Zoe Wooff

Dr. Donna Sinclair

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"What was, like, the vibe?": Oral History Analysis Through Valarie Yow's Lenses

In chapter 11 of her book *Recording Oral History: a Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, during her analysis of her own oral history work, Valarie Raleigh Yow looks at "plot, key phrases, structure of the narrative, ... self-concept, ... word choices" and "desires, metaphors, [and] symbols" in order to discuss the further implications of her interviews with narrators, particularly her interview with 'Marlene' about her life and her work on a gallery of women's art.[1] Yow and, by extension this course which uses her book as a foundational text, where I conducted my own oral history interview, stress the importance of discerning patterns within the oral history document. Yow does not attempt to cover this methodology in-depth but insists that the analysis phase of writing oral history is the "most creative period for the researcher-writer" and presents several different lenses through which one can analyze their monograph.[2] To analyze the oral history I have gathered during this class, that of local graphic designer Miranda Field-Martin, I am going to discuss the plot and narrative structure of the narrative, the word choices and key phrases, and the way the narrator's metaphors and symbols contrast with her

[1] Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History : a Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Third edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 347.
[2] Yow, *Recording Oral History,* 319.

self-concept to create a fully realized picture of a young woman developing her own sense of self-worth in a difficult and frightening time.

In following the specific methodology laid out by Valarie Yow in chapter 11 of her book, I have stepped away from the role of the interviewer and am instead going to analyze this project from as close as one can get to an outside perspective. However, I would first like to acknowledge some aspects of the interview that require me to reflect on my time as an interviewer. I was, perhaps, too close to the story during my interview with Ms. Field-Martin, and I acknowledge that in the text when I visibly and audibly react to a comment about her ex-boyfriend's mental health (e.g. "MFM: He had his own mental health problems that were exacerbated by the pandemic, so, you know we both were not doing our best. / ZW: [laughs] Sorry, I'm not supposed to react").[3] This was unprofessional of me, but the fact that my narrator found it amusing does, I think, tell us something about who she is as a person: both that she is someone who does not take things like this oral history interview too seriously that she is unable to laugh at them, and that she is someone who no longers feels defensive over her ex's mental health at this point in her story. Due to the fact that she resists going into any particular detail about the 'mental health problems' that she and her ex-boyfriend were experiencing beyond saying that their experiences were 'really bad,' one can infer that these struggles are deeply significant and personal, and the fact that she was able to laugh at my/the interviewer's reaction to her comment regarding her ex's declining mental health demonstrates a degree of healing and moving on from something so affecting. Additionally, my narrator was initially reticent to have her story collected by the Oregon Historical Society, but she signed her release form anyway. It was only until a few days later when I had her review the beginnings of my transcription work

[3] Field-Martin, Miranda. Interview. By Zoe Wooff, May 9, 2023. 7.

that she gave me explicit permission to submit it to the Oregon Historical Society because "It turned out way better than [she] expected."[4] This, to me, indicates issues with self-esteem and a lack of understanding of what the overall goal of the collection of these types of oral histories is. Because Field-Martin was insecure in how 'interesting' her story might or might not be, it kept her from seeing the big picture: that we need to collect as many of these stories as possible to even be able to understand, in the future, what the so-called 'average experience' even was for a young, middle-class American.

In terms of plot and narrative structure, I disagree with Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet, who Yow quotes in chapter 11, that the interviewer inherently is the one who organizes the memory to give it "coherence and significance."[5] I find Yow's own interpretation, that narrators will tell coherent stories in their answers automatically, even if they are small anecdotes within the 'larger frame' of the interview, much more compelling. If one were to see just the interview instrument for this specific project, one would not be able to guess what kind of story the narrator would go on to tell: the questions themselves are very basic, consisting of a lot of questions based on the basic phrases 'what was it like' and 'how did your community react' as well as the essentially Generation Y/Z 'what was the vibe?' The narrator then transforms these questions into something meaningful, with a simple 'What was it like quarantining in Santa Barbara?' being responded to with a small treatise on living with intense anxiety alongside someone else's toxic family in a place that, to an outside observer with little-to-no context, might appear as utopic.

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[4] Field-Martin, Miranda, "RE: Transcription of Interview 5/9", email message to author, May 16 2023.
[5] Yow, *Recording Oral History,* 338.

In terms of key phrases or word choices, I think a lot of that comes down to the way that both the narrator and the interviewer are fully rooted in their identities as people in their early twenties. As previously mentioned, both consistently use the word 'vibe' instead of the more mature or professional 'mood,' 'environment,' or even 'energy.' Additionally, the narrator consistently uses various forms of the filler word 'like,' even using it as a dialogue tag (e.g: "He was, like, 'okay, I guess,"' versus "'Okay, I guess,' he said to me"). The narrator also exhibits little to no self-control when it comes to swearing in what could easily become an official document: Obviously, considering the documented nature of the narrator's anxious personality type, the swearing itself is sometimes an indicator of the narrator's discomfort with the seriousness of the topic at hand (e.g.: when talking about the uncomfortable leadup to the initial lockdown phase: "I was like 'I'm fucking leaving.'" followed shortly after by "No one else packed up their shit but I did."[6]) and sometimes serves merely as an intensifier (when discussing the 2020 presidential election cycle: "Dealing with the fucking election was so unhinged at that time [...] just the bleakest shit I've ever seen in my entire life.")

When discussing symbols, Valarie Yow refers to a story of a man who saw a corpse at the age of 11 when he was beginning his career, and how this vision would haunt him symbolically in his last years. Throughout the text, Field-Martin continually returns to apocalyptic or Hell-based imagery, which I believe is not only indicative of her Catholic school upbringing (despite her nor her family ever identifying as religious) and of the ultimate realization of one of her myriad childhood phobias: the idea of a global pandemic. When discussing her community's initial reactions to the pandemic, she says that her "first reaction was panic" because "When I was a middle schooler, [...] my teacher showed us the trailer to the movie *Contagion* in our

[6] Field-Martin, Interview, 4.

classroom, and [...] I developed a sort of a fear of disease. [...] I was specifically scared of the concept of a global pandemic and what that would mean."[7] She categorizes herself as being in a unique position to having to "actually confront one of my childhood fears in like a very real way," something that was "really scary."[8] When talking about the election cycle she describes it as something that "just absolutely drains the soul and life out of you" and, again, describes 2020's election season as "just the bleakest shit I've ever seen."[9] When discussing her move, one of the most vivid images of the entire interview is realized, when she describes LED signage over the highway with public service announcement style messaging that "said some of the spookiest stuff you've ever seen." Field-Martin even goes on to describe them as "horror movie-adjacent" and, in a direct callback to her childhood fear: "Good *Contagion* set pieces."[10] One of the funnier moments of the interview is actually, on the surface, quite intense and frightening: when describing the fall 2020 wildfires in Oregon and a conversation she had with her professor, the narrator quotes herself as saying: "'I have to be so honest with you, I don't know that I can see a future for myself right now because the sun is red and the sky looks like we're in Hell, and we might all die tomorrow.'"[11]

Interestingly, despite the consistently dark, sometimes apocalyptic imagery, the primary way that the narrator expresses her self-concept is through the idea that she is 'lucky.' The specific phrase 'I got off pretty lucky' or 'I feel like I was extremely lucky' is used a total of six times in the nineteen-page interview, in a number of different contexts: When she is discussing how relatively easy it is to do graphic design homework remotely ("I feel like I got off extremely

[7] Ibid., 3
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 8
[10] Ibid., 9.
[11] Ibid., 11.

lucky [...] I just sent it in like as a .pdf, and everything was fine."[12]), when she describes the privilege she felt in spending three months of lockdown in Santa Barbara, California ("Like I said, I think I got off pretty lucky. And Santa Barbara is [...] it's completely gorgeous. [...] I was basically just taking, like, really long walks around the neighborhood"[13]), and when she describes her lived experience with contracting COVID-19 in the Spring of 2021 ("The actual infection was basically fine"[14]). I think that the way that these two ways of thinking (the apocalyptic and the optimistic) exemplify the way that the narrator's story is one of coming-of-age. Something must be destroyed (society, the world's supply chain, a young woman's own inhibitions and fears surrounding the aforementioned breakdown of society specifically through viral means) in order for something new and better to take its place (even though this is, in this context, only true in the case of the young woman, who emerged with a changed worldview).

Overall, I believe that Field-Martin's outlook on the entire situation and her demonstrated character arc over the course of the time covered in the interview can be summed up by one sentence she says near the end of the interview: "It really felt like a moment where every single system had kind of collapsed in the way we expected it to work, and there was a real opportunity to change those systems and build them into something better, and then it didn't happen." Here, she describes a kind of monumental, apocalyptic breakdown of structures, indicative of her fear of pandemics and the mounting anxiety she felt the entire time, but it's coupled with a very optimistic idea about change, which showcases her optimistic, 'lucky' side. While the government and society as a whole may not have built 'the system' into something better, I think the narrator herself was able to apply this concept to herself: in relocating three different times,

[12] Ibid., 6.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 18.

seeing the escalation and end of what was ultimately a toxic relationship, being forced into large-scale exposure therapy for a major childhood anxiety, along with being in a time of transition (one's college years), Field-Matin was able to build those broken personal systems back into a more sustainable life for herself. Her COVID journey, then, is a type of coming-of-age story. At the end of the interview, the positive sensibilities outweigh the negative ones, despite the acknowledgment that perhaps the narrator was the only one who changed instead of the entire world. She leaves things on a positive note, telling the interviewer that "In some ways, I feel like my situation was completely non-unique and the same as everyone else's, but I also feel like I got off incredibly lucky and I'm lucky to be here and alive and to have the people I love be here and alive. And I think that's all I got."[15]

[15] Ibid., 19.

Works Cited

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