

Life is a tapestry: a cautionary metaphor

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Abstract: *This paper draws from two research projects where the power of dominant discourses to influence storytelling was evident. Drawing on examples from story workshops central to the research, I discuss my use of collective biography to facilitate the re/membering of embodied experiences. While stories give access to the complex nuances of personal experience that give rise to the metaphor 'life is a tapestry', healthy subjectivity is often measured by the understanding of the self as coherent and whole. For this reason the metaphor provides a caution – stories are not innocent, naïve representations of lived experience but are shaped to coherence by narratives that may elide transgressive experiences. Dominant socio/cultural discourses and narratives can colonise imagination and memory to effectively silence or sideline the complication of ambiguities and ambivalences. The combination of a collaborative storytelling process and the use of place as a framework facilitated diverse stories. The knots and tangles of disparate experiences sustain the breath of life in narrative representations of the women's lives. The resulting peripheral view of dominant storylines is a useful, if not a necessary aspect of personal narratives as research data.*

'Life is a tapestry' is a much-used metaphor often heard when people talk about their lives, but in the novel *Lovers' Knots* Marion Halligan writes:

Life is not a rich tapestry. Its shapes and colours are not delineated in tidy threads, rather in a human eye view anyway they're a matted tangle like water hyacinth in a river, beautiful possibly and charmingly named, but what a pest. But okay, you want to stick to the tapestry idea, maybe the definition of God is seeing the right side, the front, while we mortals have to make do with the reverse, the back, the knots and tangles and rough ends, and work out the pattern as best we can. (Halligan 1993: 376)

In two research projects using personal narratives as a means of accessing life experiences, the desire for the god's eye view, a neat and tidy story, a somehow *proper*¹ story initially constrained the story telling. Though storytelling and narrative are widely accepted and valued as windows to personal experience, the expectation of a coherent narrative can elide ambiguous and contradictory experiences. So although biography is accepted as a creative crafting of multiplicity that postmodernists describe as pastiche (eg. Atkinson and

Silverman 2006: 2), and despite academic critique of any presumption that life stories provide access to authentic experience, there are significant influences that shape or constrain the telling by eliding messy threads and contradictions.

The quest for coherence is pervasive. Life stories are cultural products shaped by cultural expectations, dominant storylinesⁱⁱ and form that pre-empt the objective god's eye view. From family albums and stories to interview transcripts, narrative representations of life can become inert artefacts of disembodied objectivity when the complexities and context are elided.

This paper will begin with brief examples of expectations when people are asked to tell their stories, before outlining the embeddedness of narrative in cultural practices. I use my story of moving to Gippsland to illustrate the power of the landscape in image and text to shape experience. Drawing from the two research projects with women participants, but with particular reference to the most recent project, I discuss the collaborative process of storytelling that I use to encourage the telling of embodied life stories. The knots and tangles of disparate experiences sustain the breath of life in narrative representations of the women's lives and are a peripheral view of dominant storylines. Portions of the women's stories appear in italics.

Tell me a story ...

Families often want to keep stories they have been told by elderly relatives. Recently, for example, a friend said that he had given his mother a digital recorder so she could record her life stories, but he was disappointed that she had not done so. He thought that being able to speak her stories onto the recorder would be easy for her, but he hadn't counted on her not valuing her own memories as stories, and not knowing where to start. My friend assumed that his mother could readily tell her experiences in this purposeful way, and that she would want to do that. The Coordinator of a local Neighbourhood Learning Centre told me about a similar situation. An elderly man goes to the Centre for a few hours each week to work with the literacy tutor. His family have told him he should write about his life because he tells such interesting stories. So he has started writing but he is having trouble putting his experiences on paper and he constantly quarrels with the literacy tutor because of her insistence about how he should punctuate and edit the text to make better sense. He writes the way he thinks the stories, and he doesn't want to change them.

While the elderly gentleman has yarns his family love to hear, and my friend's mother has her memories, there are barriers and hurdles that inhibit the representation of their stories. Sometimes unacknowledged expectations can impact on the story *telling* and silence difference or diverse experiences. Relating stories for recording is not necessarily a simple or intuitive act. It requires acts of translation to bring the complexity of experience into language and then stories to record. Formalised settings can impede that process and invoke fear of not getting it right, or failing to tell the somehow *proper* story.

The expectation that life experiences can and will be recorded in predictable ways was also made clear in transcripts I recently received back from an online transcribing service. The research uses a style of interviewing that is conversational and allows the interviewee the

opportunity to expand on the topic in a storytelling mode. However, on the top of the transcripts there are notes from the transcribing assistant, for example 'strange grammar, typed as spoken', or 'this is just conversation, not sure where the interview begins'. On one group transcript she has written 'too much laughter, interview sometimes inaudible, just talking'. These comments highlight that the transcribing assistant has expectations of what constitutes a proper interview, what research data is, and how to appropriately relate life experiences (apparently without too much laughter). This transcription assistant is clearly unfamiliar with the informal approach she encountered that made her work more difficult.

These examples of taken-for-granted expectations indicate that storytelling is often understood in simple terms as intuitive, if not artful recollection. However, in my research with women participants I have found that unexamined expectations can inhibit the telling of divergent personal stories.

The frame of personal stories

Similarly to textual representations, the stories we tell reflect engagement with the gender, race and class prescriptions, and other conventions of dominant culture. This is one reason that using narratives in social research provides an opportunity to see the personal as political, through the connections between personal biography and social structure (Riessman 1994). My interest in narrative and personal storytelling is in these connections but more specifically in the work needed to comply with cultural expectations that shape a sense of the self which is evident in personal stories. Danielle Klapproth (2004: 56) explains that 'a person's sense of their social acceptance ... is perceived in terms of a need for compliance with culturally recognized story types'. John Paul Eakin (1999:141) writes similarly about the importance of achieving a coherent personal narrative, pointing out that narrative practices are often used to gauge familiar signs of healthy identity. Participants in the first research project 'Women's history in women's hands', all came with one particular experience they understood and identified as *their story*. Each of these experiences was resonant with narratives that had recently gained legitimacy in the public sphere, for example stories about sexual abuse, war experiences and adoption. These effectively gave the women an acceptable speaking position or discursive framework to talk about their lives. The stories complied with the form of the quest narrative of the individual hero overcoming adversity. This provided a means to construct a coherent narrative that was made legitimate in the public realm. Effectively this story form helped the women to make sense of life experiences that were messy and difficult to reconcile. Many of the stories eventually told in this project revealed ambiguous and conflicting storylines that the women continued to live with and renegotiate over time. There were many conversations about families and family secrets. Several women explained the shock they experienced as a blow to self identity when secrets such as having been adopted were finally discovered.

The stories the participants first identified were clearly significant in their lives but they were also important in providing a coherent and legitimate frame that gave them permission to speak their personal life stories. However, the heroic quest framework with its emphasis on resolution does not accommodate continuing conflict and divergent experiences in the one life. It does not account for the work of continually reconciling social expectations with individual aspirations or dreams that can background personal narratives. The problem of

managing this conflict to achieve a coherent self narrative was revealed as a problem in the second project when one participant remarked:

I am interesting woman and no one knows it. I look like an ordinary grandmother, but it's like standing on an island when you live all your life in a small community. You sort of put on a coat of 'this is who I am' and it's so difficult sometimes, to stand alone in a community where it's your home, it's your base. (Jaye 2007)

In this instance, Jaye's attachment to her community necessitates compliance as an aspect of belonging, at the expense of her individuality. Jaye's words suggest she feels constrained by stereotypical expectations of elderly women that impede talking about individual interests and other experiences that do not sit easily in the storyline she identifies of the *ordinary* grandmother. Paradoxes that are difficult to articulate or story are set up this way.

The individual work to translate the negotiation of sociocultural expectations and disparities to personal stories is therefore not a trivial matter. In itself it can hinge on how we know ourselves to be. It is derived from knowing what constitutes culturally appropriate narratives, an awareness that is developed from an early age (Nelson 2003; Eakin 1999; Davies 1989). Davies explains that knowing what is 'right' is a consequence of 'desires ... constituted through the narratives and storylines, the metaphors, the very language and patterns of existence through which we are "interpellated" into the social world (2000: 37). Indeed, Atkinson and Silverman point out that what is considered uniquely biographical 'is always narrated in ways that establish and recapitulate cultural frames of reference (2006:14). They critique interview-narrative performance as not 'any more authentic or pure a reflection of self than any other socially organized set of practices' (Atkinson et al, 2006: 22) and go on to suggest that in general the 'celebration of narratives of personal experience reinstate the speaking subject as the privileged hero or heroine of his or her own biography (Atkinson et al, 2006:18). It is a cultural and gendered accomplishment when biography instates the self as author, central to a coherent narrative.

Clearly, cultural competence (Sondergaard, 2002: 199) necessarily inflects how individuals determine what is a *proper* story. Indeed, tensions and differences created by competing storylines, and the necessity to reconcile them, are embodied in response to cultural practices that interlock and buttress the whole of society (Haug 1987:49). As Jaye's words suggest, gender norms create pervasive expectations that shape discourses that are gendered and disciplinary. Frigga Haug and other feminists have pointed out that women are socialized through the body to understand their corporeality in moral terms (Haug, 1987:51). The two Australian texts, 'Good and Mad Women' (Matthews, 1984) and 'Damned Whores and God's Police' (Summers, 1994) testify to this in the 20th century and highlight the disciplinary impact of the moral discourses inherent in these dichotomies. These tensions produce storylines that impact on a sense of belonging and self-worth, and make a difference to which stories are willingly shared. Haug and her collaborative partners pioneered a method of storytelling through memory work to research tensions in their lived experiences (1987). Their method has since been modified and used by researchers with mixed results. However, my approach to using narrative for research purposes is derived

from Bronwyn Davies' sustained use and development of the method. In the book *Doing Collective Biography*, Davies and Gannon, (2006) provide a thorough discussion of the process and their use of the method. However, there are two significant differences in my approach to collective biography that result from my use of the method with research participants rather than collaborative partners. The first is the focus on telling rather than writing stories, and secondly my use of 'place' as a conceptual framework in the recent project.

A sense of place

Personal stories are a response to the context of time and place and are not immutably fixed although 'local cultures create biographies that are embedded' (Atkinson and Silverman: 2006: 2). When I moved to the Latrobe Valley in Victoria two years ago, I became aware that social dysfunction and environmental degradation are frequently attributed to the region. The Latrobe Valley is the heart of Gippsland - a resource rich, fertile and productive region that supplies 85% of Victoria's electricity, significant timber, gas, dairy and other resources, and is newly responsible for the metropolitan need for water from a proposed desalination plant. There are high levels of violence, gambling, and significant educational underachievement. There is also a failure to acknowledge in any meaningful way, the traditional owners or the current Aboriginal population.

The Latrobe Valley receives frequent media coverage that highlights these issues and images of the Valley are often used generically to background television reports when global warming is discussed. There's also extensive discussion of social problems resulting from the privatisation of local industry. Together these visual and textual images create significant storylines of depression and dysfunction in the Latrobe Valley.



As I explored the environment of my new home, the landscape reflected the images and the stories of depression I'd heard, but also beauty. I wondered if this confusing landscape would eventually soften in my eyes. I felt personally threatened by incidents of road rage and my perception of the brutality of industry inscribed the ebb and flow of local fortunes

on the landscape and I found, as Christopher Tilley (1994: 23) has written, that ‘the landscape is an anonymous sculptural form always already fashioned by human agency, never completed, and constantly being added to ... the landscape is both a medium for and an outcome of action and previous histories of action.’ Even if I were to stop seeing violation in the landscape I wondered how this place would become a part of my life.



The highly industrialised landscape is a ‘stage not a backdrop ... that propagates a visual ideology masking the social forces and relations of production’ (Tilley, 1994: 23). My biographical history came into contact with this place in confronting ways. ‘Complex webs of meaning ... are inextricably embedded’ (Eileraas, 2007: xi) in Gippsland, but rather than barely perceptible nuances, dominant stories are clearly evident in the landscape images.

Apart from the view of industry or its effects at almost every turn, in the Latrobe Valley monumental structures like the Big Cigar and an immigrant statue memorialise particular central stories. The Big Cigar is a tribute to Sir Winston Churchill and presides over the shopping precinct in the township of Churchill named after him amid local controversy. The anticipated prosperity of the town constructed after the war did not reach the hoped-for proportions and the Big Cigar, locally dubbed the pigeon roaster, is an incongruous memorial in this district known for greenhouse emissions.

Ten kilometres away, the recently constructed Immigration Memorial celebrates the heroism of early settlers and later migrants. It elides the contribution of women and families with its focus on the lone male immigrant arriving with just one suitcase.

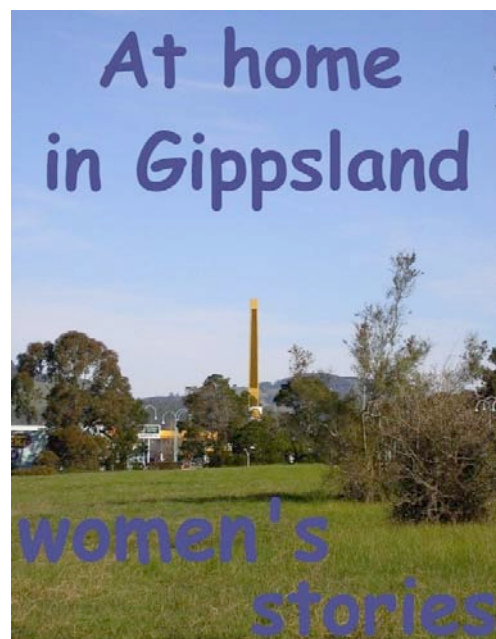


The surrounding landscape is constantly altered, with the growing of fast-yield timber and then the harvest. The acquisition of property, indeed whole townshipsⁱⁱⁱ to extend the open-cut mines brings a need to shift geographical features such as the Morwell River and constructions including the Strezlecki Highway. Of course there is construction to build new towns^{iv}, a better highway, improved river and wetlands^v and these contribute to a diverse and controversial landscape marked by stories of heroism, responsibility, dysfunction and degradation. There is a sense that landscape is cheap and the resources here are for the taking.

Story Workshops for Women

As a newcomer to Gippsland, I also witnessed an extraordinary friendliness of the locals and the intense loyalty they voiced for their place. I devised the project, 'At Home in Gippsland, Story Workshops for Women' because of my interest in women's experiences living in this complicated and diverse rural region of Victoria.

The big cigar, Churchill



In these workshops I used place and gender as the framework. Place is known to be pedagogical, places teach us (see for example Gruenewald, 2006). Place also enlivens the notion of context because it draws on the interrelationship of the social and physical landscapes. Margaret Somerville (2008) has recently conceptualised a framework to research the pedagogies of place. There are three key principles in Somerville's place pedagogy framework: our relationship to place is constituted in stories and other representations, the body is at the centre of our experience of place; and place is a contact zone of cultural difference where diverse experiences meet. This approach presents an opportunity to research narrative representations of self in relation to lived environment. I developed the story workshops with these principles in mind but also an awareness of factors that inhibit storytelling as previously touched on in regard to the imagined *proper* story.

I chose an image of 'The Big Cigar' at Churchill for the flyer advertising the workshops, and introduced the idea of 'at home in Gippsland' to invoke a sense of belonging. Taking as a point of departure, the keeping of family albums, scrapbooks, and family history which are individual activities and modes of authorization (Gudmundsdottir, 2006: 220), I used collaborative processes of storytelling based on collective biography to facilitate embodied remembering and diverse experiences. Collective biography^{vi} is:

an ethical reflexivity that enables us not simply to reiterate habituated knowledges, but to see, feel, touch and hear, our own and others' vulnerability to those normative discourses and practices. (Davies and Gannon, 2006: 182)

The recorded sessions began with techniques of memory work, using prompts such as photographs, garden cuttings, or a topic I had chosen and introduced^{vii} to begin the conversations. Each participant then had the opportunity to relate a memory in response to the prompt while the rest of the group listened, asking questions for clarification, or later offering other perspectives or their own responses. The informality of the small group allowed the freedom to move away from the initial topic and for conversations to develop or trail off into new areas. Not all of the stories were specifically about Gippsland and many times they were about families. The stories ranged broadly over a sense of belonging in Gippsland, love of the local environment and special places, impermanence due to living in temporary accommodation, moving house and coping with family secrets and change. Storytelling in the group often took surprising turns to new conversations and experiences as when Chris reminisced about her childhood:

I can remember we used to pick mushrooms on the old Traralgon Hospital site – that was one of our out of town mushroom paddocks. We used to pick mushrooms there and then it was built Then many years later they pulled it down. No one would imagine, with our beautiful pride we had in our hospital, it just wouldn't exist anymore. (Chris 2007)

This observation sparked stories about the pride the women felt in community work, fundraising for a kindergarten and to buy equipment for the hospital. Even though they

hadn't known each other before the Workshops, they remembered the fun of thinking up new activities to raise money and fondly recalled the pleasure of baking and street stalls.

The Workshops existed as a contact zone where the opportunity to express difference and multiple ways of knowing, including knowing Gippsland, was possible. Pratt has explained contact zones as 'special places where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other' (1991: 33). Trust and familiarity developed over the weeks of the workshops in spite of differences in the group. The women's stories ventured into the complexities that shaped their lives. In the following conversation among three women, they took the lead from each other, moving into painful and secret memories that stimulated further discussion and reflection.

*Women feel a responsibility when we have a family. You keep secrets in the family, but the family next door could be going through the same thing.
My dad had terrible problems after he came back from the war ... he wouldn't wash, he wouldn't talk to anyone, he just sat there.
My dad had war problems too, from being gassed.
Secrets, the moment you say it, it stops being powerful,
(Jaye, Chris and Denise 2007)*

Later, one of the participants commented that she 'was puzzled how such a diverse group could work, however we are an interesting lot, and have become a caring group of friends' (Denise, 12th March 08).

Telling is a space between the experience and representation in written words or other creative means. After each session, I cut up the transcripts and pasted together the stories threaded in the women's conversations, and I took those texts back to the women the following week. These always began new conversations and discussions that refined the stories. Working in this way helped navigate potential barriers such as the pursuit of a *proper* story, fears about literacy or not being skilled writers, and how to begin telling stories. The women were surprised to see the variety of stories in their conversations and the depth of their interest and engagement with significant issues, for example the gambling problem and concern for Aboriginal residents. Pasting fragments of conversations together kept the flow between different voices, decentring the authorial subject and maintaining diversity. Next we worked together to produce a book of the stories, adding photographs, recipes and pieces of biographical writing that the women brought in to share, journal entries, poems and snippets of personal wisdom:

If you remember it, its still there, it's just in another room. (Jaye)

The completed book, *Peripheral Vision: a kaleidoscope of stories by women* hints of tolerance and curiosity about difference but it is no panacea. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is an attempt to invoke the sense of a contact zone and encourage readers to allow their own stories to take flight from the fragments:

With each turn of the hand, the individual fragments of our kaleidoscope fall for a moment into another pattern and begin other stories. (Morgan)

Stories such as the demolition of the Hospital, about alcoholism, and another about gambling create what Karina Eileraas refers to as ‘stammers in dominant discourses (2007: 159). Stammers, she explains can disrupt or misrecognize the dominant imaginary (2007: 159), they can create fissures and stimulate new ethical modes of exchange and alternative stories (2007: 159). Even though *Peripheral Vision* is not a revolutionary, textual storm trooper the women’s stories introduce stammers in the dominant representations of Gippsland, in the recognition of difference and concerns about the social repercussions of privatisation of industry. *Peripheral Vision* intimates there are other experiences to be told, other stories to be heard. Significantly the women came to value their own experiences, as Coco expressed in an inscription in the book, ‘*thank you for convincing us that our stories are worth telling*’.

In/conclusion

A considerable portion of this paper is devoted to establishing that cultural practices are inherent in the dominant narratives and images that surround us in the physical and social landscapes of our lives. My experience of moving to Gippsland illustrates multiple storylines embedded in the physical and social landscapes. Sometimes contradictory or ambiguous, sensory perceptions of dominant discourses are embodied, as are gender norms, consciously or not. Individuals are challenged to construct a coherent narrative or *proper* story, from diverse experiences for the sake of healthy subjectivity, belonging, and to ‘fit in’. The ability to represent a coherent narrative of self can be a crucial personal issue. However, in situations such as life history recording or research that seeks to understand social processes and practices, it is desirable if not necessary to explore complexity and divergences. To hear these requires respectful and patient listening but that is not necessarily enough to elicit the knots and tangles behind the fabrication of coherence. My use of collective biography as a storytelling process, and place as a conceptual framework enabled the telling of diverse stories in recent workshops with women. Reflexive conversations loosened the hold of dominant discourses and story forms and embodied experiences were shared. Collaborative storytelling allowed difference and multiplicity to breathe life into ‘*Peripheral Vision*’.

While each person *has* stories, *telling* them does not necessarily follow easily, it is determined by patterns of culture that have a strong hold on imagination. The tapestry metaphor provides a useful caution for researchers and interviewers to be mindful of cultural practices that can elide the knotty tangles of life and rich complexity for the sake of a coherent story.

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ⁱ This term was used by one of the participants.

ⁱⁱ Sondergaard explains that storylines are 'a condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as an explanatory framework of one's own and others' practices and sequences of action (2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ For example. Yallourn, and Driffield in 2007

^{iv} Churchill

^v relocated Morwell River and Morwell River Wetlands

^{vi} for a succinct but more comprehensive explanation of collective biography see Onyx and Small (2001), or a book length discussion in Davies and Gannon (2006).

^{vii} eg. your first home in Gippsland