Fast Forward: Oral History in a Time Of Change
would have produced more clarity if he had first clearly defined the myths, and then explored the reasons why they were created.

One example is ‘The Myth of the Volunteer.’ Dapin challenges the myth that every conscript in Vietnam was a volunteer. Dapin makes the observation that most of the National Servicemen thought they were volunteers for Vietnam. This is in spite of the fact they had been conscripted under the National Service Act. Conscripts are generally not considered as volunteers. Further check of the Defence Act Section 50C would suggest that the Army had the right to deploy any member of the Army overseas, no matter what their preference. Dapin cites Malcolm Fraser’s answer to Parliament, indicating that the Army was not to give national servicemen a choice on their deployment to Vietnam.8

While debunking this myth, Dapin fails to elicit from his informants why many Vietnam veterans considered that they were volunteers. He does not provide the reader with any information as to why these men claimed they were volunteers. While he cites those who claimed that there were parades where a choice to go to Vietnam was given, and others who were sure there was no choice, he does not analyse what they perceive were either a form or parade to indicate a reluctance to serve in Vietnam. It would be very interesting to know why the idea of being a volunteer should be so important to these national servicemen, and Dapin fails to explore this issue. As Portelli tells us, even a false statement can give us an insight into history and the realities of an era.9

In his foreword, Dapin states that he did not interview all the interviewees. He accepted the word of an interviewee about the veracity of another veterans’ story of his national service time. For oral historians this is a strategy fraught with danger, which may result in obtaining one community view, instead of many individual variations of the same history. The interesting part of this admission is that one non-interviewee was happy with his portrayal in the book.10 This is another area which should have been explored, national servicemen training and fighting together knew much about each other.

Dapin does give us a starting point for further research. As an oral historian, I found many questions sitting among the information that Dapin provides from his interviewees.

There is much to like about the book, as it provides some new information about national servicemen’s life on the battlefield. Perhaps Dapin attempts to cover too much ground in trying to cover the whole war. The book may have been stronger if he had concentrated on just those areas where myths have appeared. However, he provides information which will help those oral historians who are interviewing war veterans, as well as showing us that war veterans do not necessarily reflect the official version of history.

(Endnotes)


7 Dapin, op.cit., p. 35.

8 Ibid, p. 96.


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Review


How does racial violence happen?

Rani Pramesni wanted visitors to ponder this question in her immersive installation-based performance Chinese Whispers, informed by Chinese Indonesian memories of the May 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia. The installation was also a personal exploration of Pramesni’s personal identity and feelings about the riots, which triggered her family’s migration from Indonesia to Australia when she was twelve years old. Chinese Whispers was created while Pramesni participated in the Emerging Cultural Leaders program.
at Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2013, where she was mentored by the Vietnamese Australian playwright Chi Vu. Visitors to the installation moved through a physical maze wearing a pair of headphones, through which we listened to excerpts of Pramesti’s personal narration and her interviews with Chinese Indonesians in Australia as they recounted their own memories of the riots.

The use of oral history in what was originally envisioned as a typical theatre performance was accidental but it enabled Pramesti to construct an immersive installation that combined features of a physical exhibition space, including objects and a theatre piece, with one live performer. Pramesti originally intended to create a work based on the migration stories of Chinese Indonesians in Melbourne and involve the participants as actors in the final work, but there was a problem. The participants led busy lives and could not attend regular performance workshops, so Pramesti interviewed them about their migration stories. The result was 14 hours’ worth of interviews but no actors, so the installation piece was born. With Ria Soemardjo, an Indonesian Australian musician who composed and recorded the soundscape, Pramesti identified themes from the stories that participants had provided. However, she came across an ethical problem: ‘Whose stories do I have the right to tell?’ She resolved this by focussing on what made the most impact on her. These were the participants’ memories of the May 1998 riots and she wove their memories into her own ‘Hero’s Journey’ narrative.

Triggered by economic problems and high levels of unemployment, these riots consisted of mass violence, burnings, lootings, rape and killings mainly targeted at ethnic Chinese Indonesian businesses and homes across several Indonesian cities including Jakarta where Pramesti’s family lived. In at least three cities, more than 100 women were raped and more than 1000 people died in shopping mall fires in Jakarta and Solo between 12 and 15 May. The riots also contributed to the fall of President Suharto’s regime and his resignation on 21 May. Not all interviewees experienced the riots first hand and for most interviewees the riots were not a trigger for their migration to Australia as the riots were for Pramesti’s family. This enabled Pramesti to explore the riots from different perspectives and come to the central question at the beginning of this review.

Visitors wandered in pairs with headphones through the narrow passageways of the maze made with translucent white fabric, moving to the next room through aural cues. In the maze we encountered objects to touch and explore such as origami newspaper accounts of the riots while we listened to Pramesti’s narrative and her interviewees’ memories. Vines of green paper leaves and lanterns entwined with the soft glow of Christmas lights enveloped us, ‘holding’ us, in Pramesti’s words, in order to guide us through the traumatic memories.

Natalie, one of Pramesti’s interviewees later explained why remembering the riots was important to her.

We don’t want to open that room. It was there, the experience and sort of impact. We don’t want to go there anymore. It’s unpleasant but how do you heal or how do you make sure this does not happen again if you don’t learn from it. That’s why it’s healing.

The first room began with Pramesti’s childhood in Indonesia and visitors were invited to spin a zoetrope, an early form of animation, which showed a child running. According to Pramesti.

When the riots happened I was only 12 years old and up until 1998 I thought of myself as just another Indonesian person but after the riots happened, and even as the riots were happening, I came to realise that people perceived of me as ‘Chinese.’

The feeling created was that of an idyllic childhood which was destroyed as visitors walked along the corridor lined with paintings of the riots leading to a room exploring intergenerational hate. The anti-Chinese violence that occurred in May 1998 was not an isolated occurrence in Indonesia’s history, according to Pramesti’s narrative and the books we flip through on the bookshelf. In the next room, we heard Tara, one of Pramesti’s interviewees, categorising groups of Indonesians as Cina or Chinese and Prihumi or ‘people from the earth’ — the latter term being used as a racial slur. The message was that racism goes both ways. Around the next corner, we were confronted with a set of drawers and we were encouraged to open them. They contained weapons — an iron bar and two rocks that fitted perfectly into the palm of an adult’s hand. While listening to graphic accounts of what individual interviewees witnessed during the riots, we picked up the weapons, forcing us to contemplate the reasons for hate. Holding one of the rocks, I learnt how it might feel if I threw it at someone I hated and also what it might feel like to be hit by one. We were soon urged into the next space where an animation of the riots surrounded us. Are we perpetrators? Are we bystanders? Or are we victims? And what does it mean to be each of them?

Pramesti’s narrative then led us into the next room where we sat down in front of a Catholic altar. The soundscape was calm and soothing. Visitors were encouraged to reflect on what we had experienced and to leave a message with a few words of what we had learnt. These messages were later attached to the outside walls of the space. The final room acted as a debriefing space with actress Fanny Hanusin inviting visitors to try a vast array of Indonesian snacks and drinks and to chat about our thoughts, experiences and feelings.

Through the intimate construction of the maze and her careful narration, we saw the influence of Pramesti’s
training in social work, as well as theatre, as she sought to gently and thoughtfully guide us through the difficult and traumatic memories. The installation was deeply moving and reflective as it engaged our senses and emotions through its design and the combination of lighting, sound, spoken personal narratives and physical objects. The installation was difficult, however, if a visitor had mobility problems because of the small, intimate spaces or a hearing impairment because the experience relied so heavily on listening. It was also a didactic experience in that we were prompted to think about and respond to the May 1998 riots and Pramestí’s central question at the end of the journey. By then we learnt that, in poet Mark Gonzales’s words, ‘You cannot heal what you will not face.’

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Review


This is a splendid production that utilises an obvious, though powerful, formula. The authors invited thirteen oral historians to present an excerpt from their own or others’ work in a situation of recent state crisis, catastrophe or trauma. Interviewers have a page or two to introduce themselves and the occasion for interview/s. Then follow, in each chapter, up to a dozen pages of transcription, followed by a commentary on the interview. The sites of trauma include Srebrenica, Hazara refugees in Australia, the massacre at Virginia Tech, the Cuban rafters, Rwandan Rescapés, Hurricane Katrina, the drug war in Cuidad Juárez, poisoned workers in China, Rwanda again, US Army chaplains in Afghanistan, and the World Trade Centre.

Every contributor has thought deeply about the interview and has much to discuss. Each raises lots of issues or questions, of which I pull out just a few randomly. Selma Leydesdorf notes about her Srebrenica interview with Hanifa:

Whenever I present the translated interview to MA students, their reaction is always the same. ‘It is chaotic; there is no plot, no timeline, and no information. This woman is obviously too traumatized to give a good interview.’

But, Leydesdorf warns them that only a perfunctory reading will bring up such a blunt dismissal. Interviewing Reza in Australia, Denise Phillips cautions that he may have consciously or unconsciously slanted his narrative, desperately bidding for any form of influence with the Department of Immigration. Phillips warns interviewers to beware of raising expectations that we have little power to fulfil. Elizabeth Campisi remarks that Cuban refugees arriving in Miami in the ‘nineties felt great pressure to conform to a narrative that presented life in Cuba as invalid and negative.’ Interviewers pass the message to each other – ‘You have to get to them before they learn what to say.’ The closing of options in the refugees’ reflection and memories, she concludes, squandered opportunities for the rafters ‘to heal themselves of the trauma of leaving.’

The Tutsi Kiroli, interviewed by Taylor Krauss, far from being grateful for having survived, thinks himself as a walking fatality: he ceased living when his children were killed by Hutu and his lineage was therefore eliminated. Eric Rodrigo Meringer derives the lesson, from his interviews with Juaires residents Raul, Rosa and Jonathon, that media emphasis on drug cartels v antinarcotics forces, wrongly subsumes all violent crime in that city as part of the drug war. Working with soldiers in Afghanistan, the army chaplain Christina, interviewed by David W. Peters, used to be offended by soldiers swearing. Not any more: ‘They protected me. They carried my bags.’ Another chaplain, Timothy, found himself in the crosshairs of an enemy: ‘The bottom line was, that at the end of the day, I told everybody that I wished one of them would kill him… It sure shocked a bunch of them.’ Mary Marshall Clark comments on interviews with Zohra, a Muslim New Yorker after the attack on the World Trade Centre, that she first wanted to tell the stories of her ancestors whom she invoked to help her make meaning out of her own experiences of September 11.

Timothy reflects that his chaplaincy work is not exactly that of the oral historian. The chaplain is more interested in healing than in determining the accuracy of the story. The primary task is to help the soldier make meaning out what has happened. Do we oral historians unconsciously do that too? I wonder. When is the narrative of catastrophe complete? asks Clark. Oral history is a parable ‘that often fits for those doing oral history in time of emergency and after, particularly in deeply politicized moments when state actors define the meaning of events unilaterally, and collective memory is constructed to eclipse narratives that challenge historic norms of suffering andvalor.’ The psychoanalyst Ghislaine Boulanger notes that ‘psychoanalysts have been encouraged to take a more comprehensive view of our patients, to understand that they are embedded within a culture and acted upon by history.’ These are deep questions, and indeed, the book throws up issues like this on every page.

It’s something of a pity that five of the chapters, nearly half the book, relate to the United States. Refugees making their way to Italy, inmates of Indonesian holding centres, Vietnamese boat people, Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, the Forgotten Australians and oral histories conducted in South