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## Past remarkable: Using life stories to trace alternative futures



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### ABSTRACT

The paper argues that life stories and histories offer different perspectives on the past, with implications for studying the future. A life is proposed as a form of “social site” (Marston, S.A., Jones III, J.P., & Woodward, K. (2005). *Human geography without scale, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30, 416–432.) where the future is met and negotiated. Unlike the broad sweep of historical narrative, a focus on the site of a life can reveal cumulative losses, futures denied and paths not taken. Life stories challenge historical narrative with alternative futures that ‘might-have-been’; they might therefore usefully be added as a more experimental type to Inayatullah’s taxonomy of historical “traces” (Inayatullah, S. (2012). *Humanity 3000: A comparative analysis of methodological approaches to forecasting the long-term, Foresight*, 14 (5), 401–417).

A case study based on a life story from Aceh is used to demonstrate ways in which alternative futures can emerge from life stories and then be acted upon. The paper concludes that the experimental power of life stories as historical traces lies not only in the stories themselves but in the unique event of *storytelling* and its potentially transformative impact on the teller and listener, and hence the future.

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## 1. Introduction

... life and duration, and thus history and politics, are never either a matter of unfolding an already worked out blueprint... Duration proceeds not through the accumulation of information and the growing acquisition of knowledge, but through the division, bifurcation, dissociation – by difference, through sudden and unpredictable change, which overtakes us with its surprise... (Grosz, 2005: 110–111).

### 1.1. The people in the field

This paper about futures begins with a (narrativized but true) story about the past:

At a conference in Banda Aceh on land use after the tsunami, international agricultural scientists spoke to us about ‘landscape mosaics’ – the mosaic of forest, peat swamp, rice field and rubber plantation that shifts like a kaleidoscope over time. The scientists argued that the mosaic might change, but what mattered was maintaining a balance between all of the pieces.

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After the talk, we were taken on a bus into the countryside, to some rice fields where the scientists had been experimenting with seed varieties and planting techniques. It was a hot afternoon, and we could see that some of the plants were growing green and strong, but others next to them were limp and yellow. The local farmer who looked after the land was a calm man, slowly lifting an arm to point things out to us, showing with his fingers the depth of planting, the quantity of fertilizer.

“So,” we said, “what was the soil like? How did you prepare it for the planting?”

“The ploughing was difficult”, he said, “very slow...”

“Were there rocks?” we asked, although the soil looked soft and easy to plough.

“No rocks,” he said. “But many bodies...there were many people under this field.”

There was silence for a moment. We hadn’t thought about bodies in the landscape mosaic. ‘Were they from the tsunami?’ we asked.

He shrugged: “Maybe they were killed in the fighting. Nobody knows who they are, where they came from...We’ll probably never know.”

In the landscape mosaic of Aceh – recently emerged from 30 years of civil conflict and the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami that killed 170,000 Acehnese – here is a piece that bursts out of the past and into all of Aceh’s potential futures. In this paper, a case study from Aceh is used to support the idea that the often invisible past may be a source of unexpected alternative futures; further, that one way of identifying multiple and future-laden pasts is through listening to the life stories of those who lived through them.

### 1.2. *The past in the future, the future in the past*

How do we identify the ragged pieces that emerge from difficult histories, and how do they connect with the imagining of alternative futures? Many histories are not smooth trajectories of progress and development, but more akin to what Ganguly has called “a jagged array of nauseating tableaux” (2009: 439). The value of histories for futures studies is discussed below through the writing of futurist [Sohail Inayatullah \(1998, 2008, 2012\)](#) and the work undertaken by ethnoecologist Nancy Turner in collaboration with decision research scientists (2008). Inayatullah suggests that before we are able to envisage alternative futures, we need first to see the present as remarkable rather than just “the way things are” (1998: 818); this argument is extended here to seeing the past also as remarkable. It is proposed that to do so requires an addition to the forms of historical “trace” described by [Inayatullah \(2012\)](#). [Turner, Gregory, Brooks, Failing, and Satterfield \(2008: 8\)](#) provide a guide to the forms of “invisible loss” that characterize difficult histories, and the ways in which they constrain the futures of a community, an elaboration of what Inayatullah calls the “weight of history” (2008: 8).

Uncovering hitherto invisible histories that might reveal something new for the future, requires, in historian Carter’s words, attention to the non-events of everyday life, to anecdotes about “the trifling, the dirt, the rubbish” (2004: 175) that are overlooked in the master narratives of history (“history’s pretence of clear-sightedness” (2004: 175)). Revelations in these alternative histories offer “an opportunity for grounding the future differently” (Carter, 2004: 170)). The discussion below draws together Carter’s work and that of philosopher [Elizabeth Grosz \(1999, 2000, 2005\)](#), who argues for attention to be paid, outside the recycling patterns of mainstream history, to “histories of singularity” with their multiplicity, diversity and contingency. These singular histories offer a glimpse of alternative futures – paths not taken, futures denied – that are part of a limitless world of “futures yet unthought” (Grosz, 1999).

The following section reviews the ways in which life stories differ from histories, and how life stories might usefully be added into Inayatullah’s taxonomy of historical “traces”; life stories, for example, may be a way of identifying cumulative losses that are invisible in big historical narratives, and in conventional measures of community wellbeing. Sections 3 and 4 develop the idea of a life and life stories as connected integrally with the future. Section 3 examines the idea of a *life* as both a unique site of the past and the place where the future is actually met and negotiated. Section 4 focuses on a *life story* as a ‘singular history’ that can be used (by teller and listener) in an experimental way for exploring alternative futures outside the projections of historical master narratives. A case study based on a life story from Aceh is then used to demonstrate ways in which alternative futures can emerge from life stories and then be acted upon. The last section proposes that part of the experimental power of life stories lies in the unique event of the *storytelling* itself, and its potentially transformative impact on the teller, the listener and hence the future.

## 2. The contingent and multiple past

### 2.1. *Historical narrative and life stories*

Inayatullah reminds us that “the past we see as truth is in fact the particular writing of history, often by the victors of history” (1998: 818). History organizes what was for those at the time a chaotic present (or less dramatically, “just... the way life was lived” (Danto, 1981: 206)), into an intelligible past (Mink, 1966: 184; Ricoeur, 1984: 99). History can be used in this way to construct nation states as models of evolutionary progress, and to suppress or re-order chaotic events of the past so that they lead ineluctably to a glorious or problematic present (see for example [Attwood, 2001](#); [Bowen, 1989](#); [Farriss, 1987](#); [Goodall, 2000](#); [Rappaport, 1994](#); [Zurbuchen, 2005](#)).

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