

**“Can You Imagine?”: A reflection on the divergent and convergent practices of Oral History, Broadcast Journalism, and Podcasting.**

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“Can You Imagine?” podcast subject and narrator Deloris, with my father in March 2020, a few weeks into Covid lockdown.

I'm going to start this reflection with a little story about how this thesis project came about... which illustrates the role of serendipity in my life and in all things. Or as my deeply religious narrator Deloris would say, not serendipity at all, but God's will. Which is a huge part of her story.

I started working on my Oral History Masters (OHMA) thesis with a completely unrelated project in mind. I'd already done copious amounts of work on this project, one that stemmed from my Curating Oral Histories class, which - as these things do - had morphed over time, becoming more complex and expansive, appropriate to thesis length work. But I'd also spent three years of my coursework attempting and failing to take a Journalism School podcasting class. That had always proved impossible - a combination of requirements, logistics and oversubscribed class rolls. Finally in the last year of my part time studies, with one class left for me to take, the opportunity presented itself and I couldn't turn it down. It seemed serendipitous. (Now as I struggle to meet insane deadlines, another word comes to mind... )

The class, "Telling True Stories in Sound" is taught by a master podcaster, [Daniel Alarcón](#), and in past years it had been a free-form course telling audio stories of a general nature. I hoped to use my already developed project and adapt it to this class, combining both; one stop shopping. But unbeknownst to me, at the last minute the JSchool was motivated to add a theme to the class - immigration. The course was now "Telling True Stories (about Immigration) in Sound," which I discovered in the first class when Daniel said, "Let's start by going around the room and talking about our interest in immigration. Lisa, you go first." My thesis project had nothing to do with immigration, so I was mildly panicked.

But I realized almost immediately that there was a story I'd been interested in telling for some time and it was *all* about immigration. It was Deloris's story, the woman who'd come into my family's life decades earlier as the extraordinary nanny who helped raise my two kids for ten years. She then stayed in our lives as a close friend until we employed her again, to take care of my 98 year old dad, who has severe dementia.

Deloris came to this country from Jamaica, eventually became an American citizen, brought her grown daughter here, and at the age of 67, has for the first time begun thinking about retirement back to Jamaica. In many ways it's a very typical immigrant story, but this one has so many twists and turns, and Deloris is so eloquent, that it lends itself perfectly to both Oral History and narrative podcasting. It's about immigration and "The American Dream," but it's also about politics and racism and COVID and the American nightmare. And of course it's all about serendipity/acts of God.

Its working title is "Can You Imagine?" which is apropos for a few reasons. First - it's Deloris's catchphrase. She uses it all the time, right up there with "Lord have mercy," and "Can you believe it?" (either of which would be a good title as well). Secondly the events of this story are, in fact, somewhat unimaginable. Who could imagine that at the age of 65 this woman who has lived paycheck to paycheck - and sometimes not even that - was suddenly able to buy her dream house? And not just any house, but a mansion, some ten miles from where she grew up in very humble beginnings. And that it's all because of a global pandemic that has caused so much pain in the world. And that in realizing her dreams, she was able to minister to a dying man and nurse him back to health, at least for the foreseeable future. Add to that the fact that she bought the house sight unseen. This meant that by the time I took the podcasting class, she and I were set to travel to Jamaica so she could see the house for the first time, revisit her hometown and reunite

with a childhood friend who has already returned from the US to retire in her own dream home. These provided immersive scenes and unfolding plot twists. Can you imagine, indeed.

I came into this project, and into the Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) program from a long career as a traditional broadcast journalist and filmmaker. Thumbnail sketch: 17 years at ABC News working my way up from secretary straight out of college to magazine longform producer at PrimeTime Live, anchored by Diane Sawyer and Sam Donaldson. Then I moved to CBS News 60 Minutes when it added a second night. I was there for six years. I left to write a book around an ongoing high profile story I'd done at both networks. I made documentaries for HBO and Oprah Winfrey's Doc Club while teaching journalism at Columbia Journalism School. Now I run a pretty serious national journalism prize at the J School, the duPont-Columbia Awards, which is the audio and video equivalent of the Pulitzer Prizes (whose office is located across the hall). All of which is to say I've spent a career pretty steeped in "Big J" Journalism.

When I started studying Oral History I had no idea how the two fields - Oral History and Journalism - overlapped or contrasted, which is the main thrust of this reflection. My thesis project, a podcast about a very personal story that I myself am enmeshed in, is yet another departure from both old-school broadcast journalism *and* Oral History. That's because the burgeoning field of podcasting has brought listeners into a hybrid world of personal storytelling and journalism. So in doing this work I've been presented with at least three different but adjacent practices. As someone who has been involved in all three, I can talk about my process and in doing so, explore the questions raised by adhering (or not) to the tenets of each of them.

## MY JOURNALISM LENS:

As I said, my background is within a traditional TV network, one that began back in the last century and ended early in this one. Even then, in the 80s/90s/-00s of my time there - and in fact since the medium began - there has always been an ongoing tension between journalistic rigor and commercial demands. While I saw many instances of commercial demands besting journalist rigor during my time in the network news business, I would say that since I left in 2004, standards have relaxed/disintegrated further. And so today's "traditional network" rules allow for more "story-telling," facts be damned or re-arranged, and more blurring of the journalistic lines. ABC, NBC, and CBS all have "news" magazine programs that were once investigative and substantive. And while all three news divisions still have Standards departments that are designed to watchdog journalistic ethics, sadly 20/20, Dateline and 48 Hours have all been true crime fests for several years now, complete with re-enactments that are so sensational and formulaic, they're even satirized on Saturday Night Live: <https://youtu.be/K5Lv6t0moFY>.

But to look at the times I came up through, a typical move up the ladder of national network news went like this: You pay your dues. You report short quick-turn news. Little depth beyond who/what/when/where and if you're "lucky" a few seconds of drama and a few good visuals. It's mostly "day of air" or "spot" news. You master harrowing deadlines and hundreds of logistical steps - booking crews, writing shot sheets, pulling file tape, conducting short pre-interviews when you can; making and airing a story out of one interview, some file tape and graphics.

In this rung of the ladder there's not much opportunity to blur lines. Here is where you learn the basic hard and fast rules of journalism. They revolve around the maxim: "Credibility is a journalist's calling card." So these rules are mostly to ensure the

credibility and accuracy of reporting. They include: corroboration is king; absolutely no paycheck journalism - if money - or its equivalent - changes hands it calls the reporting into question; don't fabricate; don't re-enact events as though they're really happening; don't cross the line with your story's subjects and get involved with them; don't take sides and certainly don't cede authority over the reporting. In the news business you don't advocate. At the networks, we were not permitted to make campaign donations, to sign a petition, to publicly take a stand on any issue, let alone march at protests. But making one to three minute hard news stories in quick turnaround doesn't afford much occasion to do most of those things anyway. And you have no time to march in protests...

Some TV reporters make that a life's calling, flying in and out of hotspots and resetting almost every day. But most others, like me, consider it the first move up the ladder, heading towards longer and longer form stories, with greater depth and narrative. The pinnacle that most never reach - because who can afford it - is feature documentaries. (Obviously that's not the only end goal, but it's a common one. ) That's the basic trajectory.

I followed a version of that path - a smidgen of hard news, and then a hard right towards longer, more researched, character-driven stories, as a newsmagazine producer.

The standards I listed earlier got harder to adhere to at the magazine level. Longer form skewed towards deeper narratives, with compelling subjects. The needs were great for a long piece - STORY....CHARACTERS... and ACCESS... plus at the most serious of shops - SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION, where all those other elements combine to

inform and educate but in a way that doesn't make eyes glaze over. The longer the form, the more engaging it needed to be.

All those elements required developing relationships. That meant spending lots of time with subjects, asking them to dig deep into their past for possibly their most painful, sensitive moments. Crossing the line, negotiating agency, staying at a distance from the subject, all became trickier.

My own experience mirrored this tension. I did my share of celebrity profiles, which has its own nightmarish brand of murky boundaries, but on my own time I found myself more often drawn to portraits of ordinary people who responded to a particular challenge that inspired or modeled social justice themes, or at the very least, a deep humanity. There were so many ways in which my best reporting incorporated aspects of Oral History, and also necessitated rigorous self-examination to navigate increasingly fuzzy boundaries.

In fact, I reviewed my journalistic body of work when reflecting on this OHMA project, and I was struck by a consistency I hadn't fully realized before. My subjects were often elderly or had lived a full life that they looked back at for our story. They were plain spoken and passionate. They were usually seen as "other" by the mainstream. They wanted to make change. Parenthetically, they were often hilarious. There was the octogenarian jazz musician/junkie/ex-con-turned-advocate for journeyman musicians who needed support to break their drug habits. There was the veteran Federal prosecutor who couldn't lock up a repeat child molester in his high profile missing child case, so he pursued another child abuse case where the victims were marginalized and their case ignored, and he got justice for *them*. There was the elderly Navajo man who had kept silent for decades about his heroic exploits in WWII as one of the now



celebrated code-talkers. And the 80-plus-year-old who lovingly cared around the clock for his Alzheimer's-patient wife, illustrating the marital vows at their most literal. The aging veteran Army colonel-turned-activist, a decorated Vietnam War nurse, who was the highest ranking military officer at the time to have been expelled from the military for being gay. The elderly Jewish surgeon who pioneered gender reassignment surgery in small town Colorado. The longest serving death row inmate who was about to be executed and maintained his innocence while he told us his life story. I loved profiling a subject with a rich history who could look back and help us learn from his or her life story. I admired them and wanted to celebrate them. I often stayed in touch, even befriended them *after* the story had aired.

It all makes sense! Now I understand why I was drawn to Oral History.

#### MY VENTURE INTO ORAL HISTORY

I entered a field where the focus was on memorable life stories, and tales of daily living that added up to something culturally informative. Where it was accepted, encouraged even, to bond with the subjects (aka narrators), to break bread and share across the interviewer/narrator divide, even if that didn't mean dissolving that divide, but understanding it and celebrating it. Where the obligation of the interviewer was first to the human subject and then to the work. I was relieved at the thought that my narrators would have shared authority over the work, that I wouldn't have to be (as) concerned that I was exploiting them. Where I didn't have to feel guilty about giving my winter coat to a doc subject after I'd filmed her being evicted in the middle of the winter. What a relief to continue many of my practices while doing journalism, now in a space where they were openly accepted and encouraged!

I began to see some of the ways in which the best practices of Oral History and journalism diverged. To revisit the some of those laid out above:

Corroboration: In some cases, there's a two source or even a three source rule in journalism before something can be reported, especially for investigative journalism. In Oral History, the "reporter" is really a conduit for the narrator's memories, and the memories stand as they are. There can be second sourcing or other accounts that contradict the original narrator. But there's no inherent *obligation* to corroborate an account. Instead, except in the case of interviews gathered solely for archives, together the interviewer and the narrator are often undertaking to make meaning out of the words, to interpret, including using the context of others whose memories may be contradictory. When they encounter conflicting stories, oral historians do not have the journalist's responsibility to do additional corroboration; they can allow conflict to persist. One helpful way I have come to see the interests of Oral Historians is as collectors of testimony, the testimony of witnesses to their own experiences, which are then used to construct meaning around an event, a movement, a historical moment etc.

"Checkbook journalism" is a hard no: In contrast, in many of my Oral History discussions over the past three years, paying our narrators was a *goal*. The sense was very different - that we are asking them for something valuable, and aren't we exploiting the labor of the interview and of their lived experience and compromising their ownership of the narrative if we harvest it and put our names on it for our own financial or other gain?

Getting personal with your subjects: In Oral History that is encouraged. There is an attempt to create a bond, to encourage highly prized intersubjectivity in the interview, an interactive, collaborative experience between the two that leads to richer, more in depth

outcomes. In journalism, personal relationships raise the question of conflicts of interest. Motivations become murkier.

Agency/Shared Authority: As a journalist, I could discuss areas of interest with a subject before an interview, but sending them the questions ahead of time was a serious ethical breach. As was sending them the work-in-progress, and certainly not the finished work before it was presented publicly. This called into question the journalistic integrity of the independent reporting.

This of course was complicated - how to reconcile that with journalistic fact-checking, also an imperative? Fact-checking was a sensitive process, one that I nonetheless engaged in scrupulously as a journalist with an eye towards getting the story right, since journalism, especially broadcast journalism (somewhat less so print) is fundamentally a reductive process. In a typical story I might be compressing several hours long interviews, reams of background research and my own interpretations into a 10 minute piece that accurately reflected the bigger bucket. "Would it be fair to say something like ...x, y and z?" was my go-to phrase as we got closer to air. But never - "The script says x, y and z - is that accurate? Is that what you wanted to say? And if not, what should I change it to?" In Oral History the rules are the complete opposite. Subjects can and must be able to access all the original interview material. And they have to agree to it all. They have the right to withdraw permission at any time, and to require excisions in the final product. This is *their* story, and in the collection of the material, the oral historian is serving them, by helping them to tell it. It is as if the interviewer is helping to translate the story in order to facilitate sharing it and perhaps analyzing it or interpreting it for a wider audience. The translator/interviewer shares the authority over those memories with the narrator. There is also more room within Oral History for the narrator's role in shaping

what comes after the interview, for the shared authority to include that interpretation of the memories and to have some agency in whatever ultimately results from the interview.

Advocacy: Taking a stance on a story is very rewarding. “Advocacy journalism” - an oxymoron for some - means the hard work can go towards needed change. It has impact. This is something we talk a lot about in the duPont Awards office, because we value impact as a criteria for the award and as an important journalistic goal. But it’s tricky. As a journalist, if you are going into a story with a set point of view, and your motivation is an already established end point, that can jeopardize the accuracy of the reporting. If your reporting contradicts or complicates your original idea - and it often does - you are faced with a dilemma. As an advocate, your final results may be determined by your initial motives, instead of a mandate to examine different sides and give a fair, nuanced representation of the subject. The challenge becomes how to achieve the highly valued *impact* of journalism while also avoiding advocacy - and the optimal approach is to go into reporting with an open mind, and come to conclusions that *then* lead to the impact. It’s a question of intention.

I grappled with all these distinctions in my practice of Oral History during my time here. I relished my kinship with narrators. I even sought out friends whose stories I was interested to tell, and was *free* to tell within this discipline. I appreciated the luxury of knowing that my account of a story would be fully vetted by the original source. On the other hand, I also struggled with the idea of giving so much agency to a source, who was able to withhold information after the fact, or change their original version of events. This discomfort was tempered by the knowledge that as the ultimate author of the work, I may then go on to interpret those final words, and use other voices to clarify and qualify those accounts.

As in any Oral History project, there is also the painful prospect that I could spend weeks or months pouring myself into a project when at any step along the way the narrator had the option to pull the plug. Nowhere was this more of an issue than in my thesis podcast on Deloris. I discovered after conducting several interviews and most of the way through an exhausting field trip to Jamaica that Deloris was unlikely to grant permission to make public certain aspects of the story - ones that were central to the project. It turned out she was highly reticent to make public any details about the new house she had bought, the cornerstone of the narrative. It's been hard to commit myself to the painstaking and arduous creative process, not to mention the sheer hours and frustration of mastering the needed skills, knowing that I might have to either leave this story in the classroom, or in order to publish make drastic changes, possibly untenable ones, to the narrative. On the other hand, Oral History practices afford the opportunity to reach subjects who might *never* have been willing to tell their stories otherwise. Deloris illustrates this advantage so well. She wouldn't have opened up in the first place, allowed me to record her journey, without the understanding that she had final say about its ultimate outcome.

With all of these considerations and contradictions of the two fields, I approached my thesis project with a mix of gratitude for the Oral History lens that allowed me to take on this highly personalized, narrative non-fiction podcasting project, and an apprehension about how fruitful it would be.

As I contemplated this project I thought about what an interesting one this was to approach in the face of all these tensions between journalism and Oral History. It tackles most of the above list - conflict of interests; giving subjects control over the work; crossing boundaries in ways that can compromise integrity, even checkbook journalism

in the most literal sense, since I write Deloris's paychecks. I'm completely subjective about Deloris. I have about 20 conflicts of interest at play here - not least of which are that I both love her and I am her boss. I'm completely part of the story and oh, she keeps my father alive, and about 17 other red flags. Note - as I said, since today's journalism is a shape shifting field and shifting more wildly by the minute, there probably are people who would consider this project to be journalism; it is in fact a project I'm making for a journalism class. Nowadays, it sometimes seems like every young journalist wants to tell their own story - certainly the journalism *students* want to. But I'm still old school enough, with my traditional news background, to feel much more comfortable labeling this as Oral History based narrative non-fiction. True Stories in Sound, without the journalism trappings. I would deal in facts certainly, which keeps the work in the journalism space. I would use my judgment to stay true to her intent when moving things around, synthesizing her words into narration, or deciding what to leave in or take out. I wouldn't have Deloris re-enact moments, and I wouldn't direct her, like an actress, to complete a story arc. But I was able to tell this story about someone I consider as close to me as my family, and give her a say in what I would leave out if it caused *her* discomfort.

## MY VENTURES INTO PODCASTING

Narrative podcasting has exploded over the last decade. And just like storytelling on any platform, the words apply to a wide range of content, only one subset of which has journalistic roots, for example [This American Life](#), or [Radiolab](#) or NPR's recently canceled [Invisibilia](#). These are shows whose calling cards are sources, fact and corroboration. They use story to creatively engage audiences to stick with the substantial discourse.

Some journalism podcasts are serious investigative series, like Michigan Public Radios' [Believed](#) uncovering the egregious history of gymnastics coach Larry Nassar, or a personal favorite, the rigorous while also edge-of-your-seat [APM's In the Dark](#) Season 2. It painstakingly uncovered judicial malfeasance in Mississippi in the case of a Black man wrongfully convicted of murder. *In the Dark* had an impact of the highest order - Curtis Flowers is now free because they dove deep into his case until it ended up in the Supreme Court. The medium also specializes in wacky you-can't-make-this-stuff-up series like Wondery's "The Shrink Next Door," with a tagline that promises "A summer party. A stormy night. And a shocking revelation about Joe's neighbor next door." And of course there is the avalanche of true crime podcasts, the ones making all the money, and the ones getting most of the resources. But even though they run the same gamut that you might find in the visual medium, podcasting is just different.

Narrative podcasting has a style that's more informal, more conversational. Listening to a successful podcast can feel like eavesdropping on a funny, tense, dramatic, gossipy private conversation. Podcasters are telling personal stories, often about themselves and loved ones, straddling the boundaries of where the storyteller leaves off and the subject begins. In narrative podcasting, storytelling is typically more centered than substance. That isn't to say these kinds of podcasts can't be journalistic and informative, but the emphasis tends to be different. The intimacy of a voice in one's ear lends itself to a sense of personal bond with the audience, and consequently draws the connective thread tighter between that audience and the story's subjects. To me this all puts podcast style more on a continuum towards Oral History's interpersonal human accounts. In that sense, telling Deloris's story as a podcast is a good fit.

But my venture into podcasting also points up a contradiction inherent in practicing Oral History within the context of an end curated product, one whose scope is very specific and one that has deadlines and requirements to complete it. The podcast is not Deloris' life story in an Oral History; rather her life story informs an account of a very limited time period. It must be shaped into a narrative framework, with beats and story arcs and pacing and, did I mention deadlines? It harkens back to my days of producing magazine shows, where my lengthy 'let the interview go where it takes us' style was frowned upon, indeed impossible within the constraints of my work. I will confess there were many times as I interviewed Deloris that I was silently urging her to cover a point I needed for the story, or where I neglected an opportunity to dig deeper into one of her answers to uncover more context and layers. But when one is completing this kind of assignment, every interview - and there were several - must then be listened to, transcribed, and then dissected for the bits and pieces that will fit the narrative puzzle, then arranged, re-arranged, or rejected outright in a process that takes up much, much more time than the interviews themselves do. I'm not saying I would willfully disregard critical pieces of her story if they didn't fit into a *pre-determined* arc. Rather I'm saying that having heard her story, and based on that, having determined the narrative, I needed to make her words work within the context of that narrative and not digress down a completely different road, no matter how interesting it was. At those times, I found this detracted from the pleasure I'd come to appreciate in an Oral History interview, in its active listening and discovering facets of the account in the moment, as a result of a joint creative process. (Luckily over the course of several months, I interviewed Deloris several times, so this was not my only experience of our interactions.)

The imperative to collapse and reduce has always been an issue for me in the journalism space... narrative podcasting turned out to be not so different. Podcasting



advertises itself as an expandable medium - unlike broadcasting with its proscribed lengths, the podcast technically can be “as long as it needs to be,” the medium’s oft-used response to the question of length. But in fact, that is misleading. Narrative audio storytelling is still beholden to the “storytelling” - perhaps even more so than some traditional matter-of-fact versions of journalism, which means that I heard many times from my editor this semester that the wonderful things Deloris said - and went on and on to say - didn’t keep the story moving. “We need to get to the moment of transformation/plot point sooner,” was the note I got most often. I agreed. For the purposes of the story, we did keep it moving, and out came Deloris’ three minute poignant reaction to the killing of George Floyd. In relationship to the rest of the story, it was too much. I understood that, but this was when I appreciated the Oral History space, where the care centered more on the whole interview, or at least on much longer chunks of it. It encouraged me to add to this project using Oral History tools to bring the best of both worlds into my project. I plan to create a simple accompanying website with excerpts from Deloris’s interviews that did not make it into the podcast. My goal is to bring more of her words to an audience but also to more fully honor the narrator and her lived experience. All of this helps to redress the unavoidable reductiveness of the curated project.

This approach is already being practiced regularly by some news organizations with the additional goal of adding transparency as well as a fuller editorial experience, and on a self-interested level, to pre-empt criticism, even lawsuits. For example, since 2017 PBS’ FRONTLINE has been publishing - and promoting - its Transparency Project, slightly edited versions of full interviews. See here

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/about-frontlines-transparency-project/>.

On this site, audio files can be searched using the linked transcripts as part of an effort to encourage trust in FRONTLINE'S reporting. Other news organizations also do this - although not necessarily the full audio or video - and they do it more selectively than FRONTLINE. See George Stephanopoulos' and James Comey here, for example: <https://abcnews.go.com/Site/transcript-james-comeys-interview-abc-news-chief-anchor/story?id=54488723>,

But it's not standard practice and there's no requirement for transcripts to be archived, or made available to the public. Transcripts are considered to be a stand-in for original raw material, and raw material is often referred to in the business as the equivalent of reporters' notebooks. Those are "protected" from public access, and there are rigorous shield laws that help to do so. Much of that is a function of protecting sources and confidential information, but it's also about maintaining an independent autonomous press.

The guidelines In Oral History make archiving full transcripts an end goal, and typically (but not always) making them available to the public. At this point, I don't plan to archive Deloris's full transcripts. But as I spent countless hours editing the podcast, I began to feel the need to in some way a similar mechanism, and look forward to excerpting her interviews into longer sections to post online.

It was interesting to consider the question of corroboration for this podcast, so critical in my years as a journalist. I didn't "fact check" this project in the traditional sense. But the reality is I know more about Deloris's history than I would about most of my past subjects in a journalistic context, about whom I would have had different standards. Here's an example - in a documentary I directed about hospice in a maximum security prison

where the men serving life are the hospice staff, they told about their life histories, their crimes, the formative experiences that led to a life of crime etc. I had no prior knowledge of them before taking on the story, and I then took great pains to research documentation to back those accounts up, making choices about what parts of their story I was comfortable using in the finished product. In another example I wrote a journalistic narrative book about an historical kidnapping in New York. I interviewed scores of the people involved in the story and I also did copious research using documents and prior press reports to corroborate their accounts.

But because of our shared history and my past knowledge of Deloris's story, I felt an ongoing sort of corroboration that spanned far back before my "reporting" this particular story. I myself have also personally witnessed many key parts of this story. And we had many conversations about it long before I started capturing them on tape. Finally, beyond just corroborating the facts of this story, because I've known Deloris for decades and have seen countless examples of her extraordinary character and integrity, I have convincing evidence her account will be honest. Because of that, having a personal connection to the story may raise "journalistic" questions about conflict of interest, but paradoxically the connection also made the story more journalistically sound, not less.

While I was making this podcast, I did pay attention to one concern about our close personal connection that was raised early in my Oral History studies. We talked about how familiarity and thus presumption can breed misinterpretation. In our Method and Theory class we read the feminist Katherine Borland's essay, "That's Not What I Said: A Reprise 25 Years On," from *Beyond Women's Words* [Beyond Women's Words : Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Katrina Srigley, et al., Routledge, 2018, p.31-32].

In it Borland updated a previous work that included an Oral History interview with her grandmother Bea in which Borland thought she was honoring her grandmother as a fellow feminist. After the first work came out, her grandmother wrote to critique it, and as perhaps only family can do, laced into her for getting it wrong. Borland cites from the letter:

“...You've read into the story what you wished—what pleases YOU (and, I presume, your instructor). That it was never by any wildest stretch of the imagination the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all. . How far is it permissible to go, in the name of folklore, and still be honest in respect to the original narrative?”

Borland then went on to examine the risks - and her lessons learned - of interviewing and potentially misinterpreting narrators with whom the writer is presumed to be allied:

“Researchers and their narrators (or interlocutors) find their footing with one another and define the power relations between themselves in multiple and nuanced ways. Still, I continue to believe that the researcher's confident "I understand you," which emerges partly as a consequence of the rituals of rapport, might well be replaced by the more tentative, "Do we understand each other?" Such a question implies continuing dialogue with narrators after any preliminary attempt at interpretation. It does not require agreement. **Recent scholarship has suggested that familiarity can breed a kind of contempt in the interview setting: the closer one's bond to a narrator and the more one knows about the events being narrated, the more difficult it is to listen**

**respectfully without imputing one's own meanings, remembering differently, listening in an "interested" way, or even being wounded by the narrator's words."**

This was something I tried to heed as I interpreted Deloris's words in the context of telling her story, a story that in theory I understood because I was there for parts of it, and because of our familiarity. Still, I circled back with her on several occasions post interview to revisit her words and the thoughts behind them. And I breathed a sigh of relief in the end when she reacted with enthusiasm to the portion of the podcast I plan to make public.

MY EXPERIENCES WITH MEMORY - IN MY ORAL HISTORY STUDIES AND APPLIED WITHIN THIS PROJECT.

So much of the study of Oral History centers around memories - what stands out, what doesn't, what changes with time, with different perspectives, how memories are affected by such a range of factors - environment, stimuli, state of mind, and the intersubjective experience created by narrator and interviewer together. In the case of this story, I was struck that it wasn't so much that we contradicted each other with our shared memories. It was more that certain events were profoundly more resonant for each of us. An example: at the moment when my father was critically ill as Covid was erupting, my overarching memory was a scene between Deloris and myself after the doctor told us to put my father in hospice and give him nothing more than "comfort care." We came home and both cried; Deloris erupted in helpless rage. We processed this crisis together. I wrote about it in a Serious Play course assignment in great detail. But that, perhaps, is one of the reasons it stands out so much. It was certainly an indelible memory to me, but I also had a blow-by-blow account on paper to revisit. When I asked Deloris what stood out for her of those days, she didn't even mention it. Instead she immediately and vividly

recounted her daring rescue of my dad from the outpatient rehab unit where he was recovering from pneumonia just before Covid locked its doors. She wheeled him out on her own volition, and almost certainly saved his life. That moment, first of extreme helplessness, followed by equally extreme action, drama and ultimately triumph in which she is clearly the hero, was something I barely remembered. Of course that's what stands out to her!

I saw so much of the unexpected characteristics of memory in this project that harkened back to our Oral History studies. Another example of the weight of certain memories: in a very visual way, Deloris told me of an embodied memory (that won't make it into the audio-driven podcast) of sleeping every night with the grandmother who raised her in the two rooms where she grew up. She described hiding behind her grandmother in bed at night, curled in a ball to sleep, terrified of ghosts. She then recounted leaving to make her own way in Kingston as a young adult, returning to visit and climbing into bed at night again with her grandmother. She described the older woman patting her limbs, caressing her head and back - she demonstrated this on me as she said the words. She said, of the woman she's labeled tough and flinty, that this must have been her way of expressing affection. This is clearly a deep memory, and I could feel her emotion as she talked and stroked my arm. (Contrastingly, at another moment, when asked about her memories of arriving off the bus 30 years ago to New York City, a moment one might assume would be deeply ingrained, she had little affect, and few memories.)

Another phenomenon about memory I learned about in my Oral History studies was illustrated while making this podcast, not just while recording Deloris, but also as a personal experience of my own. I was "in the field" recently at my father's to gather tape for the podcast, and I cooked him matzah brei, or fried matzah for breakfast. I took out

the medium size metal bowl pitted with decades of small dings, that was nested in similar bowls of varying sizes. Holding it by the small metal ring fastened to the side, I crumbled up the sheets of matzah in small pieces and added the egg mixture to soak. All the while, a sensation flooded back to me of hundreds of past gestures, with other pieces of matzah, other eggs, but always with this bowl. Tears came to my eyes, as they do while I write this. The flood of sensation recalled visceral memories of Sunday mornings and the clang of the fork stirring the mix, in this bowl. It is the simplest of objects, but it holds so much meaning - and a rush of memories - for me. This was the power of embodied, involuntary memories where interacting with physical objects can evoke strong, emotional recall. This incredibly vivid sensation, often affiliated with Proust's "Madeleine Moment" in his classic *A La Recherche de Temps Perdu*, was revisited several times with creative variations during my OHMA study, from classmate Courtney Scott's exercise in the Serious Play course of making - and imprinting the sensations of - homemade slime for kids, to exploring such memory connection in my classmate Casey Dooley's "Palace of Memories" <https://www.palaceofmemory.io/> a curating project about what she termed "architectural memories" As she explained in her presentation:

"I've found that by asking people to go on a mental tour of their homes past and present, they often recall memories they might've forgotten... people mentally tour their home and remember the front door...*and then they remember all of the things that happened while they were turning the handle over time. In those moments, real-time recollecting often results in an emotional connection to history made, as well as an awareness of present-minded history in the making.*"

I also wrote about a fascinating research study in China for the OHMA blog in the 2020 Workshop class related to this:

<http://oralhistory.columbia.edu/blog-posts/journeys-through-spaces>).

The study involved using virtual reality to recreate childhood memories for research subjects. Subjects wore goggles and special gloves to enter a virtual world that looked like a childhood kitchen, where they were presented with objects they could “touch” virtually, then were tested on the descriptive texture of their memories, versus a control group who did not have this same type of interactive virtual experience. This concept of enriched memory through sensory recall held true in the virtual world as well.

While collecting material from Deloris for this podcast I witnessed the power of the this kind of recall firsthand. When Deloris decided to give up her Brooklyn apartment as the first stop to an eventual move back to Jamaica, we spent the day there as she packed up 30 years of her wide-ranging New York mementos. There was the box of Tshirts she’d collected and stored, festooned with activist slogans, from the various political and domestic workers rights groups she’d been part of as a nanny. There was the box of saved mementos from the various families she’d worked for, including many love notes and souvenirs from my own kids. She’s kept them all, including the smaller-than-preemie diaper of one newborn who is graduating high school this year. The love and pride she felt was so palpable. And there were the delicate high heeled sandals she wore when she left Jamaica to come to this country. As she showed all of these to me and reacted to them, it provided that “Madeleine Moment” to jump off to questions about those times, and to her years of nannying, both the good and the bad experiences.

But perhaps these heightened sensory moments that enhance memory presented itself most clearly in our trip back to Jamaica, especially when we visited Deloris’s hometown.



I listened to Deloris enjoying the sensation of crunching down on fresh sugar cane stalks cut from her childhood yard, as she described those days. I watched as, at age 67, she clambered up the first few feet of the mango tree outside her childhood window to show us how she used to do it. I witnessed the way her emotions were heightened while reliving those memories and how it enriched her accounts.

In the end, I believe the tools of each one of the spaces I inhabited while making this project were valuable, whether they were used for gathering information, tapping into deeply rooted memories in partnership with my subject, or learning how to mix audio design and story structure with those memories to create my end product. I do believe that the potential traps for misusing these tools lie in cross-pollination, when the tools of one field, with its attendant standards, are used in the service of another, one in which those best practices are at odds. If you conduct Oral History interviews with a narrator and assure them of joint authorship and the ability to revisit and edit their words, you're going to be in conflict with the standards of a journalistic work. And if you do the opposite, record the interviews with the narrator's understanding they will be able to review the work and make changes, but then you publish it without that step as part of a journalistic work, you violate fundamental Oral History practices. If you use creative sound design and conjure up an entire scene that didn't actually exist, you might run into trouble using it for a more traditional journalism outlet. The issues arise when one project is already in progress and then its makers want to adapt it to another platform. As in most endeavors, forethought is the key, but not always possible. As for me, when I started the podcasting class, I already knew the territory and its rocky terrain. I talked it over with the professors, who were understanding. They gave me the leeway to use Oral History practices in order to be able to tell the story at all. I would like to think that as a veteran journalist, I was able to use sound ethical judgment that took all the different

standards into consideration and still produced a credible, sourced and engaging end product. If it's not journalism in its strictest form, it used best Oral History practices to create a "True Story in Sound" that I'm proud of.