

## What Is Oral History? Linda Shopes

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Making Sense of Oral History offers a place for students and teachers to begin working with oral history as historical evidence. Written by Linda Shopes, this guide presents an overview of oral history and ways historians use it, tips on questions to ask when reading or listening to oral history interviews, a sample interpretation of an interview, an annotated bibliography, and a guide to finding and using oral history online. Linda Shopes is a historian at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. She has worked on, consulted for, and written about oral history projects for more than twenty-five years. She is co-editor of *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History* and is past president of the Oral History Association.

### What Is Oral History?

“Oral History” is a maddeningly imprecise term: it is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition-bearers; to informal conversations about “the old days” among family members, neighbors, or coworkers; to printed compilations of stories told about past times and present experiences; and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.

Each of these uses of the term has a certain currency. Unquestionably, most people throughout history have learned about the past through the spoken word. Moreover, for generations history-conscious individuals have preserved others' firsthand accounts of the past for the record, often precisely at the moment when the historical actors themselves, and with them their memories, were about to pass from the scene.

Shortly after Abraham Lincoln's death in 1865, for example, his secretary, John G. Nicolay, and law partner, William Herndon, gathered recollections of the sixteenth president, including some from interviews, from people who had known and worked with him. Similarly, social investigators historically have obtained essential information about living and working conditions by talking with the people who experienced them. Thus, the Pittsburgh Survey, a Progressive Era investigation of social conditions in that city designed to educate the public and prod it towards civic reform, relied heavily on evidence obtained from oral sources.

Among the most notable of these early efforts to collect oral accounts of the past are the thousands of life histories recorded by Federal Writers Project [FWP] workers during the late 1930s and early 1940s. An agency of the New Deal Works Progress Administration, the FWP was deeply populist in intent and orientation; the life histories were designed to document the diversity of the American experience and ways ordinary people were coping with the hardships of the Great Depression. Plans for their publication fell victim to federal budget cuts and a reorientation of national priorities as World War II drew near; most of

them remain in manuscript form at the Library of Congress and other repositories around the country. The best known of the FWP life histories are the “slave narratives” elicited from elderly former slaves living in the South; other narratives were collected from a variety of regional, occupational, and ethnic groups.

Though of considerable value, early efforts to record firsthand accounts of the past can be termed “oral history” by only the most generous of definitions. While methods of eliciting and recording them were more or less rigorous in any given case, the absence of audio- and videotape recorders—or digital recording devices—necessitated reliance on human note-takers, thus raising questions about reliability and veracity. Many early interviews were also idiosyncratic or extemporaneous efforts, conducted with no intention of developing a permanent archival collection.

Thus, historians generally consider oral history as beginning with the work of Allan Nevins at Columbia University in the 1940s. Nevins was the first to initiate a systematic and disciplined effort to record on tape, preserve, and make available for future research recollections deemed of historical significance. While working on a biography of President Grover Cleveland, he found that Cleveland’s associates left few of the kinds of personal records—letters, diaries, memoirs—that biographers generally rely upon. Moreover, the bureaucratization of public affairs was tending to standardize the paper trail, and the telephone was replacing personal correspondence. Nevins came up then with the idea of conducting interviews with participants in recent history to supplement the written record. He conducted his first interview in 1948 with New York civic leader George McAneny, and both the Columbia Oral History Research Office—the largest archival collection of oral history interviews in the world—and the contemporary oral history movement were born.

Early interviewing projects at Columbia and elsewhere tended to focus on the lives of the “elite”—leaders in business, the professions, politics, and social life. But oral history’s scope widened in the 1960s and 1970s in response to both the social movements of the period and historians’ growing interest in the experiences of “nonelites.” Increasingly, interviews have been conducted with blue-collar workers, racial and ethnic minorities, women, labor and political activists, and a variety of local people whose lives typify a given social experience. Similar in intent to the WPA interviews of the previous generation, this latter work especially has helped realize oral history’s potential for restoring to the record the voices of the historiographically—if not the historically—silent. For similar to President Cleveland’s associates, few people leave self-conscious records of their lives for the benefit of future historians. Some are illiterate; others, too busy. Yet others don’t think of it, and some simply don’t know how. And many think—erroneously, to be sure—that they have little to say that would be of historical value. By recording the firsthand accounts of an enormous variety of narrators, oral history has, over the past half-century, helped democratize the historical record.

To summarize: oral history might be understood as a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record. Although the conversation takes the form of an interview, in which one person—the interviewer—asks questions of another person—variously

referred to as the interviewee or narrator—oral history is, at its heart, a dialogue. The questions of the interviewer, deriving from a particular frame of reference or historical interest, elicit certain responses from the narrator, deriving from that person's frame of reference, that person's sense of what is important or what he or she thinks is important to tell the interviewer. The narrator's response in turn shapes the interviewer's subsequent questions, and on and on. To quote Alessandro Portelli, one of oral history's most thoughtful practitioners, "Oral history . . . refers [to] what the source [i.e., the narrator] and the historian [i.e. the interviewer] do together at the moment of their encounter in the interview." [Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 3.]

The best interviews have a measured, thinking-out-loud quality, as perceptive questions work and rework a particular topic, encouraging the narrator to remember details, seeking to clarify that which is muddled, making connections among seemingly disconnected recollections, challenging contradictions, evoking assessments of what it all meant then and what it means now. The best interviewers listen carefully between the lines of what is said for what the narrator is trying to get at and then have the presence of mind, sometimes the courage, to ask the hard questions. Yet all interviews are shaped by the context within which they are conducted [the purpose of the interview, the extent to which both interviewer and interviewee have prepared for it, their states of mind and physical condition, etc.] as well as the particular interpersonal dynamic between narrator and interviewer: an interview can be a history lecture, a confessional, a verbal sparring match, an exercise in nostalgia, or any other of the dozens of ways people talk about their experiences. Several years ago, for example, I interviewed a number of elderly Polish women who had worked in Baltimore's canneries as children. I too am of Polish descent and these women were similar in age and social position to my mother's older sisters. In interview after interview, as we talked about the narrator's life as an immigrant daughter and working-class wife, her experiences as a casual laborer in an industry notorious for low wages and unpleasant working conditions, the narrator would blurt out with great force, "You have no idea how hard we had it!", often rapping her finger on a table for emphasis. I had become a representative of the generation of the narrator's own children, who indeed have no idea how hard their parents and grandparents had it; what began as an interview thus became an impassioned conversation across the generations.

### **How Do Historians Use It?**

For the historian, oral history interviews are valuable as sources of new knowledge about the past and as new interpretive perspectives on it. Interviews have especially enriched the work of a generation of social historians, providing information about everyday life and insights into the mentalities of what are sometimes termed "ordinary people" that are simply unavailable from more traditional sources. Oral histories also eloquently make the case for the active agency of individuals whose lives have been lived within deeply constraining circumstances.

A single example here must suffice. For their study of deindustrialization in the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania, historians Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht interviewed almost ninety men and women who had

lived through the long economic decline that started when the region's mines closed during the mid-twentieth century. Getting underneath the statistical summaries and institutional responses afforded by census data, government reports, and company and union records, the interviews are replete with information about the various and deeply gendered strategies individuals used to cope with this disaster: men traveled long distances to work in factories outside the region, often living in nearby boardinghouses during the week and returning home only on the weekends; women held families together while themselves entering the paid labor force; families made do, went without, and expected little; some, with fewer ties to the region, pulled up roots and relocated elsewhere. Interviews also reveal subtle shifts in the power dynamics within marriages, as unemployment undermined men's authority even as employment enhanced women's status; and changes in parental expectations for children, who had to forge lives in new economic circumstances. Summing up what they have learned from their interviews, Dublin and Licht have written:

The oral histories of the men and women of the anthracite region in general render a complicated picture of economic crisis. Neither catastrophe nor a complete restructuring of life marked the collapse of the area's economy. Unevenness characterized the experience--the consequences for and responses of different communities, families and individuals varied. . . . As business and labor historians have recently emphasized the unevenness of capitalist economic development--industrialization, for example, unfolding in varying ways and with varying consequences in different trades and communities--interviews with those who have faced modern-day long-term crises of economic decline suggest that unevenness is a valuable concept for our understanding this contemporary experience as well. [Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht, "Gender and Economic Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region, 1920-1970," *Oral History Review* 27 (Winter/Spring 2000): 97.]

It is not difficult to understand how, in interview after interview, oral history opens up new views of the past. For in an interview, the voice of the narrator literally contends with that of the historian for control of the story. Recounting the experiences of everyday life and making sense of that experience, narrators turn history inside out, demanding to be understood as purposeful actors in the past, talking about their lives in ways that do not easily fit into preexisting categories of analysis.

Of course, not all oral history falls into the category of social history. Interviews abound with politicians and their associates, with business leaders, and the cultural elite. In addition to recording the perspectives of those in power, these interviews typically get at "the story underneath the story," the intricacies of decision-making, the personal rivalries and alliances and the varying motives underlying public action, that are often absent from the public record.

Some interview projects also focus on very specific topics—like memories of a flood, participation in a war, or the career of a noteworthy individual—rather than the more encompassing narratives typical of social historians. While these interviews certainly add to our store of knowledge,

particularly illuminating the relationship of the individual to major historical events, their limited focus is often quite frustrating to historians and archivists.

In addition to providing new knowledge and perspectives, oral history is of value to the historian in yet another way. As David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig have demonstrated in *The Presence of the Past*, most people engage with the past in deeply personal ways, drawing upon it as a resource for enhancing identity and explaining experience. Yet at the same time they seem uninterested in understanding anything other than their own personal experience and claim that the formal study of history is “boring.” [Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)] Oral history affords the historian a way to negotiate this paradox and perhaps helps surmount the barrier separating the analytic work of the professional historian from vernacular efforts at history-making. For oral history interviews are often quite simply good stories. Like literature, their specificity, their deeply personal, often emotionally resonant accounts of individual experience draw listeners—or readers—in, creating interest and sympathy. Edited carefully, they can open the listener to a life very different from his or her own in a non-threatening way. Contextualized thoughtfully, they can help a reader understand personal experience as something deeply social.

Nonetheless, some have argued, not without cause, that the highly individual, personal perspective of an interview, coupled with the social historian’s typical focus on everyday life, tend to overstate individual agency and obscure the workings of political and cultural power. Indeed, not surprisingly, many narrators recall with great pride how they coped with life’s circumstances through individual effort and sustained hard work, not by directly challenging those circumstances. And, it must be said, narrators are a self-selected group; the most articulate and self-assured members of any group—the literal and psychic survivors—are precisely those who consent to an interview, creating an implicit bias. Nonetheless, oral history does complicate simplistic notions of hegemony, that is the power of dominant political or cultural forces to control thought and action, as individuals articulate how they have maneuvered, with greater or lesser degrees of autonomy or conformity, risk, calculation or fear, within the circumstances of their lives.

### **Interpreting Oral History**

For all their considerable value, oral history interviews are not an unproblematic source. Although narrators speak for themselves, what they have to say does not. Paradoxically, oral history’s very concreteness, its very immediacy, seduces us into taking it literally, an approach historian Michael Frisch has criticized as “Anti-History,” by which he means viewing “oral historical evidence because of its immediacy and emotional resonance, as something almost beyond interpretation or accountability, as a direct window on the feelings and . . . on the meaning of past experience.” [Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 159-160.] As with any source, historians must exercise critical judgment when using interviews—just because someone says something is true, however colorfully or convincingly they say it, doesn’t

mean it is true. Just because someone “was there” doesn’t mean they fully understand “what happened.”

The first step in assessing an interview, then, is to consider the reliability of the narrator and the verifiability of the account. The narrator’s relationship to the events under discussion, personal stake in presenting a particular version of events, physical and mental state at the time of the events under discussion and at the moment of the interview, as well as the overall attention and care the narrator brings to the interview and the internal consistency of the account all figure into the narrator’s reliability as a source. The veracity of what is said in an interview can be gauged by comparing it both with other interviews on the same subject and with related documentary evidence. If the interview jibes with other evidence, if it builds upon or supplements this evidence in a logical and meaningful way, one can assume a certain level of veracity in the account. If, however, it conflicts with other evidence or is incompatible with it, the historian needs to account for the disparities: Were different interviewees differently situated in relationship to the events under discussion? Might they have different agendas, leading them to tell different versions of the same story? Might the written sources be biased or limited in a particular way? Might intervening events—for example, ideological shifts between the time of the events under discussion and the time of the interview or subsequent popular cultural accounts of these events—have influenced later memories? Writing in 1977 about the confirmation of Griffin Bell for United States attorney general, journalist Calvin Trillin quoted a black attorney who had quipped that if all the white politicians who said they were working behind the scenes for racial justice actually were doing so, “it must be getting pretty crowded back there, behind the scenes.” Similarly, John F. Kennedy’s assassination not only reshaped Americans’ subsequent views of him but even changed how they remembered their earlier perceptions. Although Kennedy was elected with just 49.7% of the vote in the fall of 1960, almost two-thirds of all Americans remembered voting for him when they were asked about it in the aftermath of his assassination. [Calvin Trillin, “Remembrance of Moderates Past,” *New Yorker* (March 21, 1977): 85; quoted in Cliff Kuhn, “‘There’s a Footnote to History!’ Memory and the History of Martin Luther King’s October 1960 Arrest and Its Aftermath,” *Journal of American History* 84:2 (September 1997): 594; Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time* (New York: Random House, 1976): 5.]

In fact, inconsistencies and conflicts among individual interviews and between interviews and other evidence point to the inherently subjective nature of oral history. Oral history is not simply another source, to be evaluated unproblematically like any other historical source. To treat it as such confirms the second fallacy identified by Frisch, the “More History” approach to oral history, which views interviews as “raw data” and “reduce[s them] to simply another kind of evidence to be pushed through the historian’s controlling mill.” [Frisch, 159-160.] An interview is inevitably an act of memory, and while individual memories can be more or less accurate, complete, or truthful, in fact interviews routinely include inaccurate and imprecise information, if not outright falsehoods. Narrators frequently get names and dates wrong, conflate disparate events into a single event, recount stories of questionable truthfulness. Although oral historians do attempt to get the story straight through careful background research and informed questioning, they are ultimately less

concerned with the vagaries of individual memories than with the larger context within which individual acts of remembering occur, or with what might be termed social memory. In what is perhaps the most cited article in the oral history literature, Alessandro Portelli brilliantly analyzes why oral accounts of the death of Italian steel worker Luigi Trastulli, who was shot during a workers' rally protesting NATO in 1949, routinely get the date, place, and reason for his death wrong. Narrators manipulated the facts of Trastulli's death to render it less senseless and more comprehensible to them; or, as Portelli argues, "errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings." [Alessandro Portelli, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event," in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 1-26; quoted material is from p. 2.]

What is needed then is an understanding of oral history not so much as an exercise in fact finding but as an interpretive event, as the narrator compresses years of living into a few hours of talk, selecting, consciously and unconsciously, what to say and how to say it. Indeed, there is a growing literature, some of it included in the appended bibliography, on the interpretive complexities of oral history interviews, replete with strategies for mining their meaning. Much of it begins with the premise that an interview is a storied account of the past recounted in the present, an act of memory shaped as much by the moment of telling as by the history being told. Each interview is a response to a particular person and set of questions, as well as to the narrator's inner need to make sense of experience. What is said also draws upon the narrator's linguistic conventions and cultural assumptions and hence is an expression of identity, consciousness, and culture. Put simply, we need to ask: who is saying what, to whom, for what purpose, and under what circumstances. While these questions cannot really be considered in isolation when applying them to a specific interview—the who is related to the what is related to the why is related to the when and where—here we will consider each in turn to develop an overview of the issues and questions involved.

### **Who Is Talking?**

What a narrator says, as well as the way a narrator says it, is related to that person's social identity (or identities). Who a narrator is becomes a cognitive filter for their experiences. Recognizing the differing social experiences of women and men, feminist historians have noted that women more so than men articulate their life stories around major events in the family life cycle, dating events in relation to when their children were born, for example. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to connect their personal chronologies to public events like wars, elections, and strikes. Women's narratives also tend, as Gwen Etter-Lewis has put it, towards "understatement, avoidance of the first person point of view, rare mention of personal accomplishments, and disguised statements of personal power." [Gwen Etter-Lewis, "Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts," in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991), 48; quoted in Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. (London: Routledge, 1998), 89.] Racial identity, too, figures into oral historical accounts. Writing about the 1921 race riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Scott Ellsworth coined the phrase "segregation of memory" to

describe the varying ways blacks and whites remembered this gruesome event. [Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).] It is a typical pattern, suggestive of the deep racial divides in the United States. In interview after interview, whites recalled either “very little at all” about members of minority groups or that “we all got along,” while members of minority groups tended toward both a more nuanced and less sanguine view of white people. Interviews with politicians and other notable public figures pose particular problems. While they are perhaps no more egocentric or concerned about their reputations than many others, their practiced delivery and ability to deflect difficult questions often leads to accounts that are especially facile and glib. Indeed, the general rule of thumb is the longer a public official has been out of the public eye, the more honest and insightful the interview will be.

One can catalogue any number of ways different “whos” inflect oral history narratives. Yet identities are neither singular nor fixed. “Who” exactly is speaking is defined by both the speaker’s relationship to the specific events under discussion and temporal distance from them. Hence while we would expect labor and management to record differing accounts of a strike, union members too can differ among themselves, depending upon their relative gains or losses in the strike’s aftermath, their differing political views and regard for authority, or their differing levels of tolerance for the disorder a strike can create. And their views can change over time, as perspectives broaden or narrow, as subsequent experiences force one to reconsider earlier views, as current contexts shape one’s understanding of past events. All are part of who is speaking.

### **Who Is the Interviewer?**

There is no doubt that the single most important factor in the constitution of an interview is the questions posed by the interviewer. Inevitably derived from a set of assumptions about what is historically important, the interviewer’s questions provide the intellectual framework for the interview and give it direction and shape. For especially articulate narrators, the questions are a foil against which they define their experience. Good interviewers listen carefully and attempt to more closely align their questions with what the narrator thinks is important. Nonetheless, more than one interviewer has had the experience described by Thomas Dublin as he reflected upon his interviews with coal mining families: “Once, when looking over photographs with Tom and Ella Strohl [whom he had previously interviewed], I expressed surprise at seeing so many pictures taken on hunting trips with his buddies. When I commented that I had not realized how important hunting had been in Tommy’s life, he responded good-naturedly, ‘Well, you never asked.’” [Thomas Dublin, with photographs by George Harvan, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21.]

Yet the questions asked are not the only influence an interviewer has upon what is said in an interview. Like narrators, interviewers have social identities that are played out in the dynamic of the interview. Narrators assess interviewers, deciding what they can appropriately say to this person, what they must say, and what they should not say. Thus a grandparent being interviewed by a grandchild for a family history project may well suppress less savory aspects of the past in an effort to shield the child, serve as a responsible role



model, and preserve family myths. And I described above how my own social identity as the upwardly mobile granddaughter of Polish immigrants created a particular emotional subtext to interviews with Polish cannery workers.

### **What Are They Talking About?**

The topical range of oral history interviews is enormous, including everything from the most public of historical events to the most intimate details of private life. What is analytically important, however, is the way narrators structure their accounts and the way they select and arrange the elements of what they are saying. Interviews frequently are plotted narratives, in which the narrator/hero overcomes obstacles, resolves difficulties, and achieves either public success or private satisfaction. There are exceptions, of course, but these conventions, typical of much of Western literature, suggest something of the individualizing, goal-oriented, success driven, morally righteous tendencies of the culture and hence the underlying assumptions people use to understand their experiences. They also perhaps reflect the egocentric and valorizing tendencies of an interview, in which one person is asked, generally by a respectful, even admiring interviewer, to talk about his life. Comparison with interviews conducted with narrators outside the mainstream of western culture is instructive here. Interviewing Native American women from Canada's Yukon Territory, anthropologist Julie Cruikshank found that her questions about conventional historical topics like the impact of the Klondike gold rush or the construction of the Alaska Highway were answered with highly metaphoric, traditional stories that narrators insisted were part of their own life stories. Negotiating cultural differences about what properly constituted a life history thus became Cruikshank's challenge. [Julie Cruikshank, in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).]

Narrators also encapsulate experiences in what I have come to term "iconic stories," that is concrete, specific accounts that "stand for" or sum up something the narrator reckons of particular importance. Often these are presented as unique or totemic events and are communicated with considerable emotional force. So, for example, one woman recounted the following incident from her childhood, illustrating the value she places on charity and self-denial:

One thing I'd like to tell about my grandmother, she was not a very expressive person, but one time she heard of a family with three daughters about the same age as her own three daughters, who were in pretty hard straits. And she had just finished making three elegant new costumes for her daughters in the days when a dress . . . took a great deal of labor. And, instead of giving the three girls the discarded ones of her daughters, she gave them the three brand new ones, which I've always liked to remember. [Louise Rhoades Dewees, interview by Nicolette Murray, March 26, 1979, transcript, pp. 7-8; Oral History among Friends in Chester County, Chester County [Pennsylvania] Library.]

Folklorist Barbara Allen has argued that the storied element of oral history reflects the social nature of an interview, for in communicating something

meaningful to others, stories attempt to create a collective consciousness of what is important. Applying this notion to a body of interviews from the intermountain West, Allen identifies certain categories of stories—how people came to the West, their difficulties with the terrain and the weather, the “grit” required to survive—and suggests that these themes speak to a broad regional consciousness. Whether a given story is factually true or not is not the point; rather, its truth is an interpretive truth, what it stands for, or means. [Barbara Allen, “Story in Oral History: Clues to Historical Consciousness,” *Journal of American History* 79:2 (September 1992): 606-611.]

As important as what is said is what is not said, what a narrator misconstrues, ignores, or avoids. Silences can signify simple misunderstanding; discomfort with a difficult or taboo subject; mistrust of the interviewer; or cognitive disconnect between interviewer and narrator. Interviewing an immigrant daughter about her life in mid-twentieth century Baltimore, I asked if she had worked outside the home after her marriage. She replied that she had not and we went on to a discussion of her married life. Later in the interview, however, she casually mentioned that for several years during her marriage she had waited tables during the dinner hour at a local restaurant. When I asked her about this apparent contradiction in her testimony, she said that she had never really thought of her waitressing as “work”; rather, she was “helping Helen out,” Helen being the restaurant’s owner and a friend and neighbor.

Silences can also have broad cultural meaning. Italian historian Luisa Passerini found that life histories she recorded of members of Turin’s working class frequently made no mention of Fascism, whose repressive regime nonetheless inevitably impacted their lives. Even when questioned directly, narrators tended to jump from Fascism’s rise in the 1920s directly to its demise in World War II, avoiding any discussion of the years of Fascism’s political dominance. Passerini interprets this as evidence on the one hand “of a scar, a violent annihilation of many years in human lives, a profound wound in daily experience” among a broad swath of the population and, on the other, of people’s preoccupation with the events of everyday life—“jobs, marriage, children”—even in deeply disruptive circumstances. [Luisa Passerini, “Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 58-60.]

### **Why Are They Talking?**

The purposes of an interview, expressed and implied, conscious and unconscious, also influence and shape the narrative itself. For a generation, social historians worked to shift the focus of historical inquiry away from party politics and public life towards an understanding of the everyday lives of ordinary people. As a result, their interviews are often rich with detail about work and family, neighborhood and church, but include little about the workings of local power. Interviews are also often exercises in historical resuscitation, efforts to revive popular memory about a subject precisely at that moment when it is about to slip away—hence the enormous number of interviews done in the 1960s and 1970s with pre-World War I immigrants. Hence too the more recent spate of interviewing projects on World War II, the holocaust, and the civil rights movement. These interviews often have a valorizing quality—the passion to remember and the pleasure of remembering serving as a filter to what is actually remembered, even as narrators also confront loss, disappointment, and unmet

goals. Community-based oral history projects, often seeking to enhance feelings of local identity and pride, tend to side step more difficult and controversial aspects of a community's history, as interviewer and narrator collude to present the community's best face. More practically, narrators whose interviews are intended for web publication, with a potential audience of millions, are perhaps more likely to exercise a greater degree of self-censorship than those whose interviews will be placed in an archive, accessible only to scholarly researchers. Personal motives too can color an interview. An interviewer who admires the interviewee may well fail to ask challenging questions out of deference and respect; a narrator seeking to enhance a public reputation may well deflect an area of inquiry that threatens to tarnish it.

### **What Are the Circumstances of the Interview?**

The circumstances of an interview can also affect what is recalled. In general, interviews for which both interviewer and interviewee have prepared are likely to be fuller and more detailed accounts than more spontaneous exchanges. Similarly, physical comfort and adequate time help create the expansive mood and unhurried pace that enhances recall. I remember carving out two hours from an otherwise busy day in which to conduct an interview with a local civil rights activist. The narrator turned out to have an exceptionally well-developed historical sense, answering questions with not only great specificity but also considerable reflectiveness on the larger significance of his actions. After two hours of talk, I was becoming increasingly anxious about all the other things I had to do that day. I was also becoming very hungry, as we had talked through the lunch hour. As a result, the last part of the interview is rather perfunctory. It would have been better if I had stopped the interview after an hour and a half and scheduled a second session on another day.

Other external conditions can also affect an interview. Some oral historians have suggested that the location of the interview subtly influences what a narrator talks about and how they talk about it. Interviews in a person's office, for example, tend to be more formal, less intimate, with the narrator emphasizing public rather than private life. Likewise, an interview with more than one person simultaneously or the presence of a third person in the room where an interview is taking place can constrain a narrator, turning a private exchange into something more akin to a public performance. I often think that interviews with two or more family members at the same time document family relationships more than the actual topics under discussion.

### **Summary of Questions to Ask**

To evaluate an oral history interview, consider the following:

#### **1. Who is the narrator?**

What is the narrator's relationship to the events under discussion?

What stake might the narrator have in presenting a particular version of events?

What effect might the narrator's social identity and position have on the interview?

How does the narrator present himself or herself in the interview?

What sort of character does the narrator become in the interview?

What influences—personal, cultural, social—might shape the way the narrator expresses himself or herself?  
Consider especially how the events under discussion are generally regarded and how popular culture might shape the narrator’s account.

## **2. Who is the interviewer?**

What background and interests does the interviewer bring to the topic of the interview?  
How might this affect the interview?  
How do the interviewer’s questions shape the story told?  
Has the interviewer prepared for the interview?  
How adept is the interviewer in getting the narrator to tell his or her story in his own way?  
What effect might the interviewer’s social identity and position have on the interviewee, and hence the interview?  
How might the dynamic between narrator and interviewer affect what is said in the interview?  
Does the interviewer have a prior relationship with the interviewee?  
How might this affect the interview?

## **3. What has been said in the interview?**

How has the narrator structured the interview?  
What’s the plot of the story?  
What does this tell us about the way the narrator thinks about his or her experience?  
What motifs, images, anecdotes does the narrator use to encapsulate experience?  
What can this tell us about how the narrator thinks about his or her experience?  
What does the narrator avoid or sidestep?  
What topics does the narrator especially warm to, or speak about with interest, enthusiasm, or conviction?  
What might this tell us?  
Are there times when the narrator doesn’t seem to answer the question posed?  
What might be the reason for this?  
Are there significant factual errors in the narrative?  
Is it internally consistent?  
How might you account for errors and inconsistencies?  
How does the narrator’s account jibe with other sources, other interviews?  
How can you explain any discrepancies?

## **4. For what purpose has this interview been conducted?**

How might the purpose have shaped the content, perspective, and tone of the interview?

## **5. What are the circumstances of the interview?**

What effect might the location of the interview have had on what was said in the interview?  
If anyone other than the interviewer and interviewee were present, what effect might the presence of this other person have had on the interview?  
Do you know the mental and physical health of the narrator and interviewer?

What effect might these have had on the interview?

## Model Interpretation

### *First, the interview.*

In the mid 1990s, health educator Patricia Fabiano interviewed Dolores Bordas Kosko of McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, as part of her study of the First Thursday Girls' Club. This group of working-class women has been meeting socially on the first Thursday of the month for more than forty years. The Kosko interview is one of several Fabiano conducted with the club's seven members to investigate the relationship between informal support systems and health, understood as a sense of coherence and well being. In this interview, Ms. Kosko speaks about her experiences working at Dravo Corporation, an industrial manufacturing plant located near McKees Rocks. As she tells it:

I went to work for Dravo [in June 1972], I didn't want to progress, all I wanted to do was go back and help supplement [my husband's] income, because we were struggling. It was just too hard on one salary. We had zip. We lived from one pay to the other. There were no extras. And we never went on vacation, we couldn't afford it. . . . By that time Valerie was twelve, Diane was nine, and then I went to work part-time, which was fine. But then, you know, you work three days, and then the next thing you know, they want you to work four days, and then before you know it you're working five days, with no benefits, no nothing. No paid vacation. Then they offered me the full-time job, and I thought, "Well, I'm working five days anyways, and it seems to be working." I was living right there . . . so it was very convenient, so I did go as a full-time employee.

Over the years, her work life continued to change:

And I did that for maybe about three years and then I was offered . . . a job as a supervisor. What did I know about being a supervisor? I took it, and I think to myself, "How did I ever do it?" Without any formal training. I did not have a college degree, they gave me the job of supervisor of stenographic services. I had ten girls reporting to me. Responsible for a co-op program of students going to business school and working at Dravo. Setting that program up. Interviewing. I never had any formal instruction on how to interview people. I was interviewing people. I had to do performance reviews. Writing procedure manuals. Maybe part of it is my sense of organization. Do you develop a sense of organization or is that ingrained in you, a part of your personality?

And then after that, as I look back now, it seems like every four years I made a change. I was transferred over to Automation Systems responsible for office automation, testing software, making recommendations. I still very much wanted to go to college, to get a college degree. I didn't think I

was going to be able to go for the four years, but I definitely wanted to have an associate's degree. And Dravo had the tuition refund program. You have to pay for it first, and then they reimbursed you for it. And I started with classes. It took me twelve years. But I have my associate's degree in Business Administration. I'm not bragging, but I just feel very proud of myself that I was able to do it, working full time, raising a family, working overtime also when projects needed it or demanded it. . . .

Then, in 1988 Kosko lost her job, a crisis that disrupted her life and challenged her to reassess certain assumptions and choices:

After sixteen years at Dravo my job was eliminated because they were downsizing. Always in the back of your mind you think, "Oh, I wish I could get laid off and I'll sit at home." And no one really knows what happens to them when there really is a layoff. But my job was eliminated, I was laid off. And I had two weeks, they gave me a two-week notice. And a lot of people reacted with anger when they were laid off. They just picked up their stuff and they left their office. I got laid off, I came out of the office, and I went back to my office, and I went back to work. And people were walking past my office because they put two and two together, so they figured I got laid off, but they couldn't figure out why I was still working. But I never thought I should do it any other way. I had a job, I had a project to finish. And I finished it in the two weeks, and then when the two weeks were over, then I packed up my stuff and I left. Why? Dravo was good to me. I got my education. They paid me. That was the contract with them. My contract was to finish that project. And I did. And I wouldn't do it any other way.

But the day I had to walk out of there, it was the most horrible feeling. I felt as though I was in limbo. Like I wasn't anywhere, and I thought to myself, "I should be enjoying this time off." But I had out-placement services, and I went to work at that. But I didn't start at eight o'clock. I started at eight thirty, because I really didn't want to bump into the people in the elevators. So I went in a little bit later, and I left like four o'clock because my job was to get a job. I felt like I was in limbo. Like I didn't have an identity. I didn't have an identity. I wasn't. I was Dolores Kosko, but yet, I wasn't Steve's wife, I wasn't Valerie's mother, or Diane's mother, or Julia Bordas's daughter. I felt in limbo, that I had no identity. That's the only way that I can describe it. I was collecting unemployment. Steve was working. And I had severance pay 'till the end of the year. What drove me [to find another job]? I don't know. [My friend] Joanne would say to me, "You're crazy. Stay home!" But I don't know. I still don't know what it was.

"Should I go to do something different?" And I looked at that, but I'm not good at sales, because I can't sell a product I don't believe in. I can't lie to anyone. So I knew sales wasn't for me. The position I really liked the best at Dravo was where I was responsible for office automation, and then I was responsible for the voice mail and I did training sessions. And then, I

realized then, that I missed my calling. I should have gone to school to be a teacher. That's my one regret, that I didn't go to college. But, at the time, I don't think I was mature enough, or I didn't know what I wanted to do. My parents wanted to send me to college, but I felt that I didn't want to burden my parents because my parents really couldn't afford it. So I just went to Robert Morris School of Business for a six month course, but after my layoff, that's when I realized that I missed my calling. But I didn't know that when I was eighteen. [Patricia Maria Fabiano, "The First Thursday Girls Club: A Narrative Study of Health and Social Support in a Working-Class Community," (Ph.D. diss., The Graduate School of the Union Institute, 1999), 211-215.]

**Now, the analysis.**

Recall that Kosko recounted her family and work history to Patricia Fabiano for her study of a group of women who have met informally every month for more than four decades. Fabiano is a good interviewer. She is prepared and has prepared Kosko for the interview by explaining the purpose of her study. Long acquainted with Kosko and knowledgeable but not part of her world, she is deeply respectful and appreciative of the club—she assumes its value and wants to understand how it works to enhance health. She also wants to situate the story of the club in broad biographical and social, that is to say, historical, context. These preconditions to the interview create enormous rapport and set the stage for creative inquiry. Much of the richness of Kosko's account comes from her effort to address Fabiano's questions (regrettably not included in the edited transcript) thoughtfully and honestly.

The questions Fabiano brings to the study also open a way for Kosko to draw upon an interesting repertoire of both personal and social explanations as she puts her life into words. Like most people speaking within the individualizing framework of an interview, Kosko presents herself as the hero of her own story, a sturdy survivor and ethical person who will finish a job even when laid off and who cannot lie in a way that she feels would be necessary for a career in sales. The assumptions of the study work to create a self-consciously progressive narrative, shaped around the theme of growing confidence and autonomy. Not incidentally, this theme resonates with contemporary feminism, which has validated women's aspirations and married women's right to work. Though Kosko would not likely identify herself as a feminist, the assumptions and language of feminism are reflected in her account. And when Kosko's very identity is challenged by the loss of her job, she explains the limited options and missed opportunities in her life in terms of both personal limits ("I wasn't mature enough [to go to college at eighteen]") and the constraints imposed by her family's class position ("My parents really couldn't afford it.") Although conducted one-on-one in Kosko's home, this interview is also quite similar in content, tone, and perspective to the interviews Fabiano conducted with the other six group members for her study. In part, this is so because the women's lives have been similar. But it also suggests that their individual accounts have been influenced by the conversation they have been having among themselves for more than forty years about the shape and meaning of their lives. Fabiano's interviews simply made that understanding more conscious and explicit.

To assess the interview in this way does not reduce it to an exercise in good feeling or in telling the interviewer what she wants to hear. Nor does it suggest that it is in any way untruthful or that all interviews are equal—some are richer, more thoughtful, more insightful than others, offering up more for historical analysis. Rather, it helps us understand the deeply situated, contingent, and subjective nature of oral history interviews.

### **Oral History Online**

Electronic technologies are democratizing access to extant oral history collections by on-line publication of both actual interview recordings and written transcripts of them. While oral historians generally have embraced opportunities for world wide dissemination of their work via the Web, many are also appropriately skeptical of the very ease of access the web affords, vastly increasing the possibility for misuse of existing interviews. Especially troublesome is Web publication of interviews conducted pre-Web without narrators' explicit permission; many feel this violates narrators' rights to decide the level of access to their interviews. Also problematic is the greater opportunity the web affords for anyone to publish anything, regardless of quality.

These concerns notwithstanding, web publication of interviews has numerous advantages beyond mere access. Electronic search engines enable users to identify material relevant to their own interests easily and quickly, without listening to hours of tape or plowing through pages of transcript. Hypertext linkages of excerpted or footnoted interviews to full transcripts allow a reader to more fully contextualize a given quote or idea; to assess how carefully an author has retained the integrity of a narrator's voice in material quoted; and to more fully evaluate an author's interpretive gloss on a narrator's account. Most exciting though is the opportunity e-publication affords for restoring orality to oral history. Almost twenty years ago Alessandro Portelli argued convincingly that oral history is primarily oral, that "the tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing. . . . The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be presented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcribers' own words." [Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 47.] One thinks of irony, for example, as something that is communicated by tone, not words, and so can be lost if not rendered orally. Similarly, hearing, rather than reading, narrators' accounts can render them more compelling, more humane or chilling, more three-dimensional. Quite simply then, by reproducing actual recorded sound, web publication of interviews is perhaps more appropriate than print publication.

### **ORAL HISTORY ON THE WEB -- EXEMPLARY SITES**

***American Life Histories, Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940***

Library of Congress, American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>



This site features approximately 2,900 life histories, both in transcribed and image form, collected from 1936-1940. The documents represent the work of more than 300 writers from the Federal Writers' Project of the U.S. Work Projects Administration. The histories appear as drafts and revisions, in various formats, from narrative to dialogue, report to case history. Topics include the informant's family, education, income, occupation, political views, religion and mores, medical needs, and diet, as well as observations on society and culture. Interviewers often substituted pseudonyms for names of individuals and places.

### ***Archives of American Art, Oral History Collections***

Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art

<http://www.archivesofamericanart.si.edu/oralhist/oralhist.htm>

This site offers transcriptions of more than 180 interviews with a variety of artists, including Louise Nevelson, Robert Indiana, Richard Diebenkorn, and Rube Goldberg. Projects include Texas and southwestern artists, Northwest artists, Latino artists, African-American artists, Asian-American artists, and women in the arts in Southern California. This site also include transcripts for more than 50 of the 400 interviews conducted in the 1960s as part of the "New Deal and the Arts Oral History Program."

### ***Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938***

Library of Congress, American Memory

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

A collaborative effort of the Manuscripts and Prints and Photographs Divisions, this site has more than 2,300 first person accounts of slavery. The narratives were collected as part of the 1930s Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration, and they were assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the 17-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. Each digitized transcript of a slave narrative is accompanied by notes including the name of the narrator, place and date of the interview, interviewer's name, length of transcript, and cataloging information.

### ***Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive***

McCain Library and Archive, University of Southern Mississippi

<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spscol/crda/index.html>

This Web site offers 125 oral histories relating to the civil rights movement, drawn from the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History Collection. The site features interviews with civil rights leaders such as Charles Cobb, Charles Evers, and Aaron Henry. It also offers oral history information about prominent figures on both sides of the civil rights movement, such as "race-baiting" Governor Ross Barnett, national White Citizens Council leader William J. Simmons, and State Sovereignty leader Erle Johnston. Approximately 25 of the interviews also provide audio clips from the original oral history recordings. Each interview file includes a longer (250-300 word) biography, a list of topics discussed, a transcript of the interview, and descriptive information

about the interview, the interviewer, interviewee, and topics, time period, and regions covered.

### ***IEEE History Center Oral Histories***

Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc.

[http://www.ieee.org/organizations/history\\_center/oral\\_histories\\_menu.html](http://www.ieee.org/organizations/history_center/oral_histories_menu.html)

This collection contains 180 interviews with “the technologists who transformed the world in the 20th century.” Categories include: the history of the merger of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers and the Institute of Radio Engineers to form the IEEE; interviews with distinguished Japanese electrical engineers and managers; the fiftieth anniversary of the MIT Radiation Laboratory; oral histories of RCA Laboratories in the mid-1970s; and the Frederick E. Terman Associates Collection.

### ***Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World***

James Leloudis and Kathryn Walbert, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

<http://www.ibiblio.org/sohp/overview.html>

This site relies on hundreds of interviews with working-class southerners conducted by the Southern Oral History Program Piedmont Industrialization Project of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The site combines those sources with materials drawn from the trade press and with workers’ letters to President Franklin D. Roosevelt to craft a rich account of cotton mill life, work, and protest. There are approximately 70 audio clips of interviews with mill workers ranging in length from 15 seconds to more than eight minutes.

### ***May 4 Collection***

Kent State University

<http://www.library.kent.edu/exhibits/4may95/>

The events of May 4, 1970, on the campus of Kent State University that left 13 students dead or wounded are the focus of this site. The materials attempt to answer why the events took place as they did, what lessons can be learned, and what can be done to “manage conflict among peoples, groups and nations.” The site contains online transcripts of 93 of the 132 interviews conducted at May 4th commemorations on the Kent State campus in 1990, 1995, and 2000.

### ***Oral History Online!, Regional Oral History Office (ROHO)***

Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/BANC/ROHO/online/>

This site offers full-text transcripts of more than 55 fully-searchable interviews, with plans to add oral histories on Black Alumni at the University of California. Current offerings include “The University History Series” focusing on the Free Speech Movement, “The Suffragists Oral History Project,” including the words of twelve women active in the suffrage movement, “Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement,” “The Earl Warren Oral History Project,” and

“Health Care, Science, and Technology,” featuring interviews regarding the medical response to the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco from 1981 to 1984.

### ***Rutgers Oral History Archives of World War II***

Sandra Stewart Holyoak, Rutgers History Department

<http://fas-history.rutgers.edu/oralhistory/orlhom.htm>

These oral history interviews record the memories of men and women who served overseas and on the home front during World War II. The archive contains more than 160 full-text interviews, primarily of Rutgers College alumni and Douglass College (formerly New Jersey College for Women) alumnae. Rutgers undergraduates conducted many of the interviews. The easily navigable site provides an alphabetical interview list with the name of each interviewee, date and place of interview, college of affiliation and class year, theater in which the interviewee served, and branch of service, when applicable. The list also provides “Description” codes that indicate the nature of the interview contents, including military occupations (such as infantry and artillery members, nurses, navy seamen, and engineer corps) and civilian occupations (such as air raid warden, student, clerical worker, and journalist).

### ***Women in Journalism***

Washington Press Club Foundation

<http://npc.press.org/wpforal/ohhome.htm>

This site provides access to 41 of 57 full-life interviews of American women journalists for three professional generations: pre-1942, World War II through 1964, and post-1964. The collection includes interviews with women who began their careers in the 1920s and continues to the present day. Print, radio, and television journalism are all represented. Interviews address difficulties women have encountered entering the profession and how their growing presence has changed the field. Interviews range from one to 12 sessions and each session is about 20 pages long. The interviews are indexed but are not searchable by subject.

## **ORAL HISTORY GUIDES**

### ***Southern Oral History Program (SOHP)***

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/sohp/sohpnew/>

“How To: Resources for Planning and Conducting Oral History Interviews,” includes The SOHP Guidebook, SOHP Interview forms, and a bibliography of more than 50 oral history resources. The interview forms include a cover sheet, interview agreement, interview agreement with restrictions, life history form, and proper word form. The SOHP Guidebook includes guidelines on designing an oral history project; advice on conducting, cataloguing, and transcribing interviews; notes on budgets and equipment needs; and ten interviewing tips.

## **Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History**

Judith Moyer

[http://www.dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

Developed by historian and educator Judith Moyer, this thorough guide to oral history offers suggestions and strategies for collecting and preserving oral history. Topics range from an explanation of how and why to collect oral history to guidelines for planning and conducting interviews, including initial research, locating individuals, choosing equipment, and asking productive questions. Moyer also addresses a number of important conceptual and ethical issues related to conducting and using oral histories, including questions of accuracy, the limits of oral history, strategies for overcoming specific interview problems, and twenty questions to help interviewers learn from their experience.

### **TIPS FOR EVALUATING ORAL HISTORY ONLINE**

**Purpose & Provenance:** Is the purpose of the site clearly stated? Where? How? What is the purpose—archival, pedagogical, etc.? Is this a credible and useful purpose? Are you provided with enough information to understand the larger context within which the site was developed, the rationale behind it, etc.? Why would someone use this site?

**Credibility:** Who has sponsored and organized the site? How do you know? Are the organizers credible? How do you know? Can you contact someone at the site to pose questions, etc.?

**Site Features:** Is the site well designed? Can you follow its organization? Navigate it easily? Is it updated regularly? Are graphics supportive or distracting? Are there links to other related sites? Are the links credible? helpful? current?

**Oral History Material Located on the Site:** Does the site include full interviews, interview excerpts, or summaries of interviews? How do you know this? Does the site explain why it chose to present full interviews, excerpts, or summaries? written or audio interviews? If the site includes actual interviews, does it include written transcripts, audio interviews, or some combination of both? Is the level of editing of both written and audio materials made clear?

**Design and Technical Quality:** How is the presentation of interviews organized? Is the layout easy to follow? If audio is included, what is the quality of sound? Can you hear what is being said easily, with difficulty, or hardly at all? If the site encourages people to submit their reminiscences, how much guidance are respondents given? How easy or difficult is it to submit a response? What is the quality of the responses?

**Context for the Interviews:** Are the interviews—either taken together or individually—contextualized in any way? Is any background given on the topic(s) of the interview(s) or the individual narrator(s)? What orientation are

you given to the purpose for which the interview(s) were conducted in the first place, the project/interview methodology, the interviewers' backgrounds, etc. In other words, what tools are you given for assessing the individual interviews?

**Searching the Site and Assessing Quality:** Does the site include a listing or a finding aid to all interviews maintained by the sponsoring organization? How useful or complete is this listing or guide? Can you search the interviews for information on a specific topic? Do searches return useful citations? Does the site tell you where the individual interviews are archived and if they are available to users? How good are the interviews? Are they interesting, rich, full, substantive, etc.? Do they contain unique information, unavailable elsewhere? Overall, what did you learn from the interviews? Are there things you wish the site would include or "do" that are not available?

### **Selected Bibliography**

Coles, Robert. *Doing Documentary Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Reflective essays on the ethics and dilemmas of documenting other people's lives.

Dunaway, David K. and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publishers, 1996.

An anthology of important early articles that attempted to deepen understanding of both interviewing methodology and the interpretive complexity of oral narratives.

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

A collection of Frisch's previously published essays; a singularly thoughtful effort to understand the relationship between the practice of oral history and the politics of public memory.

Gluck, Sherna and Daphne Patai, eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Praeger, 1991.

Important, albeit uneven, efforts to link oral history to the theory and practice of feminism and feminist studies.

Grele, Ronald. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. New York: Praeger, 1991.

Theoretically informed essays on, among other things, oral history interviews as expressions of ideology and consciousness.

\_\_\_\_\_. "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction." *Journal of American History* 74:2 (September 1987): 570-578.

A good discussion of the strengths and limits of oral history as a historical source.

Hardy III, Charles and Alessandro Portelli. "I Can Almost See the Lights of Home—A Field Trip to Harlan County, Kentucky." *The Journal of Multimedia History* 2 (1999).

A successful effort at "aural history" that integrates oral history interviews, written transcripts, and oral and written commentary by the authors into a coherent essay; available only online at [www.albany.edu/history\\_journals/jmmh](http://www.albany.edu/history_journals/jmmh).

Jackson, Bruce. *Fieldwork*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Interviewing methodology from a folklore perspective; especially good on technical matters.

Jeffrey, Jaclyn and Glenace Edwall, eds. *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991. Proceedings from a 1988 conference sponsored by Baylor University's Institute for Oral History, bringing together oral historians and cognitive psychologists to examine both individual and collective memory.

*Journal of American History*.

Since 1987, the September issue of the journal has included a section of essays on oral history; typically, each essay identifies ways oral history interviews can enrich historical study of a given topic (e.g. the civil rights movement, education, farm women, etc.) and identifies important extant collections related to that topic.

*Oral History Review*. The journal of the Oral History Association, published annually from 1973 to 1987 and biannually since then. Includes articles, interviews, review essays, and book and media reviews related to the practice of oral history in a variety of settings and the use and interpretation of interviews for a variety of scholarly and public purposes.

Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thomson. *The Oral History Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1998. The single best anthology of previously published work on the more theoretical aspects of oral history; includes a good international range of materials.

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. Elegantly written essays on the interview exchange or dialogue, with case studies focusing on interviews about war and about political movements.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning In Oral History*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

Insightful, elegantly written analyses of oral narratives by a literary scholar with a deep understanding of the politics of history and historical practice; "The Death of Luigi Trastulli" is arguably the most cited essay about oral history narratives.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

A practical guide to doing oral history, covering a range of topics in question-and-answer format.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford Press, 1988.

At once a handbook on program development and interview methodology and an astute discussion of the politics of historical inquiry and the nature of historical evidence.

Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994.

A solid discussion of project planning, interview methodology, and the use and interpretation of oral history materials.