Accepted Manuscript

Title: Past remarkable: Using life stories to trace alternative futures

Author: Jane Palmer

Please cite this article as: J. Palmer, Past remarkable: Using life stories to trace alternative futures, *Futures* (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2014.10.002

Highlights

A life is a form of "social site" at which individuals negotiate the future.

Life stories are a type of historical "trace" with implications for the future.

A life story shows us many alternative futures never actualized.

Storytelling is an improvised experimental event, with uncertain outcomes.

In listening to life stories we can gain both foresight and the empathy to act.

Past remarkable: Using life stories to trace alternative futures

Order of Authors: Jane Palmer, Ph.D

Abstract

The paper argues that life stories and histories offer different perspectives on the past, with implications for studying the future. A life is proposed as a form of "social site" (Marston, S.A., J.P. Jones III & K. Woodward 2005, 'Human geography without scale', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 30, pp. 416-432.) where the future is met and negotiated. Unlike the broad sweep of historical narrative, a focus on the site of a life can reveal cumulative losses, futures denied and paths not taken. Life stories challenge historical narrative with alternative futures that 'might-have-been'; they might therefore usefully be added as a more experimental type to Inayatullah's taxonomy of historical "traces" (Inayatullah, S. 2012, 'Humanity 3000: A comparative analysis of methodological approaches to forecasting the long-term', *Foresight*, vol. 14, no. 5, pp. 401-417).

A case study based on a life story from Aceh is used to demonstrate ways in which alternative futures can emerge from life stories and then be acted upon. The paper concludes that the experimental power of life stories as historical traces lies not only in the stories themselves but in the unique event of *storytelling* and its potentially transformative impact on the teller and listener, and hence the future.

1. Introduction

> .... life and duration, and thus history and politics, are never either a matter of unfolding an already worked out blueprint… Duration proceeds not through the accumulation of information and the growing acquisition of knowledge, but through the division, bifurcation, dissociation – by difference, through sudden and unpredictable change, which overtakes us with its surprise… (Grosz 2005: 110-111).

1.1 The people in the field

This paper about futures begins with a (narrativized but true) story about the past:

> At a conference in Banda Aceh on land use after the tsunami, international agricultural scientists spoke to us about 'landscape mosaics' – the mosaic of forest, peat swamp, rice field and rubber plantation that shifts like a kaleidoscope over time. The scientists argued that the mosaic might change, but what mattered was maintaining a balance between all of the pieces.

> After the talk, we were taken on a bus into the countryside, to some rice fields where the scientists had been experimenting with seed varieties and planting techniques. It was a hot afternoon, and we could see that some of the plants were growing green and strong, but others next to them were limp and yellow. The local farmer who looked after the land was a calm man, slowly lifting an arm to point things out to us, showing

2

with his fingers the depth of planting, the quantity of fertilizer.

"So," we said, "what was the soil like? How did you prepare it for the planting?"

"The ploughing was difficult", he said, "very slow…"

"Were there rocks?" we asked, although the soil looked soft and easy to plough.

"No rocks," he said. "But many bodies…there were many people under this field."

There was silence for a moment. We hadn't thought about bodies in the landscape mosaic. 'Were they from the tsunami?' we asked.

He shrugged: "Maybe they were killed in the fighting. Nobody knows who they are, where they came from…We'll probably never know."

In the landscape mosaic of Aceh – recently emerged from 30 years of civil conflict and the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami that killed 170,000 Acehnese – here is a piece that bursts out of the past and into all of Aceh's potential futures. In this paper, a case study from Aceh is used to support the idea that the often invisible past may be a source of unexpected alternative futures; further, that one way of identifying multiple and future-laden pasts is through listening to the life stories of those who lived through them.

1.2 *The past in the future, the future in the past*

How do we identify the ragged pieces that emerge from difficult histories, and how do they connect with the imagining of alternative futures? Many histories are not smooth trajectories of progress and development, but more akin to what Ganguly has called "a jagged array of nauseating tableaux" (2009: 439). The value of histories for futures studies is discussed below through the writing of futurist Sohail Inayatullah (1998; 2008, 2012) and the work undertaken by ethnoecologist Nancy Turner in collaboration with decision research scientists (2008). Inayatullah suggests that before we are able to envisage alternative futures, we need first to see the present as remarkable rather than just "the way things are" (1998: 818); this argument is extended here to seeing the past also as remarkable. It is proposed that to do so requires an addition to the forms of historical "trace" described by Inayatullah (2012). Turner *et al* provide a guide to the forms of "invisible loss" that characterise difficult histories, and the ways in which they constrain the futures of a community, an elaboration of what Inayatullah calls the "weight of history" (2008: 8).

Uncovering hitherto invisible histories that might reveal something new for the future, requires, in historian Paul Carter's words, attention to the non-events of everyday life, to anecdotes about "the trifling, the dirt, the rubbish" (2004: 175) that are overlooked in the master narratives of history ("history's pretence of clear-sightedness" (2004: 175)). Revelations in these alternative histories offer "an opportunity for grounding the future differently" (Carter 2004: 170)). The discussion below draws together Carter's work and that of philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (Grosz 1999, 2000, 2005), who argues for attention to be paid, outside the recycling patterns of mainstream history, to "histories of singularity" with their multiplicity, diversity and contingency. These singular histories offer a glimpse of alternative futures – paths not taken, futures denied – that are part of a limitless world of "futures yet unthought" (Grosz 1999).

The following section reviews the ways in which life stories differ from histories, and how life stories might usefully be added into Inayatullah's taxonomy of historical "traces"; life stories, for example, may be a way of identifying cumulative losses that are invisible in big historical narratives, and in conventional measures of community wellbeing. Sections 3 and 4 develop the idea of a life and life stories as connected integrally with the future. Section 3 examines the idea of a *life* as both a unique site of the past and the place where the future is actually met and negotiated. Section 4 focuses on a *life story* as a 'singular history' that can be used (by teller and listener) in an experimental way for exploring alternative futures outside the projections of historical master narratives. A case study based on a life story from Aceh is then used to demonstrate ways in which alternative futures can emerge from life stories and then be acted upon. The last section proposes that part of the experimental power of life stories lies in the unique event of the *storytelling* itself, and its potentially transformative impact on the teller, the listener and hence the future.

2.   The contingent and multiple past

2.1   Historical narrative and life stories

Inayatullah reminds us that "the past we see as truth is in fact the particular writing of history, often by the victors of history" (1998: 818). History organizes what was for those at the time a chaotic present (or less dramatically, "just … the way life was lived" (Danto 1981: 206)), into an intelligible past (Mink 1966: 184; Ricoeur 1984: 99). History can be used in this way to construct nation states as models of evolutionary progress, and to suppress or re-order chaotic events of the past so that they lead ineluctably to a glorious or problematic present (see for example Farriss 1987; Bowen 1989; Rappaport 1994; Goodall 2000; Attwood 2001; Zurbuchen 2005).

> The nation still constitutes a central organising concept for historians of all political and theoretical persuasions. The pleasures of national historiography are, after all, immense; a national focus ensures historians a large and interested audience, and enables their historical work to count in current debate and contemporary local culture (Curthoys et al. 2010: 235).

Historical narratives that construct the present in certain ways become the foundation for what Peter Schwartz (1991 (1996): 237) calls the "official future", the future envisaged from the standpoint of the way things are today. However critical and reflexive historians (see for example Wyschogrod 1998; Perks et al. 2003; Curthoys et al. 2010) commit themselves to the possibility of multiple narratives; oral sources are seen as potentially offering an understanding of the non-victor's history or "history from below" (Curthoys et al. 2010: 140, citing historian E P Thompson), and of the cognitive, cultural and psychological factors in events (Passerini 2003: 54). First-person accounts and oral histories are thus used by historians as 'historical evidence' for alternative narratives; they are "clues …[that] need now to be harvested, selected, arranged and freed from their ambiguity" (Passerini 2003: 55).

However there is a multiplicity and diversity in life stories – a different account for every life lived – that makes them difficult to use as evidence in developing a unified narrative. Anna Szörényi notes that edited collections of 'anecdotes' can produce a false collective 'experience' that erases the record of the experiences of individuals:

> A singular 'refugee experience' is thus manufactured from the myriad and disparate

4

political situations and life histories that can cause people to relocate (Szörényi 2009: 178).

In an essay on the film *Shoah*, based on the testimony of concentration camp survivors, Shoshona Felman notes that " the collection of the fragments does not yield, even after ten hours of the movie, any possible totality or any possible totalisation" (Felman et al. 1992: 223). What is most significant about oral histories is their "peculiar specificity" which includes not only facts, but "the dimension of memory, ideology and subconscious desires" (Passerini 2003: 53-54). Bochner suggests that, rather than using stories as evidence for theory, we might instead hear them "as a call to be vigilant to the cross-currents of life's contingencies" (2001: 132).

2.2 *Historical traces: the narrative and the experimental*

Life stories, testimony, or oral histories, rather than evidence, constitute a form of historical "trace" (Inayatullah 2012). Inayatullah describes three forms of historical trace, each of which has implications for constructing the future: a conception of reality as essentially unchanging over time; the deriving of "general keys to how and why civilizations rise and fall" based on detailed historical readings; and the identification of grand patterns in 'macrohistory' (Inayatullah 2012: 406-407). Life stories do not fit comfortably into any of these categories; rather than pointing to historical patterns and trajectories, life stories are more likely to be non-narrative, disjointed, episodic and told without regard for chronological time. This is especially the case for those who have lived through difficult histories. Life stories are a subversive and sometimes chaotic counterpoint to the "narrative turn" taken in recent times by the social sciences (Riessman 1993: 1; Denzin et al. 2003: 4):

> The narrative turn promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories …
> away from writing essays and toward telling stories … (Bochner 2001: 134-135).

However rather than providing an alternative narrative, life stories disrupt master narratives through their often chaotic and non-narrative qualities; this is most evident in traumatic life stories – Ganguly's "jagged array of nauseating tableaux" (2009: 439). Yet life stories are not *merely* disruptive: they present us also with an array of paths not taken, worldviews and courses of action that stand outside or even contradict dominant cultural and historical narratives.

In the social sciences, the narrative turn has been followed by the 'turn to experimentation' with its acceptance of uncertainty, the need to work at the local scale and in dialogue, and the need for continual re-thinking about the way forward (Coombes et al. 2012; Lorimer 2012; Human 2014). The experimental turn can be seen in the fluid and always provisional human-nonhuman collectives of Bruno Latour (2004, 2005), and in the call for "a new way to see, trial and sponsor on-the-ground experiments" in black-white reconciliation (Coombes et al. 2012: 692). Life stories are proposed here as a fourth, more experimental, historical trace, one that moves away from the certainty of narrative but opens up the possibility of surprise and the emergence of something "absolutely new" (Grosz 1999: 16).

The experimentalism of listening to life stories lies partly in their improvised quality. Like the writing of history, recollection may be, as Carter notes, a kind of "remembering forwards" (2004: 135), a performance that is both improvised and purposive in constructing a past and a future.

5

Through deciding what is important to tell, and what will best serve the purposes of the present or future *at the moment of storytelling*, each storyteller offers the listener a particular improvised and momentary past. These improvisations offer the futurist an opportunity to "rupture the commonplace narratives of the group they are interacting with" (Bussey 2014: 95). The experimental non-narratives of life stories are therefore a very different kind of historical trace, in which we might see "the spaces of reality… loosen and the new possibilities, ideas and structures …emerge" (Inayatullah 1998: 817).

Life stories operate as disruptive historical traces in several ways; one example is their revelation of cumulative losses that are invisible in historical narrative. Like the bodies in the field, these losses are a hidden history that weights every future of the community where they occur.

2.3   *Tracing the invisible past*

> There is an enormous and lasting reservoir of memories of torture, violence, and
> displacement enacted against communities and individuals in Aceh. Profound loss and
> a potent sense of injustice are remainders of the violence. Careful consideration should
> be given to specific efforts to work through these memories as a part of the ongoing
> peace process in the context of rebuilding Aceh (Good et al. 2007: 76).

> … the legacy of conflict in terms of institutional capacity, distrust and poor
> relationships inevitably overshadowed the first year or more of the tsunami response
> (da Silva 2010: 27).

It is not only historical narrative that obliterates much of the past of communities and individuals. Planners and development practitioners undertaking interventions in communities often fail to see that "current conditions already represent significant losses compared with the past" (Turner et al. 2008: 9). Like official histories, socio-economic assessments can mask 'invisible losses' suffered over many years, which have had un-quantifiable impacts on communities. Losses include cultural and lifestyle losses, loss of identity, health losses (for example through enforced changes to diet), loss of self-determination, influence and "order in the world", and opportunity losses as people become "so … focused on trying to fix the injustices of the past that it is hard to focus on moving forward and seizing opportunities" (2008: 5). The ways in which historical loss and privation in a community cast shadows over its future include for example (2008: 3-5, emphases added):

> Colonial history is full of episodes in which newcomers sought to change the life ways
> of local inhabitants or dismissed their practices as inferior or unworthy, *resulting in
> exasperation and despair.*

> *Apprehension and confusion* can result from external changes that affect the expected
> and anticipated cycles of life, including disruptions of the regular return of migratory
> species or changes in the seasons… often resulting in *profound disorientation.*

> … This overwhelming, but as yet little recognized, *erosion of cultural diversity*
> parallels, and is linked to, the escalating loss of global biodiversity.

Histories, and the narrative myths of progress and modernity, Paul Carter notes, ignore the "the toxic radiating cloud of disappearances that most progress-marking events involve" (2004: 59). Carter proposes that attention be given instead to the gritty, the ordinary and the overlooked; the

6

result is less an analytical critique of prevailing myths and narratives but rather a revelation of what it is that they leave out. As an example, Carter draws attention to the diaries of colonial Australian astronomer William Dawes, whose record of conversations with Patyegarang, a young Aboriginal woman, suggest a particular kind of loss: a lost opportunity for a different and better future for black-white relations in Australia (Carter 2004, Collaboration 6: Speaking pantomimes). Returning to the past to discover the points at which such opportunities arose and were lost, might allow us, suggests Carter, to "[put] things back together in a different way" (Carter 2004: 179).

Such *non*-events can appear in stories of experience as the fourth kind of "historical trace", the opposite of the trends and big events that constitute political and historical narratives. Ethnographer Jack Katz notes that stories can even tell us what did not happen:

> The social reality of any place exists not only as a present for those currently in occupancy but also as … *a future denied* to others who took courses of action that led them elsewhere (Katz 2004: 301, emphasis added).

Similarly, Stella Clarke (2011) suggests that a novel can show us "the tragedy of *paths not honoured or taken*" (2011, emphasis added). The exploratory novels discussed by Clarke, and Katz's ethnographies of absence, like alternative histories and counterfactual geographies (see for example Warf 2002; Day 2010; Gilbert et al. 2010) are ways of revealing the contingency of the past and imagining a world of alternative futures. However the focus of this paper is not on counterfactuals – worlds that might have been had history been different (Warf 2002: 18; Gilbert et al. 2010: 246). It is focused instead on what futures might yet be if we attend to what has actually happened but which remains hidden: "the debris of the operation… hitherto fallen between the cracks of knowledge" (Carter 2004: 70). Life stories, and more generally stories of experience, are "phosphorescence in the wake of events", seen only with "an eye open in the dark" (Carter 2004: 170). The following sections offer an explanation of how these evanescent historical traces can connect us to alternative futures.

3.   A life as a site for meeting the future

Life stories are more than simply another version of the past; the lens of individual experience can change the way we view history, as can be seen in this comment by historian David Thelen:

> A 75-year-old man from Westfield, New Jersey, reported: 'there are two things that have had a profound effect on my life. One was the Great Depression … The second was the Second World War … I think it makes you a stronger person from having lived through adversity and having overcome it.' While history textbooks ordinarily put these two events in different chapters, the New Jersey man recalled that both events had remarkably similar consequences for him (Thelen 2000: 25).

The individual who describes their experience has "an utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical *position* with respect to an occurrence" (Felman et al. 1992: 206). There are parallels between the idea of an individual's life as the focus of events, and the "social site" described by Marston *et al* (2005). In a reconceptualization of the relationship between the global and the local, the social site – whether a neighbourhood, a village or a city – is the place where apparently totalizing external forces (such as globalization and economic development) are met, resisted, modified and integrated into people's lives. The social site is the place "where ideas are formed,

7

actions are produced, …relationships are created and maintained" (2005: 427). This shift in focus draws attention to the local concreteness of so-called world problems as grounded in the here and now (Beck 1998). Tsing also draws attention to the importance of those two-way interchanges that occur at the margins between the global and local: those "zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap, or where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge" (1994: 279).

The social site is a way of disrupting official futures which so often get it wrong about what will actually happen in communities as a result of global forces. It offers a different way of thinking about the conventional hierarchy in which 'global' always means strong and irresistible, and 'local' means small and vulnerable (Marston et al. 2005: 421ff). It helps us to see that apparently irresistible forces and trends might in fact be contingent and variable, woven differently into many diverse sites. Similarly, 'a life' can be seen as a site where things actually happen, where so-called global events and trends, as well as national, regional and local events, are encountered and modified, and where "invisible losses" might become visible.

In the case study presented later in this paper, historic and tectonic events are traced through a life story, to reveal surprising ways of responding to loss and envisaging the future. Focusing on the 'social site' and the site of a life can give us a different view of the past and the diverse ways in which external events at all scales are shaped into a future. It can also suggest a myriad of alternative futures that have not (yet) happened.

4.   Life stories as 'histories of singularity': possible, probable and potential futures

> If dominant modes of knowledge (causal, statistical) are incapable of envisioning the absolutely new, maybe other modes of knowing, other forms of thinking, need to be proposed (Grosz 1999: 21).

Futures studies has been defined as "the multidisciplinary and systematic field of inquiry into probable, possible and preferable futures" (Milojević 2014: 28) or "the study of alternative futures including the worldviews and myths that underlie them" (Inayatullah et al. 2014). Marcus Bussey argues that futurists need to work not only with desired futures but with "as yet unforeseen possibilities and a host of possible 'others' who may emerge… in the unfolding narrative" (2014: 97). However to move beyond the 'probable, possible and preferable' to the 'yet unforeseen' requires experimentation and the uncertainty that accompanies it (Human 2014: 14). It is to move beyond what Grosz criticises as the limitations of 'causality' – in which the future is an 'effect' of the present and past – and of statistical projection in which future events are predicted as probabilities; both, Grosz argues "are incapable of envisioning the absolutely new" (1999: 21):

> In seeking an open-ended future, one is … required to … accept the role that the accidental, chance, or the undetermined plays in the unfolding of time (Grosz 1999: 18).

The development of futures that are *possible, probable or preferable* is based upon "insights from today's knowledge and expectations of the future" (Karlsen et al. 2010: 60, 65, 67); Grosz's " futures yet unthought" on the other hand are discovered because living beings are always 'searching' and 'groping' towards an unknown future (Grosz 1999: 15, citing Bergson). Futures that contain the "absolutely new" are in Grosz's terms (after Deleuze), *potential* futures, always

available in some virtual universe and awaiting an encounter with the world. Rather than scenarios based on foresight and projections of signals detected in the present (Karlsen et al. 2010: 69), Grosz's futures can be conceived of only when they have been stumbled upon.

While potential futures cannot be grasped by projecting from current conditions, they might be glimpsed, Grosz suggests, in "histories of singularity"; a history of singularity is, like a life story, a kind of historical trace that lies outside the patterns of history:

> Historical research is commonly based on the belief that we can learn from the past, and by reflection on it, we can improve the present. … The more and the better we understand the past, the more well armed we are to face *a future which is to a large extent a copy or reformulation … of historical events* (Grosz 2000: 229, emphasis added).

A history of singularity however "defies repeatability" and instead reveals what is latent, "the potentiality of the future" (2000: 229). Life stories, in their 'peculiar specificity' and multiplicity seem ideally suited to fulfil the role of 'singular histories' outside the patterns and projections of historical narrative. Instead of stitching itself neatly into history's trajectory, the story of a life, especially one lived in conditions of chronic trauma or privation, may have no trajectory at all. Yet, as the case study below demonstrates, from the array of might-have-beens, thwarted plans, and lost hopes, something remarkable – a "future unthought" – can emerge. A life story as a form of 'singular history' is thus both an historical trace and capable of contradicting history.

Nevertheless Oliver Human suggests that the "absolutely new" would be unrecognizable to us without some connection to prior experience:

> We can only recognize the event, like the other, by means of prior experiences with such phenomena. Something radically new would not be understandable to us; we must have traces of past experiences which allow us to deal with the events we face (2014: 5).

Grosz too points out that to judge something as radically new "must involve … some recognition of the old, such that this new departs from it" (Grosz 2000: 214). Life stories make these connections between the familiar and the new; the anecdotes are concerned with the everyday, "the trifling, the dirt, the rubbish" (Carter 2004: 175), but they lie outside the narrative frames of the present and the foreseeable futures. Life stories ask us as listeners instead to " downcast our eyes to the 'dirt and rocks' …where social things happen, things that are contingent, fragmented and changeable" (Marston et al. 2005: 427), and potentially gain a shared glimpse of alternative "futures yet unthought". It is a form of invitation and, as Maggie MacLure notes "once invited in, our task is to experiment and see where that takes us" (2013: 4).

The case study below, based on the life story of someone who lived through dramatic changes to her village over almost a century, is at once both revelatory and familiar.

5. A case study from Aceh, Indonesia

Aceh during the whole of the twentieth century was a place of occupation by foreign powers, decades of civil unrest and then, with the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami, one of the worst natural disasters ever recorded. The impacts of chronic trauma, loss and a prolonged absence of

9

government investment have had lasting impacts on the Acehnese people (Good et al. 2007; Shea et al. 2008; Grayman et al. 2009).

Ibu A, whose life story forms the basis of the case study below, is one of 24 old people whom I interviewed in rural Aceh, in order to study the value of life stories in assessing resilience and precariousness in the present (Author 2011). She was 90 years old when I interviewed her, and so had lived through most of the historical events of Aceh's past century. In her life story, Ibu A performed some remarkable interweaving of the ways in which environmental change, chronic trauma, ageing and health issues had affected her life and livelihood. In documenting cumulative 'invisible loss', her story represents a potentially valuable resource for development scholars and practitioners seeking new and better models for socio-historical assessment of communities (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003: 165; Folke 2006: 262; Adger et al. 2009). In the area of cumulative effects assessment, where practitioners have argued for more "historical, descriptive and democratic accounts of thresholds and limits" (Mitchell *et al*. 2011: 29), Ibu A's story offers one such account. However we shall see that Ibu A's life story offers glimpses not only of an alternative past, but an alternative future.

Many parts of Ibu A's life story describe the village where she lives and its relationship with water: sea level rise, the disappearance of a river, and the 2004 tsunami. The village was completely destroyed in the tsunami, but during her life time, rising sea levels had already forced it to move at least three times. Writing in 1988 about this village, one archaeologist noted:

> [The] physical evidence… is sufficient to suggest that not only has the shoreline receded some 150 to 200 m. over the past eighty years …, but it has also sunk at least two to three meters in the same period…

> … A local informant indicated that the location of the village … had been moved three times within living memory (Edwards McKinnon 1988: 116).

In Ibu A's story, the village appears as an always shifting, sinking place, the water covering it "little by little until it is totally gone. Little by little, the sea level rise, then the river level rise… then the village has disappeared." She can no longer heat the salty river sand to make salt: "not anymore, there is no more place, the river has gone." Most recently – but not finally – came the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami: not 'finally' in the "official future" because planning for the next tsunami has already begun (see for example da Silva 2010), and not 'finally' for the villagers, because they have rebuilt their home on its new shoreline. The following is an excerpt from Ibu A's life story:

> *What happened when the tsunami came?*

> How can I forget, my daughter, tsunami happened like yesterday…I still remember. I feel like I couldn't go to the mountain, but I have to. We stayed there in the mountain for two nights in the rain…. I walk very slowly, little by little until finally I arrived in other people's village… We stayed two days and two nights in the mountain my dear, *Laa ilaha illallah* [There's no other God besides Allah]. I lost 9 of my family, 7 grandchildren, plus their mother, and one baby born. We couldn't find their bodies.

> After we stayed in the mountain for two days, we were moving to another village…we stayed there for two months, and then we were moving to refugee barrack, we stayed

10

there quite long, two years. After that, we moved to this house. I don't know where we will move after this…heaven! There's nowhere else to go beside to the God. We'll go there together, in the end of the day when God calls.

So there is no more a river here?

[Ibu and her brother]: No, it's been collapsed by the sea, when tsunami happened, the river was gone forever. Before tsunami, there was still a piece of the village remaining there but only an open land, no houses there. After tsunami, it's all gone. If only the river was still there, our village may be quite big.

Of course, I love this village, no matter what…this village is my home, I was born here. This is my place.

When Ibu's brother was asked after the interview how big the village was, he replied: "More or less, 400 hectares, including the mountain area and the area that is covered by the water". The village for both him and his sister takes in its many inundations and relocations, even, perhaps, the great mosque buried out to sea that can be glimpsed occasionally through clear water (Edwards McKinnon 1988: 115, 116). Their village is the "trace" of events that have shaped it (Bakhtin 1981 (1937-73): 189).

The village that emerges from Ibu A's life story is a glimpse into a very different future from the one envisaged by officials after the 2004 tsunami. In 2005, the village became part of a phenomenon that took planners and government by surprise. The government's top-down and wide-sweeping blueprint for post-tsunami reconstruction was founded on an overriding concern to prevent a future tsunami causing such high levels of inundation and death. The "official future" included an exclusion zone two kilometres wide along the coast in which construction was prohibited. However "the behaviour of the victims went against the preconceptions of the planners – continuously and systematically. Survivors opted for recovery, not for re-planning" (Dercon *et al*. 2007: 11). People demanded to re-build on their own land, rather than land offered elsewhere:

In the name of Allah the Benevolent and Merciful,

We, the villagers of Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar, the victims of tsunami on 26 December 2004, currently 14 villages in number, herewith state the following:

1. *In the spirit of togetherness, trust, social justice, self-reliance and honesty, we give our pledge to return to our home villages, to start our lives again and to develop our community.*

2. *In doing so we open our doors for concerned individuals, groups and organizations who wish to assist us in the development process of social, economic and cultural life of our communities…(JUB-UPLink 2005-6: Declaration)*

Had stories such as Ibu A's been heard before establishment of the exclusion zone, this alternative, even subversive, future envisaged by communities would have emerged earlier. Ibu A's story contains the seeds of this alternative future: a record of similar disasters already weathered, and of other issues more important than simple survival. These include historical connection to place and

community, the potential additional trauma of being unable to return 'home', and the livelihood imperative which includes proximity to the ocean. As a result of listening to people in Ibu A's community and others nearby, non-government organisation UpLink supported several village heads in petitioning the government and developing the declaration quoted above. This resulted in the villagers being permitted to return and rebuild within the two-kilometre exclusion zone (JUB-UPLink 2005-6; Syukrizal et al. 2009). UN-HABITAT also supported village organisations and community groups in deciding to return and re-build their villages (Dercon et al. 2007: 9). The government blueprint was abandoned for "lack of specificity and realism" (Dercon et al. 2007: 7).

The life stories told to me by old people in Ibu's village offer insights into the impacts of chronic physical insecurity, interrogation and disempowerment over decades of occupation, civil conflict and government neglect in Aceh (Author 2011). However as Anna Szörényi notes in the context of refugee stories, there is no single post-conflict or tsunami story. One remarkable aspect of Ibu A's story is its inversion of Turner et al's "invisible loss": not the erosion of culture, security and wellbeing, but the repeated submersion of houses, mosques, farms and waterways, each time rebuilt as closely as possible to the ocean where the outlines of the old structures remain just visible beneath the water. Ibu A's life story is also a tectonic history of her village. While she told of fear, political instability and violence, her story reveals a deep attachment to the geologically unstable, disappearing/re-appearing place she calls home. It is a commitment to a future that might not fit established ideas of "progress" or "development" but rests instead on "the more disconcerting notion of unpredictable, disordered, or uncontainable change… that … seems to unsettle scientific, philosophical, political, and cultural ideals of stability and control…" (Grosz 1999: 16). Ibu's story, different from but resonating with many others, shook the foundations of Aceh's reconstruction blueprint and the course of Aceh's future; it did indeed allow "the spaces of reality to loosen and the new possibilities, ideas and structures, to emerge" (Inayatullah 1998: 817).

However such an impact required the attentiveness of others, an openness to engagements that might produce such stories and their uncertain consequences.

6. Storytelling as transformative event

Life stories as a form of historical trace reveal hitherto unseen or unacknowledged values, assumptions, expectations, cumulative stresses, and adaptation and coping strategies; more significantly for this paper however, life stories carry with them alternative futures that may either languish in Grosz's virtual world, or, if attended to (as in the case study above), be actualized in place of the official future. Listening and attending to life stories however is more than simply a gleaning of alternative futures; part of its experimental power lies in its potential to transform both the teller and the listener.

> Oral history turns the historian into an interviewer and changes the practice of the historian into a personal interaction with the past within living memory (Bornat 2003: 190).

The storytelling is an event, a "transmission" from speaker to listener (Portelli 2003: 70); moreover the storyteller, unlike the historian, provides by their presence a link in body and memory between the 'there-and-then' of their life and the 'here-and-now' of the storytelling. The nature of this event beyond simply hearing the 'facts' is most starkly evident in stories of trauma; to this extent, the historian, the psychiatrist, the anthropologist, the documentary film-maker and the war crimes

12

judge participate in a potentially transformative experience when they listen to storytelling about a difficult past; they become "witness to the eyewitness" (Carter 2004: 86, 123; Hirsch et al. 2009). Richard Slaughter in *The Foresight Principle* describes this transformation of the listener to an "involved self" as necessary for the shared work of radically changing the future: it produces an empathy that "merges into responsibility, and … into a notion of service and pursuit of a higher good" (1995: 141).

The significance of life stories as historical traces can be linked to both kinds of learning: learning from the story, and transformative learning from engagement in the storytelling event. Attention to specificity and multiplicity in listening to stories of the past allows hitherto invisible detail, and hence alternative futures, to emerge; however this attention requires an interest in, and respect for, the historically uneventful, the debris that has fallen "between the cracks of knowledge" (Carter 2004: 70). In listening, it is possible to gain both foresight and empathy – qualities that assist futurists in becoming, with communities, the co-creators of alternative futures.

7. Conclusion

A *life* is a site at which individuals meet the future; a *life story* shows us, instead of a trajectory into the future, the often chaotic ways in which a particular future has already been negotiated and many others never actualized. As a fourth type of Inayatullah's historical trace, life stories not only carry hidden histories and alternative potential futures, but emerge in dialogue; *storytelling* is an event that can be transformative for both the teller and the listener, and hence, potentially, for the future.

In Ibu A's village, an old man gave this description of loss:

> You know, [children] will ask me, what this village looked like before it's being taken and covered by the water. The village was beautiful, the landscape and the village covered a large area of land. The village is very different now; it was not like what you see today.

Yet not long after the tsunami, one old woman chose to return early to this much-changed and forbidden landscape and build a very small 'up-high' house for herself while she waited for permanent housing. Her small 'up-high' house stood as the vanguard of an alternative future until the official future swerved to meet it.

- Australian Postgraduate Research Award

References

Adger, W.N., S. Dessai, M. Goulden, M. Hulme, I. Lorenzoni, D.R. Nelson, L.O. Naess, J. Wolf & A. Wreford 2009, 'Are there social limits to adaptation to climate change?', *Climatic Change*, vol. 93, no. 3-4, pp. 335-354.

Attwood, B. 2001, 'Learning about the truth: The stolen generations narrative' in B. Attwood & F. Magowan (eds), *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington NZ. pp. 183-213.

Author 2011.

Bakhtin, M.M. 1981 (1937-73), 'Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel: Notes toward a historical poetics' in M. Holquist (ed), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin. pp. 84-258. Trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist.

Beck, U. 1998, 'The Cosmopolitan Manifesto', *New Statesman*, vol. 11, no. 496, pp. 28-30.

Bochner, A.P. 2001, 'Narrative's virtues', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 131-157.

Bornat, J. 2003, 'Oral history as a social movement: Reminiscence and older people' in R. Perks & A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London. pp. 189-205.

Bowen, J.R. 1989, 'Narrative form and political incorporation: Changing uses of history in Aceh, Indonesia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 671-693.

Bussey, M. 2014, 'Extending the scenario horizon: Putting narratives to work', *Journal of Futures Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 95-100.

Carter, P. 2004, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Clarke, S. 2011, 'Lessons in life of unknown scholar: Review of *Caleb's Crossing* by Geraldine Brooks', *The Weekend Australian (Review)*, 16-17 April, Sydney, p. 20, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/lessons-in-life-of-an-unknown-scholar/story-e6frg8nf-1226037122725> viewed 30 July 2014.

Coombes, B., J.T. Johnson & R. Howitt 2012, 'Indigenous geographies II: The aspirational spaces in postcolonial politics - reconciliation, belonging and social provision', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 37, no. 5, pp. 691-700.

Curthoys, A. & J. Docker 2010, *Is History Fiction?*, University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney.

da Silva, J. 2010, *Lessons from Aceh: Key Considerations in Post-Disaster Reconstruction*, DEC, Arup, Practical Action Publishing, Rugby, UK.

Danto, A.C. 1981, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Day, M. 2010, 'Counterfactual reasoning and method in historical geography', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 253-260.

Denzin, N.K. & Y.S. Lincoln 2003, 'Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research' in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA. pp. 1-45.

Dercon, B. & M. Kusumawijaya 2007, 'Two years of settlement recovery in Aceh and Nias: What should the planners have learned?', paper presented to the *43rd ISOCARP Congress: Urban Trialogues*, Antwerp, 16-23 September, <http://www.isocarp.net/Data/case_studies/952.pdf> viewed 25 September 2011.

Edwards McKinnon, E. 1988, 'Beyond Serandib: A note on Lambri at the northern tip of Aceh', *Indonesia*, vol. 46, pp. 102-121.

Farriss, N.M. 1987, 'Remembering the future, anticipating the past: History, time, and cosmology among the Maya of Yucatan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 566-593.

Felman, S. & D. Laub 1992, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Routledge, New York.

Folke, C. 2006, 'Resilience: The emergence of a perspective for social-ecological systems analyses', *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 253-267.

Ganguly, D. 2009, 'Pain, personhood and the collective: Dalit life narratives', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 429-442.

Gilbert, D. & D. Lambert 2010, 'Counterfactual geographies: Worlds that might have been', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 245-252.

Good, M.-J.D., B. Good, J. Grayman & M. Lakoma. 2007, *A Psychosocial Needs Assessment of Communities in 14 Conflict-Affected Districts in Aceh*, International Organization for Migration, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

Goodall, H. 2000, 'Fixing the past: Modernity, tradition and memory in rural Australia', *UTS Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 20-40.

Grayman, J.H., M.-J.D. Good & B.J. Good 2009, 'Conflict nightmares and trauma in Aceh', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 290-312.

Grosz, E. 1999, 'Thinking the new: Of futures yet unthought' in E. Grosz (ed), *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca. pp. 15-28.

Grosz, E. 2000, 'Deleuze's Bergson: Duration, the virtual and a politics of the future' in I. Buchanan & C. Colebrook (eds), *Deleuze and feminist theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. pp. 214-234.

Grosz, E. 2005, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*, Next wave: new directions in women's studies, I. Grewal, C. Kaplan & R. Wiegman (eds), Duke University Press, Durham.

Hirsch, M. & L. Spitzer 2009, 'The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies', *Memory Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 151-170.

Human, O. 2014, 'Potential novelty: Towards an understanding of novelty without event', *Theory, Culture and Society*, online DOI: 10.1177/0263276414531050, <http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/05/10/0263276414531050> viewed 23 May 2014.

Inayatullah, S. 1998, 'Causal layered analysis - Poststructuralism as method', *Futures*, vol. 30, no. 8, pp. 815-829.

Inayatullah, S. 2008, 'Six pillars: Futures thinking for transforming', *Foresight*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 4-21, <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/10.1108/14636680810855991> viewed.

Inayatullah, S. 2012, 'Humanity 3000: A comparative analysis of methodological approaches to forecasting the long-term', *Foresight*, vol. 14, no. 5, pp. 401-417.

Inayatullah, S. & I. Milojević 2014, *Metafuture.org*, Web page, Maroochydore, Australia, <http://www.metafuture.org/> viewed 31 July 2014.

JUB-UPLink 2005-6, *Jaringan Udeep Beusaree (Udeep Beusaree Network): People's driven reconstruction; timeline and green map*, Green Map, New York, <http://www.greenmap.org/greenhouse/files/banda_aceh05.pdf> viewed 31 July 2014.

Karlsen, J.E., E.F. Øverland & H. Karlsen 2010, 'Sociological contributions to futures' theory building', *Foresight*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 59-72.

Katz, J. 2004, 'On the rhetoric and politics of ethnographic methodology', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 595 (September), pp. 280-308, <http://www.aapss.org/uploads/QR_katz.pdf> viewed.

Latour, B. 2004, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Latour, B. 2005, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Lorimer, J. 2012, 'Multinatural geographies for the Anthropocene', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 36, no. 5, pp. 593-612.

MacLure, M. 2013, 'The wonder of data', *Cultural Studies<=>Critical Methodologies (May)*, online DOI: 10.1177/1532708613487863.

Marston, S.A., J.P. Jones III & K. Woodward 2005, 'Human geography without scale', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 30, pp. 416-432.

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003, 'Analytical approaches' in J. Alcamo & E.M. Bennett (eds), *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: A Framework for Assessment*, Island Press, Washington. <http://www.maweb.org/en/Framework.aspx > Viewed 10 January 2011.

Milojević, I. 2014, 'Creating alternative selves: The use of futures discourse in narrative therapy', *Journal of Futures Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 27-40.

Mink, L.O. 1966, 'The autonomy of historical understanding' in W.H. Dray (ed), *Philosophical Analysis and History*, Harper and Row, New York. pp. 160-192.

Mitchell, R.E. & J.R. Parkins 2011, 'The challenge of developing social indicators for Cumulative Effects Assessment and land use planning', *Ecology and Society*, vol. 16, no. 2, <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss2/art29/> viewed 28 March 2013.

15

Passerini, L. 2003, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism' in R. Perks & A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London. pp. 53-62.

Perks, R. & A. Thomson (eds) 2003, *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London.

Portelli, A. 2003, 'What makes oral history different' in R. Perks & A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London. pp. 63-74.

Rappaport, J. 1994, *Cumbe reborn: an Andean ethnography of history*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Ricoeur, P. 1984, *Time and Narrative*, trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Riessman, C.K. 1993, *Narrative Analysis*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California.

Schwartz, P. 1991 (1996), *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester.

Shea, G.A., T. Mahmud, E. Indris, E. Kesumawati & Nursyidah 2008, 'Institutional development for post-tsunami and post-conflict recovery in Aceh', paper presented to the *International Workshop on Post Tsunami Soil Management*, Bogor, Indonesia, 1-2 July, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/19044604/proceedings-balai-penelitian-tanah/135> viewed 2 February 2010.

Slaughter, R.A. 1995, *The Foresight Principle: Cultural recovery in the 21st century*, Praeger Publishers, Westport CT.

Syukrizal, A., W. Hafidz & G. Sauter 2009, *Reconstructing Life After the Tsunami: The Work of UpLink Banda Aceh in Indonesia*, International Institute for Environment and Development, IIED, London, <http://pubs.iied.org/14582IIED.html?k=Banda%20Aceh> viewed 18 August 2013.

Szörényi, A. 2009, 'Till human voices wake us: Responding to refugee testimony', *Life Writing*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 173-191.

Thelen, D. 2000, 'Popular uses of history in the United States', *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 22-25.

Tsing, A.L. 1994, 'From the margins', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 279-297, 29 March 2013.

Turner, N.J., R. Gregory, C. Brooks, L. Failing & T. Satterfield 2008, 'From invisibility to transparency: Identifying the implications', *Ecology and Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol13/iss2/art7/> viewed 14 February 2010.

Warf, B. 2002, 'The way it wasn't: Alternative histories, contingent geographies' in R. Kitchin & J. Kneale (eds), *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, Continuum, London. pp. 17-38.

Wyschogrod, E. 1998, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology and the Nameless Others*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Zurbuchen, M.S. 2005, 'Introduction: Historical memory in contemporary Indonesia' in M.S. Zurbuchen (ed), *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, University of Washington Press, Seattle. pp. 3-32.