

A NOTE: Bridging Cultural Gaps Through Interviews

by Raymond M. Summerville



In early August of 2015, as a graduate student in Folklore at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I participated in the [Missouri Audio Project](#), a six-day intensive radio workshop organized by Julija Šukys of the English Department and taught by expert radio producer and instructor Rob Rosenthal. Throughout the workshop, eight other participants and I learned the basics of interviewing, recording, script writing, and editing. As a trained folklorist, seeing so many parallels between folklore fieldwork and radio fieldwork was eye opening. I realized that taking notes in the field and formulating questions for recorded interviews are not entirely different. They both require one to pay very close attention to detail, and it is primarily through these processes that the fieldworker shapes the story. It also requires a good deal of work. Transforming an hour-long interview into a very concise six-minute script was daunting and taught me a number of important lessons.

Editing my interview primarily involved identifying the most interesting or telling segments, finding the parts that I really wanted to share, and cutting the rest. It also involved rearranging certain portions of the interview to tell the most cohesive story that I could. All the things generally viewed as germane to natural conversation come under scrutiny during the editing process. For instance, through the course of any given interview, one may expect a subject to say any number of things that may be humorous, exciting, sad, or simply interesting. Additionally, one's subject may go off on thought-provoking tangents at times. Although all these things collectively may contribute greatly to one's understanding of the individual, as a radio producer I may need to omit much of it. As a folklorist, I had already become familiar with the tedious process of transcribing, but storytelling takes the transcription process in a different direction. Within a set of transcriptions from an interview one may see multiple narratives at play, and any of the narratives may be used to highlight any single aspect of a subject's life. Thus, my overall goal—and my biggest challenge—was learning to edit zealously while still keeping the story that I really wanted to tell clearly in focus.

I learned a lot about radio production throughout the workshop, but I also learned even more about Columbia, Missouri. Being from the Raleigh-Durham area and an alumnus of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, the largest and proudest of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the country, I was already well versed in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. The North Carolina Piedmont region is closely tied to its birth. Four A&TSU students started the sit-in movement in Greensboro in 1960. A few months later, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded in the

bookstore of Shaw University, a neighboring HBCU in Raleigh. A plethora of museums and monuments in cities and on campuses throughout North Carolina and the South commemorate this era in history.

As I listened to my interviewee, George Hatton, I realized that he did not have the privilege of learning about racism through such neat and convenient means. Hatton learned instead through his direct exposure to racial hatred. Hatton, a Columbia native, explains in our interview that implicit institutional racism and openly exposed racism affects his life in many ways. Hatton is an African American man, approximately 60 years of age, whom I had met a couple of years prior to our interview while working a side job as a houseman at a local hotel. While working, Hatton would often tell intriguing stories to workers and guests alike to pass the time, making arduous, repetitive work a little less tedious.

Hatton explains in the interview that being raised in Columbia means that he has seen its African American community change drastically over the course of several decades. He describes how the close-knit, safe neighborhood where he grew up changed as he got older and began to be plagued and overrun by drugs, gang violence, and racism. As a teen in the 70s, Hatton was a star athlete at Hickman High School, but a combination of poor decision making and difficulties adapting to Columbia's rapidly changing culture meant that Hatton would end up spending nearly a decade in prison. Despite his many setbacks, through hard work and perseverance, Hatton would eventually make a new life for himself and prevent his daughter and nephew from making the same mistakes that he once made.

“It weighs heavy on you... the way they [the police] always harassed you all the time to where the atmosphere that you lived in... the surrounding that you lived in pulled you or sucked you in to... street life.”

~ George Hatton

Hatton's interview illustrates a number of things that may be of interest to folklorists and educators. On the one hand, it shows how communities change over time. People often live only in the present, taking age differences and generational gaps for granted, but social and cultural changes may also create opportunities for learning. For instance, some scenes of racism that took place in Columbia in the 1980s that Hatton describes in the interview resemble the same kinds of racism experienced by many African Americans who lived through the St. Louis race riot of 1917. Likewise, this assignment led me to ask if ongoing, open dialogue could not have prevented the Ferguson riot of 2014, or the Concerned Student 1950 protest that took place at the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2015 (see more in Shonekan 2018). In thinking critically about these occurrences, the span of time separating these events is as equally relevant as the 120 miles or two-hour drive that divides the communities involved. These clashes clearly illustrate how being physically close in proximity is oftentimes not enough to prevent conflict, but the implementation of interviews as a pedagogic tool at all levels of learning (in the classroom and in the community) may be a way of using communication to bridge cultural gaps. If younger students are able to learn from older community members through conducting interviews, in addition to building new relationships, students would more than likely ascertain information that would otherwise be

impossible to gain. Furthermore, by not relying on textbooks or teachers for this research, students may be more likely to view themselves as agents of change.

Identifying people to interview, talking with them, and then carefully processing their findings may teach students to see familiar people and common surroundings in entirely new ways. For example, Hatton's interview offers a harrowing glimpse into what some scholars and educators identify as the school-to-prison pipeline, an old social problem that intersects with issues concerning race, class, and gender (West 1993, Alexander 2010, Morris 2015). Hearing firsthand accounts of the school-to-prison pipeline is important because listening to these narratives may foster empathy and potentially a greater sense of understanding. To understand the impact that this pipeline has on individual lives and communities, one must hear the stories of those affected the most.

Projects that require students to conduct interviews in their communities may help them to see the interviewing process as a vital component of storytelling. Storytelling differs greatly from reading about town history, listening to history lectures, or even watching historical documentaries. It is a much more powerful way to implement praxis in the classroom because students govern so many different things for themselves. Students determine who they want to interview. They decide what questions should be asked, how to ask them, and how to follow up to get the information they need. Ultimately, the student shapes the story from the interview.

Additionally, this process forces students to make complicated decisions on the fly, as opposed to having information dictated to them. My reflections upon this process have pointed me to the understanding that teaching interviewing as an important component of storytelling may be viewed as a form of independent learning that is more likely to foster critical thinking than most other learning methods, in part, because it requires a great deal of creativity. Students must be creative in determining the best way to display information derived from their subjects. Overall, conducting interviews may encourage young people to think more critically about history, about themselves, and about the complex cultures in which they live.

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URL

Missouri Audio Project: Telling Stories in Sound: <http://missouriaudioproject.com/2015/11/04/missouri-audio-project-summer-workshop-2015>

Direct link to Dr. Summerville's piece: <https://soundcloud.com/missouri-audio-project/raymond-summervilles-piece>

SCRIPT for George Hatton Community Profile

1. NARRATION: GEORGE HATTON HAS LIVED IN COLUMBIA ALL OF HIS LIFE AND CAN RECOUNT A NUMBER OF VIOLENT ENCOUNTERS THAT HE HAS HAD WITH LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT. GEORGE FEELS THAT THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM IS RACISM.

2. (24:35) I remember when I was in my forties...and I was walking down the street with a blue shirt on...and a police stopped me and asked me if I was a crip and I told him noooo. Well that in turn led to an argument between the both of us and one thing led to another. (25:19) It got real close to being violent. (25:36) I don't like being stereotyped because I have a blue t-shirt on or a red t shirt on. (39:42) Everybody is stereotyped as a gang member or a drug dealer.

3. NARRATION: TODAY GEORGE HATTON IS NOT A GANG MEMBER OR A DRUG DEALER HE IS A PILLAR IN HIS COMMUNITY. GEORGIE GRADUATED FROM HICKMAN HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF 1975. AT THE TIME HE WAS THE THIRD BEST KICKER IN THE NATION. AS GEORGE EXPLAINS, HE DIDN'T GO TO COLLEGE BECAUSE LIKE FOR MANY BLACKS IN HIS NEIGHBORHOOD...THE OPPORTUNITIES SIMPLY WERE NOT THERE.

4. (26:50) When I grew up as a young kid there wasn't really a lot for blacks to do or opportunities doors wasn't really open to a lot of people. You had to have a lot of people in high places or parents that are well known.

5. NARRATION: A LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTANT HARASSMENT FROM THE POLICE MADE LIFE DIFFICULT FOR GEORGE AND OTHER BLACK PEOPLE IN THE AREA.

6. (24:00) It weighs heavy on you...the way they always harassed you all the time to where the atmosphere that you lived in...the surroundings that you lived in pulled you or sucked you in to...street life.

7. NARRATION: AFTER GRADUATING FROM HICKMAN HIGH SCHOOL GEORGE PLAYED SEMI PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL, BUT WHEN PLANS TO PLAY IN THE NFL DID NOT WORK OUT, HE WAS PULLED INTO THE STREET LIFE WHERE HE WOULD MAKE THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS A WEEK SELLING CRACK COCAINE.

8. (43:54) Money is the root of all evil in the world. (44:00) If you make a thousand dollars a day are you going to work a 7 or 8 dollar an hour job I'm making a thousand dollars a day kicking it on the street selling drugs.

9. NARRATION: GEORGE'S LIFE AS A DRUG DEALER WAS SHORT LIVED. AFTER MULTIPLE ARRESTS HE SPENDS MUCH OF THE NINETIES INCARCERATED FOR DRUG RELATED OFFENCES. DESPITE THIS UNFORTUNATE TREND IN URBAN CULTURE GEORGE STILL BELIEVES THAT RACISM IS THE CAUSE OF MOST OF THE POLICE VIOLENCE IN COLUMBIA.

10. (19:56) Back then you had a couple of police officers on the force that just had it in for blacks. (20:36) They made it a point to try to get to know all the blacks but to really kind of like dog most of the blacks out.

11. NARRATION: GEORGE RECALLS A TIME WHEN TENSIONS IN HIS NEIGHBORHOOD HAD FINALLY REACHED ITS BOILING POINT.

12. (19:10) Two girls had an argument and one girl was pregnant. The police was arguing and she was arguing with the police. The police kicked her in the stomach while she was pregnant which set off almost a riot. I saw several people beat this police officer and they smashed his car and tore his car up until the state patrolmen came in and actually got the car back but it was for a couple of days like marshal law around here.

13. NARRATION: RACISM, HARASSMENT, AND RIOTS CHARACTERIZE GEORGE HATTON'S EXPERIENCES WITH LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT IN COLUMBIA. DESPITE THIS FACT HE WAS STILL EXCITED WHEN HIS DAUGHTER TOLD HIM OF HER PLANS TO BECOME A POLICE OFFICER.

14. (28:33) When I was off in the street life she told me, dad I don't know if I could ever arrest you if you did something wrong and I try to embed in her...do your job...to be the best you can be at your job.. to be the best you can be at what you do. If I do something wrong...arrest me.

15. NARRATION: ARRESTING DAD IS SOMETHING THAT HIS DAUGHTER WOULD NEVER HAVE TO DO. HAVING A DAUGHTER ON THE FORCE HELPED TO CHANGE GEORGE'S OUTLOOK ON LIFE. TODAY GEORGE IS A ROLE MODEL. KIDS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD CALL HIM GRANDPA AND HE TRIES TO INSTILL A SENSE OF PRIDE, RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPECT IN ALL OF THE YOUTH IN THE AREA. WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE FUTURE, GEORGE HOPES THAT THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN HIS FAMILY WILL BE ABLE TO LIVE A MUCH BETTER LIFE WITH MANY MORE OPPORTUNITIES THAN HE HAD.

16. (58:37) Today I have grandkids that play sports, that are very good at sports and...I got a nephew that verbally committed to Missouri. It was a smile to see that me growing up and the talent that I had I always wanted to play at Missouri, but mother didn't have the money to pay for that first year of college so, I never got the opportunity to play college ball, but I smile and look at my nephews...and one of my nephews just verbally committed to Missouri. Missouri offered him a scholarship and probably about forty other colleges offered him a scholarship already, but I'm hoping he stays at Missouri.

17. NARRATION: GEORGE HAS GAINED A SENSE OF PRIDE FROM YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE HIS DAUGHTER AND NEPHEW. WHILE LIFE MAY HAVE SLOWED DOWN FOR GEORGE, WITNESSING A GROWING RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION MAKES HIM GLAD THAT HE IS STILL HERE TO BE A PART OF IT ALL.

18. I AM RAYMOND SUMMERVILLE. THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.
(August 6, 2015)