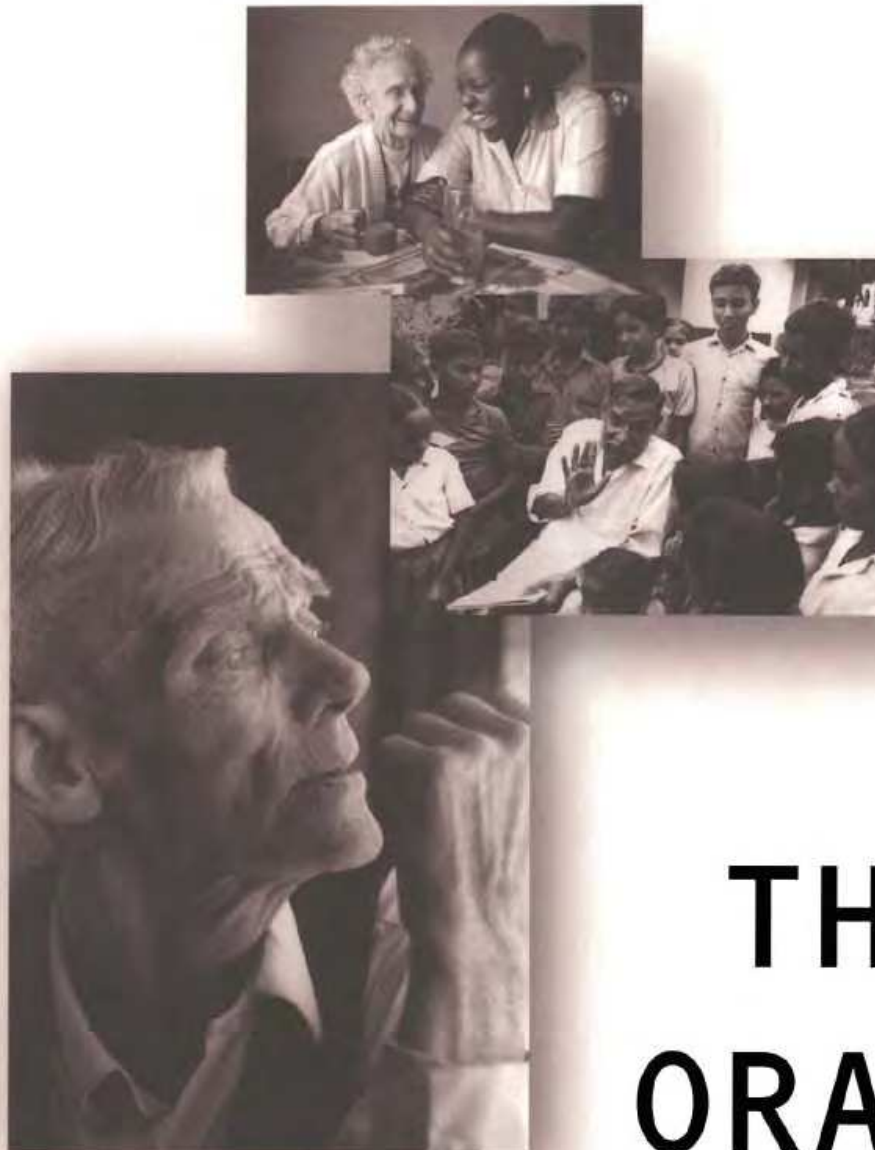




THE ORAL HISTORY READER

Edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson

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The oral history reader

Oral history has had a significant impact upon historical practice in the second half of the twentieth century. It has democratized the study of the past by recording the experience of people who have been 'hidden from history'. *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, is an international anthology of key writings about the theory, method and use of oral history. This collection examines how oral history has challenged the practice of history and explores developments and debates in the field through classic and recent articles.

Arranged in thematic parts, *The Oral History Reader* details issues in the theory and practice of oral history, from the creation of oral evidence through to data analysis. Highlighting the complexity of historical relationships and testimony, this collection covers key debates in the post-war development of oral history including: the problems posed by interviewing, issues of ethics, the politics of empowerment, analytical strategies for interpreting memories, and the concerns of archiving and public history. Each part contains an introduction which contextualizes the selection by reviewing key issues and relevant literature. Extensive cross-referencing and indexing provide aids to research.

The Oral History Reader is an essential resource for students of oral history as well as practitioners. This comprehensive volume illustrates similarities and differences in oral history work around the world and details the many subjects to which oral history has made a contribution.

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The oral history reader

Edited by Robert Perks and
Alistair Thomson



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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
Part I Critical developments	
Introduction	1
1 Black history, oral history and genealogy <i>Alex Haley</i>	9
2 The voice of the past: oral history <i>Paul Thompson</i>	21
3 Oral history and <i>Hard Times</i> : a review essay <i>Michael Frisch</i>	29
4 Movement without aim: methodological and theoretical problems in oral history <i>Ronald J. Grele</i>	38
5 Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism <i>Luisa Passerini</i>	53
6 What makes oral history different <i>Alessandro Portelli</i>	63
7 Popular memory: theory, politics, method <i>Popular Memory Group</i>	75
8 Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history <i>Joan Sangster</i>	87
Part II Interviewing	
Introduction	101
9 On oral history interviewing <i>Charles T. Morrissey</i>	107

10	Ways of listening <i>Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross</i>	114
11	Life history interviews with people with learning disabilities <i>Jan Walmsley</i>	126
12	Family life histories: a collaborative venture <i>Akemi Kikumura</i>	140
13	Interviewing the women of Phokeng <i>Belinda Bozzoli</i>	145
14	Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses <i>Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack</i>	157
15	Marking absences: Holocaust testimony and history <i>Naomi Rosh White</i>	172

Part III Advocacy and empowerment

	Introduction	183
16	Oral history as a social movement: reminiscence and older people <i>Joanna Bornat</i>	189
17	Reaching across the generations: the Foxfire experience <i>Eliot Wigginton</i>	206
18	Culture and disability: the role of oral history <i>Karen Hirsch</i>	214
19	Central American refugee testimonies and performed life histories in the Sanctuary movement <i>William Westerman</i>	224
20	The Gulag in memory <i>Irina Sherbakova</i>	235
21	The Sahel Oral History Project <i>Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker</i>	246
22	Leprosy in India: the intervention of oral history <i>Sanjiv Kakar</i>	258

Part IV Interpreting memories

	Introduction	269
23	Structure and validity in oral evidence <i>Trevor Lummis</i>	273

24	What is social in oral history?	284
	<i>Samuel Schrager</i>	
25	Anzac memories: putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia	300
	<i>Alistair Thomson</i>	
26	Theory, method and oral history	311
	<i>Peter Friedlander</i>	
27	'That's not what I said': interpretive conflict in oral narrative research	320
	<i>Katherine Borland</i>	
28	Evidence, empathy and ethics: lessons from oral histories of the Klan	333
	<i>Kathleen Blee</i>	
29	Telling tales: oral history and the construction of pre-Stonewall lesbian history	344
	<i>Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy</i>	
 Part V Making histories		
	Introduction	357
30	Archival science and oral sources	365
	<i>Jean-Pierre Wallot and Normand Fortier</i>	
31	The future of oral history and moving images	379
	<i>Dan Sipe</i>	
32	Perils of the transcript	389
	<i>Raphael Samuel</i>	
33	Reminiscence as literacy: intersections and creative moments	393
	<i>Jane Mace</i>	
34	'What the wind won't take away': the genesis of <i>Nisa—The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman</i>	402
	<i>Marjorie Shostak</i>	
35	Presenting voices in different media: print, radio and CD-ROM	414
	<i>Peter Read</i>	
36	Angledool stories: Aboriginal history in hypermedia	421
	<i>Karen Flick and Heather Goodall</i>	
37	Children becoming historians: an oral history project in a primary school	432
	<i>Alistair Ross</i>	

38	The exhibition that speaks for itself: oral history and museums <i>Anna Green</i>	448
39	Out of the archives and onto the stage <i>Shaun Nethercott and Neil Leighton</i>	457
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	465
	<i>Useful contacts</i>	468
	<i>Index</i>	472

6 What makes oral history different

Alessandro Portelli

Alessandro Portelli holds a Chair in American Literature at the University of Rome. Reprinted from A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991, pp. 45–58, by permission of the State University of New York Press. A first version, ‘Sulla specificità della storia orale’, appeared in *Primo Maggio* (Milano, Italy), 1979, vol. 13, pp. 54–60, reprinted as ‘The peculiarities of oral history’ in *History Workshop*, 1981, no. 12, pp. 96–107.

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

Agatha Christie, *Elephants Can Remember*

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

Washington Irving, ‘Rip Van Winkle’

MEMORIES LEADING TO THEORIES

A specter is haunting the halls of the academy: the specter of oral history. The Italian intellectual community, always suspicious of news from outside—and yet so subservient to ‘foreign discoveries’—hastened to cut oral history down to size before even trying to understand what it is and how to use it. The method used has been that of charging oral history with pretensions it does not have, in order to set everybody’s mind at ease by refuting them. For instance, *La Repubblica*, the most intellectually and internationally oriented of Italian dailies rushed to dismiss ‘descriptions

“from below” and the artificial packages of “oral history” where things are supposed to move and talk by themselves’, without even stopping to notice that it is not *things*, but *people* (albeit people often considered no more than ‘things’) that oral history expects to ‘move and talk by themselves’.¹

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

THE ORALITY OF ORAL SOURCES

Oral sources are *oral* sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published.² Occasionally, tapes are actually destroyed: a symbolic case of the destruction of the spoken word.

The transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies changes and interpretation. The different efficacy of recordings, as compared to transcripts—for classroom purposes, for instance—can only be appreciated by direct experience. This is one reason why I believe it is unnecessary to give excessive attention to the quest for new and closer methods of transcription. Expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations. The most literal translation is hardly ever the best, and a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention. The same may be true for transcription of oral sources.

The disregard of the orality of oral sources has a direct bearing on interpretative theory. The first aspect which is usually stressed is origin: oral sources give us information about illiterate people or social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted. Another aspect concerns content: the daily life and material culture of these people and groups. However, these are not specific to oral sources. Emigrants’ letters, for instance, have the same origin and content, but are written. On the other hand, many oral history projects have collected interviews with members

of social groups who use writing, and have been concerned with topics usually covered by the standard written archival material. Therefore, origin and content are not sufficient to distinguish oral sources from the range of sources used by social history in general; thus, many theories of oral history are, in fact, theories of social history as a whole.³

In the search for a distinguishing factor, we must therefore turn in the first place to form. We hardly need repeat here that writing represents language almost exclusively by means of segmentary traits (graphemes, syllables, words, and sentences). But language is also composed of another set of traits, which cannot be contained within a single segment but which are also bearers of meaning. The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing—unless, and then in inadequate and hardly accessible form, as musical notation.⁴ The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be represented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcriber's own words.

In order to make the transcript readable, it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks, which are always the more-or-less arbitrary addition of the transcriber. Punctuation indicates pauses distributed according to grammatical rules: each mark has a conventional place, meaning, and length. These hardly ever coincide with the rhythms and pauses of the speaking subject, and therefore end up by confining speech within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow. The exact length and position of the pause has an important function in the understanding of the meaning of speech. Regular grammatical pauses tend to organize what is said around a basically expository and referential pattern, whereas pauses of irregular length and position accentuate the emotional content, and very heavy rhythmic pauses recall the style of epic narratives. Many narrators switch from one type of rhythm to another within the same interview, as their attitude toward the subjects under discussion changes. Of course, this can only be perceived by listening, not by reading.

A similar point can be made concerning the velocity of speech and its changes during the interview. There are no fixed interpretative rules: slowing down may mean greater emphasis as well as greater difficulty, and acceleration may show a wish to glide over certain points, as well as a greater familiarity or ease. In all cases, the analysis of changes in velocity must be combined with rhythm analysis. Changes are, however, the norm in speech, while regularity is the norm in writing (printing most of all) and the presumed norm of reading: variations are introduced by the reader, not by the text itself

This is not a question of philological purity. Traits which cannot be contained within segments are the site (not exclusive, but very important) of essential narrative functions: they reveal the narrators' emotions, their

participation in the story, and the way the story affected them. This often involves attitudes which speakers may not be able (or willing) to express otherwise, or elements which are not fully within their control. By abolishing these traits, we flatten the emotional content of speech down to the supposed equanimity and objectivity of the written document. This is even more true when folk informants are involved: they may be poor in vocabulary but are often richer in range of tone, volume and intonation than middle-class speakers who have learned to imitate in speech the monotone of writing.⁵

ORAL HISTORY AS NARRATIVE

Oral historical sources are *narrative* sources. Therefore the analysis of oral history materials must avail itself of some of the general categories developed by narrative theory in literature and folklore. This is as true of testimony given in free interviews as of the more formally organized materials of folklore.

For example, some narratives contain substantial shifts in the 'velocity' of narration, that is, in the ratio between the duration of the events described and the duration of the narration. An informant may recount in a few words experiences which lasted a long time, or dwell at length on brief episodes. These oscillations are significant, although we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation: dwelling on an episode may be a way of stressing its importance, but also a strategy to distract attentions from other more delicate points. In all cases, there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning of the narrator. The same can be said of other categories among those elaborated by Gérard Genette, such as 'distance' or 'perspective', which define the position of the narrator toward the story.⁶

Oral sources from nonhegemonic classes are linked to the tradition of the folk narrative. In this tradition distinctions between narrative genres are perceived differently than in the written tradition of the educated classes. This is true of the generic distinction between 'factual' and 'artistic' narratives, between 'events' and feeling or imagination. While the perception of an account as 'true' is relevant as much to legend as to personal experience and historical memory, there are no formal oral genres specifically destined to transmit historical information; historical, poetical, and legendary narratives often become inextricably mixed up.⁷ The result is narratives in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns the individual and what concerns the group, may become more elusive than in established written genres, so that personal 'truth' may coincide with shared 'imagination'

Each of these factors can be revealed by formal and stylistic factors. The greater or lesser presence of formalized materials (proverbs, songs,

formulas, and stereotypes) may measure the degree in which a collective viewpoint exists within an individual's narrative. These shifts between standard language and dialect are often a sign of the kind of the control which speakers have over the narrative.

A typical recurring structure is that in which standard language is used overall, while dialect crops up in digressions or single anecdotes, coinciding with a more personal involvement of the narrator or (as when the occurrences of dialect coincide with formalized language) the intrusion of collective memory. On the other hand, standard language may emerge in a dialect narrative when it deals with themes more closely connected with the public sphere, such as politics. Again, this may mean both a more or less conscious degree of estrangement, or a process of 'conquest' of a more 'educated' form of expression beginning with participation in politics.⁸ Conversely, the dialectization of technical terms may be a sign of the vitality of traditional speech and of the way in which speakers endeavor to broaden the expressive range of their culture.

EVENTS AND MEANING

The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the nonhegemonic classes. From this point of view, the only problem posed by oral sources is that of verification (to which I will return in the next section).

But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity. If the approach to research is broad and articulated enough, a cross section of the subjectivity of a group or class may emerge. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material cost of a strike to the workers involved; but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs. Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, we might say that oral sources, especially from nonhegemonic groups, are a very useful integration of other sources as far as the *fabula*—the logical, causal sequence of the story—goes; but they become unique and necessary because of their *plot*—the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story.⁹ The organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationships to their history.

Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts'. What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened. When workers in

Terni misplace a crucial event of their history (the killing of Luigi Trastulli) from one date and context to another, this does not cast doubts on the actual chronology, but it does force us to arrange our interpretation of an entire phase of the town's history. When an old rank-and-file leader, also in Terni, dreams up a story about how he almost got the Communist Party to reverse its strategy after World War II, we do not revise our reconstructions of political debates within the Left, but learn the extent of the actual cost of certain decisions to those rank-and-file activists who had to bury into their subconscious their needs and desires for revolution. When we discover that similar stories are told in other parts of the country, we recognize the half-formed legendary complex in which the 'senile ramblings' of a disappointed old man reveal much about his party's history that is untold in the lengthy and lucid memoirs of its official leaders.¹⁰

SHOULD WE BELIEVE ORAL SOURCES?

Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philological criticism and factual verification which are required by all types of sources anyway, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.

Of course, this does not mean that we accept the dominant prejudice which sees factual credibility as a monopoly of written documents. Very often, written documents are only the uncontrolled transmission of unidentified oral sources (as in the case of the report on Trastulli's death, which begins: 'According to verbal information taken...'). The passage from these oral 'ur-sources' to the written document is often the result of processes which have no scientific credibility and are frequently heavy with class bias. In trial records (at least in Italy, where no legal value is accorded to the tape recorder or shorthand transcripts), what goes on record is not the words actually spoken by the witnesses, but a summary dictated by the judge to the clerk. The distortion inherent in such procedure is beyond assessment, especially when the speakers originally expressed themselves in dialect. Yet, many historians who turn up their noses at oral sources accept these legal transcripts with no questions asked. In a lesser measure (thanks to the frequent use of shorthand) this applies to parliamentary records, minutes of meetings and conventions, and interviews reported in newspapers: all sources which are legitimately and widely used in standard historical research.

A by-product of this prejudice is the insistence that oral sources are distant from events, and therefore undergo the distortion of faulty memory. Indeed,

this problem exists for many written documents, which are usually written some time after the event to which they refer, and often by nonparticipants. Oral sources might compensate chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement. While written memoirs of politicians or labor leaders are usually credited until proven to be in error, they are as distant from some aspects of the event which they relate as are many oral history interviews, and only hide their dependence on time by assuming the immutable form of a 'text'. On the other hand, oral narrators have within their culture certain aids to memory. Many stories are told over and over, or discussed with members of the community; formalized narrative, even meter, may help preserve a textual version of an event.

In fact, one should not forget that oral informants may also be literate. Tiberio Ducci, a former leader of the farm workers' league in Genzano, in the Roman hills, may be atypical: in addition to remembering his own experience, he had also researched the local archives. But many informants read books and newspapers, listen to the radio and TV, hear sermons and political speeches, and keep diaries, letters, clippings, and photograph albums. Orality and writing, for many centuries now, have not existed separately: if many written sources are based on orality, modern orality itself is saturated with writing.

But what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context.

Changes which may have subsequently taken place in the narrators' personal subjective consciousness or in their socio-economic standing, may affect, if not the actual recounting of prior events, at least the valuation and the 'coloring' of the story. Several people are reticent, for instance, when it comes to describing illegal forms of struggle, such as sabotage. This does not mean that they do not remember them clearly, but that there has been a change in their political opinions, personal circumstances, or in their party's line. Acts considered legitimate and even normal or necessary in the past may be therefore now viewed as unacceptable and literally cast out of the tradition. In these cases, the most precious information may lie in what the informants *hide*, and in the fact that they *do* hide it, rather than in what they *tell*.

Often, however, narrators are capable of reconstructing their past attitudes even when they no longer coincide with present ones. This is the case with the Terni factory workers who admit that violent reprisals against the executives responsible for mass layoffs in 1953 may have been counterproductive, but yet reconstruct with great lucidity why they seemed useful and sensible at the time. In one of the most important oral testimonies of our time, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the narrator describes very vividly

how his mind worked before he reached his present awareness, and then judges his own past self by the standards of his present political and religious consciousness. If the interview is conducted skillfully and its purposes are clear to the narrators, it is not impossible for them to make a distinction between present and past self, and to objectify the past self as other than the present one. In these cases—Malcolm X again is typical—*irony* is the major narrative mode: two different ethical (or political, or religious) and narrative standards interfere and overlap, and their tension shapes the telling of the story.

On the other hand, we may also come across narrators whose consciousness seems to have been arrested at climactic moments of their personal experience: certain Resistance fighters, or war veterans; and perhaps certain student militants of the 1960s. Often, these individuals are wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were part, and their account assumes the cadences and wording of *epic*. The distinction between an ironic or an epic style implies a distinction between historical perspectives, which ought to be taken into consideration in our interpretation of the testimony.

OBJECTIVITY

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

Alex Haley's introduction to *Autobiography of Malcolm X* describes how Malcolm shifted his narrative approach not spontaneously, but because the interviewer's questioning led him away from the exclusively public and official image of himself and of the Nation of Islam which he was trying to project. This illustrates the fact that the documents of oral history are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony. Written documents are fixed; they exist whether we are aware of them or not, and do not change once we have found them. Oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence. The condition for the existence of the written source is emission; for oral sources, transmission: a difference similar to that described by Roman Jakobson and Piotr Bogatyrev between the creative processes of folklore and those of literature.¹¹

The content of the written source is independent of the researcher's need and hypotheses; it is a stable text, which we can only interpret. The content of oral sources, on the other hand, depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, dialogue, and personal relationship.

It is the researcher who decides that there will be an interview in the first place. Researchers often introduce specific distortions: informants tell

them what they believe they want to be told and thus reveal who they think the researcher is. On the other hand, rigidly structured interviews may exclude elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to the interviewer and not contemplated in the question schedule. Such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference.

The first requirement, therefore, is that the researcher 'accept' the informant, and give priority to what she or he wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wants to hear, saving any unanswered questions for later or for another interview. Communications always work both ways. The interviewees are always, though perhaps unobtrusively, studying the interviewers who 'study' them. Historians might as well recognize this fact and make the best of its advantages, rather than try to eliminate it for the sake of an impossible (and perhaps undesirable) neutrality.

The final result of the interview is the product of both the narrator and the researcher. When interviews, as is often the case, are arranged for publication omitting entirely the interviewer's voice, a subtle distortion takes place: the text gives the answers without the questions, giving the impression that a given narrator will always say the same things, no matter what the circumstances—in other words, the impression that a speaking person is as stable and repetitive as a written document. When the researcher's voice is cut out, the narrator's voice is distorted.

Oral testimony, in fact, is never the same twice. This is a characteristic of all oral communication, but is especially true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements given in an interview. Even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different times. As the two subjects come to know each other better, the narrator's 'vigilance' may be attenuated. Class subordination—trying to identify with what the narrator thinks is the interviewer's interest—may be replaced by more independence or by a better understanding of the purposes of the interview. Or a previous interview may have simply awakened memories which are then told in later meetings.

The fact that interviews with the same person may be continued indefinitely leads us to the question of the inherent incompleteness of oral sources. It is impossible to exhaust the entire memory of a single informant; the data extracted with each interview are always the result of a selection produced by the mutual relationship. Historical research with oral sources therefore always has the unfinished nature of a work in progress. In order to go through all the possible oral sources for the Terni strikes of 1949 to 1953, one ought to interview in depth several thousand people: any sample would only be as reliable as the sampling methods used, and could never guarantee against leaving out 'quality' narrators whose testimony alone might be worth ten statistically selected ones.

The unfinishedness of oral sources affects all other sources. Given that no research (concerning a historical time for which living memories are

available) is complete unless it has exhausted oral as well as written sources, and that oral sources are inexhaustible, the ideal goal of going through 'all' possible sources becomes impossible. Historical work using oral sources is unfinished because of the nature of the sources; historical work excluding oral sources (where available) is incomplete by definition.

WHO SPEAKS IN ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is not where the working classes speak for themselves. The contrary statement, of course, would not be entirely unfounded: the recounting of a strike through the words and memories of workers rather than those of the police and the (often unfriendly) press obviously helps (though not automatically) to balance a distortion implicit in those sources. Oral sources are a necessary (not a sufficient) condition for a history of the nonhegemonic classes; they are less necessary (though by no means useless) for the history of the ruling classes, who have had control over writing and leave behind a much more abundant written record.

Nevertheless, the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian. It is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed; who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers; and who gives the testimony its final published shape and context (if only in terms of montage and transcription). Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in the abstract, but speaks *to* the historian, *with* the historian and, inasmuch as the material is published, *through* the historian.

Indeed, things may also be the other way around. The historian may validate his or her discourse by 'ventriloquizing' it through the narrator's testimony. So far from disappearing in the objectivity of the sources, the historian remains important at least as a partner in dialogue, often as a 'stage director' of the interview, or as an 'organizer' of the testimony. Instead of discovering sources, oral historians partly create them. Far from becoming mere mouthpieces for the working class, oral historians may be using other people's words, but are still responsible for the overall discourse.

Much more than written documents, which frequently carry the impersonal aura of the institutions by which they are issued—even though, of course, they are composed by individuals, of whom we often know little or nothing—oral sources involve the entire account in their own subjectivity. Alongside the first person narrative of the interviewee stands the first person of the historian, without whom there would be no interview. Both the informant's and the historian's discourse are in narrative form, which is much less frequently the case with archival documents. Informants are historians, after a fashion; and the historian is, in certain ways, a part of the source.

Traditional writers of history present themselves usually in the role of

what literary theory would describe as an 'omniscient narrator'. They give a third-person account of events of which they were not a part, and which they dominate entirely and from above (above the consciousness of the participants themselves). They appear to be impartial and detached, never entering the narrative except to give comments aside, after the manner of some nineteenth-century novelists. Oral history changes the writing of history much as the modern novel transformed the writing of literary fiction: the most important change is that the narrator is now pulled into the narrative and becomes a party of the story.

This is not just a grammatical shift from the third to the first person, but a whole new narrative attitude. The narrator is now one of the characters, and the *telling* of the story is part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political and personal involvement than that of the external narrator. Writing radical oral history, then, is not a matter of ideology, of subjective sides-taking, or of choosing one set of sources instead of another. It is, rather, inherent in the historian's presence in the story, in the assumption of responsibility which inscribes her or him in the account and reveals historiography as an autonomous act of narration. Political choices become less visible and vocal, but more basic.

The myth that the historian as a subject might disappear in the objective truth of working-class sources was part of a view of political militancy as the annihilation of all subjective roles into that of the full-time activist, and as absorption into an abstract working class. This resulted in an ironical similarity to the traditional attitude which saw historians as not subjectively involved in the history which they were writing. Oral historians appear to yield to other subjects of discourse, but, in fact, the historian becomes less and less of a 'go-between' from the working class to the reader, and more and more of a protagonist.

In the writing of history, as in literature, the act of focusing on the function of the narrator causes this function to be fragmented. In a novel such as Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, the character/narrator Marlow can recount only what he himself has seen and heard; in order to tell the 'whole story', he is forced to take several other 'informants' into his tale. The same thing happens to historians working with oral sources. On explicitly entering the story, historians must allow the sources to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse.

Oral history has no unified subject; it is told from a multitude of points of view, and the impartiality traditionally claimed by historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator. 'Partiality' here stands for both 'unfinishedness' and for 'taking sides': oral history can never be told without taking sides, since the 'sides' exist inside the telling. And, no matter what their personal histories and beliefs may be, historians and 'sources' are hardly ever on the same 'side'. The confrontation of their different partialities—confrontation as 'conflict', and confrontation as 'search for unity'—is one of the things which make oral history interesting.

NOTES

- 1 B.Placido in *La Repubblica*, 3 October 1978.
- 2 One Italian exception is the Istituto Ernesto De Martino, an independent radical research organization based in Milan, which has published 'sound archives' on long-playing records since the mid-1960s—without anyone in the cultural establishment noticing: see F.Coggiola, 'L'attività dell'Istituto Ernesto de Martino', in D.Carpitella (ed.), *L'etnomusicologia in Italia*, Palermo, Flaccovio, 1975, pp. 265–270.
- 3 L.Passerini, 'Sull'utilità e il danno delle fonti orali per la storia'. Introduction to Passerini (ed.), *Storia Orale. Vita quotidiana e cultura materiale delle classi subalterne*, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1978, discusses the relationship of oral history and social history.
- 4 On musical notation as reproduction of speech sounds, see G.Marini, 'Musica popolare e parlato popolare urbano', in Circolo Gianni Bosio (ed.), *I giorni cantati*, Milano, Mazzotta, 1978, pp. 33–34. A.Lomax, *Folk Song Styles and Culture*, Washington DC, American Association for the Advancement of Sciences, 1968, Publication no. 88, discusses electronic representation of vocal styles.
- 5 See W.Labov, 'The logic of non-standard English', in L.Kampf and P.Lauter (eds.), *The Politics of Literature*, New York, Random House, 1970, pp. 194–244, on the expressive qualities of non-standard speech.
- 6 In this article, I use these terms as defined and used by G.Gennete, *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil, 1972.
- 7 On genre distinctions in folk and oral narrative, see D.Ben-Amos, 'Categories analytiques et genres populaires', *Poétique*, 1974, no. 19, pp. 268–293; and J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, [1961], 1973.
- 8 For instance, G.Bordoni, Communist activist from Rome, talked about family and community mainly in dialect, but shifted briefly to a more standardized form of Italian whenever he wanted to reaffirm his allegiance to the party. The shift showed that, although he accepted the party's decisions, they remained other than his direct experience. His recurring idiom was 'There's nothing you can do about it.' See Circolo Gianni Bosio, *I giorni cantati*, pp. 58–66.
- 9 On fabula and plot see B.Tomaševskij, 'Sju•etnoe postroenie', in *Teorija literatury. Poetika*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1928; Italian trans., 'La costruzione dell'intreccio', in T.Todorov (ed.), *I formalisti russi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1968, published as *Théorie de la littérature*, Paris, Seuil, 1965.
- 10 These stories are discussed in chapters 1 and 6 of A.Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991.
- 11 R.Jakobson and P.Bogatyrev, 'Le folklore forme spécifique de creation', in R.Jakobson, *Questions de poétique*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, pp. 59–72.

27 'That's not what I said'

Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research

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In the summer of 1944, my grandmother, Beatrice Hanson, put on a pale, eggshell-colored gabardine dress with big gold buttons down the side, a huge pancake-black hat, and elbow-length gloves—for in *those* days ladies dressed *up* to go to the fair—and off she went with her father to see the sulky (harness) races at the Bangor, Maine, fairgrounds. The events that ensued provided for a lively wrangle between father and daughter as they vied to pick the winner. Forty-two years later Beatrice remembered vividly the events of that afternoon and, in a highly structured and thoroughly entertaining narrative, recounted them to me, her folklorist-granddaughter, who recorded her words on tape for later transcription and analysis. What took place that day, why it proved so memorable, and what happened to the narrative during the process of intergenerational transmission provide a case study in the variability of meaning in personal narrative performances. This story, or, better said, these stories, stimulate reflexivity about our scholarly practice.

Let me begin with the question of meaning and its variability. We can view the performance of a personal narrative as a meaning-constructing activity on two levels simultaneously. It constitutes both a dynamic interaction between the thinking subject and the narrated event (her own life experience) and between the thinking subject and the narrative event (her 'assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence'¹). As performance contexts change, as we discover new audiences, and as we renegotiate our sense of self, our narratives will also change.

What do folklorists do with the narratives performed for/before us? Like other audience members, we enjoy a skillfully told tale. But some of us also collect records of the performance in order to study them. Oral personal narratives occur naturally within a conversational context, in which various

people take turns at talk, and thus are rooted most immediately in a web of expressive social activity. *We* identify chunks of artful talk within this flow of conversation, give them physical existence (most often through writing), and embed them in a new context of expressive or at least communicative activity (usually the scholarly article aimed toward an audience of professional peers). Thus, we construct a second-level narrative based upon, but at the same time reshaping, the first.

Like the original narrator, we simultaneously look inward towards our own experience of the performance (our interpretive shaping of it as listeners) and outward to our audience (to whom we must display a degree of scholarly competence). Presumably, the patterns upon which we base our interpretations can be shown to inhere in the 'original' narrative, but our aims in pointing out certain features, or in making connections between the narrative and larger cultural formations, may at times differ from the original narrator's intentions. This is where issues of our responsibility to our living sources become most acute.

Years ago, scholars who recorded the traditions, arts, and history of a particular culture group gave little thought to the possibility that their representations might legitimately be challenged by those for and about whom they wrote. After all, they had 'been in the field', listening, taking notes, and witnessing the culture firsthand. Educated in the literate, intellectual tradition of the Western academy, these scholars brought with them an objective, scientific perspective that allowed them, they felt, to perceive underlying structures of meaning in their material that the 'natives', enmeshed in a smaller, more limited world, could not see. Therefore, it is not surprising that general ethnographic practice excluded the ethnographic subject from the process of post-fieldwork interpretation, nor that folklorists and anthropologists rarely considered their field collaborators to be potential audiences for their publications. More recently, some researchers sensitive to the relationships of power in the fieldwork exchange have questioned this model of the scholar as interpretive authority for the culture groups he/she studies.²

For feminists, the issue of interpretive authority is particularly problematic, for our work often involves a contradiction. On the one hand, we seek to empower the women we work with by revaluing their perspectives, their lives, and their art in a world that has systematically ignored or trivialized women's culture.³ On the other, we hold an explicitly political vision of the structural conditions that lead to particular social behaviors, a vision that our field collaborators, many of whom do not consider themselves feminists, may not recognize as valid. My own work with my grandmother's racetrack narrative provides a vivid example of how conflicts of interpretation may, perhaps inevitably do, arise during the folklore transmission process. What should we do when we women disagree?

To refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves seems to me an unsatisfactory if not illusory solution. For the very fact that

we constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories, and our later presentation of these stories—in particular publications under particular titles—will influence the way in which prospective readers will interpret the texts. Moreover, feminist theory provides a powerful critique of our society, and, as feminists, we presumably are dedicated to making that critique as forceful and direct as possible. How, then, might we present our work in a way that grants the speaking woman interpretive respect without relinquishing our responsibility to provide our own interpretation of her experience?

Although I have no easy answer to this question, I believe that by reflecting on our practice we can move toward a more sensitive research methodology. In the spirit of reflexivity I offer here a record of the dispute that arose between my grandmother and myself when I ventured an interpretation of her narrative. First, I will summarize the narrative, since the taped version runs a full twenty-five minutes. Then I will present her framing of the narrative in performance and my refraining during the interpretive process. Finally, I will present her response to my interpretation. While I have already ‘stacked the deck’ in my favor by summarizing the story, reducing it through my subjective lens, my grandmother’s comments powerfully challenge my assumption of exegetical authority over the text.⁴

Beatrice began her story with a brief setting of the scene: in the grandstand, she finds herself seated directly behind Hod Buzzel, ‘who’, she states, ‘had gotten me my divorce and whom I *hated* with a passion’. Hod is accompanied by his son, the county attorney (who, Beatrice says, ‘was just as bad as his father in another way—he was a snob’). Beatrice’s father knows them both very well.

Beatrice, the narrator, then explains the established system for selecting a horse. Observers typically purchase a ‘score card’ that lists the past records of horses and drivers, and they evaluate the horses as they pace before the grandstand. Beatrice’s personal system for choosing a horse depends most heavily on her judgement of the observable merits of both horse and driver. She explains:

And if I could find a *horse* that right pleased me, and a driver that pleased me that were together...*there* would be my choice, you see? So, this particular afternoon...I *found* that. Now that didn’t happen all the time, by any means, but I found...perfection, as far as I was concerned, and I was absolutely *convinced* that *that* horse was going to win.

Beatrice decides to bet on Lyn Star, an unknown horse driven by a young man. She knows that this young man’s father is driving another horse in the race. Her father and the Buzzels select Black Lash, a horse with an established reputation for speed.

The subsequent action exhibits an inherent potential for narrative patterning. Sulky races, in which a driver sits behind the horse in a two-

wheeled single-seat carriage, are presented in a series of three heats. In other words, the same group of horses races against each other three times during the afternoon, alternating with three groups of horses who race against one another in the same fashion. Normally, drivers act on their own, competing individually against their opponents, but the appearance of a father and son in the same race suggests to Bea the possibility that these two may collaborate with one another in some way. Each heat, from the perspective of the audience, involves three stages: selecting a horse and placing a bet, observing the race proper, and collecting on one's winning tickets. With regard to the particular race narrated, an additional structural element is provided by the repetitive strategy employed by the father and son upon whom Bea has placed her hopes.

In each heat, the father quickly takes the lead and sets a fast pace for the other horses while the son lopes along behind. As the horses turn into the second lap and start their drive, the father moves over to let his son through on the rail (the inside lane of the track) thereby forcing Black Lash, the next-to-front runner, to go out and around him. Dramatic tension is produced by the variable way in which this strategy is played out on the course. In the first heat, Lyn Star wins by a nose. In the second, he ties in a photo finish with Black Lash. In the third, the father's horse, worn out by his previous two performances, drops back behind the others, leaving Lyn Star and Black Lash to really race. But because of the way the races have been run, Lyn Star's driver had never really had to push his horse. He does so this time and leaves Black Lash half a length behind.

As a superlative narrator, Beatrice recognizes and exploits the parallels between the observed contest and the contest between observers who have aligned themselves with different horses. She structures her narrative by alternating the focus between a dramatic reenactment of events in the grandstand and a description of the actual race as it unfolds before the observers. Within this structure, the cooperation between the father and son on the racecourse provides a contrast to the conflict between father and daughter in the grandstand.

Before the first heat, Bea's father asks her, 'D'you pick a horse?' And she responds that, yes, she has chosen Lyn Star. At this, her father loudly denounces her choice, claiming that the horse will never win, she'll lose her money, and she should not bet. Beatrice puts two dollars on the horse. When Lyn Star wins, Bea turns triumphantly to her father. Undaunted, he insists that the race was a fluke and that Bea's favorite horse will not win again. Nevertheless, Beatrice places six dollars on Lyn Star in the next heat. By now, though, her father is irate and attempts first to trade horses with her so that she won't lose her money, and then, when she declines this offer, he refuses altogether to place her bet. Young Buzzel, who has become an amused audience of one to the father-daughter contest in the grandstand, offers to take her money down to the betting office. Since Bea has never placed her own bets, she accepts.

With the third heat Beatrice's father catapults their private argument into the public arena, as he asks his daughter, 'What are you going to do this time?' Beatrice is adamant, 'I am *betting on my horse* and I am betting *ten bucks* on that horse. It's gonna win!' At this, Beatrice, the narrator, explains, 'Father had a fit. *He* had a fit. And he tells everybody three miles around in the grandstand what a fool I am too.... He *wasn't* gonna take my money down!' So Beatrice commandeers young Buzzel to place her bet for her again. When Lyn Star wins by a long shot, Bea's father is effectively silenced:

And I threw my pocketbook in one direction, and I threw my gloves in another direction, and my score book went in another direction, and I jumped up and I hollered, to everyone, 'You see what know-it-all said! *That's* my father!' And finally one man said to me...no, he said to my father, 'You know, she *really* enjoys horse racing, doesn't she?'

To understand how Bea frames her narrative, we must return to a consideration of her initial description of how a horse is chosen. This prefatory material orients the audience to a particular point of view, emphasizing that the race should be understood as an opportunity for racegoers to exercise their evaluative skills in order to predict an eventual outcome. Indeed, the length and detail of this portion of the narrative emphasizes the seriousness, for Beatrice, of this preliminary evaluative activity. This framing of the story gains significance if one considers that Bea's knowledge of horses was unusual for women in her community. Emphasizing the exceptionality of her knowledge, she explained to me that her father owned and raced horses when Bea was a child and 'though I could not go *fishing* with my father on Sundays, or *hunting* with him on any day of the week, for some strange reason, he took me with him, mornings' to watch his horses being exercised.

Additionally, in her framing of the narrative, Beatrice identifies the significance of the event narrated, its memorability, as the unique coming together of a perfect horse and driver that produced an absolute conviction on her part as to who would win the contest. Since this conviction was proved correct the narrative functions to support or illustrate Bea's sense of self as a competent judge of horses within both the narrative and the narrated event. In effect, her narrative constitutes a verbal re-performance of an actual evaluative performance at the track.

What do I as a listener make of this story? A feminist, I am particularly sensitive to identifying gender dynamics in verbal art, and, therefore, what makes the story significant for me is the way in which this self-performance within the narrated event takes on the dimension of a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment. Literally and symbolically, the horse race constitutes a masculine sphere. Consider, racing contestants, owners, and trainers were male (although female *horses* were permitted to compete). Also, while women obviously attended the

races, indeed, 'ladies dressed up' to go to the races, they were granted only partial participant status. While they were allowed to sit in the grandstand as observers (and, having dressed up, one assumes, as persons to be observed), they were not expected to engage as active evaluators in the essential first stage of the racing event. Notice that even at the very beginning of the story Bea's father did not want her to bet. Betting is inherently a risk-taking activity. Men take risks; women do not. This dimension of meaning is underscored in the second heat when Beatrice, the narrator, ironically recounts that her father was going to be 'decent' to her, in other words, was going to behave according to the model of gentlemanly conduct, by offering to bear his daughter's risk and bet on her horse for her.

Significantly, as the verbal contest develops, Beatrice displays greater and greater assertiveness as a gambler. Not only does she refuse to align herself with the men's judgement, she also raises the ante by placing more and more serious bets on her choice. From an insignificant bet in the first heat—and here it bears recalling that in racing parlance a two-dollar bet is still called a 'lady's bet'—she proceeds in the second and third heats to bet six and ten dollars, respectively.

In portraying the intensification of the contest, Beatrice, the narrator, endows Beatrice, the gambler, with an increasingly emphatic voice. Her tone in addressing her father moves from one of calm resolution before the first and second heats—'That's the horse I'm betting on', and 'No, I'm gonna stay with that horse'—to heated insistence before the third heat—'I am *betting on my horse!*' (each word accentuated in performance by the narrator's pounding her fist on the dining-room table).

Finally, if one looks at Beatrice's post-heat comments, one can detect a move from simple self-vindication in the first heat to a retaliatory calumny of her father's reputation delivered in a loud disparaging voice—'You see what know-it-all said! *That's* my father!' Thus, at the story's end, Beatrice has moved herself from a peripheral feminine position with respect to the larger male sphere of betting *and* talk, to a central position where her words and deeds proclaim her equal and indeed superior to her male antagonist. Symbolically underscoring this repudiation of a limiting feminine identity, Bea flings away the accessories of her feminine costume—her gloves and her pocketbook.

If on one level the story operates as a presentation of self as a competent judge of horses, on another it functions to assert a sense of female autonomy and equality within a sphere dominated by men. From yet another perspective, the verbal contest between father and daughter results in a realignment of allegiances based on the thematic contrasts between age and youth, reputation and intrinsic merit, observable in the contest between the horses Black Lash and Lyn Star. When her father (tacitly) refuses to place her bet before the second heat, young Buzzell, whom Bea has previously described as an antagonist, and who has been betting with the

older men, offers to place her bet for her. In effect, he bets on Beatrice in the contest developing on the sidelines.

Furthermore, with regard to the narrator's life experience, one can view the narrative as a metaphor for a larger contest between Beatrice and her social milieu. For in the early 1930s Beatrice shocked her community by divorcing her first husband. This action and her attempt to become economically independent by getting an education were greeted with a certain amount of social and familial censure. For instance, Beatrice recalls, when her mother entered the date of the divorce in the family bible, she included the note: 'Recorded, but not approved.' It also forced Beatrice to leave her two young daughters in the care of their paternal grandparents for the five years she attended college, a necessity that still saddens and troubles her today.

My grandparents agree that, in the ideology of marriage at that time, 'you weren't supposed to be happy'. My grandfather relates that his grandmother suffered severe psychological strain during menopause, was committed to a psychiatric hospital, and, while there, crossed her name off her marriage certificate. In a slightly more active form of resistance, Beatrice's grandmother, after injuring herself while doing heavy farm work, took to her bed for several years. However, as soon as her son married, she got up, moved in with him, and led a normal, active life, becoming the strong maternal figure of Bea's own childhood. Bea's mother separated herself psychologically from both her husband and her family by retreating into a strict, moralistic, and, in Bea's view, hypocritical religiosity. For Bea's predecessors, then, a woman's socially acceptable response to an unhappy marriage was to remove herself from the marriage without actually effecting a formal, public separation. Although Bea's first husband was tacitly recognized by the community as an unfit husband—irresponsible, alcoholic, a spendthrift and a philanderer—Beatrice was expected to bear with the situation in order to protect her own reputation and that of her family.

By divorcing her first husband Beatrice transgressed middle-class social decorum and was branded 'disreputable'. The appearance in the present narrative of the divorce lawyer and Bea's negative reaction to him leads me to link Beatrice's performance and status at the races to her previous loss of reputation in the larger village society. In both instances Beatrice had to prove in the face of strong opposition the rightness of not playing by the rules, of relying on her own judgment, of acting as an autonomous individual. I would suggest, then, that the latent associations of this narrative to circumstances critical to the narrator's life, even if not consciously highlighted in the narrative, may reinforce its memorability.

What is essential to emphasize, however, is that this is *my* framing of the racetrack narrative informed by contemporary feminist conceptions of patriarchal structures, which my grandmother does not share. Moreover, after reading an initial version of this interpretation, Beatrice expressed

strong disagreement with my conclusions. I quote a portion of the fourteen-page letter she wrote to me concerning the story:

Not being, myself, a feminist, the 'female struggle' as such never bothered me in my life. It never occurred to me. I never thought of my *position* at all in this sense. I've always felt that I had a fine childhood. It seems, now, that I must have had a remarkable one. To begin with, I had a very strong father figure. Surrounded by the deep and abiding love of my Grandmother Austin (whom I adored); the clear, unfaltering knowledge of my father's love and his openly expressed pride in me, and the definite disciplines set by my grandmother which provided the staunch and unchallengeable framework in which I moved, I knew absolute security. (The disciplines were unchallengeable because I never had the least desire to challenge them. I would have done anything not to disappoint Grandma or make her feel bad, and I was so very happy and secure that only an idiot would have tried to upset the situation.)

In consequence of all this, as I grew older, the inner strength which that sense of security had built in me, served always to make me feel equal to anyone, male or female, and very often superior. Feminism, as such, was of no moment to me—none at all. Privately, it has always seemed ridiculous, but that's neither here nor there. It makes no difference to me what anybody else thinks about it.

So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation. You've read into the story what you wished to—what pleases YOU. That it was never—by any widest stretch of the imagination—the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all. The skeleton remains, but it has become your story. Right? How far is it permissible to go, in the name of folklore, and still be honest in respect to the original narrative?

Beatrice brings up a crucial issue in oral narrative scholarship—who controls the text? If I had not sent my grandmother a copy of my work, asking for her response, I could perhaps have avoided the question of my intrusion into the texts I collect. Discussions with our field collaborators about the products of our research are often overlooked or unreported by folklore scholars. Luckily, my grandmother is quite capable of reading, responding to, and resisting my presentation of her narrative. For my own and my grandmother's versions provide a radical example of how each of us has created a story from her own experience. While I agree that the story has indeed become *my* story in the present context, I cannot agree that my reading betrays the original narrative.

Beatrice embraces an idealist model of textual meaning that privileges

authorial intentions. It makes sense for my grandmother to read the story in this way. From my own perspective, however, the story does not really become a story until it is actualized in the mind of a receptive listener/reader. As my consciousness has been formed within a different social and historical reality, I cannot restrict my reading to a recuperation of original authorial intentions. I offer instead a different reading, one that values her story as an example to feminists of one woman's strategy for combating a limiting patriarchal ideology. That Bea's performance constitutes a direct opposition to established authorities reveals for me how gender ideologies are not wholly determinative or always determinative of female identity.⁵

Nevertheless, despite my confidence in the validity of my reading as a feminist scholar, personally I continue to be concerned about the potential emotional effect alternative readings of personal narratives may have on our living subjects. The performance of a personal narrative is a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a 'self to their audience.'⁶ Our scholarly representations of those performances, if not sensitively presented, may constitute an attack on our collaborators' carefully constructed sense of self. While Bea and I have discussed our differences at length and come to an amicable agreement about how to present them (i.e., the inclusion of her response to my initial reading in the final text), I might have avoided eliciting such a violent initial response from her if I had proceeded differently from the outset.⁷

I could have tried to elicit my grandmother's comments on the story's meaning before I began the process of interpretation. During the taping session itself, however, this would have proved problematic. As I stated earlier, oral personal narratives occur naturally within a conversational context, and often the performance of one narrative leads to other related performances. These displays of verbal art provide an important context for understanding how the narrative in question is to be viewed, and from my perspective it would not be productive to break the narrative flow in order to move to the very different rhetorical task of interpretation and analysis.

Furthermore, during a narrative performance of this type, both narrator and listener are caught up in the storytelling event. Although associative commentary about the stories is common, at this stage in the fieldwork exchange neither narrator nor listener is prepared to reflect analytically on the material being presented. Indeed, the conscious division of a storytelling session into discreet story units or thematic constellations of stories occurs at the later stage of review and study.

Nevertheless, the narrator's commentary on and interpretation of a story can contribute greatly to the researcher's understanding of it. I now feel I ought to have arranged a second session with my grandmother in which I played her the taped version and asked her for her view of its function and meaning. Time constraints prevented me from doing so. I did solicit an interpretation from Bea with not much success after I had written and she

had read my initial version of this article. At that time Beatrice insisted that the story was simply an amusing anecdote with no deep or hidden meanings. Although it may be that some narrators are not prepared to interpret their own stories analytically, Bea's reaction may have been due to her sharply felt loss of authorial control.

With the benefit of hindsight, let me review two points that proved especially sensitive for my grandmother. First, Bea reacted very strongly to the feminist identity my interpretation implied she had. Though some might quibble that this problem is simply a matter of labels, the word 'feminist' often has negative, threatening connotations for women who have not participated in the feminist movement. More important, Bea's objection points to an important oversight in my own research process.

When I began the task of interpretation, I assumed a likeness of mind where there was in fact difference: I was confident that my grandmother would accept my view of the story's meaning. After all, she had been very excited about working with me when I told her I wanted to study older women's life experience narratives. She sent me a great deal of material and commentary on the difficult conditions of women's lives in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Maine, material and commentary that seemed on the surface to convey a feminist perspective. Moreover, she offered her own accounts and stories, some of which dealt with very sensitive matters, assuring me that I should feel perfectly free to use whatever proved helpful to me in my research. How, then, did we, who had a close, confidential, long-standing relationship, manage to misunderstand each other so completely?

The fieldwork exchange fosters a tendency to downplay differences, as both investigator and source seek to establish a footing with one another and find a common ground from which to proceed to the work of collecting and recording oral materials. Additionally, as we are forever constructing our own identities through social interactions, we similarly construct our notion of others. My grandmother has always appeared to me a remarkably strong, independent woman, and thus, even though she has never called herself a feminist, it was an easy step for me to cast her in that role. Although she knew that I considered myself an activist feminist, to her I have always been, first and foremost, a granddaughter. She was, therefore, unprepared for the kind of analysis performed on her narrative. The feminist movement has been criticized before for overgeneralizing about women's experience in its initial enthusiasms of sisterly identification. Yet it bears repeating that important commonalities among women often mask equally important differences.⁸

For Beatrice, another troubling feature of my interpretation is the portrait it presents of her father. Here the problem arises from our different understandings of what the narrative actually is. I approach the story as a symbolic construction and the people within it are, for me, dramatic characters. Thus, Beatrice's father, the antagonistic figure of the story,

becomes a symbol of repressive male authority in my interpretation. For Beatrice, however, the story remains an account of a real experience, embedded in the larger context of her life. She brings to her reading of the 'characters' a complex of associations built up over a shared lifetime. From this perspective my interpretation of her father is absolutely false. Whether or not it 'works' for the father figure in the story, it does not define the man. In fact, Beatrice's father was one of the few people who encouraged and supported her during the difficult period after her disastrous first marriage. She remembers her father with a great deal of love and admiration and speaks often of the special relationship they had with one another. Indeed, if anyone was the villain of Beatrice's youth, it would have been her mother, a cold, judgmental woman. Nevertheless, in a written account of the racetrack story composed shortly after the event took place, Beatrice herself remarks that at the track, 'Father and the Buzzels were acting very male', quarreling over the results of the races.⁹

When I sent Beatrice a copy of my essay in which *her* narrative had suffered a sea change, she naturally felt misrepresented. To complicate matters, my original essay contained a great deal of theory that was unfamiliar and at times incomprehensible to her. Embedded in the context of my own scholarly environment, I had not bothered to provide any accompanying explanation of that theory. Thus, if I had 'misread' her text, I also gave her every opportunity to misread mine. I now feel that had I talked to Bea about my ideas *before* I committed them to writing, presented her with drafts, or even arranged to have her read the paper with me so that we might discuss misunderstandings and differences as they arose, her sense of having been robbed of textual authority might not have been as strong as it was.

I am not suggesting that all differences of perspective between folklorist and narrator, feminist scholar and speaking woman, should or can be worked out before the final research product is composed. Nor am I suggesting that our interpretations must be validated by our research collaborators. For when we do interpretations, we bring our own knowledge, experience, and concerns to our material, and the result, we hope, is a richer, more textured understanding of its meaning.

I am suggesting that we might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms once we are safely ensconced in our university libraries ready to do interpretation. By extending the conversation we initiate while collecting oral narratives to the later stage of interpretation, we might more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research.

Quite possibly, this modification of standard practice would reveal new ways of understanding our materials to both research partners. At the very least, it would allow us to discern more clearly when we speak in unison and when we disagree. Finally, it would restructure the traditionally unidirectional flow of information out from source to scholar to academic

audience by identifying our field collaborators as an important first audience for our work. Lest we, as feminist scholars, unreflectively appropriate the words of our mothers for our own uses, we must attend to the multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings generated by our framing or contextualizing of their oral narratives in new ways.

POSTSCRIPT

On July 8, 1989, after a ten-month absence, I visited Beatrice and gave her a copy of the present version of this paper for her final comments. She took it to her study, read it, and then the two of us went through it together, paragraph by paragraph. At this juncture she allowed that much of what I had said was 'very true', though she had not thought about the events of her life in this way before. After a long and fruitful discussion, we approached the central issue of feminism. She explained, once again, that feminism was not a movement that she had identified with or even heard of in her youth. Nevertheless, she declared that if I meant by feminist a person who believed that a woman has the right to live her life the way she wants to regardless of what society has to say about it, then she guessed she was a feminist.

Thus, the fieldwork exchange had become, in the end, a true exchange. I had learned a great deal from Beatrice, and she had also learned something from me. Yet I would emphasize that Bea's understanding and acceptance of feminism was not something that I could bestow upon her, as I had initially and somewhat naively attempted to do. It was achieved through the process of interpretive conflict and discussion, emerging as each of us granted the other interpretive space and stretched to understand the other's perspective. While Bea's identification with feminism is not crucial to my argument, it stands as a testament to the new possibilities for understanding that arise when we re-envision the fieldwork exchange.

NOTES

- 1 R.Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, Prospect Heights, Ill., Waveland, 1977, p. 11. For a discussion of the differences between narrated and narrative events, see R.Bauman's introduction in his *Story, Performance, and Events*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1986. [Editors note: a number of discursive footnotes have been deleted from the original.]
- 2 For a discussion of new experiments in ethnographic texts, see J.Clifford and G.E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1986, and G.E.Marcus and M.M.J.Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- 3 For a discussion of the sexist bias in folklore scholarship generally, see M.Weigle, 'Women as verbal artists: reclaiming the daughters of Enheduanna', *Frontiers*, 1978, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 1-9.
- 4 The racetrack narrative I present here forms part of an extended taping session

- I conducted with my grandmother during a three-day visit to her home in December 1986. A transcription of the full version of Beatrice's narrative appears in my article 'Horsing around with the frame: the negotiation of meaning in women's verbal performance', *Praxis*, Spring 1990, pp. 83–107.
- 5 Beverly Stoeltje discusses the dialectic between individual behavior, changing environments, and ideals of womanhood in "'A helpmate for man indeed': the image of the frontier woman", in C.R. Farrer (ed.), *Women and Folklore: Images and Genres*, Prospect Heights, Ill., Waveland Press, 1975, pp. 25–41.
 - 6 Victor Turner views performances as reflexive occasions set aside for the collective or individual presentation of the self to the self in 'Images and reflections: ritual drama, carnival, film and spectacle in cultural performance', in his *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York, The Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1987, pp. 121–132. For a discussion of how personal narratives are tools for making sense of our lives, see B. Myerhoff, 'Life history among the elderly: performance, visibility and remembering', in J. Ruby (ed.), *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, pp. 99–117.
 - 7 In several lengthy post-essay discussions, Beatrice, my grandfather Frank, and I discussed both the story and what happened to it during the process of transmission. After hearing the revised version (in which my grandmother's comments were included), Frank stated that he had learned to see features of the society in which he grew up that he had never really been aware of before. Beatrice was less enthusiastic about my alternative reading, but agreed that my perspective was thought-provoking. For her, the more general issue of how stories are transformed with each new telling was the most interesting point of the essay, and she expressed a desire to continue working on projects of the same type.
 - 8 Equally serious is the tendency to discount as vestiges of false consciousness attitudes or behaviors that do not fit into our own vision of feminist practice. In a cogent critique of this tendency in feminist research, Rachelle Saltzman demonstrates how women who use sexist-male jokes within their own gender group see this activity as an expropriation for use rather than an acceptance of a belittled female identity, in 'Folklore, feminism and the folk: whose lore is it?', *Journal of American Folklore*, 1987, no. 100, pp. 548–567.
 - 9 Quotation from a letter written to Beatrice's second husband, Frank Hanson, 6 August, 1944.