



Performing Oral Histories

University of Greenwich, 12th April 2022

Proposal for presentation

From the Ground Up: The Role of Metaphor in Co-devising Interpretations of Memory Stories

In co-creative practice, it is not simply the performance that manifests as a dialogic space. Because performance-making supports sense-making, the engagement of community participants in the re-interpretation of oral testimony involves them in processes of exploring and crucially challenging individual and community narratives. In this paper, I suggest that the interpretative act does not have to be conceived simply in terms of authorship and narrative. Instead, I advocate for embodied modes of participatory listening and theatre-making. Drawing upon my practice research, I focus on the use of theatrical metaphor as a way for participants to co-operatively bring their memory worlds into relation with one another.

This paper examines the intergenerational, co-devised performance, *From the Ground Up* (2016), which enabled community participants to share lived experience of an urban common in northeast London. Questioning the capacity of the discursive to fully give account to human encounters with a semi-natural environment, I investigate the potential of visual and embodied metaphors as a performance method for collaborative interpretation. In metaphor, we are invited to think of one entity in terms of another entirely separate entity; it connotes meaning relationally. In an analysis of this approach, I consider how participants generated meaning in the connections between their diverse memory stories, and articulated something more of the relational and affective dimensions of their past worlds to the audience. Paying attention to sensate and embodied sensitivities can, I suggest, disrupt the 'storiness' of lived experience narrative, opening out possibilities to subtly challenge stable personal and collective narratives.

Biography

I am a theatre-maker and researcher who works with and in response to individuals and communities. Located at the interface of oral history and applied performance, my doctoral research, at Royal Holloway (2019), considered shared ethical questions around who has the authority to tell a community's narrative. Before my PhD, I led a community-based oral history project, which critically and creatively explored the history of the London St. Patrick's Day Parade. I am currently a Research Fellow on an AHRC-funded interdisciplinary project, *Wastes and Strays: the past, present and future of English urban commons*.

Dr Siobhan O'Neill
Research Fellow
School of Architecture
University of Portsmouth
siobhan.o'neill@port.ac.uk