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“Do you Love the Town you Live in?": Narratives of Place from Australian Mining Towns

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Abstract: This article combines the authors' disciplinary locations in history and literary studies, exploring personal narratives as revealed in oral history from residents of Australian mining towns. These narratives operate as a kind of counter or vernacular history, presenting hidden stories not well represented in Australian national history and culture. We argue that regional vernacular knowledge, borne of local experience and culture some distance from the major cities, is somewhat difficult to access through predominantly city-based, professional academic networks.

Keywords: Oral History, Narrative, Interview Techniques, Regional History, Local History, Mining Towns

“I haven't worn you out have I? That's only part of it mate. There's so much I could tell you, but anyway...”

THESE ARE THE words of a man, Harry, telling his story. It is speech reformed into written word but there is no ‘persona’, and arguably no ‘narrator’. The speaker is an oral history respondent interviewed as part of an historical study of industrial and mining towns in Australia. The quote is from the transcript, transcribed from a digital recording but largely unmodified, conducted in Broken Hill New South Wales (NSW), Australia in April 2006.¹ It comes from the end of a long interview, where the craft of the storyteller was unusually pronounced. The control of the narrative, the selection of incidents, the rhythm, the humour, the evocation of emotion and empathy are all techniques of storytelling or narrative.

From the point of view of a researcher undertaking an historical study, interviews like Harry's pose some significant conceptual and methodological challenges. As researchers we are drawing upon these

personal narratives to create, in turn, an historical narrative. As Reissman noted ‘Story telling... is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us.’² More generally, when people write or speak narratives they are telling stories, stories about who they are and where they are. Narrative is a literary device, an expression of perspective and a mode of writing.³ When narratives become the source and subject of academic study we have to think very carefully about the origin, expression and validity of the stories and the speakers. This is the core of oral history, which at its heart, is vernacular history told through personal narrative.

The framework for this paper is shaped by the authors' disciplinary locations in history and literary studies. From history we take an extensive tradition that tackles the provenance and veracity of written and oral sources. While oral evidence has met with considerable resistance within the discipline, over the last twenty years a large group of scholars have begun to explore its strengths and weaknesses.⁴ From literary studies we draw upon a concern for the meanings and shape of narrative and language, a subject of significant disciplinary focus, again in

¹ Interview with Harry Finlay, Broken Hill, 2006. We have used pseudonyms for these respondents. These interviews were carried out with the approval of, and monitoring from, the relevant human research ethics committees at the University of Newcastle and Monash University, Australia. The approach taken was a ‘life history’ approach, where the researcher asked a series of open-ended questions broadly structured around a respondent's life from their earliest memories to the recent past.

² Catherine Kohler Reissman, *Narrative Analysis*, Sage, Newbury Park (California), 1993, p. 1.

³ We are conscious of the extensive cross-disciplinary field which constitutes ‘narrative studies’, and the complexity and variation in approach. For our purposes we see narrative as culturally sanctioned and reinforced ways of speaking of the past. We read personal narratives as social products, where thoughts, words, phrases, and stories accumulate through social and cultural interaction and exchange. See, for example, Steinmetz, (p. 490) who asserts that ‘it has long been recognized that the construction of individual life stories is strongly conditioned by cultural narrative models.’ George Steinmetz, ‘Reflections on the Role of Social Narratives in Working-Class Formation: Narrative Theory and the Social Sciences’, *Social Science History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (Autumn, 1992), pp. 489-516

⁴ The list is a large one but some of the major works would include, Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: oral history* (revised edition – first published in 1978), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000; Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: the cultural experience of the Turin working class*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987; Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and other stories: form and meaning in oral history*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991; Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: living with the*

both written and oral forms.⁵ The broader project from which the interviews are sourced is an historical one. It is the narratives that people tell that is of interest to us but there are also the stories that are allowed to be told, and the ones that can be heard. In the following we outline the historical project, consider issues of knowledge production in relation to vernacular history, and sample the narratives emerging from the research. As we shall see, it is the dissonance between dominant narratives about Australian mining towns and the local, vernacular knowledge as revealed in the oral history interviews that reveals the value of this approach.

Before exploring some methodological questions and sampling the evidence, we want to put forward a hypothesis which we think helps explain the controversies, and anxieties, that surround the use of oral history as a research method. Oral history variously employed and mobilised, offers a potentially profound challenge to the shape and origin of knowledge production at least in western or western-influenced societies. By tapping into vernacular knowledge, by challenging or even just modifying the simple flow of knowledge from specialist expert to audience, oral history creates anything from a minor bump to a major roadblock in the accepted form of knowledge production.⁶

The specific form of vernacular knowledge we explore also has an uneasy relationship to an essentially city-based cosmopolitan or University culture. The political economy of academic history in Australia (at least) militates against research that reveals life beyond the capital cities. The largest, richest Universities in Australia with the most number of graduate students are located in the capital cities. On graduation this talented cohort with access to fine scholars and excellent resources percolates through the history profession into new appointments and research projects. On the whole they are very good at creating histories that reveal something of themselves. In the backstreets of inner city suburbs, in the heady mix of an urban intelligentsia, they have a 'feel' for topics that speak to their own lives in the city.⁷

Capital city universities are also staffed by scholars with 'cosmopolitan sensibilities'. They connect to a larger world of professional history with strong

traditions in European and North American scholarship. With some notable exceptions the local, the vernacular and place-based folk knowledge is not a priority when colleagues discuss 'the greats' of the profession and 'the big picture' issues of the philosophy of history. Funding, publication and reputation are all linked to perceptions of value located in place. This is no conspiracy, however, but a structured favouring of capital city and cosmopolitan research. The research student in Melbourne or Chicago or London will favour a topic where resources are close at hand, and where supervisors are imbued with the urbane certainty of those cultured cities. There is little if any doubt about the worthiness of the topic.

The vernacular knowledge and local experience that lies at the heart of small mining towns, usually many miles from major Universities, are, then, not easily accessible to humanities scholars. The regional vernacular, for example, lies outside of the structured patterning of university research. The coalescing of Universities, resources and intellectual traditions in capital cities makes historical research beyond these networks at times a lonely and isolated practice.

As Doreen Massey pointed out, however, it is no longer tenable for analysis to 'proceed blithely...as though the world existed on the head of a pin, as though it were distanceless and spatially undifferentiated.'⁸ Our lives are played out in the daily geographic space of action where we work, sleep, socialise, and exist. What you might call a 'geography of desirability', then, is enacted through a series of axes, international, national, and local. New transport options change the boundaries of that space, places rise and fall with the whims of the market, and the availability of investment capital. Yet even in the early twenty-first century the space which defines the everyday is shaped by the consanguinity of home, work and social life – a suburb and a surrounding area of a dozen square kilometres. While the first question asked of a stranger at a party would be 'What do you do?', the second question is likely to be, 'Where are you from?'. We locate ourselves, and seek to locate others, in place. This is powerfully reflected in the oral history interviews. 'Narrative research', according to Josselson, 'strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in

legend, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994. For a valuable recent review see Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *Oral History Review*, Vol. 34, issue 1, (Winter-Spring, 2007), pp. 49-71.

⁵ See, for example, Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism*, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1978 and W.J.T. Mitchell (ed), *On Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981.

⁶ By 'vernacular knowledge' and 'vernacular history', we are referring to informal, often hidden understandings of the world and of the past informed by experience and culture, rather than acquired through formal systems of education and training. The distinction between vernacular and official history was most influentially developed by John Bodnar, *Remaking America: public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, p. 13

⁷ A powerful statement of the notion that creativity and cultural innovation resides in the city in a fundamentally urban setting is Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Classes*, Hazard Press, Christchurch, 2003.

⁸ D. Massey, 'New Directions in Space', in D. Gregory & J. Urry (eds) *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, Macmillan, Hampshire, 1985, p.12.

society, history and time.⁹ We would add 'place' to this list as the personal narratives from mining towns reveal both geographically specific and marginalized experiences.

The task for us, then, as the researchers and writers of this history is to record the narratives of place offered by the respondents but also 'read through' the narratives of place constructed from other centres, whether they be political, geographic or academic. All too often what could be called a 'dominant narrative', a 'dominant discourse' or an 'official history', offer a picture of Australian mining towns as representing the absence of culture. At this point we encounter one of the principal insights offered by personal narratives of place. They connect with a lived experience of place which reveals an often hidden or marginalised feature of local society and culture. For example, one common assumption may be that towns like Mount Isa in north western Queensland are populated by hard working, hard drinking miners and their long suffering wives. This is a caricature that is rarely if ever matched by local realities. Mining towns, including Mount Isa, have a complex cultural diversity. One local man and his life story illustrate some the complexities of culture, migration and perception. Sigge is a miner at Mount Isa who came to the town in 1984. He was of Finnish origin but even here his relationship is somewhat tentative as he arrived well after the main period of Finnish migration to Mount Isa and maintains an arm's length relationship to the local Finnish community. Mount Isa's Finnish community emerged in the 1930s and grew in the immediate post-second world war period as kin and chain migration supplemented the early arrivals.

Sigge was born in a small village in central Finland, grew up in Sweden, and spent many years travelling through Africa, Europe and lived in Canada for a period before coming to Mount Isa. In 1985 during a trip to the Philippines he met his future wife, and they married in Mt Isa a year later. His son is being raised with what Sigge calls both European and Filipino culture. Asked how he understands himself he replied, 'I am just a person from the global village.' A miner and talented builder he shuns the local hotels, revels in the cosmopolitan mix of his own household and the freedom, space, climatic heat and human warmth that the town gives him. This reflective Finn who married a Filipino belies stereotypes about local culture, miners and Mount Isa.¹⁰ Sigge's story reflects both the multicultural nature of Mount Isa society with its earlier history of Finnish migration, and the complexity of relation-

ships local residents have 'to place'. While many, including Sigge, express a strong commitment to place, Sigge's relationship is complicated by his transnational experience and his links to both Finland and the Philippines.

That Sigge's story operates as a counter or vernacular history often disrupting national assumptions about place is confirmed in examples from other towns. The mining town of Queenstown, near the west coast of Tasmania, where gold and copper has been mined from the 1880s, has a national reputation as a site of environmental destruction. The spectacular bare hills that surround the town were understood to be the principal marker of that destruction. For non-locals the image of these hills, denuded by pollution, bushfires and poor soils, was one of the defining images of the late twentieth century backlash against unfettered industrial progress, which gained momentum in Tasmania and Australia in the 1970s and 1980s. Coupled with this outside perception was an identification of locals as simple and inward looking, almost complicit with the polluting industry. 'Locals' apparently lacked the sophistication and awareness that seemed to come with city-based social movements and green politics.

Queenstown residents are fully aware of such outside perceptions. Paul is a single man who worked in the mines, and devoted much of his life to union, labor party and more recently Council politics. He noted that, 'Tasmanians have got these preconceived ideas about the West Coast.' When asked to elaborate he said 'Well we've got two heads around here. We're stupid. We're rednecks.'¹¹ Another respondent, Janice, made a very clear connection between the outside perception and local perspective:

I know people think we're you know, hillbillies, but like I say to them well, do you love the town you live in? Cause I do ... I try and tell them, don't come here and condemn it. ... But I don't think it's right, once they've got to come here and they've got to learn about it. And find out why the hills are bare.¹²

In this case the respondent links the outsiders' view with a call to visitors and new residents alike to understand more about the nature of those well known hills, in order to transcend the dominant narrative on Queenstown with a local, vernacular understanding.

If there is an exception to the general cultural marginalisation of mining and industrial towns then it would be Broken Hill. On the western edge of New South Wales not far from the border of South Australia, Broken Hill has a national resonance unusual

⁹ Ruthellen Josselson, 'Narrative research and the challenge of accumulating knowledge', *Narrative Inquiry* vol. 16, no. 1, 2006, p. 3.

¹⁰ Interview with Sigge Lampen.

¹¹ Interview with Paul Richardson, p. 13.

¹² Interview with Janice Redman, p. 6.

for mining and industrial centres in Australia. One important and obvious advantage is its size. A city of some 23,000 people is difficult to ignore. Although there has been a definite decline since the halcyon days of the 1950s when the town's population topped 30,000 Broken Hill has not experienced the steep decline of other towns. Historians, both academic and popular writers, have extensively studied Broken Hill's history. The town has appeared in numerous literary works and films.¹³ Broken Hill has a cultural presence that is entirely different to the almost entire negation of some mining towns and their histories.

Despite the fact more is apparently known about Broken Hill nationally, it nevertheless occupies a highly circumscribed place that does little to acknowledge the complexity of the town's history and culture. Broken Hill is seen as the 'Gibraltar of Unionism', a site of major industrial conflicts, the origin of major national and now multinational mining companies, and an old mining town with residual working class toughness but little else. What is left out in these images is local culture and social history.

One Broken Hill respondent spoke of the presentation of industrial relations in Broken Hill by the media in Sydney and Melbourne in the east.

You'd have three years of freedom. It made it really look silly when the Eastern papers would call Broken Hill a Communist place and all that, and they'd have wildcat strikes on the wharves and everywhere else, and we'd have industrial harmony here. Now who was the ratbags? It wasn't here.¹⁴

Another respondent remembers time in the hinterland, farming and boarding in town for school.¹⁵ The relationship of the town to the surrounding area is something almost entirely absent in dominant presentations of place for Broken Hill. The fact of its geography, hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest major townships in most directions is read nationally as isolation and abstraction from its regional context.

Interpreting the narratives contained in oral evidence is not always straight forward. Occasionally the 'problematic present' comes through in these interviews, with narratives which lament the youth of today, the growth of materialism, or the decline of their town. Yet such sections are clearly delineated and need not undermine the historical value of the remainder of the interviews. The present does not shape the memories of the past themselves. Where they do it is fairly obviously so. As David Lowenthal wrote in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 'no memory is totally delusive'.¹⁶

These interviews from mining towns then are worth careful investigation. It is necessary to read beyond the literal meaning of the words to explore the nuance, contradiction and complexity of each transcript in relation to other transcripts and other forms of evidence. Despite the remarkable ability of some respondents, no individual can exert an absolute control over the narrative structure and content of a long interview. Interviews in this sense are genuinely productive. They do not resemble normal conversation. There is a level of intensity and deep listening that is rarely found in normal conversation. Respondents find the process so valuable because many have rarely if ever been listened to so carefully.

A powerful theme in personal narratives as revealed through oral evidence is the role of place in memory and personal identity. Place plays a starring role in all of these interviews. Place was the day to day reality of people's existence, it shaped what Anthony Giddens called people's 'practical and discursive consciousness.' For respondents the bedrock of their memories is the texture and tangible elements of their town-based lives. Their stories reveal a local dimension to place-based experiences, upsetting common assumptions about place, and revealing a vernacular knowledge which is often difficult to uncover in the face of powerful national assumptions about these people and their places. By understanding that some histories and stories are difficult to access by city-based researchers, we can tune in to a rich regional vernacular knowledge. As Harry points out in the beginning, there is much more he and others like him can tell us.

About the Authors

Dr. Antoinette A Eklund

Antoinette Eklund secured her doctorate from the University of Wollongong, Australia in 1999. She has taught English, Communication and Bridging programs in a number of Universities. Her research interests cover the

¹³ The Australian road movie *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) directed by Stephan Elliot is an example of the use of Broken Hill as 'landscape' but also the figuring of the town within the narrative structure as a 'town to pass through' and a well known city hotel (which has since closed down) as a film location. www.australianscreen.com.au/titles/priscilla

¹⁴ Interview with Peter Bennett, p. 7.

¹⁵ Interview with May Watson, p. 1–2.

¹⁶ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 200.

field of literary theory, culture and communications, as well as writing and reading. She is currently teaching writing at Monash University.

Prof. Erik Eklund

I am a historian who has published extensively on the labour and social history of Australian industrial and mining towns. My 2002 monograph, *Steel Town: The making and breaking of Port Kembla* won the 2003 New South Wales' premier's prize for regional and community history. In 2003 I published a co-edited textbook, *Australia to 1901* (with Martin Crotty). My current research project looking at a sample of six Australian mining and industrial towns is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. In 2008 I was appointed Professor and Head of School, Humanities, Communications and Social Science at the Gippsland campus at Monash University.

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