

Stories of Survival and Narratives of Resistance:

The Role of Memoirs in Narrating Genocide and Promoting Social Justice

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Stories and memory are key factors in place-making and identity formation by making a meaningful connection to a space and enabling one's 'being-in-the-world'.¹ Memoirs represent the narratives of personal lives made into meaningful historical records, which may work to form narratives of resistance. I argue that memoirs are a useful means of narrating forms of genocide and promoting social justice through reconciliation. These narratives are involved in place-making, as each person's identity is formed through memories of people, places and events during one's lifetime.

'Story' and 'narrative' are often used interchangeably, where story has been defined as "an account of incidents or events,"² while narrative has been defined as "a message that tells the particulars of an act or occurrence or course of events."³ However, this paper will distinguish between the two, where story is defined as a representation of an incident or event, which can be achieved both through language or other means, and narrative is defined as a method of storytelling, which is transmitted primarily through language.

This paper will begin by describing the connections between stories, memory and

place-making, which will explain the function of stories. It will also explain the importance of recognizing emotion in places and memory, as well as analyze the question of how stories originate. The next section will describe the importance of language, narrative and identity formation in place-making, where language is described as key in both place-making and identity formation. It will then describe the memoir as a potential narrative of resistance, using case studies from Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and the Guatemalan genocide. The paper will also analyze some of the criticisms of memory, as well as some of the personal and societal benefits of memoirs in expressing communal struggles and promoting social change.

STORIES, MEMORY AND PLACE-MAKING

The Western conception of stories comes from the Greek word, *mythos*, which in Greek means story, as myths were stories that allowed one to "humanize time."⁴ However, it is important to note that not all stories are told through narrative, as some stories may be interpreted through other means, such as music, images or dance. This idea of non-narrative stories may relate to the idea of the landscape as a text and vice versa, as well as that of the landscape as a stage, on which human life is performed.⁵ These ideas suggest that there is always an implied reader or observer, which relates to the function of stories, as every story involves "someone telling something to someone about something."⁶

When writing about a landscape, one moves

¹ Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, "Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)," accessed March 15, 2011, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/heidegge/#SH8a>.

² "Narrative," Wordnet, last accessed March 20, 2011, <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=narrative>.

³ "Story," Miriam Webster, last accessed March 20, 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/bps/dictionary?query=story>.

⁴ Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, (New York: Routledge, 2002): 3–4.

⁵ Denis Cosgrove and Steven Daniels, "Spectacle and Text: Landscape Metaphors in Cultural Geography" in *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. J. Duncan and D. Ley, (London: Routledge, 1993): 57; Pierce Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape" in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth, (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979): 12.

⁶ Kearney, 2002, 5.

"beyond nature into the intensely human realm of value,"⁷ which is often done through naming and names.⁸ Harkin, for one, argues that the landscape "bears traces, both physical and linguistic, of past events,"⁹ as it symbolically links people to the past through "naming and narratives that inscribe meaning on the landscape."¹⁰ Stories may enhance meanings by changing people's perceptions of places, as the names of places are often derived from stories themselves.¹¹ For example, many place names in the Coast Salish areas of the southern coast of British Columbia are connected to European interpretation of the land, which reflects the manipulation of colonial powers through re-naming the landscape.¹² Certain places may also trigger memories of unrelated experiences or stories of other places, other people, and other times.¹³ These places and memories may also incite emotions that have been forgotten, just as storytelling and place-making do, as they must be "*felt* to make sense."¹⁴

Kearney suggests in his book, *On Stories*, that all stories come from the sorrows experienced in one's life, and thus help to make them more bearable and reflect people's ability to endure suffering and loss.¹⁵ However, there are many reasons why it remains to be difficult for some people to articulate stories of violence, such as a sense of shame or guilt for surviving, when

others did not, or a fear of reliving the past.¹⁶ Victims of the Holocaust, for instance, may be unable to speak about their experiences because of their knowledge of "the truth about people, human nature, about death, [...] in a way that other people don't know it."¹⁷ Additionally, there may be societal restrictions or cultural norms about speaking out about crimes committed against humanity by the government, as in the case of Maya women who were victims of the Guatemalan genocide in the 1980s.¹⁸ Yet, the act of narrating a story may also lead the author to uncover truths that they had not seen before, as storytelling invites one to become the reader of one's own life.¹⁹

LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

It is believed that "language – in its structure, utterances, and inscriptions – constitutes the cornerstone of place-making,"²⁰ as opposed to material transformations. A warm conversation can make a place feel warm, for example, while an unfriendly argument may make one feel uncomfortable.²¹ However, language is also essential for the physical construction of place, as it is not possible to engage in the planning process of construction without the exchange of words.²² Still more important to place construction, is language's use of metaphors, as well as how "sentences and larger units impart emotion and personality, and hence high visibility, to objects and places."²³ A good

⁷ William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78 (1992):1349.

⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81, (1991): 688.

⁹ Michael E. Harkin. "Sacred Places, Scarred Spaces." *Wicazo Sa Review*, 15 (2000): 64.

¹⁰ Tuan, 1991, 81.

¹¹ Keith H. Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places." In *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 105-150.

¹² Thom, Brian David, "Coast Salish Senses of Place: Dwelling, Meaning, Power, Property and Territory in the Coast Salish World" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2005): 249-50.

¹³ Basso, 1996, 107.

¹⁴ Joyce Davidson, and Milligan Christine, "Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5 (2004): 524.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Sorrows and the Making of Life Stories," *Philosophy Today* 47, (2003): 322.

¹⁶ Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston, "The burden of memory: Victims, storytelling and resistance in Northern Ireland." *Memory Studies*, 2 (2009): 3585-59.

¹⁷ Langer, Lawrence, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 59.

¹⁸ Catherine Nolin Hanlon and Finola Shankar, "Gendered spaces of terror and assault: The testimonio of REMHI and the Commission for Historical Clarification in Guatemala," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 7, (2000): 265.

¹⁹ Kearney, 2002, 156.

²⁰ Patricia L. Price, "Cultural geography and the stories we tell ourselves," *Cultural Geography* 17, (2010): 205.

²¹ Tuan, 1991, 81

²² *Ibid*, 684-85

²³ Ricoeur, Paul, "The metaphorical process as cognition, imagination, and feeling" in *On metaphor*, ed. S. Sacks, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979): 22.

example of this is illustrated by the unique languages and storytelling styles of First Nations people, which developed over millennia of oral storytelling traditions. For instance, Squamish storyteller, Dominic Charlie, utilizes an original style and syntax to provide his interpretation of a sea lion story, of which various versions from different areas on the West Coast exist.

It's a reef out there on the point there where this nice beach, reef there, and that's where the sea lion comes on when he goes to sleep on a rock, and he goes there and they spear 'em. And this man never give his brother a chance to get any sea lion. And this man get sick and tired of him, and he thinks what to do, because he's a powerful man. And he carved that thing just like a sea lion, see. And he carve a fir, a fir log, he carved it just, oh, about as big as a sea lion.²⁴

This story represents the importance of sea lions as a source of spiritual power for certain Coast Salish tribes, and reinforces the important value of sharing.²⁵ There is a close connection between language and place, as "it is the tradition of living on the land that ensures the continuity of language."²⁶ Therefore, it is no coincidence that the removal of territory from many First Nations groups, as well as the relocation of children into residential schools, contributed to the endangerment and disappearance of their traditional languages²⁷. Parallels have also been made between residential schools and Nazi "death camps," which make reference to "the

Canadian Holocaust."²⁸ The loss of language may be termed as a type of cultural genocide, or ethnocide, as it is also connected to loss of place and identity.²⁹

Language and narrative are important for identity formation. Language allows one to encode memory and provide order to our environment.³⁰ Similarly, narrative provides a structure that "organizes events and human actions into a whole, attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effects on the whole."³¹ It also enables one to be present in the moment, which relates to Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world," as the possibility of experience is dependent on the notion of place.³² The ability to tell a story of our lives based on memory seems synonymous with the concept of identity, as "identity, or sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we tell ourselves and each other about our lives."³³ Stories are an important factor in to one's personal, as well as cultural identities. However, it is impossible to truly engage with a place or person without engaging with all of the stories of that place or person. Otherwise, the whole picture of one's identity would not be complete.³⁴ Both written and spoken language may also be perceived as a weapon, as learning a new language allows one to transmit stories to a greater audience, while written language allows for a permanence through print. However, the preservations of the language of one's origin is

²⁴ Oliver Wells et al. (includes an interview with Dominic Charlie), in *The Chilliwacks and their Neighbours*. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987): 169-70.

²⁵ Thom, 2005, 98-99.

²⁶ Tim Ingold, "Ancestry, Generation, Subsistence, Memory, Land" in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Development and Skill*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 147.

²⁷ Thom, 2005, 98-99.

²⁸ David Macdonald, "First Nations, Residential Schools, and the Americanization of the Holocaust: Rewriting Indigenous History in the United States and Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40, (2007): 1007. doi: 10.1017/S0008423907071107

²⁹ MacDonald, 2007.

³⁰ Kearney, 2002, 4.

³¹ Irena Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet experience: memoirs, diaries, dreams*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 10.

³² Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2011.

³³ King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 23.

³⁴ "The danger of a single story," Adichie, Chimamanda, last modified July, 2009, March 15, 2011, http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html.

important for maintaining and passing on the cultural identity of a group, as the loss of culture is synonymous with a loss or change of identity. In order to facilitate this preservation, inventory projects of First Nations language and place names have been created within Coast Salish tribes as a means of reclaiming the landscape and preserving local histories.³⁵

Only the past, and not the present or the future, can be narrated, which is determined by the storyteller's own narrative time.³⁶ However, "the past does not exist until it has been narrated, created through story both as time and as space."³⁷ It is important to note that the past is a place as well as a time, whether a place is positive or negative, is determined by its association with good or bad experiences.³⁸ Some may argue that stories are necessary for understanding where we are going in life, in that the individual searches for a narrative that can help explain the chaos and confusion of life.³⁹ This need for stories relates to a human desire to recount and narrate our lives; this desire is particularly important when it comes to major historical events, such as the Holocaust and other forms of genocide, in that there is a greater sense of urgency to tell these stories. However, it is important to note that there is no ethically neutral narrative, as all narratives are subject to bias.

MEMOIRS AS NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE

Memory is important for all first-person narratives, as they are all made possible through memory, while images within memory are reconstructed through language.⁴⁰ The word "memoir" comes from the Latin word

"memoria," which means "to remember."⁴¹ Memoirs allow for the voices of all social classes to be heard, by preserving them in archives or compiling them in books. This is necessary to understand the experiences of state violence and war through the perspective of the oppressed, rather than publishing only those of the highly educated classes.⁴² However, these memoirs are always an interpretation of memory.

Memoirs represent intimate lives made into meaningful historical record, as they connect lives to the historical and social situations of time and place.⁴³ Memoirs of oppression may represent a form of resistance narrative, as the author exposes past injustices that may not be told otherwise.⁴⁴ Resistance narrative is both an individual and a collective process, in that it may transform both the individual and society.⁴⁵ These narratives are about the truth, which is about the exposure of injustice and requires societal transformation.⁴⁶ Memoir writing is both a "liberating and a healing method of accessing hidden knowledge," and is often used to express communal struggles, as well as personal experiences.⁴⁷ It may also allow one to reclaim spaces of terror through freedom of personal expression.⁴⁸ Unofficial storytelling mechanisms such as memoirs or informal interviews may offer greater ease of communication. However, storytelling within official bodies, such as truth commissions or court proceedings may have further reaching impacts and be given greater legitimacy.⁴⁹

Narratives are also contingent on one's

³⁵ Thom, 2005, 227-28.

³⁶ W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "The Past as Place: Names, Stories, and the Remembered Self," *Folklore* 102, (1991): 3.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 13

³⁸ *Idib*, 4

³⁹ Ricoeur, 2003, 322-324.

⁴⁰ King, 2000, 2, 14.

⁴¹ "Memory," Merriam Webster Dictionary, accessed March 15, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memory>.

⁴² Nolin Hanlon and Shankar, 2000, 270.

⁴³ Paperno, 2009, 2, 9.

⁴⁴ Patrick Ewick and Silbey Susan, "Narrating Social Structure: Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 108 (2003):1329.

⁴⁵ Hackett and Rolston, 2009, 356.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 362.

⁴⁷ Nolin Hanlon and Shankar, 2000, 266-68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 270.

⁴⁹ Hackett and Rolston, 2009, 370.

culture, gender, race and class, as these are all constructed through narrative.⁵⁰ Differences in one's identity in a narrative are apparent in testimonial literature of Maya women in Guatemala, who experienced femicide by the state military because of their indigenous cultural identity and their role as care-givers in the community.⁵¹ Yet, women have not written most historical literature, partly because of a lack of access to education, as well as institutionalized discrimination in many countries with a history of patriarchal regimes. In contrast, the majority of official and unofficial memoirs of resistance and testimonial literature in the last few decades *were* written by women.⁵² One compelling example of these women is Rigoberta Menchú, whose influential biographical book has helped to tell the story of many Maya Quiche people in Guatemala during the civil war.

Memoirs are always interpretive, as they are reflections of the past, confined within the boundaries of the author's language.⁵³ For example, in one German Mennonite's unpublished memoirs titled, "Memories of Events during my Life," the author described his experiences as they were remembered or told to him during his lifetime. However, it does not necessarily describe what actually happened, as memories often transform over time. For instance, at the beginning, he describes the relative peacefulness of his life when he was a child living in a German Mennonite village in Southern Russia during the First World War,⁵⁴ yet it is unlikely that he had any idea of what was actually going on at that age. However, King argues that memory as narrative is dependent on Freud's concept of "Nachtraglichkeit," which translates as "afterwardness," the reconstruction of "what wasn't known then."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Price, 2010, 203.

⁵¹ Nolin Hanlon and Shankar, 2000, 266-68.

⁵² Hackett and Rolston, 2009, 356.

⁵³ King, 2000, 14.

⁵⁴ Peter Koop, "Memories of Events During my Life," 1983. Unpublished memoir in private collection.

⁵⁵ King, 2000, 11, 22.

Cronon, in his article, "A Place for Stories," describes how two interpretations of history can have vastly different conclusions, which is applicable to the process of writing a memoir, as the outcome is completely dependent on the writer's experience.⁵⁶ Thus the question is posed: which story is the right one? There is no easy answer to this question, as it depends on who is telling the story and their credibility as a historical witness.⁵⁷

"WHEN TAKEN TOGETHER, INDIVIDUAL FRAGMENTS SHOW AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE 'OFFICIAL HISTORY' OF THE COUNTRY."

There is also a significant difference in the outcome between narratives told by the victors and those told by the defeated or the oppressed, which may relate to the layering of multiple meanings of any

one story.⁵⁸ In this sense, the production of narratives of resistance may represent a means of encouraging social movements, in that it may promote change or social justice. Narratives about social movements in history may also serve this purpose by inspiring changes to the status quo. For example, in *Memoirs of Peasant Tolstoyans in Soviet Russia*, the promotion of communalism of land and labour was described as a reclamation of the lost years of war and violence.⁵⁹ When taken together, individual fragments show an alternative to the "official history" of the country.⁶⁰ The variety of voices represented illustrates the complexity of relationships between the experiences of the narrators and those of society as a whole.

A memoir may also create a greater sense of connection between historical events through

⁵⁶ Cronon, 1992, 1351.

⁵⁷ Kearney, 2002, 47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

⁵⁹ Boris Mazurin, *Memoirs of peasant tolstoyans in Soviet Russia*, William B. Edgerton, (Washington: American University Press, 1993): 108.

⁶⁰ Nolin Hanlon and Shankar, 2000, 266-68.

the use of narrative and plot.⁶¹ For example, stories may “singularise suffering against the anonymity of evil” through the use of affect, or emotion.⁶² This sense of understanding is often achieved through the use of narrative imagery to “bring the horror home to us.”⁶³ Images from the Holocaust provide an example of this, as they are often reproduced many times over and seeing them becomes a metaphor for perspective.⁶⁴ However, events are remembered in different ways, depending on one’s age or the nature of the event: some in language, some visually and others through the body.⁶⁵

Eduard Casey describes how memory is contained in and performed through the body,⁶⁶ in that it is “constitutive of our experience living in time.”⁶⁷ For example, any type of emotional reaction to a memory or story is expressed through the body. The process of inscribing experiences acts as a proof of events that existed in historical time.⁶⁸ The mind can be conditioned to stories in the same way that the rest of the body can react physically to a memory of sadness. Wells has suggested however, that “things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our [body or] mind.”⁶⁹ This idea relates to the belief that sacred places or spaces of important historical significance hold the memory of events enacted there, while places of fear or terror may perpetuate the traumatic events that occurred there.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

“[Stories are] an urgent matter of survival. We

have to know where we once were in order to know where we are and where we are going.”⁷¹ Storytelling is what gives us a shareable world, as events are translated into stories and made memorable over time.⁷² While the past cannot be narrated with absolute certainty, it is important to understand that past events be told as both history and story.⁷³ Stories are said to come from the sorrows experienced during one’s life, whether they be physical suffering or mental trauma. However, the stories of the past, depending on the narrator’s interpretation, could lead to a story being perceived as both positive and negative. Memoirs are useful as narratives of resistance in allowing a greater number of voices to be heard and exposing the stories of the less powerful. They transform both the individual and the collective society by ensuring cultural preservation, promoting justice and reconciliation or creating a meaningful historical record. Memoirs as stories may help to humanize the experience of violence and war, in that they represent a personalized account of historical events.

This paper does not attempt to justify the credibility of storytelling or memory in attaining justice or reconciliation. Nor does it examine the complicated concept of truth in describing historical events. It also does not try to generalize the concept of narratives of resistance to be applied to any form of oppression, in that one man’s experience during the First World War in Russia is very different than that of a Maya woman during the Guatemalan genocide. Additionally, it does not compare or contrast varying forms of genocide in different areas. It is hoped, however, that researchers and historians will take more seriously the importance of storytelling and memoir as a legitimate form of historical interpretation.

⁶¹ Cronon, 1992, 1352.

⁶² Kearney, 2002, 62-63.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 62.

⁶⁴ Barbie Zelizer, ed., *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 2.

⁶⁵ Kearney, 2002, 28.

⁶⁶ Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987): 173.

⁶⁷ King, 2000, 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

⁶⁹ Oliver Wells, *The Chilliwacks and their Neighbours*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987): 1-266.

⁷⁰ King, 2000, 27.

⁷¹ King, 2000, 38.

⁷² Kearney, 2002, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 148.