

Listening for Stories, Attending to Genre:  
The Intersection of Canonical Forms with Everyday Life Experience

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Anthropological life story work is a fundamentally collaborative endeavor, in that it involves the construction of a narrated version of a self, negotiated into coherence through understandings between the recorder-anthropologist and the person whose story is ostensibly being put to paper. With any transmission of a life story, as Charlotte Linde has noted, "coherence must be understood as a cooperative achievement of the speaker and the addressee; it is not an absolute property of a disembodied, unsituated text" (1993: 12). I found that at Alkali Lake, to listen to life stories was to enter a treasured relationship where learning something of how to perceive and act in a particular social world comes through the transmission of another's life experience. This discovery was not, for me, immediate; I first had to learn what the role of the addressee was in the "cooperative achievement," Linde discussed.

#### **Taping a Personal Narrative with Angela George**

The Shuswap (Secwepemc) Elder, Angela George is one of the individuals from Alkali Lake who has occasionally been asked to speak about her life at conventions. She has told me that she held forth for over an hour on the subject of her life as an invited guest at one such gathering. At that event she was given many thanks, was much honored as an Elder, and was presented with an exquisitely beaded walking stick. Her reflections on that speech, and her description of the audience's appreciation of it, had become an important part of her larger narrative about her life. In my experience, when people admired the beaded walking stick, Angela would tell them how she came to possess it. I knew she was aware of the value others place on her life story, and on her community's story. I had traveled a few times with Angela George to fishing places, and to visit her relatives, before I felt comfortable asking if I might tape record some of what she had to say. After we had about six months of acquaintance, I asked her if she would come driving with me, to record place names close to Alkali Lake, just south on Dog Creek Road.

A short session at her kitchen table a month later was to be my only other opportunity to record Angela George that summer. I left her with copies of the tapes, and hoped I would be able to see her again when I returned the next summer. When we met again, she told me she had dreamed that she would "tell me her life," and I would record it for her. When she told me this, I was pleased to comply with what I thought was her request. Based on what I had previously heard from her about her public speaking engagement, and having listened to the narrative she presented in my car the summer before, my assumptions were that she would present a chronological account that we could assemble in her house, and as an audience, I would be a conduit, a mostly passive listener operating a tape recorder. To further fill out and clarify the narrative, which I assumed would be stylistically similar to AA narratives I had heard from community members at Alkali Lake meetings, I formulated a set of questions.

I sat at her kitchen table the next day, ready to begin, with tape recorder levels set to receive her words. However, the narrative I had anticipated was not delivered. Her life story was not what she wanted to discuss at her kitchen table. I decided to be helpful, and suggested she mention all the children she had, their names and when she had them. She balked; she seemed reticent, as if she were unable to understand the questions. Providing a neatly ordered chronology was apparently not what she had in mind.

Charles Briggs has pointed out that "interview techniques smuggle outmoded preconceptions out of the realm of conscious theory and into that of methodology" (1986: 3).<sup>1</sup> What I had attempted to do in Angela's kitchen was a formal interview, with all of the baggage of questions I thought should inform it. My "conscious theory" concerned my expectation that Angela and I had a common understanding of what kind of narrative a life story is. My questions followed from that interpretive framework, rather than from an understanding of what it might mean to Angela to "tell her life." I had forgotten, again, what Vi Hilbert continues to teach me about "learning how to listen."

Our interview went no further. I felt awkward and disappointed that I had somehow not lived up to my rôle as recorder of life history. After a cup of tea and something to eat, Angela suggested we go pick berries the next day. We took her young grandchildren, Candice and Dallas, in the car with us. Angela and I took a

familiar road, one that leads near her family cabin, Joe's Lake Road. We were near Joe's Lake when we passed a place where she and her husband, Jimmy George, had once encountered some bears:

Angela: One time me and Jimmy was going around in there  
 hunting we was on foot  
 and the one bear had three little ones there  
 playing on them trees them  
 He had two black ones and one white one  
 I would like to get the white one

*ap: Yeah*

Angela: But Jimmy wouldn't want to kill him.  
 Oh, he say,  
 "He must have like his kids just like you."  
*(laughter)*  
 I wanted the white one they were nice and small yet.  
 He say, "That bear loves his little ones just like you."

[from the tape of July 10, 1989]

Finding a mother bear with three cubs is an event worthy of remark. To find a white cub is even more remarkable. Angela may have wanted to take home the little bear, but Jimmy was unwilling to kill its mother to make this possible. It is doubtful that the two black cubs would have survived without her. Angela's empathy and identification with the mother bear, through Jimmy's observation that, "That bear loves his little ones just like you," is also significant. She had to forgo the novelty of having a white bear cub, because a mother loves her "little ones." Angela was telling me what we both knew; how important that kind of love can be. (In a sense, there are little bears in Angela's family, too. Angela's daughter Dorothy has a Shuswap name, *Kenkekem*, meaning black bear.) This is a story of a decision not to act on impulse, and story of sweet sentiment, delivered with laughter, told at a specific place, by Angela to me. One minute later, after mentioning that she "had all of [her] skirts ready for the Sundance," and a pause, she came back to the story:

Angela: Oh, we used to come through in there when we hunt  
 and there's a lake in there  
 and other lake back in there.  
 That's where we seen this bear  
 with his three little ones  
 Pretend to be eating the grass around  
 he keep on looking at his little ones  
 playing on the tree

We had now passed a bit beyond the lake, which had been visible a minute earlier, hence, her deictic remarks, which oriented my attention to the place once more. The bear was acting like a person, "pretending" and looking at its "little ones."

And next:

Angela: He's just like a human person that bear  
 he say when his little ones fight  
 That one that starts to fight  
 he'll take him and he'll spank him.

[from the tape of July 10, 1989]

And so the bear even disciplines her children as a human person might. It also should be noted that the use of the binomial, "human person," contrasts humans with other kinds of persons, including bears, or, when viewed another way, includes humans and bears in the hierarchical category of "person".)

The story Angela George told had an internal consistency, but was never linked in her narrative to other events, or to longer sequences of events. I find Linde's notion of life story as a "discontinuous narrative unit" (1993: 216) to be very helpful here as a conceptual tool. It falls to me, in part, as addressee, to discern the links between what I perceive as fragments. In the Euro-Canadian storytelling style I am most familiar with, a life story segment can be presented with respect to a larger story told earlier, through the use of *orientation*

*clauses* (Linde 1993: 70). (E.g., “Remember when I was away in Germany?”) This allows the hearer to think about the life story already related, mark the place in the account already loosely woven into coherency, and mentally push apart the threads, to accommodate another piece of the tale. If there is a shared cultural understanding on the part of the speaker and addressee as to the cues appropriate for such orientation, the accommodation is successful. If such orientation is not part of the discourse structure of the language used, it is possible that some other linguistic, or perhaps even extra-linguistic, cue is being employed. On that day, I wasn't able to discern the indexical features that might orient me with respect to her narrative that day. I wasn't even then aware that this story was an important part of “telling her life.”

The next week found us traveling to another place, and then coming home with two cranky grandchildren in the back seat,

Angela: My mom musta shoot some bear in there  
 Round there there were two bears and he kill them  
 My stepfather wasn't supposed to kill it  
 and my mom kill it herself  
 She shoot it with a big rifle  
 ap: How come he wasn't supposed to shoot it?  
 Angela: Just like in olden days  
 Jimmy didn't believe it you're not supposed to kill a bear  
 and he did kill a bear and our boy died  
 It's supposed to be like that

*ap: Oh*

Angela: Like my—  
 Candice: Uh!  
 Angela: Don't start kicking Dal!

[from the tape of July 17, 1989]

Much of Angela George's life story is beyond my capacity, as a person from another culture, and younger person who has experienced far less personal suffering than she, to fully comprehend. The question I had

asked at her kitchen table, about how many children she had, was one of consequence. At Alkali, such a question necessarily carries another question, nested within it: How many children have you lost?

My question in the car, “how come you're not supposed to shoot it?” cut in on her story, and caromed the conversation off in a different direction than I think she had intended. A native Shuswap speaker would have shared with Angela an underlying cultural understanding of why men do not kill bears, and of the relationship between humans and bears. Her references to the time, “Just like in olden days,” and Jimmy's lack of belief in it, “Jimmy didn't believe it you're not supposed to kill a bear,” are also indicative of prevailing attitudes against such stories, or their discounting as “fairy tales” which was encouraged by the local Catholic priests. The story that she had been telling about her mother shooting a bear, meanwhile, was left unfinished as the children began to fight in the back seat. It was not resumed, and we drove on to other places, and into different stories.

#### **Telling stories to make sense of life**

Angela's way of explaining the making sense of her son's death, “and he did kill a bear and our boy died/ it's supposed to be like that” is a very different way of making sense out of one's life, actions and outcomes than the one I knew. What Angela presented was indexed to a larger, canonical story. Her brief reference to “olden days” indicates a similar anchoring of events to parallel orderings in another world, and leaves room for an understanding of the unthinkable, the loss of a son.<sup>2</sup>

For Tagish and Inland Tlingit Elders, Julie Cruikshank has found that stories with motifs common to many North American groups, such as the Star Husband Story, are used to explain events in storyteller's lives (1990: 339). Where such stories can serve as models relevant to a person's life, they may be drawn upon for the support and comfort they provide through their explanatory power. Similarly, references to the model of Christ's story of suffering, and the stories of mythical women warriors were used by Ruth Behar's Mexquitican consultant, Esperanza, to refer to the way her life is lived (Behar 1993: 11-12). For Angela George, the moral ordering of the world is still in some ways referenced to canonical stories, which have relevance for the way she lives her life.

### The conflict between orientational axes in two traditions of discourse

Angela George and I traveled together often for the rest of that summer. It was important to her to travel to the places where she had spent her days, to introduce me to her kin and to her former employers, to show me the places she had lived and worked. We traveled several times to Timothy Mountain, about 160 kilometres from the reserve, where she and her husband had once worked as a camp cook and hunting guide. We also visited her friends and relatives near Lac la Hache, where she had once worked for a rancher. Within the context of travel, Angela George told me about many key life events, including: her marriage to her first husband, her time working on the ranch; her illness, cured by her son's prayers; her visions and subsequent participation in Sundances; her trips to pick berries; and her time spent at the family cabin. At first, I thought the stories were told during travel simply because her house afforded no quiet (children running, TV blaring) presenting no way to record without distractions.

Sitting at Angela's kitchen table at the start of the summer of 1989, I had been attempting to impose that sort of chronological order on her story with the kinds of questions I was asking, and which Angela was not answering. Joel Sherzer provides a caution against this approach:

[g]iven the temporal organization of most narratives told in European languages, it is not surprising that narrative theorists, often without knowledge of non-European narrative traditions, define narrative universally in terms of temporal sequence.”

[1985: 303].

I find her own expression, “telling my life,” a most appropriate descriptor of Angela's narratives, because it does not indicate in any sense that chronology is an essential component of an ordered account. As I have discussed elsewhere, the telling of spatially anchored narratives for the Shuswap can be considered together as a “map of experience,” their telling being a way of maintaining knowledge of the land and its resources by the group. Until Angela explicitly categorized those narratives as “telling her life,” I was unaware that this kind of life story,<sup>3</sup> for the Shuswap, is also bound up with place.

It seems that this association of life story with place may be useful in the study of other cultures' oral histories and life stories as well. In her work with Haida Elder Florence Edenshaw Davidson, Margaret Blackman states that Davidson began the story about her life with “the drowning of her brother Robert, one

month before her birth,” but, “From that point on [...] there was little chronological order to the narrative” (1982: 16). In Cruikshank's work on place names with the Tlingit/Tagish elder, Mrs. Angela Sidney, she found that Mrs. Sidney would tell stories to explain the place names, and that “by imbuing place with meaning through story, narrators would seem to be using locations in physical space to talk about events in chronological time” (1990b: 347). Cruikshank (1990a) has also examined the work of Keith Basso and Renato Rosaldo with respect to narratives of place to show that life story accounts are often evoked by place, or even by the mention of a place name. Perhaps the strongest example of the latter phenomenon recorded in the literature can be found in Edward Schieffelin's *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (1976; see also, Feld [1995]), in which the Bosavi are described as driven to extreme sorrow and rage when a place longingly remembered is called up through the singing of its name. All of these orientational frameworks to story or song, whether documented or implied, indicate that temporality is only one of many ways of coherently referencing past events.

### Contrasting Form and Use of Life History Narratives

I have found that “telling my life” concerns the passing on of life experiences, themselves not temporally ordered, to another individual over time at shared intersections of experience and place. Hence, the temporally organizing element of “telling my life” is actually the shared time of storyteller and audience, as audience comes to know and understand more about the narrator through time. Within this framework, the narrative accounts which comprise “telling my life” refer to various points in time, in conjunction with place, and with relationships, to weave together a new understanding of self, and then to continually remake it.

“Telling my life” involves *repair*. Through recounting memories of the land and the stories the landscape contains, a narrator and audience knit their experience of a place into a new whole. It is a creative process. This has led me to consider that life stories may not be best represented in print in order of occurrence of events, as the shared experience of the narrator and audience should be taken into account as well.

I have also found that when listening to someone “telling their life,” being the *audience*, on my part, requires a complete engagement. I have to listen with great attention in order to determine what might be meant for me to understand with respect to my own life, to my relationship with my consultant, and what might be

important for others to hear later. As a writer/recorder/conduit, I need to pay attention so that I can be the ears for the Elders' grandchildren and others who will be reached through their tape recordings. In Angela's case, she wanted me to record these stories for her as well. She would like other people to know about how she has lived her life. My organization of the stories must reflect an accounting for that audience, as well.

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Briggs' (1986) volume. Briggs' cautions, I continue to find, do not apply only to interview techniques. For example, part of the interpretive frame that I brought to the field concerned a notion of professional self, and within that, some ideas of what it was to "do (good) fieldwork." I now have to ask myself what I think it is that an anthropologist *does*, and then ask if that is bound up with some idea of "collecting data," or with actually getting useful information. Some part of my notion of what "doing fieldwork" meant in 1989 included asking questions. It has taken me a long time to realize that most of fieldwork (at least, in Salish territory) is undertaken to discover what the "right question" is. And then to have the sense, rather than to ask, to consider how people have been telling me the answer all along.

<sup>2</sup>Salish tales of Bears associated with death, which include mentions of extremely violent acts Grizzly Bear Woman, can be found in Hanna and Henry (1995), Elmendorf (1993). For Clackamas versions of these stories, see Jacobs (1960).

<sup>3</sup>I would agree with Crapanzano (1984) that "the life history [...] is the result of a complex self-constituting negotiation," [whose dynamic must be taken into consideration] but I am surprised by his statement that the life history "is the product of an arbitrary and peculiar demand of another—the anthropologist." In my case, it was the consultant who made the demand which was first misunderstood, and the persistence of the consultant which led to the eventual work of recording and transcription and interpretation. I did make what were interpreted as arbitrary and peculiar demands in my initial misunderstandings of what "telling her life" would consist of, but these were generally met by confusion, reticence, and/or laughter.

It is a mixed blessing that this dear elder is hard of hearing; when we drove, she often misunderstood what I had asked over the car and road noise, or talked right over my questions, telling me whatever she wanted to. I have watched her guess at what others have said as well. Although sometimes questions that require immediate answers are misinterpreted, her responses to supposed questions are often much more interesting than the responses to my actual questions would have been. I suspect she may have at times guessed at what I had asked, and inferred that I had asked a culturally/situationally appropriate question.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* for directing me to