

## Section 1

# Reflections on women's words



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# Introduction to Section 1

## Reflections on women's words

*Linda Shopes*

The obvious questions to ask when reading *Beyond Women's Words* are in what ways do the essays go “beyond” the earlier eponymous volume and what do these “beyonds” tell us about changes in feminist oral history, or as the subtitle of the previous volume put it, “the feminist practice of oral history,” in the intervening quarter-plus century? The five chapters in this first section suggest some answers, not incidentally because three of them are written by scholars whose work also appeared in the first *Women's Words*.<sup>1</sup> It is to these we turn first.

The section begins appropriately enough with Katherine Borland's reprise of her original *Women's Words* contribution, “That's Not What I Said.” In that chapter, she discussed how she and her grandmother, Beatrice Hanson, resolved disagreement over Borland's interpretation of her interview with Hanson, particularly her imposition of a feminist analysis on certain elements of Hanson's story, a perspective and a movement with which Hanson did not identify. The chapter raised important questions about interpretive authority in oral history, and while Borland maintained that oral historians need not have their work “validated by our research collaborators,” she did conclude by suggesting that we might “re-envision the fieldwork exchange” to include explicit discussion of meaning.<sup>2</sup> Borland has not changed her mind about this in the intervening years. What has changed, however, is the way she now frames issues of interpretive authority. In line with oral historians' more recent attention to cultural theory, including the work of George Herbert Mead and Mikhail Bakhtin, she argues that social interaction, performed through language—what oral historians sometimes refer to as intersubjectivity—is a continuous process of identity formation; consequently, “[t]he self in narrative becomes not an essence to be uncovered but a matter of narrative positioning in a specific context for a particular end.”<sup>3</sup> Interpretive differences are thus not a problem to be solved but intrinsic to the active process of talk. Accordingly, whether or not Hanson was a feminist is not the issue, exploring points of difference is.

The section concludes with Rina Benmayor's chapter about teaching digital storytelling to undergraduates, many the children of Mexican migrants, in a Latina Life Stories class at a California public university. Similar to Borland's

work, it both resonates with and differs from themes in her essay in the earlier volume. Though the students and settings are different—in the earlier case, participants in a Spanish-speaking adult literacy program at Hunter College’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies in New York City—both chapters consider oral history within a continuum of first-person narrative forms; both affirm that a pedagogy employing these narrative forms can sharpen students’ sense of identity and encourage personal empowerment; both link students’ work to testimony, or *testimonio* in the Latin American tradition, which seeks to connect the personal to a broader social critique as a step towards change; both locate gender within a range of social identities and structures, assuming rather than interrogating a feminist perspective. As with Borland, where the two chapters differ is in interpretive perspective, also reflecting broader shifts in oral historiography. The earlier piece is situated within Freirian notions of popular education, which aimed at “reciprocity and mutual ‘returns’” between researchers and communities of study as a way to disrupt the unequal power relations characteristic of traditional modes of social research, ideas that underlay numerous community-based oral history projects in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> The current chapter, however, focuses on “the centrality of emotion,” as well as the role of voice and image, in the pedagogical practices described.<sup>5</sup> If it is memory that shapes stories, then it is emotion, Benmayor suggests, that unlocks memories.

The third repeat author, Daphne Patai, whose chapter “When is enough enough?” is also the third in this section, reiterates the similar/different dynamic of the previous two. Her earlier piece was a bracing reflection on certain dilemmas of feminist oral history based on her own experience interviewing third world women: attempting to address inequality while operating from a position of privilege; the limits of informed consent, narrator empowerment, and “returning the research” once the researcher goes home to do her work; a tendency towards the emotional seduction of narrators, raising unmet expectations among them; the “fraud” of a “purported solidarity of female identity.” For Patai, there is no resolution to these dilemmas. They are embedded in structural inequalities that lie beyond the realm of individual research; one simply carries on as best one can.<sup>6</sup> The current chapter speaks with a sharper contrarian voice and steps outside the feminist frame to critique much of the current oral history enterprise including an excessive focus on identity, often accompanied by inflated claims of “methodological innovation and theoretical sophistication”; a privileging of reflexivity over content; and the subordination of empirical research to political commitments and the conflation of empirical accuracy with narrative truth.<sup>7</sup> There are savvy warnings here, but Patai’s work overreaches, belied by Borland’s and Benmayor’s. For Borland, identity and narrative are intrinsic to an interview’s epistemology, not categories that, as Patai suggests, can stand outside it. And Benmayor demonstrates how a carefully developed, methodologically innovative practice focused on identity and grounded in a specific set of circumstances can be non-exploitative and empowering, while also reaching outward to broader theoretical concerns.

But what of the two newcomers to the volume, if not to oral history? In what ways do they go “beyond” the earlier *Women's Words*, and in what ways does it matter? Sanchia deSouza's and Jyothsna Latha Belliappa's “The positionality of narrators and interviewers: Methodological comments on oral history with Anglo-Indian schoolteachers in Bangalore, India,” the second chapter in this section, suggests a couple of answers. Admittedly, its problematization of the positionality of interviewers vis-à-vis narrators and related ethical issues echoes themes taken up in the original volume and in feminist oral history more generally. The piece's primary value lies in its subject, which extends beyond the geographic range and social identities of narrators discussed in the original *Women's Words*.<sup>8</sup> And that matters because it speaks to the internationalization of oral history in the last quarter century—and expands the knowledge of readers like me by introducing an unfamiliar female experience. But the authors also note an equally important, more localized value to their interviews with teachers: it is a response to the call of scholars of education in India to address the “insufficient attention paid to teachers' rich perspectives and experiences.”<sup>9</sup> Content, in this case, matters.

The final chapter under discussion and the fourth in this section is Kathleen Blee's “Feminist oral histories of racist women,” theoretical reflections on her studies of women who are former members of white supremacist groups in the United States including the 1920s Ku Klux Klan and more recent neo-Nazi and white power skinhead groups. As Blee suggests, the very subject of her work falls outside mainstream feminist oral history, with its overwhelming focus on women with whom we presume to share—despite real and acknowledged differences (a la Borland, e.g.)—a certain sisterhood, whose experience we value, even valorize, whose voices we wish to amplify, and whom we wish to restore to the mainstream of history. The subject of Blee's work challenges these assumptions and leads her to identify two analytic tools that advance a feminist approach to her interviews and by extension are more widely applicable to feminist oral history: master status and trauma. The former, a concept from sociology, refers to a status or identity that trumps all others, in her case “racist,” leading to an inquiry that tends to skew certain aspects of identity and experience while ignoring others. Combining the category of gender with that of racist thus complicates the story. The latter concept, trauma, which Blee defines as “those experiences that alter a person's (or a societal) identity in deep and seemingly irrevocable ways,” is a pathway to understanding women's involvements in racial extremism.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, Blee avers, notions of master status and trauma can help create the analytic space to approach interviews that in their subject matter demand not simply the empathy characteristic of much feminist oral history, but also a critical distance.

How then might these five chapters collectively address the questions posed at the beginning of this Introduction? Certainly older themes and issues continue to resonate with and trouble our work. But what we are also seeing are multiple layers of integration into the ambit of feminist oral history: integration of more diverse female subjects, extending the range of our inquiries;

of new theoretical approaches, reflecting broader intellectual developments and giving our work greater depth; and of a more mature, less insistent feminism, assimilating with greater ease into our analytic repertoire. Historians do not predict the future, but what we have here is evidence of a field's and a practice's continuity with its past, expansiveness in its present, and a vitality that suggests optimism for its future.

## Notes

- 1 Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 2 Katherine Borland, "That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Women's Words*, 63–75; quoted material on 73, 74.
- 3 Katherine Borland, Chapter 1 of this volume, 33.
- 4 Rina Benmayor, "Testimony, Action Research, and Empowerment: Puerto Rican Women and Popular Education," in *Women's Words*, 159–174; quoted material on 160.
- 5 Rina Benmayor, Chapter 5 of this volume, 64.
- 6 Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" in *Women's Words*, 137–153; quoted material on 144.
- 7 Daphne Patai, Chapter 3 of this volume, 48.
- 8 While the original *Women's Words* was exceptional for its time in incorporating work from around the globe (by my calculation, 23 per cent of the chapters were about oral history practiced in non-Western countries, and an additional 15 per cent in Europe) and chapters in the current volume, reflecting the intersectional identities of our age, are harder to categorize, it is nonetheless true that the book in hand reflects a greater range of experiences.
- 9 Sanchia deSouza and Jyothsna Latha Belliappa, Chapter 2 of this volume, 40.
- 10 Kathleen Blee, Chapter 4 of this volume, 59.

# 1 “That’s not what I said”

A reprise 25 years on

*Katherine Borland*

On 4 August 1944, 35-year-old Beatrice Hanson put on a pale, eggshell-colored gabardine dress with big gold buttons down the side, a huge pancake-black hat, and elbow-length gloves, and off she went with her father to see the sulky (harness) races at the Bangor fairgrounds. The events that ensued produced a lively wrangle between father and daughter as they vied to pick the winner, and that night, bubbling over with enthusiasm, Bea recounted the story to her two adolescent daughters. Two days later, Bea wrote to her husband, Frank, who was serving overseas, to tell him about it. Somewhere between 1950 and 1983 she revised the letter slightly and included it in an epistolary novel (never published) about their lives during the war. In 1985, as we passed a racetrack while driving down the New Jersey Turnpike, Bea was reminded of how much she enjoyed horseracing and told me the story. A year later, on 28 December, my sister, her husband, Frank, and I were treated to a highly structured and thoroughly entertaining narrative that I recorded for later transcription and analysis.

My grandmother and I were delighted to be working together—until I sent her a copy of the essay I had written for my graduate class in folklore and performance the following fall. On 22 January 1988, I received a typed, 13-page, single-spaced rebuttal of my feminist interpretation of the story. Insisting that she was not and never had been a feminist, Bea wrote:

So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation. You’ve read into the story what you wished—what pleases YOU (and, I presume, your instructor). That it was never—by any wildest stretch of the imagination—the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all . . . How far is it permissible to go, in the name of folklore, and still be honest in respect to the original narrative?<sup>1</sup>

This candid critique provided a cautionary tale to feminist researchers who in their enthusiasm for recovering women’s perspectives inadvertently appropriated

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the voices of the very women they sought to champion. In subsequent visits and dialogue, Bea and I were able to come to an understanding of our differences, a process I narrated in *Women's Words*.<sup>2</sup>

I went on to pursue research with people whose identities were not so closely intertwined with my own. But Bea continued to send letters and other writing—her novel and several one-act plays, a genealogical chart, and a recording of a dramatic reading, *To You, With Love*, that she and Frank performed on the Women's Club circuit after their retirement from college teaching. She even got her childhood friend to send a self-made tape of his reminiscences. Both my grandparents welcomed my occasional visits as opportunities to regale me with stories of a long and colorful life together, including Frank's aborted career in Vaudeville and the plots of Bea's prize-winning one-act plays. Rereading Bea's 1988 letter now, I discover that it contains much more than the critique that provided the basis for my methodological intervention in *Women's Words*. On page one, Bea asserts, "But I do believe that the interpretations of any author's work probably often give the work many more facets, many more 'meanings' than the original author ever considered." Like me, she understood that questions of ethics and method are complicated by the contingent, and always provisional, meaning of expressive culture. Bea and Frank are no longer around to correct me if I misrepresent them, so as I revisit the artefacts of their lives, I focus on what these say about the workings of narrative rather than on biographical reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Even so, life review creeps into many folklore- and oral history-oriented projects because research subjects are likely to regard any representation of their narratives as expressions of self, even if the researcher's project has a different focus.

Researchers and their narrators (or interlocutors) find their footing with one another and define the power relations between themselves in multiple and nuanced ways. Still, I continue to believe that the researcher's confident "I understand you," which emerges partly as a consequence of the rituals of establishing rapport, might well be replaced by the more tentative, "Do we understand each other?" Such a question implies continuing dialogue with narrators after any preliminary attempt at interpretation. It does not require agreement.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship has suggested that familiarity can breed a kind of contempt in the interview setting: the closer one's bond to a narrator and the more one knows about the events being narrated, the more difficult it is to listen respectfully without imputing one's own meanings, remembering differently, listening in an "interested" way, or even being wounded by the narrator's words.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the intimacy my grandmother and I shared may have contributed to my initial inability to respect her difference. However, if our epistemological method, our special form of inquiry into truth, requires the cultivation of an open, nonjudgmental frame of mind to move beyond what we think we already know, we must still acknowledge that telling and listening are intertwined aspects of an interview that is, at base, a social interaction.



Arthur W. Frank calls this stance the hermeneutic approach.<sup>6</sup> However, we can trace the epistemology of deep listening back to the pioneering Progressive Era thinker, Jane Addams. Long appreciated as a social reformer, Addams' contributions to the philosophical movement of American Pragmatism remained underappreciated until the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> She modeled a practice in which she temporarily suspended her own frame of reference to render herself receptive to another's experience. This method recognizes subjective truths as valid forms of knowledge, and advocates for ordinary women's storytelling as a form of empowerment, two ideas that remain relevant to contemporary feminist ethnographic research.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, even a respectful, nondirective listener influences the narratives that are constructed for her by another, because self-representation is an inherently intersubjective process. Intersubjectivity, the mutual fashioning of selves in social interaction, offers another way of thinking about the exchanges between my grandmother and me. Sociologists have long argued that reflexive self-consciousness (the notion that an individual can develop a rich and complex inner life) occurs through interaction with others and through a dynamic interaction with the generalized abstraction that is the social world.<sup>9</sup> This intersubjective dimension of our identities encompasses shared feelings and affects as well as shared thinking.<sup>10</sup> Feminist psychologist Jessica Benjamin describes intersubjectivity as an alternative understanding of the self from that based on the idea of an individual psyche. This is the subjectivity that emerges from the self-in-the-world, a self that is formed by social receptivity and interaction and that recognizes the subjectivities of others rather than seeing others as fantasy extensions of the self's wishes and desires.<sup>11</sup> This notion of identity broadens our understanding of the co-constructed nature of the interview to contemplate the many ways that identity is already deeply co-constructed. Instead of thinking of a person's identity as fixed, we begin to see identity as an ongoing formation, which can shift depending on context and circumstance. The self in narrative becomes not an essence to be uncovered but a matter of narrative positioning in a specific context for a particular end.<sup>12</sup>

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, a philosopher and literary critic, the intersubjective self is formed and can be known only through signs (words, gestures, choice of dress or grooming), which are ideologically saturated and hierarchically layered. In the case of language, the words we use to express ourselves are already loaded with meanings derived from our socio-historical context. For instance, I may speak in a regional dialect that connects me to the time and place of my rearing, even if I no longer live in that region. Moreover, different people may read the *signs* of my dialect differently, depending on their familiarity and associations with my particular (but always socially inflected) form of our shared language.<sup>13</sup>

How do we apply these insights to oral narrative research? Contemporary oral historians and folklorists recognize that the narrative accounts that form the basis of our research are co-created through dialogue, most often questions and answers, and by the assumptions and expectations narrators and researchers

bring with them to the interview.<sup>14</sup> Researchers who gather life stories alternately describe the method as a means for narrators to fashion a coherent self out of disparate experiences, a reflexive opportunity for them to re-examine the past to fashion a more mature and agentive self-concept, or as presenting an inherent challenge to a subject's self-composure when the researcher's goals structure the line of questioning.<sup>15</sup> Rather than seeing our interviews as a means for the narrator to gain self-knowledge, as the first two perspectives imply, I suggest that we focus on the researcher as learner. If we embrace the deeply social nature of our identities that intersubjectivity implies, then a focus on incoherence and interpretive dissonance provides both a way to preserve the narrator's distinctive perspectives within our own projects and a way for us, the researchers, to learn from those points of difference.

We might also keep in mind that subjectivities are anything but unitary in everyday practice, and that they transform in response to changing life circumstances and available social scripts. My focus on Bea's narrative self-construction in one story, for instance, violated Bea's sense of her own self-concept understood in a more comprehensive, for-the-record sort of way. Recently, I discovered an interview Bea did with a journalist in the early 1970s about her playwriting. Although she worked as a high school, college, and adult education English teacher, she was passionately involved in amateur theater for most of her life, and wrote several successful one-act plays.<sup>16</sup> The journalist reports that when Bea's husband, Frank, was hired at Montclair State University, Bea stepped down in compliance with an unwritten rule that married couples could not both serve on the faculty. The reporter quotes Bea as saying, "It is a ridiculous situation and should be changed," then comments, "That she goes along with it almost willingly in spite of her resentment against the rule, underscores Mrs. Hanson's guiding belief that 'a woman makes a mistake if she puts her own career first,'" a decidedly double-voiced explanation.<sup>17</sup>

Bearing in mind that narrators can hold conflicting attitudes toward the social roles they inhabit, we can re-examine the physical records we construct through our method. An interview designed to elicit life review is, as Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet argues, "a ritualized speech act, which results from the conjunction, in the 1970s, of a genre, autobiography, with a new medium, the tape-recorder, within the institutional framework of the social sciences."<sup>18</sup> But it is also an extension of the everyday art of conversation. From the perspective of a folklorist, life review is less about creating a narrative self-portrait where none existed before than about gathering together oft-repeated stories in a new, perhaps more reflective or comprehensive configuration. Recorded interviews, however, materialize and fix one's ordinarily ephemeral conversational self-expression.

The tape-recorder, video camera, or notebook function as signs of a powerful third interlocutor, an absent public who influences how narrators understand and perform the rhetorical task of fashioning accounts of their experience. Researchers often worry about the ways this third interlocutor can produce anxiety and stiffness in the narrator, blocking self-disclosure. In our

1986 tape-recorded sessions, Bea occasionally instructed me to turn off the recorder so that she could remember relevant details and provide an accurate, coherent account. Fully aware of the recorder, Bea still could not know how her narrative would materialize through recording and transcription. In her written response to my interpretation, one-third of her critique addressed the inelegant and incoherent (to her) quality of the transcript:

Because I know the horse-race story so well, your transcription (or anyone's transcription, at least of the oral version) is bound to be disappointing to me. I miss the *flavor*—the essence that I supposed was mine in telling and writing it.<sup>19</sup> I miss the tension, the suspense that makes the story come alive . . . If you stuck religiously to the tape and what you've set down in the above instance was exactly what I said, and *all* that I said, then I don't see how it even made sense to *you*.<sup>20</sup>

Bea's struggle to reconcile the story, as it existed in her head as compared to how it manifested on paper, highlights the ways in which our research methods produce skeletal representations that lack the "flavor" of not only a living performance, but also a remembered experience. Like the tip of an iceberg, the spoken story presents to a listener words and images uprooted from the context of the narrator's memories and associations. Unlike a written narrative that presumes an absolute distinction between the author and reader, oral narratives leap around, suspending phrases, sketching rather than elaborating, with the usually justified expectation that a listener will silently fill in gaps as needed. To speak of narrative dialogism, then, is not only to recognize the co-production of meaning in the question and answer format of an oral interview. It also connotes how words and images resonate among speakers and listeners in multiple, meaningful ways, how what appear to be monologues are always dialogic, addressed to an actively receptive listener. As a listener accustomed to reading transcripts, I view Bea's focus on the oral narrative of the verbal competition in the grandstand as much more flavorful and interesting than her earlier written version, which focuses more on the drama playing out among the horses and riders. In that earlier written version, however, Bea foregrounds her aspirations for a future with her second husband, Frank, by identifying their marriage with the equine competition on the field. This dimension of meaning is muted in the oral version by the early introduction of the theme of divorce (as opposed to marriage), a circumstance that led me to completely overlook the possibility that the story might resonate with Bea as a symbol of her *second* successful marriage rather than her first failed one.

Cultivating deep listening skills are important ways of moving from a position of knowing/judging to one of learning/appreciating. To understand another's perspective, however, does not require accepting it fully as one's own. Nor do one's own interpretations need to be accepted by one's interlocutors to be defensible. In fact, my own interpretive conflict with Beatrice has led me to greater insight in two related areas. First, I recognize much more clearly the

social constraints and opportunities Bea navigated as a woman growing up in the first half of the 20th century, experiences that were very different from my own and that led to a very different sense of self in the world. Second, in the larger body of Bea's recorded stories and reminiscences, I am now much more attuned to those moments when Bea departs from my expected script and speaks differently. I have moved from an engagement with the stories that resonate with me, that confirm my prior understandings of Bea and her world, to productive puzzlement over the pieces that jar, do not fit, or speak differently. Ultimately, for oral narrative research, the issue in "That's not what I said" is not the truth of what happened that day at the racetrack, but in how Bea and I came to an interpretive understanding that was fuller and more nuanced than either of our initial views. It illustrates the generative possibilities of tackling moments of narrative dissonance, of pushing through discomfort to apprehend and explore the worlds we conjure through words.

## Notes

- 1 Letter written by Beatrice Hanson to Katherine Borland, 22 January 1988, 7.
- 2 Katherine Borland, "‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 63–75.
- 3 See, for example, "Co-narration, Intersubjectivity, and the Listener in Family Storytelling," *Journal of American Folklore* 130 (518): 438–456.
- 4 See also Elaine Lawless, "‘I Was Afraid Someone Like You . . . an Outsider . . . Would Misunderstand’: Negotiating Interpretive Differences between Ethnographers and Subjects," *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 302–314; and my review essay, "Decolonizing Approaches to Feminist Research: The Case of Feminist Ethnography," in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 621–628.
- 5 Alan Wong, "Listen and Learn: Familiarity and Feeling in the Oral History Interview," in *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, eds. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 97–112; Martha Norkunas, "The Vulnerable Listener," in *Oral History Off the Record*, 81–96.
- 6 Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 94–96.
- 7 Maurice Hamington, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams* (College Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010).
- 8 For instance, see Addams' analysis of Devil Baby Legends as a means for ordinarily silent and abject elderly women to find voice and authority in her *The Long Road of Women’s Memory* (New York: Macmillan, 1916) as well as her autobiographical account, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, ed. Victoria Bissell Brown (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998). For a contemporary discussion of the therapeutic effects of telling one's story to an understanding listener, see Carl Lindahl, "Legends of Hurricane Katrina: The Right to Be Wrong, Survivor-to-Survivor Storytelling, and Healing," *Journal of American Folklore* 125 (2012): 139–176. For an extended discussion of the value of subjective truths, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialog* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 3–23. For a discussion of how personal memories contribute to reconstructing social history, see Joan Sangster, "Politics and Praxis in Canadian Working-Class History," in *Oral History Off the Record*, 59–76.

- 9 George Herbert Mead, "Thought as Internalized Conversation [1934]," in *Four Sociological Traditions: Selected Readings*, ed. Randall Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 293.
- 10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007).
- 11 Jessica Benjamin, "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space," in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, eds. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), 188–203. Benjamin accepts both ideas of the individual psyche and self-in-the-world as useful, complementary constructs for psychoanalysis.
- 12 Michael Bamberg, "Positioning between Structure and Performance. Oral Versions of Personal Experience: Three Decades of Narrative Analysis," Special Issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7 (1987): 335–342.
- 13 V.N. Volosinov, "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929)," trans. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik, in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Volosinov*, ed. Pam Morris (New York: Edward Arnold), 2009.
- 14 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 54–77.
- 15 On coherence, see Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); on self-examination, see Alicia J. Rouverol, "Trying To Be Good: Lessons in Oral History Performance," in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, ed. Della Pollack (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 19–44; on discomposure, see Penny Summerfield, "Dis/composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History Research," in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, eds. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (New York: Routledge, 2000), 91–106.
- 16 As a child, Bea played piano for the silent pictures theater in her town and for a dance band when she was a little older. After her 1936 divorce, she worked briefly for the Boston-based American Broadcasting Company as an itinerant director of amateur theater, traveling from town to town, a bag of scripts in one hand and a suitcase full of costumes in the other. She worked her way through normal school cleaning houses, but won an American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers award for a one-act play she wrote. The award money allowed her to complete her studies at the University of Maine, where she received her Master's degree. When she taught high school, she directed the school plays and pageants. She continued writing and directing one-act plays with amateur and school groups, and at some point during the 1960s, one of those plays was optioned for Broadway, but it was never produced.
- 17 Helen C. Smith, "Curtains Are Her Calling," *The Star Ledger* (1971), 41.
- 18 Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet, "Textualisation of the Self and Gender Identity in the Life-Story," in *Feminism and Autobiography*, 61–62.
- 19 Bea refers here to the letter version of the story. At present, I am pursuing these comments in a comparative examination of the written and oral versions of the tale.
- 20 Letter written by Hanson to Borland, 4.

## 2 The positionality of narrators and interviewers

### Methodological comments on oral history with Anglo-Indian schoolteachers in Bangalore, India

*Sanchia deSouza and  
Jyothsna Latha Belliappa*

One of our own schoolteachers, she said to me, “Look here, all of you [Anglo-Indian teachers] are going [away]. Then why should we send our children to these schools?”

I said, “But why, there are other teachers.”

“No, but you’ll have something in you’ll,” she said, “which is completely different. Where’s the need for us to send our children if you’ll are not there?”

And another occasion, one of the parents said, “Where are all the skirts gone?” One of the parents said that to me. Where are all the skirts gone?

Conversation between “Laura” and Sanchia<sup>1</sup>

Many of urban India’s educational aspirations in the postcolonial period have centered on the public figure of the Anglo-Indian schoolteacher, an authoritative yet nurturing woman in a skirt with something “completely different” about her that made parents seek out the school where she taught. At the core of our research project on Anglo-Indian women schoolteachers from Bangalore are seventeen life stories involving many hours of conversation. In this chapter, we offer some insights into these illuminating “teaching” narratives but focus in particular on methodology, specifically the theme of positionality in the interview process.

The Anglo-Indian community is a bi-racial Christian ethnic minority with roots in the colonial era. Emerging from the domestic relationships between European men and Indian women, it evolved into a distinct community with a hybrid culture. After Indian independence from British rule in 1947, the community was constitutionally recognized, with Anglo-Indian citizens being defined as those “whose father or male progenitor is of European descent but who is domiciled within India.”<sup>2</sup> Their distinguishing features include English as a mother tongue and Eurocentric cultural practices, including Western musical and dance traditions. Anglo-Indian women wear Western attire to distinguish themselves from Indian women and adopt European standards of femininity.<sup>3</sup> Traditions allowing for the social mixing of genders also created

a relatively relaxed attitude towards individual choice in matters of love and marriage that is unusual in much of Indian society. The anxiety with which the British and other Indian communities have viewed Anglo-Indians, who face considerable prejudice, has generated long-standing and continuing negative stereotypes. The men are depicted as unreliable, shiftless, and susceptible to alcoholism, for example, and the women as predisposed to loud, licentious, and sexually indiscriminate behavior.<sup>4</sup>

The shifting fortunes of Anglo-Indians also require comment. In the latter half of the 19th century, the British colonial government so preferred Anglo-Indian men (regardless of individual academic achievement) for administrative jobs in the railway, post, and telegraph sector that they came to constitute something of a “railway caste.”<sup>5</sup> Considering them loyal on the grounds of their European ancestry but a potentially destabilizing force on account of their racial hybridity, colonial authorities adopted a strategy of ensuring them stable economic status while also constructing them as colonial allies.<sup>6</sup> In the early 20th century, however, changes in government policy, particularly the Montague–Chelmsford Reforms that, following the First World War, opened up administrative jobs to more educated Indians from diverse communities, limited Anglo-Indian men’s access to government employment. In response, more Anglo-Indian women entered the workforce to support husbands and children, clustering particularly in teaching, nursing, and secretarial jobs.<sup>7</sup> In Bangalore, many of them sought jobs in European-style schools, especially English-language Christian missionary schools run by Catholic nuns and priests or Protestant clergy. Particularly adept at mobilizing the cultural capital they possessed—ability to teach in English, proficiency in Western traditions of art, music, and theatre, and the relationships formed within the community as a result—to land teaching positions, they comprised a majority of teachers in these minority schools by the 1970s.

The church or school boards that privately manage these schools make decisions on the recruitment of teachers, wages, leave policies, and terms of employment. Funded through student fees and private donations, the schools are affiliated with the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (the Council), which sets curriculum and administers the school-leaving certificate exams taken after class ten (when students are about fifteen years of age).<sup>8</sup> There are no collective bodies to represent the teachers’ interests and any form of collective action is strongly discouraged. Relationships between management and staff are deeply hierarchical and governed by a formal, rigid code of conduct based on age and gender. For instance, it is not unusual for management to prescribe a staff dress code with injunctions on the length and fit of clothes.

Our narrators belong to this large group of Anglo-Indian teachers, most of whom have had long careers (30+ years) teaching thousands of students from many different religious and linguistic communities in Bangalore. We calculated that one teacher had touched the lives of more than 20,000 students in her 25-year career. These teachers have thus arguably played a key role in English-

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language education in Bangalore and therefore in the city's emergence as India's information technology capital and, by extension, in the nation's growth as an economic power.<sup>9</sup>

Here, we address the issue of positionality through a discussion of ethical questions that arose in our interviews with still-serving and retired Anglo-Indian women. As a two-member collaborative team composed of a senior researcher, Jyothsna Belliappa, and a junior one, Sanchia deSouza, we usually interviewed the schoolteachers individually, engaging in a one-on-one discussion. We used a life story approach to elicit teachers' memories of their careers and to locate their experiences in the changes that have occurred in Bangalore's English-language school system over the past 50 years. (We also conducted additional interviews with members of the Bangalore Anglo-Indian community and wider education community.) In our core interviews with seventeen teachers between 47 and 77 years of age, we found that gender identity, community membership, and faith tended to influence narrators' accounts of professional life.

Following the feminist principle of locating interviewers' subjectivities, we note the initial motivations that guided our research questions. Both of us, though not Anglo-Indian ourselves, have been taught by Anglo-Indian teachers. Additionally, we have direct experience of the teaching profession: Sanchia's mother was a school teacher while Jyothsna was previously one. Before our collaboration, we had been working separately in the field, gathering oral histories from teachers and students from two different schools for separate public history projects. We decided to collaborate because we thought it would better allow us to address gaps in the research and literature on Indian education—namely, the insufficient attention paid to teachers' rich perspectives and experiences. By focusing on women from a marginalized ethnic and religious minority within Indian society, and how they are experiencing marginalization by neo-liberal educational regimes, we endeavoured to bring an intersectional perspective to research on teachers and teaching.<sup>10</sup>

### **Private conversation, public performance**

The oral history interview frequently involves an intimate conversation between interviewer and narrator, but with a sense of privacy that is largely an illusion, given that the interview is intended in part or whole for an archive or for publication. We used the snowball method to recruit narrators, asking friends and community members to put us in contact with those who might be interested in speaking with us. We promised privacy, as much as possible, and pledged to use pseudonyms in all publications and avoid any mention of schools. Given that many teachers obtained their jobs through their communal relationships—or their social capital—they often find themselves in a rather delicate position. They cannot afford to annoy the school management, which might include the powerful members of their community or church who played a role in their hiring and who will continue to influence the terms of their



employment. Consequently, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was particularly important.

If the oral history interview is a private conversation, it also takes on the character of a public performance, albeit with a largely invisible public that is represented by the interviewer. Feminist oral historians argue that the interviewer plays a role in co-constructing the narrative that emerges through the questions asked, the interjections made, the manner in which she listens or responds to the narrator, and the ways in which authority is shared.<sup>11</sup> Issues of self-representation and the power differential that can characterize relations between narrators and researchers are thereby significant to the creation of narratives throughout the interview.

Our narrators' understanding of performance in the interview was centered on the recording. Indeed, our promises to switch off the recorder if they wanted to share anything "off the record" elicited such a high level of trust that we began to question just how much power we had. At any rate, it became clear to us that our power was based on how much they trusted us. For reasons we explain in more detail below, their trust in us was very strong and based on their view that we shared much in common with them. This, in turn, raised a related issue: whether the creation of intimacy exploits narrators. Feminist researcher Janet Finch effectively articulated the problem when she reflected on the dynamics of interviewing clergymen's wives in England in the 1980s when she herself was a clergyman's wife. "I have also emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me," she writes, adding: "They have often revealed very private parts of their lives in return for what must be, in the last resort, very flimsy guarantees of confidentiality: my verbal assurances . . . that I would make any public references to them anonymous and disguised."<sup>12</sup>

In our project, we attempted to mitigate such power imbalances by offering to share transcripts with our narrators, which they appreciated. We also offered to provide drafts of anything we might publish, though most were not interested in reading this material. In the initial stages of our research, we attempted to use written confidentiality agreements (signed by researcher and narrator), which are common in Western contexts, but found that they tended to erode trust rather than establish it in Indian settings. Two teachers who signed consent forms indicated that they were unsure what sorts of "rights" over their narratives would be signed away for our use.

## **Prefaces and self-disclosure**

We have fully respected every teacher's request to keep a section(s) of their interviews private. Our observational notes on our meetings with them, particularly before and after the actual interview, are illuminating and form part of the conceptual framework for our analysis. In our respective efforts to gain access to, and build rapport with, our narrators, both of us tended to invoke the concept of "sameness" in ways that led our narrators to relate to us in what

we describe as “teacher/aunt” mode. For example, Jyothsna’s previous experience as a school teacher and Sanchia’s identity as Goan resonated with the women in particular ways. Specifically, Goan Catholics, who are a product of Goa’s past status as a Portuguese colony, possess a hybrid cultural identity that is similar to that of Anglo-Indians. Now viewed as highly Westernized, Goan Catholics have been subject to the same gendered stereotypes that plague Anglo-Indians. Further, highly Westernized Goan women in urban India have followed a similar employment trajectory to that of Anglo-Indian women—teaching, secretarial work, and nursing—though it occurred later in the 20th century between 1940 and 1980.

The sense of “sameness” that helped us gain our narrators’ trust was not simply imposed by us but instead co-constructed in conjunction with our narrators. Our narrators had few if any qualms about questioning us about our personal lives and motives before beginning the recorded interview portion of our meeting. Sanchia, as a younger woman from a community with an ethos of Christianity and hybridity similar to that espoused by Anglo-Indians, found herself in a position of vulnerability and power. The sameness invoked in conversation led narrators to adopt a role that can best be described as both teacher and aunt. For instance, they frequently addressed her as “my girl”—a phrase typically used to indicate the speaker’s seniority in a familial or community context. Some women shared sensitive information about their lives in undertones. Many did not hesitate to ask Sanchia probing questions about her personal life and her position on marriage, motherhood, and other issues. They also asked about her status—whether she was single or married—and her relationships with parents and siblings. They offered pointed advice, such as “you better hurry up and have children if you want to.” The dynamics were similar to those described by Jieyu Liu, who conducted interviews in China with women who were at least one generation older than herself. According to Liu, the position she held as the junior woman—the learner, the daughter—was valuable in terms of creating closeness and rapport with the women and obtaining deeply textured accounts. Our experience bears out her emphasis on the importance of creating research relationships within the framework of social norms based on gender, age, and seniority on both ethical and academic grounds.<sup>13</sup>

That the narrators did not ask Sanchia whether they shared the same faith, and Sanchia’s own silence on the matter, also deserves comment. Sanchia’s surname “deSouza” immediately marks her as Catholic by descent in India, and probably by faith as well. Sanchia is not a practicing Catholic, but, knowing that a young person’s decision to move away from religion can provoke strong reactions in older people whose faith is so integral to their lives, she avoided discussing her stand on religion. It seems likely that the narrators’ identification of her as Goan Catholic and therefore a fellow Christian, along with the opportunities they had to question Sanchia about her personal life, increased their level of comfort when it came to carrying out the interview. It may well have enabled them to share with her controversial opinions or painful personal

details that are usually withheld from strangers, such as criticisms of the church and alcoholism in the family. The status that interviewer and narrator shared as members of a marginalized and occasionally stigmatized minority very likely encouraged the frank admission regarding alcoholism.

A judicious use of self-disclosure, then, can be an important tool in feminist oral history research, one that can contribute towards further developing the narrative being told in the interview. To offer another example of the value of judicious self-disclosure, this one involving Jyothsna, we begin with the following exchange:

LAURA: It's important to correct spelling, grammar—doing corrections helps you get to know your children. You learn what they know, what mistakes they make. You correct their errors—you know where they tend to go wrong. Then you come to know their background from the way they write, whether the parents are taking an interest in their work. . . . Nowadays teachers don't correct! You leave the spelling and the punctuation just like it is! . . . How can a teacher put her signature on a book with so many spelling mistakes and punctuation mistakes?

JYOTHSNA: And you come to know their personalities—

LAURA: Yes! From all their little compositions. Children love to talk and they love to tell you all their stories. What happened at home and what mother said and what father said. We never finished with the school at three o'clock. We brought home corrections and we had extra spelling. I joined [school's name] in 1977 and I had 77 children. They gave us a helper who could do the corrections. But I didn't like that—because the helper was not that particular with corrections. I think they've done away with that.

Having been a primary school teacher, Jyothsna identified with some of Laura's motives for keeping up with "corrections" (marking and grading). In this exchange, Laura seems encouraged by Jyothsna's comment to articulate her sense of pride in carrying out this work. Although Jyothsna has, on some occasions, effectively drawn on this teaching experience to create familiarity with narrators either before or during the interview, she is also acutely aware that the context in which she taught, at a 21st-century international school with a more egalitarian work culture, differed significantly from narrators' experiences. For this reason, and because she was hesitant to take away "airtime" from the narrator, she avoided making regular references to her own experiences.

### **Personal myth-making**

As Luisa Passerini long ago observed, narrators tend to draw on personal myths in interviews, sharing narratives that include conflict, crisis, and resolution, and sometimes even triumph, as they position themselves as the heroes of their narratives. Such individual myth-making in narratives of rebellion

carries great symbolic value, offering a means of resisting a social reality oppressive to women, even if rebellious features might be exaggerated to create a certain effect.<sup>14</sup> In our project, we have seen elements of this myth-making, though the women sometimes found themselves in situations where they risked much to challenge the school management's authority. Interestingly, Georgiana spoke of having "the heart of a pilot and paratrooper" before explaining how she made the choice to be a teacher:

I couldn't imagine myself sitting at a desk [as a stenographer] . . . I wanted to be out with children and I felt being in the open air was far better than being confined. And I didn't like being a nurse. I didn't have so much empathy in me at that particular time to feel sad for those who were sick, you know. I was lively and I wanted to be out with children. That's how I went in to be a teacher. No regrets.

Ruth explained that she was constantly in conflict with school management in part because "I wasn't such an easy person that took everything they said lying down. I argued back. I was always arguing about the salary being very low," she said, but also added: "They had a lot of regard for me." In support of the latter claim, she explained how she was given a position of responsibility by management, recruiting teachers. In her narrative, then, she is both formidable and worthy of respect (higher-level positions) precisely because of her obstinate character.

In another narrative in which a heroic challenge of authority wins the day, Rosemary described her school's disapproval of her decision to sell encyclopaedias to augment her income, and how she defended her behavior:

I got into trouble with Sister (the principal) over that. She said, "You're not supposed to take up another job." I said, "I didn't know that." There was no written rule like that. So she said, "You'll have to stop this." And then, I don't know from where I got the courage, I said, "Sister, you sisters teach us to go out into the world and take care of ourselves, you know, not be a burden to others, to stand on our feet. And what am I doing, I am working hard to see that my two sons finish their education. And that is the reason. I'm not doing it to build a house or to get rich." She says, "No, no, no, you'll have to stop it." I said, "Well sister, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I cannot stop it." And I walked out of there.

Significantly, while Rosemary's narrative highlights her defiance, it only briefly hints at the real risks involved. As she disclosed elsewhere in her interview, her family was dependent upon her income to pay school fees, so losing her job would have been disastrous. Her presence of mind in using the school's own principles to make a case in her favor allowed her to challenge both the principal and the management's claim to have control over her activities.

The description of her dramatic exit conveys her sense of having taken complete control of the situation.

## **Meek dictators**

As researchers, we were surprised by how several of the teachers who narrated the kind of confident, even defiant, narratives just cited ended the interview process once we switched off the recorder. After the performance part was over, the dynamic shifted again to a footing in which we, the researchers, were placed in a position of relatively greater power. Most of our narrators had attained a Teacher Training Certificate (TTC) educational level following high school graduation. As post-graduate degree holders working in the field of education, we, as interviewers, were constantly aware of our privilege and reflected on it throughout the process. Our narrators occasionally invoked this marker of prestige (higher levels of formal education) and our employment in tertiary education to suggest that we had more expertise as educators than them. Sanchia was initially startled, for example, when Rosemary apologized for some of her teaching methods, even asking Sanchia, “Is that all right, what I did?” Her uncertainty possibly arose from her experience of having had several colleagues and superiors challenge her teaching methods over the years, incidents that she narrated in their conversation.

An educationist and historian of education in India, Krishna Kumar has well captured the position of Indian teachers, historically speaking, with the term “the meek dictator,” meaning that they enjoy a high degree of prestige and authority in the classroom among students (and in an earlier time, with parents), but are disempowered by administrators and school management. In Kumar’s view, this disempowerment derives from the way the colonial education system took away teachers’ power to decide a curriculum—something that village-based teachers under the pre-colonial indigenous systems had possessed—and thus the sort of knowledge they could impart.<sup>15</sup>

Trained teachers enjoy a certain prestige as members of a “noble profession” that both cares for and educates the younger generation, yet this same responsibility also generates societal suspicions of them and how they do their jobs. Thus, we would extend the concept of the “meek dictator” to encompass the limited empowerment teachers experience in their roles, being constantly monitored and controlled by school management and the principal and, via them, by parents. When we first approached teachers and school administrators for interviews, several expressed concern that we might be journalists out to “expose” their schools (they later explained in interviews that there had recently been some negative media reports). We would argue that this position of meek dictatorship also shaped the dynamic of our interviews. The performance aspect of the interview—a space in which the teachers could be said to be teaching us about their lives—brought out their sense of authority, but the enmeshed meekness and diffidence also came out during other aspects of the process.

Finally, given the sensitivity of the community to the prejudices they have experienced, both historically and in the present, we had to face suspicions about why outsiders like us were interested in the Anglo-Indian community and how we were going to represent it. Such concerns also affected some teachers' willingness to be identified, since they did not want to be known as having spoken negatively about their school or community. Given this condition, we have been forced to leave out fascinating stories of defiance because the description of the incidents would immediately expose our narrators' identities. Out of concern for their welfare, we have used pseudonyms for everyone, even though some expressed a willingness to be identified. This begs the question of whether we have attributed too little authority and power to our narrators and emphasized their disempowerment too much—a difficult question to answer.

## Conclusion

In reflecting on our methodology, we have highlighted some of the intriguing shifts in power dynamics that can characterize the formal and informal interview process. Our focus on a community doubly marginal in Indian society—Anglo-Indian women who are schoolteachers—brought to light some of the ways in which the professional, community, and personal positionality of both researchers and narrators have to be carefully negotiated, but also showed that these remain difficult to pin down. Given the kind of authoritarian systems and gender relations through which the Anglo-Indian women schoolteachers we interviewed have lived their professional and personal lives, we found that they were rarely called upon to speak about themselves. Many approached the “task” of recounting their experiences and achievements with some diffidence (“I cannot praise myself,” said one) but seemed to enjoy it once we established initial rapport. Our interview process and the resulting narratives revealed that in the simultaneously public and private setting of classroom and interview, these teachers constantly moved between diffidence and authority as they navigated a changing educational and social milieu. We, as feminist oral historians, show our desire to protect (and maybe inadvertently over-protect) teachers and enable their speaking through choosing which stories to share publicly and through our own careful self-disclosure in the interview process. The challenge of balancing such ethical considerations with an analysis of the narratives themselves, and how they reflect myth-making and our narrators' self-representational desires, is an ongoing one.

## Notes

- 1 All names used are pseudonyms, as agreed to in discussions with the teachers.
- 2 Government of India, Constitution of India, art. 366 (b) (1950). This official use of the term “Anglo-Indian” for a mixed-race political constituency differs from the way it was used in most colonial-era literature, where it referred to British people who had spent significant time in India but were not necessarily mixed race.

- There are some ambiguities in how the current community defines its identity and disagreement over whether the term should include Portuguese-descendants (Goan or East Indian community members).
- 3 Lionel Caplan, *Children of Colonialism: Anglo-Indians in a Postcolonial World* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).
  - 4 Caplan, 63–66, 77–78; Alison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 15–16; Geetanjali Gangoli, “Sexuality, Sensuality and Belonging: Representations of the ‘Anglo-Indian’ and the ‘Western’ Woman in Hindi Cinema,” in *Bollyworld, Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, eds. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 143–162.
  - 5 Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity: India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 21–23.
  - 6 See Adrian Carton, *Mixed-Race and Modernity in Colonial India: Changing Concepts of Hybridity Across Empires* (London: Routledge, 2012), on the development of the category of race amidst the changing political structures of colonial India.
  - 7 Caplan, 27–31.
  - 8 While the Council requires schools to follow government guidelines on wages, it has limited resources to monitor their implementation; anecdotal evidence suggests some schools try to avoid strict compliance.
  - 9 M.K. Raghavendra, “Local Resistance to Global Bangalore: Reading Minority Indian Cinema,” in *Popular Culture in a Globalized India*, eds. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), 17–19, for a succinct discussion of the history of language in Bangalore and its connection with globalization.
  - 10 Poonam Batra, “Voice and Agency of Teachers: Missing Link in National Curriculum Framework,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 40 (2005): 4347–4356; Nandini Manjrekar, “Women School Teachers in New Times: Some Preliminary Reflections,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 2 (2013): 335–356.
  - 11 See Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” Helen Roberts ed., *Doing Feminist Research* 30, no. 6 (1981): 1; Gayle Letherby, “Feminist Methodology,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Innovation in Social Research Methods*, eds. Malcolm Williams and Paul Vogt (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 62–79; Katherine Borland, “That’s Not What I Said: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 63–75; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990); Steven High, “Sharing Authority: An Introduction,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 12–34; Linda Shopes, “Commentary: Sharing Authority,” *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 104.
  - 12 Janet Finch, “‘It’s Great to Have Someone to Talk To’: Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women,” in *Social Research: Philosophy, Politics and Practice*, ed. Martyn Hammersley, (London/Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1993), 170.
  - 13 Jieyu Liu, “Researching Chinese Women’s Lives: ‘Insider’ Research and Life History Interviewing,” *Oral History* 34, no. 1 (2006): 43–52.
  - 14 Luisa Passerini, “Women’s Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences and Emotions,” in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narrative*, ed. Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 189–197.
  - 15 Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991).

### 3 When is enough enough?

*Daphne Patai*

For more than twenty years I have noticed that current books and manuscripts in the field of oral history routinely claim to raise new methodological issues in the context of their particular projects. So, too, do many conference papers, as if the advent of each new subject necessarily raises unique methodological problems not previously considered. Despite this rhetoric, in practice the only novelty in oral history for some time has been the focus on ever more specific identity groups and ever more detailed articulations of the various aspects of identity. Why, then, do authors pretend otherwise? An obvious explanation is that academic work both demands and thrives on supposed methodological innovation and theoretical sophistication.

Oral history researchers have by now spent many years thoroughly going over the problems: the complexities of the interview situation, the role of the interviewer in what can be (but is not always) a dense personal interaction, the relative merits of insider versus outsider status, the elements of time and space, the role of language, the need to make decisions at every stage of the process, the debates over the resulting product, the uncertainties of interpretation. It would seem that we have by now exhausted self-reflexivity and ethical awareness, talk of collectivity and return, uncovering “silenced” voices, and claims to occupy the political and moral high ground.

Mulling over these matters, I have come to wonder for how much longer we can till the same soil, always unearthing familiar pebbles and rocks that we strain to treat as startling new discoveries. Perhaps this is unavoidable when academic demands for methodological awareness continue unabated. There is scant reward for saying: The object (or subject) of my study may be new, but new themes or identity groups by no means necessarily entail new methodological problems or issues, however much we wish to believe the contrary. In addition, each new generation of researchers tends to read current or recent versions of work in their field while too often ignoring older research, leading to lack of awareness of how familiar both their research concerns and solutions may be. The central questions that frame my discussion here, then, are: Must claims for constant theoretical or methodological innovation be made if oral history is to continue to have some validity? Is there really anything new under the oral history sun?



Other scholars with substantial experience in this field are evidently beginning to feel the same impatience. In a 2014 essay in the *Oral History Review*, Linda Shopes, a leading oral historian, wrote of her fatigue with the “clumsy imposition” of theory on interesting oral history projects that do not require such justification.<sup>1</sup> Extending that argument a year later, she explained that in her twelve years as co-editor of Palgrave Macmillan’s *Studies in Oral History* series, she grew weary of projects “in which presumed theoretical ideas—themselves often expressed in turgid and obfuscating language—strained to connect to the interviews at hand even as they overpowered what were, in fact, often quite informative, thoughtful, and eloquent narratives.”<sup>2</sup> This is a reasonable response to the growing disjuncture between the inherent interest of many projects and the theoretical and methodological claims, usually astonishingly thin and distinctly familiar, with which scholars surround their work.

A related focus has been on ethical dilemmas in conducting oral history work. After my own absorption in these problems in the 1980s, I began to realize the limited utility of such explorations and concluded that, however committed one might be to proper practices, in the most fundamental sense the ethical issues separating researchers and researched had very limited solutions.<sup>3</sup> In the end, we simply had to decide whether or not our research (imperfect as it always is) was worth pursuing. In a 1994 essay on what I called the “nouveau solipsism,” I suggested that ultimately it is the work itself, not our ceaseless reflections on ourselves and the “process,” that is of value.<sup>4</sup> This perception was stimulated by the ever more egregious self-involvement of scholars whose research subjects actually deserved better. A case in point at the time was anthropologist Ruth Behar’s *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story*, in which she averred that her own struggle to get tenure at a North American university was not all that different from Esperanza’s struggles as a street peddler in Mexico City.<sup>5</sup>

Leaving aside such fantasies, other dubious propositions are frequently asserted by scholars. In a 2015 article, Shopes refers to the “broadly subversive nature of so much of our work” in oral history, a familiar claim made in recent decades by scholars in many different fields, eager to assert the political significance of their work.<sup>6</sup> Subversive of what, one may well ask, and for what purposes? The politics of the scholar, like those of the speaker in an oral history interview, are not necessarily “subversive.” To the contrary, in today’s academy, leftist politics are the norm, as if scholarship had no intrinsic value and must be defended in some other terms. Challenges to the status quo, however, have become the status quo. Transgression is long gone, though its vocabulary lingers on.

The insistence on “subversion,” like the pretense that “our” research necessarily promotes (or should promote) progressive goals, confuses the aspirations (often self-aggrandizing) of researchers with the specific demands of sound scholarship. Interestingly, in the same essay, Shopes also makes clear her commitment to empirical research as a necessary component of oral history

work. In other words, nothing she writes suggests she believes truth and accuracy should be sacrificed to our love of “subversion” or to our political commitments. Furthermore, perhaps demonstrating that little is new in the field of oral history, Shopes discusses a variety of problems (ethical and practical) that arise as conflicts develop between narrator and researcher over control of a project and of its interpretation.

But these, too, are familiar themes. Katherine Borland’s essay in *Women’s Words*, for example, dealt ably with such a disagreement over interpretation.<sup>7</sup> And, well before her, other scholars revealed their own stake in arguments regarding control and credit in oral history work. Nearly 40 years ago, the historian Nell Irvin Painter frankly recounted the conflict she had with Hosea Hudson over whose name should appear on the book she created from his narrative of his life as a Communist organizer in the southern United States starting in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Or, to take a more drastic case, the French scholar Philippe Lejeune cited the disquieting attitude of writer Adélaïde Blasquez toward Gaston Lucas, the subject of her 1976 book.<sup>9</sup> Not only, it turned out, had Blasquez destroyed the tapes of her interviews with Lucas, but when Lejeune, invited by Blasquez’s publisher to do an interview with her, suggested that Lucas, too, should be interviewed, Blasquez replied that Lucas had nothing of value to say regarding her work. He existed, she maintained, only as a character that she, through her art, had created in the book.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps because oral history is so plainly dependent on willing narrators, who may indeed never before have had their stories recorded, its practitioners may be especially vulnerable to extravagant pronouncements of its unique role in the world. One oral historian active in Brazil has actually argued that the primordial objective of the “discipline” of oral history (seen as inherently supportive of leftist goals) is to formulate political arguments.<sup>11</sup> But oral history need not and should not be defended on the questionable grounds that it supports particular political commitments. No research tool in itself has political valence, though the use we make of it may well do so. And when it does, this in fact raises the possibility that problems of bias might cloud the researcher’s judgment and distort the work. To insist, as is frequently done, that all research is politically motivated is an easy, and unconvincing, retort, against which I have written for some time.<sup>12</sup> It confuses the content and the context of research. This is why Linda Shopes, like many other scholars, is right in insisting on the importance of empirical research. Granted, this is a pre-postmodern stance—and it should be applauded as such. In practice, even those who, on the one hand, state that reality is just a verbal construct, on the other rapidly abandon that stance when it comes to defending the accuracy of their own pronouncements, or when writing about the suffering, exploitation, and oppression that they accept as the objective reality of their subjects’ experiences.<sup>13</sup> Few would bother doing oral history if they thought the stories they gathered were no different from fictional narration—which, yes, contains a “kind of” truth, but not necessarily truth about the actual world, historical events, or even individual perceptions and experiences.

One cannot have it both ways. Passion and political commitments are inherently neither honest nor admirable; they are not necessarily good guides to understanding the world, however deeply felt. And narratives, no matter how convincing, are not automatically either true or accurate. We see this clearly in the spate of supposedly autobiographical books that have been exposed as fake—that is, as fiction.<sup>14</sup> Denunciations of fraud have also arisen in relation to the race and ethnicity of public figures in recent years, as apparent in public reactions to revelations regarding Rachel Dolezal, a white activist who claimed to be black and rose to be president of the Spokane, Washington, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Or, to take another recent case, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, who claims, without evidence, to have Native American heritage and was lauded by Harvard Law School as an example of their commitment to hiring minority women. Where sexual identity is concerned, by contrast, self-designation is now widely accepted and is rapidly becoming an orthodoxy, though not always without controversy (as in, for example, Smith College's announcement in 2015 that it would accept applications from people born male who "identify as female," and in the "transgender bathroom wars" of early 2016). In other words, we are living through a time of extraordinary confusion about if and how to gauge the validity of individuals' statements about their "identity."

Problems of authenticity arise in relation not only to claims to identity, of course, but to the very content of oral narratives, which, like other accounts, oral and written, may contain deep distortions, even lies, as happened with Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú. Her famous *testimonio*—the term used primarily for the oral history narratives of Latin American leftists—of her life as a Guatemalan political activist promoting Indigenous peoples' rights, was highly praised and celebrated for years. But then anthropologist David Stoll published his research showing that Rigoberta had fabricated certain important and oft-cited aspects of her life story, relating to her education, her brother's death, and the key conflict in which her family was embroiled.<sup>15</sup> A heated controversy ensued, in which Stoll was angrily denounced as if he were an apologist for the Guatemalan dictatorship, as if this resolved the empirical questions raised by his work. Attacks on Stoll were often buttressed by questions about what motivated him to do his research in the first place.

Once her lies were exposed, Rigoberta's shifting explanations—first blaming Elisabeth Burgos, who recorded and published her story, then affirming that her narrative was "my truth"—did not help matters. Nor did the immediate defense of her by numerous academics, who argued that the actual truth of her account was insignificant in view of the "larger truth" about the Guatemalan military.<sup>16</sup> Such sophistry, however, undermines the very cause a narrator's distortions and lies may have been created to support. In reality, any struggle for justice and human rights must depend on accurate representations of events and experiences. Claims to victimhood should not automatically be granted a

privileged status—especially in today’s world in which such claims have turned into a valuable commodity, readily brought into play.

To say that what might have happened is no different than what did happen has become a familiar reaction to questionable and even patently false allegations of crimes and perceived offenses against women and minorities.<sup>17</sup> Adopting such a stance, however, means entering into a slippery world in which everything is subjected to politics. Once the distinction between fact and fiction dissolves, everyone can enter into the game, which will eventually self-destruct. In the realm of fiction, the South may have won the Civil War, Hitler perhaps was killed in his youth or emerged victorious in World War II, and Communism prevailed throughout Europe into the 21st century. Such fictional scenarios abound, and are known as “alohistory”—that is “other,” “alternative,” or “counterfactual” history, what might have happened as opposed to what actually transpired. But in the realm of fact, something very different took place, even if we might argue about particular events and their interpretation.

The work of discerning the world and trying to interpret it is multifaceted and never ending, true, but we cannot just make things up as we go along, with no foundation, simply because it better serves some immediate purpose. Bridges built without respect for physical principles will collapse. Among the real-world consequences of conflating fact with politically motivated fictions is the debasement of learning and education in general, which cannot survive if subjected to political tests. This is obviously true in scientific and technical fields, and also in the humanities and social sciences. Oral history is a form of narrative, and this is important to understand, but it is not merely narrative, indistinguishable from fiction. The “history” part of the term “oral history” actually carries some weight.

Since the 1991 publication of *Women’s Words*, an enormous amount of research in oral history has appeared, particularly devoted to identity groups considered marginalized, silenced, or simply ignored. Many publishers and journals constantly seek out work utilizing oral history, and numerous courses and programs devoted to it exist. But the more institutionalized a field becomes, the more desperate the continuing claims for its newness and unique relevance sound. The main change in oral history, as in many other fields, has involved newly emerging identity groups, which have become a prized category. Though certainly researchers must be able to adapt to different situations, there is no evidence beyond the rhetorical that the identity of either researcher or narrator entails a particular ethics, methodology, and/or a specific political ideology. Nor do I think the “intersectional analysis,” popularized by Women’s Studies and designed to recognize multiple oppressions, resolves any of these issues.

Scholars, it seems to me, have responsibilities as scholars that can only be subordinated to politics at some peril. Contrary to currently fashionable allegations, the value of scholarship has to do with the integrity and thoroughness of the research and not with its underlying political commitments. For when we argue about the substance and value of oral history work, we invariably do so with reference to something outside of “narrative” and “identity”—vastly

overused words these days. The history of intentionally politicized research and knowledge claims is well documented and hardly provides an inspiring model. As one political scientist said to me in an interview, there's "stuff" out there in the world that we must deal with.

Perhaps it is an appropriate awareness of the "stuff," the life of the world, to which our words refer and relate, that explains the recent surge in books on the subjects of trauma and crisis.<sup>18</sup> In these books there is typically less angst about the researcher's role, less solipsism. While methodological issues are raised, it is revealing that the more popular the book, the less likely it is to focus on methodological and theoretical concerns.<sup>19</sup> Still, the researchers' politics may intrude, at times to the detriment of the work.<sup>20</sup> Historical and other kinds of research are absolutely crucial for these projects, if they are not to be relegated to the category of fiction or fraud, as is a critical awareness of the problems associated with memory, both individual and collective. But the excessive self-reflection, methodological obsessions, and political declarations typical of much feminist oral history, and continued in queer oral history and other identity-focused research, at times strike a discordant note. Of course, when researchers write primarily for other researchers, they should expect those other researchers, if they are familiar with the field, to be skeptical about claims to innovation that are by now shopworn.

Apart from the numerous works on trauma and crisis in recent years, a significant body of research has developed in fields that shed important light on oral history, given its key elements of speaking, remembering, and listening. Especially suggestive is recent work in neurobiology, psychology, and philosophy, which have illuminated both the neurological and existential aspects of memory, consciousness, and the sense of self.<sup>21</sup> These do not, however, replace the more empirical research oral historians still need to undertake to contextualize, understand, and interpret the oral narratives they gather. But they do take us far beyond the constant emphasis, decades old by now, on the interaction between researcher and narrator (though "intersubjectivity" continues to be a hot topic), the solipsism of the tirelessly self-reflexive scholar, and the ceaseless cultivation of identity politics.

New technologies may allow us to gather such stories in particularly compelling ways, and to use them in venues that go beyond the written text—all of which have led to their own issues and problems. But these are part of the oral historian's path, well-trodden by now and not requiring constant reinvention merely because it is group X or Y that has come into focus. As demonstrated by Jorge Luis Borges's delightful fictional creation of the *Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, a new taxonomy may well be a fascinating way of re-categorizing and apprehending things in the world, and, indeed, of showing the arbitrariness of (some) conventional categories, but it remains, nonetheless, an instance of taxonomy, not a reordering of the world.<sup>22</sup>

The allure of oral history, its fascination as a tool for researchers, and as a unique experience for readers and spectators, continues unimpeded. Identity groups founded on victim status come and go, whether as the focus of projects

or as manifestations of the researcher's own assertion of self. Like new themes and objects of oral history research, however, they very seldom raise fundamentally new methodological issues. In the end, having gone through extensive permutations and ruminations, we are back with the basics: a teller, a story, and a listener.

## Notes

- 1 Linda Shopes, "‘Insights and Oversights’: Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 257–268.
- 2 Linda Shopes, "After the Interview Ends: Moving Oral History Out of the Archives and Into Publication," *Oral History Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2015): 300–310.
- 3 See Daphne Patai, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake," *International Journal of Oral History* 8, no. 1 (February 1987): 5–27.
- 4 Daphne Patai, "Sick and Tired of Scholars' Nouveau Solipsism," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (1994): A52.
- 5 Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
- 6 Shopes, "After the Interview," 309.
- 7 Katherine Borland, "‘That's Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1992), 63–76.
- 8 Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
- 9 Adélaïde Blasquez, *Gaston Lucas, serrurier: Chronique de l'anti-héros* (Paris: Plon, Terre Humaine, 1976).
- 10 Paul John Eakin, Foreword to *On Autobiography*, by Philippe Lejeune, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xvii–xix.
- 11 José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, *Manual de História Oral* (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1996; 5th edition, 2005), 274. Meihy's claims for oral history are grandiose. Particularly as practiced in Brazil, he argues, it is a kind of superdiscipline that uniquely challenges the status quo, is subversive, supports affirmative action and social inclusion, promotes democracy, and so on. It is not surprising that he also advocates "transcreating" (a term borrowed from translation theory) the text—that is, changing the speaker's words so as to better capture his/her essence, which the "oralista" (Meihy's term for the oral history practitioner) presumably understands far better than the speaker.
- 12 See Daphne Patai, "When Method Becomes Power," in *Power and Method: Political Activism and Educational Research*, ed. Andrew Gitlin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 61–73. In the years since this essay was published, methodolatry seems to have gained even more traction in academic research, perhaps because taping a story and then turning it into a text can be easily criticized as far too simple and lacking in academic rigor.
- 13 See Alan B. Spitzer, "The Debate Over the Wartime Writings of Paul de Man: The Language of Setting the Record Straight," in *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, eds. Daphne Patai and Will Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 271–286, demonstrating that even the most avid postmodernists switch tacks and insist on "setting the record straight" when they feel misrepresented or misunderstood by others, which ought to be a logical impossibility for them.

- 14 See Forrest [Asa] Carter, *The Education of Little Tree* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976); Misha Defonseca, *Misha: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years* (Boston: Mt. Ivy Press, 1997); Norma Khouri, *Forbidden Love* (London and New York: Doubleday, 2003). See Paul John Eakin, Chapter 1, "Talking about Ourselves: The Rules of the Game," in *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), for an important discussion of such texts.
- 15 David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (New York: Westview, 1999).
- 16 Daphne Patai, "Whose Truth? Iconicity and Accuracy in the World of Testimonial Literature," in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 270–287. The vast majority of essays in this book defend Rigoberta and attack Stoll and those who took his work seriously.
- 17 See the Tawana Brawley case and other alleged hate crimes, or the instantly believed charges of rape at Duke University, the University of Virginia, and numerous other examples of causes célèbres that turned out to be lies.
- 18 See Sarah Helm, *If This Is a Woman. Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (London: Little, Brown, 2015), which utilizes a vast array of material, including her own interviews; and Steven High, ed., *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), which attempts a more holistic approach to survivor testimony. Its emphasis on narrators as collaborators rather than "objects" of study is, however, familiar.
- 19 Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, trans. Keith Gessen (Normal, Ill: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006), for example, says nothing whatsoever about methodology.
- 20 For example, some of the essays in Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, eds., *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), while not delving greatly into methodological issues, at times reveal all too clearly the researchers' biases (as in the essays about the 1994 Cuban rafter exodus and Muslims in post-9/11 America), not helped by the difficulty the reader has in discerning whether these biases reside in what was asked and/or what is presented to the reader.
- 21 See Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); Raymond Tallis, *The Knowing Animal: A Philosophical Inquiry into Knowledge and Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Eric R. Kandel, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (New York: Norton, 2006); David Morris and Kym Maclaren, eds., *Time, Memory, Institution: Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015); and journals such as Sage's *Memory Studies*, founded in 2008.
- 22 Jorge Luis Borges, "John Wilkins' Analytical Language," trans. Eliot Weinberger, in *Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), 229–232.

## 4 Feminist oral histories of racist women

*Kathleen Blee*

It is now commonplace to note the optimistic premise of feminist oral history. Early formulations assumed that eliciting stories was a means of sharing authority between researcher and researched, that telling stories empowered narrators who might otherwise have few opportunities to tell their life story with an (implied) audience beyond their own social networks, and that both outcomes advanced feminist scholarship and politics.<sup>1</sup> For scholarship, feminist oral history promised to elicit broader and more contextualized and meaningful information about ordinary people. Politically, it offered a way to recover and center the experiences, thoughts, and histories of marginalized persons: women as well as the poor, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, LGBTQ+ people, those with different abilities and disabilities, the “undocumented,” and many others. As part of this broader project, feminist oral historians recovered both private and public stories, including those of domestic violence, workplace harassment, neighborhood-based collective action, and non-commercial artistic endeavors. The scholarly and political promises of feminist oral history have been fulfilled in numerous studies that make visible the lives of women and marginalized men whose struggles for recognition and dignity would otherwise have been lost to history. Its mission was less clear, however, with respect to unsympathetic subjects, who lacked dignity, or did not give voice to socially valuable insights. It was especially murky when the narrators were actively engaged in efforts to harm or deny others social rights and resources.

In this chapter, I reflect on the implications for feminist oral history of two studies of former members of white supremacist groups in the United States. For one, I interviewed elderly women in the 1980s who were members of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, perhaps the largest explicitly racist political movement in American history, with at least three million men and a half million women determined to defend white, Protestant supremacism and undermine the economic, political, and social positions of Jews, Catholics, non-whites, and immigrants. For the second project, I interviewed women in the 2000s and 2010s who belonged to white supremacist groups in the 1990s and 2000s, such as neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, and white power skinhead groups. These groups were hostile to Jews, all people of color, and the US federal government, which they considered to be Jewish-dominated or ZOG (Zionist Occupation

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Government, to suggest that invisible Jewish conspirators secretly control the state). The women I interviewed in both projects had left racist activism, so they recalled their involvement from their perspective as former members.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, I assumed that both sets of women would be doubly distanced from racist activism, as former members of racist groups and as former believers in racist ideologies. The interviews revealed the fallacy of this assumption: neither group had fully rejected the beliefs of their former racist groups. Most of those active in the 1920s Klan had left the organization only because it collapsed precipitously at the end of the decade. Most of those active in the late 20th century took active steps to leave racist groups, but often continued to accept their ideology. In some of these cases, exit was prompted by non-ideological concerns, such as the viability of the group or personal conflicts with members or leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Interviews with racist women are examples of “awkward” research that does not fit well into the ordinary assumptions of scholarship. Elsewhere, I have outlined the ethical and methodological challenges posed by studying people and groups that differ significantly from the progressive activists and movements usually examined by feminist oral historians. These include ethical concerns about providing publicity for political agendas that seek to restrict social justice, human rights, or social equality, and the ethical responsibilities of scholars who study people and groups that advocate violence toward others.<sup>4</sup> The challenges are also methodological: How can feminist scholars present rich and accurate oral histories of people and social worlds that are difficult to fully access or understand? This chapter moves the discussion towards possible solutions. By reflecting on insights and missed opportunities in my studies of 1920s Klanswomen and contemporary female racist activists, I outline two concepts that may serve as analytic tools for feminist oral histories of exceedingly offensive narrators: master status and trauma.

## **Master status**

Sociologists have long described a status that overpowers all others as a “master status.”<sup>5</sup> Gender is an example of a master status, as it both creates expectations for how a person will think, act, and speak, and sidelines attention to other statuses that might create contrary expectations. A woman medical doctor, for example, is generally expected to exhibit stereotypically “female-traits,” rather than stereotypically “doctor-traits.” Similarly, the racial status of an African American mathematician is generally highly visible, whereas a white mathematician’s race would rarely command attention.

Feminist oral history is sensitive to the problems of master status. As pioneer practitioners noted, women’s experiences do not surface fully when scholars interpret narratives through a master-status lens, whether the working class, Holocaust survivors, or African American civil rights activists.<sup>6</sup> But gender itself can be a master status, obscuring the multiple and often conflicting identities and statuses of race, social class, nationality, and sexuality that shape

oral narratives, along with the actions, motivations, ideas, and personal agendas of female and male narrators.<sup>7</sup>

Master status complicates the process of oral history by creating expectations for what is relevant to explore in the interview and what is less salient. This is certainly true when working with racist activists, since racial extremism is both highly stigmatized and widely regarded as a master status.<sup>8</sup> Seeing someone as a “racist” sets expectations for what they are thinking and what motivates their actions, overshadowing other aspects of their lives. It pulls the interview and analysis in a pre-set direction, toward instances of racism at the expense of everything else. When a white supremacist man recounts a story of attacking his African American neighbor, there can be little incentive to push the narrator to discuss his motives, as they seem to flow clearly from his racist identity. But this may obscure the complicated layers of motivation that fuel racial violence. Further explanation might reveal his sexual entanglements with the neighbor, a property dispute, or simply an alcohol-fuelled battle among friends. Similarly, in studies of hate crimes, the search for evidence of a motive that is covered in hate-crime statutes can swamp the search for other motives.<sup>9</sup>

A feminist oral history approach provides a partial remedy to the problem by pushing one to search for gender subtexts within the master status of “racist” through direct evidence of gendered perspectives and attention to silences in the text.<sup>10</sup> In the narratives of 1920s Klanswomen, for example, I found that women joined the Klan to advance their gendered interests as (white Protestant) women as well as their racial/religious interests as white Protestants—a complicated intertwining of gender and racial politics. In the interviews with women racists of the late 20th century, I found evidence of despair that was strikingly different than the bravado and exhilaration recounted by their male racist counterparts. Women, but rarely men, were negative about the quality of leaders and interpersonal dynamics within their groups. Indeed, they rarely wanted their children, especially daughters, to devote their lives to racist extremism even if they wanted them to hold racist beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

I was not able to fully move beyond the lens of master status when analyzing the narratives of racist women, so other aspects of their experiences remained elusive. In interviews, my narrators spoke extensively about sexuality and friendships, problems with alcohol or anger issues, and worries about their future. While each topic was a chance to understand these women in a more comprehensive way, I rarely followed up except to explore how these experiences fit into their racist commitments, such as how sexual conflicts led to racial ideas. I missed the chance to understand how their involvement in white supremacy was inflected by other status categories, such as being heterosexual, middle class, a child, or a victim. Looking back, a deeper recognition of the power inherent in the analytic lens of master status could have alerted me to be broader in my scope, to ask questions, and push my analysis beyond the simple explanation of racism. My narrators’ identities, ideas, and aspirations were clearly tied to racial extremism, but this does not explain all they were.

## Trauma

A second conceptual tool of value to feminist oral histories of racist women is trauma, those experiences that alter a person's (or a societal) identity in deep and seemingly irrevocable ways.<sup>12</sup> Feminist principles of empathy and rapport in interviewing, and sensitivity to gendered social reality in interpretation, position scholars to understand the multiple layers of recounted trauma, which may be revealed by silence and reluctance to describe experiences as much as by direct testimony.<sup>13</sup>

By employing a feminist approach when interviewing racist women, I uncovered many complex accounts of trauma experienced before, during, and sometimes after women's time in racial extremism. Many indicated that they joined racist groups because of earlier incidents of personal trauma, such as an assault by a non-white person. Others described motivating traumas instead as an ideological shock induced by learning that much of what they had believed was wrong: they recounted, for instance, the trauma of hearing the racist doctrine that an invisible cabal of Jews controls the world. Further, racist women drew on traumatic stories to describe how their lives became more embedded in racist extremism, and thus increasingly dominated by hate, violence, and social marginality. They told stories of being excluded from family circles, losing jobs, and involvement in criminal activities. Recalling the end of their time in racial extremism, they even narrated the process of exiting a racist group as occasioning trauma. Walking away made them vulnerable to retaliation by former comrades, sanction by law enforcement, and ostracism from racist family and friends.

Trauma is not a constant theme among racist women, a finding that reveals much about the relationship of racial extremism to the wider society in which it is embedded. Klanswomen in the 1920s, for example, rarely made reference to trauma when relaying the process of joining the Klan as Klan communities did not differ significantly from white society in many localities. Indeed, early 20th century, white US Protestant majority populations broadly assumed their superiority over non-whites, immigrants, and Catholics. However, these 1920s Klanswomen did raise the issue of trauma in a different, and unexpected, context. They claimed to be wounded by what they perceived as the unfairly negative characterization of their Klan by subsequent generations that required them to hide their involvement from their children and grandchildren. They insisted that the Klan, not the African Americans, Catholics, and Jews it attacked, was the real victim of history. All of these women left the Klan at some point in the 1920s as its chapters folded and the national Klan ceased to exist by 1930. But if they experienced any sense of trauma in leaving, it was not legible in their narratives. No woman I interviewed would discuss her experience of leaving the Klan in any detail, although exiting was almost certainly emotionally difficult given that the organization collapsed in a firestorm of sexual and financial scandals.

By contrast, women who were involved in racist extremism in the late 20th century were much more apt to narrate a story of trauma that extended across

the full process of entering, participating in, and leaving racist groups. Almost every woman I interviewed about her time in white power skinhead, neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, or white supremacist groups in the 1990s and 2000s talked about the traumatic events that led her into racial extremism, including abuse by parents, bullying by peers, and sexual assault. While important to note the widespread accounts of trauma that preceded entry into racist groups, we must also be cautious in interpreting the meanings of this trauma. Radically separated from mainstream society, contemporary racist groups exist on the political and social fringes or virtually underground. Being a member of such a group thus requires a foundational shift in identity and lifeway for all but the very few who grow up in racial extremist families or communities. When a former member is asked to account for her decision to make such a dramatic change, she will likely describe dramatic and traumatic episodes as causal events. Traumatic events may well have led these women into racial extremism, but the widespread incidents of trauma experienced by women who did not go that route suggests that trauma is not the sole precipitating factor.

More revealing are the accounts of trauma experienced while women are in racist groups or leaving them. Organized racism is a hidden world, carefully shielded from the surveillance of police and anti-racist organizations. In such communities, abusive behavior toward women and girls, which includes sexual assault and losing their ability to make choices about their work, education, or personal lives, can be difficult to detect or stop. Leaving these groups can also involve trauma, from attacks from former comrades to negative reactions of those who discover their racist pasts.

Trauma can be a useful conceptual tool for mapping the fundamental reorientation of one's sense of self and the world that is required to cross the divide from mainstream to racial zealot—a shift from someone who may have racist attitudes to someone who fully embraces the agendas of Nazism, is convinced that a Jewish conspiracy controls the world, and works to expel non-whites from the US. But the concept can also be misleading. When racist women narrate a story about the traumatic reorientation of their lives and identities as they move from mainstream into racist groups, they imply a vast difference between the world of organized racism and the rest of white-dominated society. Certainly, there are significant differences between the two but it is important not to overstate the ideological gulf between them. Despite an overall trend toward acceptance of racial equality in the US, there remains an overlap between the white supremacist ideas of racist groups and the everyday racist understandings of many white Americans.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Oral history narratives are deeply woven into the cultural understandings of the societies in which they are produced.<sup>15</sup> Feminist oral historians have rightfully been attentive to issues that arise when the cultural worlds of scholars and narrators overlap, as exemplified by Judith Stacey's early warning of the

danger of exploitation in feminist methods that depend on empathetic connection.<sup>16</sup> The issues that come to the fore when working with people whose politics, ideas, or agendas are radically opposed to our own—and who pose a threat to the principles of justice, equity, and democracy—are less well studied even though our distance from these narrators may better position us to analyze rather than simply accept their accounts.<sup>17</sup>

Interpreting oral histories of racist women requires feminist oral historians to stand both inside and outside their narratives. It demands both an empathetic understanding and a critical, skeptical stance. The concepts of master status and trauma can be useful tools in this endeavor as they place feminist scholars in a reflexive space that simultaneously respects and pushes back against the narratives of racist women. Master statuses shape how others interpret words, actions, and life. For feminist oral historians, the concept of master status provides a caution against interpretation that too easily assigns overwhelming significance to the most obvious status of a narrator, such as their racial activism. Similarly, accounts of trauma are powerful moments in oral history narratives but these must be analyzed with care so as to avoid overly simplistic interpretations of the complex, causal pathways that define people's lives.

## Notes

- 1 Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 2 Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); "Personal Effects from Far-Right Activism," in *The Consequences of Social Movements: People, Policies, and Institutions*, eds. Lorenzo Bosi, Marco Giugni, and Katrin Uba (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66–84.
- 3 Blee, *Women of the Klan*; Blee, "Personal Effects"; David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).
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## 5 Emotion and pedagogy

### Teaching digital storytelling in the millennial classroom

*Rina Benmayor*

“The beauty and power of a tale told to an empathetic listener,” writes prominent feminist anthropologist Ruth Behar, “is at the heart of the most meaningful scholarship.”<sup>1</sup> It is also at the heart of my most meaningful teaching. Oral histories, life stories, and *testimonios* have the power to transform students, and the classroom more generally, into a unique space of empathetic learning, creativity, and personal empowerment.<sup>2</sup> This was my experience working as an oral historian with the El Barrio Popular Education Program in East Harlem, which recorded older Latina women’s life histories as part of an action-research project of educational empowerment. Writing about that project in *Women’s Words*, I argued that the acts of telling and writing one’s life story were key components to an empowerment process; that the classroom nurtured collective awareness of cultural rights; and that this awareness had the potential to translate into collective claims and action.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, I have witnessed this same transformative power in a different educational context, this time teaching my undergraduate digital storytelling course called “Latina Life Stories” at a California public university where a significant number of students are the daughters and sons of migrant Mexican farmworkers.<sup>4</sup> I have written extensively about this class, analyzing pedagogical strategies, student learning, and the value of digital *testimonios* as a “signature pedagogy” for Latino Studies.<sup>5</sup> Here, I consider the role of emotion and feeling in my digital storytelling classroom, assessing its value for a critical feminist pedagogy with transformative potential. Digital storytelling (which I first encountered in the late 1990s) is used in various contexts, including in community heritage projects, schools, awareness-raising social projects, and in tandem with oral history.<sup>6</sup> I saw in the short digital movie format a rich active-learning tool for teaching Latina literature, which is so firmly grounded in the autobiographical narrative.

Emotion is at the core of memory, and hence all storytelling. My approach to teaching digital life storytelling includes pedagogies that engage emotions and are rooted in foundational feminist concepts and practices: that the personal is political; subjectivity and identity involve complex intersections of race, class, gender, and other social identities in analysis; discourses and narratives are shaped in memory through positionality and emotion; breaking silences requires

vulnerability and safety; and storytelling has the potential to be empowering, both individually and collectively. While epistemological concern with emotions has long been central to feminist studies, in the last decade the interconnection between emotions, memory, and subjectivity has generated renewed interest among cultural historians.<sup>7</sup> In oral history, emotion and affect are fundamental methodological concerns, of course, and much, including a number of chapters in this collection, has been written on their centrality to understanding Holocaust and trauma narratives in particular.<sup>8</sup> However, the “emotional turn” in teaching oral history and life storytelling has not been explored.

I am well aware of the dangers of blurring boundaries between oral history, a fundamentally dialogic process between two interlocutors, and life storytelling which can be created in an interview context but also in private, as an individual creation.<sup>9</sup> The digital stories I work with have oral dimensions but they have not been produced by dialogic interviews. They are self-narrations, stories of personal experience, voiced orally in dialogic spaces, then written as dramatic scripts, recorded in oral performance by the narrator in her/his own voice, and turned into short movies that include visual and sometimes musical texts. Orality is a part of the process. Auality, the telling of stories in the narrator’s own voice, gives meaning and power to those stories.

The digital stories my students produce are *testimonios*; I use the Spanish term “*testimonio*” to signal an intentional act of bearing witness and testifying. The stories my students tell are primarily personal, but they have collective referents to a social or cultural injustice or celebrate accomplishments forged under difficult circumstances. They are emotion stories that explore meaningful moments in students’ lives, most of whom are Latinas, with a handful of Latinos, other students of color, and white students. Their stories address issues of migration and assimilation, the gendered and racialized body, racism, sexism, and homophobia, ethnic and cultural identity, mixed race heritage, education, family and community, and individual life challenges and achievements. They reveal that so-called millennial students care deeply about social issues and their relationships to others. While some sign up for “Latina Life Stories” because it fulfills several requirements or it fits their schedules, Latina/os tend to be drawn to the class because it directly addresses their own cultural and lived experiences.

Every student holds within them a story that needs to be told, and the class facilitates that telling. But how that telling is situated matters. Taking cues from autobiographical writings of contemporary Latinas, students’ *testimonios* are not merely emotive tellings.<sup>10</sup> Also deeply oppositional, they speak back to people and forces that oppress, marginalize, and devalue their lives. Student *testimonios* are also propositional, articulating new ways of understanding struggles and conflicts, which will benefit others like them, and especially members of younger generations. In what follows, I reflect on the centrality of emotion in the creative process that organizes the course and detail some of the pedagogical strategies involved. For a fuller appreciation of what



transpires, readers are encouraged to first view some of the videotaped stories and a short video about the course (links are provided in the notes).<sup>11</sup>

### Texts of emotion

“Latina Life Stories” is structured to activate what Spanish Basque oral historian Miren Llona calls “enclaves of memory,” deep emotional experiences that are seared in memory and that in turn construct subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> In my course, a number of activities trigger these enclaves, beginning with the course readings, which include autobiographical and theoretical writings by Latinas of diverse national/cultural origins, born or raised and living in the United States. Since the 1980s, Latina writers have not only produced a rich body of literature based in personal experience narratives, but also contributed key theories and concepts that are now widely used in the humanities and social sciences. Narrating her lived and psychic experience as a Chicana in the “borderlands” of South Texas, Gloria Anzaldúa’s path-breaking book, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, theorized a new mestiza consciousness through theoretical intersections of colonialism, ethnicity, race, class, gender, myth, and sexuality.<sup>13</sup> Thirty years later, her work continues to inspire students. Contemporaneously, Chicana poet, playwright, and essayist Cherríe Moraga linked personal narrative to bodily emotion as a source of critical knowledge, in what she called doing “theory in the flesh.”<sup>14</sup> Others, like Puerto Rican poets Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, explored the embodiment of hybridity through histories of migrations, mixed ethnic heritages, and feminist politics.<sup>15</sup> The texts of these and many other Latina writers model the move from emotional memory to building social theory. They are what Luisa Passerini calls texts of emotion, which are socially constructed through both normative and “outlaw” discourses of emotion.<sup>16</sup> Because these are culturally grounded stories of personal experience, students find the readings deeply engaging. They recognize in them their own experiences and, more importantly, they stir feelings that are deeply rooted in their memories.

### Pedagogies of emotion: Getting to story

The course has two major assignments: to create and produce a digital *testimonio*, namely a three-minute digital movie that combines an original story script, performed and recorded in the author’s voice, with a visual treatment and perhaps music; and to write a final paper reflecting on and theorizing the story in connection with course themes and concepts. Getting to the story involves several weeks of preparation, during which students discuss the readings, listen to, watch, and analyze digital *testimonios* produced in previous semesters, do “memory writes,” and hold story circles. Described below, each of these activities engages emotions and emotional memory in particular ways.

**Memory writes:** Each class session begins with five minutes of free journaling, which I call a “memory write” about a personal experience. These memory writes are related to class themes such as migration, gender roles, racism, discrimination, the body, or heritage identity. This personal journal space allows students to access intimate emotional memories without the pressure of disclosure. Many of them take up the invitation to share their memory writes, thereby giving public voice to personal experiences and feelings. These students set the tone for the class because their memories spark among the other students recognition of commonalities. Since each student in the class feels the vulnerability of personal disclosure, their responses to these shared memories are caring and supportive. Memory writes may evolve into digital stories, but the real importance of this exercise is empathetic—to spark a bonding process based on careful listening and mutual respect of commonalities and differences.

**Critiquing *testimonios*:** Part of each class is devoted to viewing digital *testimonios* produced by students in previous years, which serves to generate constructive critiques of form—which elements (dramatic dimensions of the story, effectiveness of the performance, choice and treatment of visual images) worked particularly well and which did not. These critiques also spark reactions to the content of the stories being told. Given that these are stories produced by peers, students can more readily relate to them and this brings forth intense responses to the situations and feelings recounted.

**Story circles:** In the more intimate space of a small story circle, students discuss readings and begin to break their own silences, recounting their pasts and exploring possible story topics. Story circles are usually composed of groups of three, but sometimes the entire class becomes one large circle (the course is capped at 26 students). These circles enable feedback to be given and serve as testing grounds for the story that each student will eventually make into their movie.

All of these exercises create spaces for personal disclosure that transform the classroom into a safe storytelling environment. In her final reflection paper, student Ana Elías-Morales commented about students’ willingness to take the risk of sharing their intimate experiences and feelings and, in doing so, transform what might have been an ordinary class discussion into something much more meaningful. She stated:

Sharing my stories in class was liberating; hearing stories from others . . . was inspiring . . . Reading their drafts and helping them figure out what to write about was not only revealing, but made me see many of them with new eyes . . . We all have so many stories to tell, but it’s up to each of us to share them and either let them consume us, or empower us.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps because these accounts are personal, emotionally compelling truths, they provoke mindful listening, respect, compassion, and empathy. Vulnerability

opens the way for solidarity across differences. As naïve as it may sound, I have never witnessed in this class the vitriolic interactions that can erupt among students around issues of race, politics, and privilege. As Herminia Cervantes expressed it:

Listening to their stories and comments made my story better and it helped me get comfortable with sharing my story because my classmates never judged me in a bad way. They were always there to give me suggestions and listen to what I had to say.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps since this class is about students' own trajectories, they see it as a space for positive emotional work.

Significantly, the next stage—producing a script (maximum one-and-a-half pages double spaced), recording it, and making the digital movie—is not merely technical work. Carrying it out can be equally powerful and challenging from an affective standpoint.

### **Performing story**

The heart of a digital story is voice. The story, in this case, moves from oral sharing to written script. Once the script is ready, the next step is to perform it as an oral telling.<sup>19</sup> This step is doubly emotive, both voicing memoried feelings and embodying the performance. To record their stories, students brave the heat and confinement of a sound booth and my dramatic direction. While they may have practiced their scripts at home to the wall, the moment of recording is still laden with fear. Now the narrator stands before the microphone, script pinned to the booth wall, trying to imagine their intended audience on the other side. To help make this transition back into an oral mode, the story is printed out in poetic format, rather than as a written paragraph, with line breaks that mark natural speech and breath patterns. It usually takes three takes to “get it right,” *telling* the story, rather than reading it, achieving the right pace, rhythm, emphasis, pitch, and tone.

Performing is stressful on multiple levels, but it is usually here that the core emotion of the story tumbles out. The narrators try hard not to “lose it,” but often do. Speaking about difficult life experiences brings tears to my students' eyes, causing their voices to crack; happier stories invite laughter and volume. In speaking about her experience, Ana Elías-Morales stated: “The first indication that this story was very personal was in my first attempts to record it in the sound booth; I cried. I felt as though my mom was speaking through me.”<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, emotion carries the story and makes it “real.”

### **Producing story**

The emotive power of digital media, like film, lies in the marriage of story, image and sound. As Passerini notes, “new texts . . . no longer concern orality

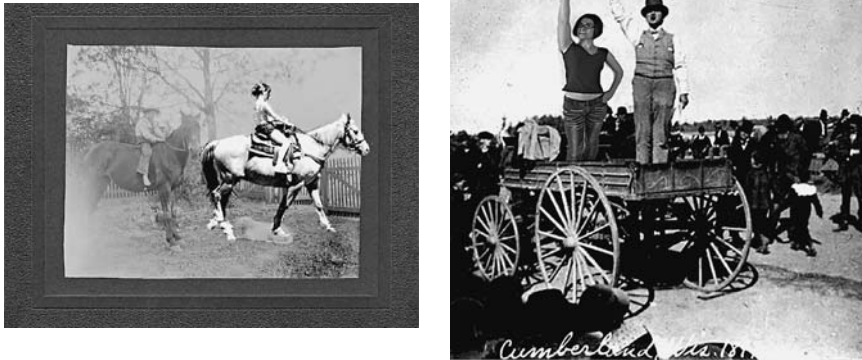


Figure 5.1 Screen shots from *Fighting for My History* by Kristen La Follette

but visibility.” Visibility, she argues, “is crucial to studying emotions that might never be articulated in words,” requiring different decoding strategies as well as, I must note, different encoding strategies.<sup>21</sup> Take, for example, the following images. Kristen La Follette inscribed herself into archival photographs of her paternal ancestor, the radical socialist and statesman Robert La Follette, aka “Fighting Bob.” Her goal was to convey how Robert, as she called him, and his politics continue to inspire her today.<sup>22</sup> Her digital manipulations of the images signified an emotional strategy. In the first, she rendered her horse in living color and led it beyond the frame of the archival photograph; in the second, she placed herself on the wagon alongside but also slightly in front of her ancestor. In explaining these subtle manipulations, she stated: “I did this to reclaim my space into my own history, and to show that I ally with my ancestors. It felt good to see myself in family pictures where my identity had been missing before.”<sup>23</sup>

Emotion and political activism are the catalysts here. The digital manipulation creates an independent visual drama that supports the story, but can also symbolically stand on its own. Visually, Kristen affirmed the legacy of political struggle for social justice that drives her.

Music and soundscapes also set mood and signal the dramatic and emotive dimensions of a story. Copyright and fair use laws restrict students’ ability to use music from their favorite playlists. They are encouraged to explore instrumentals from public access websites. They also find a piece of music that complements the rhythm, mood, and story’s emotional shifts between major and minor keys. Some opt to use copyrighted music at the beginning and end of the story, and perhaps at an appropriate interval in the story, so as to not exceed the allowable percentage of fair use. Others commission original scores from musician friends. Many spend hours searching for the right piece or constructing their own soundscapes to emotionally “nail” the story. Ana Elías-Morales declared:

I knew that it had to be a melody that would capture the essence of my mom and also maintain a constant rhythm . . . I accidentally found the music and knew when I heard it that it was the right one! . . . It is a lovely piece of music called *Mimbre y escarcha*, and enhanced my story perfectly.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, the use of music is optional. What matters in the end is the performative voice that tells the story.

### Theorizing story

The final paper assignment asks students to connect their story to the concepts learned throughout the semester and to reflect on its meaning. In other words, they are required to theorize their story and explain and evaluate their creative processes. Theorizing is the most difficult task, as it requires stepping outside the narrative to foreground ideas rather than feelings, although the two are obviously linked. I actually believe that emotion is at the core of all critical reflection, catalyzing the move from the individual to the social, in short, a “theorizing from the flesh,” to use Cherríe Moraga’s language.<sup>25</sup> Liliana Cabrera-Murillo’s *testimonio*, “Dancing into *Mi Cultura*,” articulates how she experienced this shift, as she sought to find her place within both her Mexican heritage and what she calls her “privilege” as a fourth-generation, middle-class Latina. It was in Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands consciousness that Liliana discovered a space of belonging.<sup>26</sup> She wrote:

For so long I was desperately seeking to name my experience. [. . .] I had to find a way to claim an identity that embraced a rich Mexican heritage as well as a fourth generation citizen experience. [. . .] It now seems ironic that the name that I’ve found to identify my experience [new mestiza consciousness] . . . requires me to embrace a comfort in ambiguity. With this new paradigm available to me, I have learned to use the privilege of my education . . . aware of the oppressions, the systems that support the breeding of future oppressors, and [discover] a new position for me to join the resistance against them.<sup>27</sup>

The emotive language—“desperately seeking,” “embraced,” “comfort,” “aware”—illustrates the intensely affective dimension of her conceptual discovery. Passerini speaks of how “emotions can shape a new self.”<sup>28</sup> As Liliana’s reflection suggests, theorizing one’s narrative articulates that transformative move from feeling to gaining a new understanding of one’s place in the world.

Coming to this awareness of new discourses on identity and consciousness is tremendously empowering. Digital storytelling in itself is not a form of social activism. But for students like Ana, Kristen, and Liliana, it can lead there. Finding in Latina feminist theory and *testimonio* a way to name individual and collective struggles situates students as cultural and social actors in history.

The class readings offer new discourses of identity, belonging, and fights for equality. The digital *testimonio* provides a space in which students can give voice to their own identity struggles and triumphs, inscribing themselves as thinkers and authors in their own right. This, in my view, opens the door to forms of activism as millennial students contemplate future roles in their communities and the larger society. The *testimonio* is not just a storied representation of an individual's lived past, but becomes a personal statement, a glimpse into who that individual is and the kind of person they may become.

### Presenting story

The digital *testimonio* is an artifact. It is as tangible as a published book. The in-class and public screenings provide immediate audiences, but in many cases the stories are also copied onto discs and presented to parents as gifts or shared through social media.

The in-class screening is a particularly important transformational moment. Although students have bonded in the class and know quite a bit about one another by this time, each *testimonio* seen on the big screen brings a deeper level of understanding and insight into their classmates' histories and personae. As Jacquelyn Gallardo said: "Watching everyone's video was very emotional and I feel like I've gotten to know each one of them on a deeper level because they let me in to a part of their life" [sic].<sup>29</sup>

The *testimonios* are received with respect and appreciation, not only for the experiences they recount, but also for the creative production involved. While the classroom has become a safe sharing space, the public screening creates a new moment of vulnerability as well as one of great pride. As Gallardo noted,



Figure 5.2 2014 Festival poster

it was an unveiling of intimacy, personal history, innermost feelings, and creativity to complete strangers, but also to family and friends: “Seeing people crying, especially my mother[,] made me realize how important these stories are. My mother later told me how proud she was of me for growing as a person . . .”<sup>30</sup> The full emotional import of the whole process is not entirely felt until this moment. As the Kleenex box circulates among the audience, tears, hugs, and proud smiles mark the conclusion of the festival and the course. Since final papers are not due until after the public screening, they allow the student to reflect on that final process as well.

## Conclusion

I call “Latina Life Stories” my “heart” class because that is where the stories come from and, in turn, create a deeply felt experience. In this regard, the class might well fit into Alexander Freund’s critique of the storytelling boom as a neoliberal emotion industry of confessional, self-help, survival, and triumph life narratives.<sup>31</sup> But while my course creates a space that privileges emotion and emotional knowledge, with pedagogical strategies that intentionally kindle affective memory, it is also an intensely political space and project. Storytelling is situational and life stories mean different things in different contexts to different people, depending on whether you are the listener, the teller, or the critic. The act and process of creating a story—in this case a digital *testimonio*—can be deeply self-liberating to the individual, but it can also produce new cultural discourses and pathways to social action that have implications for a larger collectivity. The process of having the authors or “tellers” provide their own interpretations of their stories gives special insight into what these new discourses might be. For Latino students and all students who live in “othered” spaces, many of them the first generation in their families to attend college, speaking back to power and proposing new relational discourses, identities, and cultural constructs through their narratives matters to them personally. They carry these stories as well as a greater appreciation of them as they make their way in the world, and interact with others in their cultural communities. To quote José Garza: “For it is classes like this that ignite my desire to become a writer, a teacher, and a better human being.”<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Ruth Behar, Jacket endorsement to *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation: Approaches to Oral History in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain*, eds. Rina Benmayor, María Eugenia Cardenal de la Nuez, and Pilar Domínguez Prats (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).
- 2 Among Spanish speakers and American Latinas, the term “*testimonio*” is widely used to designate personal narratives that bear witness, that testify. Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). In the class, we use “*testimonio*” rather than “life story”; in writing my use of each term is contextual. I use “digital storytelling” when speaking generically and “*testimonio*” to signal the type of stories my students produce.

- 3 Rina Benmayor, "Testimony, Action Research, and Empowerment: Puerto Rican Women and Popular Education," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna B. Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 159–174.
- 4 California State University, Monterey Bay was inaugurated in 1995, as the 21st campus of the California State University system. Located on the Central Coast and on the edge of the Salinas Valley, it is a Hispanic-serving institution, with 30 per cent of the student body largely of migrant Mexican families. I was part of the university's founding faculty and taught "Latina Life Stories" every year from 1995 until retirement in 2011.
- 5 Rina Benmayor, "Digital Testimonio as a Signature Pedagogy for Latin@ Studies," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 507–524; "Theorizing through Digital Stories: The Art of 'Writing Back' and 'Writing For,'" *The Academic Commons*, last modified 7 January 2009, <https://fyse2015.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/benmayor.pdf>; "Digital Storytelling as a Signature Pedagogy in the New Humanities," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (June 2008): 188–205.
- 6 See Joe Lambert, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, 4th revised edition (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012); the South African Sonke Gender Justice uses digital stories to raise awareness around HIV/AIDs, gender equality, and human rights: [www.genderjustice.org.za/](http://www.genderjustice.org.za/); Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling: <http://storytelling.concordia.ca/>.
- 7 See Luisa Passerini, "Connecting Emotions. Contributions from Cultural History," accessed 5 October 2017, [www.nnet.gr/historein/historeinfiles/histvolumes/hist08/historein8-passerini.pdf](http://www.nnet.gr/historein/historeinfiles/histvolumes/hist08/historein8-passerini.pdf); Miren Llona, "The Healing Effect of Discourses: Body, Emotions, and Gender Subjectivity in Basque Nationalism," in *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation*, 77–92.
- 8 See the chapters by Theresa de Langis, Stéphane Martelly, Hillary Hiner, and Hourig Attarian et al. in this collection as well as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Dawson, eds., *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2004); Alistair Thomson, "Anzac Memories Revisited: Trauma, Memory, and Oral History," *Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 1–29.
- 9 Alexander Freund, "Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age," *Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 96–132, in which he makes a case for the danger of conflating storytelling and oral history.
- 10 Latina autobiographical writers we read in the course include: Gloria Anzaldúa, Norma Cantú, Sandra Cisneros, Teresa Marrero, Cherríe Moraga, Aurora Levins Morales, Rosario Morales, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and the Latina Feminist Group.
- 11 See, for instance, Ana Elías-Morales, "Letter to my Family," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXQQaKaiH18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXQQaKaiH18); Liliana Cabrera-Murillo, "Dancing into Mi Cultura," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6oynUJhXxA&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6oynUJhXxA&feature=youtu.be); José A. Garza, "Welcome to the Family," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0AQOe15Blg&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0AQOe15Blg&feature=youtu.be). To view a video about the course itself, go to: "U-Stories: Latina Life Stories," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLbh2gw8EsA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLbh2gw8EsA).
- 12 Llona, 80.
- 13 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1999).
- 14 Cherríe Moraga, no title, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 23.



- 15 Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, *Getting Home Alive* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1986).
- 16 Passerini, 118. Also see Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotions in Feminist Epistemology," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
- 17 Ana Elías-Morales, "Revelations of my Identity," 6 May 2008, 6.
- 18 Herminia Cervantes, "Theorizing Story," 13 December 2012, n.p.
- 19 Digital *testimonio* scripts are generally one-and-a-half pages in length, double-spaced. They go through multiple drafts, attending to length, the dramatic arc of the story, and the use of spoken rather than written language.
- 20 Elías-Morales, 5.
- 21 Passerini, 122.
- 22 Kristen La Follette, *Fighting for My History* (2005), last modified 16 August 2016, <https://youtu.be/m0d5u0iKkUs>.
- 23 Kristen La Follette, "A Reframed Identity," 14 May 2005, 10.
- 24 Elías-Morales, 5.
- 25 Moraga, no title, 23.
- 26 Anzaldúa.
- 27 Liliana Cabrera, "Dancing into *Mi Cultura*," Spring 2004, 8–9.
- 28 Passerini, 120.
- 29 Jacquelyn Gallardo, final paper; no title, 30 November 2012, 7.
- 30 Gallardo, 7.
- 31 Freund.
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