Introduction

The Cork Folklore Project is a community-based urban folklore centre in Cork City, and has been collecting, archiving, providing access to, and disseminating oral testimony or ‘talk’ since 1996.¹ In this piece, I will consider the range of different practices engaged in by the CFP as a range of ‘ways with talk’ (whether in the generation or dissemination of talk), not unlike a family recipe collection that is added to, adapted, and used according to who will be eating, who will be preparing the food (and their skills and predilections), and the tools of preparation available for each encounter. I will take this opportunity to celebrate the practice of this precarious yet valuable undertaking; one that generates raw materials and uses and disseminates them without depleting the rich larder of ingredients that have the potential to provide sustenance to a wide variety of people and groups down through time.
Talk

At the CFP, our main preoccupation is with talk. What we do (and what few others do in such a sustained and long-term accessible form) is to explore everyday life through talk: through interviews with (mainly urban) people of all walks of life about their ordinary and extra-ordinary experiences, in the past and in the present. Since 1996, successive generations of researchers (on Community Employment or other schemes supported by the Department of Social Protection, formerly FÁS) have sat down with individuals to record conversations with them. The choice of thematic focus, or a deliberate lack of thematic focus (more on that later) may be determined by a number of things: the individual contributor or researcher’s interest (such as theatre, LGBTQ+ life, or stonemasonry in Cork), a place-based project that is deliberately without a specific ‘topic’ (such as the memory map interviewing project), or suggestions from members of the public or groups who wish to work with us. This ‘talk’ is incorporated by us into an audio interview archive that is located on the Northside of the city and that welcomes researchers of all ages and backgrounds.

Creativity?

When speaking about creativity, it must be recognized first and foremost that this archive is in itself a repository of creativity in and through human interaction. It is full of stories, jokes, songs, turns of phrase, inflections, and ways of talking that represent both individual and shared forms of creative expression. In addition to that, the material descriptively represents so many of the creative ways in which people responded and respond to the personal and systemic challenges of life, such as lack of access to economic and cultural resources, marginal status, and vulnerability to coercive powers; it also represents the ways in which people articulate and celebrate these responses and a sense of cultural distinctiveness. Any creativity that we bring to the mediation of this material is just adding another layer to the significant existing richness.

Figure 2: Interviewee Eileen Jones (l) with interviewer Breda Sheehan (r), 17 August 2010.
Image courtesy of the Cork Folklore Project.
I have described the CFP and discussed its status as one iteration of participatory or engaged research in this journal (O’Carroll 2013). As engaged practice, the social inclusion aspect of our activities (with regard to our researchers and the community, however imagined) is as important as the research element. In a similar manner, our archive of 650+ interviews functions as a cultural and creative resource for communities of interest and locality, artists, playwrights, health care professionals, historians, schoolchildren, linguists, social and health scientists, and seven-year-olds alike. Public dissemination in various formats (including radio, online storymapping, a popular journal, books, and films) has been as much, if not more, of a focus for us as dissemination through academic publishing. Overall, I would like to assert that the CFP is in itself a creative response to the question of whether and how sustainable, open, long-term, local-urban cultural heritage documentation and stewardship is possible. In this piece, I would like to foreground a range of our more overtly creative or non-standard dissemination elements.

Some Background: The Human Voice/Oral Testimony and Ways of Sharing It

Although folklore and oral history as disciplines have been centrally concerned with the capturing and preservation of oral interactions, usually in the form of audio recordings, the material itself has predominantly been accessed and disseminated in textual form. This is due, to a great degree, to the greater time resources needed to access long form audio compared to text; to the difficulty of sharing, disseminating, and duplicating audio (particularly in pre-digital contexts); and to the fact that text as a primary mode of communication (followed by images) still dominates expectations and conventions in academia and the public sphere. Because of this, the inherent richness and strengths of oral testimony have been muted. Technological advances have transformed the ease with which we can make, manipulate, preserve, and disseminate audio recordings; they allow us to respond to this very specific and rich form of expression in more and more fitting ways. However, even though we can put elements of oral testimony online and make them discoverable and accessible, this iteration of the human voice (often long-form, informal, low-key interaction) is at odds with practically every representational convention of popular and academic online communication. This raises a number of questions that archives of oral testimony will need to address in terms of doing justice to this kind of material in dissemination. I begin to explore those questions elsewhere (O’Carroll 2015, 2018): here I outline our approaches to dissemination.

Collective Listening

It’s hard to resist the simile of a shared meal when discussing collective listening. This is on the face of it the simplest mode of dissemination engaged in by the CFP, but its fittingness to the medium of talk, and potential depth of sophistication as a tool for both sharing and gathering testimony, should not be underestimated. We engage in collective listening sessions with the general public (on ‘listening nights/mornings’), with communities of interest, and when sharing our practice with groups interested in carrying out oral history work. Our simply-structured public listening events involve up to 100 people gathering in our Outreach Hub in order to listen to short excerpts from our interviews, which are played with somewhat minimal commentary from us, and with (often recorded) contributions and conversation from the listeners afterwards. Collective listening with smaller groups follows a similar pattern, but often has a more developed focus on specific themes or methodologies.
Whether the groups involved are large or small, collective listening differs in quality from individualized interactions with our material (which we witness when people interact with our memory wall exhibition, or access our interviews in a research capacity). The shared experience involves a surprising amount of nonverbal communication through breath management (gasps, breath being held, exhalations), laughter, sounds of agreement or disagreement, and body stance alteration and gestures. As there is an implied expectation of immanent discussion, of the piece being still present in the room after the sound waves have dissipated, of a continuing conversation in whatever form, the quality of listening differs from individual listening. And, of course, the material, although divorced in time and space from the original interview, finds here a context kindred to that of its generation – people in a room listening to each other. The talk then continues in a multiplicity of ways: whispered comments to seat-mates in the hall; comments, agreements, and disagreements from the floor; stories, memory, and song added to the mix; individuals volunteering or volunteered to be interviewed; and the chat on the way out the door and on the way home.

Notwithstanding the enjoyment of hearing laughter or exclamations of surprise at certain junctures, the point where ‘impact’ is most viscerally evident to me in communal listening events is when audience silence achieves a certain heightened quality. These are moments when the intensity of the listening silence engendered by unanimous intense attention speaks volumes in terms of a shared felt importance of the moment, of what is being communicated and how. What sort of impact does the embodied experience of a shift into that kind of shared intensity have on us, physiologically and socially?
The Archive Journal

Since its inception, the CFP has produced a free journal annually, which is distributed through the city and county library system. This publication, The Archive, has from its inception served a number of roles. It is a way for us to disseminate our research to the local community and provide free access to aspects of our work. Contributing a piece to it is a central part of our researchers’ training. Past CFP researchers and members of the community also contribute to the journal. The Archive has always contained a mixture of formats and content: from narratives based on personal memory to articles with an academic format, interaction with images (the ‘picture and a story feature’ and studies of photographic collections deposited with us), excerpts from our sound archive, articles on contemporary themes (such as urban exploration and skateboarding in the city), and (more recently) reflections on practice. The diversity of the offerings in this publication, which is well-recognized and well-read in the city, gives a broad interpretation of what ‘folklore’ and cultural representation can be.

Figure 4: Cork Folklore Project Archive journals, Volumes 17-22 (2012-2018).
Radio

As part of Cork’s tenure as European Capital of Culture in 2005, the CFP carried out a special collection project resulting in a series of six half-hour radio programmes and a book.³ The ‘How’s it goin’, boy?’ project involved 40+ interviews with Cork residents from the city and all over the world, exploring their relationships with the physical and cultural landscapes of the city and discussing experiences of migrancy and cultural contact.

The shift to radio allowed us to honour the richness of expression in the encounters more fully than text ever would, through the delivery, humour, tone of voice, accents, and expressiveness of the talk. We did not follow the common conventions of (documentary) radio at the time. Other than the same one-sentence introduction to each programme,⁴ there were no spoken links or exposition in the series: the nearly three hours of radio consisted of a flow of clusters of interview excerpts (memories, stories, descriptions, reflections), with the clusters linked by short segues of song, music, and/or wild track (sounds recorded on the streets of the city). All of the segues, apart from the guitar track recorded for the series, consisted of interview or street recordings. The lack of scripted links reflected a desire to avoid imposing an organizing narrative on the material beyond the organization of the clips. This enabled us to respond to resonances between elements of different interviews that went beyond a direct or linear matching of topics, to a more nuanced response to tempo, emotional register, and reflection.

At the time, inward migration – felt to be a new phenomenon – was daily discussed in divisive terms in the print and broadcast media. We chose not to create a documentary about inward migration. Why would we? The material was far richer than the following of a linear storyline, no matter how nuanced, would allow us to express. Besides, the point of the project was to mix things up a bit: by concentrating on the city as our main focus, we mixed the voices of those we are often expected to interview (older long-term residents) with those of other locals, young and old, from near and far. By indulging our ethnographic interest in details of everyday experience, we represented the lived experiences of those often relegated in the media to ‘diversity’ or ‘issues’ programming, in a format that could breathe more, simply exploring what it is like to be a stranger newly-arrived on the streets of the city, or a young Traveller girl in 1980s Cork, or a Cork resident from Bulgaria coming to grips with the fact that, in local slang, ‘how bad’ refers to something good.

It was our first foray into making a stand for slow listening by eschewing broadcast conventions in favour of ways with audio that asserted space for memory, description, prevarication, and ambiguity, as well as jokes, reflection, and song.

We published a book of the same name in 2006, using narratives from the interviews and images provided by the interviewees. It was interesting to note at the time that, although we had reproduced the radio programmes in a CD box set, the public response to the book was more immediate and more sustained. The ‘flickability’ of a book meant that people could pick it up, see a picture of someone they knew or a topic that interested them, and start reading. Even for those with an interest in the project’s work, the step of inserting a CD and pressing play, coupled with the much more established expectations around print as a communications medium, often resulted in this format (so very suited to transmitting talk) not reaching anything like its potential for impact.
Film

Readers can view some of our eight films at http://corkfolklore.org/films/. Our early films (including one about the phenomenon referred to here: ‘What has 90 balls and drives women crazy?’) were initiated by project researchers with an interest and skills in film production; later films were made in collaboration with participatory production company Frameworks Films, or in partnership with Cork City Council Heritage Office.

Play and Drama

More recently, we have been engaging with play-and-drama-based workshops with primary school children. Janusz Flakus, a CFP researcher with a background in museum curatorial practice and drama studies, has developed and piloted educational workshops with a range of themes, incorporating audio, text, and images from our archives.

The ‘Children’s Republic of Cork’ workshop is inspired by the wealth of testimony in our collection on how children in 1930s-1960s Cork City inhabited and ‘owned’ certain streetscapes. In the workshop, children use this material to take control of areas of our Outreach Hub in order to develop exhibitions on street life, play and work, poverty, and the ways in which children found creative solutions to lack of resources.

The drama workshop ‘Our childhood in Cork’ sees children working together to create and direct scenes inspired by narratives, including accounts of reluctantly going out to work for the first time at the age of fourteen, of listening to a boxing match on the radio, and of ‘minding’ the bicycles of hospital visitors as a way to get a chance to ride. In the workshop ‘The games we used to play’, children recreate games such as glassey alleys, gobs, pickey, and feck (nearest to the wall); we have had reports from participant schools of the games being adopted by the children during break time.

Figure 5: Schoolchildren playing pickey during a games workshop. Image courtesy of the Cork Folklore Project.
A workshop in development for secondary school students will involve them in taking part in a trial of the ‘good old days’, mobilizing evidence from our archives in their deliberations.

Janusz has also developed different versions of an interactive oral history game for children, local adults, and tourists (along the lines of ‘Who wants to be a (Cork) millionaire?’), where answers to quiz questions are to be found in audio interview extracts.

This exploratory work has impressed upon us how powerful oral testimony can be when used in this context: a little description ‘from the horse’s mouth’ in all its specificity, recognizability or strangeness, and local character, can bring an experience to life or provide a window onto a context or scene and spark imagination in a way that generalized description cannot hope to do.

**Online Storymapping: The Cork Memory Map**

Beginning in 2010, the CFP embarked on an interviewing project with an online map-based dissemination element (www.corkmemorymap.org). The idea of the ‘Memory Map’, where stories and memories from interviews would be accessible and pinned to an online map, gave us an opportunity to engage in quite diffuse, place-based enquiry. The concept made sense to interviewers and prospective interviewees (despite the fact that online map pins were far from common at the time), and was a surprisingly effective hook on which to hang our continuing approach of open, non-thematically-driven exploration of everyday life in the past and present. This is in some ways part of our overall strategy of creatively building openness into our practice: we have managed to carve out a
space in which to engage in slow, open documentation of everyday life, which builds up a cumulative and multi-layered picture of a place and its people over a period of time. We are well aware that (though our resources be scant) this is an unusually privileged position to be in, at a time when ethnographic research and creative practice is often carried out within the context of time-bounded, thematic funded projects that supports anything but a slow approach.

The map itself is an example of highly curated dissemination of material from an archive of everyday experience that takes advantage of the (at the time novel) opportunity to use multiple media together. The ability to do some justice to the voice by using audio clips, and to make these clips available in conjunction with text (transcripts) and images, in a visualization friendly to casual browsers, was very much a cause for celebration for us. At last, the tiniest fraction of our collection could be accessed easily and immediately – along with formats that are textual/visual and in alignment with web mediation convention – and do the work of communicating the richness of the material in a very direct fashion. Much of the potential of the format has not yet been mobilized by us. More material, mapped in overlapping layers corresponding to all sorts of themes and organizing principles, with individual extracts linking back to the online catalogue entries for the interviews, represent just a few of the areas on which we are working.

One thing that has become apparent to me is that we may have initially misplaced our expectation of the mechanisms through which the map’s impact is strongest. Long before the map’s first online iteration was launched in late 2011, colleagues and members of the public were marvelling at the richness of the interview extracts and stories, when the work was presented in the context of digital initiatives. The material communicated its own richness of form and content with an immediacy that is in utter contrast to the blank space that fills many people’s minds when the words ‘folklore/ethnographic interview’ are uttered. Since the (still relatively modest, in terms of the number of items represented) online map became available, its impact has been strongest felt when we have used it in our own practice. Whether in public presentations with community or other groups who are interested in getting into oral history, with archival or academic colleagues or students, or with various stakeholders engaged in evaluating our practice, use of the map has elicited strong, energetic, engaged responses and ignited understanding and appreciation of and interest in our practice and the collection that is unprecedented in its intensity.

Figure 7: Interviewees, researchers and audiences at different stages of the Cork Memory Map project. Image courtesy of the Cork Folklore Project.
Some conclusions can be drawn from this. The first is that even the shortest extracts from the interviews exert a power that no amount of description can achieve. People are generally unused to exposure to oral testimony of this kind. This means that its energy, emotive power, and creative content can pack a punch, and make an impression. It also may mean that we don’t generally have a well-developed ability to enjoy, appreciate, or critically evaluate ‘talk’ in an unmediated form outside of a facilitated or social situation (collective listening, in essence). Archives of ‘talk’ need to consider this carefully. Is it realistic, in the event that we make longer excerpts or full-length interviews available online, to expect people of any background or motivation to engage with them in any meaningful way? Is curation, and creative mediation, the best way to create a space for this material until we can foster a more nuanced appreciation of the form within the shared imaginary and in communicative spaces?

Carving Out Space for the Voice: Future Play and Interventions

We are in a position to pay some attention to potential forms this creative mediation of the human voice might take, as our most recent and most pressing archival project, the implementation of an online catalogue, is underway. And considering that a wide range of sectors are fostering an interest in, interrogating, and celebrating the everyday and the vernacular in a way that was not the case in the recent past (the broadcast media, the arts and creative sectors, healthcare, architecture and city planning, initiatives supporting sustainable community development, health and wellbeing, to name a few), this may be a good time to do so.

We know that the content of our archives is extremely rich. Perhaps we might begin an approach to additional dimensions of dissemination by thinking about form as much as content: the particularity of the disembodied voice generated by folklore and oral history interviewing. The fact that, in its raw form, it is long-form, linear, and difficult to interpret or hear meaningfully at a social or cultural distance can lead to it being muted when shared. Yet, if we wanted to stay true to this disembodied voice, the interview material, as our primary material and focus of dissemination, there are many possible pathways of dissemination. Some of these we have already explored: group listening, the linking of audio with map-based visualizations, and ‘broadcast-type’ audio production (which we do of course need to continue developing in the form of podcasts).

It is time to play around with other pathways that could unsettle a number of expectations, whether these be our own archival tendency to careful and copious contextualization, popular expectations (or lack thereof) of what ‘folklore’ is, or the expectation that spoken voice must almost always be subjugated to image or text. Such a departure may surprise both us and the prospective communities and groups that might see value in our holdings.

Playful ways of experimenting could include, for example, interventions involving listening in the dark, ghost voices, sound installations, or voice baths.

One place to start exploration is through the production of edited pieces or voice medleys that follow more the form of the speech than the content: the rhythms, the tone, the intonation, the pitch, the mood. When we have played around for a while and have deepened our understanding of the potential of the form, collaboration with musicians and sound artists or visual artists would be an option. However, I feel that such collaboration should not happen until we have a better understanding of how to follow or respond to the voice on levels other than content alone: what may be important here is to
carve out space for the performative-yet-intimate spoken word form to be engaged with in and of itself, rather than as an embellishment.

With more resources, all sorts of creative dissemination would be possible, of course: objects with voices, spoken word music, hidden voice eruptions, triggered audio (whether geo-triggered or interactionally triggered – this kind of approach harnesses an unsettling effect that might encourage types of listening that are different to the usual), and other audio interventions yet to be conceived. Certainly, it is time for the Cork Folklore Project to get playful for a while, in order to more properly explore ways of communicating the richness of both the form and content of our holdings.

To End

As an entity that serves a range of goals and a multiplicity of stakeholders, the Cork Folklore Project has had to foster creativity in its practice. After twenty-two years, it is a member of a local community (however imagined), and regularly seeks to interrogate what that community might be. It follows leads from community members and members of staff, on both the focus (or lack thereof) and the modes of collection and dissemination engaged in. This broad menu of activities and multiple modes of output is perhaps the only way in which we can come close to realizing the potential of the undertaking.

References


Notes

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2 *The Archive* is available digitally on our website in PDF format at http://corkfolklore.org/our-journal/.

3 The radio programmes can be accessed through a link to be found here: http://corkfolklore.org/radio/.
This introduction went thus: “‘How’s it goin’, boy?’ is a series produced by the Northside Folklore Project, with the support of Cork 2005, celebrating the city and its people, old and new”.

I have discussed this project, and the arguably beneficial effects of engaging in place-based – as opposed to life-story-style – interviewing, in O’Carroll 2014.