

Sunday 2 PM – Waterton Conducting Archival and Ethnographic Research

C.S. MacCath

Archives exist for the purpose of collecting, preserving, and disseminating documentary information about individuals, businesses, religious organizations, governments, and other entities. People themselves are important sources of knowledge as well, from boat-building techniques passed from father to son in rural Newfoundland to quantum physics theories studied by experts in the field. Because of this, both archival and ethnographic research can be valuable to writers. This presentation will provide you with basic best practices for conducting both. We'll be looking at ethical and technical considerations, ways to get the most out of your visit to an archive, and approaches to in-person interviews.

1) Introduction (SLIDE 1)

- a. My name is Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran, and I write scholarship under that name, but I write fiction and poetry under the abbreviated name C.S. MacCath.
- b. I'm a PhD candidate in the Folklore Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and among my primary tools of research are the archive and the ethnographic interview, since both of these allow me to investigate nuances of human culture and tradition.
- c. I'm offering this workshop because I think archival research and ethnographic interviews can be helpful to writers of all kinds, whether they're worldbuilding for a science fiction series, researching a biography, or investigating the prevalence and content of phantom ship legends in Newfoundland, which I've done for my doctoral coursework.
- d. This is a quick and dirty guide to both topics designed to give you an introductory overview and a few pointers.

2) Best Practices for Archival Research (SLIDE 2)

- a. Preliminary Notes
 - i. I've worked most closely with the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive in St. John's and have studied the Beaton Institute in Cape Breton, so my examples will be drawn from these places.
- b. What Archives Are (SLIDE 3)
 - i. They are topical collective memory repositories: A collection of historical documents and recordings about a subject, place, people, event, etc.
 - ii. They have a mandate: A specific mission statement that circumscribes what they will collect and retain.
 1. The Beaton Institute is the official repository for historically significant records of Cape Breton University. Additionally, the Institute is a cultural heritage archive mandated to preserve the social, economic, political, and cultural history of Cape Breton Island. <https://www.cbu.ca/campus/beaton-institute/>
 - iii. They contain primary research materials: Documents like letters, journals, academic papers, photographs, and recordings. Sometimes an archive will also collect material culture like a historically significant piece

of jewelry, but those sorts of acquisitions are more often handled by museums.

- iv. They take special care to protect and preserve their holdings: Special preservation techniques and climate-controlled environments slow the deterioration of donated materials, and you will be asked to take special care when handling these materials.

c. Preparing for Your Visit to an Archive (SLIDE 4)

- i. Call the archive first.
 - 1. Learn what its policies are regarding archival research. For example, MUNFLA restricts the number of pages you can photocopy, photocopies them for you, and does not otherwise permit reproduction of its holdings. So you can't take pictures of documents with your phone, make a digital copies of audio recordings, etc.
 - 2. Discuss your research with an archivist. Find out if the archive has a searchable online catalogue, and ask what the best subject terms might be for you to use in that catalogue for conducting preliminary research.
- ii. Use the archive's online catalogue for preliminary research, if it has one.
 - 1. Accession numbers tell the archivist where to look for the materials you want to review, so be sure to make note of these.
 - 2. Subject terms make it easy to search for other records like the one you're viewing, so make note additional subject terms in the records of holdings you're interested in viewing.
- iii. Plan to spend the day taking notes.
 - 1. Because archives often place limits on the ways you're permitted to copy holdings, be prepared to take extensive notes.

d. Walkthrough of a Selected MUNFLA Record (SLIDE 5)

- 1. Explain accession numbers, title, the difference between a collector and a donor, scope and content (Herbert Halpert's Fall 1978 Folklore 6210 course), the importance of multiple/related subject terms, year (the year it was entered into the archive and not the year of its creation), and physical description.
 - a. This looks like a graduate term paper for Herbert Halpert's 1978 Folklore 6210 course, which was entered into the archive in 1991.
- 2. When I've used MUNFLA, I've screen-captured each of the records I was interested in and written down each of the accession numbers separately for the archivist, which made both her work and mine go quite a bit faster.

e. At the Archive (SLIDE 6)

- i. *Access Restrictions:* Some archived materials might have access restrictions. For example, the donor and collector might have stipulated that their identities be anonymized in any use of the material. MUNFLA files these access restrictions with the holding itself, and anyone who wishes to use the materials must respect these access restrictions. Other archives may have similar policies.
- ii. *Copyright Restrictions:* The MUNFLA archive endeavours to honor the work of donors and collectors by leaving as much copyright in their hands as possible. This means that while MUNFLA has the right to use the materials in its holdings, we might not have that right. In order to obtain it, we need to make a good faith effort to contact collectors and donors. In cases where that is not possible, we are still required to abide by MUNFLA's copyright restrictions and overlay fair use copyright restrictions upon them. Other archives may have similar policies. I'll come back to this topic in a moment.
- iii. *Ethical Restrictions:* Primary research materials are different from library materials because they reflect the lived experiences of their donors more intimately than polished texts do. So it's important to think carefully about how we plan to use archival materials even when we're following all of the archive's rules. I'll come back to this topic in a moment as well.

f. Citing Archival Sources (SLIDE 7)

- i. MUNFLA requires that a copy of any work making use of archival materials be deposited with the archive, and it also requires that a citation formatted according to its own guidelines appear in the work. Again, other archives might have similar policies, so be sure to ask for a citation guide.

g. Covering Your Ethical Bases (SLIDE 8)

- i. Discuss the challenge of working with other people's narratives in a sensitive way via Butler and Vardy's memorate:
 1. Introduce the memorate. Explain that it's an account of a fairy sighting donated by a living person close to my age. Note that while such experiences and their narrative counterparts are less common than they used to be in Newfoundland, fairy belief does exist there, which means that narratives about it exist as well.
 2. Discuss the stigmatization of supernatural experience narratives and the importance of sensitivity when working with the memorates of living people. Extrapolate this out to a discussion of the need for sensitivity when working with any first-person narrative or primary research account.
 - a. *From the Memorate edition of the Folklore & Fiction Newsletter:* Memorates are directly connected to the people who tell them, and I care very much about the dignity of those people. Note that I asked and obtained

- i. *Think about why you're conducting the interview:* What is the purpose of the interview? What information do you want to obtain? This will help focus your thinking as it relates to the needs of your overall project.
 1. (Example: Interviewing a physics professor about black holes for a science fiction story is different from interviewing a transport truck driver about her profession for the sake of an ethnography about the industry. The relationship of interviewer to informant and data is quite different in these two situations.)
 - ii. *Decide what kind of interview you want to do:* Is it a life history interview? Is it an interview about a particular subject? This will help narrow the interview scope to relevant topics.
 1. (Example: If you want a life history, your interview will be broader in scope. If you want a professional writer's discussion of the craft, your interview will be narrower in scope.)
 - iii. *Consider the person you're interviewing:* Is it a child? An adult? An elderly person? A university professor? A business executive? A stay-at-home father? This will help cater the interview to your informant(s).
 1. (Example: Depending upon their ages, children may need to have interview topics presented to them more simply, while a business executive may only be available for a limited window of time and need for topics to be presented to them in descending order of importance.)
- c. The Ethnographic Interview: Topics (SLIDE 13)**
- i. An initial list of topics or open-ended questions is better than a set of specific questions where ethnographic interviewing is concerned. This allows conversations between you and your informants to flow more freely and permits you to ask relevant questions as they come up.
 1. (Example: Asking a parent the names and ages of their children is very different from saying, "Tell me about your kids.")
 - ii. Traditional Arts Indiana suggests the following general list of topics for interviews about heritage and culture, which might be adapted according to your need. (Use writers and writing as an example below.)
 1. *Beginnings:* How did you get started doing X?
 2. *Community:* Who do you make X for? What is your audience?
 3. *Aesthetics:* What makes a good X? A bad X?
 4. *Process:* Tell me about your process for making X.
 5. *Traditionality:* How did you learn X, and from whom?
 6. *Creativity:* How have you changed X since you learned it?
 7. YouTube: Traditional Arts Indiana
 - a. Fieldwork Guide: Structuring interview questions
 - b. Fieldwork Guide: Getting interesting answers
- d. The Ethnographic Interview: Informants (SLIDE 14)**
- i. *Before the Interview:*

1. Conduct a pre-interview with your informants whenever possible in order to set expectations. This might be done via email, by phone, or in person. However, be careful not to offer too much in the way of information or provide a list of questions. Fresh, spontaneous answers are always preferable to rehearsed narratives where ethnographic interviews are concerned.
 - a. (Example: If I were interviewing one of you, I might say that I was a PhD Candidate in Folklore researching the culture of writing conventions and wanted to interview you about your experiences as a writer and a convention participant. This would hopefully put you at ease a bit but leave room for spontaneity during the interview.)
- ii. *During the Interview:*
 1. Avoid responding with verbal acknowledgement cues (m-hm, right, go on, etc.)
 2. Avoid interrupting your informant to ask for clarification or to jump the gun on follow-up questions.
 3. Be comfortable with silences. Let informants respond to questions in their own time.
 4. Ask your informants questions for which you already know the answers. This is especially important in situations where the goal is straightforward ethnography and not information-gathering.
 - a. (Example: If a writer mentioned a three-act plot structure to me during an interview, I would ask her what it is even though I know the answer.)
 5. Ask informants to define esoteric terms and describe esoteric processes mentioned during an interview.
 - a. (Example: If a writer mentioned getting an agent with a Twitter pitch, I would ask her to describe the process she employed to do so.)
- e. **The Ethnographic Interview: Formats (SLIDE 15)**
 - i. *Face-to-face interviews:* I've presumed you'll be conducting face-to-face interviews in this part of the workshop, and these are the gold standard of ethnographic research. I've also presumed you'll be recording these interviews, and video is better than audio for this purpose because nuances of facial expression, examples and demonstrations of handcrafts, and other visual information is best captured by video. Failing this, a sensitive audio recording will include the interviewer's description of important visual information.
 1. (Example: Mary is submerging her canning jars in boiling water, or John is fitting the plank he just shaped into the side of the boat.)
 - ii. *Questionnaires:* If you must interview by way of a written questionnaire, it's important to note that you'll receive far less and far less nuanced information from your research participant (as I mentioned a moment

ago in my discussion of topics versus questions). So it's important to consider your interview questions carefully and with an eye toward minimizing the time it will take to complete your questionnaire. In my own experience, this method has been less than stellar for producing good ethnographic material.

f. The Ethnographic Interview: Locations (SLIDE 16)

i. Outdoor Locations:

1. Run the risk of wind, traffic, and other kinds of noise interference.
2. Present more opportunities for distractions such as weather, comments from neighbours and other passersby, etc.
3. However, they may be necessary in situations where your informant's work and the reason for your interview are outdoors.
 - a. (Example: A boatbuilder working on a dock.)
 - b. Note: Use a wind buffer on your microphone during outdoor interviews, if at all possible. Even a breeze can wreak havoc with sound quality.

ii. Indoor Locations:

1. Offer better control of the noise environment, but telephones, radios, and other such devices should be turned off. If you're planning to submit to an archive, refrigerators, air conditioners, and other sources of background noise should be unplugged.
 2. Children and pets, while lovely, are examples of indoor distractions. It's better if these family members are absent for recorded ethnographic interviews.
 3. Keep pens, cups of tea, and other opportunities for tapping and clicking away from your informant whenever possible. Encourage informants not to scrape their chairs across the floor while adjusting their seats, etc.
- iii.** These issues of location are especially important if you plan to donate your interview to an archive, because your work will be made available to other researchers indefinitely, so you'll want to create the best possible recording.

g. The Ethnographic Interview: Technical Considerations (SLIDE 17)

- i. Use the best equipment:* Use the highest quality setting on your audiovisual devices, and use the best audiovisual devices you own or can borrow.
1. Again, this is especially important if you plan to donate your interview materials to an archive.
 2. I would emphasize here that it is exceedingly difficult to scrub sound from a recording with tools we might readily have to hand. I've done it with Audacity for an Audible ACX recording, but it was a steep learning curve, and much of that learning was about the importance of not introducing sonic clutter to begin with.

- ii. *Practice using your equipment:* Practice using your equipment before you arrive to conduct the interview. This allows you to set it up and operate it more smoothly on site.
 - 1. Sometimes informants are nervous about being interviewed, so the faster you can set up, the less opportunity they have to be nervous before the interview begins.
 - a. Be disarming and cordial to minimize this nervousness. Let people know you're on their side and that you've come to talk about something that interests both of you. It matters.
 - i. (Example: In my own, upcoming field work, I'll have to frontload the informed consent process quite strongly, so it will be especially important for me to be as disarming and cordial as I can be with my informants.)
 - iii. *Bring extra chargers and batteries:* Bring extra chargers and batteries for your audiovisual devices!
 - iv. *Always run a backup recorder:* When conducting recorded interviews, always run a backup recorder. I use my iPhone's audio recording app for this.
- h. The Ethnographic Interview: Ethical, Copyright, and Archival Considerations (SLIDE 18)**
- i. *Be transparent:* Be truthful and clear with informants about your intentions with regard to their information, and make certain this is reflected in the documents you and your informants sign together. Give your informants copies of these fully-executed forms. With this in mind...
 - ii. *Ask your informants to sign an agreement:* The information you gather from informants belongs to both of you in various and somewhat specific ways. They own the information, but you've collected it from them and want to use it as part of a project you own. So it's important to have a written agreement with informants detailing the ways you plan to use their information. Further, if you're planning to submit research materials to an archive, you'll need to follow its rules for data collection and submission.
 - iii. *You might use an archive's template to create this agreement:* Fortunately, most archives have forms for both the donor (informant) and the collector (you). Even if you don't plan to deposit your interview with an archive, it still might be a good idea to use archival copyright and consent forms as templates for your own written agreements with informants.
 - iv. Final Notes
 - 1. I'm coming from an academic perspective on issues of ethics and copyright, but your mileage may vary on this issue depending upon the situation. If you're interviewing a sex worker for a non-fiction book with a traditional publisher, your ethical and

copyright considerations should be thorough and on point. However, if you're interviewing your grandmother about quilt-making for a family history, you might not need to ask that she sign a formal agreement. Still, when working closely with people and their knowledge, it's always a good idea to be careful.

- 4) **Take Questions from the Audience (SLIDE 19)**
- 5) **Promote the Folklore & Fiction Newsletter (SLIDE 20)**
- 6) Close and Thank the Audience (NO SLIDE)