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## Choreographing Intertextual Stories: Qualitative Inquiry Meets Oral History

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### Abstract

In *Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher: Choreographing the Story* (2010), Valerie J. Janesick offers readers an engaging conversational exploration of oral history methods using the metaphor of choreography. Janesick weaves together the theoretical and practical dimensions of conducting oral history projects and generously shares valuable examples throughout the text.

### Keywords

Qualitative Inquiry, Methodology, Oral History, Metaphor, Social Justice

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## **Choreographing Intertextual Stories: Qualitative Inquiry Meets Oral History**

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*In Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher: Choreographing the Story* (2010), Valerie J. Janesick offers readers an engaging conversational exploration of oral history methods using the metaphor of choreography. Janesick weaves together the theoretical and practical dimensions of conducting oral history projects and generously shares valuable examples throughout the text. **Key Words:** *Qualitative Inquiry, Methodology, Oral History, Metaphor, Social Justice*

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Qualitative inquiry and oral history. When Janesick (2010) brought these two notions together in her book entitled *Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher: Choreographing the Story*, she joined a tradition of some of the most innovative thinkers about the arrangement of narratives and the process of interpretation. Qualitative inquiry resists definition, but embraces description, and when choreographed can be simultaneously ordering and freeing. When applied to an oral history project the conditions are created for an artistic composition; a composition that allows room for improvisation and arrives at a plurality of meaning. Janesick expertly crafted a multi-dimensional space in this work within which deeper understandings come forth. She combines the introduction of new ideas with a strong and centered narration filled with instructive examples easily accessible by many different reading communities.

Janesick (2010) brings her creation to life via the metaphor of choreography as she shares her dynamic understanding of oral history. Her version of oral history is clearly tied to serving a social justice agenda, and she is passionate about sharing her enthusiasm for the transformative qualities of oral history projects. When oral historians honor the transactions that occur between the “texts” *that reside in people* they enter the “dance” open to a choreography that elevates the opportunities for meaning-making within a particular context. In Janesick’s view, the author/narrator/qualitative researcher/choreographer is the arranger of the “dance” (the multivocal story), and this choreographer is in a dialogic relationship with the participant/dancer; they together are in motion creating a version of the story. How does this transaction between two people actually operate within the context of an oral history project? Janesick’s orientation to this question resides in a postmodern framing and resembles literary theorists’ use of the concept of intertextuality.

*Reading* intertextually (the shaping of meaning through the intentional symbiotic exchange of two or more “texts”) has an important history and, in fact, represents (holds) a transformational moment in the history of literary theory (e.g., Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the “dialogic imagination” and Barthes’ (1981) “plurality of meaning” and “five codes” of interpretation). Oral history *interviewing* (and in our case, the writing of a book review) intertextually is an extension of the concept. Janesick (2010) builds the bridge that makes this theoretical traversing possible.

As the reviewers of Janesick's (2010) book, we benefitted from experimenting with the transactions that occurred between the "texts" that resided within us as we read and interpreted this work. We will follow Janesick's organizational structure for the book (centered around what she termed the critical elements in dance and choreography, namely *order*, *design & tension*, *balance & composition*, and *harmony*) to share some examples of the transactions we encountered as we experienced a co-reading of this work.

### **Part I: Order: Reinventing Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher**

For us, this part of the book captured our attention by way of the power of the narratives selected as case examples. The reinvention Janesick (2010) points to centers on the potential that exists when a fuller complement of qualitative research tools and techniques are brought to bear on an oral history project.

T: Janesick had me with her choice of an opening quote by Joan Didion, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." And then quite literally her Case 1.1 arrested my attention, "...my journey toward becoming an educator began the day I awoke to realize that I was trapped in a deathbed of my own making, hopeless, alone and just waiting to die. At 450 pounds I had become extremely depressed, lonely, and isolated" (p. 19).

A: As I read the cases in the first chapter, I was first awestruck by the quality of the stories as they hooked my mind and imagination right away. I wanted to meet the authors and talk with them about their experiences. When I read "at 450 pounds" I was hooked. Similarly, in the second case, I was hooked after reading, "I had heard rumors of paranormal activity."

### **Part II: Design and Tension: The Tools of the Oral Historian: The Choreography of Techniques and Issues**

Part II resonated with us as qualitative researchers and as educators passionate about teaching qualitative research methods courses.

A: Janesick (2010) challenges us to rethink and reconceptualize all along the way. Never before have I thought of interviewing as a creative act of the imagination. And suddenly, that approach seems helpful, fun, lightening. When I think about the IRB in the context of qualitative research, dark Star Wars music comes to mind, but Janesick helped me change that almost instinctual response. She makes the IRB process seem more manageable and possible to navigate. Janesick's decision to include practical advice and excerpts from actual IRB-researcher correspondence is invaluable for both student-researchers and faculty mentors alike. I cannot express enough adoration for the practicality of this book. I am thinking most about the sections on interviewing and IRB processes. Logistics are a huge part of research. She allows us to think about simple aspects of the process that we might dismiss at the onset. How will you react if a participant never shows up for an interview?

T: In her section on "interviewing as a creative act of the imagination" Janesick (2010) reminds us that researchers must develop habits of the mind and the body and then proceeds to give examples and practical advice. The section outlining six types of interview questions is an immensely helpful tool for novice researchers, and I can

imagine pages 46–52 will receive a lot of traffic among those designing interview protocols.

### **Part III: Balance and Composition: Becoming an Oral Historian**

We both recognized that Part III may have benefitted from one more layer of organization. While gems were found (such as extensive case examples, a discussion of reflexive journaling and ways to develop the habit of writing, examples of alternative data sources and ways of representing findings, additional ethical considerations, etc.) they at times seemed to be all stuffed together inside a traveling trunk show, too good to not bring along, but each one clamoring to be given more attention than the space allowed.

A: This way of thinking about writing (as athletic) is perfect for me. I'm an athlete. I cannot write unless my body lets me do it. Otherwise, most of my mental energy is spent battling my body. Or, I am thinking about dirty dishes, laundry, walking the dog. The body must be attended to while writing. This was a vehicle for Janesick (2010) to tie into the metaphor. Dance is athletic. Writing, like dance, is athletic; it requires preparation, practice and focus of mind. Her call to think of writing as sport has made me more excited about writing, as has this entire book. I completely loved the 30 day challenge. Writing for 30 days to practice narrative writing, and then taking another 30 days to explore websites that describe oral history containing tapes and videos of completed projects can yield some robust results. A few problems developed for me in this section when reading Case III.5. First, I've already read parts of this; second, this example was perhaps too long; and third, Janesick (2010) did not debrief the piece. Even though I wanted the case to end, I still wanted her to tell me something about it. While I like the idea of generating poetry as a data analysis technique, I did not like the phrasing "found data." I prefer lifted. "Found" reminds me of emerge; another frequently used term when trying to describe how themes are identified. There is a convergence of data and researcher that yields these, and words like "found" and "emerge" don't reflect that to me.

T: The immense challenges of data representation and data analysis can never be underestimated. And the iterative nature of this process makes it difficult to capture in a still shot. It often needs more explanation conducive to a three or four dimensional event. Equally challenging is the task of teaching novice researchers about this process helping them live with ambiguity and to capitalize on the creative tensions that result. Janesick's (2010) organization of this part of her text seems to reflect these kinds of inherent difficulties as it is packed with many connected, yet not neatly transitioned, sections. Reflexivity is so central to all qualitative inquiry projects, and Janesick appropriately reserves some time to discuss the usefulness of reflexive journaling for oral historians and then drops in a range of techniques (contemporary and future-oriented) that need consideration. A return to each of these areas would be beneficial.

### **Part IV: Harmony: The Art of Making Sense of Oral History Projects with a Choreography of Social Justice**

This concluding part of *Oral History* operates as a gradual aesthetic crescendo

linking Janesick's (2010) motivations for her sustained attention on oral history once again filled with poignant examples.

T: The aesthetic qualities of the research process have captured Janesick's attention, and in this final part of her book she shares how her combination of experiences and intellectual influences have shaped her as a researcher and educator. Janesick describes the classroom as "an elegant space in which one can move beyond just knowledge to understanding" (2010, p. 183). This description signifies her appreciation for the transformative nature of such spaces when research is understood to have connections to a social justice agenda. She writes, "I see oral history as an orientation that can help my students come to their own emancipation. It is the reason I like to showcase their work in the examples in this book. Each one validates the who, what, why, and where of research as an art and as a lived experience" (p. 188).

A: Case IV.2 was perfect. It made me feel soothed and warm – like I was there. This case actually made me want to learn to knit. Vivid images were spinning in my mind as I imagined the place, the people, the sights, and the smells. I wanted to go to Florida.

## **Appendices A – G:**

A: I am thankful that Janesick (2010) put all of this ancillary information in the book as a large set of appendices. I see these appendices as a reference, something I will come back to over time. My favorite part of the appendices was this writing activity: "Find a household item that annoys you and write three pages about why this item annoys you" (p. 232). Today, that would be the coffee grinder. I could not get the piece that holds the grinds and the blades off the base. This is not something I wanted to mess with first thing in the morning as I am slowly waking up and trying to decide on whether or not I want to go out into the cold and get the workout over with or stay inside, keep warm, and do some reading/writing. I could write about this for pages and pages. I'd go from the coffee grinder to the rituals of the day and how they keep me calm, focused, and positive. I love this prompt! I'd like more of them.

T: The appendices are valuable tools that further enhance this book's usefulness for graduate research methods courses. Like the "Performance Exercises" and "Selected Readings" that bookend each part of the text, they represent carefully selected pieces to assist the researcher at all junctures of the oral history project.

Overall, Janesick (2010) continues to demonstrate why she is among the most provocative thinkers about forms and functions of qualitative inquiry. She is so adept with building instructive metaphors to increase and enhance understanding, while she intentionally chooses to write in an accessible way, determined to engage researchers at all levels of experience. From her acknowledgment section throughout the entire text, she is positioned as an informed, caring educator sharing her most treasured learnings with her readers. This text will quickly be adopted by those of us teaching graduate-level research methodologies courses and equally enjoyed by others intrigued by possibilities of oral history. To experience more of this inviting text, we suggest you visit the book's web page located on the Guilford Press web site at [http://www.guilford.com/cgi-bin/cartscript.cgi?page=pr/janesick.htm&dir=research/res\\_qual](http://www.guilford.com/cgi-bin/cartscript.cgi?page=pr/janesick.htm&dir=research/res_qual) to see the book's full table of contents, read chapter one in its entirety, and check out other reviews.

Janesick's (2010) ideas are the kind you have a hard time keeping to yourself. We suggest finding someone to share the reading experience with (a graduate class, a colleague, a fellow oral historian, or a friend), and create a choreography of your own that will no doubt lead to a meaningful creative inquiry experience.

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