Creek, I was struck by a story she recounted about a cross-dresser who lived on one of the boats at the mouth of the river. After our interview, Denise sent me a self-published book her mother, Anne (name changed), had written, called *Mt Coot-tha memories*. In this book, Anne also told stories of cross-dressers. The symbolic resonance of these stories across generations interested me, but I was unsure what to make of them, or how they could inform my fictive work.

### **Paper as initial discussion**

In the past, I had shied away from memory work in my creative practice and theoretical discussions, choosing to focus on storytelling strategies in oral history interviews as a means of understanding my practice. As a creative writer, I felt that I was not qualified to discuss the neuropsychological underpinnings of the process of remembering. The theme of this conference encouraged me to reconsider my original avoidance of the theme. I remembered the stories, which had so fascinated me, and wondered if there was some clue as to their significance in memory theory. What I present is some initial discussion as a way of testing the fruitfulness of this topic.

As I became more immersed in the literature, I came to realise that my two questions were far bigger than I initially imagined when I submitted my abstract to the conference almost a year ago, and that the task I had set myself would not fit snugly into a 20 minute paper presentation. As a result, what I offer is a brief overview of what will ultimately be a far more detailed response to the questions. I scope the discussion by focusing on understanding one or two key texts in each section.

In the first section, I seek to answer the question about if, and how, memory in oral history can be explored in fiction. In order to do this, I briefly outline some of the theory that connects the constructions in memory with explorations of memory in fiction. I use Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, as an example of a work of fiction that 'dramatises the complex relationship between history and memory' (Mobley 2005, 68).

In the second section, I argue that fiction can offer one means of exploring memory theory. I turn to my own creative practice in an attempt to understand the stories of cross-dressing I encountered, and provide specific examples of how I grappled with memory theory in my own fictive writing.

### **Question one: Can fiction speak to memory work in oral history? If so, how?**

#### **Memories as narratives**

The linking of fiction, and ideas around memory in oral history, may not be such an unusual one. Nelson (2003, 128) states that the rise in both the novel and biography 'in the eighteenth century reflected the emergence of individualistic world view...Both are based on individual life stories and thus depend on real or fictional versions of autobiographical memory.'

Memory shares a similarity with fictive works, namely their narrative forms.

Fiction, like memory, uses narrative as a means to organise knowledge. Katherine Nelson (2003, 125) argues that *narrative* is the medium of shared memories, collective memories and fictional creations. Paul Rosenblatt (2003, 225) goes so far as to state that 'we hear our interview respondents relating narratives about their lives that seem to be like what we read in novels.' It is the narrative quality of novels and memories that creates the sense that one is like the other.

However, this relationship between narrative, memory and fiction is far from simple; in life stories, these narratives link memory with an individual's notion of their identity. Robyn Fivish and Catherine Haden (2006, viii) argue narratives are the critical link between memory and self. In addition, the 'ways in which any given individual constructs a life narrative are influenced by larger cultural frameworks available for understanding what a self is' (ibid). As a result, how we interpret and tell our memories may be dependent on our culture, and, as culture is in a constant state of flux, our memories, and understanding of self, may change throughout our lives.

James Olney (1998, 20) uses the metaphor of 'weaving' for the operation of memory. Olney states that:

The weaver's shuttle and loom constantly produce new and different patterns and designs and forms and in operation memory is like weaving...if it is processual then it will bring forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self.

Researchers have turned to fiction as a means of understanding this complex process of remembering.

### **Memory as expressed in literature**

Donald Polkinghorn (1988, 71) argues that 'although literary theorists approach narrative as literary expression, their insights into narrative form can be applied to human sciences in their investigation of human experience and understanding.' A key text linking psychological understandings of memory to representations in fiction is Daniel Albright's book chapter, 'Literary and Psychological Models of the Self' (1994).

Here Albright (1994, 19) speculates on whether literary constructions of selfhood might be of use to psychologists in order to understand the remembered self. The notion of the 'remembered self' is explained by Ulric Neisser (1994, 2) who states that the remembered self is the self constructed on the occasion of recollection. In oral history interviews, it is the self the interviewee constructs when telling their life story.

Albright (1994, 19) begins his discussion by declaring that 'literature is a wilderness and psychology is a garden.' In clarifying this statement, he argues that psychologists are interested in categorisation, while the literary critic is 'inclined to regard neatly cut divisions as mythologies' (ibid). Albright (1994, 21) observes that literature is suspicious of the remembered self. He (ibid) uses a number of examples from fiction and poetry to demonstrate how the remembered self is made problematic. Albright (1994) argues that literature has explored the way in which the brain is selective when creating memories, and the way memory changes when it is recalled over and over again.

Albright demonstrates the way in which, when remembering, the brain is selective. He uses T.S. Eliot's 1933 quote to understand this quality of memory:

'Memory is but a few meagre arbitrarily chosen set of snapshots...the poor faded souvenirs of passionate moments.'

This metaphor reflects current understandings about how interviewees create and draw on memories. After all, the brain ‘cannot record or retain all of our experiences; the overload would make life unmanageable’ (Thomson 2010, 297). Most short term memories are lost within moments or days after the event (ibid). Only some are retained and consolidated into long term memories.

Albright (1994, 36) also argues that ‘past events do not lie brightly, overtly before our gaze, but are instead swaddled in a thick tissue of prior recalls and prior recallers, each adding colours and shadows to the original.’

Albright’s description is reflected eloquently in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*.

### **Remembering in *Beloved***

In *Beloved*, Morrison offers a personal and subjective exploration of the impact of slavery. Marilyn Saunders Mobley (2006, 69) argues that Morrison ‘uses memory to represent the interior life’ in order to ‘explore and represent dimensions of slave life that classic slave narratives omitted.’

The plot of *Beloved* centres on acts of remembering and forgetting. Sethe is forced to remember her time enslaved at the plantation, Sweet Home, when Paul D, who worked with her on the plantation, arrives unexpectedly on her doorstep. Sethe’s home is haunted by her child, Beloved. Sethe has repressed the memory that, when trying to escape from Sweet Home, she killed Beloved rather than have her face a life of slavery.

Mobley (2006, 70) argues that *Beloved* ‘foregrounds the dialogic characteristics of memory along with the imaginative capacity to construct and re-construct the significance of the past.’ This sense of reconstruction is reminiscent of Alistair Thomson’s discussion, in *Moving Stories* (2010), of the transformative powers of new ideologies, such as feminism, in one of the women’s re-interpretation of her life in oral history interviews:

‘Phyl explains it was not until 2005 when she read *Ten Pound Poms* and noted its gender analysis of migrant families’ relationships that she began to rethink her family departure from Australia [...] Phyl now explains [her husband’s] homesickness as jealousy of her professional success [...]

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the notions of ‘disremember’ and ‘re-remember’ to explore the process of making sense of past experiences. At the beginning of the novel, Sethe has chosen

to 'disremember' the trauma of killing her own child. When *Beloved* manifests as a real person, directly after the arrival of Paul D, Sethe must 're-remember.' But the process of re-remembering is not as simple as unearthing repressed memories. It is deeply painful, and requires a process of dismantling old barriers, opening up the possibilities of being overwhelmed to the point of breakdown.

What *Beloved* demonstrates is that it is fiction's capacity to 'represent the interior life,' which operates as a means of exploring the process of memory construction.

### **Fiction as a means of representing memory**

Dorrit Cohn (1999, 117) argues that the difference between fiction and biography is that 'a character can be known to the narrator in fiction in a manner no real person can be known to a real speaker.' Literature 'can provide direct access to other people's mind and hearts' (Gregory 1998, 29).

Marshall Gregory (1998, 28) argues that it is this quality in literature that has the capacity to educate. Gregory (*ibid*) states:

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle provides a classic description of a persistent problem in the philosophy of mind... "People can see, hear and jolt one another's bodies, but ... direct access to the workings of a mind is the privilege of that mind itself"; in default of such privileged access, the workings of one mind are inevitably occult to everyone else (13-15).

Gregory (*ibid*) argues that 'literary experience, unlike life, does provide direct access to others' minds, and in so doing yields essential data, which we use in order to sharpen the accuracy and to increase the depth of our inferential knowledge about the interior lives of real-life persons.'

Applying Gregory's assertion to the process of remembering, and given the example of how Morrison has used fiction to explore memory in a way that sits comfortably within other understandings of memory in oral history, I would argue that fiction's access to the interior can offer a representation of the complex process of remembering. Fiction can function as another way, alongside traditional methods, of exploring memory work in oral history.

Fiction becomes a means to explore these ideas symbolically, as I did in my own creative practice.

**Question two: Can I use these notions to understand the stories I had gathered as part of my own creative practice?**

### **Stories of cross-dressing**

As part of my PhD thesis, I interviewed a number of Brisbane residents. Denise was a former resident of the Brisbane suburb of Breakfast Creek. She recalls a memory from sometime during the 1950s:

There was a man at Breakfast Creek, he lived in a houseboat. He was a widower and her death upset him so much that he went out dressed in his wife's clothes. He stood head and shoulders over other men—heads turned when he went by in a frock and a hat and a handbag. Today he'd be mistaken for a cross-dresser or a drag queen or whatever the term is.

Denise later gave me a copy of a self-published book her mother had written, called 'Mt Coot-tha Memories.' Anne was writing about growing up in Brisbane during the 1930s. In the book, the image of the cross-dresser appeared twice more.

On page 1, Anne writes:

One day a little wizened figure appeared in a shirt too big for him—swag, cork hat, billy etc and asked the ranger's wife if she would oblige him with a billy of hot water etc. In those days the woodstove seemed to smoke all day—like an ever-ready torch. It turned out fairy cakes and scones galore without too much ado. As he looked so thin and worn they cut a large lunch with extras. Looking aghast at the starved, skinny apparition before them they knocked back offers of chopping wood etc. After some time the swaggy removed his hat and false beard to reveal that she was a very little and dear friend of the Ranger's wife.

On page 14:

Brisbane city had many comical fellows in those days...In the lunch hour two huge women with big hands and feet would stand outside the emporium in Queen Street,



using the display windows for mirrors, take out a stick of white chalk each and do up their faces. They had big noses and when these were well and truly chalked would have made history in the circuses. I honestly think they were men—but they did draw quite a crowd.

The image of the cross-dresser seemed to hold the fascination of both the women. It was a memory that had been consolidated for both of them, and would appear in their interviews and writing. How could I make sense of this memory and use it in my fiction?

### **The ethics of fictional representations**

These women's stories were problematic for a number of reasons. They carry with them a number of embedded assumptions that I, as an ethical writer, must understand before I can produce a fictional account. My deepest concerns were around how the women have chosen to interpret and tell the cross-dressers' story.

The story of the swagman represents a genre of story that uses cross-dressing as a comic device, and which ultimately ends in the 'true sex' of the person being identified at the end of the story (Bauer 2006, xxiii). While I understand Anne is drawing on a long tradition of such stories, it is not acceptable for me as a contemporary writer to merely mimic it in my fiction given current understandings of gender.

Indeed, the problem with all three stories is that they may sit uncomfortably with cross-dressers' own definition of themselves. Individuals may choose to cross-dress for any number of reasons, and may identify as either male or female. M.H. Wyndzen (1998), in her personal essay, 'What it means to be transexual', states that 'it doesn't matter if I'm "really" a woman. Ultimately that's just a word game. What matters is that...those who didn't know me feel I belong with other women (even if I don't always pass).' Inherent in this definition is the individual's right to decide on their own gender. Others' interpretations that don't respect this decision, regardless of whether they know or not, can be harmful.

In all three stories, the women interpret the cross-dressing individuals as either male or female, despite their attire. As it is impossible for me to find and ask the subjects of these stories, their attitudes towards their own gender remain unknown. It is possible in my fiction to imagine one of these character's attitudes. However, as a cisgender person (Lisa Harney (2011) defines cisgender as a person who is not a transgender person), I didn't feel

comfortable adopting this role imaginatively. In addition, this conflicted with my original aim to capture the interviewees' way of speaking.

Was there another way I could make sense of these stories?

Heike Bauer (2006, xiv) states that 'female cross-dressing was closely linked to emergent feminist discourses which challenged the certainty of binary male and female sex and gender order.' I felt that this could be one reason both women were fascinated by these stories: because they represented a challenge to this traditional binary. Julia Serano (2007, 12) argues that people may find cross-dressing challenging because it reflects an 'insecurity about having to live up to gender ideals.' As a writer of fiction, I could speculate on this possibility.

### **How these understandings of memory and cross-dressing combine in the fiction**

In my fiction, I decided I needed to emphasise that my fictional character, based on the interviewee, was making an interpretation that was open to debate. I chose to write in the first person voice of the interviewee to demonstrate the interpretative quality of the story.

Denise, in stating that the person on the boat would be 'mistaken for a cross-dresser or whatever they call it,' while demonstrating an ignorance about the issue, which is understandable given the historical context, also shows her resistance to categorise into accepted understandings.

I rely heavily on symbolism and image to represent these stories in my creative work. I created a character, Jill, who is trying to find her way in the world and make sense of her place in it, given rigid understandings of gender she has internalised.

I chose to represent Jill remembering her childhood in an interview, in order to capture the complex process of interpretation and re-interpretation that is inherent in drawing on memory to produce life stories.

In the extract I'm about to read, I use the image of the butterfly to symbolically represent the possibility of transforming notions of gender through the re-interpretation of memory.

### **Extract from the creative work**

*Jill sits at the kitchen table, books and memorabilia spread around her. Her feet are planted squarely on either side of the chair. Her hands rest, fingers spread, over the open page of a photo album. Behind her is a cabinet filled with butterflies pinned stiffly to white squares of*

*cardboard. She has made us tea. I rest my cup in the middle of the table, aware of elbows and tape recorders. I ask her about her childhood.*

Jill says, My Dad had his workshop on Breakfast Creek Road. So I caught a tram from school to Dad's work. I loved to see the tram cross Breakfast Creek Road. A man would walk up ahead of the tram, waving a red flag and ringing a bell.

So, late one afternoon I was throwing rocks into the water. I was watching all the boats that were moored along the river. There was a fishing boat that came in around the same time every afternoon. I was very attracted to one of the men on the boats. He would wave at me when the boat entered the mouth of Breakfast Creek and sometimes I would wave back and sometimes I wouldn't. I didn't want to seem too keen.

I was waiting for this boat and watching. I saw somebody on one the house boats, maybe about twenty metres away. I was staring because they seemed so extraordinarily tall. And, as a little girl, you know, I was just transfixed. It was a beautiful dress. Really vivid colours. And the shoes, would you believe! High heels. I'd never seen anything like it. My mother always wore very sedate, very sombre clothes.

## **Conclusion**

'It is arguable...that metaphors are the only proper way to describe the remembered self, since memory itself is only a metaphor, a dim surrogate for a past time that can never be recovered, never embodied, never made to sit still' (Albright 1994, 39).

Fictional metaphors can offer one means of exploring the complex process of memory in telling life stories.

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