The Peculiarities of Oral History*
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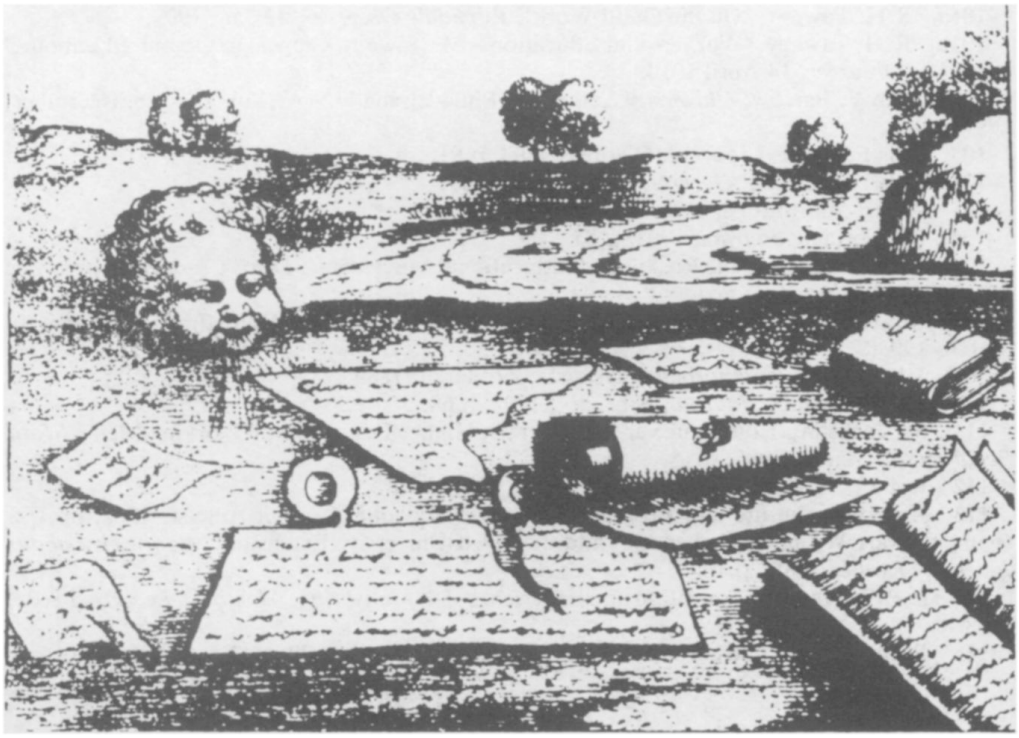

From *Pronosticatio* by Paracelsus, 1536.

> 'Yes', said Mrs Oliver, 'and then when they come to talk about it a long time afterwards, they've got the solution for it which they've made up themselves. That isn't awfully helpful, is it?' 'It is helpful,' said Poirot, . . . 'It is important to know certain facts which have lingered in people's memories although they may not know exactly what the fact was, why it happened or what led to it. But they might easily know something that we do not know and that we have no means of learning. So there have been memories leading to theories . . . '
>
> Agatha Christie, *Elephants Can Remember*

> His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter, and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm.
>
> Washington Irving, *Rip Van Winkle*

A spectre is haunting the halls of the Academy: the spectre of 'oral history'. The Italian intellectual community, always suspicious of news from outside (and yet so

*The expression 'oral history' is open to criticism, in that it may be taken to imply that historical research may be based entirely upon oral sources. A more correct expression would be 'the use of oral sources in history'. For the sake of brevity, I will here use 'oral history' as the term which has entered common use.

subservient to 'foreign discoveries') – and even more wary of those who suggest *going* outside – has hastened to cut oral history down to size before even trying to understand what it is and how to use it. The method used has been that of charging oral history with pretensions it does not have, in order to set the academicians' minds at ease by refuting them. For instance *La Repubblica*, the most intellectually and internationally oriented of Italian dailies rushes to dismiss 'descriptions "from below" and the artificial packages of "oral history" where things are supposed to move and talk by themselves', without even stopping to notice that it is not things, but people, that are expected to move and talk in oral history (albeit people normally considered as no more than 'things').[1]

There seems to be a fear that once the floodgates of orality are opened, writing (and rationality along with it) may be swept out as if by a spontaneous uncontrollable mass of fluid, irrational material. But this attitude blinds us to the fact that our awe of writing has distorted our perception of language and communication to the point where we no longer understand either orality or the nature of writing itself.[2] As a matter of fact, written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have common characteristics as well as autonomous and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other); therefore, they require different and specific interpretative instruments. But the undervaluing and the overvaluing of oral sources end up by cancelling out *specific* qualities, turning them either into mere supports for traditional written sources or into an illusory cure for all ills. These notes will attempt to suggest some of the ways in which oral history is intrinsically different.

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Oral sources are *oral* sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published. (One Italian exception is the Istituto Ernesto De Martino, a Milan-based militant research organisation, which has been publishing 'sound archives' on records for at least 12 years, without anyone in the cultural establishment noticing.)[3] Occasionally – as seems to be the case with the Columbia University Oral History Program, in New York – tapes are actually destroyed: a symbolic case of the destruction of the spoken word. The transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies reduction and manipulation. The differing efficacy of recordings as compared to transcripts for classroom purposes, for instance, can only be appreciated by direct experience. More important is the fact that expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations. (This is why I believe it is unnecessary to give excessive attention to the quest for new and closer methods of transcription. The most literal translation is hardly ever the best; a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention, and the same may be true for the transcription of oral sources.)

The disregard of the orality of oral sources has a direct bearing on interpretative theory. The first aspect which is usually stressed is the origin of oral sources – in that they give us information about illiterate peoples or social groups whose history is either absent or distorted in the written record. Another aspect concerns content: the daily life and material culture of these peoples or groups. However, these are not specific to oral sources: emigrants' letters, for instance, have the same origin and content, but are

In the search for a distinguishing factor we must therefore turn to *form*. We hardly

need repeat here that writing reduces language to segmentary traits only – letters, syllables, words, phrases. But language is also composed of another set of traits, which cannot be reduced within a single segment, but are also bearers of meaning. For instance, it has been shown that the tonal range, volume range, and rhythm of popular speech carry many class connotations which are not reproducible in writing (unless it be, inadequately and partially, in the form of musical notation).[5] The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be detected in the transcript but can only be described, approximately.

In order to make the transcript readable it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks, which are always the more or less arbitrary addition of the transcriber. Punctuation indicates pauses distributed according to grammatical rules: each mark has a conventional place, meaning and length. These hardly ever coincide with the rhythms and pauses of the speaking subject, and therefore end up by confining speech within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow. The exact length and position of the pause has an important function in the understanding of the meaning of speech: regular grammatical pauses tend to organise what is said around a basically expository and referential pattern, whereas pauses of irregular length and position accentuate the emotional content; very heavy rhythmic pauses (often nearly metric) recall the style of epic narratives.[6] Most interviews switch from one type of rhythm to another, thus expressing variations in the narrator's attitude towards his or her material. Of course, this can only be perceived by listening, not by reading.

A similar point can be made concerning the velocity of speech and its changes during the interview. There are no basic interpretative rules: slowing down may mean greater emphasis as well as greater difficulty, and acceleration may show a wish to glide over certain points, as well as greater familiarity and ease. In all these cases, the analysis of changes in velocity must be combined with rhythm analysis. Changes are, however, the norm in speech, while regularity is the 'presumed' norm in reading, where variations are introduced by the reader rather than the text itself.

This is not a question of philological purity. Traits which cannot be reduced to segments are the site (not unique, but very important) of essential narrative functions: the emotional function, the narrator's participation in the story, the way the story affects the narrator. This often involves attitudes which the speaker would not be able (or willing) to express otherwise, or elements which are not fully within his or her control. By abolishing these traits, we flatten the emotional content of speech down to the presumed equanimity and objectivity of the written document. This is even more true when folk informants are involved: they may be poor in vocabulary but are generally richer in the range of tone, volume, and intonation, as compared to middle-class speakers[7] who have learned to imitate in speech the dullness of writing.

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Oral sources are *narrative* sources. Therefore the analysis of oral history materials must avail itself of some of the general categories developed in the theory of literature. (Of course here I am discussing primarily the testimony given in free interviews, rather than more formally organised materials such as songs or proverbs – where the question of form however is even more essential.) For example, some narratives contain substantial shifts in the 'velocity' of narration: that is substantial variations in the ratio between the duration of the events described and the duration of the narration.[8] An informant may recount in a few words events which lasted a long time,

or may dwell at length on brief episodes. These oscillations are significant, although we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation: a narrator may dwell on an episode which seems innocuous to distract attention from more delicate points, or to attract attention to it. In all cases there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning the narrator has in mind. The same applies to other categories among those elaborated by Gerard Genette (see note 8), such as 'distance' or 'perspective', which define the position of the narrator towards the story.

Oral sources from non-ruling classes are linked to the tradition of the folk narrative. In this tradition, distinctions between narrative genres are perceived differently than in the written tradition of the educated classes.[9] Since writing has absorbed most of the functions of certification, official testimony and educational process, oral narration in a literate society finds it less necessary to establish a rigorous distinction between 'factual' and 'artistic' narrative, between 'events' and feelings and imagination. The perception of an account as 'true' is relevant as much to legend as to personal experience and historical memory; and as there are no oral forms specifically destined to transmit historical information,[10] historical, 'poetical' and legendary narrative often become inextricably mixed up. The result is narratives where the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns him or her and what concerns the group, becomes quite thin, and personal 'truth' may coincide with collective 'imagination'.

Each of these factors can be revealed by formal and stylistic factors. The greater or lesser presence of formalised materials (proverbs, songs, formulaic language, stereotypes) can be a witness to a greater or lesser presence of the collective viewpoint within the individual narrator's tale. The shifts between standard 'correct' language and dialect are often a sign of the kind of control which the speaker has over the materials of the narrative. For instance, a typical recurring structure is that in which the standard language is used overall, while dialect crops up in digressions or single episodes: this may show a more personal involvement of the narrator or (as is the case when dialect coincides with a more formulaic or standardised account) the intrusion of collective memory. On the other hand, standard language may emerge in a dialect narrative for terms or themes more closely linked with the public sphere, such as 'politics'; and this may mean a more or less conscious degree of estrangement,[11] as well as a process of 'conquest' of a more 'educated' form of expression beginning with participation in politics. Conversely, the dialectisation of technical terms of political speech may be an important sign of the vitality of traditional culture, and of the way in which the speaker endeavours to enlarge the expressive range of his or her tradition.

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The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no factual interest; interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events, and they always cast new light on unexplored sides of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes. From this point of view, the only problem posed by oral sources is that of their credibility (to which I will return below).

But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure (unless it be literary ones) is the speaker's subjectivity: and therefore, if the research is broad and articulated enough, a cross-section of the subjectivity of a social group or class. They tell us not just what

people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know of, for instance, the material cost of a given strike to the workers involved; but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs. Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, we might say that oral sources (above all, oral sources from the non-hegemonic classes) are a very useful integration of other sources as far as the *fabula* – or story – goes: that is, the logical and causal sequence of events; but what makes them unique and necessary is their *plot* – the way in which the narrator arranges materials in order to tell the story.[12] The organisation of the narrative (subject to rules which are mostly the result of collective elaboration) reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationship to their own history.

Subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible 'facts'. What the informant believes is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened. For instance, over half of the workers interviewed in the industrial town of Terni tell the story of their postwar strikes placing the killing of a worker by the police in 1953 rather than, as it really happened, in 1949; they also shift it from one context to another (from a peace demonstration to the urban guerilla struggle which followed mass layoffs at the local steelworks). This obviously does not cast doubt on the actual chronology; but it does force us to rearrange our interpretation of events in order to recognise the collective processes of symbolisation and myth-making in the Terni working class – which sees those years as one uninterrupted struggle expressed by a unifying symbol (the dead comrade), rather than as a succession of separate events. Or again: an ageing former leader of Terni's Communist Party, tired and ill, recounts as historical truth a daydream of his, in which he sees himself on the verge of overturning the CP's postwar policy of working towards a 'progressive democracy' in alliance with bourgeois forces rather than pushing on from anti-fascist resistance to socialism. Of course, he never did play such a role, although it does symbolise the resistance which the so-called 'Salerno policy' met with inside the party. What his testimony makes us feel is the psychological cost of this policy for many militant workers, how it caused their need and desire for revolution to be buried within the collective unconscious.[13] When we find the same story told by a different person in a different part of the country, we understand that the old comrade's fantasy in Terni is not just a chance occurrence. It is rather part of a burgeoning legendary complex, in which are told as true events that at least part of the working class wishes had happened. The 'senile ramblings' of a sick old worker then can reveal as much about his class and party as the lengthy and lucid written memoirs of some of the more respected and official leaders.[14]

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The credibility of oral sources is a *different* credibility. The examples I have given above show how the importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in. Therefore there are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of historical philological criticism that apply to every document, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'untrue' statements are still psychologically 'true', and that these previous 'errors' sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts.

Of course, the does not imply acceptance of the dominant prejudice which sees

factual credibility as a monopoly of written sources. The official police report on the death of the Terni worker discussed above begins with these revealing words: 'According to verbal information taken . . .' This is a typical opening formula (in the technical sense) of such official documents, and it shows how many *written* sources are only an uncontrolled transmission of lost *oral* sources. A large part of the written documents which are granted an automatic certificate of credibility by historians are the result of similar processes, carried out with nothing resembling scientific criteria and nearly always with a heavy class bias. For example, this manipulation is inherent in the transcription of trial records (in Italian procedure at least, which accords no legal value to the tape recorder or even to shorthand): what goes on record is not the words of the witnesses, but a version of their testimony translated into legal jargon literally dictated by the judge to the clerk. (The judiciary's fear of the tape recorder is equalled only by the similar prejudice of many historians.) The distortion inherent in such a procedure is beyond assessment, especially when the speakers are not members of the hegemonic class and express themselves in a language twice removed from that of court records. And yet, many historians who turn up their noses at oral sources accept these legal transcripts without blinking. In a lesser measure (thanks to the lesser class distance and the frequent use of shorthand) this applies to parliamentary records, newspaper interviews, minutes of meetings and conventions, which together form the chief sources for much traditional history, including labour history.

A strange by-product of this prejudice is the insistence that oral sources are distant from events and therefore undergo distortions deriving from faulty memory. Now, by definition, the only act contemporary with the act of writing is writing itself. There is always a greater or lesser lapse of time between the event and the written record, if only the time necessary to put it down in writing (unless of course we are talking about contracts, wills, treaties, etc, where the writing *is* the event). In fact, historians have often used *written* sources which were written long after the actual events. And indeed if lack of distance is a requisite, this ought to include physical distance as well – that is, only a direct participant ought to be considered reliable, and only at the moment of the event. But it so happens that such evidence can only be taken with a tape recorder, as happened with interviews recorded during the housing struggles in Rome in the 1970s, where the words of squatters and police were recorded *at the time* of the evictions.[15]

It is true however that most oral testimony refers to more or less distant events. It is nevertheless not clear why a worker's account of a sit-in strike or a partisan account of an episode of the anti-fascist resistance should be less credible than the accounts by eminent political leaders of the postwar period or even of the fascist era which are enjoying a remarkable publishing success in Italy. This is not so much the consequence of direct class prejudice, as of the 'holiness' of the written word. An excellent American historian, for instance, was ironical about the usefulness of collecting Earl Browder's oral memories of the fifties; but he admitted that if Browder (who was a Secretary of the U.S. Communist Party in the 30s and 40s) had written memoirs concerning the same period, he would have had to consider them reliable until proved otherwise. Yet the time span between the events and the narration would be the same. Writing hides its dependence on time by presenting us with an immutable text (as the Latin tag has it, 'scripta manent' – writings endure), thus giving the illusion that since no modifications are possible in the future of the text, no modifications can have taken place in its past history or in its prehistory. But what is written is first experienced or seen, and is subject to distortions even before it is set down on paper. Therefore the reservations applying to oral sources ought to be extended to written material as well.

The originally oral interviews with political leaders and intellectuals which are increasingly being turned out in book form by the Italian publishing industry are usually revised before printing and checked with notes and documents. The oral narrators of the non-hegemonic classes often resort to similar aids. On the one hand they belong to a tradition which has been forced, because of its lack of access to writing, to develop techniques for memory which have in large part atrophied in those who give greater importance to writing and reading.[16] (For instance they may still used formalised narration and meter; identify and characterise people by means of nicknames and kinship; date events in relation to agricultural cycles; retain the very habit of repeating and listening to oral narrations.) Folk informants often speak from within a collective tradition which passes on detailed descriptions of events preceding their birth, but which remain remarkably compact from one source to another.[17] These stories are part of a collective tradition which preserves the memory of the group's history beyond the range of the lives of individual members. On the other hand, we ought not to consider our sources as entirely innocent of writing. Perhaps the case of the old Genzano farmworkers' league leader, who in addition to remembering his own experiences very clearly had done research on his own in local archives, may be atypical. But the majority of informants know how to read, read newspapers, have read books, listen regularly to radio and TV (which both belong to the same culture as produces the written word). They have listened to speeches by people who read – politicians, trade unionists, priests. They keep diaries, letters, old newspapers and documents. For several centuries now, in spite of mass illiteracy, writing and orality have not existed in separate worlds. While a great deal of written memory is but a thin veneer on an underlying orality, even illiterate persons are saturated with written culture. The most common cultural condition for people in the non-hegemonic classes in a country like Italy is somewhere in between, in a fluid state of transition from orality to writing and sometimes back.

The fact remains however that today's narrator is not the same person as took part in the distant events which he or she is now relating. Nor is age the only difference. There may have been changes in personal subjective consciousness as well as in social standing and economic condition, which may induce modifications, affecting at least the judgement of events and the 'colouring' of the story. For instance, several people are reticent when it comes to describing forms of struggle approaching sabotage. This does not mean that they don't remember them clearly, but that there has been a change in their political opinions or in the line of their party, whereby actions considered legitimate and even normal or necessary in the past are today viewed as unacceptable and are literally cast out of the tradition. In these cases, the most precious information may lie in what the informants hide (and in the fact that they hide it), rather than in what they tell.

However, informants are usually quite capable of reconstructing their past attitudes even when they no longer coincide with present ones. This is the case with the Terni factory workers who admit that violent personal reprisals against the executives responsible for the 1953 mass layoffs may have been counterproductive, but yet reconstruct with great lucidity why they seemed useful and sensible at the time. It is also the case with one of the most important oral testimonies of our time, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Here the narrator describes how his mind worked before he reached a new awareness, and then judges his own past self with his present political and religious consciousness. If the interview is conducted skilfully and its purposes are clear to the informant, it is not impossible for him or her to make a

distinction between present self and past self, and to objectify the past self as other than the present one, other than now. In these cases (Malcolm X again is typical) irony is the major narrative technique used: two different ethical (or political) and narrative standards interfere and overlap, and their tension shapes the narrative.[18]

We may however come across narrators whose consciousness seems to have been arrested at the climactic moment of their personal experience – certain resistance fighters for example, or many World War I veterans, perhaps some student militants of 1968. Often they are wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were part, and their account takes on the cadences and the wording of epic. Thus an ironical style or an epic one implies a differing historical perspective which ought to be considered in our interpretation of the testimony.

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Oral sources are *not objective*. This of course applies to every source, although the holiness of writing sometimes leads us to forget it. But the inherent non-objectivity of oral sources lies in specific intrinsic characteristics, the most important being that they are *artificial*, *variable*, *partial*.

Alex Haley's introduction to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* shows that the shift in Malcolm's narrative approach did not happen spontaneously but was stimulated by the interviewer, who led the dialogue away from the exclusively public, official image that Malcolm was trying to project of himself and of the Nation of Islam.[19] This illustrates how oral sources are always the result of a relationship, a common project in which both the informant and the researcher are involved, together. (This is one reason why I think the historian ought to conduct most interviews in person, rather than through professional interviewers; and why oral research is best carried out in teamwork.) Written documents are fixed; they exist whether we are aware of them or not. Oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence. The condition for the existence of the written source is its *emission*; for oral sources it is their *transmission*. These differences are similar to those described by Jakobson and Bogatyrev between the creative processes of folklore and literature.[20]

The content of the oral source depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, stimuli, dialogue, personal relationship of mutual trust or detachment. It is the researcher who decides that there will be an interview. Researchers often introduce specific distortions: informants tell them what they believe they want to be told (it is interesting to see what the informants think is wanted and expected, that is what the informants think the historian is). On the other hand, rigidly structured interviews exclude elements whose existence and relevance were previously unknown to the researcher and are not contemplated in the question schedule; therefore such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference.

The first requirement, therefore, is that the researcher 'accept' the informant and give priority to what he or she wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wishes to hear. (Any questions lurking unanswered may be reserved for a later interview.) Communication always works both ways, the interviewee is always – though perhaps quietly – studying the interviewer as well as being studied. The historian might as well recognise this fact and work with it, rather than try to eliminate it for the sake of an impossible (and perhaps undesirable) neutrality. Thus, the result is the product of both the informant and the researcher; therefore when (as is often the case) oral interviews

in book form are arranged in such a way as to exclude the researcher's voice, a subtle distortion takes place: the transcript gives the informant's answers, but not the questions they are answering, and therefore gives the impression that a given speaker would *always* say the same things, no matter what the circumstances – in other words, the impression that a speaking person is as fixed as a written document. When the researcher's voice is cut out, the informant's voice is distorted.

In fact, oral testimony will never be the same twice. This is a characteristic of all oral communication: not even the most expert folk singer will deliver the same song twice in exactly the same fashion. This is even more true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements during an interview. It is therefore often worth the trouble interviewing the same informant more than once. The relationship between researcher and informant changes as they get to know and trust each other better. Attitudes change too: what has been called 'revolutionary vigilance' (keeping certain things from an interviewer who comes from another class and may make uncontrolled use of them) is attenuated; and the opposite attitude, a consequence of class subordination (telling only what the informant thinks may be relevant from the researcher's point of view rather than his or her own) gives way to more independent behaviour.

The fact that interviews with the same informant may be usefully continued leads us to the problem of the inherent incompleteness of oral sources. It is impossible to exhaust the *entire* historical memory of a single informant; so the data extracted from the interviews will always be the result of a selection produced by the mutual relationship. Oral historical research therefore always has the unfinished nature of a work in progress. This makes it different from historical research as we are accustomed to conceive it, with its ideal goal of reading through *all* existing sources, documents, archives, and pertinent literature. In order to go through all the possible oral sources for the Terni strikes of 1949-53, the researcher would have to interview at least 100,000 people. Any sample would only be as reliable as the sampling methods used; and on the other hand could never guarantee us against leaving out 'quality' informants whose testimony alone might be worth more than ten statistically selected ones.

But the unfinishedness, the partiality of oral sources infects all other sources. Given that no research can be considered complete any longer unless it includes oral sources (where available of course), and that oral sources are inexhaustible, oral history passes on its own partial, incomplete quality to all historical research.

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Oral history is not the point where the working class speaks for itself. The contrary statement of course is not without foundation; the recounting of a strike through the words and memories of workers rather than those of the police and the company-dominated press obviously helps (though not automatically) to correct a distortion implicit in the traditional sources. Oral sources therefore are a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for a history of the non-hegemonic classes, while they are less necessary for the history of the ruling class who have had control over writing and therefore entrusted most of their collective memory to written records.

Nevertheless, the control of the historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian: it is the historian who selects the people who are to speak; who asks the questions and thus contributes to the shaping of the testimony; who gives the

testimony its final published form (if only in terms of montage and transcription). Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in the abstract, but speaks *to* the historian, and *with* the historian (and, inasmuch as the material is published, *through* the historian). Things may indeed be more the other way round: the historian speaking through the workers' testimony, ventriloquising a discourse which is not theirs. So far from disappearing in the objectivity of the sources, the historian remains important at least as a partner in the dialogue, often as a 'stage director' of the interview, as an 'organiser' of the testimony – and organisation, as the old radical saying goes, is not technical, it is political. Instead of finding sources, the historian at least partly 'makes' them; though other people's words may be used it is still his or her discourse. Far from becoming a mere mouthpiece of the working class the historian may amplify a personal contribution.[21]

While the written document is usually invoked to prove that the account is a reliable description of actual events, oral sources involve the entire account in their own subjectivity. Alongside the first person narration of the informant is the first person of the historian, without whom there would be no source. In fact both the discourse of the informant and that of the historian are in narrative form, which brings them closer together than is the case with most other first-hand sources. Informants are historians, after a fashion; and the historian is, somehow, a part of the source.

The traditional writer of history presents himself (or, less often, herself) in the role of what literary theory would call an 'omniscient narrator': he gives a third-person account of events of which he was not a part, and which he dominates entirely and from above, impartial and detached, never appearing himself in the narrative except to give comments aside on the development of events, after the manner of some nineteenth-century novelists. Oral history changes the manner of writing history much in the same way as the modern novel transformed literary fiction; and the major change is that the narrator, from the outside of the narration, is pulled inside and becomes a part of it.

This is not just a grammatical shift from the third to the first person, but a whole new narrative attitude: the narrator is now one of the characters and the telling of the story is now part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political involvement than the traditional development of the external narrator. Radical history-writing is not a matter of ideology, of subjective sides-taking on the historians' part, or of what kind of sources they use. It is rather inherent in the historian's presence in the story being told, in the assumption of responsibility which inscribes him or her in the account and reveals historiography as an autonomous *act* of narration. Political choices become less visible and vocal, but more basic. The myth that the historian as a subject might disappear overwhelmed by the working-class sources, was part of a view of political militancy as the annihilation of subjective roles into the all-encompassing one of the fulltime militant, as absorption into an abstract working class. This resulted in an ironical similarity to the traditional attitude which saw the historian as not subjectively involved in what he (or she) was writing. Of course oral history seemed to be custom-made for this end, in that oral historians led others to speak rather than speaking themselves. But what actually happens is the opposite: the historian is less and less of a go-between from the working class to the reader, and more and more of a protagonist. If others speak instead, it is still the historian who makes them speak; and the 'floor', whether admittedly or not, is still the historian's.

In the writing of history, as in literature, the act of focussing on the function of the narrator causes the fragmentation of this function. In a novel like Joseph Conrad's

Lord Jim, the character/narrator Marlow can recount only what he himself has seen and heard; in order to narrate 'the whole story' he is forced to take several other 'informants' into his tale. The same thing happens to the historian working with oral sources: on entering the story and explicitly declaring control over it, he or she must on that very account allow the sources to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse. Thus, oral history is told from a multitude of 'circumscribed points of view': the impartiality claimed by traditional historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator (where partiality stands both for taking sides and for unfinishedness). The partiality of oral history is both political *and* narrative: it can never be told without taking sides, since the 'sides' exist inside the account.

Of course, historian and sources are not the same 'side', whatever the historian's personal history may be. The confrontation of these two different partialities – confrontation as conflict, and confrontation as the search for unity – is not the least element of interest in historical work based on oral sources.

1 *La Repubblica*, 3 October, 1978.

2 Eric A Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Harvard University Press 1963.

3 See Franco Coggiola, 'L'attività dell' Istituto Ernesto De Martino' in Diego Carpitella (ed.), *L'Etnomusicologia in Italia*, Palermo 1975.

4 See for instance Luisa Passerini, 'Sull' utilità e il danno delle fonti orali per la storia', intro. to Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale. Vita quotidiana e cultura materialie delle classi subalterne*, Turin 1978.

5 Giovanna Marini, 'Musica popolare e parlato popolare urbano', in Circolo Gianni Bosio (ed.), *I Giorni Cantati*, Milan 1978. See also Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Styles and Culture*, Washington D.C. 1968.

6 See Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, a → Walter J Ong, 'African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics', *New Literary History*, vol. 8 no. 3, Spring 1977, pp 411-29; Dennis Tedlock, 'Towards an Oral Poetics', same volume, pp 506-19.

7 See William Labov, 'The Logic of non-standard English', in Louis Kampf-Paul Lauter (ed.), *The Politics of Literature*, New York 1970, pp 194-239.

8 Here as elsewhere in this paper, I am using these terms as defined and used by Gerard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris 1972.

9 Dan Ben-Amos, 'Catégories Analytiques et Genres Populaires', *Poétique*, vol. 19, 1974, pp 268-93.

10 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, Penguin ed. 1961, 1973.

11 For instance, a Communist Party militant interviewed in Rome described the situation of his community and family mainly in dialect, but shifted briefly to standard Italian whenever he had to reaffirm his fidelity to the party line and the line's inevitability. The language shift showed that though he accepted it as inevitable he still saw the party line as something quite different from his own experience and tradition. His recurring idiom was 'There's nothing you can do about it'. A transcript of the interview is published in Circolo Gianni Bosio (ed.), *I Giorni Cantati*.

12 Boris Tomacevskij's essay on plot construction, in Tzveean Todorov (ed.), *Théorie de la Littérature*, Paris 1965.

13 See Alessandro Portelli and Valentino Paparelli, 'Terni: materiali per una storia operaia' in *Giorni Cantati*, bulletin of the Circolo Gianni Bosio, vol. 10, March 1977, 18-36.

14 Nathan Wachtel shows a similar phenomenon for folk reconstructions of the Spanish conquest in Mexico and Peru, which he partly explains by the distance in time (which does not apply to events within the informant's memory, as in Terni): 'Are these distortions arbitrary and mere fruits of fancy, or do they rather respond to a certain logic? And then, what logic is it? Why one interpretation rather than another?' *La Vision des Vaincus*, Paris 1971. From the Italian translation, *La Visione dei Vinti*, Turin 1977, p. 47.

15 On the time span between the event and the writing on the event see Genette as in note 8. The housing struggle recordings are partly published in the record *Roma. La borgata e la lotta per la casa* edited by Alessandro Portelli, Milan, Istituto Ernesto De Martino, Archivi Sonori SdL/AS/10.

16 Paul Thompson tells about the members of a social psychology convention, who, asked after a few days, were not able to remember the topics discussed there. Scholars used to reading and writing have a tendency to forget how to listen. Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale*, p 36.

17 See Alfredo Martini-Antonello Cuzzaniti, 'Il 1898 a Genzano', *I Giorni Cantati*, vol. 10, March 1977, pp 3-16.

18 See the definition of irony in George Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*, ch. 5

19 Of course Haley was only aiming to replace politics with 'human interest'. It was Malcolm X's unrelenting political tension which made his personal story the most politically relevant part of the book.

20 Roman Jakobson and Piotr Bogatyrëv, 'Le folklore, forme spécifique de création' in *Questions de Poétique*, Paris 1973, pp 59-72.

21 To this all-important purpose, a historian working with oral testimony collected by someone else is virtually working with a *written* source: a source he may not ask questions of, a source he may not influence and change, a source 'written' on the tape (the Italian 'inciso' or carved gives fully this sense of unchangeability).

Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era

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Oral History Review, Volume 40, Number 1, Winter/Spring 2013, pp. 25-35 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era

Mark Tebeau

Abstract: This essay explores the development of a mobile interpretive project, Cleveland Historical, that draws on oral history theory and practice to emphasize aurality as a key element in digital (and especially mobile) interpretive projects. Developed at the intersection of oral history and digital humanities theory and practice, Cleveland Historical suggests a model of curation that emphasizes a dynamic, layered, and contextual storytelling endeavor. The resulting curatorial process transforms the landscape into a living museum, one in which the community actively participates in remaking understandings of place and community identity. Of particular note, this collaborative oral history project provides a transformative way of understanding "place" and of moving beyond an emphasis on visual interpretive practice, in order to provide a deeper way of building interpretive stories for public humanities exhibitions on mobile computing devices.

Keywords: Cleveland Historical, digital humanities, landscape, mobile devices, place, public history, urban history

The mobile computing revolution offers tantalizing possibilities to archivists, historians, and curators interested in reaching broader public audiences. Sales of mobile devices—phones and tablets—have eclipsed those for desktop computers, and immense flows of information are traversing wireless networks toward mobile devices. Although humanists, including oral historians, have embraced these technological trends, sometimes slowly, broad publics have incorporated mobile computing into their daily lives. Nearly 90 percent of Americans own cell phones and approximately 50 percent use smart phones, with high ownership rates among poor and minority populations, for whom cell phones have replaced

The author would like to thank Kathryn Nasstrom, Doug Boyd, and Troy Reeves, as well as his colleagues at the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities, especially Erin Bell and J. Mark Souther.

doi:10.1093/ohr/oht037
The Oral History Review 2013, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 25–35

landlines and perhaps even desktop computing.[1] Presently, as much as 20 percent of all Internet traffic occurs on mobile devices (a number expected to grow dramatically), and it has been predicted that by 2015 some 80 percent of all Internet calls will originate on mobile devices.[2]

In response to the mobile revolution, the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities at Cleveland State University developed the Cleveland Historical Project—a mobile application and mobile-optimized website available on the Internet—to curate the city through layers of interpretive storytelling, with a particular emphasis on multimedia and especially sound.[3] Each story on Cleveland Historical (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/) consists of several layers of information: images, sound (usually oral history), video, and a few hundred words of text. The stories are also geolocated and displayed on a map, allowing for easy navigation and way-finding. Importantly, geolocation allows the present physical context of the region to become part of the interpretive frame, transforming the landscape into a laboratory for informal learning. Stories can also be discovered and connected through faceted search and tagging, as well as through the "tour" functionality. Inspired by the neighborhood walking tour, Cleveland Historical's tour feature connects stories (and their layers) to other stories, providing a historiographical, thematic, temporal, geographic, or human context, deepening the experience through making contextual meaning. Moreover, by utilizing easy-to-use archival software, the interpretive content and the connections between the various types of content can be changed dynamically, allowing the tool to be customized for local history events, community endeavors, or classroom learning. Lastly, Cleveland Historical has capitalized on this dynamism, engaging literally hundreds of students, teachers, and community members in storytelling, thus transforming the curatorial process itself. Presently, there are approximately five hundred stories, with three hundred thousand words, four thousand images, one thousand audio files, and one hundred videos available on Cleveland Historical. Yet, Cleveland Historical eschews existing models of urban encyclopedias (as well as Wikipedia) and

[1] "Mobile Access 2010," Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, July 7, 2010, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Access-2010.aspx.

[2] "2010 Horizon Report," The New Media Consortium, 2010, http://wp.nmc.org/horizon2010/; "Cisco's VNI Forecast Projects the Internet Will Be Four Times as Large in Four Years," The Network: Cisco's Technology News Site, http://newsroom.cisco.com/press-release-content?articleId=888280 (accessed January 4, 2013); Stacey Higginbotham, "The Mobile Tsunami Is Near: Blame Netflix & Apple," GigaOM, January 31, 2011, http://gigaom.com/2011/01/31/the-mobile-tsunami-is-near-blame-netflix-and-apple/;"Mobile Devices Now Make Up About 20 Percent of U.S. Web Traffic," AllThingsD, http://allthingsd.com/20120525/mobile-devices-now-make-up-about-20-percent-of-u-s-web-traffic/ (accessed January 4, 2013).

[3] Cleveland Historical can be accessed at www.clevelandhistorical.org. It can be found on the iOS App Store at https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/cleveland-historical/id401222855?mt=8 and on the Google Play Store at https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.dxy.clev.history. Cleveland Historical is built using the Curatescape mobile publishing framework (http://curatescape.org) and the Omeka content management software (http://www.omeka.org).

comprehensive archival catalogues, choosing instead to emphasize the interpretive perspective so vital to humanities scholarship.[4]

Cleveland Historical emphasizes active human curation as being vital to understanding place and community identity. In this, it builds on more than two decades of scholarship premised on the argument that "place" matters. More than two decades ago, scholars began documenting communities in monographs and photographic anthologies, emphasizing the complex ways that place emerged from lived experience and everyday life.[5] Recent scholarly and policy discourses have made this recovery of place a vital part of community and economic development. Indeed, these efforts have been inspiring innovators, designers, architects, and entrepreneurs to reimagine communities based on a sense of their past as distinctive human creations. Unfortunately, much of this work does not call forth rich historical contexts but picks and chooses which elements to sell to consumers.[6] Likewise, place-based publishing efforts have proliferated around so-called hyper-local histories that "see" places as aggregations of archival materials, images, and textual statements.[7] Too often, texts about place, like digital interventions, privilege sight over other senses—touch, smell, and especially sound—that provide meaningful and deep interpretive perspectives on past experiences that have often been overlooked.[8]

[4] On the importance of curation to the digital humanities, see Digital Humanities Manifesto, 2009, UCLA, http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf. In Cleveland, we have an excellent print and online encyclopedia that has been a model for similar projects nationwide; see John Grabowski, ed., The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, http://ech.cwru.edu/ (accessed January 1, 2013). Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia that embodies the crowdsourcing ethos, makes wide use urban encyclopedias like these.

[5] See, for example, Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997); Harm de Blij, The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape, Reprint (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Brinckerhoff Jackson, A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992); Michael Hough, Out of Place: Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Alison Isenberg, Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[6] See, for instance, the Project for Public Spaces, "What is Placemaking," http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/ (accessed June 1, 2011); Steve Thorne, "Place-based Public Tourism: A New Paradigm," http://economicdevelopment.org/2012/10/place-based-cultural-tourism-a-new-planning-paradigm/ (accessed November 14, 2012); Bruce Whyte, Terry Hood, and Brian White, Cultural and Heritage Tourism: A Handbook for Community Champions (Quebec, 2012), http://torc.linkbc.ca/torc/downs1/Cultural%20&%20Heritage%20Tourism.pdf; D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren, eds., Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place, First ed. (Berg Publishers, 2004); Rick Snyder, "A Special Message from Governor Rick Snyder: Community Development and Local Government Reforms," (March 21, 2011), http://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/2011Special_Message-1_348148_7.pdf.

[7] See, for example, the hyper-local histories of Arcadia Publishing, http://www.arcadiapublishing.com/; in Cleveland, you can find dozens of these, such as James A. Toman and James R. Spangler, Cleveland and Its Streetcars (Arcadia Publishing, 2005).

[8] The Project for Public Spaces does an excellent job of highlighting how place has been imagined by a variety of professional groups, including architects; see, for example, Project for Public Spaces, "Architecture of Place," http://www.pps.org/reference-categories/architecture-of-place-2/ (accessed December 15, 2012). The best extant expression of place in terms of sound is City Lore, City of Memory, http://www.cityofmemory.org/map/index.php (accessed November 10, 2010).

With this in mind, we sought to recover those sensory experiences, especially sound, by curating the city through voice, as well as text. Cleveland Historical is premised on the core of oral history; we have eschewed the overemphasis on the visual—both image and text—employed in many digital endeavors. Instead, wherever possible, Cleveland Historical emphasizes oral history as the key component of the interpretive process. Oral history practice, of course, is more than the voice, and Cleveland Historical seeks to channel oral history's emphasis on subjectivity and collaboration—values that are fundamental to the digital humanities and that have been described as "qualitative, interpretive, experiential, emotive, (and) generative."[9] Not surprisingly, oral history and digital practice share an underlying activist endeavor, one that breaks down traditional power relations and reimagines communities as part of the process of scholarly production. Building on this common core of innovation and activism, Cleveland Historical seeks to integrate public history, oral history, and digital humanities practice. Indeed, integrating three key elements—oral history; a layered, story-based approach to mobile interpretation; and dynamic collaborative storytelling process (facilitated through open-source software)—offers a suggestive direction for digital public humanities.[10]

Listening and the human voice, in particular, evoke place in visceral and profound ways. Human voices call forth memory, time, and context; they provide interpretive dimensions.[11] In Cleveland Historical, for example, we listen to a story about the Hough neighborhood (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/7) in which Larry Rivers asks of the 1967 Hough Riots: "Was it good?" In a video featuring Rivers (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eGgmKd9bSg), we hear Rivers's ambivalence in the tone of his voice, followed by a pregnant pause, which offers an interpretive perspective that would not have been possible without oral history. Of course, such voices and community soundways have long been fundamental precepts at the core of oral history as a historical endeavor. Oral historians have argued that the voices we capture as part of our scholarship and public projects should be a vital element of our interpretive work. In particular, oral historians working in media contexts, along with radio producers using voices to evoke emotional response to audio storytelling, have led the way in exploring the capacity of sound to evoke place, offering a model for public historians to emulate. Yet prior to the emergence of the digital age late in the 1990s, film, radio, or recording programs would have been among the only ways to bring voices to mass audiences beyond one-off

[9] Quoted in the Digital Humanities Manifesto.

[10] On orality, see, for example, Alessandro Portelli, "On the Peculiarities of Oral History," History Workshop Journal, 1981, no. 12, 96–107.

[11] On the import of authoring "in sound," see, for example, Charles Hardy, III, "Authoring in Sound: Aural History, Radio and the Digital Revolution," in The Oral History Reader, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006, second edition), 392–405.

public programs, printed books, or interview transcripts (the latter often buried deep within print archives). Thus, the digital age has changed the field in dramatic ways, in particular by extending the possibilities for using voices both in research and public interpretive projects.[12]

By embedding the work of oral history into the tools and techniques of digital history, Cleveland Historical seeks to bring oral histories and human voices to the fore in efforts to make place. We listen as two former campers from the 1950s, Brenda Mathews and Leslie Witbeck, sing the Camp Mueller song in a video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBmsjl3Nx2M&feature=g-user-a&list=PL41140D89A4A99B99), remembering their experience at one of the nation's first summer camps for urban African American children. Their voices carry the joy of first-time campers, offering an acute history lesson about hope and possibility and providing an interpretive frame for a story about the work of the pioneering Phillis Wheatley Association (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/19). Likewise, we hear Henry Loconti's recollections of an Iggy Pop show at the Agora (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/1), set against the context of the musician's music, and we understand something about the experience of club-goers in the 1970s. Indeed, music itself often provides an aural backdrop that provides the most acute interpretive frame for a story. For example, exploring the music of Dvorak's New World Symphony, as played and explicated in the story about Cleveland Cultural Gardens' Czech Garden (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/107), reveals the Czech nationalist ambitions that were embedded in the Gardens, as well as the music and artistry of Dvorak.[13] Thus, sound brings the physical landscape into sharper relief, building a richer sensory and material context for understanding place.

Listening to human voices on a mobile device allows users to experience memory within the landscapes where the stories were lived.[14] For example, listening to Rick Calabrese recount the story of his family's produce stand in the West Side Market (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/67), while standing in that context, underscores and evokes the sensory and experiential context of the market, which remains a vibrant commercial center for individual and commercial consumers in the region. When experienced in situ, these stories enhance our sensory experience of the market: its red brick architecture, claustrophobic stalls, the wafting aroma of kielbasa. If history can be seen and smelled in the market's close confines, listening to the stories of Rick Calabrese, Marilyn Anthony, or other market vendors and customers renders that history

[12] For a recent essay on this subject, see Sioban McHugh, "The Affective Power of Sound: Oral History on Radio," Oral History Review, 39, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2012): 187–206.

[13] On the narrative of the Czech Garden, see Mark Tebeau, "Sculpted Landscapes: Art & Place in Cleveland's Cultural Gardens, 1916–2006," Journal of Social History, 44, no. 2 (2010): 327–50.

[14] For the theory of "locative media," see Jason Farman, Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media, 1st edition (Routledge, 2011).

more legible. It reconnects people to the market's changing fortunes over the course of the twentieth century, dating to when the market was originally built for a city teeming with European migrants. Listening to such stories might even encourage people to reminisce about their own family's stories of the market or of their family's food traditions more broadly.

If geolocating oral history offers a new dimension to oral history narratives, it is not entirely clear where a story should be geolocated or whether geolocation even provides the best way to contextualize historical stories. In fact, advocates for geospatial technologies sometimes overstate the salience of maps as vehicles for interpretation. At times, it is not entirely clear that the map provides the richest context from which to understand a story. Some stories, such as the burning of the Cuyahoga River (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/63), transcend any single location. Moreover, placing the story at an abandoned railroad bridge along the Cuyahoga River (as we now do) may be physically accurate but remote from a location where its interpretive connections are richer. How and where should deconstructed buildings be interpreted? Where they were located or perhaps in locations more clearly related to broader redevelopment strategies? Should we "pin" the story of Rockefeller (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/328) and the origins of Standard Oil to a brownfield along the Cuyahoga River or connect it to the rise of the city's economic fortunes through geolocating that narrative downtown (which is what we do now)? Our experience with Cleveland Historical suggests that taking location too literally can make a story less accessible intellectually than layering such stories within broader historical contexts where their meaning is clearer and more accessible.

Moving oral history into the public context of the streets demands that we accelerate our reconceptualization of oral history and digital humanities as a more community-oriented endeavor. Just as the mobile revolution has fractured further the power relationships that have long guarded information, so too the Cleveland Historical Project team felt the need to build the project collaboratively. Inspired by the promise of social history and the radical ways that oral history can restructure power relations, we moved toward curating the city in collaboration with the community, rather than curating it for the city's many constituencies. Inspired by crowdsourcing but mindful of its many limitations, we developed a collaborative method that might be called "community sourcing."[15] We train the community in documentary techniques, including oral history collection, and we support them with a team of student and volunteer

[15] Crowdsourcing as a term is widely used, with Wikipedia being the most noted example; for an overview of the concept, see Enrique Estelles-Arola and Fernando Gonzalez-Ladron-de-Guevara, "Toward an Integrated Crowdsourcing Definition," Journal of Information Science, 2012, 1–14; James Surowiecki, The Wisdom of Crowds, Reprint (Anchor, 2005).

facilitators and interpretive storytelling workshops. Not only has this built sustainable projects through enhancing collaborators' command of the oral history craft, it also has allowed our research team to collect a large number of oral histories on a wide variety of subjects. Then, those same collaborative teams log interviews, index them, and select audio segments as building blocks for interpretive stories about the city and its communities. Finally, we often publish the stories developed by partners, usually on Cleveland Historical, and also encourage them to extend and build their own audiences. We have also extended our community to include teachers, through professional development workshops. Many of the K–12 teachers who have participated have taken their oral history and digital skills into the classroom. Some teachers use the mobile application in teaching and learning history, asking students to explore their region and its various stories through Cleveland Historical; others are working with students to build stories for the app, such as the work of St. Ignatius High School students on the brewing industry (http://www.clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/311) in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood. This mode of collaborative work has fueled the expansion of the Cleveland Regional Oral History collection and provided content for Cleveland Historical.[16]

Collaboration is but one aspect of the digital revolution that has forced scholars to reimagine their relation to public audiences and the curatorial process itself. First, as argued above, the openness of the digital revolution has made knowledge production more democratic, challenging traditional power relations between scholars and their audiences. Such an increase in "shared authority" captures the spirit of the oral history method but challenges disciplinary foundations, as publics have greater access to digital tools for capturing and publishing oral history.[17] Inspired by this challenge, our research team has invited multiple and diverse constituencies to become involved in documenting their lives and communities. This has generated wide-ranging stories related to neighborhood-based communities, cultural institutions, and municipalities. Other groups, associated with a broad swath of Cleveland's diverse population, have also participated: African Americans, Native Americans, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals, various immigrants, former Japanese internees, women, working-class, and various professional groups. It is perhaps not surprising that this range of stories is not always represented proportionally on Cleveland Historical. The different capacities of partners to execute oral history and digital storytelling projects, as well as matters related to funding and

[16] See, for example, "St. Ignatius High School," http://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/157 (accessed January 1, 2013); Sara Ziemnik, (TriSarahTops2198), Twitter post, "@urbanhumanist Just had a great lesson Cleveland in the Gilded Age using #CLEHistorical in my APUSH class!"

[17] Michael Frisch, A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

organizational priorities, have shaped various partners' and potential partners' participation in the project.[18] Such challenges, however, are surely endemic to the digital age, as reflected in the persistence of a "digital divide," in which poor, working-class, and minority communities lack full access to the digital era. Indeed, if it is not clear on its face that community-based knowledge production automatically produces greater societal equity, we have engineered Cleveland Historical in a manner that addresses such challenges through an active curatorial process.[19]

Collecting information is not enough, however. Digital curation is, and should be, more than merely aggregating content or crowdsourcing the production of knowledge, both of which have been fetishized by the technologists promoting the digital age.[20] In a world where the volume of information being produced is extraordinary, we must find new ways to make sense of that data, especially because this era of "big data" has not necessarily improved our ability to analyze and interpret information, although it holds many promises.[21] With this in mind, the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities has moved toward an activist model of curation in which team members develop interpretive stories that introduce historical and cultural contexts that challenge audiences to understand history in a new fashion—a practice in line with the process of historical research and thinking.[22] Moreover, we have engineered Cleveland

[18] For example, through several separate and ongoing funded oral history initiatives, including the Re-Imagining Cleveland and the Phillis Wheatley Projects, the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities has collected stories about the African American experience. This has resulted in multiple narratives related to the African American experience, approximately eighty stories at this writing (just less than 20 percent of the total).

[19] On the digital divide, see, for example, Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith, "Digital Differences," Pew Internet & American Life, April 13, 2012, http://pewinternet.org/topics/Digital-Divide.aspx?typeFilter=5.

[20] See, for example, the writing of Clay Shirky: Clay Shirky, "How Can Social Media Make History," May 16, 2012, http://www.npr.org/2012/05/18/152868437/how-can-social-media-make-history; Clay Shirky, Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations, Reprint (Penguin Books, 2009); Clay Shirky, Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaborators, Reprint (Penguin Books, 2011). Curation has taken on many meanings in the digital humanities, see, for example, Digital Curation Guide: A Community Resource Guide to Data Curation in the Digital Humanities http://guide.dhcuration.org/contents/ (accessed December 7, 2012). The Oral History in the Digital Age project divided its work into three categories, including both "collecting" and "curation," which overlap in striking ways; see Oral History in the Digital Age, ed. Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012), http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/essays/.

[21] For a generalist's overview of big data, see "Data, Data Everywhere," The Economist (February 25, 2010), http://www.economist.com/node/15557443; "Big Data's Mass Appeal: A Special Report," The Chronicle of Higher Education (May 28, 2010) http://chronicle.com/section/Big-Data/446/; "Big Data," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_data (accessed December 14, 2012); Christa Williford and Charles Henry, One Culture: Computationally Intensive Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Council on Library and Information Resources, June 2012). For the argument that the volume of information has not enhanced interpretive practice in the sciences, see Dominique Brossard and Dietram A. Scheufele, "Science, New Media, and the Public," Science, 339, no. 40 (2013), 40–41.

[22] See, for instance, Sam Wineburg, Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

Historical to be dynamic and iterative, allowing us to alter stories rapidly so as to accommodate new sources, perspectives, and research. For example, systematically identifying shortcomings in the content—such as a dearth of suburban oral histories—has allowed the team to build a dynamic project whose strength lies not in its encyclopedic coverage but in a dynamic and iterative developmental process that represents new approaches to scholarship, as well as new interpretive possibilities in the digital age. Additionally, using open-source archival content management systems that are easily programmed and re-imagined allows Cleveland Historical to be transformed to meet emergent project obstacles.[23]

Ironically, digital tools have presented us with new dilemmas precisely by presenting new possibilities, such as allowing us to more easily edit oral histories. As a result, we are brought closer to the human voice than ever before, no longer experiencing oral history as mediated by the transcript or interpretation. Thus, we now face more directly that tension between the "raw and the cooked" oral history interview. In some ways, the gap between interpretive oral history segments—whether audio clips or transcripts—and raw interviews have never been more profound because the digital context potentially allows us to have them both.[24] And the original interview matters! Indeed, decoupling an audio clip of an oral history from its broader interview context may diminish the interpretive richness of the interview. This problem is illustrated in the story of the Agora Theater and Henry Loconti, a unique local and national music venue and its founder. In multiple oral histories, Henry Loconti (http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/crohc000/54/) places the development of the Agora within the broader context of the development of the music business, including its origins in the "game" and jukebox business of the 1950s. If this context provides the best way to understand the development of the Agora, it is nonetheless told in a fashion that is difficult to bring directly into the exhibit context of Cleveland Historical because of its length and need for explication. As of this writing, our team has not chosen to layer this narrative into Cleveland Historical for several reasons, including the lack of availability of correlative source materials and our choice to emphasize other aspects of the Agora's stories (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OblbMR2_tCw). However, our decision also was shaped by the format of the digital exhibit (and mobile) context of Cleveland Historical, which makes lengthy interview clips unwieldy. Of course, such tensions are not new to

[23] Improvisation has emerged as a digital humanities theme; see Mark Tebeau, "Digital Humanities as Jazz," http://urbanhumanist.org/digital-humanities-as-jazz/ (accessed March 18, 2011). Cleveland Historical uses Omeka content management software; see Tom Scheinfeldt, "Omeka and its Peers," September 1, 2010 http://www.foundhistory.org/2010/09/01/omeka-and-its-peers/; http://omeka.org/ (accessed December 8, 2012).

[24] See Michael Frisch and Doug Lambert, "Case Study: Between the Raw and the Cooked: Notes from the Kitchen," in Oxford Handbook of Oral History, ed. Donald Ritchie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 333–48.

oral history practice, but they have been accentuated by the easy accessibility promised by the digital age.[25]

Mindful of the importance of oral history contexts in conveying meaning, the project team has adapted the indexing approach used by Michael Frisch to build richly descriptive, minute-by-minute interview logs that build connections between interviews, both within a group of interviews and across the entire collection.[26] Connecting the interviews in this fashion enhances the curatorial process. It allows a broad community of interpreters ready access to segments of a wide array of interviews and, at the same time, allows our community of curators to create layers of meaning across interview collections. Such layering helps to accentuate oral history as a backbone to our interpretive approach, even as it informs the interpretive process. Additionally, as the complete oral histories have been archived, these minute-by-minute ledgers have been made available, giving public audiences a way of recontextualizing the interview clips that they've heard. Returning to the example of Henry Loconti and the Agora, interview logs have provided a way of connecting the development of the night-club to its broader narrative context within the Loconti interviews. The next challenge will be to connect the original interview segments to the presentation on the mobile app and website in a manner that is well designed, both from a technological and user-experience perspective.[27]

Ultimately, Cleveland Historical provides a window for oral and public historians into the possibilities presented by the digital era and the emerging mobile age. Through innovative deployment of mobile technologies, combined with best oral history practices, the project has worked to make the city the context for storytelling and oral history. In so doing, Cleveland Historical has experimented with a new way of building oral history projects—namely, community sourcing—and presenting that work to broad publics. Likewise, we have connected oral history to landscape in ways that enhance our understandings of place and the oral history segments themselves. No longer disembodied from its geographical and historical contexts, oral history grows more vital and explanatory. Cleveland Historical argues strongly for projects (and especially mobile interpretive projects) that emphasize aurality, thus making human voices vital

[25] Presently, a variety of researchers are exploring ways to annotate audio segments, making the pieces and parts of oral history and/or video more easily accessible. These include Annotator's Workbench, http://www.eviada.org/element.cfm?mc=6&ctID=31&eID=1 (accessed December 21, 2012); OHMS from the University of Kentucky, http://nunncenter.org/ohms-enhancing-oral-history-online/ (accessed June 15, 2012); and PopcornJS, http://popcornjs.org/ (accessed December 21, 2012).

[26] See, for example, the project documentation for our work on the Cleveland Cultural Gardens; Erin Bell, Michael Frisch, Douglas Lambert, and Mark Tebeau, Cleveland Cultural Gardens Oral History (Buffalo, New York, Randforce Associates, November 2006).

[27] See especially PopcornJS, which provides a useful model for connecting oral history segments to large oral history interviews.

to the digital humanities endeavor. Likewise, at the intersection of oral history and digital humanities practice, we propose a model of curation that develops interpretive meaning through a dynamic, layered, and contextual storytelling endeavor. This dynamic curatorial process transforms the city into a living museum through which we can collaboratively remake our understandings of place and community identity.

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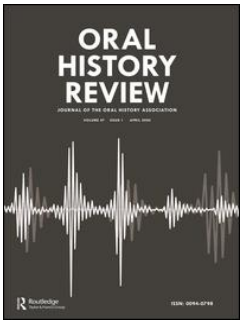

The Oral History Review

ISSN: 0094-0798 (Print) 1533-8592 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uohr20

Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age

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To cite this article: Alexander Freund (2015) Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age, The Oral History Review, 42:1, 96-132

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohv002

Published online: 17 Nov 2019.

Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age

Alexander Freund

Abstract: Storytelling—in the form of public talk about oneself—has become a new social phenomenon over the past quarter century. The case of StoryCorps illuminates how autobiographical (often confessional) storytelling in public comes out of the simultaneous democratization and neoliberalization of Western society since the 1970s. The storytelling phenomenon, which frequently aligns itself with (or appropriates) oral history, reinforces neoliberal values of competitive individualism and thus depoliticizes public discourse. Oral historians, rather than embracing storytelling, need to investigate it as a historically situated social phenomenon that often undercuts the epistemological, methodological, ethical, and political aims of oral history.

Keywords: Oral history theory, storytelling, StoryCorps, neoliberalism, individualism, therapy culture

The Storytelling Phenomenon

Every Friday morning, millions of Americans tune in to National Public Radio (NPR) on their way to work and their hearts swell when they hear the NPR host announce: "Time now for StoryCorps. Across the country, people come to StoryCorps to record interviews with friends and loved ones." They become misty-eyed or may even have to pull over to have a good cry as they savor yet another American's story of hardship and eventual triumph. One morning, ten-year-old Ida Cortez from San Francisco tells her mother how she came to love reading despite her dyslexia; another morning, three blind brothers tell of a blind savior who gave them what their mother failed to provide. Since 2003, StoryCorps and NPR have produced and broadcast over 500 of these

I thank OHR editor Kathryn L. Nasstrom for her early encouragement and insightful comments as well as OHR editor Stephanie Gilmore and editor Elinor Mazé for their fine editorial work.

doi:10.1093/ohr/ohv002. Advance Access publication 11 March 2015
The Oral History Review 2015, Vol 42, No. 1, pp. 96–132

three-minute stories.[1] They are part of a new phenomenon in the West: the storytelling phenomenon. This article explores the storytelling phenomenon and its implications for oral historians.

Storytelling has become a buzzword in Western societies, especially in North America. In this article, I focus on public autobiographical storytelling—talking about one's life in public. Public, autobiographical storytelling—storytelling for short—is a new social phenomenon that has emerged over the past quarter century. This new phenomenon is made up of individual practices of making part of one's life public in the form of a story, often in a confessional mode; an enabling industry, including academia as well as for-profit and nonprofit organizations; and a broader culture and *mentalité* that motivate the individual practices, the industry, and a general public to produce, disseminate, sell, buy, and consume confessional stories. The storytelling phenomenon is grounded in Western societies' processes of, on the one hand, democratization and greater social and legal equality and, on the other hand, greater economic inequality, the demise of the welfare state, and the emergence of a crass hyperindividualism in the wake of neoliberalism. Furthermore, storytelling is shaped by Western societies' discourses of emotion, therapy, survival, and trauma that emerged in the 1970s, and it has roots in a centuries-long history of confessional and psychologizing interviewing practices that inform self-monitoring and self-reporting.

I argue that this kind of autobiographical, public storytelling is a technology of the self. As such, it is a powerful means of forming individual and collective identities through unifying narratives. With its focus on the individual, the new kind of storytelling tends to atomize society, proposing the narrator as a protagonist who overcomes seemingly personal challenges in a world of inexplicable circumstances such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression. It is motivated by liberal beliefs in individual autonomy, freedom, and rights. Inadvertently, however, it supports neoliberal values of consumerism, competition, and free market solutions to all economic, social, and cultural problems. The storytelling industry thrives on sympathy but fails to create empathy or understanding. The rise of storytelling has led to a depoliticization of narrative and public discourse—replacing politics with nostalgia, hero-worship, nationalism, myth-making, and self-help mantras such as the belief in positive thinking, self-sufficiency, and self-empowerment.

Let me be clear that I am not talking about all storytelling practices here. Storytelling has always been with us; it is "one of our basic social acts."[2]

[1] All stories are available on the two organizations' websites: http://storycorps.org/listen/ and http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps.

[2] On the fundamental role of storytelling in society, see Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013); Bruce Jackson, *The Story Is True: The*

Rather, I am talking about a new discourse about storytelling that has emerged in the West over the past quarter century. A simple Google search for "storytelling" makes clear that storytelling is now talked about in every sector of society, and it is discussed in the same way, whether in medicine and health care, business and marketing, or pedagogy and therapy: telling a story, especially about yourself and particularly if it reveals intimate details of your life, is always positive and usually offers a solution to otherwise intractable problems. This one-sidedly positive view is often either naïve or calculating (towards exploiting others' naivety about the "magic" of storytelling).

Rather than embracing this new discourse of storytelling, oral historians need to investigate it as a historically situated social phenomenon. We need to ask: Why and how did this kind of storytelling emerge as a new social movement and industry in the late twentieth century? How has it come to assume cultural, social, and economic power over the past quarter century? What are its social, political, cultural, economic, and mental effects on society? Finally: What are the methodological, interpretive, ethical, and political implications for the practice of oral history? Studying storytelling as a social phenomenon is part of a larger task oral historians need to attend to, namely that of positioning oral history in a *longue durée* history of interviewing that attends to both specific technologies and larger social, economic, and cultural forces.[3] In this article, I continue this task of historicizing oral history by focusing on the most recent time period.

In the following, I outline the phenomenal growth of commercial and non-commercial storytelling over the past few decades. I take the development of StoryCorps, and the public's as well as oral historians' response to its products, as a case study. I contextualize the storytelling phenomenon by linking it to the economic and social changes in the United States since the 1970s, in particular the increasing gap between political equality and economic inequality. I pay particular attention to attendant sociocultural developments such as the rise of therapeutic culture, a societal obsession with emotion, survival, trauma, and remembrance, and the rise of positive thinking and the self-help movement. I conclude by exploring what is at stake in this discussion of storytelling and oral history and suggest some questions for future investigation, an investigation that oral historians as students of narrative, interactive communication, history, and politics are particularly well equipped to undertake.

The new storytelling phenomenon that I describe in the following is most evident in the United States, but also in other Western societies such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. An exhaustive description of the storytelling

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Art and Meaning of Telling Stories (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007). Quote in: Jackson, *The Story is True*, x.

[3] Alexander Freund, "'Confessing Animals': Toward a *Longue Durée* History of the Oral History Interview," *Oral History Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2014): 1–26.

phenomenon is beyond the limits of this article, and, more importantly, beyond the limits of our current knowledge. As much as I can tell, the social sciences and humanities have not yet identified the recent storytelling craze as a phenomenon in need of greater scrutiny. Lacking any substantive research, at this point, we can only describe some of its most visible features.

An Internet search for "storytelling" reveals the scope and diversity of "storytelling." Wikipedia describes storytelling in the broadest terms as "the conveying of events in words, and images, often by improvisation or embellishment. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation, and instilling moral values." The Wikipedia authors also tell us that "storytelling predates writing" and that "contemporary storytelling" has moved beyond oral tradition and traditional genres such as fairy tales to include "history, personal narrative, political commentary, and evolving cultural norms." It is used for education, therapy, games, interactive fiction, and documentaries.[4] In this definition, the stories that are told can be about anything, take any form, and be used for everything. Clearly, then, storytelling permeates our everyday lives. This is also American literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall's argument; he calls humans "the storytelling animal."[5]

A Google search leads to tens of millions of hits for "storytelling"; they reinforce the Wikipedia claim that telling stories has become an accepted and popular method in therapy, education, knowledge management, business communication and strategy, conflict resolution, advertising, music, and film, at times referencing, even if implicitly, ancient and traditional indigenous storytelling in Africa and the Americas. More than anything, storytelling has become a new managerial tool. Storytelling, we learn from Wikipedia, is now widely used in business as "a more compelling and effective route of delivering information than that of using only dry facts." Storytelling is used to resolve workplace conflicts, build team spirit, craft business strategies, and advertise goods and services. "Organizational storytelling" is considered a "key leadership competency for the 21st century."[6] Indeed, the book market is awash with titles that promise storytelling as a powerful strategy for managing corporate reorganization, layoffs, and "diversity." Managers learn that "facts tell, stories sell" and that *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*.[7]

[4] "Storytelling," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 3, 2014.

[5] Gottschall, *Storytelling Animal*. Gottschall argues for a broad definition of story, from dreams and advertisements to songs and televised sports; see 1–20.

[6] "Organizational Storytelling," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 3, 2014.

[7] J. S. Brown, S. Denning, K. Groh, and L. Prusak, *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling Is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management* (Boston: Butterworth Heinemann, 2004); Steve Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative* (San Francisco: Jossey–Bass, 2007); Terrence L. Gargiulo, *Stories at Work: Using Stories to Improve Communication and Build Relationships* (Westport, CT: Praeger and Signorelli, 2006) and *StoryBranding: Creating Standout Brands*

In *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, author Annette Simmons encourages her readers to use a personal story to gain people's trust. Other guide books encourage readers to use storytelling to (re)gain trust in themselves. Storytelling self-help guides are designed to help readers work through various personal problems or relationship issues with the help of autobiographical storytelling. These self-help guides are part of a much larger industry, the so-called self-help and actualization movement. It was identified by journalist Steve Salerno in 2005 as a multibillion dollar industry that in 2003 alone churned out 3,500 to 4,000 books and in 2005 grossed 8.56 billion dollars.[8] Storytelling is now marketed as a coaching strategy for improving personal relationships and life in general. From the classic confession—*Tell My Story* (Step 5 of Alcoholics Anonymous's 1939 Twelve-Step Program)—to the newest "storytelling solution to low self-esteem," a large audience is told that to "change your story [means to] change your life" and that storytelling is a "way of healing" and "experiencing spirituality."[9] Together, these books, DVDs, workshops, seminars, retreats, and personal coaching sessions demonstrate a growing popular belief in the "power of story" to transform oneself and influence others. They are part of the self-help industry's mantra of empowerment through self-help and positive thinking.[10]

The confessional approach to storytelling is modeled and replicated in popular news media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television, online platforms, and fundraising campaigns. Almost all reporting on the

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Through the Power of Story (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Books 2011); Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) and, with a new subtitle, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling* 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Annette Simmons, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact* (New York: Amacom, 2007); Doug Lipman, *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play* (Atlanta, GA: August House, 1999); Ty Bennett, "Facts Tell - Stories Sell," 4 DVD Set (http://tybennett.com/product/facts-tell-stories-sell-4-dvd-set/); Ty Bennett and Don Yaeger, *The Power of Storytelling* ([Columbia MO?]: Sound Concepts, 2013); Mazzocchi, Rudy A., *Storytelling: The Indispensable Art of Entrepreneurism* (Kingsport, TN: Paladin Timeless Books, 2013); Philip N. Meyer, *Storytelling for Lawyers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[8] Steve Salerno, *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

[9] *Step 5 AA Telling My Story: Hazelden Classic Step Pamphlets* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010); Anna R. Van Heerden Johnson, *The Storytelling Solution to Low Self-esteem* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2014); Stephanie S. Tolan, *Change Your Story, Change Your Life* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011); Jim Loehr, *The Power of Story: Change Your Story, Change Your Destiny in Business and in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008); Louise Desalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999); Allison M. Cox and David H. Alberts, eds., *The Healing Heart Families: Storytelling to Encourage Caring and Healthy Families* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003); James H. O'Keefe and Joan O'Keefe, *Let Me Tell You a Story: Inspirational Stories for Health, Happiness, and a Sexy Waist* (Riverside, NJ: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2013); Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning Through Storytelling* (New York: Tarcher, 2014).

[10] Salerno, *SHAM*, 32–34; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America* (New York: Macmillan, 2009).

entertainment industry, a large portion of professional sports reporting, as well as reporting about politicians, is based on the exposure of private lives and the quest for scandalous confessions.[11] We only need to think of the many public confessions on Oprah Winfrey's couch—"a site that blends therapy with commerce in the production of 'talk'"—to see the prevalence and power of this new storytelling phenomenon.[12] This kind of storytelling is at times sold under the guise of oral history—whether in *Vanity Fair*, *Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, *Buzz Feed*, *The Wire*, or any number of media, a pastiche of interview excerpts about a theater, a television show, a rock band, or a musical event is now regularly called oral history. This is grating to oral historians, but more importantly, a growing part of the population has been learning to think and talk about themselves in the same ways in which stars make public the most intimate details of their lives.

Outside of the commercial marketplace, the storytelling movement is most manifest in the not-for-profit and academic sectors, where many storytelling practitioners would see themselves in opposition to the self-help movement or other business-oriented applications of storytelling. In the nonprofit sector, storytelling websites, storytelling projects, storytelling circuits, and storytelling festivals cover a wide range of practices and genres, from fairy tales to autobiographical accounts. Storytellers include both professionals and amateurs, career and one-time storytellers. The Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, founded by theater producer Joe Lambert and others, offers "custom project services" to help people use "storytelling for professional development, as a reflective practice, as a pedagogical strategy, or as a vehicle for education, community mobilization, or advocacy."[13] On its website, the center claims that it "has worked with nearly a thousand organizations around the world and trained more than fifteen thousand people in hundreds of workshops to share stories from their lives."[14] Many other nonprofit organizations as well as commercial companies offer similar services. Other individuals and groups have established projects to record stories and present edited versions online. These include "Interview Project," the Kitchen Sisters, and the Moth.[15] Storytelling festivals,

[11] For more examples, see Alexander Freund and Erin Jesse, "'Confessing Animals,' Redux: A Conversation between Alexander Freund and Erin Jessee," edited by Troy Reeves and Caitlin Tyler-Richards, *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 314–324, 317. See also the "Feel No Shame" fundraising campaign by the Sentebale charity, which includes supposed confessions of secrets by celebrities such as Prince Harry, cofounder of Sentebale: http://sentebale.org, accessed December 3, 2014.

[12] Leigh Gilmore, "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch," *Biography* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 657–689; quote 662.

[13] Center for Digital Storytelling, "About us," http://storycenter.org/about-us/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[14] Center for Digital Storytelling, "How it all began," http://storycenter.org/history/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[15] DavidLynch.Com, "Interview Project," http://interviewproject.davidlynch.com/www; Brooke Bryan, "Interview Project," *Oral History Review* 37, no. 1 (2010): 71–77; The Kitchen Sisters, "About," http://www.kitchensisters.org/about, accessed March 3, 2014.; *The Moth: True Stories Told Live*, http://themoth.org, accessed March 3, 2014.

dating back to the early 1970s, often bring together tellers of fairy tales and other traditional stories. The global celebration of stories and storytelling has spawned a World Storytelling Day that is celebrated with festivals and events around the world. In many of these venues and in the diverse practices discussed, autobiographical storytelling is mixed up, intertwined, and conflated with other genres. Again, the point here is not that I wish to subsume all of these diverse practices under the label "storytelling." Rather, the point I am making here is the opposite: that an increasing number of practitioners—including oral historians—call their work storytelling, and they sometimes do so without sufficiently reflecting on the broader implications of this shift in terminology. While traditional storytellers, including oral historians, have been around much longer, the popular exposure and impact of more recent storytelling games, apps, commercial products, and Internet-based projects is much greater.

In academia, storytelling seems to have emerged initially in education as a pedagogical tool. A search on WorldCat for books, articles, and other media with the title "Storytelling" provided nearly 16,000 hits (almost all of them nonfictional and nonjuvenile literature). Hovering below ten hits per year until 1959, publications slowly took off in the late 1960s, reaching one hundred in 1979, increasing faster after the mid-1980s, and again after 1990 (245 titles), after 2000 (524 titles) and after 2010 (1,056 titles). The largest topics were "language, linguistics and literature" (1,012 titles), education (873), and anthropology (373). There were more storytelling publications on "Business and Economics" (218) than on the traditionally narrative topic of "history and auxiliary sciences" (188). Much of this academic interest in storytelling can be explained by the linguistic turn of the 1960s and the subsequent narrative turn of the 1980s. There are now narrative subfields in almost all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.[16] In history, in addition to oral history, there has been a return to narrative. Philosophy has discovered narrative as a field of research. Next to cognitive psychology, clinical psychology has focused attention on narrative therapy.[17] Anthropology, ethnography, folklore studies, literature, and linguistics have of course a much longer interest in storytelling. Storytelling is also a major focus in newly emerging disciplines such as cultural studies, film and media studies, and digital humanities.

Overall, there is now a huge marketplace, both online and offline, in the for-profit, nonprofit, and academic sectors, for the production, dissemination, and consumption of stories and storytelling that is distinctive and different from

[16] David Herman, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–21.

[17] Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

the previous history of storytelling. As one of storytelling's major advocates, Barbara Ganley, wrote in 2012: "Indeed, we're awash in such stories." There is a flood of all kinds of stories produced and disseminated by museums, libraries, radio, television, Internet forums, "and oral history centers across the planet." [18] The difference from earlier periods is that everyone now wants to "do" storytelling and that storytelling has assumed a nearly magical halo of providing effective, powerful solutions to all kinds of individual, social, and economic problems. Ganley lays out the power of storytelling in transforming the world: "Medical, business, and law schools are paying attention to the power of stories in healing, and in developing ethical, effective business leaders. Citizen journalism, as seen in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, is grounding the big moment in the mural of individual experience. We're telling it as it is. As we experience it. We're forming communities around our stories."[19] These are grand, ambitious claims that motivate oral historians, confirming their belief that with storytelling, they are on the right track. Motivational as this story of storytelling may be, oral historians should be alarmed—or at the very least, sceptical.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the private telling and public distribution of autobiographical (often confessional) stories is being generated, motivated, embedded, produced, and consumed in a broader socioeconomic and cultural context. There is now a multinational, social and cultural movement carried by a wide range of individuals as well as academic, nonprofit, and nongovernment organizations that believe in or at least pronounce storytelling as a powerful means for changing individuals and society. Storytelling is also an international, multibillion-dollar industry that spans government and nongovernment agencies, the private economy, and all levels of education; it is deeply entwined with a multibillion-dollar digital economy that seeks profits from selling products that seemingly enable and improve people's ability to produce, disseminate, preserve, and consume stories. Indeed, storytelling is a new mass creed that makes people believe in storytelling as a panacea for all the ills of the world and their own lives.

Before moving on to explore where our tiny band of oral historians fits into this multibillion dollar, multinational, transcultural phenomenon, let us look at one storytelling organization that has captured the attention of oral historians, not least because it claims to create no less than "An Oral History of America:"[20] StoryCorps.

[18] Barbara Ganley, "Foreword," in Joe Lambert, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), ix-xi; here x.

[19] Ganley, "Foreword," x.

[20] "StoryCorps, An Oral History of America: Sound Booths Will Record Ordinary People's Life Stories," National Public Radio, October 23, 2003, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1475619, accessed March 3, 2014.

Telling America's ~~Stories~~ Story: StoryCorps's "Oral History of America"

When it comes to storytelling, digital humanities, and oral history, StoryCorps is the story of the early twenty-first century. StoryCorps, as it is described at the beginning of many of the three-minute story segments regularly broadcast on National Public Radio, is "the project recording conversations between loved ones."[21] On its website, NPR describes the project goal as "sharing and preserving the stories of our lives."[22] StoryCorps itself claims that it "is one of the largest oral history projects of its kind, and millions listen to our weekly broadcasts on NPR's Morning Edition and on our Listen pages."[23] StoryCorps wants to give every American "the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives."[24] Wherever the project sets up recording facilities, people are allowed to record one forty-minute session; they are encouraged to donate $25; and they receive a CD copy of their conversation. Since 2003, StoryCorps has collected 50,000 interviews with 100,000 participants. The recordings are archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The mission and scope are grand: "We do this to remind one another of our shared humanity, strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters. At the same time, we will create an invaluable archive of American voices and wisdom for future generations." Further: "In the coming years we will build StoryCorps into an enduring institution that will touch the lives of every American family."[25]

StoryCorps has been met with widespread support and enthusiasm in the United States and other Western countries. The organization has received the Peabody Award, and the three books of stories collected by StoryCorps founder David Isay are bestsellers.[26] Similar projects, although with a lower public profile, have been around the United States for a couple of decades. The Berkeley-based Center for Digital Storytelling claims on its website: "Through its wide-ranging work, the Center for Digital Storytelling has

[21] For an example, see/listen to National Public Radio, "The Lives of Blind Brothers Changed When 'Dad' Came Knocking," February 21, 2014, available at URL http://www.npr.org/2014/02/21/280277459/the-lives-of-blind-brothers-changed-when-dad-came-knocking, accessed March 3, 2014.

[22] National Public Radio, "StoryCorps: Sharing and Preserving the Stories of Our Lives," http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps, accessed March 3, 2014.

[23] StoryCorps, "About Us," http://storycorps.org/about/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[24] StoryCorps, "Frequently Asked Questions," http://storycorps.org/about/faqs/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[25] StoryCorps, "About Us."

[26] Isay also won the 2015 TED Prize: Noam Cohen, "David Isay Wins 2015 TED Prize for StoryCorps, an Oral History Project," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2014, online at http://nyti.ms/11cqenr, accessed November 17, 2014.

transformed the way that community activists, educators, health and human services agencies, business professionals, and artists think about the power of personal voice in creating change."[27] Community Expressions, LLC, founded in 2008 after the directors had taken workshops with Lambert, offers "workshops and consultation on storytelling, dialogue, facilitation, community mapping and social media" in order to "assist communities of all sorts work towards a healthy, sustainable future."[28]

Projects modelled on StoryCorps have been set up in other countries. In the United Kingdom, the BBC recently initiated the Listening Project, which archives all recordings in the British Library's oral history collection. Its goal: "Capturing the nation in conversation to build a unique picture of our lives today and preserve it for future generations."[29] In Australia, The Story Project, "an independent not-for-profit cultural organisation" modelled on StoryCorps, "brings people together to record and share the stories of their lives." Story snippets are disseminated via local radio stations and online. [30] In Canada, The Tale of a Town describes itself as "a national oral history and theatre initiative aiming to capture the collective community memory of our country's main streets, one story at a time."[31]

For almost every supporter of such storytelling projects, at the heart is the conviction that telling and listening to stories is positive, healing, and empowering, and can lead to personal transformation and even social change. In the words of Isay: "Listening is an act of love . . . If we spent a little less time listening to the racket of divisive radio and TV talk shows and a little more time listening to each other, we would be a better, more thoughtful, and more compassionate nation."[32] The Australian Story Project states: "We believe this simple act of sharing stories helps bring people together."[33] The Center for Digital Storytelling views storytelling as "a tool for change" and therefore has as its mission to "promote the value of story as a means for compassionate community action."[34] Community Expressions is "dedicated to helping rural

[27] Center for Digital Storytelling, "How it all began," http://storycenter.org/history/, accessed March 4, 2014.

[28] Ibid.

[29] BBC, "The Listening Project," http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/the-listening-project, accessed March 3, 2014.

[30] The Story Project, "About," http://www.thestoryproject.org.au/about/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[31] "What is the Tale of a Town—Canada," http://thetaleofatown.com/about-tale-of-a-town/, accessed November 28, 2014.

[32] David Isay, *Listening is An Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the Storycorps Project* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 269. See also Benjamin Filene, "Listening Intently: Can StoryCorps Teach Museums How to Win the Hearts of New Audiences?" in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, distributed by Left Coast Press, 2011), 181.

[33] The Story Project, "About," http://www.thestoryproject.org.au/about/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[34] Center for Digital Storytelling, "About us," http://storycenter.org/about-us, accessed March 3, 2014.

communities, nonprofits and individuals weave together the old and the new, the slow and the fast to create better worlds."[35] In the (nonsatirical) words of political satirist Stephen Colbert at StoryCorps's tenth anniversary gala in New York City on 30 October 2013: "There is really only one plot: the need to give and receive love. And that's what every human story is really about."[36]

Such sentiments are familiar to social historians who have been employing oral history to write a more inclusive history and to practitioners who have viewed oral history as a powerful tool for activism. Collecting the narratives of both victims and perpetrators, oppressed and oppressors, they have subjected their evidence to historical scrutiny rather than relying simply on the power of story. Thus, practices of storytelling and oral history differ widely, and so do the outcomes and the ways in which they are made public. As will become clear later on, social history and StoryCorps stand at opposite poles of the politics of history. While social historians have emphasized diversity and differences and asked for the economic, social, and cultural causes and effects of hierarchies and oppression, StoryCorps stands squarely in the camp of consensus history that is built on the themes of American exceptionalism, the idea of "one nation, one people," and "a nostalgia for a less complex past in which we were all one." As Roger D. Launius, senior curator at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, has shown, this consensus history is particularly popular among those of the political and social Right.[37]

Before moving on to examine oral historians' response to StoryCorps and the larger storytelling phenomenon, let me briefly describe a typical StoryCorps story and the typical online response by the listening public.[38] The story "The Lives of Blind Brothers Changed When 'Dad' Came Knocking" was broadcast on NPR on the morning of 21 February 2014 and disseminated via its Facebook blog.[39] In just under three minutes, Ollie Cantos and

[35] Community Expressions, "About community Expressions," http://community-expressions.com/about-3/about/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[36] StoryCorps, "StoryCorps 10th Anniversary Gala—The Recap!" November 1, 2013 http://storycorps.org/storycorps-10th-anniversary-gala-the-recap/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[37] Roger D. Launius, "Public History Wars, the 'One Nation/One People' Consensus, and the Continuing Search for a Usable Past," *OAH Magazine of History* 27, no. 1 (2013): 31–36, quotes 31 and 33. On the antidemocratic, antipartisan, proconsensus politics of neoliberals, see Amable, "Morals and Politics," 18–21.

[38] A caveat, though: The 40-minute StoryCorps conversations are archived and not yet accessible. The main way in which the listening US public hears StoryCorps stories is through National Public Radio. StoryCorps and NPR have professional editors who craft a three-minute story from the "best" of the recorded audio interviews.

[39] NPR, "The Lives Of Blind Brothers Changed When 'Dad' Came Knocking," February 21, 2014 http://www.npr.org/2014/02/21/280277459/the-lives-of-blind-brothers-changed-when-dad-came-knocking, accessed March 3, 2014; at the StoryCorps website, the story was filed under the title "I didn't know that there were other blind people except me and my brothers," http://storycorps.org/listen/ollie-cantos-and-leo-nick-and-steven-argel/, accessed March 3, 2014.

three fourteen-year-old triplets, all from Arlington, Virginia, tell their story of overcoming hardship. The three boys had been born blind and as children and teenagers struggled with systemic discrimination and poverty. According to the NPR narrator, "their single mother had a hard time caring for them." Leo, one of the brothers, recalled: "Every day was, like, wake up, go to school, come back home, and then you stay there for the rest of the day." Their mother did not let them go outside to play. The highlight of their childhood was a visit to McDonald's when they were seven years old. Nick, another brother, states that at one point it was so bad he wanted to commit suicide. "That all changed when they were ten," the NPR/StoryCorps announcer explains, when an older man from their community, Ollie, "got word of their situation and knocked on their door." He too had been born blind and struggled with hardship. Ollie slowly won the brothers' trust. They now call him Dad. According to StoryCorps, "He's now in the process of formally adopting the brothers."[40] As Ollie recounts the story of being called Dad for the first time, his voice breaks with emotion.

Listeners and readers could leave comments on the NPR website and on NPR's Facebook page. Within a few hours, there were 29 NPR website comments and 376 NPR Facebook comments and some 6,500 Facebook Likes. Within three days, there were 56 NPR website comments, and 1,675 Facebook comments and over 14,000 Facebook Likes. Almost all of them were supportive and positive, describing the story as "great," "heartwarming," "beautiful," "amazing," "moving," and "inspirational." Many commented that they became "misty-eyed" or were moved to tears. This uniform response seemed to suggest that the story demonstrated what could be called the "American spirit" or "humanity at its best." The public's response to this and many other StoryCorps/NPR stories was in fact reminiscent of the responses Michael Frisch had identified in reviews of Studs Terkel's 1970 book *Hard Times*.[41]

In one way this uniformity in responses is not surprising. I have analyzed dozens of NPR-StoryCorps stories and hundreds of comments left by listeners on the two organizations' websites. Most stories focus on overcoming hardship, which comes in many forms: a bout with cancer, the loss of a loved one, a disfiguring injury, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, mental or physical disabilities, learning disabilities, posttraumatic stress syndrome, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, bullying, prejudice, racism, a child's illness or death, parents' divorce, a shipwreck, even homosexuality and transgender identity. A good number of the hardships come as a result of the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past thirteen years, almost all focusing on U.S. military

[40] The transcript of the NPR story is at http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=280277459, accessed November 28, 2014.

[41] Michael Frisch, "Oral History and *Hard Times*, A Review Essay," *Red Buffalo: A Journal of American Studies* 1/2, no. 3 (1972): 217–231, repr. in *Oral History Review* 7, no.1 (1979): 70–79.

personnel wounded, maimed, or mentally scarred. There are also stories of inspiration and thanks, such as a neurosurgeon thanking his middle-school science teacher, a twenty-year-old man thanking his quirky grandmother, a homeless man thanking an undocumented immigrant woman for feeding him, two siblings being thankful for the birth of a baby that transformed their family. At times, there is a witnessing-history story: the widow and step-daughter of Spalding Gray recounting the day he disappeared; nurses who attended to Jackie Kennedy on the day of her husband's assassination; a rancher recounting his days as a Hollywood stunt double in numerous Westerns; or a young man remembering his participation in the 1963 March on Washington.[42]

Almost always NPR/StoryCorps stories tell a tale of survival, and almost always with the help of someone else. A homeless boy is taken in by his teacher; a woman's child is saved by her best friend; a family takes care of a son brain-damaged in the Iraq War; a father helps his son through "a rough period"; a single mom protects her son from the reality of poverty; a mom helps her daughter overcome dyslexia. Absent from these stories are state, social, and cultural institutions; the economic system; religion; and any social, economic, or cultural critique. This is to some degree the result of the StoryCorps aesthetic that tends to shear the stories of some of their more thorny complexities and that, by keeping all potentially controversial aspects out of the story, allows "us the listeners to project ourselves into the story: that could be me; people are people."[43] It is also, and more importantly, as I argue below, a result of recent social and cultural undercurrents that pressure all publicly told, autobiographical, confessional stories into the interpretive straightjacket of the neoliberal belief that people have their fates in their own hands.

This then is what StoryCorps and similar projects do: A mass production, dissemination, and consumption of stories of love, generosity, overcoming hardship, and survival. They are often touching and almost always appear to be apolitical. They are based on the explicit assumption that taking time to tell stories and to listen to stories heals individuals and society. They are based on the implicit assumption that hardship can affect every American equally, that hardship is a matter of fate and thus unpredictable, and that survival is up to the individual (and perhaps a helper or two). The underlying ideology of these stories is the neoliberal notion of a hyperindividualism that sees no role for the state or solidarity in the lives of individual Americans. If we fail, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Such stories preclude and reject any political analysis of inequality and injustice. Taken together, these survivor stories silence citizen

[42] One of the anonymous reviewers of this article suggested that as listeners became familiar with the genre of NPR/StoryCorps stories, they may have adapted their storytelling style so that their conversations would have become even more homogenous. This is an excellent point whose substantiation awaits detailed research on the archived stories.

[43] Filene, "Listening Intently," 188.

critique. This effect of storytelling is not simply the result of a StoryCorps or NPR aesthetic. More broadly, it is the effect of how storytelling happens in the modern West. Unless we critically investigate the underlying politics of storytelling and its effects on society and democracy, we will be swept up by its ideological undercurrents. We can investigate it most effectively by historically contextualizing it and drawing on our understanding of narrative and the dialogic constructions of history and memory in interviews.

As I have said elsewhere, the point of such an investigation is not to figure out whether StoryCorps and similar storytelling projects produce good or bad oral history, or even historical narratives of any fashion. I am not setting out to discredit StoryCorps or any other well-intentioned project. Rather, the point is to call on oral historians to use their tools and skills to critically examine and historically situate StoryCorps, digital storytelling, and other forms of what one might call the "fast food" production and consumption of stories.[44]

Do We Really Want to Get Back to the Campfire? Oral Historians' Confusion about StoryCorps

Oral historians, at least in North America, seem to have responded rather positively to StoryCorps and the broader storytelling hype. StoryCorps was first discussed in the *Oral History Review* in 2005 in a media review by Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner, who drew attention to the project's ambition: "One press release hopes for up to 250,000 interviews recorded over the next ten years."[45] A year later, Peter Lamothe and Andrew Horowitz wrote a review of StoryCorps for the exhibition reviews section of the *Journal of American History*. While both reviews had questions about some aspects of the projects, they were supportive of it.[46] At the same time, major anthologies included StoryCorps and similar projects as examples of Web-based audio sound productions and as models for public history.[47] Oral historians' positive response to StoryCorps was also evident when the Oral History Association invited Isay to give a keynote lecture at its 2008 annual meeting. He spoke on "Listening is an Act of Love," which is also the title of his 2007 book, subtitled *A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project*. The following year, four oral historians wrote an extensive

[44] Alexander Freund, "Letter to the Editor," *Oral History Association Newsletter* 43, no.1 (Spring 2009): 3, 6.

[45] Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner, "Storycorps," *Oral History Review* 32, no. 2 (2005): 103–4; quote 103.

[46] Peter Lamothe and Andrew Horowitz, "StoryCorps. Biltmore Room, Grand Central Terminal, 42d St. between Park and Lexington Avenues, New York, NY 10017," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (June 2006): 171–4; quote 171.

[47] Charles Hardy III and Pamela Dean, "Oral History in Sound and Moving Image Documentaries," in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2006), 553–4; Filene, "Listening Intently."

review of this book and the larger project. Again, while raising questions about it, they were fundamentally supportive of it.[48]

Although oral historians have embraced StoryCorps and similar ventures, they have also raised questions and concerns, mostly about whether StoryCorps actually does oral history and whether it is viable as a historical archive.[49] Nancy Abelmann, Susan Davis, Cara Finnegan and Peggy Miller cautiously suggested that StoryCorps's claims to do oral history may be a bit of a stretch; at least their "techniques," they wrote, "diverge from the current practice of oral history."[50] The authors argued that the stories were crafted as "poignant moments" that conformed to the "tastes of the project and its connection to NPR programs like All Things Considered."[51] The authors also questioned StoryCorps's claim to stand in the tradition of the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s. They suggested that StoryCorps produced "fragments of emotion from seemingly individuated lives," but not, like the FWP, historical documentation about specific social groups.[52] Indeed, they concluded, the narratives produced by StoryCorps were not oral history, but rather a process by which people use a specific formula to produce "an enduring nugget" of self-documentation within a larger "culture of self-documentation."[53] Many of the critics' concerns were also expressed in the discussion period following Isay's keynote address to the 2008 gathering of oral historians, some of whom "saw in the emotional power of StoryCorps programming evidence of a highly problematic, manipulative, even voyeuristic sensibility even further removed from oral history standards."[54]

All of these critiques were useful to establish that StoryCorps did not really do oral history. But the white elephant remained in the room: Why was StoryCorps so vastly more successful—in scope, funding, and public exposure—than any oral history project? One path to an answer can be found in oral historians' warm embrace—despite their reservations—of StoryCorps and the broader storytelling phenomenon. Even though they have pointed out the great diversity in storytelling and even pointed to the fundamental differences between storytelling à la StoryCorps/NPR and the stories produced in their own projects, oral historians have been quite eager to jump on the storytelling bandwagon, suggesting that it is not problematic at all to call all kinds of practices, including oral history, "storytelling" and thus erase, at least on the surface, all differences in epistemology, method, ethics, and politics. The shift is obvious in the program

[48] Nancy Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps, Anyway?" *Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 255–260.

[49] See Pozzi-Thanner, "Storycorps," 104; Lamothe and Horowitz, "StoryCorps," 173–4.

[50] Abelmann et al, "What Is StoryCorps," 256.

[51] Ibid., 257.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 260.

[54] Michael Frisch, "From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back," in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, distributed by Left Coast Press, 2011), 134–5.

titles of the Oral History Association's annual meetings, where over the past few years, "story" and "storytelling" have replaced "voice," "memory," and "oral history" as the main keywords.

Oral historians have embraced storytelling, and they have done so with great emotion. This emotion has been fuelled by nostalgic assumptions about a better past as well as a romanticization of storytelling as a panacea for our world's ills. Pozzi-Thanner underwrote the project's broader goal of helping us to listen to each other: "In our electronic times, how often do people still sit down together and deeply listen to each other's stories?" StoryCorps, she argued, "might encourage people to ask deeper questions about each other, to listen to each other more carefully, if only for that one hour."[55] Abelmann et al. agreed: "The stories are also about the need to slow down and pay attention. We concur with Isay that our fast-paced lives are driven by hypermediation and hypermobility and that we rarely make the time to honor the stories of those we love: to slow down, to talk, and most importantly, to listen."[56] The premise of this argument is that there once was a time when we sat down and listened to each other and that we now no longer do so.

This nostalgia is the mantra of much of the storytelling circuit. For Lambert, it is all about "find[ing] our way back to the campfire. Through digital storytelling, we all can become storytellers *again*."[57] Abelmann et al. see this as "perfect communication": "While everyday life offers only fragmentation, divisiveness, and distraction, StoryCorps creates a parallel universe that is quite the opposite: an intimate yet semipublic space in which to share ourselves. In the world of StoryCorps, the impossible dream of perfect communication may not be so impossible at all: all one needs is a partner, a silent, gently lit space, a microphone, and forty minutes."[58] This premise—that StoryCorps and other storytelling ventures offer us a long-lost path to a better world— is myth and make-belief, not history or politics. Implied in this premise is the assumption that if only we found our way back to the campfire, if only we took the time and started listening more deeply to each other's stories, if only we achieved the "dream of perfect communication," then everything will be better—individual lives and society at large. And all of this can be accomplished in forty minutes in a fake living room with a microphone. As I argue below, this myth is driven by neoliberal hyperindividualism and its attendant social discourses of survival, therapy, and trauma.

Online comments by NPR listeners show that this belief in the goodness of sharing stories has become deeply rooted in American culture and society. Oral

[55] Pozzi-Thanner, "Storycorps," 104.
[56] Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 258.
[57] Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*, 5 (emphasis added).
[58] Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 258.

historians, in their reviews of StoryCorps, are similarly affected. Lamothe and Horowitz described their own experience of recording an interview with each other in the recording booth. They "were greeted by two upbeat staff members. The small space, designed to resemble a comfortable living room, put us at ease despite the potentially imposing recording equipment. We were given some simple instructions, signed a release form . . . , and then one of us (Andrew Horowitz) proceeded to interview the other (Peter Lamothe). We were surprised at how quickly the allotted forty minutes passed." They were "tremendously impressed" by the experience:

> As the interviewee, Peter spoke about personal experiences he had not revisited in years. The intimacy of the setting made him want to be honest, and opinions, biases, and some strong personal feelings came to the surface quickly. Peter left feeling that for him the most significant benefit of StoryCorps was an emotional one: the chance to reflect on his past awakened at once the conscience and the soul, the mind and the heart. For his part, Andrew felt privileged to have a venue for getting to know Peter in a far more personal way than their relationship would have otherwise allowed. If the two of us arrived as colleagues, we left as friends.[59]

Storytelling fans would wholeheartedly embrace these responses and sentiments. The authors described an almost therapeutic and deeply transformative effect of storytelling. Both knew that they were producing a recording that could be made available to an audience of millions. Oral historians know that this was an unusual experience, not an everyday life occurrence. Most of our moments are much more private, our conversations around the kitchen table or around the water cooler overheard by not more than a half dozen people. Yet, it was in the most public of circumstances that the two men felt such a deep level of intimacy and privacy that they could "be honest" and share stories and feelings they presumably could not share in the privacy of their offices, over dinner, in a car ride, or during a game of golf. The effects Horowitz and Lamothe describe are reminiscent of catharsis through confession or psychoanalysis. The difference is, however, that Lamothe's confession could potentially be broadcast to the world instantaneously, and that both of them were fully aware of it, having signed over their rights to StoryCorps and NPR. And yet, the only thing they found "daunting" was the recording equipment, not the fact that their "inner selves" were broadcast to the world. Was this an experience of trust or of self-deceit? How did we get to this place—we have not always been there and have not been there for very long—where we find it completely normal and

[59] Lamothe and Horowitz, "StoryCorps," 172–3.

even healing to share the most intimate aspects of our lives in public? What are the implications for oral history?

Abelmann et al. viewed StoryCorps more critically, but similarly disclosed their emotionally charged support of the project. They shared a "fascination with StoryCorps": "Our discussions were inspired by: the weekly story broadcast's emotional 'driveway moments,' our knowledge of the Corps's dedicated facilitators, the public's active participation in the traveling recording booths, and the announcement that StoryCorps interviews would be archived in the Library of Congress." Although they did not see it as oral history, they nevertheless wanted "to think about its place in the genealogy of oral history."[60] The authors likened the StoryCorps stories to "snapshots in a scrapbook" and "short public tributes to the power of story." They also viewed them as "part of a long American legacy of celebrating the 'ordinary,'" without elaborating what that tradition may be. They described the stories as "tender celebrations of intimacy, communicated paradoxically through StoryCorps's larger media web." They did not elaborate this paradox, even though it seems to be at the core of explaining the storytelling phenomenon. Instead, they focused on the emotionality of the stories, and they did so in a personal and supportive fashion.

Emotion, indeed, drives much of the public's and oral historians' response to StoryCorps and the storytelling phenomenon. "What makes StoryCorps so powerful?" asks American public historian Benjamin Filene. "Why do millions of people sob their way to work and come back for more?"[61] These are important questions, answered by Filene only through another question: "Does the project illustrate the power of letting people tell their own stories?" But of course, as Filene points out himself, these are not their own stories.[62] Most people cannot tell stories in three minutes and move millions to tears. As both Abelmann et al. and Filene show, the Friday morning tears are the product of professional editing, not some mysterious power innate to the act of storytelling. StoryCorps and NPR carefully select from the raw footage and craft stories by selecting, rearranging, and producing a story arc that is intended to make listeners cry. Just like the stories, the effect is homogenous. Abelmann et al. write: "What unites the StoryCorps interviews as celebrations, rituals, or snapshots is the similar, almost uniform way in which they evoke the emotions of the listener/reader. The listener, as the title proclaims, will love listening, and we would add, be moved (even to tears). The reader may experience the same emotional tug. . . . These are, it seems, the conversations that we would wish to have (or wish we had had) with a dying loved one."[63] Being moved to tears is the

[60] Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 255.
[61] Filene, "Listening Intently," 175.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 259.

emotion most often expressed in the listening public's online response to these stories. And academics are not ashamed to open their articles with the admission: "I can count on Friday mornings for a good cry."[64] Crying seems to be an integral part of the storytelling phenomenon. NPR Morning Edition host Steve Inskeep reveled in the fact that he regularly cried listening to StoryCorps sound bites.[65]

Have oral historians bought into the emotionality of storytelling, even though they know that the NPR stories, like Hollywood dramas, are edited with the purpose of making them cry? Have they bought into the idea that storytelling is always sharing and empowering even though they know that the StoryCorps participants have no control over the editing? Do they agree that experience can be reduced to emotion, especially when the range of emotions allowed in StoryCorps seems quite narrow and appears to exclude emotions presumably discomfiting for the consuming public, such as outrage at political injustices and economic inequalities or hate born out of nationalism or poverty? It is difficult to resist the "emotional tug of storytelling as healing and empowering. Many of those who write about StoryCorps seem to agree with Filene, who argues that "the project shows that emotion powerfully conveys meaning and is meaningful in itself." If oral history has taught us anything, however, it is that emotion is deceptive, misleading, and never self-explanatory. We never know why people cry when they tell a story, but we can be sure that they cry for other reasons than our reasons for crying along. Further, although the storytelling movement reduces emotion to love and crying (usually about a happy end), our interviewees tell us of other emotions as well, including anger, hate, outrage, and fear.[66] Finally, emotion in particular fools us into mistaking sympathy for empathy. Too often, we believe we have achieved empathy when all we have done is felt sympathy. But only one, as Allison Landsberg emphasizes, demands intellectual work: empathy.[67] That is why historians do not trade in sympathy; they trade in empathy. Nevertheless, the emotional tug is difficult to resist, because it is rooted in deeper social forces: the early twenty-first century's mass culture of public confession, the rise of a neoliberal hyperindividualism, and the emergence of therapeutic culture and an obsession with trauma and survival

[64] Filene, "Listening Intently," 174.

[65] National Public Radio, "Air The StoryCorps Theme, Cue The Tears," October 21, 2013 http://www.npr.org/2013/10/21/236383017/air-the-storycorps-theme-cue-the-tears and http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=236383017, accessed March 3,2014.

[66] Although other emotions are absent from the edited NPR stories, it would be interesting to see how much they are present in the 40-minute conversations. While this corpus of sources will help us write a history of mentality of American society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its use for a history of emotions may be rather limited.

[67] Allison Landsberg, "Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification," in "Memory and Media Space," special issue, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 2, (June 2009): 222–3.

since the 1970s.[68] All of these social forces must be considered when contextualizing the storytelling phenomenon.

Why Do We Talk about Ourselves? Neoliberalism, Hyperindividualism and Therapy Culture

There is a widely held belief that storytelling is part of the rush of democratizing social forces that emerged after the Second World War, including the rise of the middle class, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the expansion of higher education and the student movement, and more generally the power surge of the left and liberalism. In academia, social history and the writing of a more inclusive history were expressions of the sixties.[69] Oral history commonly sees itself in this tradition, providing both a methodology that uncovers the voice of the past and a field of research that critically discusses the methods and ethics of interviewing and interpretation. Museum curators and other public historians, who have been under great pressure to make the public active participants in and contributors to their exhibitions, have chimed in: "Having worked for a generation to tell stories that de-center elites, museums now are de-centering elite storytellers, too."[70] Indeed, storytelling by everyone for everyone, widely shared online, has increasingly been viewed as a democratizing tool of individual empowerment and social change. But this is only part of the story. The attempt to democratize society through storytelling has also been shaped by neoliberalism's crass individualism and the attendant rise of therapy culture. We need to look at both democratization and the free-market hyperindividualism to understand why, only a generation after oral historians complained that ordinary Americans were reluctant to tell their stories, they are now chomping at the bit to upload the most intimate details of their lives to the World Wide Web.[71]

The American historian Thomas Borstelmann has identified the 1970s as a crucial decade in US history. Two major undercurrents emerged at that time. It was an era of increasing social equality and increasing economic inequality.[72] In the first half of the twentieth century, Americans increasingly embraced a spirit of egalitarianism that saw all people as equal and that rejected traditional hierarchies and authorities. After the Second World War, and during the

[68] Freund, "'Confessing Animals.'"

[69] Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, "Introduction," *Letting Go?*, 11

[70] Ibid., 11

[71] On the generational shift from Holocaust survivors' forgetting to the Second Generation's remembering, see Arlene Stein, "Feminism, Therapeutic Culture, and the Holocaust in the United States: The Second-Generation Phenomenon," *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 37–38.

[72] Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3–4, 17, 21–22, 153–62, 175, 214.

affluence of the postwar economic boom, social and legal democratization further extended this movement toward greater equality. In the wake of the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other minorities gained greater access to legal protection, education, employment, housing, and health care. Racial segregation was abolished; African Americans could now attend better schools and, increasingly, go to college and university. Sexism and patriarchy were at least acknowledged if not tackled through affirmative action policies. At the same time, social norms and moral values regarding sexuality, family, recreational drug use, dress, or being out in public all loosened.[73]

The dramatic changes, crises, and shocks of the 1970s deeply unsettled a large part of the US population. In the wake of the oil crisis of 1973, stock markets fell, one recession followed another, there was massive inflation, deindustrialization, and a shift from manufacturing to service industries, all of which resulted in declining real wages, rising unemployment, increasing poverty, and a growing concentration of wealth in the upper class.[74] The status of the recently expanded middle class became precarious and its members anxious. Inflation hit the poor the hardest, and poverty levels increased steadily after 1973.[75] The political shocks of the time, in particular the Vietnam War and the Watergate Affair, were just as great. Many Americans lost trust in their government to positively affect their lives. There was also a backlash against the hippie culture, which a newly emerging Christian Right blamed for declining family values, an increase in divorces and family breakdowns, and rising rates of drug use and crime.[76] Reeling from these shocks, Americans drew inward and focused their attention on themselves. And they put all of their trust in the private economy, believing the dogma that individual competition provided the best solutions for every aspect of life. This cleared the path for neoliberal ideas of unfettered free-market competition, deregulation, and individualism at all costs, which slowly at first and more forcefully from the 1980s onward, replaced government regulation and welfare. Neoliberalism caused a shift from citizenship to consumerism and from the common good to individual choice. It also led to increasing economic inequality.[77]

[73] Ibid., 53–63, 123.

[74] Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 9; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 133–4.

[75] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 134–5.

[76] Ibid., 8, 53–63, 123.

[77] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 126–133, 153–55; Steger and Roy, *Neoliberalism*, 12, 14, 27–8, 47; Bruno Amable, "Morals and Politics in the Ideology of Neo-liberalism," *Socio-Economic Review* 9, no. 1 (2011): 3–30. Tim Flannery argues that the rise of Neo-Darwinism and the popularity of its exponents such as Richard Dawkins coincided with the rise of neoliberalism: "We have a tendency to use ideas such as selfish gene theory to justify our own selfish and socially destructive practices. It's significant, I think, that Dawkins's books received wide acclaim on the eve of the 1980s—the era when greed was seen as good, and when the free market was

These two countercurrents—increasing social democratization and legal equality on the one hand, and increasing economic inequality and the neoliberal ethic of self-reliance on the other hand—have only increased over the past few decades.[78] But even though these two developments contradicted each other on the notion of equality, they also both supported and reinforced a crass hyper-individualism.[79] Individualism has a long history in the United States and an even longer connection to capitalism, which is "based on an individualistic ethic of intensive work."[80] It surfaced in oral history interviews long before the 1970s. In the 1960s, as Frisch argued, those who told of their experience of the Great Depression "tended to view their problems in atomized, alienating ways. Shame, a sense of personal failure, unavoidable obsession with personal concerns, paralytic insecurity in several dimensions—all these are repeatedly described as the predominant personal responses."[81] People viewed history through their individual experiences; indeed, they collapsed history and individual memory. The consequences, according to Frisch, were personal—including "psychic scarring, searing memory, and sense of crushing responsibility"—and political: "Anyone who has wondered why the Depression crisis did not produce more focused critiques of American capitalism and culture, more sustained efforts to see fundamental structural change, will find more evidence in the interior of these testimonies than in any other source I know. By seeing people turn history into biographical memory, general into particular, we see how they tried to retain deeper validation of their life and society, and how they deferred the deeper cultural judgement implied by the Depression crisis."[82] Despite the heavy-handed editing, the NPR/StoryCorps stories and similar storytelling products reveal similarly "searing memory" of the early twenty-first century's "disaster capitalism."[83]

The underlying effects of individualism, including the "sense of crushing responsibility," did not abate in the 1970s, but several factors led to a reinterpretation that gave such experiences a positive spin, moving it from shame to survival and triumph. A focus on the self and its public expression were

worshipped." Tim F. Flannery, *Here on Earth: A Natural History of the Planet* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010), 18.

[78] Amable, "Morals and Politics," 6.

[79] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 21–22, 175, 214.

[80] Peter Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), viii; quote from Amable, "Morals and Politics," 14.

[81] Frisch, "Oral History," 77. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," *Commentary* 99, 6 (June 1995): 35–40, describes the American public's response to the story of Anne Frank in similar ways; since the 1950s, American audiences and critics have felt "uplifted" and "inspired" by the "triumphant humanity." The story often triggered identification and even "fantasies of survival" (37). Rosenfeld argues that all great American monuments to the Holocaust—from Broadway productions of Anne Frank to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Hollywood films—allow audiences to look away from the darkness of history and instead focus on the (at times imagined) survival of the individual (38).

[82] Frisch, "Oral History," 77.

[83] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Belknap Press, 2014).

increasingly celebrated. Some observers were appalled at what they perceived as hedonistic narcissism. Journalist Tom Wolfe called the 1970s the "Me Decade."[84] Historian and cultural critic Christopher Lasch described this new US culture in 1979 as a "culture of narcissism."[85] In the same year, American sociologist Charles Derber identified an increasing pursuit of attention in American society.[86] Even President Jimmy Carter chimed in, berating his fellow Americans: "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption."[87] Certainly, in the 1970s, civic engagement declined steadily from its peaks in the 1950s and 1960s. Americans focused on self-improvement, self-expression, self-gratification, and self-indulgence.[88] They turned en masse to "the private sphere of consumerism" facilitated by twenty-four-hour shopping, an expanding credit industry, and the introduction of personal credit cards.[89]

This criticism has only become harsher over the past three decades. In 2000, Derber reviewed his earlier study of attention-seeking Americans and found that the problem had deepened and widened. He argued that "the pursuit of attention is now being diffused and institutionalized, hardwired into our beings through new systems of media, business, and technology, and fueled by new, aching deprivations that prey on our psyches. The result is a spreading virus of prosaic but dehumanizing behavior that subtly alienates us from one another and turns daily interaction into a veiled competition for recognition and respect."[90] Among the trends he identified, he noted "the rise of intimate self-exposure as a fashionable artistic and media genre" including confessional novels and "trash talk" shows that trickled down into everyday life: "Most people never appear on talk shows, but many practice a kindred pursuit in their own social lives, seeking attention from friends or workmates by talking endlessly about their own intimate problems. Whether it be the lingering traumas from a difficult childhood, current marital troubles, or simply neurotic obsessions that plague one's daily state of mind, such topics have become the stuff of ordinary conversation . . . [that] often mutates into uninhibited outpourings of personal problems and becomes a plea or contest for support." This attention-seeking was facilitated by new technology that allowed them to explore "previously

[84] Tom Wolfe, *The "Me" Decade and the Third Great Awakening* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

[85] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

[86] Charles Derber, *The Pursuit of Attention: Power and Ego in Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2000).

[87] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 12; see also 125, 146.

[88] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 125, 146; Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard Kulka, *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

[89] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 144–5.

[90] Derber, *Pursuit of Attention*, xxv.

unimaginable ways of pursuing attention."[91] Derber noted drily: "An age of self-absorption is not friendly to either democracy or community."[92]

Other social critics were just as biting in their assessment of the American psyche. In Chris Hedge's gloomy view of US society, the majority of Americans in 2009 are semiliterate and defeated by a corrupt political system and an exploitative economic system. They escape into worlds of fantasy, victim narratives, and self-pity.[93] Others agreed, but argued that Americans were under increasing pressure to succeed. Psychologist Jean M. Twenge identified the large group of middle-class Americans born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as "Generation Me"—a generation that was told by television, schools, and parents to put themselves first. Considering the economic problems of this era, it is not a generation that is spoiled or selfish, but a generation with high expectations—expectations that are ever harder to meet. Generation Me was evidence of an "epidemic" of narcissism.[94] Twenge and her colleague W. Keith Campbell write: "American culture's focus on self-admiration has caused a flight from reality to the land of grandiose fantasy." [95] Even if we do not agree with the excessiveness and moral conservatism of these social critics' diagnosis of Western individualism, we can position storytelling within Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" that "gives rise to the emergence of 'privatized identity'—of short-term, market-oriented, episodic fabrications of the self."[96]

In focusing on the individual in the interview, oral historians have long walked on the tightrope of individualism, trying to balance the successes of their narrators with the socioeconomic structures and larger historical patterns that constrained their lives. But in the marketplace of stories, oral historians' stories are often too complex, too gloomy, and too critical of the nation. Storytelling's unambiguous and often patriotic celebration of individual survival and success is unhindered by historical context. Such simple stories, celebrating a nation of survivors and the American Spirit, are much easier to digest. I fear that in their confusion of oral history and storytelling, or in their attempt to emulate the success of StoryCorps, oral historians are increasingly in danger of following this model of storytelling.

The attempt to stay clear of storytelling is particularly difficult, because storytelling makes big claims about its power to heal individuals and society. From the 1970s onward, Americans learned to talk about themselves, and they

[91] Ibid., xviii.

[92] Ibid., xxv.

[93] Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Toronto: Knopf, 2009).

[94] Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable—Than Ever Before* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

[95] Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 4.

[96] Anthony Elliot, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Contemporary Bauman,* ed. Anthony Elliot (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.

learned to talk about themselves in a specific way: as survivors. The new language of survival came out of a growing Holocaust remembrance, driven in particular by the generation of children of Holocaust survivors, and by feminist activists who argued that survivors of sexual abuse needed to tell their experiences in public in order to end the widespread epidemic of incest and violence against children and women. Telling a tale of survival removed the stigma of being a victim and allowed audiences to connect via the "spirit of humanity" and the underlying narrative of hope.[97]

In the 1970s, Americans not only learned to talk about themselves as survivors; they also came to expect benefits from publicly telling their stories of survival. Accounts of one's self were shaped by the language of psychoanalysis and therapy that became popularized in the 1970s as a means of monitoring, diagnosing, and reporting oneself, one's family, and one's life world. Indeed, some social critics have argued that over the past half century, a therapeutic culture or therapy culture has emerged in the West. In the early 1960s, US psychologist Philip Rieff argued that people had turned from a commitment to community, church, or party to a commitment to themselves, focusing all attention on their inner lives and seeking release with the help of therapists and therapy. Americans, Rieff argued, no longer found purpose in life through community, but rather through ensuring that they felt good.[98] Indeed, during the 1970s, the demand for therapy increased and the number of clinical psychologists in the United States tripled.[99] Since the 1980s, an increasing number of critics have pointed to the rise of therapeutic culture and a resulting depoliticization of society.[100]

The British sociologist Frank Furedi has most recently written about the "therapy culture" in Western society and found that people were much less self-aggrandizing and narcissistic than earlier critics had charged. Indeed, people had become victims of a therapy culture in which every negative emotion is diagnosed as in need of medical treatment, where people are encouraged to view themselves as ill, and, consequently, "to make sense of dramatic episodes through mental health terms." Furedi writes: "Today we fear that individuals lack the resilience to deal with feelings of isolation, disappointment and failure. Through pathologizing negative emotional responses to the pressures of life,

[97] Stein, "Feminism," 27–53; Rosenfeld, "Americanization," 38; Gilmore, "American Neoconfessional." Alyson M. Cole argues that Americans have denounced narratives of victimization and victimhood in order to gloss over suffering, injuries, and injustices and the required political response. See her book *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[98] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

[99] Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 125.

[100] Dana Becker, *Myth of Empowerment: Women and the Therapeutic Culture in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Katie Wright, *The Rise of the Therapeutic Society: Psychological Knowledge and the Contradictions of Cultural Change* (Washington DC: New Academia, 2011); Stein, "Feminism."

contemporary culture unwittingly encourages people to feel traumatised and depressed by experiences hitherto regarded as routine." [101] This trend to view a great range of individual and collective ills through the therapeutic language of trauma, and to turn to public forms of testimony, confession, and therapy, has been identified by other critics as well.[102] According to these critics, therapeutics has become a worldview that dominates Western society. Furedi writes: "Today, with the rise of the confessional mode, the blurring of the line between the private and the public and the powerful affirmation for emotionalism, there is little doubt that it has become a formidable cultural force."[103] Furedi sees therapy culture as a recent phenomenon: "It is easy to forget that the promiscuous application of therapeutic diagnosis to describe the condition of people confronting misfortune is a product of the past decade or so. Today, every minor tragedy has become a site for the intervention of trauma counsellors and therapeutic professionals."[104] The "management of the self" is now open to intervention by state, public, and private institutions.

Therapeutic culture, Furedi claims, also shapes historical interpretation and public commemoration. He even claims that we now have "a veritable industry of rewriting history in line with current therapeutic imagination."[105] Commemoration is now enacted in the form of public mass therapy, which "may dispose people to react to major events, like 9/11, as potential trauma victims rather than as concerned citizens."[106] Furedi argues that the 9/11 memorialization, following the memorialization of the Oklahoma City bombing, shifted commemoration from communal purpose to individual therapy, "from a bereaved community to a community of bereaved . . . Bereavement becomes not so much an act of remembrance about the dead, but a therapeutic statement about the survivor."[107]

[101] Frank Furedi, *Therapeutic Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6–7, 16. Illouz's and Wright's accounts are more nuanced than Rieff's or Furedi's. Wright argues against the "excessively negative theorizing" (5) and complicates the theory of the therapeutic turn by focusing attention on "the messy reality of everyday life" (4) that is reflected in her interviews with people about their therapeutic experiences.

[102] Christina Hoff and Sally Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006); Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Janice Peck, "The Secret of Her Success: Oprah Winfrey and the Seductions of Self-Transformation," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (2010): 7–14.

[103] Furedi, *Therapy Culture,* 17, 22; Furedi, like Rieff and Lasch, argues that therapy culture could emerge in the vacuum of meaning-making left by the decline of the church and religion. Considering the vibrancy of church and religion in the United States and other parts of the Western world, I believe we need to better understand how church practices and religion have fed into therapeutic culture. Foucault's analysis of psychoanalysis emerging from religious confessional practices is one beginning. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Freund, "'Confessing Animals.'"

[104] Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, 19.

[105] Ibid., 21.

[106] Ibid., 16.

[107] Ibid., 14–15.

Being at the crossroads of history and memory, oral historians cannot but be unnerved by Furedi's suggestion that by association with storytelling, oral history has become entangled in therapy culture. Unfortunately, our emotional, and at times uncritical, response to the storytelling phenomenon provides further evidence that at least in some regards we need to regain our scepticism.

The rise of therapy culture is closely linked to the rise of the self-help movement, which in turn thrives on storytelling. Storytelling—to segment life into uplifting episodes of individual survival—is, no doubt, related to what American social critic Barbara Ehrenreich calls the American "ideology of positive thinking." Ehrenreich has identified a multimillion dollar industry—self-help books, DVDs, positive thinking workshops, "tens of thousands of 'life coaches,' 'executive coaches,' and motivational speakers," as well as various other "coaches, preachers, and gurus of various sorts"—that makes a profit from playing on Americans' fears that they have little control over their lives by teaching them "unwarranted optimism" and "deliberate self-deception." Positive thinking is not a cause or an effect of success, but rather "is driven by a terrible insecurity." Positive thinking, Ehrenreich argues, is closely allied with the two driving forces of the twentieth and early twenty-first century: nationalism and capitalism. Ehrenreich writes that "positive thinking has made itself useful as an apology for the crueler aspects of the market economy. If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure. The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must [be] because you didn't try hard enough, didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success. As the economy has brought more layoffs and financial turbulence to the middle class, the promoters of positive thinking have increasingly emphasized this negative judgment: to be disappointed, resentful, or downcast is to be a 'victim' and a 'whiner.'"[108]

We see this positive thinking buttress not only many of the stories manufactured in the storytelling sector. We see it also, through comments on Facebook and elsewhere, in the consuming public. Ehrenreich's analysis points to another area which we need to consider when contextualizing the storytelling phenomenon. StoryCorps may have been born in the context of 9/11 and Katrina, but these two events—skillfully retold by government agencies and Fox as "national catastrophes"—are only surface events. Below, the American angst is built on the massive economic, military, social, and cultural insecurities that have dominated American life since the 1970s. From deindustrialization to the financial crisis of 2008, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, from the

[108] Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*.

deterioration of the educational and health care systems, and from the race wars of the 1970s to the massive increase of violence in popular culture, Americans have had good reasons to flee to positive thinking and uplifting stories à la *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.[109]

Storytelling versus Oral History: The Politics of History and Memory

Storytelling proponents claim that storytelling promises a path to a better world precisely by avoiding politics. To Colbert and others, the storytelling that happens with StoryCorps is the opposite of politics: "We live in a time when absolutely everything is a source of division. Everything plays as a political statement. Coastal cities vs. small towns. Republicans vs. Democrats, MSNBC vs. FOX, Costco vs. Sam's Club. But you don't hear any political agenda on StoryCorps—you don't hear any agenda at all. You just hear a desire to share."[110] Have oral historians accepted these claims? Lamothe and Horowitz argued: "Through the broadcast of interview excerpts on National Public Radio, StoryCorps gives a wide audience the best of what oral history can offer: focusing on personal anecdotes that resonate with the broadest themes of human experience, these stories insist on the inclusion of ordinary individuals in the historical record and force a democratic understanding of history."[111] Similarly, Abelmann et al. believe that "StoryCorps interviews are a complex form of ritual among intimates. What binds them are not sociological coordinates, grand narrative, or historical integrity but their sensibility."[112]

As Michael Frisch pointed out in 1972, one of the three basic questions to ask about any corpus of oral histories is, who is talking? While it seems that StoryCorps covers a broad range of people, the lack of basic biographical data obscures the demographic composition of participants. Do men and women participate equally? Do people of all ages, races, ethnic groups, and social classes participate proportionally to the overall population? Are people of all political convictions and religious creeds proportionally represented? As Filene has pointed out, at least for the purposes of NPR storytelling, such data are intentionally withheld. StoryCorps wants to make the point that every American is the same. It does so under the cover of democratization, inclusion, and humanism. For example, the racial background or social class status of the blind triplets

[109] Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul : 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1993). This is the first in a long and continuing series of books and other inspirational products based on compilations of personal stories.

[110] StoryCorps, "StoryCorps 10th Anniversary Gala—The Recap!" November 1, 2013 http://storycorps.org/storycorps-10th-anniversary-gala-the-recap/, accessed March 3, 2014.

[111] Lamothe and Horowitz, "StoryCorps," 173

[112] Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 258.

whose story we read earlier play no role in their story—and neither does their or their mothers' access (or lack of access) to public or private support. They are Americans, and whether they are white or black, poor or rich, StoryCorps's underlying message is that the story would be the same. Such a move, however, together with populist claims that all debate is divisive, is a political strategy to preempt social critique. And it prevents oral historians from investigating the larger public culture and the shaping forces of NPR and StoryCorps that generate survival stories.

Thus, what binds the stories is not their sensibility (whatever that may concretely be), but the fact that they are implicitly and mostly unintentionally (at least on the part of the narrators) informed by the values of a crass antistate individualism. Individualism in early twenty-first century America ignores the sociological insight that, in C. Wright Mills's words, "personal troubles" are usually connected to "social issues"; it also ignores the historical insight that individuals think and act, in Karl Marx's famous phrase, "under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[113] Rather than documenting and critiquing the effects of neoliberalism, has the storytelling phenomenon instead supported and reinforced neoliberal values of free-market competition?

We can find a preliminary answer by exploring how storytelling has reframed the debate about the politics of history and memory. Abelmann et al. took initial steps to place StoryCorps in a larger context of history, memory, and public remembrance and commemoration. The project, they wrote, came out of the American national catastrophes of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and it was part of the "era of self-publication."[114] From the former emerged an emphasis on "the heroic in the banal . . . a way to make sense in a vacuum of meaning." StoryCorps, they wrote, arose in the context "of our insistently commemorative culture." In the case of 9/11 and Katrina, "StoryCorps' documenting, commemorating practices celebrated the endurance and heroism of the victims and the rescuers."[115] This analysis is an important first step and can easily be linked to the development of hyperindividualism and therapy culture since the 1970s. This allows us to see that rather than a "vacuum of meaning" there was a competition for meaning that was quickly won by the government and conservative media. To identify "the heroic in the banal" was part of their winning strategy. This narrative spoke powerfully to a public that had come to believe, over the previous decades, that everyone was a survivor and had a story to tell, and that to tell this story publicly was a means of empowerment and healing.

StoryCorps also partook of a culture of self-documentation and self-publication, as Abelmann et al. noted: "Although StoryCorps presents itself as

[113] Mills and Marx quotes from Callero, *Myth of Individualism*, 8–9.
[114] Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 260.
[115] Ibid.

universal in its interest and deeply historical in its tradition, it is very much of the present, part of the FaceBooking, scrapbooking, blogging flow of endless self-documentation." Rather than recording a historical experience, many people use StoryCorps, just as they use Twitter, Facebook, and the digital storytelling movement, to document themselves in the present.[116] The promise that this self-documentation is archived, whether in the Library of Congress or the ether of the Internet, creates hope that one won't be forgotten, that the attention of the now will carry on after one's death. Furthermore, as the self-help movement began to use digital media for selling its products, the digital technology industry saw a market for pushing its products. Easy online access and interactivity merged with the need for public confession to create StoryCorps, Facebook, and other digital storytelling platforms. Thus, if we see self-publication not solely as a democratizing force, but also as a result of a multibillion dollar industry that makes a profit from self-publication, then we can better understand how the industry's values become embedded in the public's seemingly individualistic and autonomous self-expression.

True, as one of this article's anonymous reviewers pointed out, I am here conflating all kinds of diverse commercial and noncommercial storytelling practices, but that is exactly the point I am trying to get across at this early stage of analysis: the umbrella concept of (public, autobiographical, confessional) storytelling binds all of these practices together through its promises of attention, healing, and empowerment. One of oral historians' future research agendas may be to disentangle how exactly Facebooking, digital storytelling, and other practices of self-publishing inform interviewees and interviewers alike as they sit down for an oral history interview.

For now, I wish to focus on the idea that storytelling conflates history and individual memory and thus depoliticizes public discourse. This is not a new phenomenon. Forty years ago, Michael Frisch examined storytelling products and popular responses of another time: Studs Terkel's collection of memories of the Great Depression and the popular media's reviews. Frisch agreed with most other critics and readers that reading the memories of 150 Americans who had either lived through the Depression or heard about it afterwards was "moving, poignant, intense, human, and instructive." The current public response to StoryCorps/NPR stories is similar. Frisch disagreed, however, on another point. He did not agree with *Newsweek* that the book "will resurrect our faith in all of us" or with *Saturday Review* that this was "a huge anthem in praise of the American Spirit." Indeed, he had found the book "more depressing than anything else," because it demonstrated "the Depression's destructive impact on the lives people lived." Similarly, StoryCorps/NPR stories demonstrate neoliberalism's destructive impact on current Americans' lives. Terkel's stories, Frisch

[116] Ibid.

argued, showed "why Americans find it so hard to examine their culture and institutions critically, even when massive breakdowns make such examination imperative."[117] The current storytelling phenomenon presents similar evidence.

The major problem with the critics' reading of the book, according to Frisch, was that they took the oral testimonies at face value, as simple but true representations of what the Depression was actually like, not as the well-ordered, smoothed-over memories recounted in the 1960s, at a time when people were trying to make sense of so many social, political, and cultural crises: the lasting legacy of the poverty, unemployment, and missed opportunities in the wake of the Great Depression, the resonances of the Second World War, the pressing implications of the civil rights movement and increasing racial tensions, the war in Vietnam, the assassinations of political and religious leaders, further economic recessions, and the overthrow of cultural and moral values. The critics, Frisch claimed, understood oral history to work in two ways: either as more information about the past ("more history") or as direct access to authentic experience that speaks for itself and needs no expert interpretation ("no history"). This simplistic reading of oral history as evidence was even more surprising, Frisch noted, because Terkel himself had been clear that his was a memory book, not a history book.[118]

What has changed in the intervening forty years? Today, more than ever, it seems, the consumers of memory stories believe that their emotional response is an indication that the stories they hear provide access to authentic experience. Ganley writes about what storytelling accomplishes: "We're telling it as it is. As we experience it. We're forming communities around our stories."[119] For historians, this is troubling news; just as troubling is that (unlike Terkel) the producers of these "oral history" stories share the same belief. For example, StoryCorps claims it is creating an archive and thus "more history." Rather than a great-men history, Isay writes, "StoryCorps will instead create a bottom-up history of our country through the stories and voices of everyday Americans."[120] When Filene interviewed StoryCorps archivist Taylor Cooper, Cooper told him, "This is the history of America by America for America." Filene concluded: "StoryCorps sets out to spark a shift in historical understanding: it wants to demonstrate powerfully, viscerally, exhaustively that ordinary people shape history."[121] At the same time it claims that out of respect for the storytellers, no contextualization of the individual stories ("no history") is necessary. This populist view of history as simply the story of the past has become a vehicle for individualistic ideology under the cover of oral history.

[117] Frisch, "Oral History," 71.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ganley, "Foreword," x.
[120] Isay, *Listening*, 163.
[121] Filene, "Listening Intently," 176.

Some historians seem have been taken in by this argument. Filene claims that StoryCorps teaches people history simply by giving them the opportunity to record their stories. From their personal, emotionally charged experience, Lamothe and Horowitz, writing that StoryCorps offers "an experience in history," extrapolated major claims about the project's contributions to history: "Through this powerful personal experience, StoryCorps teaches broad lessons about the nature of history. The interviewee has the opportunity to interpret his or her own life history. The interviewer also assumes the role of historians by identifying someone whose stories seem worth learning and preserving."[122] Thus, if I understand correctly, the authors argue that a) a forty-minute conversation approaches something resembling a life history; b) experiences are always, and naturally interpreted from a historical perspective; c) anyone interviewing another person is a historian (that is, asks questions from a historical perspective); and d) identifying someone important in one's own life (such as one's mother) resembles a historian's judgment on historical significance. Such claims are only possible to accept if we agreed with the underlying assumption that history is a natural way of thinking rather than a politically charged and controversial discourse about the past.[123]

Filene similarly argued: "Through the hundreds of stories that StoryCorps has showcased, a collective portrait of America emerges—a citizenry of diversity and strength; committed to hard work and sustained by quiet pride; determined in adversity and imbued with an overwhelming decency."[124] This is the "no history" point of view Frisch criticized in 1972. This view is problematic, as Frisch and many other oral historians have pointed out, because no testimony provides unfiltered access to the past. All memory is filtered by time and intervening experience. As Frisch wrote of Depression memories: "Failure forced people to reduce general experiences to personal terms, the intense pain thus sheltering them from deeper, more profoundly threatening historical truths; survival, however, seems to encourage them to elevate personal and biographical generalization into historical terms, at once a self-validating message and a culturally validating legacy for the next generation."[125]

Lamothe and Horowitz also embraced the "more history" view, claiming that "StoryCorps encourages an inclusive vision of who and what is historically significant."[126] Again, this claim can only be accepted if we agreed with its

[122] Lamothe and Horowitz, "StoryCorps," 171, 173–4.

[123] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); see also Linda Shopes, "'Insights and Oversights': Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 257–268.

[124] Filene, "Listening Intently," 178.

[125] Frisch, "Oral History," 78.

[126] Lamothe and Horowitz, "StoryCorps," 173.

underlying assumption that conflates the past and history, a view in which everything and everybody is history. But history is a social discourse and political struggle about what events and whose experiences are important. StoryCorps and all other storytelling projects make the same selections and judgments about who and what to include. StoryCorps's "Oral history of America" is a product of its time, not the ultimate, universal story, as the nod to "inclusivity" suggests. Thus, in StoryCorps's NPR stories, it is not the individual experiences that matter—as Filene points out, the characters are kept bland in order to help listeners identify with them.[127] Rather, at center is the morale of the story, which is almost always the "American" story of individuals overcoming hardship, the story of frontiersmen and pioneers, of explorers and adventurers, of heroes and heroines, the story of the "American Spirit." Stories of successful state intervention and a beneficial welfare state are as rare as stories of an economic system destroying lives and communities. The "miracle of Ollie" rejects the importance of publicly organized solidarity and structural support for the weak. The 50,000 StoryCorps stories sound like a broken record: As Americans, we overcome hardship the American way. We are all equals and our fortune is in our hands and in our hands only. There is no room for the state. And there is no room for social critique.

While we should be happy that forty years after Michael Frisch's analysis, oral history seems to have arrived in mainstream society, I suggest we ought to be alarmed that a large number of people—including the producers and consumers of StoryCorps/NPR stories—understand oral history to mean taking stories at face value, without any attempt to historicize them. Under the moniker of oral history, storytelling ventures produce for public consumption good-feel stories of personal triumph, apparently bereft of all politics. Can oral historians gain anything from such an approach? Filene, for example, argues that historians reject StoryCorps's approach to history because they can't handle stories' emotion. But such a claim is based on a misunderstanding of StoryCorps. As Filene himself admits, StoryCorps sidesteps the discipline's basic benchmarks (such as reason, chronology, causation) and asserts that everyone's "story stands on its own" and, at the same time, "stands for all of us." As Filene writes: "The project's books and radio broadcasts suggest timeless values and enduring humanity."[128] All of this is happening un-self-reflectedly within the nationalist confines of a US-centric worldview in which any American simply stands for any other American as well as for any other human being. This is not just ahistorical, as Filene rightly points out, but depoliticizing, based on a faith that just believing in our sameness will make us all equal. It is akin to the positive thinking

[127] Filene, "Listening Intently," 188.
[128] Ibid., 181–3.

movement identified by Barbara Ehrenreich.[129] Such an approach to history destroys people's capacity to study the past and to engage with the present in any critical and meaningful ways.

Filene's conclusions are problematic for historians. He argues that public historians should adopt StoryCorps's ideas because they are popular and successful, not because they provide a better understanding of the past. Indeed, he argues that public historians should bend themselves to StoryCorps, leaving behind conventional historical expectations which seem to include the most basic capstones of historical thinking, such as tracing continuity and change over time, understanding historical cause and effect, and evaluating historical significance: "StoryCorps has power because it demonstrates, over and over, a much more fundamental lesson: the past exists and we carry it with us every day. More than a project for documenting or interpreting history, in other words, StoryCorps is a brilliant tool for inculcating history-mindedness—the realization that we live poised between something that came before and something that will come after." Such a claim is only tenable if one believes that the past and history are the same, and if one believes that a sense of time is the same as a sense of history. As Filene argues, conflating past and history: "The power of StoryCorps stems from its ability to encourage people to take ownership of the past in the here and now—to claim history as their own and find personal meaning within it."[130] This is a depoliticized and misleading understanding of history. History is a discourse about the past that is informed by our present values and that teaches the values of the time to the next generation. It is a politically charged negotiation about what is important to remember and what is a reasonable and plausible way to explain and interpret the past. Simply recording a story about one's life does not lead to an understanding of history, and the meaning that many people find is distinctly ahistorical. As Frisch and so many other oral historians have ably shown, people generally do not look for historical explanations of their experiences.

Conclusion: What Is at Stake?

I began to become interested in oral history in graduate school in 1992 and began to record interviews a year later. I quickly bought into the idea that oral history was an undervalued but powerful research tool and that the field was marginalized and misunderstood. In the early 2000s, I began to sense a change. Oral history was mentioned more often in popular media and outside of academia, and in positive ways. Soon, I heard about nonacademic oral history projects that produced excellent recordings and websites, and there was a buzz about

[129] Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*.
[130] Filene, "Listening Intently."

narrative and storytelling. At that point, I was enthusiastic about storytelling—just like Pozzi-Thanner, Lamothe and Horowitz, Abelmann et al., and Filene—because I believed that we—oral historians—had finally made it. With our history going back to the 1940s, we were clearly at the root of this new popular appreciation of oral history. As experienced practitioners, we were at the centre of it. And as well-read academics, we formed its intelligentsia.

Since around 2008, however, my enthusiasm has waned, in part because I noticed that oral historians play only a marginal role in this new storytelling movement. Our funding has not increased; creators of megaprojects like StoryCorps may present at our conferences, but they hardly read our research findings nor contribute to our discussions in any meaningful sense. Most importantly, they have shaped the public debate and understanding of oral history in a way that oral historians never could. I began to take a step back and rethink the connection between oral history and the larger storytelling phenomenon, a phenomenon whose participants often threw around the phrase *oral history* without any substantial knowledge of what it actually was. I did not want to return to the alienating debates of the 1960s and 1970s about what properly constituted oral history and what was journalism, folklore, etc. There is little value in arguing whether StoryCorps or a business strategy based on storytelling is oral history. Rather, we now have to take a step back from the massive storytelling phenomenon that has swept over us, disentangle ourselves from it, and begin to study it as a new social, cultural, economic, and intellectual phenomenon.

At stake is oral history, because we are no longer in charge of defining the parameters of oral history in the public realm. I doubt that our small band of oral historians can effectively change the terms of debate at the public and corporate level of the storytelling complex. But we can certainly attempt to resist the vortex of storytelling. For example, Barbara Ganley, the founder and director of Community Expressions, LLC, writes that digital storytelling takes "academics out from their comfort zones of the rational domain of critical discourse into the deeply affective process of locating, articulating and communicating personal stories."[131] This statement is based on flawed logic, like so much of the storytelling industry that teeters on the brink of the self-help movement. The assumption that critical discourse per se is a comfort zone is untenable; there is a contradiction here that posits digital storytelling as both a more comfortable space than academia and not a comfort zone. But it is not the flawed logic of the enterprise I am concerned with (indeed, whether flawed or not, such a statement makes for better advertising than a grant application). Rather, I am worried that while it may be of interest to academics to engage in a supposedly "deeply affective process"—as if reading archival documents and writing about people's

[131] Ganley, "Foreword," ix.

oppression and discrimination and their daily political struggles were dispassionate processes—we may then forget to return to our domain of critical discourse, remaining in the comfort zone of narrative navel gazing instead of critically evaluating it.

At stake is history. Storytelling collapses individual memory—filtered through social discourses of individualism, survival, and therapy—and history. As a result, we are hearing only one story. And this one story is the neoliberal story of individual triumph and, implicitly, the success of the free market and the failure of the state. This is a powerful story. As historians, we have to take care not to be mesmerized by the emotional power of the storytelling phenomenon or by the economic success of the storytelling industry. Let me emphasize: I am not arguing against the value and validity of individual experiences and stories and I am not arguing against the power of storytelling. Storytelling is indeed powerful. But we must continue to insist that individual memory and history are not the same.

At stake is critical citizenship and democracy. Like the response to *Hard Times*, StoryCorps stories teach us that Americans continue to find it "hard to examine their culture and institutions critically."[132] Why is this so? I have argued elsewhere that, following Foucault, we can understand the interview as a technology of the self. Through the interview in its many forms—from confession and therapy to news interviews and oral history—we have learned to monitor ourselves and report our findings to experts in the hope of being absolved or healed. This self-monitoring and self-reporting is shaped by society's and the experts' expectations of what and how to report.[133] Do StoryCorps and similar forms of storytelling teach us that public confession and stories of personal survival or triumph are the only ways to talk about oneself?[134] Oral history, Frisch argued, "reveals patterns and choices that, taken together, begin to define the reinforcing and screening apparatus of the general culture, and the ways in which it encourages us to digest experience."[135] Thus, one of the questions we need to ask more frequently and consistently is, in what ways do neoliberal values, languages of therapy and trauma, and the genre of survival story shape our interviewees' self-interpretations.

One pressing task is to begin to write a history of the storytelling phenomenon. Historians need to investigate the origins and contributing factors to the rise of this phenomenon. While I have tried to accomplish some of that in this

[132] Frisch, "Oral History," 71.

[133] Freund, "'Confessing Animals.'"

[134] As Gilmore argues in "American Neoconfessional" (657–8), a new genre of memoirs of fall and redemption "displace[s] other life narratives, including those that . . . identified the systemic nature of disenfrenchisement, unmasked middle-class pieties about privacy and sexual violence, linked suffering and violence to poverty and state indifference, and challenged dominant reading practices around truth-telling."

[135] Frisch, "Oral History," 76.

article, there are many more questions. Does storytelling have its roots in the disenchantment with the hard sciences in the wake two world wars, industrialized killing, and the atomic bomb? Should we view the discourse on storytelling as belonging to neoliberal "Newspeak"?[136] What are storytelling's religious roots, if any?[137] What, for example, is the connection, if any, between the rise of storytelling and the rise of evangelism since the 1970s? What role does the Western infatuation since the 1960s with non-Christian religions, indigenous wisdom, New Age attitudes, survivalism, self-help, extraterrestrials, and such play in the rise of storytelling?[138] How has the rise of the digital media industry since the 1990s shaped storytelling? In what way is the storytelling labor market built on the ruins of print journalism, academic tenure, and the welfare state? What is the role of publicity? Why do individual storytelling, confession, and therapy all need the largest imaginable audiences possible?

Whether through StoryCorps, Oprah, or digital storytelling, in twenty-first century Western societies, interviewing, confessing, and publicity are deeply intertwined with a neoliberal individualism and the self-help and digital technology industries. Oral historians need to study this broader social phenomenon, not in order to discredit it, but rather in order to explain and understand it. Then they need to ask how their own practices and projects relate to it. Finally, they need to ponder the epistemological, methodological, interpretive, and ethical ramifications of and responses to the entanglement of oral history in the Western mass confessional practice of public storytelling. Let us not forget that the storytelling industry's grandiose claims of healing individuals and society through storytelling and of writing an ultimate history divert attention and funding away from critical investigations of social and historical phenomena. It is time to wean ourselves from the mindless celebration of story and storytelling and to begin the task of historicizing oral history, interviewing, and storytelling.

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[136] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquandt, "New Liberal Speak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate," *Radical Philosophy* 105 (January/February 2001): 2–5.

[137] On the moral order of neoliberalism, which resembles in many ways the moral order of storytelling's individualism, see Amable, "Morals and Politics." On the rise of conservative religion and neoliberalism in the United States, see Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 249–257, 275;

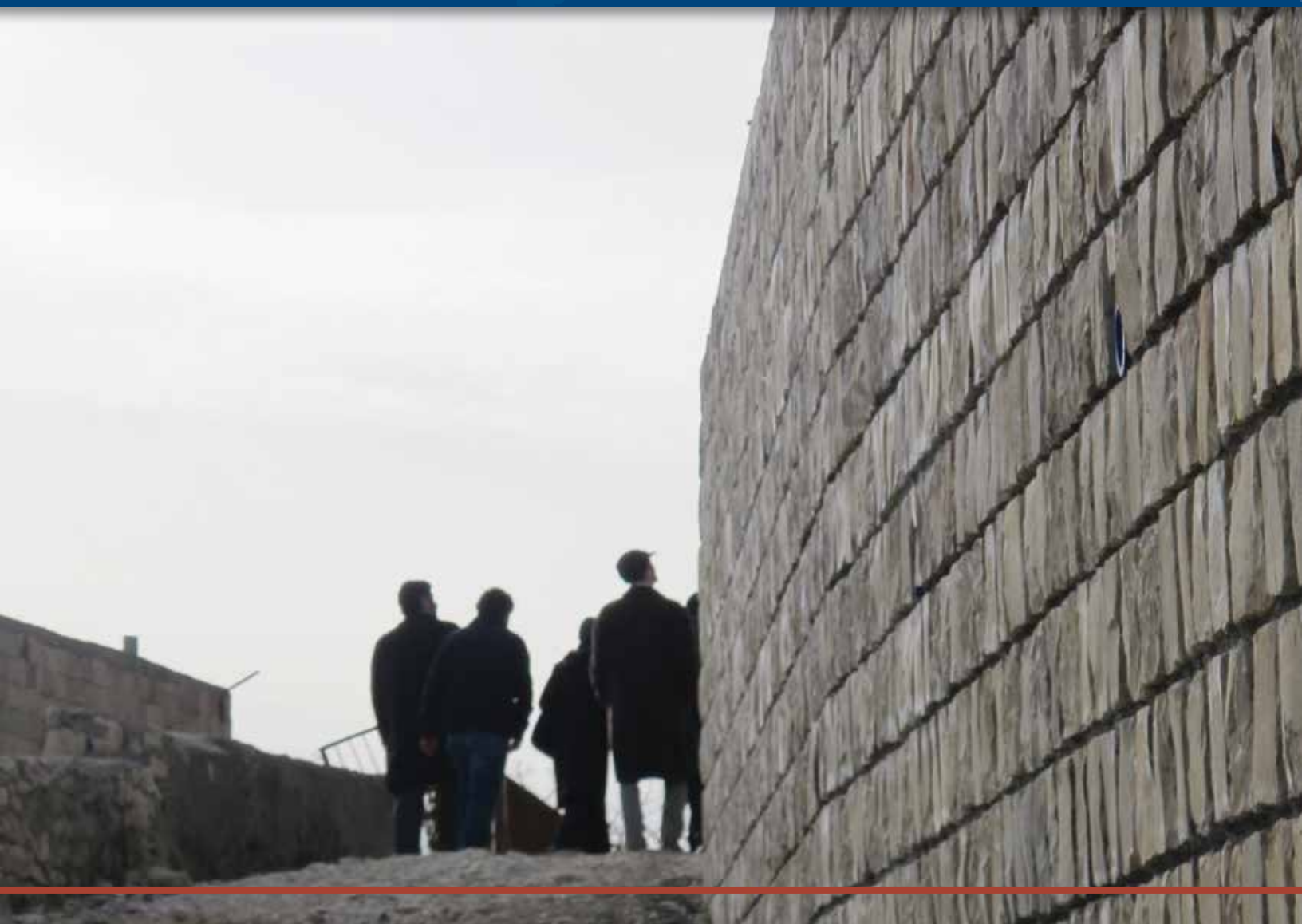
[138] Harry C. Meserve, "Editorial: The Therapeutic Age," *Journal of Religion and Health* 16, no. 2 (April 1977): 77–80; specific reference, p. 77.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
Center for Oral History

Co-produced with TAARII

Documenting and Interpreting Conflict through Oral History

A WORKING GUIDE



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p. 12: La Casa de la Mujer, Colombia

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Published with support from the Columbia University Libraries.

Documenting and Interpreting Conflict through Oral History: A Working Guide

In summer 2012, Mary Marshall Clark of the Columbia University Center for Oral History (CCOH) and Lucine Taminian of The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII) received a small grant from the Hollings Center for International Dialogue to produce guidelines for the ethics and methodologies of collecting life histories in conflict and post-conflict situations. TAARII administered the grant. These small grants were follow-up support from a Hollings Center for International Dialogue led by Dr. George Gavrilis, the director of the Hollings Center, with nearly 30 oral historians from the United States, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The goal of the conference, and of the grants that followed, was to use oral history to explore new conversations and methodologies over borders not usually crossed.

The Hollings Center grant to Lucine Taminian and Mary Marshall Clark coincided with the CCOH summer institute (June 4–15) in New York City on "What Is Remembered? Life Story Approaches in Human Rights Contexts." Ramazan Aras, Mohammad Mohaqqeq, and Lucine Taminian were invited to be faculty in the institute. Other members of the Istanbul group at the summer institute included Doug Boyd and Mary Marshall Clark of the United States. Mehmet Kurt, a Turkish graduate student studying in the United States, and Claudia P. González Perez, a fellow of the institute from Colombia, were also invited into the working group. Beth Kangas, the executive director of TAARII, and Terrell Frazier, director of CCOH's outreach programs, agreed to join the working group as editors. Danielle Duffy of the Hollings Center flew to New York to be with us in the last days of thinking and writing, for which we are very grateful.

The working group of nine individuals from five countries met at Columbia University in New York City on June 11–18, 2012, to begin crafting the Guide. The group members have extensive experience in oral history and/or have collected oral histories in conflict and post-conflict situations. Douglas Boyd, the director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries, is an expert on curating and archiving oral histories. Mary Marshall Clark, director of the CCOH and the co-director of the Master of Arts in Oral History at Columbia University, uses oral history to understand trauma and torture. Lucine Taminian, an oral historian and anthropologist, is the senior researcher in TAARII's oral history project, which collects oral histories of Iraqis living outside their country. Ramazan Aras, a professor at Artuklu University at Mardin, collected oral histories of Armenians and Kurds in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Mohammad Mohaqqeq of Kabul University in Afghanistan is a professor of literature who has used oral history to compare hope and hopelessness. Claudia P. González Perez, a human rights activist, participated in a project that documented the historical memory of female victims of violence in Colombia. Mehmet Kurt, a graduate student at Yale, used oral history in his PhD research to conduct oral histories with Kurds in Turkey. Beth Kangas, the executive director of TAARII, conducted oral history research in Yemen. Terrell Frazier led a working group of New York City activists to apply oral history to their community organizing.

The institute's program included discussions on oral history in diverse conflict and post-conflict situations. Faculty and fellows presented on the Rwandan genocide, racially based incarceration in the United States, and state violence against ethnic groups in Indonesia among other situations. The passion and thinking of the summer institute fellows, combined with the diversity of faculty experience internationally, was of great inspiration to the authors and editors of this Guide.

Our goal as writers, editor, and participants in our two-week-long conversation was to share our collective findings about how oral history can play a transformative role in bringing to light "difficult dialogues" and conversations that would otherwise be lost in situations of ongoing conflict.

The working group is deeply grateful to the Hollings Center, and especially for the vision and leadership of Dr. George Gavrilis, in understanding the importance of strengthening oral history as a global field of scholars and practitioners engaged in documenting and interpreting conflict and its impact on people, communities, and societies around the world. We are similarly indebted to Sanem Güner and Daniel Duffy, who organized the Istanbul dialogue that inspired us to continue our conversations on how to link oral historians doing human rights work around the world.

Introduction to Oral History

FIELD AND MOVEMENT

Oral history is the practice of collecting, preserving, interpreting, and curating individual, social, and collective experiences in story form. The practice of telling, recording, and writing drawn from oral stories, performances, and other narrative forms dates back at least to Herodotus and is probably an activity as old as language itself. The modern evolution of oral history as practice can be traced back to the 1930s and '40s and the invention of the portable recorder. The subsequent development of the field of oral history, beginning in the 1970s, was characterized by a rich international collaboration of scholars from anthropology, folklore, sociology, history, psychology, linguistics, and literature, who turned to the creation and investigation of oral sources to deepen their work. Because of the rapid expansion of oral history across the world, and the interest of oral historians in social and political change and advocacy, oral history has often been written about as a movement as well as an academic field of practice. Indeed, the number of large oral history archives created around the world and the increasing use and teaching of oral history as a scholarly practice are visible legacies of the 20th century oral history movement and its burgeoning field.

ROLE OF ORAL HISTORY IN CONFLICT AND IN PRESENT TIMES

As the memory of a turbulent 20th century was punctuated by increasing violence, conflict, and rapid social and economic change, 21st century leaders in the field of oral history have become increasingly aware of the potential role oral history must play in documenting change and conflict in our times. One focus of this orientation ensures that people (and communities) whose voices are suppressed, and who have little access to media and other forums, are treated as full historical subjects. A second focus of using oral history to understand the nature of conflict and change is the very valuable use of oral history for analyzing patterns of conflict as they emerge in narrative form, as well probing the silences that fragment narratives and prevent the transmission of oral stories, rituals, and performances into popular as well a historical memory.

Across the disciplines, and throughout communities around the world, there is recognition that language itself—in its aural, visual, performative, and written form—is the purest source of meaning and transmission of meaning over generations. Oral history, a linguistic and dialogic event, is one of the most acutely sensitive instruments we have to understand the complex causes, as well as the consequences, of human conflicts. As oral history is attuned to the creation and transmission of meaning and memory, it evokes new ways of hearing and provides us with the potential to reimagine the future based on new understandings of the past.

GENRES OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is a complex and multi-vocal genre (Portelli) in which multiple perspectives, ideologies, and narratives create a mosaic of memory that reveals the tensions within the remembered past as well as the enduring conflicts of our times. The interview, based on knowledge and earned trust, takes different forms in different cultural settings but is characterized by several core characteristics:

1. The quality of the relationship between the interviewer and narrator, which is characterized by openness, equality, and a joint interest in the creation of stories. Oral history is an encounter, an exchange of ideas, values, and meaning, made richer by the length and quality of the relationship over time.
2. The movement of stories through time, resulting in the creation of rich historical narratives that reveal the transformations of the past into the present and the present into the future.
3. The crystallization of memories into narratives with distinctive forms—whether told, written, or performed—that transmits meaning, or reveals the loss of meaning, over time.
4. The creation and re-creation of narratives, rich in explanatory power, that stimulate new historical consciousness and understanding across lines of social and cultural difference, locally as well as globally. These narratives require analysis and interpretation, and writing about them reminds us that oral history is a writing genre as well as an oral performance.[1]

Stories come in many different forms: oral performances, plays, jokes, life narratives, dreams, testimonies, community narratives, and oral traditions passed down over generations. The function of all these genres of telling is to transform experience into knowledge that can then be shared in a wider community.

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But there are at least three forms of oral history that have been used by the creators of this Guide:

1. life narratives: where the life story can illustrate the complex ways in which myth, ideology, culture, and memory meet;
2. community narratives: where identity is invested in the stories that are told, and those that must not be told, and where the identity of the community is more primary than the life story; and
3. cultural memories: in which the form of the telling, whether as song, poetry, jokes, performances, or ritual, is critical to understanding the multiple ways that people remember the past.

In the field of oral history as it has developed over the last half-century, we have seen the multiple uses of these forms, often in conjunction with each other, to develop a multilayered understanding of conflict and change.

"Oral history methodology gives voice to marginal groups in Turkey, who had been forced to assimilate, the means to preserve their history, culture, identity, and memory for future generations, thereby breaking the hegemony of state historiography."

—Ramazan Aras

The Possibilities of Oral History in Situations of Conflict

By S. Mohammad Mohaqqeq

Oral history is a process that enables people normally ignored in written histories to speak their minds and share their experiences. In other words, it's a different way of understanding the "past" while encouraging all people to take their part in shaping the future. What follows is an outline of oral history's possibilities in situations of conflict:

- There are many untold stories in situations of conflict that are ignored by the mainstream media and traditional research approaches. Oral history has the power to reveal the nuances of stories that will otherwise go unheard.
- Oral history builds trust. Trust encourages those who suffer most in situations of conflict to tell their stories. Victims' narratives can have a tremendous impact on the conscience of the public, worldwide.
- Despite the risks and sensitivities to interviewing people in complex contexts—where age, gender, ethnicity, and other identities require deep understanding—oral history has a clear role to play in integrating multiple voices and reconstructing the history of a country in conflict.
- Oral history methodology can reconstruct an individual's attitude and identity where that identity has been suppressed. Afghan women were forgotten in the country's history for many years, or depicted in cowardly ways, and thus internalized the belief that "women have no agency." This notion has been reified through official education without many alternative or competing narratives. Through oral history, women can create their own narratives and fill this gap.
- Oral history also has the power to reconstruct social beliefs. The dominant culture of patriarchy in a country like Afghanistan (made worse by war and civil unrest) has limited women's participation in the public sphere. Through reclaiming their voices, women will take greater leadership roles in society.
- In situations of war and violence, parties to conflict have a narrative and counter-narrative that reflects their politics and ideologies; oral history provides an alternative for those who are impacted by violence to create their own narratives. Experiences in Afghanistan show that many perpetrators of violence who have had the chance of hearing from the victims have changed their attitudes or regretted their actions.
- In Islamic culture there is a concept called "Hadith-e-Nafs" (the story of the soul), which is when a person thinks deeply about him/herself. Oral history can make this silence speak and help both the narrator and the audience rethink their own, and others', identities.
- Oral history is a form of literature and provides a unique source of stories that can be rewritten and offered as pieces of literature for future generations. Situations of conflict are full of stories worth rewriting and offering as pieces of literature.
- Oral history's multidisciplinary nature as a method, and its uses beyond archiving, provides a unique source for stories. Policy makers in post-conflict countries can use the literature for integration, peace building, and identity construction.

THE USES OF ORAL HISTORY IN SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT, AND BEYOND

The group of us that gathered to meet in Istanbul, and later in New York, began by acknowledging and defining the complications of using oral history in situations of ongoing conflict, and beyond. Types of conflict we considered included: situations of humanitarian emergency, intra-ethnic conflict, state-sponsored violence, armed conflicts, conflicts over land and territory, intimate personal violence that is related to state control and hierarchies of power, ethno-religious and sectarian violence, repression of free speech and access to the rule of law, and of course, nationalism, and more.

We feel that it is important to emphasize that all situations of conflict require extraordinary vigilance on the part of the oral historian, the ethnographer, the journalist, and the human rights worker as they seek to learn from people who have already been deeply traumatized. Philip Sandick, a graduate of Columbia's master's program in oral history and a student of human rights law at Northwestern University in the United States, is working with The Hague to develop a Public Interviewing Guide that acknowledges the damage that is often done by well-meaning human rights workers who do not know how to work with traumatized people. He argues that oral history methodology should be at the center of that effort.[2]

Writing this Guide we have discovered that oral history and ethnography are comparable disciplines in situations of conflict and are ideally used in close relation to each other. Literature

is essential for understanding the patterns of meaning conveyed in unique linguistic ways, in dialectical forms, and in poetry and performance. Human rights work that builds upon indigenous rituals and communal forms of meaning making in traditional ways is essential to build upon. Oral history does not stand alone as a discipline. In fact, its success is dependent on the many different contexts and practices in which we use it. This Guide is an effort to illuminate some of those and to invite a more global consideration of its potential uses.

We believe that through applying oral history principles to situations of ongoing conflict, and to post-conflict societies, oral history can help:

1. document roots and patterns of conflict in local and regional geographies invisible on a national or global scale;
2. reveal lost or suppressed narratives that, taken together, complicate the idea of a single historical narrative; and
3. use these new understandings and create historical dialogues that address the past and enable new visions of the future.

CASE STUDY

The Iraqi Oral History Project

The "Iraqi Oral History Project," sponsored through TAARII and led by Lucine Taminian, is one of the best examples we have of an oral history project that has succeeded despite many obstacles and complications. For that reason we use it as a model of how to engage with questions about language, the insider/outsider question, and confidentiality and protection considered in this Guide. What follows is a description of the historical context and background of the Iraqi Oral History Project, along with some lessons learned.

By Lucine Taminian:
Since its formation as a modern state in 1921, Iraq has experienced major political, economic, social, and cultural transformations. These transformations range from periods of prosperity and tranquility to ethnic strife, large-scale revolution, and foreign interventions. Key events include the 1948 mass protests, the 1958 revolution that ended the Hashemite monarchy, the rise to power of the Ba` ath Party in the 1960s, and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1973. More recent events include the rise of Saddam Hussein, a decade-long war with Iran in the 1980s, the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the economic sanctions throughout the 1990s, the 2003 invasion and occupation, and the withdrawal of American troops at the end of 2011.

The Iraqi Oral History Project of The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII), a consortium of American universities, was inspired initially by the input from audience members during a 2005 conference that TAARII cosponsored in Amman, Jordan, on Iraqi identity. In response to the formal historical presentations of the conferees, audience members—senior Iraqi men and women who had been ministers and administrators, ambassadors, and educators from the days of the kingdom until the last days of Saddam Hussein—inserted comments and corrections. Their remarks demonstrated that the personal accounts of people who took part in the events that shaped the country were essential to the telling of the history of modern Iraq. After a pilot project, TAARII received National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding in 2007 to expand its oral history project. To date, we have collected 180 interviews with Iraqis living in six different countries (Canada, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, the United States, and Yemen). We interviewed Iraqis who migrated to Jordon and other places after decades of political unrest, and who had chosen to silence their own memories of the coups, oppression, torture, wars, sanctions, invasion, and sectarian conflict. They were afraid to talk about such "events" for fear that their narratives might endanger the lives of their family members who remained in Iraq, expose their own political stands and the role they played in these events, or jeopardize their applications for resettlement in a third country. In this situation of post-conflict and diaspora, where traumatic experience is a closely held story, *telling* a life or community story is fraught by constraints. When asked about their own memories of these events, they would present the "official" narrative. However, when we asked about the *impact* of these events on their own lives, their families, and their communities, the narrators talked much more freely.

Cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the conflict setting were crucial in deciding which questions could be covered and which could not. For instance, asking direct questions about sectarian relations during the sectarian conflict that followed the invasion of Iraq could have led to mistrust.

As the project design suggests, specific terms used to describe or refer to the conflict were crucial.

Even naming the conflict was deeply sensitive.

> *Some narrators might refer to the March 2003 events in Iraq as an "invasion"; others might call it "liberation." The term that we choose to use can affect the interview.*

Another difficult problem in the Iraqi Oral History Project was that any interviewer, insider or outsider, might be distrusted. Insiders might be biased and might represent political positions and identities of certain sides of the conflict. Narrators might find it easier and "safer" to talk to outsiders in order to avoid potential betrayals or use of information for personal purposes. On the other hand, outsiders might lack the necessary cultural sensitivity and language skills. Outsiders need to establish shared ground, which can be brought in via training if they have the language skills. If not, it might be easier to train an insider.

The Jordanian interviewers involved in documenting the life stories of Iraqis could be regarded as half insiders and half outsiders. They are insiders with regard to their language skills, as Iraqi Arabic and Jordanian Arabic are similar, but outsiders with regard to their cultural sensitivity. Their training program included training not only in techniques of conducting interviews and methods of transcribing and documenting interviews, but also in Iraqi culture and history.

Because safety and confidentiality were serious issues in the Iraqi Oral History Project, it was decided that the interviewers themselves should transcribe their interviews in order to minimize the number of people who had access to the narratives. In preparing the interviews for archiving and use by "foreign" scholars, the texts were edited at times from the Iraqi dialect terms to the more familiar classical Arabic forms. Lastly, a decision had to be made about how to "archive" the stories. For two main reasons, we decided to make the life stories collected in the Iraqi Oral History Project public by archiving them in a library in the United States and opening them to scholars interested in the sociocultural and political history of Iraq: (1) the limited understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of Iraqis during the past five decades; and (2) the lack of written documentation on what has transpired in Iraq due to the looting of the National Library and Archives in 2003.

However, our measures to ensure the safety of the narrators have contradicted the legal conditions for archiving life stories. For example, we did not collect consent forms in order to avoid having participants attach their names to their narratives.

Setting Research Goals and Building a Project Design

Interviewing can be a profound and transformative experience for both the oral historian and the narrator. It is also a complex and detail-oriented process. Preparation and keen awareness of context, in every area, is key to the success of work in conflict settings. In this section, we present essential components for each phase of the oral history project, from preparation to dissemination.

PROJECT DESIGN

In general, planning a project to collect life histories and community stories in conflict settings involves establishing general and specific research goals and objectives, taking into account the explicit context of conflict.

The project design answers at least three questions:

What is it that you want to cover?

The purpose of a project design is to identify the key historical periods where there are gaps in historical knowledge and to prioritize the subjects you want to learn about on a general level.

What does the history you record mean to those who lived through it?

Oral history is devoted to the mission of understanding the "meaning" of historical experience: personal, social, and cultural. In this sense we are interested in *why* events and experiences are remembered and the meaning they have been assigned, as well as the silences and absences in narratives where memory has been repressed, distorted, or destroyed.

What is the long-term purpose of your research?

Knowing what you want to accomplish, and how you want to use the stories and memories you gather, defines your work from the beginning and will guarantee greater success.

arch Goals an

PROJECT DESIGN ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
Define clear research goals	• What do you "not yet know" about the situation of conflict or post-conflict situation that oral history will allow you to discover? • What are the central historical and cultural questions that will help open up new understandings? • What questions cannot be asked, and why?
Define the nature of the conflict or post-conflict situation	• What is the nature of the conflict, or post-conflict situation, you will be working in? • How will that situation affect your ability to apply your research goals in the short and long term? • How will the situation affect the ability of the people you interview to speak freely?
Establish the timeframe for your project and for the temporal span of your work	• When is the ideal time to conduct interviews, during active conflict or when the conflict is over? • Plan for how long you think your work will realistically take. • Consider developing a longitudinal approach so that you can demonstrate the ways that the conflict and the memory of the conflict are reshaped over time. • Plan how many interview sessions you will need to conduct with different individuals within a project to achieve depth as well as diversity.
Establish the themes and topics of your work	• Oral history narratives are organized around themes and topics. • The more clearly you identify the themes that you are most interested in, the better the interview will flow. • Keep track of the themes that the narrators bring up naturally and incorporate these into your project design.
Select project personnel	• Consider the traits of the ideal interviewer/ethnographer. • When is it important to select an insider and when is it essential to select an outsider? • Will the people you select need explicit training? • Plan to develop a team approach to evaluating interviewers and sharing positive and negative experiences throughout your project work.
What about language?	• Consider the language and dialects you will encounter. • Oral history gives precedence to the original language of the narrator whenever possible. • If possible, select interviewers who speak the original languages and dialects. • If you plan to transcribe the interviews, will you translate them for a public audience? • How will you work with your narrators to respect their choices about the final products?

PROJECT DESIGN ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
Define the research community; develop criteria for inclusion and exclusion of communities	• Are you planning to include both sides of the conflict? • Are you planning to interview "perpetrators" as well as "victims? In human rights work there is often heated discussion about this issue. • What historical, cultural criteria will you use to include/exclude communities and individuals? • How will you make selections, and how will you explain your selections to others?
Determine the transcription, translation process	• What transcription policy will be followed? Complete, or partial? • Transcription is a translation of the oral into a written text. Punctuation marks are often used in transcriptions to make the text more readable and to try to capture the pauses, silences, intonations, and tones. Transcription is a representation and interpretation of the oral text. To keep the flow of the interview, any notes or annotations should be included as footnotes rather than in the text itself. Transcriptions should include the questions that were asked during the interviews in order to contextualize the responses. • Consider the risks of having an outsider perform the transcription. • If you are using a translator, how will you train him or her to work closely with you to understand not only the words said, but the meaning of the stories and the way in which they are told? • Who has control over the editing decisions?
Choose your recorder *Choose your technology*	• Choose your recording technology. • Choose the best equipment you can afford. Recording quality matters. • Quality recording technologies are now very affordable. See Endnote 3 (Doug Boyd, "Ask Doug") for assistance choosing a digital audio recorder. • Whatever recorder or camera you choose, learn to use it well. Read the manual and practice. • Audio or video? Audio will be more portable and affordable to preserve and will require fewer logistical considerations. Video will create more logistical considerations, making you less portable and mobile, but it adds the visual dimension, which can be very powerful. Carefully consider your intended outcomes and your budget when choosing between audio and video. (See "Audio or Video for Recording Oral History" in Technology Resources.) • Consider whether you will be recording in controlled environments or if you will you need a mobile, portable solution. In certain circumstances, portability, battery life, and durability may be necessary. • Microphones: Choose suitable microphones for the recording environment and for your recorder. There is no perfect recorder for all situations. Consider a variety of microphone types for a variety of situations. Dynamic microphones are generally more durable. Condenser microphones are more sensitive, but they are also more fragile. (See "Understanding Microphones" in Technology Resources.) • See Bibliography/Resources page for additional resources.

PROJECT DESIGN ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
What are the ethics that will guide your work?	• Oral history is an ethical process, respecting the rights and dignity of all persons. • The key issue in interviewing vulnerable people is to gain their consent. This means explaining to them all the risks that are involved so that they can make a clear decision about whether to be interviewed. • A clear principle of oral history is to inform people of their rights to the recordings you create, and to get their approval to use those recordings.
What are the risks, to those you interview and to yourself?	• What will be the benefits of participation? Will they outweigh the risks? Outline the risks and benefits specifically. • When interviewing people at grave risk, it is necessary to mask the identities of those you interview, to secure the information you record on encrypted software, and to store the files in a secure place. • Consider that a recorded oral consent may be safer than a written consent. • Consider the risk the interview itself poses to the narrator and the interviewer. Make a safety plan and warn your narrator of the dangers. • The project must also consider the safety and emotional well-being of the interviewers, who will be deeply affected by the stories they hear. Create a plan to meet the needs of the interviewers to debrief and recover from difficult work.

Fieldwork

As we described in the introduction to this Guide, oral history fieldwork is flexible in form and adaptable to many different contexts. Sometimes we cannot understand big events without the life story, through which the human cost of events are measured. But in some cases, the life story has little meaning without the community or cultural story. Many oral historians around the world call this "cultural memory work."

COLOMBIA

"Our methodology allows us to do research on multiple origins of conflict, both civil and national. Through this approach we can recover the memories that have been erased by rival groups."

—Claudia P. González Perez

"The collective narration of the story of female victims enables greater understanding of women's perspectives on the origins of armed conflict in Colombia and enriches the language of human rights activists regarding women's issues."

—Claudia P. González Perez

MEMORY IS ME: MEMORY, BODY, TERRITORY

Claudia P. González Perez is an indigenous feminist human rights worker at the center La Casa de la Mujer in Colombia who uses oral history with individual women who have experienced forced displacement, massacres, the disappearance of family members, and intimate violence to build a collective story. *Memory is me: memory, body, territory* is a program that was developed by La Casa de la Mujer in 2010 to help women victims of violence connect to each other in the project of developing historical memory. Women are invited to tell their stories and place them on maps, connecting the history of their body narratives to the territories they are from. The goal is to integrate the memory of body and territory while enabling women to learn from each other's experiences. To protect confidentiality, the women tell "fictional stories" they elaborate together and then collectively analyze. In doing so they "recover" their histories literally and metaphorically—always acknowledging their shared experiences and relationship to their land and their bodies, as they sing, dance, and tell their stories.

TURKEY

Considering issues of security and risks is a matter of daily life in Turkey, where armed clashes occur between the state forces and the PKK guerillas (the Kurdistan Workers Party). A major challenge for oral historians is how to engage with the various groups of Kurds in narrating their own experiences of conflict.

In Turkey, Ramazan Aras works in community settings where there is active conflict, and the histories of "perpetrators" and "victims" are shared by virtue of living on the same land. His research involves working with both sides of a protracted conflict in which the story of a particular individual may or may not be eclipsed by the community story.

"Oral history as a methodology for creating multi-vocal histories provides a new ground for counter-narratives and histories. Hegemonic powers operate as surveillance apparatuses to ensure that their acts of violence against one group do not reach another group victim in the same region. In this context, oral history emerges as an instrument for connecting these groups. The labor of sharing their stories with each other and disseminating their stories and testimonies can be therapeutic. Therefore, oral history can play a crucial role in the process of democratization of history writing and of the political system in Turkey."

—Ramazan Aras

INTERVIEW ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
Establish rapport	• It is important to gain the trust of the narrator, a stranger with whom the interviewer wants to engage in a dialogue in order to have a "successful" interview. • Negotiate with her/him the flow of the interview, when to take a rest, and when to record and not to record.
Create transparency	• To gain the trust of the narrator, the interviewer should be transparent about the project, including its aims and future plans for dissemination. • The interviewer should accept challenges and questions raised by the narrators. • The interviewer should go through the steps of the oral history process and explain the narrator's rights.
Choose the location of the interview thoughtfully	• Setting can influence what is said. People tell the story differently each time; their story is shaped by the context of the act of telling, including who is doing the interview, where, when, and who else is present during the interview, besides the interviewer and the narrator. • It is crucial to negotiate the time and the setting with the interviewers, and to respect their schedule. • Ideally, the setting should be a space where there is some degree of privacy.
Be sensitive to nuance and context	• Cultural sensitivity and knowledge of the narrator and his/her linguistic forms of narration are important to earn respect and engage with her/him in rewarding dialogue.
Be aware of "official" or prepared stories	• Narrators, especially if they belong to marginalized social groups, are in general unaware of the importance of their own experiences of conflict and, when asked, tend to tell the "official" account or a prepared story. • If aware of official accounts or prepared stories that might be circulating among the research community, the interviewer can ask questions that move the conversation to other directions and make the narrator feel that they are in a position of power and have valuable information: "I want to learn something about . . . Teach me about it."
Structure the interview	• The skilled interviewer can negotiate the movements back and forth through time, across topics, and between personal and institutional histories to create a sense of a seamless story in which the narrator is always the focus of the interaction.

INTERVIEW ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
Use good questions	• Choose language very carefully, trying to avoid terms and ideas that are provocative. • Begin with an open-ended question or series of questions. • Ask follow-up questions that directly relate to the stories and ideas the narrator has already conveyed: for example: "You just mentioned that the land was once yours and when it was it seemed so peaceful. Can you tell me more about that?" • Be sensitive to experiences, both individual and cultural, that are too painful to be articulated, and respect the silences that exist. When trust builds, people will open up naturally. • Focus on the specific and the general, and try to maintain a balance between the two. When the narrator becomes too specific, move to the general, and when she or he becomes too general, ask for a specific story or incident. • Move the interview temporally, and ask narrators to reflect on how the passage of time affects their memories and the meaning they hold.
Probing vs. interruption	• Narrators enjoy talking about things of importance and of interest to them that may not interest the interviewer. • Do not interrupt the narrator. Interrupting the narrative flow will shift the narrative into an investigative style. Once the narrator stops, ask about topics of interest to you and/or something said prior, for more details or clarification.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION

It is crucial to create an implementation plan for each phase of your work, from research to interviewing to the documentation and processing of the oral histories you conduct. Document each phase of your work, including project planning.

Some important considerations:

1. Name interviewing files according to narrator name (or code #), date of interview, and time of recording. Include the name of the interviewer.
2. Keep tracking information of those whom you have interviewed or reached out to in the phases of your project, especially if you may go back to them over time.
3. Listen to the recordings within 1 or 2 days after the interview is over. Identify the themes and the topics that are resonant across the interviews and create a summary.
4. Evaluate your successes, and your failures, at regular points in the process through applying an evaluation procedure, and adjust your project design accordingly.
5. Document your findings: write regular reports on your progress that you can share with funders or supporters.

PRESERVING MEMORY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Digital technologies have transformed our ability to record professional-quality interviews in the field with affordable and portable audio and video equipment. However, digital technologies have complicated the curation of recorded interviews immensely.

- The data files you create using digital audio and video recorders are fragile and complex entities stored on media that will eventually change or break down.
- The shifting technological landscape will eventually render the formats you are creating today obsolete and therefore unplayable.
- Digital curation is an ongoing process to ensure future access and minimize the chances of data file corruption. This is accomplished by creating redundancy, monitoring data file integrity, and implementing a plan for future migration.

CURATION IN CONTEXT

If you are not an archivist or an archival institution, our strongest recommendation is for you to partner with an archival institution *before* you begin conducting interviews.

- Consider the curatorial phase of your project during the initial project planning stages.
- Once this archival relationship is built, it is vitally important that the chosen institution curate your collection in context. Make sure that the archival institution/partner has clearly articulated protocols for managing collections such as the one you will be creating.
- Interviews recorded in conflict and post-conflict environments may require special attention to restrict access or protect identity. If possible, mutually agree to those protocols before beginning your project.
- Work together with your archival institution so that they understand that the curation of your collection may require additional attention or protections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Make multiple copies of your interview and store those copies in multiple places.*
- *Maintain the original.*
- *Stay away from proprietary formats.*
- *Understand your formats:* Digital audio and video formats are made up of multiple elements. Understanding the elements is key to future playability and compatibility.
- *Pay attention to best practices.*
- *Avoid unnecessary compression of audio. Understand video compression.*
- *Overwhelm the future with metadata:* Knowledge is power. Make sure that oral history collections are well documented with administrative, technical, and descriptive metadata to empower future archivists to handle your digital assets.
- *Partnership:* Partner with an archival institution that has the most current capabilities in digital preservation. If you use a vendor, confirm that the system that you adopt is in line with standards and is implemented utilizing vendor-independent standards. Have an exit plan: can you take your data with you when you leave or if the vendor goes out of business?

UNDERSTANDING AND DISSEMINATING VOICES

The digital age has dramatically changed the potential for access and dissemination of oral history materials. Digital technologies have freed oral history from the constraints of the printed page, yielding the potential for large-scale access to individual interviews. Instant access can come at a profound cost. Oral histories typically contain a massive amount of personal and sometimes controversial information, which can put a narrator at enormous risk from a privacy perspective.

- The repository approach focuses on providing access to entire interviews.
- Providing access to entire interviews can be risky from the perspective of protecting a narrator's privacy
- Work with your archival partner to determine whether or not interviews in an archive should be embargoed or if digital access should be restricted.
- Audio and video editing tools are both free and easy to use, providing exciting opportunities.
- Excerpting or providing edited access can achieve the goals of amplifying stories in the short term, while simultaneously attenuating risk to the narrator.
- Simply putting excerpts online at a website does not constitute a long-term preservation or archival plan.
- Interviews that contain privacy risk should be restricted from access in an archival system dedicated to protecting access and curating the collection from the digital preservation perspective.

Oral history collections, once used only a few times a year by serious researchers in an archive, can now be accessed hundreds or even thousands of times by a range of users worldwide. This exciting transformation in digital dissemination of oral histories and related publications is energizing. Projects can be designed in such a way as to have an immediate impact on the historical record. The powerful capabilities we now have for disseminating oral histories worldwide can put narrators at great risk from a privacy perspective. Digital tools can be used to "re-edit" voices to tell unintended stories. Once in the digital domain, the potential for decontextualized use and even misuse of a recorded interview can be great. Instant access to oral history interviews may serve your short-terms purposes as project manager or scholar but may prove harmful in the long view to those whose stories you so diligently recorded and ethically try to represent. This is a heavy responsibility that must be carefully considered. Work with an archival partner who understands the contextual and cultural implications of providing future access to your collection and proactively engage archival partners in a long-term access plan for your collection.

CONCLUSION

Stories, like experience, are never finished and reflect fragments as well as patterns of meaning, the distortions of meaning, and the impacts of violence on people, cultures, and communities. The increasing use of oral history in our times demonstrates the value of understanding the meaning of conflict and change in the time that it is happening. This Guide is written in part to warn those who intend to work in zones of conflict about the very real dangers and limits inherent there, and of the importance of safeguards and ethical principles that must be followed to protect both the interviewers and the narrators. But it is also an argument—crafted by committed oral historians and ethnographers working in human rights contexts—for oral history to explore human connections across the divisions that arbitrarily separate us, to rebuild communities and connections between communities wherever and whenever we can. Our hope for change is based on voices and dreams of those we have interviewed, and many we could not.

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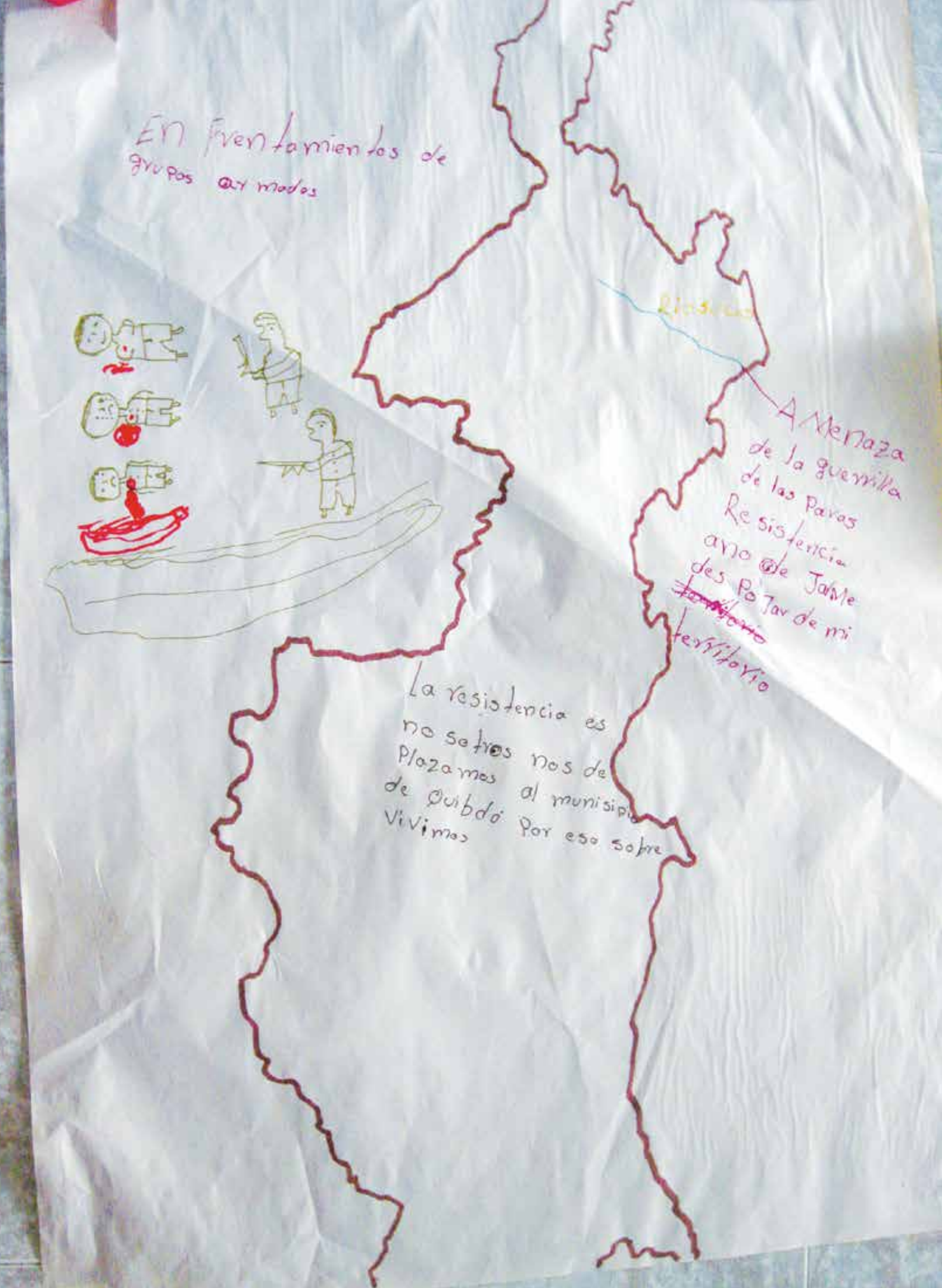
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de Quibdó Por eso sobre
Vivimos

ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

Principles and Best Practices

Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History

Adopted October, 2009

PRINT

The **Principles and Best Practices for Oral History** update and replace the Oral History Evaluation Guidelines adopted in 1989, revised in 2000.

Introduction

Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and to the product of that process. It begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee (also referred to as narrator), both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past. A verbal document, the oral history, results from this process and is preserved and made available in different forms to other users, researchers, and the public. A critical approach to the oral testimony and interpretations are necessary in the use of oral history.

The Oral History Association encourages individuals and institutions involved with the creation and preservation of oral histories to uphold certain principles, professional and technical standards, and obligations. These include commitments to the narrators, to standards of scholarship for history and related disciplines, and to the preservation of the interviews and related materials for current and future users.

Recognizing that clear and concise guide can be useful to all practitioners of oral history, the Oral History Association has since 1968 published a series of statements aimed at outlining a set of principles and obligations for all those who use this methodology. A history of these earlier statements, and a record of the individuals involved in producing them, is available to download.

Building on those earlier documents, but representing changes in an evolving field, the OHA now offers General Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History as summaries of the organization's most important principles and best practices for the pre-interview preparation, the conduct of the interview, and the preservation and use of oral histories. These documents are not intended to be an inclusive primer on oral history; for that there are numerous manuals, guidebooks, and theoretical discussions. For the readers' convenience, a bibliography of resources is provided online at the Oral History Association website.

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General Principles for Oral History

Oral history is distinguished from other forms of interviews by its content and extent. Oral history interviews seek an in-depth account of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the narrators to

give their story the fullness they desire. The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events.

Oral historians inform narrators about the nature and purpose of oral history interviewing in general and of their interview specifically. Oral historians insure that narrators voluntarily give their consent to be interviewed and understand that they can withdraw from the interview or refuse to answer a question at any time. Narrators may give this consent by signing a consent form or by recording an oral statement of consent prior to the interview. All interviews are conducted in accord with the stated aims and within the parameters of the consent.

Interviewees hold the copyright to their interviews until and unless they transfer those rights to an individual or institution. This is done by the interviewee signing a release form or in exceptional circumstances recording an oral statement to the same effect. Interviewers must insure that narrators understand the extent of their rights to the interview and the request that those rights be yielded to a repository or other party, as well as their right to put restrictions on the use of the material. All use and dissemination of the interview content must follow any restrictions the narrator places upon it.

Oral historians respect the narrators as well as the integrity of the research. Interviewers are obliged to ask historically significant questions, reflecting careful preparation for the interview and understanding of the issues to be addressed. Interviewers must also respect the narrators' equal authority in the interviews and honor their right to respond to questions in their own style and language. In the use of interviews, oral historians strive for intellectual honesty and the best application of the skills of their discipline, while avoiding stereotypes, misrepresentations, or manipulations of the narrators' words.

Because of the importance of context and identity in shaping the content of an oral history narrative, it is the practice in oral history for narrators to be identified by name. There may be some exceptional circumstances when anonymity is appropriate, and this should be negotiated in advance with the narrator as part of the informed consent process.

Oral history interviews are historical documents that are preserved and made accessible to future researchers and members of the public. This preservation and access may take a variety of forms, reflecting changes in technology. But, in choosing a repository or form, oral historians consider how best to preserve the original recording and any transcripts made of it and to protect the accessibility and usability of the interview. The plan for preservation and access, including any possible dissemination through the web or other media, is stated in the informed consent process and on release forms.

In keeping with the goal of long term preservation and access, oral historians should use the best recording equipment available within the limits of their financial resources.

Interviewers must take care to avoid making promises that cannot be met, such as guarantees of control over interpretation and presentation of the interviews beyond the scope of restrictions stated in informed consent/release forms, suggestions of material benefit outside the control of the interviewer, or assurances of an open ended relationship between the narrator and oral historian.

Top

Best Practices for Oral History

Pre-Interview

1. Whether conducting their own research or developing an institutional project, first time interviewers and others involved in oral history projects should seek training to prepare themselves for all stages of the oral history process.

2. In the early stages of preparation, interviewers should make contact with an appropriate repository that has the capacity to preserve the oral histories and make them accessible to the public.

3. Oral historians or others responsible for planning the oral history project should choose potential narrators based on the relevance of their experiences to the subject at hand.

4. To prepare to ask informed questions, interviewers should conduct background research on the person, topic, and larger context in both primary and secondary sources

5. When ready to contact a possible narrator, oral historians should send via regular mail or email an introductory letter outlining the general focus and purpose of the interview, and then follow-up with either a phone call or a return email. In projects involving groups in which literacy is not the norm, or when other conditions make it appropriate, participation may be solicited via face to face meetings.

6. After securing the narrator's agreement to be interviewed, the interviewer should schedule a non-recorded meeting. This pre-interview session will allow an exchange of information between interviewer and narrator on possible questions/topics, reasons for conducting the interview, the process that will be involved, and the need for informed consent and legal release forms. During pre-interview discussion the interviewer should make sure that the narrator understands:

*oral history's purposes and procedures in general and of the proposed interview's aims and anticipated uses.
*his or her rights to the interviews including editing, access restrictions, copyrights, prior use, royalties, and the expected disposition and dissemination of all forms of the record, including the potential distribution electronically or on-line.
*that his or her recording(s) will remain confidential until he or she has given permission via a signed legal release.

7. Oral historians should use the best digital recording equipment within their means to reproduce the narrator's voice accurately and, if appropriate, other sounds as well as visual images. Before the interview, interviewers should become familiar with the equipment and be knowledgeable about its function.

8. Interviewers should prepare an outline of interview topics and questions to use as a guide to the recorded dialogue.

Interview
1. Unless part of the oral history process includes gathering soundscapes, historically significant sound events, or ambient noise, the interview should be conducted in a quiet room with minimal background noises and possible distractions.

2. The interviewer should record a "lead" at the beginning of each session to help focus his or her and the narrator's thoughts to each session's goals. The "lead" should consist of, at least, the names of narrator and interviewer, day and year of session, interview's location, and proposed subject of the recording.

3. Both parties should agree to the approximate length of the interview in advance. The interviewer is responsible for assessing whether the narrator is becoming tired and at that point should ask if the latter wishes to continue. Although most interviews last about two hours, if the narrator wishes to continue those wishes should be honored, if possible.

4. Along with asking creative and probing questions and listening to the answers to ask better follow-up questions, the interviewer should keep the following items in mind:
• interviews should be conducted in accord with any prior agreements made with narrator, which should be documented for the record.
• interviewers should work to achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of the interviewees. Interviewers should fully explore all appropriate areas of inquiry with interviewees and not be satisfied with superficial responses. At the same time, they should encourage narrators to respond to questions in their own style and language and to address issues that reflect their concerns.
• interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose anonymity. Interviewers should clearly explain these options to all interviewees.
• interviewers should attempt to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others.
• in recognition of the importance of oral history to an understanding of the past and of the cost and effort involved, interviewers and interviewees should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value.

5. The interviewer should secure a release form, by which the narrator transfers his or her rights to the interview to the repository or designated body, signed after each recording session or at the end of the last interview with

the narrator.

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Post Interview

1. Interviewers, sponsoring institutions, and institutions charged with the preservation of oral history interviews should understand that appropriate care and storage of original recordings begins immediately after their creation.

2. Interviewers should document their preparation and methods, including the circumstances of the interviews and provide that information to whatever repository will be preserving and providing access to the interview.

3. Information deemed relevant for the interpretation of the oral history by future users, such as photographs, documents, or other records should be collected, and archivists should make clear to users the availability and connection of these materials to the recorded interview.

4. The recordings of the interviews should be stored, processed, refreshed and accessed according to established archival standards designated for the media format used. Whenever possible, all efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are cross platform and nonproprietary. Finally, the obsolescence of all media formats should be assumed and planned for.

5. In order to augment the accessibility of the interview, repositories should make transcriptions, indexes, time tags, detailed descriptions or other written guides to the contents.

6. Institutions charged with the preservation and access of oral history interviews should honor the stipulations of prior agreements made with the interviewers or sponsoring institutions including restrictions on access and methods of distribution.

7. The repository should comply to the extent to which it is aware with the letter and spirit of the interviewee's agreement with the interviewer and sponsoring institution. If written documentation such as consent and release forms does not exist then the institution should make a good faith effort to contact interviewees regarding their intent. When media become available that did not exist at the time of the interview, those working with oral history should carefully assess the applicability of the release to the new formats and proceed—or not—accordingly.

8. All those who use oral history interviews should strive for intellectual honesty and the best application of the skills of their discipline. They should avoid stereotypes, misrepresentations, and manipulations of the narrator's words. This includes foremost striving to retain the integrity of the narrator's perspective, recognizing the subjectivity of the interview, and interpreting and contextualizing the narrative according to the professional standards of the applicable scholarly disciplines. Finally, if a project deals with community history, the interviewer should be sensitive to the community, taking care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes. Interviewers should strive to make the interviews accessible to the community and where appropriate to include representatives of the community in public programs or presentations of the oral history material.

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