



Myrtle Cavalho of the Pearls of Wisdom, a group of older adult storytellers organized by Brooklyn, New York's Elders Share the Arts, relates that her father, born into slavery, remembered the day Lincoln was shot. Photo by Dona Ann McAdams.

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"Telling one's own story in one's own words"—to paraphrase Paulo Freire, the author of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and a source of inspiration for much liberatory community work—has been a watchword for community cultural development practitioners for decades and a powerful metaphor for the outpouring of theater, writing, visual artwork, music and movement that results from their work. Instead of the one authoritative voice of history, this approach brings history to life through a patchwork of individual voices. In its pure form—in the collection and archiving of stories per se—oral-history practice has been an inexhaustible seed-stock for community cultural development projects. This essay suggests that as it has developed as a methodology, oral history has come also to serve as an artistic process.

Mary Marshall Clark is an oral historian—or as she puts it, "I love listening to other people's stories." She is based at Columbia University in New York City, serving as director of the Oral History Research Office, the world's first organized academic oral-history program, founded in 1948, which houses an archive of 8,000 interviews and is a center for teaching oral history.

True to her calling, Mary Marshall explained her professional choice through a personal story.

Here are some excerpts from the biography she provided for her fellow participants in this project:

I was born in North Carolina, in the United States, in the 1950s in a town of 600 people in tobacco country. My mother was a schoolteacher and my father was an insurance agent who mostly gave his money away to pay the premiums of poor farmers whose crops could turn to dirt in violent thunderstorms. While thunderstorms, and even poverty, could be explained to me by adults, there were other realities I was confronted with that had no rational explanation. Among those was racism. When I asked my father when I was four why black people were treated as they were (I am white), he cried. My grandmother had been talking to me about the evils of discrimination (not exactly in those words)—she traveled from house to house in the town nightly to talk to people about how prejudice should end. She set up a summer school for black and white kids to study together in her home, and tried to end segregation single-handedly by

getting herself elected to the school board in the 1940s. My father and mother, when I was a teenager, became very active in the southern desegregation movement and we were shunned by whites for years—except for occasional visits/calls by the KKK.¹

When I was 12, I bought a tape recorder and began interviewing anyone who would talk to me about their memories and perceptions of life. I was not so much fascinated by history/genealogy as I was by experience itself. Not just experience, but the way people related their experience in story form. Because of the social movement I grew up in, the stories I was most interested in were stories of liberation. . . . We listen, if we listen well, with our whole selves (body, spirit, intellect, eye, imagination) and respond, in conversational form, in a way that indicates to the person we are interviewing that we have really heard. If we have not really heard, that is painfully and immediately evident and the interview is a failure.

¹ Ku Klux Klan — a white racist secret society.

Oral History

ART AND PRAXIS

by Mary Marshall Clark

Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. —PAULO FREIRE²

I was doubly nervous as I made my travel plans to meet my colleagues in Bellagio to discuss our work in relation to community cultural development: nervous about meeting people I would need to get to know so quickly and also about addressing the concept of globalization through artistic practices. I found that others, like me, were uncertain about how to best use our languages of creativity to confront and address the forces of globalization, a social-scientific term describing an increasing imbalance between the rich and the poor (not always to be read as the powerful and the weak).

As we met and talked over the next few days, however, I think we all became aware of the resilience of our methods and of creativity itself in shaping positive human development. While we came from different artistic, cultural and political situations, the languages through which we expressed, demonstrated and explained our creative processes in relation to the philosophy of community cultural development brought us closer together. For me at least, that made addressing the challenges and the problems of globalization seem much more possible. Indeed, oral history, a broad and multifaceted movement with roots in diverse cultural and community practices, is strengthened by an alliance with other forms of artistic practice, particularly theater.

I am grateful to my colleagues for giving me the opportunity to explore the creative uses of oral history to respond to the challenges globalization poses to humanity and to development. However, I remain wary of the term globalization itself: how it is defined, how and in what context it is used and

²Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), p. 75.

how it defines us or not. Individually and collectively, our resources are dwarfed by the growth of global capitalism in what may be remembered as the era of globalization. Our “best practices” must stay rooted in the soil of our remembered humility, creativity, fragility and pain. Perhaps our most creative response to globalization is to resist it, to continue to live and create despite it and to refuse the embrace of any language that would synthesize and homogenize our efforts to combat it.

THE SOCIAL PURPOSE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history, an academic, cultural and artistic practice that has many forms and richly intertwined histories in locations around the world, originated in the attempt by social historians, sociologists, activists and others to recover memories that would otherwise be lost. Motivated by a dynamic and participatory vision of history, oral history originated in the attempt to recover public memories that might not otherwise enter the collective sphere. Paul Thompson, one of the founders of the international oral-history movement, crystallized this view in his 1978 oral-history primer, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” where he stated, “All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose.”³ While oral history has ultimately evolved as an academic field as well as a tool for social historians, community activists, educators and others, this early statement by Thompson clarifies the central mission of its early decades: to restore the individual human subject to history.

³Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 1.

⁴www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs/history.html

Generally defined as the narration, representation and interpretation of history through recorded interviews with eyewitnesses, oral history became systematized as a practice with the popularization of the portable tape recorder in the late 1930s, particularly in northern Europe, England and North America. In England, the movement among historians and others to record the observations of everyday people was inspired by the usefulness of the BBC radio archives to authors and historians, and the creation of the Mass Observation Archive by a group of young historians who aimed to establish “an anthropology of ourselves,”⁴ a study of the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain. This turn toward the person as a source of historical knowledge influenced the value given to first-hand reminiscences, both in England and elsewhere. In the United States, also in the late 1930s, authors hired under the auspices of the Federal Writers Project undertook a series of interviews with ex-slaves which became the first official government-sponsored oral-history project in that country, the first real model of the radical power of oral history. It demonstrated the ability of oral history to record, through individual interviews, collective historical accounts that draw upon traditions of orality and autobiography as a way of understanding the dynamic conflicts of history from within while simultaneously validating individual historical perspectives.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the tape recorder was widely used throughout Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa to document rapid and historical change from individual perspectives. Oral history was used to recover memories of the oppressed in situations of totalitarianism in Russia and Brazil, illustrating its subversive and healing power to address both political oppression and personal suffering. As oral history developed as a movement and an academic discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, there was increasing interest among a wide group of historians, anthropologists, folklorists and others in the rich areas of overlap between oral history and oral tradition. Jan Vansina's "Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology,"⁵ illustrated the central importance accorded to storytelling and the wide uses of oral evidence in indigenous African cultural traditions. This classic text influenced the growing international oral-history movement to embrace the role of storytelling in indigenous and traditional cultures worldwide. Theoretical developments in oral history, intensifying through international meetings and conferences in the 1970s, reflected this fascination with orality itself as a cultural resource, leading to the acceptance of oral history as a form of cultural work.

⁵Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, translated by H. M. Wright (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

⁶Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist Historians*, Issue 8, Autumn 1979, p. 84.

The insight that culture was oral history's true source was articulated by the Italian intellectual historian Luisa Passerini in an essay, "Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism," that would come to define the significance and broad scope of oral history as an exploratory and multidisciplinary methodology:

Above all, we should not ignore that the raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires.⁶

Passerini's work, as well as that of her contemporary Alessandro Portelli, stressed the importance of cultivating oral sources to document the impact of fascism on working-class culture. Portelli, one of the most prolific writers of oral-history texts, has written extensively about fieldwork as a forum for the exchange of cultural knowledge and wisdom through the vehicle of the interview. In this vision of fieldwork, the interviewer must enter the cultural and temporal world of the narrator in order to understand the meanings attached to historical events. Community itself is the medium through which knowledge is transmitted. Portelli credits his view of oral history as beginning in community-based cultural work to the teachings of Gianni Bosio, an Italian editor and organizer who described the interview as a politically significant encounter and an "experiment in equality" through which both the interviewer and narrator could be transformed. Contained in this vision is a dynamic view of culture in which the acts of telling and listening are in

themselves forms of resistance not unlike the use of songs, popular literature and folklore in social movements.

The growth of oral history as an organized movement, with regular international meetings since 1979, has provided a unique forum for the cross-cultural exchange of stories and of ideas about methods and practices. Organized around broad themes embracing global concerns, these conferences have allowed presenters to explore common concerns and to share indigenous knowledge across geographic and national borders. The vitality and diversity of the oral-history movement, its openness to fieldworkers, artists and academics who hold a common interest in the history and development of culture and community, suggests the significance of storytelling as a form of communication that builds community, both locally and globally. The international forums reveal the rich array of community oral-history projects that exists worldwide.

Oral history is a methodology through which struggle, conflict and development can be recorded, helping to create the conditions for greater mutuality and understanding and a potential source of transformation and dialogue. This is particularly true, as Portelli has pointed out, in situations of war, trauma and genocide, where culture has often been stripped of its inherent power. The importance given to the truth commissions of South Africa and Latin America reveal the enduring power of personal testimony to reshape public understanding, addressing suffering in the public sphere in ways that may allow genuine transformation to occur. They represent one of many models in which personal testimony can be used to support cultural community development, to address issues of justice and reconciliation.

ORAL HISTORY AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: MODELS AND EXAMPLES

Oral history and cultural community development are linked in four distinctive ways.

1. Oral history restores the subject to history, documenting the history of communities that may have been excluded from historical accounts and encouraging individuals to see themselves as historical actors. In the most creative of these projects, oral history encourages people to remember as a way of entering and transforming history.

There are many examples of oral-history projects that restore the subject to history, beginning with the collection of the narratives of ex-slaves through the Federal Writers Project in the United States and continuing with many equally important efforts to collect working-class history and women's history. But there are many lesser-known examples of community history projects

in which groups have creatively appropriated oral history to record their existence on the margins of society, demonstrating oral history's flexibility and value as a community resource.

One example is the Brighton Ourstory Project in Britain, in which members of the gay male and lesbian community decided to record 40 interviews chronicling gay and lesbian sexual life in Britain from 1950 to 1969. The dedication in the volume of stories published in 1992, "Daring Hearts: Lesbian and Gay Lives of '50s and '60s Brighton," reads, "For all the voices that never will be heard." A section from the preface explaining their approach to oral history reads:

It's a dislocating experience to visit Brighton Borough Council, Brighton Reference Library, Brighton Museum and find nothing. It's as though lesbians and gay men have not existed, have made no contribution to the culture and economy of the town. Are we all ghosts then, muttering in dark corners and whispering in the wind? In Section 28 Britain, institutions cannot be trusted to tell the stories of our lives. Emergency oral history work is urgently needed. Every lesbian and every gay man is a walking library of information on our life and times.⁷

⁷Peter Dennis, Becci Mannall, Linda Pointing, *Daring Hearts: Lesbian and Gay Lives of '50s and '60s Brighton*, Brighton Ourstory Project, QueenSpark Book 28 (London: QueenSpark Books, 1992).

The Brighton Ourstory Project models the approach in which community members themselves take the initiative to record their own stories, thereby both contributing to the historical record and strengthening their own relationships with each other. The number of similar projects is vast. Many are distinguished by the effort to preserve memory of local groups in the face of historical and social transition and disturbances. A sampling of such projects reveals histories of Brazilian women in the trade-union movement, immigrants to the Czech Republic following the Chernobyl disaster, women's organizing efforts in American steel mills, peasant movements in post-Soviet Russia, Japanese-American citizens' experiences of internment and discrimination during World War II in the United States and many more. They are representative of the uses of oral history worldwide to document the impact of dramatic social change on specific communities that might otherwise not be recorded, and to explore strategies of resistance and survival based upon the stories and conversations that emerge.

One of the most fascinating research themes that has emerged globally through oral history research is the history of women's movements. In parts of India, for example, women are allowed to sing songs of protest even when they are not allowed to gather and demonstrate through direct verbal confrontation. An oral-history project in which these songs of protest were collected, along with stories of the protest movements themselves, has provided a unique resource for community leaders who are training new activists; it demonstrates the vital link between orality in general and oral history in particular.

The goal of community-based oral-history projects is often twofold: to capture history and to transform it. In this genre, traditional methods of interviewing and transcribing tapes for deposit in a paper archive are often too expensive, and are not the most efficient way of disseminating knowledge to a community actively engaged in the process of development and transformation.

One such example is the Audre Lorde Project in Brooklyn, New York, a community center founded in memory of poet and activist Audre Lorde. The project created an oral-history component to begin to document the legacy of Audre Lorde's activism around issues such as racism and homophobia, and to strengthen community participation in its outreach programs. Rather than conducting individual interviews for an archive, the project directors decided to make the oral-history exchange a part of their public programs. Workshops were held to train interviewers in the art of oral history, and interviews were conducted and recorded in private one-to-one settings. After rapport had been established between the interviewer and the narrator, they were invited to perform the interview in a public space before an audience. Community leaders, as well as the general public, were invited to witness the interview, and community activists, scholars and public historians were invited to comment on the progress of the interview, framing questions about content as well as interviewing technique. The narrator was also allowed to comment on the interviewer's technique. The audience not only witnessed the interview and engaged in a lively debate around issues under discussion, but learned something about oral history as a methodology through the comments of panelists and the narrator. The content of the dialogues—stories of resilience in the face of struggle—spread the legacy of Audre Lorde as the project directors intended by providing the occasion for teaching strategies of survival.

A similar strategy was used by the Park West Village Oral History Project, a community-based volunteer project in upper Manhattan, New York, founded to trace the history and legacy of a local neighborhood that was destroyed due to the policies of the developer Robert Moses in the early 1950s. The original community, largely African-American and Latino, was dislocated by new housing-development construction in the late 1940s and early 1950s, which displaced low-income residents throughout the city. The vitality of the community of musicians and artists could not be destroyed by the geographical dispersal of its members, but was kept alive through annual meetings of the 99th Street Block Association. When the community founded an oral-history project in 2001, its first goal was to gather dispersed community members to rebuild the community. Using a methodology similar to the Audre Lorde Project's, public interviews were performed in a community space in the middle-income housing that was constructed 50 years earlier

over the ruins of the neighborhood. The interviews were advertised as a part of the public history program of the local public library and attracted architects, lawyers and journalists who were familiar with the contested development. The public interviews, videotaped for the archive, were the stimulus for debate and discussions, also providing opportunities for the displaced residents and their children and grandchildren to discuss the impact of their neighborhood's disruption.

2. Oral history is a dialogical encounter based on rapport between interviewer and narrator. When integrated with other forms of community practice, it can support healing, reconciliation and development.

The clearest example of using oral history to promote well-being and personal growth as a part of the history-telling process is through the "reminiscence workers movement" (alternatively known as the "life history workers movement") in Britain, New Zealand and elsewhere, where social workers practice oral history in a variety of institutional and community settings. Influenced by the recognition of the life-review process as a therapeutic tool in restoring a sense of community through memory in the elderly, reminiscence work is practiced in many institutional settings, including communities of the disabled. The purpose of life review in an institutional setting is to overcome the isolation inherent in hospital-like environments, which may have been a life-long state for the disabled who were shunned from community participation in other settings.

Jan Walmsley and Joanna Bornat, in a presentation at a meeting of oral historians in New York in 1994, argued for the reconceptualization of the term community as a construct rather than an entity, as even the term can imply exclusion to differently abled people.⁸ To build a sense of group identity, people are invited to share their life stories with the group. Interviewers record the individual narratives in writing or with tapes which are later transcribed and made into a booklet with photographs and journal entries. An effort is made to ensure that interviewees feel included at every point throughout the process of the interview. A technique used by Bornat and others was the idea of the "Writing Hand," developed by Pecket Well College, founded and run by disabled people. It involves the practice of reading or playing back interviewees' words during the progress of the interview in order to remind narrators that the power of narrative is theirs, as well as to demonstrate their involvement as active listeners, and interested and empathetic interviewers.

Increasingly, community museums are using oral history to explore shifting concepts of community, to build a sense of belonging and simultaneously to reshape public dialogues. An excellent example is the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, a pan-Asian museum which has used oral history to

⁸ Joanna Bornat and Jan Walmsley, draft paper, "Oral History With Vulnerable People: Challenges to Concepts and Practice," presented to the Columbia University International Conference on Oral History, Oct. 18–23, 1994, New York City.

document the conditions Asians and Asian-Americans have faced in the United States. Interviews are drawn from the communities the museum serves, with two examples being Japanese-American citizens who were interned during World War II, and Asian women garment workers who fought to survive economically during the 1950s. Creative multimedia exhibits based on these digitally recorded oral-history projects were mounted, and narrators and other members of the community participated in public dialogues that were stimulated by the use of the oral histories in a public space, featuring a collision of collages of words, images and soundscapes that forces the visitor out of the role of neutral observer. A documentary on Asian garment workers, "If Tired Hands Could Talk," recreates conversational narratives from the interviews. The focus of the work of this dialogical museum is educational, but its impact is far greater as it creates the opportunity for the recovery of human dignity and healing by fusing elements of art and oral history.

Community centers and advocacy groups, with or without a museum or institutional base, use oral history with the arts to stimulate dialogues across generations and cultures. A good example of community-based oral-history work that furthers the goal of integrating oral history with artistic endeavors is that of Elders Share the Arts in New York City.

Elders Share the Arts, a cultural organization offering services to the elderly in immigrant communities, draws upon the skills of playwrights, actors and authors to reshape oral histories taken with elderly citizens into public dramatic readings and plays performed for the narrators. This is an important model in developing individual and group pride by returning the stories to the community from which they come. The interaction between artists and narrators, who are the focus of the performance and the primary audience, is constant throughout the different phases of the production. Stories collected in one community are shared with another through radio and other public programming in institutions, and immigrant experiences are shared across cultures as well as generations.

These are only a few examples of the ways in which oral history stimulates an artistic process that can ultimately foster healing and reconciliation, as well as building historical and cultural knowledge.

3. Oral history is an artistic practice that, when allied with other forms of art and media work, can transform relationships and build new cultural perspectives, opening up new dialogues about the past.

Oral history can take many artistic forms, and can be used in many settings, particularly the theater. But there are certain steps in any oral-history process which define it as an art, whether the focus is on an individual life history,

a community or a culture. These steps are not meant to be followed as if they are a list of tasks, but rather as if they are movements in a symphony that improves with practice, the development of a fine ear and, finally, with the real or imagined presence of an audience.

STEP ONE: ESTABLISHING THE FRAME OF THE INTERVIEW

In the beginning of the symphony, the oral historian is the artist, the person who understands what music is and listens for the first expression of musicality, eliciting the first chords and cadences that will determine the shape and tone of the piece that will eventually be performed. As in any practice session, the first interview session may be full of false starts and awkward pauses. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to both wait through these silences, allowing the narrators to find their own point of entry, and at the same time to ask the questions that can open up the conversation.

The first question is always an invitation to participate in what must become a joint venture, the mutual exploration of a life. It is important to let the people you are interviewing understand that you have the time and interest to hear as much of their stories as you can, and that they can make the choices about how and where to start.

In an interview I conducted for a project on the history of women in journalism, my first question indicates that we have met before, and that my interviewee had shared some of her personal diaries with me in advance:

I am sitting here on the lovely quilt of Harriett Skye, and we are having our first tape-recorded conversation. I would like to start by asking you a little bit about your family life and where you grew up. You can start with whomever you wish. I was very struck by your poem to your mother, because in a way that was a family history as well.⁹

The first paragraph of Skye's answer indicates that she understands that we have begun what might be described as an autobiographical journey in story form, which always has a beginning, a middle and an end:

Well, I guess the best place to begin is the beginning. I was born in 1931, on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. I'm the oldest of seven children. Two of my brothers were born there. My father is Douglas Joshua Skye, and my mother is Margaret Menz Skye. My father's mother, who I call my Grandma Skye, her name was Annie Murphy, and Annie Murphy was half Sioux and half Irish. Her father's name was Joshua Murphy, and her mother's name was White Mountain.¹⁰

⁹Reminiscences with Harriett Skye, Washington Press Club Foundation Women in Journalism Project, April 25, 1993, p. 1, in the Columbia University Oral History Research Office Collection, Columbia University.

¹⁰Ibid.

Eighth-grade students and elders in the Chelsea section of New York City share stories about what life is like during war: their experiences living through World War II and the events surrounding September 11th. Photo by Justine Stehle.



Skye continues to relate her family history, alluding to her cultural history, locating the narrative in both the self and the wider culture, going on to describe how her grandfather was dislocated from his reservation and sent to a boarding school in Virginia, in the southeastern United States:

It was one of the ways the federal government was going to do away with Indian people. So they took him. It was a form of cultural genocide, because they were taking them away from their parents when they were five years old and sent them from North Dakota to Virginia.¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

Skye's willingness to speak freely about the cultural genocide that she and her family had suffered indicates that the interview is going to be a dialogical encounter, a genuine exchange, in which her responsibility is to tell the truth and mine is to hear it. The tone of the interview is established from the very beginning. That she is Indian and I am white adds to the richness of the cultural exchange. The interview is an experimental educational forum through which important dialogues about the past can be had in part *because* of our difference.

In setting the tone and agenda of the interview, intended in part to educate others (through me) about what life was like for a Native woman in white society, Skye takes the authority in the interview and orchestrates the rhythm, as well as the content, of the interview. My authority becomes that of the interested listener, and I relinquish my role as the director/conductor for the sake of allowing her to perform. She becomes the artist, and I her audience. These roles can be exchanged regularly during the interview, with shifts that respond to the rhythm and pace established by the narrator.

STEP TWO: BUILDING HISTORICAL DIALOGUES THROUGH STORIES

Once the tone and pace of the interview has been established and rapport created, part of the responsibility of the interviewer is to cover the issues that may be difficult to discuss but are critical to extend the interview beyond the biographical frame into wider cultural and historical frames. Dialogue takes form in oral history through the telling and retelling of stories.

This means taking an equal level of authorship in constructing the life narrative, asking questions that shape the interview as a dialogue. In this sense, oral history is an intersection of autobiography, biography and cultural history in which there are multiple authors. The narrator is the first author, but the interviewer's questions also determine the shape and content of the interview. As the narrator reminisces about the important influences in her life, other figures who helped shape her history are brought into the story and figure into the construction of narrative, much like a play in which the dialogue always reflects the intersections of lives rather than a single trajectory. Acknowledging the complexity of identity, its fragmentary and transitional character, is the first step toward using the interview to reconstruct history in all its contradictions.

In my interview with Harriett Skye, the most complex series of exchanges we had were over gender, involving her descriptions of the contradictory roles she played as a woman. She had made it clear to me in conversation that her first identification was as a Native woman and that while we shared the same gender, it didn't mean we shared the same identity. I was careful, therefore, when I asked about her identity as a Native woman to look for ways she had described herself:

I read somewhere in your notes that you had described part of the Sioux tradition of the “manly-hearted woman.” Could you explain that a little?¹²

¹²Ibid, April 9, 1994 (session #4), p. 58.

Harriett responded:

¹³Ibid.

Yes, the manly-hearted women were women who were trained much like the men. They went to battle with the men, they rode with the men, and they earned that place, as the men did. They earned their place as warriors, and the women earned that place if that's what they wanted to do and to be. Very much incorporated into the culture—the warrior women, as they were called, or the manly-hearted woman.¹³

But as Harriett entered the narrative herself, in relation to her description of the tradition of the warrior woman, her story became more complex:

I don't know, I'm a Native woman, but I'm more of a woman, too. There's all these parts of us. I mean, I think that's true for all of us. There's a part of me that's Native, that big part of me that's Native. There's that part of me that's woman, there's a part of me that's grandmother, mother and, on occasion, wife. [Laughter] And so I think we somehow incorporate all of this into who we are as human beings, and that was one of the things that I was trying to say in the film I made, in "The Right to Be," that I want to acknowledge that power that's greater than myself as a human being. ...¹⁴

¹⁴Ibid.

As the interview progressed, questions I had about the meaning of being a Native woman journalist, as well as a mother, occasional wife, devoted grandmother and film student at New York University (in her sixties), were addressed through specific stories about her adventures and losses over a lifetime. Embedded in these stories were thick descriptions about the times in which she lived, the pressures she defied and the determination she drew upon to overcome obstacles, which revealed a lot about history.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 71.

Oral-history narratives, like history itself, are often unfinished. Harriett's allusion to the power that is greater than herself is really that of history, which she confronts through her own artistic endeavors—her film—as well as her achievements as a journalist. In the end, her biography was a window into a larger world, an occasion for her to speculate on the cultural genocide that she had described earlier in the interview:

There are many people out there who believe we didn't make it into the twentieth century, that we are part of the past. And that takes us to another issue. That takes us into it's okay to dig up our bones. It's okay to desecrate our graves. It's okay to put us into museums so they can look at us. Do I have to worry about that in two hundred years, are me and my granddaughter going to be in the Smithsonian? Do I have to worry that my sons and my daughter are going to end up in a drawer on the fourth floor of the Smithsonian Institution? I mean, I don't see anyone else worrying about that. I don't see any other group in this country that has to repatriate their funerary remains back to the reservation to be buried 150 years later. ... They don't want to give them back to us. They fight us to keep those bones so they can study what we ate and what we drank and how we died. I said, "All you have to do is ask me. I'll tell them what we ate." It's not much different than it was 150 years ago. It's still corn and meat and that kind of thing.¹⁵

In the conversations that ensued, Harriett allowed me to become the vehicle for her testimony, which she and I both knew would extend the boundaries of our conversation on the "beautiful quilt" of her dorm room at New York University. For one thing, her truthfulness and her courage would have

impact on me as a person and an interviewer. For another, the question she implicitly raises, “Why don’t you ask me?” is an invitation to participate in this interpersonal and intercultural dialogue on the part of all who read or hear the interview. In asking this question, Harriett is transforming her autobiography into a cultural text, and her life story into testimony.

The move back and forth between personal memories and stories, and social and cultural memories and stories, is a hallmark of oral-history narratives. If the history being told does not contain stories of conflict and reveal contradictions, the interview is not complete and the testimony is not truthful.

STEP THREE: CREATING ART OUT OF DIALOGUE

Harriett Skye was an accomplished filmmaker by the time I met her. She also had been a successful print journalist and had hosted her own television show on Native American affairs during the 1970s. She understood the power and importance of media to create representations that could defy and subvert stereotypes. Due to the budget constraints of our project, the bulk of the interview had been conducted on audiotape. But we were allowed to conduct a final session before a camera.

I thought this might be a burden to Harriett, but she was delighted with the opportunity to present her story to a larger audience. As an experienced maker of visual media, she took the opportunity to create a wall behind her where pictures of most of her relatives, particularly her granddaughter, were directly visible. I had the sense as we began the interview that I was no longer the person she was talking to, that her real audience was the generation of her granddaughter. Adding the dimension of video enlarged the frame of the interview from a biography to a social and cultural history, transforming the subject of the interview from an “I” to a “we.”

During the video interview, Harriett took center stage, directing the course of the interview, as an orator or storyteller in another context might draw upon personal experiences to represent the feelings and experiences of a culture or a generation. The stories she chose to illustrate her history and the history of Sioux women were culled from the rich reservoir of testimony that she had given in a more private setting, practiced in preparation for the final symphony. The fact that the story she performed was her own allowed life and art to meet in a way that transformed her dorm room into an amphitheater, her backdrop into a landscape of memory that came alive as snapshots of faded faces representing the forgotten history of a nation.

By the time our work had been completed, Harriett and I had worked together for over a year. I had spent several months reading books, articles and correspondence she had suggested as background research on her life. She had spent time preparing for the last interview session in particular, and we had developed a relationship that would last for her time in New York. Oral history, described by Alessandro Portelli as an exchange of gifts, had left us each with something we needed. For Harriett, it was a completed autobiography, one she claimed could not have been written without first being told.

The gift she carefully and thoughtfully gave me was an entry into her culture. It was one I had to earn. There were many questions I asked in the first session that she did not answer until the last session, until an equality of reciprocity had been achieved.

The art of oral history requires patience, flexibility, vulnerability and mutuality. The development of a relationship in an individual interview is analogous to what must occur in a community oral-history project that is transformed into public art. Like the one-to-one exchange, mutuality and transparency are key.

There are many examples of the ways in which oral history can be transformed into public art, but in each case the element that makes the effort authentic is the degree to which the lived experiences of the narrators and the use of specific languages of gesture and words are the motivating spirit of the performance, as well as the degree to which the audience is involved. Part of the contribution oral history can make to the field of community cultural development is to insist that the dialogical nature of the conversation, which is the occasion for transformation in oral history, be maintained in the public presentation of the art of the interview whether as an exhibit, a live performance or a documentary.

ORAL HISTORY AS THEATER

In a sense, every life history is a performance that is witnessed by two people, and ultimately many more. The same principles and guidelines that allow for the successful completion of a life history or the history of a community can guide the creation of a play in which participatory dialogue, the transfer of knowledge across generations and the transformation of community through artistic encounters are the goals.

This can be accomplished most easily through theater, in which there is a direct and ongoing relationship between the actors and the original or first storytellers, who in oral history are always the individual narrators as well as

those present in their stories. An example of a genre of theater work in which the experiences of narrators remain central to the performance throughout—and also of testimony as a form of drama—is “theater of witness.” Inspired by the use of testimony in Latin America and developed through work with Chileans in refugee communities in New York, the group Theater Arts Against Political Violence brought artists and survivors of political torture together to explore dramatic uses of testimony. Oral histories were conducted with torture survivors as a way for others to enter into the experiences of remembered torture, but in a broader landscape than one-to-one therapy (or oral history) could provide.

The actors modeled the experience of torture through their bodies, symbolically transferring the words into a lived experience that would be witnessed by the public to break down the conspiracy of silence that often confines the survivor in a world of isolation. According to Karen Malpede, who helped direct the project (cofounded by Jack Saul of the International Trauma Studies Program of New York University, Robert Group, a French theater director and Steven Reisner, a psychoanalyst), the project developed in close collaboration with those who lived through political torture. The project included three testimony sessions held in a group setting to avoid re-creating isolation. In between, the theater company met to develop and rehearse scenes from the stories. The goal of the production was to give the torture survivors the ability to stand outside their own experiences and to witness the transformation of their suffering on stage in the company of friends and fellow survivors. The survivors became the critics, and ultimately the authors, of the transformation.

Similar projects, in which survivors themselves direct and act in productions, have arisen through work with refugee communities of Bosnia, both in the Balkans and in the United States, Italy and elsewhere. A collaboration of psychologists, historians, oral historians and dramatists in Kosovo led to the creation of an Archives of Memory Project, in which theater was used to create a new collective space in which to shape community dialogues, as well as to expose the conditions of oppression which led to the experience of trauma and disruption.

The purpose of these and similar projects is to develop models that allow those who have been deprived of their authority and their rights to restore their voices to history and to reclaim their power, not only as witnesses but as real historical actors.

4. Oral history is a liberatory practice which—when practiced in communities where transformation is most needed and where those who understand their needs best can be empowered to speak for themselves and act on their own behalf—is a primary medium for liberation. Stories unleash power, connecting memory and the imagination to the world, and encourage a dynamic organization of forces to combat situations of inequality and justice exacerbated by globalization.

In “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” which many community cultural development workers count as a common bible of sorts, the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire writes of the importance of language itself as a source of inspiration and action:

To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming.¹⁶

¹⁶Freire, op. cit. p. 76.

People were not created, he suggests, to live in silence, but in work, in “action-reflection.” Freire also writes that we live in a state of dialogue, the basic human phenomenon that holds us together as a species, which is only meaningful if we connect it to our actions.

¹⁷Freire, p. 75.

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis [the synthesis of action and reflection which leads to the work of transformation, or praxis]. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.¹⁷

For Freire, the process of liberation is a complex one, requiring that the forces of oppression be named, and the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed be broken before transformation of historical conditions can occur. Oral history can provide the technique through which those who have been silenced can recover their power in history, in both individual and social ways. The power of naming and of telling stories in communities which can themselves become locations for political transformation, is a universal one that has its historic roots in orality itself and in myriad storytelling traditions.

In oral history, the form of the story, the way in which it is told, the audience it is told in front of and the tone through which it is conveyed are as central as its content. Within the specificity of that subjectivity lies the potential for transformation in history through the act of dialogical communication. As Freire suggests, the purpose of dialogue is to release the power of the word in history.

This has been most powerfully illustrated in communities of the very poor, where the theft of language through depriving people of education has contributed to the success of totalitarianism. In Latin America and South America in particular, a creative response to these conditions that relies upon the power of the word to transform history is the tradition of *testimonio*, in which voices of the oppressed are heard, recorded and read back to survivors in order to build a social movement of liberation. This technique has been used successfully by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Mothers of the Disappeared in El Salvador and Chile and other groups to create the groundwork for a liberation movement through transforming a consciousness of fear into one of empowerment.

Oral historians working with refugees, exiles and the poor and marginalized in countries around the world have used this technique, and the literary and oral narratives it inspires, to build communities of resistance and resilience in which the spoken word inspires political action in the direct way that Freire imagined.

While there are no universal models for connecting art to praxis in oral history, there are principles and guidelines which can allow for the dynamic exchange among individuals and cultures that can contribute to transformation.

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

1. In oral history, the ultimate power of interpretation lies with the storyteller. This means, first and foremost, that the narrator takes the ultimate authority in shaping his or her own story and that—just as all cultures are equal—all stories have equal power. In oral history, every narrator is an artist and must become the creator of his or her own narrative.
2. The event of the interview, the preparation that precedes it, the equality that is achieved within it, the insights and actions that result from it, constitute a parable of ways in which the larger processes of liberation and transformation can occur. As a mirror of the past, re-created in the present, the interview can also predict the future and effect the conversion of the word into action.
3. The expansion of the interview into a performance, whether of a single narrator or a group of witnesses, provides the opportunity to challenge the existing order of things and propose a new order. Because the interview is an expression of identity on multiple levels, and the intersection of interviews in a performance reveals the interconnections between personal and cultural forms of expression, the performance can reshape our collective self-understanding in ways that a single performer or one director might not imagine.

If the narratives are reduced to one theme or plot, and the individuality and specificity of memory and experience is lost, the power of the collective voice becomes repressive and the dialogical encounter does not materialize. This means that there must be an active and participatory relationship between the narrators and the designated artists/performers that motivates the production from beginning to end.

4. The creation of an artistic representation of a life, a community story or a cultural legacy based on oral histories must be true to the story as it was lived and shaped through historical and interpersonal encounters. The act of representing history is also the act of reconstructing the possibility of acting in history by understanding how the past influences the present and how relationships can be transformed. In practice, the art of oral history is always rooted in the knowledge of actual historical conditions but attuned to ways in which they can be upturned.

5. Oral history provides a framework in which to reimagine the world, first by remembering it, second by naming it and third by renaming it through the conversion of words into actions.

6. Oral history stimulates the transformation of word into action through this process of naming and renaming, breaking apart silences and finding in them sources of individual and social power. Reframing these stories in artistic performance through theater and other media helps community development to occur.

The art of oral history is to inspire those who have been silenced to speak out and to hear their own stories. The praxis of oral history is building the community from which those stories, told and retold, will transform history.