Katrina Narratives: What Creative Writers Can Teach Us about Oral History

Anna Hirsch and Claire Dixon

Abstract: Creative writing graduate students—living in post-Katrina Louisiana and struggling for a means to aid their devastated community—ask their peers about the stories they are telling concerning the hurricanes, how their peers construct their individual hurricane narratives, and how the creative process/discipline bears on the material we call history. The authors frame the discussion around Ronald Grele and Alessandro Portelli's writings on narrative. They argue that the oral history informant and the professional storyteller are linked by certain common pursuits and practices and thereby create common byproducts as well and that these connections offer useful insights into the study of oral history. In this essay, they work to bring the two disciplines together and to explore possible overlaps so that we might benefit from a place of new understanding not yet imagined.

Keywords: creative writing/fiction, Hurricane Katrina, interdisciplinary, narrative, storytelling

Writers today may be hard pressed to hear stories, to relate the writing process to the sound of words. With easier access to quick editing tools such as the computer, we tend to think about writing as pixilated blocks of text. But as Margaret Atwood points out,

We listen before we can read … . We have all been little pitchers with big ears, shooed out of the kitchen when the unspoken is being spoken, and we have probably all been tale-bearers, blurters at the dinner table, unwitting violators of adult rules of censorship. Perhaps this is what writers are: those who never kicked the habit.¹

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Ultimately, Atwood suggests, the writing process is a combination of our dynamic oral tradition and a finite structure, a guide we impose on behalf of the story. Certainly, the writer’s work draws on many kinds of knowledge, not least of which is the art of verbal storytelling.

As creative writing graduate students living in post-Katrina Louisiana and struggling for a means to aid our devastated community, we wondered what stories our peers were telling, how they were constructing their individual hurricane narratives, and how the creative process bears on the material we call history. This essay focuses on two creative writing graduate students who were studying at LSU during Hurricane Katrina. The data are vertical in nature; hence, we do not aim to reconstruct or tell the history of Katrina. Rather, we are interested in exploring the relationship between creative thinking and storytelling as critical to the work of the oral historian. We look to better understand the idea that most of the time we act first—then tell stories to describe our actions. Writers hear other voices before they ever set pen to paper. Then they impose plot, character, and a fluid writing style. We ask how might oral historians benefit from paying attention to the creative process in the retelling of past action, that is, the process by which our informants give us the nuggets of history we seek? And what might creative writers add to that discussion?

Our thinking is born in part from Ronald Grele and Alessandro Portelli’s work on narrative in oral history and in part from our experiences as creative writers. What we offer in the next few pages are glimpses and insights that we hope will springboard a larger conversation. We believe that oral history and creative writing are both useful modes of inquiry that can reveal truth. Furthermore, we believe that history and creative writing are linked by certain common pursuits and thereby create common byproducts as well. We hope that by bridging these two disciplines, we might crack open a place of new understanding not yet imagined.

Let’s take a moment and briefly revisit some terms that we generally take for granted even in our efforts to more clearly define and articulate their meanings. What, after all, do we mean when we say “history” and how is it different from “story”? As we know, history derives from the Ancient Greek ἱστορία [historia], to learn or know through inquiry, record, or narrative. Historians use narrative structures over and over again to produce their histories. But the historian does not merely compile a series of narratives (otherwise, oral history is famously “endless activity without goal or meaning”). There is also learning and knowing—what we often call historical awareness—attached to the historian’s narratives. Story is not so different. Like history, story also derives from the ancient Greek ἱστορία. Not until after c. 1500 did story come to mean the recounting of fictitious events for the purpose of entertaining. Arguably, the crucial difference between our contemporary notions of history and story, then, is that one produces “the real” and the other a fake reality. Many creative writers would certainly take issue with this distinction. For creative writers, fiction might be the form, but the creative process also produces human and therefore social truth. For us, truth—very much the real—lies in the ability of the writer to evoke and to engage the reader. The storyteller is in fact foremost a truthseeker, an illuminator, a solicitor, a fully aware creative thinker whose narratives are riddled with knowledge and wisdom concerning the fictional narrative.
Ronald Grele writes, “historians are trained to understand and analyze the varieties of historical thought and their cultural context” (emphasis added).\(^5\) We suggest similarly that creative writers train themselves to understand and recreate the varieties of human thought and their realist context (realist for the particular reality that the writer has created). Both vocations assume that methodological rigor—be it scientific or creative—is necessary to move from gathering and perceiving to honing in on those slice-of-life events we say represent truth. (We do, after all, train for years at the graduate level in order to earn that pesky Master of Fine Arts degree.) Perhaps more intriguing than the finer, philosophical differences, then, are the larger, practical similarities that story and history share. Both creative writers and historians are also arbiters of narrative, constantly seeking narrative, processing narrative, dissecting and constructing narrative, and attending to the loops and holes and narrative revisions that critical inquiry tends to produce.

Moreover, Grele notes that “oral history interviewing is simply an extension of that training into the field.”\(^6\) But the production of oral histories is discrete from the work of text-based historians in at least one truly exciting way. Oral histories take shape through the combined, live effort of the interviewer and interviewee—always with two captains at the helm who work in tandem to produce what Grele says, “can only be described as a conversational narrative.”\(^7\) This conversational drama implies a unique historical undertaking in which the scholar is no longer reliant on the apparent stasis of the written text. Unlike written text-based historians, the oral historian has the opportunity to mine a historical narrative from a hot body—a thinking, speaking other. Oral historians who subscribe to Grele’s approach assume, therefore, that the informant’s discursive style—the changes and revisions and visions of the interviewee’s reportage, whose story is fluid and real and specific to the interviewee’s worldview, though bounded by the particulars of the interview set-up, chiefly, the interplay between interviewer and interviewee—is, in fact, germane to conducting, understanding, and interpreting oral histories. As Grele writes,

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\text{If we fail to see our interviewees as bearers of a culture and thus people with their own view of the past, be it formed as part of a hegemonic ideology, or in opposition to that ideology, or as some combination of myth and ideology, or even a secret history, we will, because the information must be structured, infuse our own vision of the past into the interview.}^{8}
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Far from condemnable, therefore, the imaginative or ideological as it is part of the interviewee’s worldview is integral to the work of the oral historian. Focusing on this conversational narrative creates a democratic shift away from the traditional role of the historian as gatekeeper toward a looser, more exploratory dialogue between two thinkers who are both “experts” at their craft, whether storyteller/interpreter or story-chronicler/interpreter. In fact, Portelli tells us, “Oral history … offers less a grid of standard experiences than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined.”\(^9\)

As creative writers, we bubbled with excitement and knowing as we read Portelli’s conclusion: “As sciences of the individual,” neither oral history nor literature can, Portelli writes, “be subsumed under the grid.”\(^10\) To be sure, creative writers are not invariably cloud driven, prodigal fluff dealers, a stereotype that falls far short of common practice. Instead, the typical creative writer works creatively and systematically to construct or invent an imprint of life that is as lifelike as possible.
In particular, writing and studying the craft of writing teaches us many things, namely, that in the face of a living world that is outrageously complex, a web of tangled subjectivities, a barrel full of Me’s pulling at each other in different directions, we must, acting as creative writers, operate as a magnifying glass and work to bring into sharp focus (if, therefore, also slightly distorted like any discipline distorts its object of study) the nuts and bolts of an authentic, though fictional, human story vis-à-vis narrative structure. As one of our professors has noted more than once, “Aren’t writers really just amateur psychologists?” Amateur psychologists who hope, we suppose, through the alchemy of individual perception and narration to discover humans anew.11 In this capacity, as seekers of the human story, we now ask, is it possible that the creative writer’s obsession with storytelling, this blown-up and refined study of narrative, might serve as an innovative, interdisciplinary tool for evaluating oral histories?

In the Spring 2006, we began thinking more deeply about this question by first asking more questions. We gathered a handful of creative writing graduate students at a local coffee shop on a Friday afternoon — camcorder in tow — hoping to find some answers. Mindful of the small number of interviewees that we had invited, we employed three strategies in order to consciously frame our research not in the common academic pursuits of oral history, but rather in the mysterious quicksand of interdisciplinary experimentation.12 First, we made a concerted effort to talk with individuals that we expected would represent a wide variety of experiences. Among the people we interviewed were Penelope Dane and Clarence Nero, both of whom were present in south Louisiana immediately before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Penelope Dane, a thirty-year-old white woman, grew up in Massachusetts. At the time the hurricane struck, Penelope had lived in Louisiana for less than two months. Clarence Nero, a thirty-four-year-old black man, was raised in the Desire Project of New Orleans’ Ninth Ward. Both Penelope and Clarence are primarily fiction writers.13 Second, during the interviews we asked the interviewees two discrete sets of questions. The first set focused on their experiences surrounding Katrina and followed a basic chronological pattern, akin to the oral histories being conducted en masse throughout the sudden New Orleans diaspora. We designed the second set of questions to look at the interviewees’ writing lives. These questions were familiar in a different way — the way an interested reader might approach one of their favorite writers in hopes of learning how to be a better writer themselves. And third, we were cognizant of letting the interviewees meander away from our questions when they chose to, using our questions primarily as a tool to provoke further reflection.

Primarily a fiction writer, Penelope Dane told us that she tends to write “about shallow, self-centered New Englanders.” The specificity of this description is in line with Penelope’s primary narrative concern — character. “I would like to feel my writing is more character-driven,” she told us. Penelope’s process begins and ends with believable characters and an authentic voice. This authenticity of voice lies at the core of Penelope’s storytelling and informs much of her sense of narrative truth. As a child, Penelope told us, she got into writing because she cared about voicing individual personality, namely her own. “I was a very hidden child. My goal now is to be visible,” she told us. Penelope learned early that she could use her stories to reveal and expose the voices, the lives, the attitudes, and the histories of her characters.14
But the work of honing her craft has not always been easy. Penelope said several times that she struggled in graduate school because it had “messed with [her] process.” “Before I came to grad school,” she said, “writing was something I enjoyed. Now it’s hell. It’s me and this blank page and saying shit shit shit. And I don’t know how to fix it.” Later she explained her frustrations with an analogy:

I love to sing and I know I can’t sing on key. One day I realized that, wow, I’m really off key. But I didn’t know how to fix it. When I write, it’s like every sentence has this right sentence that’s the opposite of what I just wrote. And then even when I am on key, I don’t know it. I want to be able to hit the key and know I’ve hit it.”

Penelope wants to master her craft so that she can get the story right. But she also wants to know that she has “hit the key,” that her stories sound authentic even to herself. Getting the story right, being able to interpret and influence her work and her audience in a particular way, is not enough if she does not also know that she is managing to do so. Penelope’s search for artistic and interpretive control stretches beyond those pockets of accidental beauty we assume occur for the savant artist. Here, the writer who revises and revises and revises strikes a sort of chiasmus with the oral history interviewee who has likely told her/his story many times before. This practiced narrative, so much like a practiced song, reveals nuances of intentionality that have historical significance beyond the immediate sphere of the teller, especially when multiple versions are available for study.

Penelope’s writing process suggests an important impulse—the desire to tell the story and to tell it well. Of course, the conscious desire to express what might otherwise be suppressed, as Atwood reminds us, is a habit that can be hard to shake. In some cases, the story itself may be hard to shake. The first thing Penelope told us when we asked about her impressions of the days following Hurricane Katrina was that “There was no music on the radio.” Penelope returned to this idea of the radio several times, using this detail to frame her experience and her perception of the chaos she saw spreading across the Gulf Coast:

There was nothing else on the radio. There was no information. And I remember how hot it was. There was no music on the radio. The radio was all
just saying if you need food go here. They were talking about the people on
the roofs. There was no help. On the Saturday or Sunday after Katrina when
I was working the phones at the Red Cross I was telling people the information
from the radio. I told them to listen to Diva. When people called the Red
Cross they didn’t get very good help.  

Penelope used one hard fact, the lack of music on the radio, to show us a glimpse
of the lives of Louisianans trying to find much-needed information in the days
immediately following the hurricane. She continued to focus on the human details
(character information) to illustrate her discomfort with other aspects of her Katrina
experience. Penelope indicted one of the volunteers at a Denham Springs Red
Cross shelter for being blatantly bigoted:

We marked hands so they’d only get one bar of soap. I mean, there wasn’t a
problem with there being a lot of stuff. And these two black women came up
and this church lady said, “Are y’all kin?” Then she said to me, “I know that
was mean, but you can’t trust them” …. There had to be a way that wasn’t
so degrading to people.  

Again, Penelope honed in on a specific detail—in this case the enforced sharing of
soap—to show us what she found significant about post-Katrina life. New to
Louisiana, Penelope likely pulled on the concrete realities of her immediate
experience—in lieu of a longer history in the area—with which to relate her
personal ordeal. Yet, the creative sieve through which Penelope processed her
experiences is also strikingly similar to her writing process. Both as a writer and as
an informant, Penelope uses storytelling to bring attention to specific personalities
details in order to humanize them and create context. Penelope as informant is
Penelope as storyteller.

Unlike Penelope, Clarence stressed the big picture: “As Americans we all have a
responsibility to not give up and not forgive.” With a keen sense of ownership—
both of New Orleans’ residents and of its neighborhoods—Clarence stated, “These
are my people. I’m from New Orleans.” A native of New Orleans, Clarence Nero
was able to draw on a long history with the city in order to narrate his personal
experience of the hurricane and its terribly human and institutional aftermath.
When we asked Clarence about the days surrounding the levee breaks, he spoke
passionately about his family’s experiences evacuating from the poor, low-lying
areas of New Orleans. “Thank God my family’s doing ok,” he said, “I had a strong
feeling something was about to happen. I insisted they leave. But they don’t
evacuate in general.” “Eventually,” he told us, “ten people showed up in Baton
Rouge. They were stuck here. Of course, we lost track of some people. And then
finally we got some calls.” We asked Clarence when things got back to normal.
“Things are not back to normal,” he answered. “They won’t be for a long time.”
Like the oral history interviewee searching for the right words and having to look
no further than experience, Clarence’s Katrina narratives are guided by intuition
and a desire for greater social justice. “These are stories that I want to tell,” he
said. “For fourteen years, no one wanted to hear it. But now the Ninth Ward is
famous.”  

Just as place can be a powerful reality for others, for the characters in our stories
and the people in our historical narratives, Clarence has also discovered that context
effects his own personal and professional life. After the hurricane hit, Clarence told us, “I couldn’t focus. I had lots of trouble writing at a time when I really needed to focus. So I did what you’re doing. I got their stories—our stories—down while I could.” This is not the first time Clarence has struggled with his writing process: “When I started writing I didn’t know where it was going to go.” Of course, a host of convening factors must be in place, including the emotional safety and stability of the writer, for a story to come into being. For Clarence, a black man living in the American south and taking a heteronormative world (both black and white) head-on in his fiction, finding a room of one’s own is of exponential importance. With relative safety in place, creative writers can and do identify, exercise, and learn new ways to improve their creative selves in order to relocate the story (at times traumatic) that they carry inside onto the page. This can be an exhilarating process, as Clarence pointed out, “Voices came from a place that I know very deeply. I am inspired by their stories. They inspire me.” The creative process is honored by most creative writers as a sometimes unkind, but always extremely fulfilling beast, a process that must be worked at and for.20

Indeed, not everyone in Clarence’s community could harness the voice of the Ninth Ward’s story or felt the same urgency to tell it. Clarence identified both at an early age: “As a kid one day there was this voice. It needed to speak out and say something. This was my character, Cheekie.” (Cheekie, the title character of Clarence’s first novel, is a young boy who grew up in the Ninth Ward.) Like Penelope, Clarence feels a responsibility to represent people—his people—through both the words he speaks and the words he writes. Where Penelope might privilege character in her fiction, however, Clarence seems to favor place. “I tell stories according to a sense of place,” he told us. For Clarence, getting the place (the setting and the context) right is requisite for an authentic story. Knowing deeply the ability place has to dictate action, Clarence works concertedly to elevate his truth, the marriage of place and those who inhabit it, into the consciences of his readers.21

Still, Clarence’s writing process is imbued with a desire to get it “right.” “Writing,” he said, “is hard and it takes a lot of time to get it right. Work at it. Be patient. Keep working.” Like Penelope, Clarence admits that writing is largely subjective. “I still have to pump myself up,” he said, “tell myself how good I am. I like comments telling me how good I am.” Though his work is fictional, his goal is to recognize truth in kinship, camaraderie, home, community, and place through storytelling. Emphasizing our shared history and story, Clarence asserted, “I want to see more people putting pressure on their politicians. We’re all in the same boat. Nature doesn’t discriminate.” To do so, to put pressure on the ill systems in our world, Clarence offered the following wisdom: “Be true to yourself,” he advised us. Then, keenly aware of the individual creation, the ownership of story, one’s own story, and the power that ownership has to make and break the actions of others, and at the very least, to bear witness to the historical and social moment, Clarence recommended solemnly, “Make it your own. Bring your own voice and your own skin.”22

Both Penelope and Clarence are exemplars of the Atwood hypothesis: creative writers really are little pitchers with big ears. And yet, by now you may be wondering—can studying creative writing actually help illuminate the everyday work of oral history? As Alessandro Portelli writes, “the motivation for
telling the facts is in most cases the desire to formulate a philosophy,“ the desire on the part of every human to in fact become, “interpreter rather than datum, ‘philosopher’ rather than ‘fact.’” 23 What we have found working on this project is that we—all of us—are driven to create narratives that are both universal and unique. We imagine that the creative writer’s struggle to humanize and represent through narrative is an innately human struggle, that both Penelope and Clarence serve as good examples of how the facts and the philosophy, the data and the interpretation, the truth and the worldview, of the amateur interviewee as well as of the professional storyteller must be considered as a package, and that ultimately, the texts themselves, the stories, the novels, the oral history interviews, are all our history, no matter who wrote them and with what purpose in mind.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of all is this truth: “there is no narration without interpretation.” 24 As such, if we want to better understand our world, the social fray, the individual heart and ambition, we better get as creative in our studies as the subjectivities we aim to understand. Indeed, creative writers are already working creatively to name, describe, illustrate, and analyze this hotbed of human activity. For creative writers, narration is interpretation. As Clarence tells us, “You learn the craft. But the stories are in you.” 25 Of course, further study is needed to draw out and make use of the links between creative writing and oral history and to unmask all the ways that these connections might contribute to each discipline. The real job of making creative writing a viable, interdisciplinary tool for oral history, demands that we look more closely at the texts themselves—all the texts. As Grele reminds us,

If we read (or really listen to) again and again, not just for facts and comments, but also, as Althusser suggests, for insights and oversights, for the combinations of vision and nonvision, and especially for answers to questions which were never asked, we should be able to isolate and describe the problematic which informs the particular interview. 26

Whether or not our informants choose to make storytelling a vocation, to attempt a more self-aware relationship with these “conversational narratives,” does not change the fact that we all have stories to tell. As Penelope told us sagely, “Everyone is unique and has a story to tell, and it’s important to sit down and tell it.” 27 In fact, we know that our informants are not generally creative writers by profession. Yet our informants—our collaborators—are human, creative, left-brained and right-brained, fallible, striving, complex, carbon-based thinkers who muddle through the act of narrative creation every day. Beyond questions of mere craft, the key contribution that creative writing could potentially offer to the work of the oral historian, therefore, is this notable gift: simply, an appreciation of creativity as the real.

NOTES

2 As writers, it is our job to be leery of words and their ability to make and break meaning, for they are the most basic tools we have for articulating our ideas.
4 It behooves us to note here that not all creative writing is narrative based, and although we focus in this essay primarily on a single form — story — all forms of creative writing can and often do employ narrative elements.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 136

8 Ibid., 142.


11 The words — as close to memory as possible — of James Bennett.

12 This is not to suggest that our interviews and our process were somehow un-academic. As Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us, “All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.”

13 Again, the almost exclusive use of narrative structure in contemporary fiction writing lead us to feature the interviews of two fiction writers in this essay. Though, we could have chosen, for example, a poet whose work is narrative based or a playwright.

14 Penelope Dane, interview by Anna Hirsch and Claire Dixon, March 1, 2006, Baton Rouge, LA.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Clarence Nero, interview by Anna Hirsch and Claire Dixon, March 1, 2006, Baton Rouge, LA.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


24 Ibid.

25 Clarence Nero, interview by Anna Hirsch and Claire Dixon, March 1, 2006, Baton Rouge, LA.


27 Penelope Dane, interview by Anna Hirsch and Claire Dixon, March 1, 2006, Baton Rouge, LA.