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# Memory as a Sense of Place: Migration and Narration in Whanganui, New Zealand

Suzanne MacAuley

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### Abstract

*I came on what they call an LSD trip, which is Look, See, and Decide. That's what they call it! I was like her [his wife's] ... her satellite camera because I had to go back to South Africa and memorise everything that I had seen* (Andrew Brown, interview with author, Whanganui, New Zealand, 15 March 2001).

This article focuses on the process of remembering through the dynamics of narration. Material for analysis is based on my longitudinal study of an immigrant sector of global diasporic academic and medical professionals in Whanganui, New Zealand. In terms of a different and richer conceptual perspective, I treat these narratives as “artefacts”, as well as performance texts, which evoke meaning from the creative processes and aesthetic practices of the art of storytelling. As sensory artefacts (verbal, aural, emotional, kinaesthetic), these performed narratives are analogous to containers of memory such as tangible objects like photographs and journals in the interpretation of their layered meanings. The process of narrating memory in terms of multiple perspectives of place emerges as a crucial theme of this study. For example, Andrew Brown's statement of creating memories for the future contrasts with the usual practice of recollection of the past. His reconnaissance visit to New Zealand from South Africa anticipates and gathers memories to share with his wife. He collects and stores mnemonic information in light of their future emigration, while still gauging present realities in both countries. Other narrative themes pertain to creating a temporal sense of place through memory-making by conjuring past and present meaning in light of forecasting the future.

Keywords: memory, migration, diaspora, personal narrative

*One of the things that dawned on me with emigrating to a new country, is the concept of dying in your adopted country. And ... um... [I'm] not comfortable with that. I would never have ... it would never occur to me in South Africa. I mean, that's the place where I was born. That's the place [where] I am going to die. And now ... now that I have relocated to a foreign country, I'm actually going to die here. I am going to be buried in a different ... different country. And that worries me ... To me it feels strange ... that I am going to die in a foreign country (Athol Steward, interview with author, Whanganui, New Zealand, 3 October 1997).<sup>1</sup>*

This is one of the more eloquently poignant passages to emerge from the early stages of my ethnographic study of an immigrant sector of global diasporic medical and academic professionals living and working in Whanganui, New Zealand, since the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The city's built environment of fading Victorian facades, neoclassical edifices, and moribund private clubs attests to an intermittent history of largesse and neglect. The most recent round of economic and aesthetic revitalisation, begun in the past two decades, coincides with the arrival of different waves of immigrant groups of doctors, lawyers, educators, psychologists, and dentists from other countries such as Canada, the United States, Great Britain, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Serbia, and Croatia. South African doctors are more prevalent in this group, both professionally and in terms of nationality. For the purposes of this discussion on how memory operates in the crafting and performance of personal narratives, excerpts from interviews with two South African doctors will be critically examined in light of narrated migration stories, cultural performance, and themes of memory and displacement.

In this article, I regard Whanganui, located as it is on one of the world's edges (the west coast of the New Zealand's North Island), as a microcosm to examine how all the linkages, or oppositions, transplants, and overlaps manifest when global dynamics converge with locale due to an influx of these cosmopolitan professionals. My larger ethnographic study delineates experiences of immigration as expressed, imagined, critiqued, and performed in personal experience narratives by a number of different expatriates. Consistent with many interviews, the extracts represented here also present an "actor-centred view" of the impact of globalisation on individuals within a particular community, revealed through their various perceptions and registered in their words and actions.

Many of these collected interview segments narratively operate from multiple perspectives of place vis-à-vis melding memories of the homeland while pondering future realities of life in a new location. With reference to the opening narrative excerpt, imagining death in a foreign country shifts the tenor of discussion away from merely describing a predicament to confronting reality of a different magnitude. By voicing the unfathomable, the narrator, Athol Steward, a South African doctor, taps into one of the salient themes of exile (dying away from home). At the same time, he experiences a heightened awareness of what the implications of global estrangement might mean for him personally.

On one level, Athol Steward acknowledges and identifies with an ancient, yet universal, dilemma for exiles and immigrants. On another level, he critiques

his reaction to it relative to his own life experience as it is being narrated in a particular moment in time. This section is expressed like a coda to the rest of his narration, where he spontaneously takes the opportunity to indulge in visionary memory creation while puzzling over feelings rather akin to nostalgia for an imagined past that will never occur. Finally, the doctor's thoughts yield to consternation and anguish over his dawning realisation of the real implications of his personal quandary and circumstances. To him, this truly amounts to a graphic break from the past and a severance from the legacy of his roots.

This interview passage is also a powerfully moving narrative event coloured by self-reflection and wonder, thus intensifying different sensory modes of performance. These involve an array of kinaesthetic body movements (e.g., rocking in place and swallowing), different hand gestures, glances, and facial expressions that accompany varying voice inflections and contribute to the mood of the narration and its reception by the listener. Inherent in this process is a somatic subtext that affects the relationship between researcher and participant and has a bearing on the subsequent interpretation as well. For the speaker and the listener, the aural aspects of interviews allow mutual access to sensate experience through the sounds made, the modulations, the shouts and whispers, the very tone of voice. In his work on sound and meaning, Steven Feld cites “the potential of *acoustic knowing* [my italics], of sonic presence and awareness as potent shaping forces in how people make sense of experiences”.<sup>3</sup>

By paying attention to bodily movement and feeling, or channelling other sensations that are aroused during the recitation of a particularly moving narrative passage, the interviewer tacitly collaborates with the narrator in coming to understand the corporeal basis of subjectivity, interaction, and narrative practice.<sup>4</sup> This understanding offers another way to know and gain access to a deeper, more immediate, level of “felt” experience and meaning. A subjective bodily engagement with one another in the interview context helps us to dissolve barriers of difference, as we try to sense the wellsprings of another's somatic knowledge, thereby approaching the source of shared embodied thoughts and memories.<sup>5</sup>

For analytical reasons, I interpret the interview fragments offered throughout this discussion as self-contained narrative events. In company with other oral narrative analysts (such as Charles Briggs, Richard Bauman, and Erving Goffman), I characterise narrative events as moments during an interview when stories become intensified in their delivery. This is not necessarily in a theatrical sense, or specifically limited to a dramatic rendering, but moments conducive to reflexivity and intersubjectivity that engage and bind us verbally (and non-verbally) and deftly turn us from interlocutors into corresponding actors and audience. The survey of performative elements in this folklore of entanglement evolves from an ongoing critique of verbal art as performance and performance analysis.<sup>6</sup> The scope of this body of work helps to apprehend the function and significance of moments of meta-communicative finesse, not only preceding or marking performative vignettes within personal experience narrations, but also embedded in these verbalised enactments.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, as a folklorist operating under the joint influence of art historical and material culture pursuits, I methodologically reconstruct and frame interviews as “performance texts” consonant with my investigations of performance in the context of art-making. This idea of performance embodies a double consciousness on the part of the artist or performer—a creative consciousness intertwined with an interpretive one interacting simultaneously. For example, when a memory is recollected from the past it is being artfully re-created, narrated, and performed at the very same time as being recalled in the present. In terms of narrative analysis, I regard these fragmentary, yet self-contained, narrative events shaped by verbal artifice and animated by somatic experience as “artefacts”. They evoke meaning from creative processes and aesthetic practices of the art of story-telling *in situ*.

Thus a speech artefact is crafted in the narrative moment as it is being narrated in order to contemplate and explore the story within the story. Although verbal artefacts can be distinguished apart from the ongoing narrative continuum as self-contained story units, they are often integral to it. As sensory artefacts (i.e., evocatively visual, verbal, aural, emotional, aesthetic, and so on), these narrative events are analogous to containers of memory such as physical, tangible objects like photographs and journals shaped by past, present, and future forces. Furthermore, the interpretive concept of narrative artefacts aligns with a behavioural approach to objects like photographs. In this way an analysis of the dynamics of creativity and imaginative interaction with objects also transfers to sensitively critiquing verbally expressive and improvisational communicative acts contextualised in storytelling sequences.<sup>8</sup>

If these intensified narrative events are singled-out as self-contained performative speech acts, with the capacity to function and have meaning apart from a continuous narrative line, then the application of a more inclusive sensory and cultural analysis could potentially yield a richer synthesis of the verbal, the sensual, and the aesthetic. The interpretation of narrative acts as artistic practice (e.g., style and mode of delivery) is complementary to the process of reconstructing the aesthetic orientation of performative elements and re-animating cultural behaviour in context. This interpretive methodology can be expanded to measure creative expressiveness, improvisatory performative qualities, and aestheticism. When Athol Steward began to narrate thoughts about his own death far away from his South African homeland, his whole body language dramatically changed to convey his anguish over the thoughts he was articulating. His style of narration altered to reflect the switch from the tone of a rather informal conversation to a mode of intensified emotional and physical behaviour. An aesthetically-oriented narrative analysis encompassing style, sensate experience, and embodiment of thoughts helps us approach the depths of human feeling and understand a bit about the process of voicing the almost inexpressible.

Just as performance is process, so is memory. Memory has the fluidity and adaptive potential to both recollect and anticipate. According to James Olney in his work on memory and narrative, “memory reaches toward the future as toward the past and balance demands a poised receptiveness in both directions”.<sup>9</sup> The

following narrative excerpt exemplifies a “doubled” duality or the bifocal vision of the narrator, Andrew Brown, another South African doctor, where his narration about creating memories for the future contrasts with the more commonly understood practice of recollection of the past.

Because of financial constraints, the demands of his wife’s job as a lawyer, and for different family reasons, he left Tanya Brown behind when he first visited “to come and explore” New Zealand: “I came on what they call an LSD trip, which is Look, See, and Decide. That’s what they call it. There’s the pun.” During his trip around New Zealand, he registered his impressions through a kind of “double-consciousness”, that is, an awareness of—or speculation about—Tanya’s possible reactions filtered through his own perceptions. Andrew likens his role to being his wife’s “satellite camera”, where the results of his immediate data-gathering and reconnaissance are metaphorically stored in his memory for later “broadcast” upon his return to South Africa.

*A. B. I was like her ... her satellite camera because ... I had to go back to South Africa and memorise everything that I’d seen.*

*T. B. And I had a list of questions, you know? Because we couldn’t both come ...*  
(Andrew and Tanya Brown, interview with author, Whanganui, New Zealand, 15 March 2001).<sup>10</sup>

Each step of the way Andrew had to imagine Tanya’s responses as well as log information as potential memories for subsequent recall—gathered as data with an eye to the selectivity of creating memory. For the process of committing to memory is just as elusively mobile as its recovery later. In his writing about everyday life, Michel de Certeau reminds us that memory is often catalysed by disappearance.<sup>11</sup> The poetic transference of sensation to recollection, however, can start earlier as a form of knowing. This concept of self-conscious “memory-in-the-making” and “memory recalled” in a different context is inspired by de Certeau’s thoughts on “remembering as an act of alteration because the invisible inscriptions that make up memory become visible under new circumstances”.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the task of memory-making in this instance is imaginatively fore-grounded in Andrew’s thoughts as he divides his attention between anticipating and gathering memories to share with his wife back home. As a witness, he collects mnemonic information in light of their future emigration, while still gauging present realities in both countries.

*T. B. But he had a lot of fact finding to do ....*

*A. B. Yeah.*

*T. B. ‘Cause he even went grocery shopping with friends to see.*

*A. B. Friends in Christchurch to see what the cost of living is.*

*T. B. What food costs, you know, everything, yeah ... yeah ....*

*A. B. You know, ‘cause it’s an expensive exercise moving countries. As I’m sure people have told you. And a stressful exercise and, you know, you have to ....*

*T. B. Hmmm ... be very careful.*

*A. B. Have certain things available, you know? And I had to go back to South Africa and tell my wife because we couldn’t afford to both come and look. So I had to*

*try to get a very good cross-section of the society here and what the cost of living is about and how people live here. And cost of rentals, vehicles, finances.*

*T. B. Schooling ....*

*A. B. ... schooling ... everything ....*

*T. B. ... the works.<sup>13</sup>*

Tanya and Andrew are equally engrossed in their narrated report of his trip, reinforced by his wife's interjections used to support and testify to the truth of her husband's statements. Throughout the narration she adjusts, or allies, her memories of what she heard from Andrew with his memories of how and why he acquired this information. Their performative style persuades us that in the end their reciprocal caution and practicality influenced their estimation of facts and circumstances, until they mutually and definitively reached the decision together to emigrate. Their prudent orientation and deliberation in fashioning this unified narrative sequence enhance feelings of solidarity and commitment, which are reflected in how they harmoniously co-fashioned their dialogue.

At the beginning of their interview, Andrew portrays himself as the memory-recorder and an anthropomorphic container of memory, a human camera, which captures information for Tanya vis-à-vis Paul Ricoeur's sense of seeing "oneself as another".<sup>14</sup> This also alludes to the compound sense of double-consciousness or "bifocal vision" incorporating both near and far, that is, the immediate experience of New Zealand balanced with knowledge acquired from a longer biographical life in South Africa.<sup>15</sup> Andrew's position operating as a human satellite camera becomes more complex since he is suspended in liminal space (i.e., neither here nor there), as well as positioned between temporalities (past, present, and future). He is storing memory data in the present while looking forward to a future time of relaying this information to Tanya, and in terms of temporal continuity, looking into the distant future (perhaps finally settling in New Zealand). Sense of place is also central to memory creation in his narration. In this instance, it is really a sense of two places—South Africa and New Zealand—conjoined in memory and experience, by means of which he conjures past and present meaning in light of forecasting an imaginary future.

Andrew Brown's image of himself as a camera recording, containing, and transmitting memories for present and future use relates to Northrop Frye's description of how metaphor works: "metaphor helps us understand one domain of experience in terms of another because logically two things can never be the same thing and still remain two things".<sup>16</sup> Andrew whimsically represents himself as an instrument performing in a mechanistic domain of exploration and action, while still sensitively operating within the exacting personal terrain of relationship and dual decision-making.

The span or scope of Andrew and Tanya's narrative accommodates these divergent metaphoric spheres of memory creation and recollection without compromising cohesion and meaning. The sensory aspects of their breathless co-narration, where sentences overlap and truncate as if each person is finishing the other's thoughts out loud, further emphasise the unity of their narration through

an intensified self-absorption in the telling of their story. This deepens their affinity as manifest in the verbal interchanges between them, thus dilating while amplifying their intertwined and imbricated speech patterns.

The “satellite camera” passage is only one narrative event in a series of episodes narrated by the Browns. It exemplifies, however, many of the characteristics associated with these “stand alone” performance texts and narrative artefacts—intensity of tone, aesthetics, and style of delivery. This leads to a form of knowing and making sense of experience, acoustical force (the volume and cadence of the voices), and emotional overtones expressed in the fast pace of articulating sound into words. For example, note the repetitive echoes, overlapping words, and climax to their story: “T. B. Schooling .... A. B. ... schooling ... everything ....T. B. ... the works.”

As containers of memory and sensation, narrative artefacts suggest another realm of understanding and interpretation where, according to Michael Jackson, “individual experiences are selectively refashioned in ways that make them real and recognisable in the eyes of others”.<sup>17</sup> Although memory is a recurrent theme in these particular South African narratives, it is the process of how memory creation is catalysed by narrators through reveries and body movement that weds sensate experience and the sense of experience together. Honouring the power of speech, and recognising that as words are formed memories are released and then shaped according to circumstance, allows us to better understand the workings of the mind in the moment.

When Andrew and Tanya’s dialogue is parsed into a string of verbal artefacts, rather than the common method of parsing to identify grammatical units, one begins to understand how conceptualisation, improvisatory behaviour, and action transform and merge into utterance. Narrative artefacts suggest that they are as multi-faceted as physical objects, and can also be turned over in our mind’s eye in order to glimpse the obverse sides of words as entrances to different meanings taken to new levels of comprehension. This is what is meant by the narrative artefact as not only a container of memory, but also a receptacle for the breadth of sensory experience realised through acts of narrating.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Athol Steward, interview with author, Whanganui, New Zealand, 3 October 1997.

<sup>2</sup>Suzanne MacAuley, “Diaspora by Degree: Narrative and Performance in Interviews of Expatriates from Wanganui, New Zealand,” *Journal of American Folklore* 117 (2004): 262-87.

<sup>3</sup>Steven Feld, “Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea,” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1996), 97.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion on physically manifest interactions between interlocutors in interview sessions, see Larissa Buchholz, “Bringing the Body Back into Theory and



Methodology,” *Theory and Society* 35 (2006): 481.

<sup>5</sup>Refer to Deidre Sklar, “Reprise: On Dance Ethnography,” *Dance Research Journal* 32 (2000): 72.

<sup>6</sup>See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1984); Charles Briggs, “Metadiscursive Practices and Scholarly Authenticity in Folkloristics,” *Journal of American Folklore* 106 (1993): 387-34; Deborah A. Kapchan, “Performance,” *Journal of American Folklore* 108 (1995): 479-508; and Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro, “Bauman’s *Verbal Art* and the Social Organization of Attention: The Role of Reflexivity in the Aesthetics of Performance,” *Journal of American Folklore* 106 (2002): 62-91.

<sup>7</sup>Berger, Harris M. and Giovanna P. Del Negro, “Bauman’s *Verbal Art* and the Social Organization of Attention,” 79.

<sup>8</sup>Suzanne P. MacAuley, *Stitching Rites* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2000), 62-63, 105-06, 133-34.

<sup>9</sup>James Olney, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 343.

<sup>10</sup>Tanya and Andrew Brown, interview with author, Whanganui, New Zealand, 15 March 2001.

<sup>11</sup>Michel de Certeau quoted in Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 81.

<sup>12</sup>Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 81.

<sup>13</sup>Andrew Brown, interview with author, Whanganui, New Zealand, 15 March 2001.

<sup>14</sup>Alluded to in Michael Lambek, “The Cares of Alice Alder: Recuperating Kinship and History in Switzerland,” in *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, ed. Janet Carsten (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 236.

<sup>15</sup>See Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (London: Vintage, 1998), 213.

<sup>16</sup>Referred to in Joanne B. Mulcahy, “The Weight of Faith: Generative Metaphors in the Stories of Eva Castellanos,” in *Living with Stories: Telling, Re-telling, and Remembering*, ed. William Schneider (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2008), 112.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002, Reprint 2006), 11.

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### Biographical note

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