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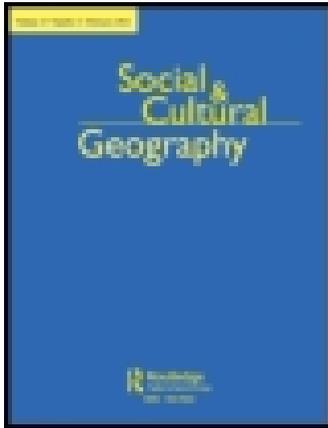
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### Theatre as safe space? Performing intergenerational narratives with men of Irish descent

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## Theatre as safe space? Performing intergenerational narratives with men of Irish descent

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In answering the question of ‘how will you ensure confidentiality?’ we are asked to anonymise transcripts (as well as photos, images, artefacts); participants names are to be changed with pseudonyms used throughout; when particular sensitivities arise, we are to age-band people and change place names; where appropriate, family relationships should not be revealed; where necessary, identity characteristics within transcripts should be removed. This is what the ethical researcher is told to adhere to. Building on previous work in social and cultural geography [Mattingly, D. (2001). Place, teenagers and representations: Lessons from a community theatre project. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2, 445–459; Ní Laoire, C. (2007). To name or not to name: Reflections on the use of anonymity in an oral archive of migrant life narratives. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 8, 373–390], and drawing empirically from the verbatim play I commissioned based on my research, I put forward the case for theatre as a ‘safe space’ for participant narratives negotiated within the political arena of representation. In this article, I use my intergenerational research with 38 men of Irish descent to argue that an/the ethical focus should not remain on participant protection through the removal of ‘revealing’ information but instead we should be pursuing options and avenues for ‘safe spaces’ to voice participant stories.

**Keywords:** intergenerational; Irish; theatre; representation; biographical; narrative

### **Le théâtre comme espace sûr ? Jouer des récits intergénérationnels avec des hommes d’origine irlandaise**

Pour répondre à la question «Comment vous assurerez-vous de la confidentialité ?», on nous demande de rendre des transcriptions anonymes (ainsi que des photos, images, objets); les noms des participants doivent être remplacés par des pseudonymes partout; quand des situations particulièrement sensibles se présentent, il faut classer les gens selon leur âge et changer le nom des lieux; s’il y a lieu, la parenté ne devrait pas être révélée; si nécessaire, les caractéristiques d’identité dans les transcriptions devrait être supprimées. Ce sont les règles auxquelles la recherche éthique doit adhérer. En me fondant sur des recherches précédentes en géographie sociale et culturelle [Mattingly, D. (2001). Place, teenagers and representations: Lessons from a community theatre project. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2, 445–459; Ní Laoire, C. (2007). To name or not to name: Reflections on the use of anonymity in an oral archive of migrant life narratives. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 8, 373–390] et en m’inspirant de manière empirique de la pièce mot pour mot que j’ai commandée à partir de mes recherches, je fais valoir le théâtre comme «lieu sûr» pour les récits des participants négociés dans le domaine politique de la représentation. Dans cet article, j’utilise ma recherche intergénérationnelle avec trente-huit hommes d’origine irlandaise pour arguer qu’un/que l’éclairage éthique ne devrait pas se cantonner à la protection du participant à

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travers la suppression de l'information «révélatrice» mais que nous devrions plutôt poursuivre des options et avenues pour des «espaces sûrs» afin de donner une voix aux récits du participant.

**Mots-clés:** intergénérationnel; irlandais; théâtre; représentation; biographique; récit

### **¿El teatro como espacio seguro? Representando narraciones intergeneracionales con hombres de ascendencia irlandesa**

En respuesta a la pregunta de '¿cómo se va a garantizar la confidencialidad?' se nos pide que anonimicemos transcripciones (así como fotos, imágenes, artefactos); los nombres de los participantes serán cambiados por seudónimos; cuando se presenten sensibilidades particulares, se categorizará a la gente de acuerdo a su edad y se cambiarán los topónimos; cuando sea apropiado, las relaciones familiares no serán reveladas; cuando sea necesario, las características de identidad dentro de transcripciones deberán ser eliminadas. Se le dice al investigador ético que esto es a lo que tiene que adherirse. Basándome en el trabajo previo en la geografía social y cultural [Mattingly, D. (2001). Place, teenagers and representations: Lessons from a community theatre project. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2, 445–459; Ní Laoire, C. (2007). To name or not to name: Reflections on the use of anonymity in an oral archive of migrant life narratives. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 8, 373–390], y partiendo empíricamente a partir de la obra de teatro textual de la cual me hice cargo basado en mi investigación, presento el caso del teatro como un 'espacio seguro' para los relatos de los participantes que se discuten en la arena política de la representación. En este artículo utilizo mi investigación intergeneracional con treinta y ocho hombres de ascendencia irlandesa para argumentar que un/el enfoque ético no debe permanecer en la protección de los participantes a través de la eliminación de la 'revelación' de información, sino que se deberían buscar opciones y posibilidades para que los 'espacios seguros' expresen las historias de los participantes.

**Palabras claves:** intergeneracional; irlandés; teatro; representación; biográfico; narrativa

### **Introduction**

Drawing from two bodies of literature – the spheres of biographical research and creative geographies – this article argues for the place of the theatre within social and cultural geography. More specifically, this article explores the production of a piece of verbatim theatre and questions whether this creates a safe space for participant narratives. After reviewing existing work at the intersections of art and geography, the article enters a critical discussion of *Under Us All*; a piece of verbatim theatre which I commissioned based upon my PhD research.

Hawkins (2012, p. 56) claims that we have seen a recent 're-turn' towards creative geographies. Indeed social and cultural geography has witnessed many 'turns' in its thematic priorities, for example before this we saw a turn towards the biographical. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) talk about the biographical turn and how it originated from the crisis of representation. This was marked by the problematic connection between experience and the social context of the participant and the researcher. Questions of validity, reliability and ultimately ethics have continuously challenged research; this is where my pursuit of theatre as a safe space for participant narratives has stemmed from. As Pratt and Kirby (2003, p. 14) have noted 'theatre is a rich site for thinking about epistemologies that blur the line between context and text, and text and embodied practice'. Around this time Denzin (2003, p. 4) argued for a turn to performance, feeling that the ethnographer could move 'from a view of performance as imitation, or dramaturgical staging (Goffman, 1959), to an emphasis on

performance as liminality and construction (Turner, 1986), then to a view of performance as struggle, as intervention, as breaking and remaking, as kinesis, as a sociopolitical act (Conquergood, 1998, p. 32). In citing Conquergood (1985) further he states 'these dialogic works create spaces for give-and-take, doing more than turning the other into the object of a voyeuristic, fetishistic, custodial, or paternalistic gaze' (Denzin, 2003, p. x). It is from this conceptualisation that my project bridges the biographical and the creative.

Following Goffman (1959) work, a constructionist analytic emphasises that aspects of the interview interactions are themselves performed. Cited by Tuan (1974, p. 159) Goffman claimed 'we not only act but put on an act' in everyday social interactions. Indeed my own research is constructed on these lines with the use of participant quotations and my own field diary extracts to inform my argument. The title of this article – 'performing intergenerational narratives' – recognises both the interview performances of my participants and the later translation of this with performing artists.

### Geographies of performance

Art and creative geographies have been employed elsewhere to negate representational concerns; their very existence however provokes questions of representation itself. While creative geographies focus us, in part, on questions of method there are much wider engagements with theatre and performance. In recent review articles investigating geography's relationship with the arts (Hawkins, 2011, 2012), different ventures have been noted ranging from: painting (Colls, 2011; Crouch, 2010), sculpture and social sculpture (Cook, 2000; Gandy, 1997), participatory arts practice (Parr, 2007; Tolia-Kelly, 2007), new genre public art (Mackenzie, 2006; Pollock & Sharp, 2007), photography (Vasudevan, 2007), sound art (Butler, 2006), bio art (Dixon, 2008), dance (Nash, 2000; Rose, 1999; Thrift, 1997) and Situationist inspired, psychogeographical practice (Bonnett, 1992, 2009; Pinder, 2005). In this latter sphere (of psycho-geographies, particularly involving memory and nostalgia; see Bonnett & Alexander, 2013), these urban engagements offer space for 'a sensuous realm that is imagined, lived, performed and contested' (Pinder, 2005, p. 285). Rogers (2014, p. 774) claims that there are 'three areas of performance that have interested geographers: performance and identity; the embodied or experiential qualities of performance; and the relationship between performance and the everyday'. In combining these three research approaches, my work investigates everyday embodied identities, and with the use of verbatim theatre – which this article champions – responds to the call for 'socially engaged art practices' (Hawkins, 2011, p. 465).

The performing arts became objects of geographical inquiry after the emergence of non-representational theory (Rogers, 2012; see also Thrift, 2000, 2003; Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000); as McAuley (2000) points out, the theatre is both the site and the object. I argue that verbatim theatre embodies both biography and creativity and can cater for participant needs in a way differently to conventional venues for dissemination. As Leavy states, 'perhaps more than anything else, performance-based methods can bring research findings to life, adding dimensionality and exposing that which is otherwise impossible to authentically (re)present' (2009, p. 135).

Biographical oral histories, unlike some other methods (though not exclusively), benefit from direct contact with the participants (Reinharz, 1992). A thorough research design can ensure that the researcher focuses on concrete interactions through time, over weeks, months, years and even generations – helping the researcher to distance her/himself from abstract speculation. According to Bertaux (2003, p. 41), life stories, such as autobiographies, are 'subjectively squared': just because these 'facts' are subjective does not mean they cannot also be objective. This should not automatically deem them less

valuable in academic research. Furthering this anti-realist critique are claims that life stories only record views, accounts and ‘facts’ given the current context; that they are entirely dependent on the current state of mind of the participant. These schools of thought can be grouped as ‘deconstruction,’ ‘narrativism’ and other forms of ‘idealism’. Deconstructionism, a critique of idealism marked by the seminal work of Derrida (1967/1978), can be considered as a literary theory technique to claim that there is no meaning within a text itself. Instead it is in the reading of text where we can find meaning. Narrativism follows this deconstructionist view to place meaning in deriving motives behind authors, or narrators, of text.

Narratives are themselves constructed as stories and, as we have seen already, are sites of investigation for geographers (see special issue of *Cultural Geographies*; Daniels & Lorimer, 2012). The value of biographical interviewing is that it explores in diverse (methodological and interpretive) ways individual accounts of life experiences within given cultural settings (Humphrey, Miller, & Zdravomyslova, 2003). Like the collection of Jeffrey and Dyson (2008), the research reported in this article offers a means of understanding major social shifts by reviewing how new experiences are interpreted by individuals within families (Roberts, 2002). It is here that I again perceive a relationship between the biographical and the creative. Though not exclusively, both can involve a process of careful selection and presentation of evidence for an audience. According to Daniels and Lorimer (2012, p. 4), ‘this [recuperation of narrative into the human geography canon] involved recovering, or reconstructing, some key geographical concepts: region, landscape, space, place and environment and reaching out to disciplines in the arts and humanities which were focussing on them also’.

Researchers must realise that in their biographical oral histories they might recover memories that are painful or unpleasant. We might also have to later question individuals on accounts they have given, to clarify certain themes. As Yow (1994) states, this is more than just a professional problem but a personal one. After having built a rapport with a participant it may be difficult to press them on an issue, or to challenge a powerful memory. Overcoming this may be achieved by balancing what has been said, against why it has been said (Grele, 1991). The researcher needs to ask, do I really need to question what has been said, or given the social context of this interview does this actually make sense? A significant issue unique to this form of qualitative research is that:

Interviews which explore the ways in which a person has remembered his or her past can be rewarding for the interviewer but may be disturbing or even damaging for the interviewee. Unlike the therapist, oral historians may not be around to put together the pieces of memories that have deconstructed and are no longer safe. (Thomson, Frisch, & Hamilton, 1994, p. 34)

The ‘safety’ of participants is questioned in the handling of biographical oral histories; perhaps though when discussing the ethics of these encounters ‘accountability’ would be more appropriate. I question how ethical it is to anonymise these stories. Certainly by not attributing a name to a story the researcher can make the storyteller feel less accountable or less responsible, which may ease tension or provide comfort. However, I argue that anonymity may also create tension and make participants feel uncomfortable. With anonymity there can be less accountability from the researcher; the possibilities for exploitation are greater with less transparent ties to the participant. Within the creative world, acknowledgement is more commonly given to the performer, artist, muse or stimuli – and in the next section I use the two concepts of ‘narrative authority’ and ‘symbolic economy’ (Mattingly, 2001) to explore theatre as a ‘safe space’ (Ní Laoire, 2007) for counter-narratives of representation.

For clarity, I am not suggesting that all participants in social science projects should be named. I believe that even if their consent is readily given, their friends, family or indeed anyone who knows them may not give theirs; they are not consulted (nor can they be) in the giving of individual consent. I argue that anonymity *can* ensure a form of research protection though it *cannot* be considered completely protective of the participant in the research encounter; as Thomson et al.'s words mentioned earlier help clarify.

### **Narrative authority and the symbolic economy**

Narrative authority 'pertains to whose voices get heard and which stories get told' (Mattingly, 2001, p. 447) and furthermore can be understood as: 'the power to shape the way identities are represented' (Mattingly, 2001, p. 448). Similarly, while questioning the narrative authority of her work, McDowell (2001, p. 95) asked:

"For whom am I writing?" when the answer may include for, with and about the informants (which are not all the same thing), for the funding body, for academic peers, for the next research assessment exercise, to improve one's own status, to gain promotion and so forth. It is often difficult for a researcher to disentangle these audiences and motives and to address their implications.

These questions are timely given the REF 2014 with researchers, departments, institutions, funding bodies and academia itself benchmarking its accountability, impact and reputations. Indeed the writing of this article has had multiple motivations: first, I review the ethical standards I was asked to conform to in my research; second, I responsibly conduct my work with a thoroughly self-reflexive approach; third, I honour my participants by analysing how and why they are represented in my study; and finally I attempt to establish myself as an active scholar within the discipline of social and cultural geography.

I support the move away from the idea of oral testimony as simply a means of collecting knowledge and instead emphasise 'the contingent nature of knowledge production of life narratives' (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 375). I argue that (if co-produced) verbatim theatre helps to make visible the power relations that inform the shaping of representations. Not wanting to fall into Rose's (1997) god trick, of seeing everything from nowhere, I am aware that 'there are limits to performances' revolutionary potential, particularly as decisions have to be made over whose stories to tell' (Rogers, 2014, p. 778). There are of course the usual – and necessary – legal and ethical considerations: consent, confidentiality and access to archival research. However, it is through personal intuition, empathy and understanding (all needed in the practical application of biographical interviewing in addition to an academic and critical vision) that we see the value of the biographical narrative. It is only after mediating an interaction (Lodge, 2005) and scaffolding a response (Wall, Higgins, & Packard, 2007) that researchers can establish the norm, and therefore anything which deviates from this normative standpoint.

In discussing the symbolic economy, I refer to the relationality of representations:

In representing the voices of a neighbourhood, one also represents the neighbourhood itself. Therefore the politics of representation in neighbourhood arts projects involve not only narrative authority of individuals, but also the symbolic economy of the neighbourhood. As Zukin points out, the symbolic economy is composed of two parallel systems, the production of space and the production of symbols. (Mattingly, 2001, p. 452)

In the context of my research, the spaces of representation are within the research encounter: the interviews, transcripts and digital recordings; the participant observation and field notes; the family group discussions and personal communications with men of

Irish descent living on Tyneside. Interlinked are the symbols of representation: the buildings of the Irish centres, the family homes, the cafes and pubs in which I conducted interviews and participant observation; as well as the digital recorder upon which I relied to detail the encounters; and the consent forms upon which the men were asked to signal their agreement to participate. These were all factors as I considered theatre as creating a 'safe space' for participant narratives.

Many participants involved in biographical research expect anonymity facilitating a much more open narrative, bypassing the digital recorder and recorded evidence as an obstacle. Equally, Etter-Lewis (1996) refutes claims that pseudonyms make a story less truthful, as does Messerschmidt (2012), with importance placed on letting participants maintain anonymity, protecting privacy and enabling a safe space to tell their stories. Perhaps though the emphasis should shift from a framing of this debate as one of ethics and anonymity to a focus on questions of research and reciprocity.

Interestingly however, a number of women got in touch after publication of [Etter Lewis'] book to say that they were ready to be named because after all, it was "their story" which highlights this tension between the need for safety and privacy and the need to give fair authorial credit to the participant. (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 383)

From my own field notes, I have examples of men stating 'I'm happy to be named in the research' and even 'no need to bother with [pseudonyms]... I've got nothing to hide'. In fact, on several occasions the men revealed that their participation in the research was driven by a desire to have 'their story' heard. This led me to question the emotional impact that this may have on research participants. Was this open display garish bravado or sought recognition? It has been argued that the use of pseudonyms can reduce the participant's control over the testimony while empowering the researcher's analytical licence, which can result in greater exploitation of participants. However, as Ní Laoire (2007, p. 385) points out, naming participants can also:

...conceal the authorial power of the researcher, who still maintains considerable control over the research process and therefore the shape and style of its outputs. While this balance of power does reduce the role of the participant on the research process and therefore can be abused, it also allows the researcher to conduct a more critical interpretation of the stories being told than might not be possible with a named interview.

But surely this is only applicable if the researcher does not share his or her findings with participants? In other words, does the question of naming or not naming become less relevant if participants are shown the results of the analysis by the researcher? Particularly given the current climate in the UK that the impact agenda has helped to generate, I argue this is not an ethical consideration that researchers take into account, nor do ethics committees promote – even demand – action in this area. My claims with respect to the opportunities that theatre presents are not made without consideration of their limitations. Participant narratives could be exploited through theatre, especially in the pursuit of profit making and professional performance. In particular – and as the aforementioned warning of Rogers (2014) makes clear – selection over whose stories are told is powerful position to hold. As I hope will become clear through my methodology, the verbatim theatre I helped co-produce was more collaborative and participatory. It is in this environment where I see potential for a safe space for participant narratives.

## **Methodology**

My research originates from the experiences of 38 men across 19 families of Irish descent who are living or have recently lived on Tyneside<sup>1</sup> (9 families with interrelated family

connections and a further 11 individuals). The research asked ultimately whether belonging to and identification with 'Irishness' was passed on through generations. The project aimed to speak with at least three generations of men (within the same family), however for several reasons, this was not always possible. Some of the fathers and grandfathers of the men of my study were dead; some were absent due to family separation and divorce; some were 'back home' in Ireland and logistically I could not travel to meet with them; there were also some family members who did not want to participate.

Our meetings took place in venues suggested by the research participants, often at home, though not exclusively, with both the Tyneside Irish Centre (Newcastle upon Tyne) and the Iona Club (Hebburn, South Tyneside) occasional locations as well as local coffee shops and pubs. The interactions between the generations were particularly interesting at this stage. An assessment of the power relations and confidence of individuals within the family cohort was noted, as were any differences between perceptions and performances of particular themes raised in the project introductions (these along with other recollections/anecdotes were kept through the research process). The 'biographical oral histories' (Gluck, 1996, p. 217) are situated within a specific locale – the Tyneside Irish diaspora – and this study looks to generational differences as a force of change between the lives of men of Irish descent living on Tyneside. Essentially I am concerned with the experience of a particular individual over their life course.

The biographical oral histories were recorded through interviews (using a digital recorder) then transcribed, themed and coded through NVivo and disseminated directly back to respondents through provision of the transcripts. Ritchie (1995) states that not only does how we are researching need clear terminology but how we refer to the researched is equally important. With this in mind, I do not use the term 'interviewee' as it implies a passivity of the individual – preferring instead, 'participant' to reflect the agency of those whom I was researching.

Like others before me within our discipline (Hawkins, 2011, 2012; Robinson, 2008) I saw the performative potential within my research. Unlike many others however, I did not conduct the research with this in mind, nor did I know how to produce any 'performed social science'. It was only after my fieldwork was 'complete', having conducted the interviews, that I pursued the creative outputs. I invited my participants to a theatre performance, shown as part of the Tyneside Irish Festival.<sup>2</sup> From speaking with the men who had attended the festival performance with me (7 of the 38 men could attend), I had suggested we could work together on developing a piece of theatre. One participant family was particularly responsive and so I approached Cap-A-Pie.<sup>3</sup> They too were keen on this collaboration, especially in improving the two-way knowledge exchange from art to academia. I coined this theatre commission as a *returning performance*, with the interest of taking the stories back to the men they derived from – beyond the confines of the 'Ivory Tower', outside the bounded walls of words in books and texts – and through spoken word and performance. The play was named *Under Us All*, which reflected the common ground these stories shared with respect to issues of ageing, identity and belonging. In this sense, the play can be understood as part of a trend within geography's cultural turn, in which 'a form of place-based performance and public engagement storytelling is being deployed as a practice to propel cross-generational interest in local, community-centred initiatives and as a way to re-learn forms of civic attachment' (Daniels & Lorimer, 2012, p. 5).

In Ní Laoire's provocative *Social & Cultural Geography* article (2007, p. 386), she debates whether 'to name or not to name' her participants during her own oral history project. Furthermore, she articulates a particular, and participatory, methodological approach:

After each interview, the final edited audio version was sent to all participants for their approval and it was made clear to them that they could request changes to be made before it was archived. Unfortunately, one of the implications of this process is that some of the most personal and powerful material in an interview may need to be removed at the request of the participant. (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 386)

In my research, the men were offered to hear copies of the digital recordings but all 38 declined. Repeated references to the embarrassment of hearing your own voice were made; as researcher – and transcriber – it was only I that had to endure this embarrassment! What the men did receive were the typed, verbatim transcripts of their interviews. They were asked to comment on the accuracy of my transcription. Typos were picked up on as well as my (deliberate) inclusion of the, at times, incorrect grammar and regional dialect. I responded, to those who asked, that my sanitising of this data would have adversely affected the ethnographic moment of the spoken words themselves. A more serious consequence of this process is the risk of withdrawal. This did not happen in my study, although discussions were had with participants about the potential omission of certain stories.

Methodologically, biographical interviewing is a unique and acquired skill, one in which the researcher must have an awareness of relationality, positionality and personality (see Richardson, 2013). Like Bertaux and Thompson (1993) in their book *Between Generations* my study sheds light on the ‘blank spaces’ of family relationships. I consider the concepts of transmission and transmissibility within the family, in what has been coined elsewhere as intergenerationality:

It is the interactions between generations – themselves products of particular times, spaces and cultures – that have significant effects on a whole range of social issues... (Hopkins, Olson, Pain, & Vincent, 2011, p. 314)

These ‘social issues’ manifest themselves in numerous ways within biographical research. Golofast (2003) broadly categorises them under three headings: ‘the routine’, ‘life as a sequence of events’ and ‘the hidden aspects of daily life’. The routine reveals itself in the emotional responses to the inertia of everyday life. Golofast’s concept of the ‘hidden life aspect’ has particular pertinence for my study:

This one might term the *mystery* or *destiny* of a biographical narrative: the obscure and sometimes totally incomprehensible and frightening, with its unexpected coincidence and failures’. (Golofast, 2003, p. 61, original emphasis)

Topics of a sexual, medical or violent nature may be uncovered through a biographical interview; as well as the mundane, everyday and inconsequential. By interviewing family members of different generations, I drew conclusions, specific to each individual yet illustrative of many aspects of contemporary life. Ecclesiastic authority through its leadership has, for example, traditionally influenced ‘Irish’ families heavily, affecting issues of marriage, divorce and abortion. While the religious teaching remains unaltered, have individual attitudes changed, and have gender and generation dynamics played their parts? By gathering biographical oral histories, I have investigated contemporary Irish masculinities on Tyneside with reference to past, present and future masculinities. This gives insight to family relationships and the shifting spatial structures of masculine pluralities. With each individual’s reflections across their own life course we see their changing (or otherwise) ideas of family, work, society and so forth. Equally, the men are aspirational in their outlook and so also adopt forward-looking perspectives. We can then see to what extent ‘generational difference’ has acted as a force of change. By working with men from different generations, I draw conclusions, specific to each individual yet illustrative of many aspects of contemporary life (Richardson, 2014).

Within the discipline we see the relevance and growing employment of intergenerationality as a concept: in questions of age (Hopkins & Pain, 2007; Maxey, 2009; Vanderbeck, 2007), parenting (Rawlins, 2006; Tarrant, 2010), drinking (Valentine, Holloway, Knell, & Jayne, 2007), religion (Hopkins, 2006; Hopkins et al., 2011) and national identity (Richardson, 2013, 2014); indeed 'intergenerational space' is the subject of a new edited collection (Vanderbeck & Worth, 2014). This article contributes to the discipline by shedding light on the use of verbatim theatre as a safe space for intergenerational narratives; in acknowledging narrative authority and the symbolic economy the work bridges a divide between narratives and performance. As Pratt and Kirby (2003, p. 16) note, 'the script is quite literally embodied through performance'. In a form of research dissemination this research has utilised theatre as a vehicle to carry stories, opening them to wider artistic interpretation while maintaining an authentic credibility through a participatory approach.

### Safe for whom?

The concept of 'safe space' emerged from a burgeoning feminist discourse, where it was used to describe female-only spaces for women who had, typically, suffered abuse. It was 'used to connote metaphorical safety: that is, a space bordered by temporal dimensions (such as a workshop or rehearsal time/space) in which discriminatory activities, expressions of intolerance or policies of inequity are barred' (Hunter, 2008, p. 8). Geographers have already investigated the theatre as a politicised space (Houston & Pulido, 2002; Nash, 2000; Pratt & Johnston, 2007; Rogers, 2010, 2011, 2012); indeed Pratt and Kirby (2003, p. 19) acknowledge a political dimension in their theatre project with a nurses union – 'to tell stories in the context of a play seemed safer'. More recently, Johnston and Bajrange (2014) have explored the politics of street theatre and specifically the potential of theatre as a socio-spatial tactic for public intervention. Theatre as a medium is more liminal and ambiguous than conventional written dissemination of research; it is this characteristic that may be attractive to a participant.

Theatre offers possibilities for transcending the representational limits of academic discourse by offering subjects more authority over the representation of their voices and speaking to audiences outside of academia. (Mattingly, 2001, p. 449)

So theatre as safe space is a performative response to Ní Laoire (2007) call for critiques of anonymity. I argue that verbatim theatre – and theatrical performance – can create 'safe spaces within which participants can tell their stories and articulate counter-narratives' (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 373).

In the context of my research, the verbatim play that developed builds on the stories and testimonies of three working-class men of Irish descent (two of whom attended the festival performance), exploring the ways in which notions of masculinity, Irishness, religion, family, health, music, life and death have changed and shifted over the years and from individual to individual. I use fictional names for these three men – Victor, Peter and Simon – though their stories are derived from the exact words I generated in our interviews together. I recognised the role of the participants in constructing their own narrative; through selection and ordering they give meaning to particular memories. Cited by Mattingly (2001, p. 450) Maines and Bridger (1992) explain three elements of the 'narrative act': that (1) speakers select and describe events from the past, (2) speakers turn these events into story elements and (3) narratives are sequentially ordered to explain casual processes. It was these 'events from the past' that prompted the participants' interest in responding to the research call in the first place. During interviews, their spoken words were 'turned into story elements' as they performed them to me; consciously or

otherwise as I noted the older the participant was, the more ‘rehearsed’ the narrative tended to be. It was the third of these components the ‘sequentially ordered’ element that was amplified through the theatre piece.

As I have already stated, when this fieldwork was being undertaken I had neither plans nor ideas for the participant stories to form a play. I was later told by the participants that if this was my earlier intention, the material I generated would have been vastly different. In particular, they mentioned that had they known (through the process of *returning performance*) their stories would be heard more widely, they would have been more restrained with the delivery of certain narratives. Topics of a religious and familial nature were mentioned as more sensitive than others; this notion contrasting with the ‘nothing to hide’ sentiment noted earlier. Perhaps then at the beginning of research projects participants are more willing to surrender anonymity. If so, this raises questions about the appropriateness of gaining consent during the initial stage of the research. If in hindsight participants feel more emotionally guarded with their volunteered narratives, should we as researchers be offering the chance to review consent during and potentially after research is ‘complete’? I believe this to be the case and through returning the interview transcripts I offered participants the chance to withdraw information. At the same time, I stressed to them that within my analysis the social context/contexts of the ethnographic moment itself will always be acknowledged; not with the intention of coercing their cooperation but to ensure they can make a fully informed decision. I propose that seeing our spoken word written verbatim is not something many researchers would be comfortable with as it is so far removed from conventional social norms. As academics we are not used to having our *spoken* word quoted directly with the referencing and citation systems in place to record our *written* words. As such, we are far more composed with what we write than what we speak; why then should we expect anything else from research participants?

The performative is valuable as ‘narrative analysis then focuses on *how* people talk as well as *what* they say, and on interpreting layers of meaning in a text and the connections between them’ (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 379 citing Wiles et al., 2005, *original emphasis*); the utterances are highly significant. Verbatim theatre can do different things with narratives than is possible within academic journal articles and books. In the case of *Under Us All*, words are delivered with reference to their social context and consideration is given to pace, audibility and emphasis. This is not to imply that theatre is *better* than more conventional forms of dissemination, more that it is *better suited* given the nature of some research and certainly more appropriate for my work. As outlined earlier, the theatrical can cater for a more embodied handling of the spoken word which strikes a compromise between maintaining anonymity and simultaneously recognising participant input.

In the play, the participants’ lives are set within their wider contexts. The audience are encouraged – through the dramaturgical support of freelance theatre director, Gwilym Lawrence – to consider the individual narratives as representations of social processes; of how we age, how we identify and how we belong. Theatre then is catering to the performative needs of the research encounter. It can be considered a safer space for participant narratives as it can treat the spoken word with reference to how it was spoken in addition to where and why. It recognises a version of narrative authority by allowing the participants’ stories to be heard but in a way that has maintained anonymity. A concern I have already noted is the potential to exploit through dramatic intervention. For example, the editorial role of the director could supersede any consultation with participants; however, the men of my research were partners in the co-creation of the play. Although not actors themselves, the men provided input to the script during the creative process. Victor’s, Peter’s and Simon’s transcripts were selected to form the characters of the play for two reasons. First, they were

the family who showed the most enthusiasm for my approach. Second, they formed the most linear model of three generations in my study; I felt their clear intergenerational relationships as grandfather, father and son would translate well to characterisation and more importantly to audience reception of transitional stories of ageing, identity and belonging.

Crucially, the actor had never met the men nor listened to their voices through the recordings prior to a dress rehearsal the week of the debut. Neither I, as the researcher, nor Gwilym Lawrence, as the director, wanted to influence the actor's dramatic licence; the play was to stand as a piece of art and open to theatre critics. We were adamant that, while I had 'a responsibility towards ensuring that the representations...[were] produced through a climate of sensitivity, dialogue, respect and a willingness for reciprocity' (Preston, 2009, p. 65), we wanted to treat the script like any other. This is unlike the acclaimed verbatim playwright Alecki Blythe, for whom (certainly in her earlier work) 'authenticity derives from the exact reproduction of recorded sound (and not just language) that is channelled and embodied from documentary source material through the actors to the audience' (Taylor, 2013, p. 369). However, my work is also unlike that of Pratt and Johnston (2013) (who functioned as writers in their theatre project) as they re-worked participants' words, which were for them 'already shaped through the protocols and artificiality of the interview method and further abstracted through the process of transcription' (p. 302). *Under Us All* was 'word for word' but not 'sound for sound'; it was an artistic interpretation not an impersonation. My role was to act as an intermediary between the participants and the artists, while working to ensure my own academic integrity.

After the performance Victor (the older participant whose words became the grandfather in the play) revealed to me that the play supported and maintained the 'legacy' of his family of Irish descent. 'Legacy' was in reference to our earlier interview together where Victor expressed feelings about his Irish family history and ancestry more generally. The first extract that follows is from the interview transcript, and the second extract has been taken from the *Under Us All* script. Whilst 'verbatim', the director in his dramaturgical role did rearrange aspects of the transcripts in a more artistic version of the original. These scripts were then passed to the participants for their commentary. Their input was invaluable to the quality of the piece. This process I argue, though not exclusive to the production of theatre, is essential to creating 'safer' and more ethically responsible spaces for participant narratives.

### *From interview transcript*

Victor: Yes, we know that you'll never interest everyone. Some people find the subject [ancestry] very boring, sometimes even within your own family. But yes, there's in Peter's generation there's at least Peter and there's another cousin down in South Shields who's a fireman as it happens. Now up in Canada, my niece married an Iranian. So he is obviously Muslim. And he is actually interested because it means a lot to them in their culture and their ancestry. And the faith, 'cos that's where the faith came from [Ireland]. It's some legacy isn't it? Now what he [Iranian nephew] picked up on, he said it was interesting that a lot of the facts that were quoted actually stated the source. So in effect that is auditable. If anyone had the mind to, they could go online and check the website and the information I've given you would actually tell you exactly where to go at that point in time. So yeah that's coming from a Muslim you know.

Michael: So touching upon the faith side of things, which is obviously a strong factor, do you see that as, in the context here on Tyneside, is that what has helped carry home some of the Irishness?

Victor: Yes. Definitely.

Michael: Could you expand on that a bit?

Victor: The way I see it is that, just remember there is three elements, three Irish families you know. 2 on me father's paternal family history and 1 on me mothers. In fact he, [a relative] was way back in the 1800s, way before the famine. And he was on Tyneside because he was a seaman [at Tynemouth]. And like I said it's legacy innit, the faith? And I would like to think that our ancestors would approve of us using this new technology [genealogy websites]. They would think it's great. Let me give you one example when we were visiting [Ireland] with me brother. We were in a pub on a lunchtime, and it was all men in, bit of craic was going on. And all the standard Irish swear words and that. And someone said something that was a bit political and I said "oh I can't comment on that" and I said "that's a bit political, I don't belong round here". And he said "what do you mean you don't belong round here?" He said "of course you do". So they see it the same as us you know.

### ***From script for Under Us All***

Victor: The way I see it is that, just remember there is three elements, three Irish families you know. In fact one relative was way back in the 1800s, way before the famine. And he was on Tyneside because he was a seaman in Tynemouth. And like I said it's some legacy isn't it? And I would like to think that our ancestors would approve of us using this new technology. They would think it's great. And it's something to pass onto younger generations and at least some of the younger generations are there to show some interest. And from point one way back in the 1800s in Ireland, there's something like five generations that have elapsed. And yet there is a feeling of feeling Irish, and Irish ancestry. When we were visiting with me brother in Ireland. We were in a pub on a lunchtime, and it was all men in, bit of craic was going on. And all the standard Irish swear words and that. And someone said something that was a bit political and I said "oh I can't comment on that" and I said "that's a bit political, I don't belong round here". And he said "what do you mean you don't belong round here?" He said "of course you do".

The most striking difference is that the voice of the researcher has been removed. My muted presence allows for the audience to take on the role of researcher, as if they are involved in the research encounter. Like the US television show 'Jeopardy!'<sup>4</sup> audience members are tasked with the puzzle of 'these are the answers but what are the questions?' Further artistic distance is built into the play with the actor's use of a dictaphone, speaking directly into it, and further blurring the boundaries between researcher, participant, actor and audience. This dramatic device creates a sense of intimacy; that in one sense there is a voyeuristic appeal that the audience is witnessing 'private' information. This is especially significant given the prior knowledge that the, at times, very personal accounts were actually given with me present in the room. The performances and flyers for the event included information to explain the research process in more depth.

According to Portelli (1981), telling stories challenges the threat of time; in this sense we can see the performative as protective, as preserving 'legacy'. Admittedly the very recording of this information immortalises it, but the theatre piece also offers a more openly accessible version of the story recounted in the research interview. In Gwilym's script-writing role, he edited the transcripts by restructuring sections of narrative and omitting my voice to tell the story in the participants' words with the greatest impact; the juxtaposition of particular recollections helping to reveal the 'unexpected coincidences' of Golofast (2003) hidden life aspect.

In the final week of rehearsals and prior to the debut performance of *Under Us All*, I invited my research participants to a 'behind closed doors' run through of the play. This was in recognition of the sensitivities involved in this piece of verbatim theatre, with accuracy to the script paramount as well as input from the participants themselves. Throughout the process, the men of the study had been encouraged to comment on aspects of the script; and indeed they did with some faults being picked up as a result of my inaccurate transcription. In one instance, the occupation of 'shipwright' was incorrectly

transcribed as ‘shipwriter’ – a job which does not exist. While a seemingly minor detail, the accuracy of this statement for the participants served as testimony to their knowledge of maritime industries; in one telephone conversation I had with Peter (Victor’s son; whose words became the father in the play), he pointed out that he did not want an audience member to question the integrity of the research based on this oversight. Without these processes of returning performance I would not have resolved this issue, indeed I would not have known it was an issue at all.

Furthermore, Peter told me there was a ‘cringe factor’ to overcome in witnessing his own words – as well as those of his father and son – performed back to him by a professional actor whom he was meeting for the first time. The actor told me he too was nervous; performing verbatim directly in front of the man whose very words he was speaking – a rare opportunity for those in his vocation. Gwilym’s dramatic licence was also being tested; would his creative composition stand up? I was seeing my ideas come full circle; sat opposite my participants looking at their reactions to their words spoken by the man I had approached to perform them. The actor summed up the experience by borrowing some of Victor’s own words from the script: ‘what you’ve been through is what we’ve all been through’ (Richardson and Lawrence, *in press*). Furthermore, as Pearson and Shanks note ‘performance survives as a cluster of narratives, those of the watchers and the watched, and all those who facilitate their interaction’ (2001, p. 14). We had all felt apprehensive, nervous and excited; we were all out of our comfort zone. It is for this reason that this interdisciplinary work was so challenging.

### **The politics of representation**

What motivated this pursuit of theatre as a safe space? In paraphrasing the work of Mattingly (2001), I thought our work [verbatim theatre] could be helpful; my presence was motivated by the larger politics of representing men of Irish descent who live on Tyneside; my focus was because of the particular characteristics of men of Irish descent, specifically the intersections of place, age and masculinity within the diaspora context. But unlike Mattingly’s project I was not ‘amplifying the voices of powerless people [to] contribute to justice and equality’ (Mattingly, 2001, p. 446) as the men of my study are not powerless, nor was I promising to address injustice and inequality, though I was amplifying participants’ voices. The literature calls this approach to theatre ‘new genre public art’ (Felshin, 1995; Lacy, 1995) which is ‘...avowedly political in that it seeks to work collaboratively with the public, to provide a catalyst for social change, and to give voice to those silenced and marginalised by mainstream public culture’ (Mattingly, 2001, p. 450). Perhaps then, through the spaces created by returning performance we are witnessing a new genre of public social and cultural geography.

This project then can be seen as a process of creating a safe space for counter-narratives of representation of men of Irish descent living on Tyneside. The men volunteered their participation in the research. They were supportive of my ideas of the performative potential of their material and saw the play as a chance to tell their story. This was about taking their stories outside the diaspora, beyond the annual Tyneside Irish Festival (held every October) into a more open arena – with the debut performance as part of an AHRC funded conference and a subsequent tour as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science to four public venues across the North East of England. Further recognition of these efforts was noted in our award of a grant from Arts Council England.

The biographical oral histories of my research cannot be generalised and cannot be representative as they are inherently individualised; but their value ‘lies in revealing the

intricate patterning of race and class' (Nayak, 2008, p. 165). They are individual stories from individual working-class men of Irish descent. They are though men who think relationally and define and self-identify as such. They are simultaneously grandfathers, fathers, and sons as well as fathers and grandfathers to be. Their lives are interconnected and intergenerational. *Under Us All* is a play written through the verbatim transcripts from interviews with three men. But more broadly it is our nature as 'world-makers' that seeks meaning in the stories of others. It is in this sense that I believe, the unavoidable notion of representation, rears its head in the play and in my research more broadly. The local press, the theatre company, even the ethical framework of the University, wanted the story to be representative as it is seen as 'safer' and more significant. With this in mind, I would rather see the play as symbolic. These individual stories, events, memories and performances, and involvement in the creative processes of script writing helped recognise the narrative authority of the participants involved. But their story is universal in the sense that it symbolises stories of masculinity, Irishness, religion, family, health, music, life and death for those who identify as 'Tyneside Irish'; indeed perhaps even for those who do not.

Some of these tensions between the particular and the universal are explored further by Rogers (2012). In citing Dolan (2005) she explains 'theatre can create fleeting moments of connection between audiences and performers with diverse identifications. These brief moments of togetherness engage a "common humanity" that "allows people to share and feel things in common"' (Rogers, 2012, p. 436). Equally, two comments from individuals who had no prior involvement with the project are particularly relevant to this discussion:

'[The play] resonates with our Irish background and our reality of the North East' (Anonymous audience survey 3/5/2012).

'Very good performance, I have just finished my dissertation on the History of the Irish in the North East England at Newcastle University so it was very interesting to hear about three generations of the Irish in this region' (Anonymous audience survey 3/5/2012).

I have already claimed that representation was unavoidable in this project because of the way the participants (and wider public) receive and relate to the work; '*our* reality' and '*the* Irish in this region' then speaking to the symbolism of the performance. The verbatim theatre piece was not a re-presentation of the lives of three men of Irish descent – but one which catered to their narrative authority and traded within the symbolic economy.

Could this article be seen as 'a predictable confrontation between the idealism of theory and the complexity of reality' (Mattingly, 2001, p. 456)? It could. But I hope it conveys more practically the contribution that this research can make, and has made to intergenerational research, to the political arena of representation and for those negotiating the complex questions of ethics and anonymity. I suggest that in conducting research ethically we need to move beyond prescriptive notions of anonymity in striving towards participant 'protection'. Instead, I call for the move towards research and reciprocity. To never take without giving. It is in these pursuits where dialogue, trust and transparency can help create a greater (and safer) space for narratives. Surely this is greater protection for our participants. While I do not claim that all projects could or even should be returned through performance, in an era where funding organisations talk of impact and engagement, to not disseminate research findings in some way would seem to be unacceptable.

## Conclusion

Adapting Mattingly (2001, p. 456) 'it is impossible for me to know what [the research] has meant, and continues to mean, to those it has touched' given the far-reaching nature of the

symbolic economy. But by speaking with the participants before, during and after the research I certainly got a sense through both their body language and their spoken words of how pleased they were with the process; their sense of pride and achievement. Equally, those men whose individual stories were not explicitly returned through performance talked of the value of the research project. I do though note Mattingly (2001, p. 456) warning that:

The actions and good intentions of artists and scholars are given meaning within larger structural and institutional processes, which can define and limit the transformative potential of such projects. Putting people's voice on stage does not necessarily give people power over the institutional and symbolic contexts in which their voices are heard.

The larger structural and institutional processes pertinent to my project are ethical practice within social and cultural geography and recognised and acceptable practice within social science research at large. I do not claim representativeness through my research. However, through returning performance in the 'safe space' of verbatim theatre, their value has had greater resonance than would otherwise be the case.

The chosen methodological approaches provide a voice, both collectively and individually, for men of Irish descent living on Tyneside. By cross-checking the biographical oral histories, with that of others in the same generation, and with supplementary 'evidence' (participant generated outline images [see Richardson, 2013] and a piece of verbatim theatre) I am verifying the biographical material gathered. There is no 'true or false' with this data, though admittedly biographical research and creative geographies are limited by their subjectivity. As such, my research does not claim objectivity; rather, it aims to make a key contribution to the study of the Irish in Britain by revealing partial, yet rich and relevant, biographical narratives. At the same time, the research responds to a significant gap within the geographical literature concerning alternative/additional forms of dissemination and calls for a shift in emphasis in ethical practice.

I would encourage those wanting to employ biographical and creative geographical methods within their own work to do so. I would also encourage them to fully position themselves within the research, to be aware of the influence of relational identity formation and to ensure that their personality (Moser, 2008) comes across as enthusiastic, approachable, interested and respectful to fully reap the benefits of creative practice in geographical research. This article has argued that while anonymity remains an important and essential component of social science research, the rationale behind this participant protection should be revised. To simply change the names of people and places does not do justice to the involvement of those we work with. The pursuit of different forms of dissemination – such as the verbatim theatre of this article – can however help to voice participant stories by recognising their narrative authority while maintaining confidentiality.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. Tyneside is the regional term for the area either side of the River Tyne in the North East of England. The region's city is Newcastle upon Tyne.
2. The Tyneside Irish Festival is an annual fortnight-long celebration of Irish culture on Tyneside. The event ranges from Irish dancing, language classes, local histories, music performances and lessons as well as films to showcase the contribution of Irish people in the region.
3. Cap-a-Pie Associates are a participatory theatre company based in the North East of England: <http://www.cap-a-pie.co.uk/>.
4. TV Show 'Jeopardy!' is a well known NBC quiz show broadcast across the USA in which the contestants are challenged given answers to which they must generate appropriate questions in response.

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