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# Reflections on Oral History in the New Millennium: Roundtable Comments

## From First Generation Oral Historians to Fourth and Beyond

by Sherna Berger Gluck

### Introduction

It is a rather daunting task that we have been assigned, particularly since the very word “millennium” carries so much weight for those who inhabit the Western, Christian-influenced world. And with the proliferation of scholarly output on oral history, it is overwhelming to think, even fleetingly, about trying to synthesize these materials into a coherent statement that reflects our past, present and future and that is international in scope. So taking the path of least resistance, I will concentrate on the U.S., and rather than attempting a scholarly treatise, I will try to reflect on the questions posed by Bruce Stave about oral history in the new millennium by interweaving my own development, direction, and future in oral history with trends suggested by a reading of four relatively recent publications: the second edition of one of the most widely used anthologies in the U.S., *Oral History: An Inter-*

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*disciplinary Anthology*, edited by Willa K. Baum and David K. Dunaway; the most recent and comprehensive anthology, *An Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, the recent oral history manual, Don Ritchie's *Doing Oral History*; and, the fourth and latest volume in a more than two-decade history of special "Women's Oral History" issues of *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*.<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that my own trajectory is necessarily typical, but I think that it does parallel the path that many feminist oral historians, at least, have trod.

### The Way We Were/The Way We Are

As pointed out by David Dunaway in his introduction to the second volume of *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, we are beginning to count among our practitioners the fourth generation of oral historians, a cohort trained by members of the second and even third generations.<sup>2</sup> The differences among the generations are reflected in a host of ways, including not only how we practice oral history, but how we talk about it—as evidenced by the variety of papers we deliver at conferences and the ensuing discussions.<sup>3</sup> I can remember, for instance, an evaluation session at the end of an OHA conference some eight years ago where members of the first generation (defined by intellectual tradition as much as or more than chronology) could not comprehend the challenges posed to the concept of objectivity by papers of the second and third generation. And most recently, members of the second and even third generation have been lamenting how much difficulty they often have comprehending the language and high theory that marks the work of many fourth generation practitioners.

Nevertheless, what is so amazing and rewarding about the Oral History Association is the incredible mix that is to be found

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<sup>1</sup> David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998); Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne, 1995); "Problems and Perplexities in Women's Oral History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 3 (1998) (the three earlier issues were: 2, no. 2 [1977]; 7, no. 1 [1983]; 19, no. 2 [1998]).

<sup>2</sup> Dunaway and Baum, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 7–9.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of many of these differences, tensions, and shifts in the field, see Ronald J. Grele, "Directions for Oral History in the United States," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 62–84.

in our membership and in the papers delivered at our conferences—offering everyone something to which they can relate, yet at the same time providing an arena for dialogue among the generations of practitioners. And while “live and let live” has come to characterize some of the relationships between the generations—as can be seen in the predictable differences in the composition of the audience at different sessions at OHA conferences—there is also remarkable agreement on some issues of long-standing concern. For instance, despite the greater fascination and ease with which the later generations approach the application of new technologies, we still seem to share some common ethical concerns across the generations, as revealed in the recent discussions at the Buffalo OHA Annual Meeting on revising the standards, principles, and guidelines of the profession.

Each of the generations has very different origins, and the state of the field was not the same at our various entry points. I can remember, for instance, when I set out with my tape recorder in October 1972 to interview 104 year old suffragist Sylvia Thygeson, there were no guidelines for “doing” women’s oral history. And although gender did not enter into their considerations, the two page mimeographed set of Goals and Guidelines of the OHA, along with Baum’s pamphlet on *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, helped me to set my course. Of course, as someone trained originally in sociology by professors who came out of the “Chicago school,” I was familiar with the life history method.

In any event, the guidelines issued by various practitioners in this early period, only five years after the OHA was founded, reflected a kind of prescriptive certainty—as did mine, when I wrote my article on women’s oral history in 1977.<sup>4</sup> What perhaps distinguished our recommendations for women’s oral history from others was the attention paid to women’s everyday life. This meant not only interviewing “non-elite”—in contrast to the first generation’s heavy emphasis on the elite—but it meant exploring “the personal.” For feminists anchored in community projects and academia alike, this reflected our belief captured in the mantra of the period: “the personal is political.” As a result,

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<sup>4</sup> See Sherma Berger Gluck, “What’s So Special About Women: Women’s Oral History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 2, no. 2 (1977): 3–13.

it was not only who we interviewed, but the questions we asked that set us apart.

Furthermore, we viewed the oral history interview as an empowering process for interviewer and narrator alike. Because we were so busy developing our own “women’s oral history movement,” I don’t think we realized at the time that we were very much like other second generation historians who were not only carrying the banner of the “new social history” and changing historical practice, but were creating an “oral history movement.”<sup>5</sup> And although most of us still might testify to how our interviews validated life experiences of the “everywomen” we were interviewing, our naive faith in its empowering potential eventually gave way to a more critical analysis of the power dynamics inherent in the process.

Indeed, this critical stance, inspired and reinforced by the post-modernist spell under which many of us fell, as well as the focus on reflexivity encouraged by “the new anthropology,” led to more theorizing both about the interview process and the resultant product. And although oral narratives still were being presented as transparent by some practitioners, increasingly the later generations treated them as representations, or cultural constructions, that were influenced by a host of factors. This meant, among other things, taking the final step away from whatever semblance remained of the “myth of objectivity.” Instead, the focus shifted to subjectivity, to how memory was constructed, to the implications of our narrators’ and our various and shifting positionalities, to an appreciation of the interview as a linguistic and performative event, and finally, to the treatment of the oral history (narrative) as a text.

Although it sounds as if these shifts represent a linear development, as historians we know how artificial and misleading periodization is. While certain tendencies differentiate one generation of practitioners from another, drawing these with such broad strokes overstates the initial emphasis on objectivity, on the one hand, and the lack of earlier theorizing, on the other. Indeed, at the same time that some practitioners were attempting to justify the “objectivity” of the oral history process by applying conventional social science standards of reliability and validity, there

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this concept, see Grele, “Directions for Oral History in the U.S.”

were others who were urging more highly nuanced approaches for evaluating interviews.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, even as some members of the second generation called for more theorizing, most of us in the 1970s, and even into the early 1980s—at least among most feminist practitioners—were still caught up in a more uncritical celebratory mode.<sup>7</sup> It was not until well into the 1980s, and largely as a result of the writings of U.S. women of color and of the post-colonial theorists that we began to problematize the feminist mantle of “sisterhood” that earlier had promoted false universalisms.

Groundbreaking works that should have prompted more U.S. oral history practitioners of all stripes to pay closer attention to questions about memory and representation were largely ignored until more fertile ground enabled them to take root in the 1980s and 1990s. The growing interdisciplinarity of oral history, as well as the increased exposure to European writings contributed to considerably more theorizing.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, some of this theorizing resulted in the oral history becoming viewed and treated as merely a disembodied text. On the other hand, even if we resisted embracing this tendency whole-heartedly, it did help us to introduce much more complexity into our work and into the practical advice we gave others. As a result, the recent manual, Don Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History*, stands in sharp contrast to the ear-

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<sup>6</sup> See Alice Hoffman, “Reliability and Validity in Oral History,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 87–93 (originally published in *Today’s Speech* 22 [1974]). By contrast, see Ronald J. Grele, “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History,” in *Oral History Reader*, 38–49 (originally published in *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* [Chicago: Precedent, 1975]); Michael Frisch, “Oral History and Hard Times,” in *Oral History Reader*, 29–37 (originally published in *Red Buffalo* 1 [1972]); and Popular Memory Group’s (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, England), “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in R. Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982 [extracted in *Oral History Reader*, 75–86]).

<sup>7</sup> See the articles in the Women’s Oral History issues, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 2, no. 2 (1977), 19, no. 2 (1983).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, although Alessandro Portelli’s ideas, as elaborated in “What Makes Oral History Different” (reprinted in *Oral History Reader*), was first published in English in *History Workshop*, no. 12 (1982), it was not until it appeared in his book, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991) that his ideas gained wider acceptance. The *International Journal of Oral History* helped to introduce the work of the Europeans like Portelli and Luisa Passerini, but it did not have a very wide readership in the U.S. On the other hand, by the early 1990s, interdisciplinarity became firmly established, e.g., Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

lier highly prescriptive ones. His responses to a series of very down-to-earth questions lay out the range of thinking and options about the issues, reflecting much more interaction between the generations and a great deal of flexibility and change.

### **Where Are We Headed?**

Before conjecturing on where we seem to be heading in the new millennium, and perhaps as an introduction to that topic—we have to acknowledge the major turnaround in the acceptance of oral history in the historical profession. It is ironic that this acceptance has come just as we have forsaken the need to defend “objectivity” and have moved further away from positivism. Much credit for the increased acceptance goes to the hard work of the several past OHA presidents, but the process has been a dialectical one. A new generation has been using oral history in their doctoral research. In my own department, for instance, our three last hires—ranging in fields from Latin American history to U.S. Western history—all utilized oral history, as did a large proportion of the candidates for our recent positions. Another indicator of the fact that we have “arrived” is the understanding of why oral history does not fit the usual requirements of the Institutional Review Boards on Human Subjects.

It is not surprising that an increasing number of doctoral students are engaged in oral history, particularly since it has been incorporated into so much of the undergraduate curriculum, if nothing else as optional assignments or as historical literature. Nor should we be surprised that they are using it and theorizing about it in ways that sometimes seem quite foreign to the earlier generations of practitioners. What is more surprising is the growing popularity at the other end of the age spectrum, young school children, especially among populations with heavy minority enrollment. For many years the OHA has encouraged using oral history in secondary, and even middle schools, but we have not emphasized its utility and value for the earlier grades. Yet, teachers are becoming enthralled by this prospect. For instance, a third grade teacher in one of our Long Beach schools is using oral history to help his second generation Cambodian students who have been classified “limited English proficiency” access the core curriculum. In this context, oral history is a means of learning social

studies, being introduced to literature, and of gaining communication skills. Other teachers in the district are being encouraged to follow suit through a collaborative project between the university and the school district.

While these developments seem far removed from the intellectual debates among oral historians in academia, their implications for the new millennium may very well be more significant when it comes to thinking about future audiences and uses, including the application of new technologies. This generation of nascent oral historians, as well as those who Dunaway referred to as the fourth generation, are much more media oriented. As any of us who teach them can attest, they seem to respond, absorb, and be challenged more by visual images and sound than by the written word. As a result, the auralness of oral history will become increasingly important returning the “voice” of the interviewees, narrators, and oral biographers to center stage. Ironically, and as yet one more indication of just how flexible the boundary between generations of oral historians is, as early as 1977 Louis Starr rather presciently predicted just this aural orientation.<sup>9</sup>

Not only will oral/aural histories and accompanying visual imagery in CD-ROM programs like those produced by the American Social History project become more widely used, but the new technology will enable scholars to access original interview recordings with considerably greater ease.<sup>10</sup> Even if many of us have grave reservations right now about putting entire oral history recordings on the internet, I think we could agree to transfer them to CD-ROMs that could be loaned or even sold to users, with all the appropriate restrictions that we presently place on the use of transcripts. Oral history interviews on CD-ROM, accompanied by key word indexing, and coupled with the ability to download and then transcribe appropriate portions through voice recognition programs will make thumbing through and xeroxing transcripts seem quite tedious. While these developments probably are only the tip of the iceberg of the new technologies that can make oral

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<sup>9</sup> Louis Starr, “Oral History,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 39–61 (originally published in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services*, v. 20, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> American Social History Project, “Who Built America,” [CD-ROM] and the new “History Matters” program they are developing; also new software programs like DocuMat InterClipper™, which was demonstrated at the OHA Buffalo Conference.

histories more widely accessible, they represent a quantum leap from the *New York Times* 1976 microfilming project.

Significantly, these technological breakthroughs point to re-centering of the narrator's voice, perhaps providing a corrective to some of the more disembodied theoretical and literary treatments of oral history narratives. At the same time, they offer an opportunity for more complex exploration of how people construct their narratives. "Hearing" the silences and listening to intonation, pitch, and style of delivery adds an entirely new dimension to the sense we make of people's stories—a possibility until now explored mainly by those who, following Dennis Tedlock, have attempted to transform the spoken word into a free verse "score."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in hearing the interviewer as well as the narrator, their dynamics can also be grasped, including how each of their agendas and subjectivities interface, and their shifting power relations.

Lacking a crystal ball, I cannot predict what new turns theory will take, how our thinking about memory and language and narrative might change; but the fourth generation and the one to follow—like those Cambodian-American third graders—undoubtedly will think about and use oral history quite differently than their predecessors. Already, we are seeing serious efforts to integrate some of the valuable critical insights from postmodernism with the earlier political focus of writing more complex and richly layered histories. Insights from poststructuralist theorists may have helped us to understand the complexity of the power dynamic between interviewer and narrator and may have pointed us towards more complex analysis of oral history narratives (texts), but I believe that they also undermined some of the democratic impulses that marked oral history. As Gail Stearns suggests in the latest of the four women's oral history issues of *Frontiers*, even as we engage in reflexive analysis and comparison of the power relations between "ethnic, classed and gendered positions of researcher and subject," we must recognize the moral agency of *both* participants.<sup>12</sup>

I would expect that in the next millennium, as in the past

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<sup>11</sup> Dennis Tedlock, "Learning to Listen: Oral History as Poetry," in Ronald Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1991), 106–125.

<sup>12</sup> Gail J. Stearns, "Reflexivity and Moral Agency: Restoring the Possibility to Life History Research," *Frontiers* 19, no. 3 (1998): 58.

thirty some years since the founding of the OHA, the dialectical relationship between theorists and empiricists, between practitioners in the academy and in the community (not necessarily different people), between “techno-buffs” and “Luddites,” between long time oral historians and newer generations will continue to push the practice of oral history in exciting new directions. And although I might not have admitted this twenty-seven years ago when I first began my work in women’s oral history—a time when many of us of the second generation were busy distancing ourselves from the first—if we go back and re-read some of the early classics, we might very well find hints that the first generation of oral historians in the U.S. would have welcomed these new directions.

[www.oralhistory.infinity](http://www.oralhistory.infinity)

by Donald A. Ritchie

“Are you ready?” people ask repeatedly in a recent series of television commercials. This apocalyptic-sounding refrain turns out to advertise the leading manufacturer of network routers for the Internet. Ready or not, the ad implies, the future lies in digital electronic communications. If that is true, are oral historians ready?

It’s a fair question considering the steady procession of technology that made oral history possible. During this past century, sound recordings evolved from wax cylinders, aluminum disks, vinyl records, wire recorders, belt recorders, reel-to-reel tape recorders, and cassette recorders to digital audio tape recorders and camcorders. Each wave of technology produced less expensive, more portable means of recording, which in turn launched more projects and enabled more interviews to be conducted with a wider cross-section of people. Personal computers similarly facilitated the transcription and preservation of interviews. Now the Internet offers innovative opportunities for the mass distribution of oral history output.

To this succession of technological breakthroughs, oral histo-

rians have reacted with a mixture of eagerness and trepidation. New technology opens new possibilities and can reduce costs, unless a project has invested heavily in older equipment that it is reluctant to abandon. Learning how to operate and make maximum use of new apparatus can disrupt comfortable routines. Nor does new technology always represent progress. None of the successors to reel-to-reel magnetic tape recorders have performed as satisfactorily in terms of long-term audio archival preservation. It is safe to say that the needs of oral historians do not rank high among manufacturers' priorities.

Technological innovations have also required adjustment to the standards and principles by which oral historians operate. A decade ago when the Oral History Association sponsored a thorough overhaul of its *Evaluation Guidelines*, the process took two years and involved an array of committees reviewing every perceived aspect of the methodology. Despite intense scrutiny, few anticipated the suddenness of the digital electronic communications revolution, which has now spurred another revision of the guidelines.

In setting standards, oral historians always run the risk of elevating practice into principle. Some projects that initially could not afford costly transcription argued passionately for the preservation of high-quality sound recordings and extolled the "aural" nature of oral history. These worthwhile issues enriched the dialogue between practitioners but they also prevented some from admitting the value of transcription as it became more affordable. Other oral historians found that transcription greatly facilitated both research use and archival preservation, yet some pioneering projects so embraced transcription that they overlooked the value of the sound recording, arguing that corrections to the transcripts invalidated the tapes, and that allowing researchers to listen to them would violate the confidences of the interviewees. Back when tapes were pricey, they rerecorded over them once they had finished transcribing, and were slow to change even after it became affordable to preserve both the tape and transcript. Similar debates have raged between those who videotaped to capture the expressions of the speakers and to expand the documentary and exhibit uses of the interviews and those who feared that videotaping would interfere with the rapport necessary to conduct meaningful interviews.

The assertion that the future of oral history is digital will undoubtedly cheer some practitioners and distress others. Beyond its enormous potentials, the digital revolution will threaten financial and intellectual investments in technologies that are moving toward obsolescence. Just as some oral history archives possess recordings made on wire and belt recordings they can no longer play, magnetic tape recorders someday will no longer be manufactured, regardless of archival concerns about the potential shelf life of digital tape and CD-ROM recordings. The preservation of electronic data will be further complicated by fast-changing technology that will confront archives with periodic choices of converting older electronic records into new formats or preserving the relics on which they were originally recorded.

Most oral historians first approached personal computers as glorified typewriters. The benefits became obvious as transcribers discovered that they could work faster on computer, edit more easily, and no longer had to retype a second “clean” copy of the transcript after the editing. They could preserve transcripts on disk and reproduced them on demand. But a few visionaries grasped that the computer offered ways to bridge the gulf between the tape and the transcript. They could preserve spoken words, pictures, maps, and other illustrations on the same disk along with the printed transcript. In Alaska, “Project Jukebox” recorded oral histories with native Americans and other Alaskans on CD-ROM, combining interviews in native languages with English translations and appropriate illustrations. Books began to appear in electronic format, such as *Who Built America?* which blended the voices of interviewees together with music, pictures and text on CD-ROM.<sup>13</sup>

Then the addition of a modem made the personal computer a link to the world. An “information superhighway” carried vast amounts of digitized information across fiber-optic telecommunication circuits at rapid speed. The Cold War spawned the original computer network in 1969 when ARPANET first linked the Pentagon with contractors and universities working on defense projects. By the 1990s, the Internet had gone civilian and commercial, linking government, corporations, and universities, together

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<sup>13</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, Steve Brier, and Josh Brown, *Who Built America? From the Centennial Celebration of 1876 to the Great War of 1914* [CD-ROM] (Santa Monica: Voyager Company, 1993).

with millions of individuals in their own homes. The World Wide Web offered easy access to information on a global scale. Users could browse library catalogs, purchase an airline ticket, locate a restaurant review, or chat electronically with others of similar interests. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television networks established Web sites on which they posted up-to-the-minute news, feature articles, and entire programs. When I missed a friend's interview on National Public Radio promoting his new book, I found it the next day on the Internet, at <http://www.npr.org>, which played the seven-and-a-half-minute audio clip through my computer. Seeking to read the transcript of another author's interview on the C-SPAN program "Booknotes," I turned to <http://www.booknotes.org> to find it along with several hundred other author interviews.

If radio and television interviews are available online, what about oral history? A search on the Internet quickly locates oral history transcripts at various Web sites, among them several presidential libraries and the Washington Press Club Foundation's Women in Journalism Oral History Project (<http://www/npc/press/org.wpformal/ohhome>). Generally, these sites list all of the oral histories in the collection and include full texts of some, with biographical information about the interviewers and descriptions of the project's objectives. The Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives has posted an interview that I conducted for the Senate Historical Office with the veteran Washington news photographer George Tames, at <http://www.nara.gov/nara/legislative/sho.html>. One can also read the interviews that high school students in Kingstown, Rhode Island conducted about the tumultuous events of 1968: "The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History." Nearby Brown University's Scholarly Technology Group helped the students post their interview transcripts and audio recordings at <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968>.

Students have also shown creative research use of the Internet. As a judge at the National History Day finals, I reviewed a project on "Rosie the Riveter" of World War II fame. Since scholarly books and documentary films have dealt with the subject, I expected the students' work to be largely derivative. Instead, they offered a fresh and lively approach that drew from interviews with women war workers from across the country. How had they found so many Rosies? They had posted inquiries on the Internet

for information from other students whose grandmothers might have worked in a factory during the Second World War. Responses from the Internet gave them a national selection of candidates for telephone interviews.

That students tend to be more adventurous with new technology should come as no surprise. Many of them grew up in households where the computer was as much a part of daily life as the television. Their elementary and secondary schools provided computer education and their textbooks came equipped with CD-ROM supplements. Undergraduate and graduate students increasingly conduct their studies and do their research electronically. University archivists report that use of manuscript collections and other materials whose finding aids are available online far exceeds that of collections whose catalogs exist only on paper. A large proportion of younger adults now get their daily news more frequently from Internet sites than from newspapers or television. Even political candidates have started campaigning online to attract the next generation of voters.<sup>14</sup>

Not everyone has exhibited as much enthusiasm for the Internet. At the Oral History Association's annual meeting in Buffalo, New York, in 1998, a number of archivists raised reservations about putting interviews online, ranging from the need to protect interviewees' privacy to the danger of misuse and manipulation of sound recordings and transcripts, and the "unmonitored access" of the Internet which would result in a loss of archival control over the interviews. They questioned whether deeds of gift that had not anticipated electronic reproduction and distribution would permit the posting of interviews on the Internet without the express permission of the interviewees or their next of kin. Ethical questions of this nature have caused some oral history projects to hesitate going on the Web for fear of stepping into a minefield.

It is imperative that oral historians grapple with the ethical issue of the Internet and avoid exploitation of their interviewees. Projects may need to revise their deeds of gift and to notify living

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<sup>14</sup>For examples of finding aids online, see the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Research Center: <http://www.academic.marist.edu/fdr/>; Archives and Special Collections, Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries: <http://www.lib.uconn.edu/DoddCenter/ASC/ascbroc.html>.

interviewees before placing their interviews on the Internet (although it seems excessive to track down the next of kin, whose intentions may conflict with those of the interviewee). At the same time there is a danger of falling into the mode of thinking that Sinclair Lewis satirized in *Main Street*, when his idealistic heroine suggested to the town librarian that “the chief task of a librarian is to get people to read,” only to rebuffed with the argument that “the first duty of the *conscientious* librarian is to preserve the books.” Having talked earnestly about returning interviews to the community, we need to ask: what constitutes the boundaries of that community? How broadly or narrowly do we want to define our audience? Did interviewees expect their life stories to remain relatively unused except by the occasional scholar, or did they hope to leave something of themselves for posterity, where their memories might be published, exhibited, and otherwise not forgotten? Given the democratic impulses of the oral history movement, it seems contradictory for oral historians not to avail themselves of the most universal and cost-effective means of mass communication and dissemination of information ever devised.

Some oral historians have equated downloading an oral history with publishing it, and have decried the lack of explanatory context for the interview. But the Internet is a distributor rather than a publisher (Congress specifically defined it that way to protect it from libel suits), and oral history transcripts are raw data rather than books. In practice, the Internet has not proved conducive for reading book-length manuscripts, although publishers have begun advertising new books by posting first chapters on their Web sites. The Internet does best with screen-sized chunks of information. Exclusively online magazines like *Slate* and *Salon* feature short essays with eye-catching graphics. The ideal text for easy reading on a computer screen runs about the length of a newspaper column. Longer texts are available online—one can find the full version of the *Starr Report* and of entire books, from the Bible to *Moby Dick*. They are easy to scan by word and key phrase for ready reference, but awkward to read at length. The probability is that most interviews will attract researchers seeking to locate specific information instead of casual readers who will peruse the entire document.

Researchers who consult interview transcripts online will

want the product to resemble as much as possible the original document. Some of the early attempts at downloading oral histories did not include the original pagination. Although researchers can scan the text by word on the screen, they will need page numbers for their citations as well as to make use of the prepared indexes if they print out a copy of the interview. Oral historians themselves will use the Internet when doing the research needed to prepare for their interviews. The Internet can provide genealogical data, newspaper clippings, alumni news, and background material on the organizations and communities with which interviewees were associated, and even maps and driving directions to their homes.

Newer projects should build the Internet into the operating plans, fully informing participants of the project's intentions and of the interviewees' options, drafting deeds of gift that specifically permit digital electronic reproduction of the interviews, and preparing transcripts in formats convenient for downloading. For long-established oral history archives the task of digitizing a large collection might appear so daunting as to paralyze. A reasonable strategy would be to start by making finding aids available on the Internet. That will alert researchers as to what exists where. Since many interview transcripts are already available on microfilm or through interlibrary loan, researchers can obtain copies without traveling to distant collections. Projects can next turn to interviews already transcribed on disk, or scan older transcripts, and post a sample of their interviews to display the richness of the collection. Researchers will pay virtual visits to archives, searching the finding aides, reading transcripts, listening to some of the recordings, and consulting with the archivists electronically.

Looking ahead, computers will eventually transcribe our tapes, which will help to get older interviews online. Voice recognition and deciphering technology is already available, although difficult to use accurately with multiple speakers. The Internet will facilitate large data bases of oral history, with intricate cross-referencing and word searching capabilities along with linkage to specific archives and interview transcripts. Improved telecommunications may also boost distance interviewing. In the past telephone interviews have been less than satisfying because of the difficulty in building rapport when one is not present and maintaining eye contact. The merger of phone and computer systems

and more prevalent use of video phones may well prompt experiments in long-distance interviewing.

Keep in mind that digital electronic communication is ephemeral. Web sites keep permutating. Material that a researcher previously consulted may be reported “Not Found” on the next visit. So far, the Internet has shown little interest in archiving its vast store of material. During an encounter with an Internet producer for a television network doing some imaginative educational work connected with its news programs, the producer admitted that he had no idea whether his network was saving any of the material he was creating weekly, nor did he seem to care. Much will vanish through neglect. Some of the Web addresses listed here may have changed before this article appears in print. Only change is constant on the Internet. The World Wide Web will not replace oral history archives, which will continue to house the original records and preservation copies of tapes and transcripts. Instead it can extend archives’ user services from their immediate locations to the furthest reaches of the globe, and perhaps beyond. It can make the next generation of researchers far more aware of the panoramic scope of oral history conducted during the twentieth century, and keep them better apprised of the interviewing that continues in the twenty-first. Wider scrutiny could lead to increased peer review of interviews, with greater attention to issues of evidence and content, and even more rigorous methodological standards. The Internet is the new millennium for oral history. Are you ready?

## Oral History and the New Century

by Bret Eynon

Oral history has always been formed by interaction and change. Oral memoirs pivot upon a unique interaction between historian and historymaker. Changing or redefining the subject of history—integrating the actions, experiences, and ideas of “ordinary” women and men—is crucial to the attraction of oral history.

And the promise of oral history goes further, seeking to transform the relationship between historian and audience, looking for ways to make study of history more accessible, more engaging, and ultimately more participatory. For inherent to oral history are the democratic notions that everyone can be a historian; that memory is in itself a meaningful form of historical interpretation; and that, through oral history projects, students and others can make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the past.

As the twentieth century ends, new technology is emerging that may significantly enhance our ability to realize these aspects of oral history's promise. Our growing ability to digitize—and thereby control and transmit—information will affect many aspects of oral history in the century to come. Already, surveying the World Wide Web, we can see indicators of significant change that will greatly improve the accessibility, usability, and transparency of oral history collections; transform the use of oral history in teaching and learning processes; and spur our return to orality, to the fundamental core of oral history as process that involves speaking *and* listening. New technology is no panacea for oral historians (or anyone else). Many challenges will remain and new ones will emerge, some directly related to technology itself. But digital media is providing us with new tools that will affect the ways we do—and think about—our work.

### **Let A Thousand Flowers Bloom**

The first signs of the changes taking place in oral history are already visible on the World Wide Web. An examination of web sites related to oral history reveals some interesting ways we are utilizing new digital technology. There is no consensus on the best way for oral historians to use the Web. As a field, we are still figuring this out. But important trends are already visible.

Most oral history-related web sites are created by established archives and provide lists of the memoirs archived by the institution. There are literally thousands of such sites, ranging from Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University to the U.S. Naval Institute Oral History Project. One elaborate site, the Chicago Architects Oral History Project site, constructed by the Art Institute of Chicago, offers for each respondent a photograph, a biographical summary, lists of interview highlights and related interviews,

and a one-paragraph transcript excerpt. A master index can be searched and transcripts can be ordered online. While limited in scope, such sites make it much easier for users, working from home or school, to quickly assess the quality and relevance of the collection.

Other web sites go further to provide larger transcript excerpts. Probably the richest transcript site is the American Memory Collection, created by the Library of Congress, which presents tens of thousands of items, from George Washington's papers to historic baseball cards. Among its most used collections are the transcripts and notes from more than 2,900 oral narratives created by the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s, addressing work and family, memories of slavery and immigration, and stories about local history. Though constrained in various ways, these narratives provide abundant opportunities to examine the nation's collective memories; on-line presentation opens the collection to teachers, students, and the public, as well as to scholars. The size of the collection is exciting and daunting. Fortunately, the collection's search engine allows Boolean searches across all the transcripts. For example, if you are researching sharecropping, a search can quickly find (and take you to) every mention of sharecropping in every transcript. The computer's ability to quickly analyze digitized text can significantly speed the research process, allowing users to deal more effectively with the collection's massive size.

Few archives can match the Library of Congress, but some have started the process of digitizing and web-publishing. The University of Florida Oral History Program web site offers excerpts from transcripts focusing on the Seminole Indians and the Florida activities of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Out of 200 interviews conducted on the Seminoles, the site provides seven page transcript excerpts for each of five interviews. The Oral History Office of the Sacramento Air Logistics Center provides complete transcripts of half a dozen interviews. As archives add electronic avenues to traditional routes, access to oral memoirs will expand, encouraging the growth of the field.

Other sites use the Web differently. The Women's Center at Virginia Technological University has created a small but fascinating site on the Black Women at Virginia Tech History Project, tracing the 1960s experiences of the university's first African

American female students. For each interview, the Center has published yearbook photographs, family snapshots, period newspaper articles, and papers and letters written by the women at the time. A timeline places the narratives in a chronological framework. Similarly, the Hoover Dam Visitor Center site contextualizes its transcript excerpts from interviews with workers who built the dam by providing photographs of the workers and the dam, background on the construction process, and a virtual tour of the dam today. Given the particular nature of oral memoirs, the ability to link transcripts to contextual information can be vital in helping users situate and analyze the interviews.

Both the American Memory Collection and the Black Women at Virginia Tech site help us see how technology can do more than provide increased access to oral memoirs. Using the search engine provided by American Memory—or even the “Find” function provided by Netscape or Internet Explorer—not only helps researchers to find what they are looking for; it also allows researchers to examine patterns of word usage and language formation within and across interviews. Enabling scholars to more easily consider who uses certain words and in what situations and in what ways, the supple search tools provided by digital technology can clarify the extent to which oral memoirs are not merely data (or evidence) but also databases. And while technology can be used in this way to get inside an oral memoir—what could be called a “micro” usage—it can also be used to draw “macro” connections to broader issues and other relevant sources. The promise of the electronic environment, in this case, is that it can facilitate both the “micro” and the “macro,” without threatening the integrity of the oral history archive itself.

### **You Must Be Made to Wear Earphones**

As we move from web-published finding aids to transcripts, search engines, and contextual information, the amount of labor and the degree of technical difficulty required goes up; and, not surprisingly, the number of Web sites goes down. The next category—offering interviews in audio form over the Web—is significantly more demanding and more rare.

One Web site for audio presentation of oral memoirs is *History Matters*, constructed by my organization, the American

Social History Project of City University of New York. History Matters offers approximately sixty audio excerpts (and related transcripts), most of them five to ten minutes in length. Unlike most sites, which are created by archives and present only their own collections, History Matters assembles material contributed by scholars nationwide and organizes it for classroom use. In addition to oral histories, the site includes other primary documents, classroom lesson plans, links to related sites, and on-line discussions of topics in history teaching. The material is organized to fit with the chronological framework of the U.S. History survey, and is searchable by theme and document type.

(History Matters is closely tied to ASHP's *Who Built America?* CD-ROM, which presented oral histories, archival songs and speeches, photographs, and other primary documents. CD-ROMs offer a more contained but reliable way to present digitized audio material, and some oral history archives are exploring ways to use this medium as well as the Web. A new audio CD, *Stories from the Collection*, created by the Columbia Oral History Research Office, provides excerpts from sixteen interviews.)

Other Web sites offering digitized audio include the Archives of the Billy Graham Center of Wheaton College, which documents the lives of evangelical Protestant missionaries, providing fifty full interview transcripts and ten audio excerpts. The website of Voice & Visions: Holocaust Survivors Oral Histories provides audio excerpts of interviews with a dozen concentration camp survivors. The Journal of MultiMedia History Web site demonstrates another approach, in which audio excerpts of oral memoirs are integrated into a scholarly article. In the first issue, an article by Thomas Kriger traces the story of a 1939 strike by dairy workers of New York State and features a dozen audio excerpts, which function both as supporting footnotes and as audio illustrations.

Listening to audio excerpts on the Web or CD-ROM has its problems. On the Web, audio is often slow to download. And various sites use different software, requiring users to invest additional time downloading the software itself. Downloading the audio excerpts can be frustrating; if the software is not working right, you wind up at a screen that says "Sound File Invalid." Audio publishing on the Web is new, and there is work to be done to smooth the process. CD-ROMs tend to be easier to use, but problems are not uncommon.

That said, when the software works right, the results can be transformative. One oral memoir on *History Matters* is the narrative of William Brown, who recalls what it was like growing up black in the South at the turn of the century. Interviewed by Charles Hardy, he tells the story of a lynching of a local man that took place when he was five years old, and recalls how the smell of burning flesh spread for miles. His printed words are powerful. But hearing his voice, listening to him struggle for the right words, hearing him move in his chair and slap the table in anger as he recalls his feelings of that day, adds layers of meaning to the story. The same is true for listening to the lilt and the relief of Shari Weiss' voice (on *Voices and Visions*) as she recalls her first sight of the American soldiers, the "beautiful, *beautiful* young men in uniform, on tanks," who liberated her from Auschwitz. And true as well for hearing the mix of strength and pain in the voice of Mary Thomas as she recalls her efforts to fill the rifles of the striking miners fighting for their lives at Ludlow, Colorado in 1914.

The oral quality of oral memoirs is, in many ways, essential to their meaning. In conversations and in interviews, we convey meaning with pitch and tone of voice, giving cues both subtle and obvious to our listeners. Pacing and pauses, volume and inflection, pronunciation of words and sounds that are not even words—coughs, sighs, exhalations, and moans—all give nuance and depth to the choice of words themselves. Some speakers are almost singers, playing their voices as instruments. Transcription, no matter how skillful, inevitably flattens the spoken quality of oral memoirs. Reading a transcript and listening to the interview are vastly different experiences. While not the same as witnessing the original interview, listening to a recording connects us to the speaker both affectively and cognitively, facilitating empathy and deepening our understanding.

Oral historians have, of course, long discussed the relationship of audio and text, and the difficulty of providing broad access to audio recordings. For the most part, the audio record has been confined to archives, or to brief excerpts available through radio and film documentaries. Now, through the Web and CD-ROM, it is increasingly feasible to offer the audio record to millions of people, to anyone with even modest access to computer technology. Ironically, in this case technology, instead of distancing us,

can help us get closer to the real human interaction at the heart of oral history.

The Web and CD-ROM not only make longer audio recordings more widely available. These media also make it easier to connect audio with text, including transcripts, scholarly commentary, and related primary documents. Comparing the written and audio versions of an oral memoir is a rich exercise in understanding the process of transcription, the kinds of choices made by transcribers and editors, and the complex relationship between written and spoken language. Juxtaposing the print and audio formats encourages deeper understanding of the memoir than utilizing either format by itself. Examining such juxtapositions has been largely limited to special sessions at scholarly events. The *Journal of MultiMedia History* suggests the possibility of making that experience integral to scholarly presentation. And sites such as *History Matters* open the experience to students and the public, offering the possibility of making it a common step in developing a clearer understanding of the nature of oral memoirs.

### **Everyone A Historian**

Over the past three decades, oral history has lent itself to thousands of classroom projects, where students conduct interviews and develop their understandings of the historians' craft. Digital technology opens new possibilities in this area. In the past two years the software for creating Web sites has grown easier to use, and this trend will continue. It is increasingly feasible for students to construct their own oral history Web sites and share their projects with the world.

One of the most impressive student-constructed oral history sites is "1968: The Whole World Was Watching," produced by the students of South Kingston High School, with help from the Brown University Scholarly Technology Group. In the spring of 1998, guided by librarian Linda Wood and English teacher Sharon Schmid, students asked thirty local residents for their memories of the 1960s in general and 1968 in particular. Their well-organized Web site presents these interviews in their entirety, both in transcript and audio format. The site also offers a detailed index of each interview, hotlinked to the relevant sections of the transcript. The user can easily compare the audio and textual ver-

sions of the interview and trace the process of transcription, editing, and selection. Finally, students wrote “stories” based on the interviews, summaries which assemble selected interview excerpts into cohesive and well-framed narratives.

The “1968” site also offers other valuable hypertext features. At the end of each transcript is a list of vocabulary words, such as “sit-in,” or “teach-in” or “Woodstock.” Clicking on the word takes the user to a glossary where the reference is explained. A timeline provides a chronological framework; some items are hotlinked to other sites. For example, clicking on the timeline item of Lyndon Johnson’s January 17, 1968 State of the Union speech takes the reader to the text of that speech, on the Web site of the LBJ Presidential Library. Together, the timeline and the glossary provide a contextual framework for understanding the memoirs.

Presenting the interviews in different formats, with contextual information, makes them more accessible and useful; it also makes the process more transparent to outside readers. And the hypertext quality of the Web makes navigation between different elements quicker and easier. Web publishing also makes the project accessible to the whole field—and to other students. When South Kingston students discussed this project at this year’s OHA convention, they highlighted the excitement of publishing their work on the Web, and the ways that having a global audience made their work feel particularly meaningful.

The number of student-created oral history archives available on the Web is slowly growing. The South Kingston site is exceptional, but other sites are interesting as well. The Miami Valley Cultural Heritage Project, created by Miami University of Ohio professor Marjorie McClellan, offers student-generated interviews on women’s history, the steel industry, and local history topics. The Behind the Veil site, created by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, offers interview transcripts generated in student projects on African American history. Interviews at all student sites are uneven, as one would expect. But they are impressive in many ways, and point towards future possibilities for training students and sharing their research with a broader audience. If such projects flourish, they will significantly increase students’ ability to contribute to the on-going construction of a new, more multivocal narrative of American history.

### **Many Rivers to Cross**

These Web-based projects suggest ways that our use of digital technology may change our field. Utilizing the Web to publish transcripts could feed growing interest in oral memoirs and attract new users. Drawing on the multimedia capacities of the new technology to provide audio access to digitized interviews can help bring oral history back to its roots in spoken language. The constructive aspect of the Web should facilitate the visibility and value of student oral history projects, allowing oral history to better realize its democratic promise. At the same time, however, oral historians will face many challenges in the coming century, including some generated by new technology.

One limitation of oral history has been its labor-intensive quality. Generating and recording quality interviews is, in some ways, the easiest step in an oral history project. Transcribing, checking, and indexing are incredibly time-consuming and/or expensive. Many oral history projects have foundered on this rock. And the process of publishing interviews on the Web or on CD-ROM can multiply the amount of time and energy involved. Moreover, the new technology itself can be expensive. Impressive school-based projects such as the "1968" site usually require the involvement of an outside university or cultural institution, providing funds and expertise. Voice-recognition and audio-indexing software now becoming available may soon facilitate or greatly reduce the need for transcription, and further the trend towards audio presentation. But the issues of time and expense are likely to remain, if not grow in size.

Another major challenge is the question of appropriate access. Archivists are struggling with what transcripts they should publish on the Web. Permissions for most existing collections do not address the issue of Web publishing. And archivists are justifiably concerned about losing control of their collections; once an interview is published online, the archive loses any ability to control its use. The spread of digital technology is forcing archives to rethink their role and function, and to confront difficult questions of security, protection, and accessibility.

The closely related issue of reliability confronts those who use the Web to study oral memoirs. The increasing ease of Web publishing is a double-edged sword. It encourages a free flow of

information, always valuable to a democratic society. But it also highlights questions about accuracy. Scholars have traditionally relied on archivists and publishers to serve as gatekeepers; now the gates they control are less vital. While most oral history sites are still posted by archives, the possibility for flawed or even counterfeit sites is undeniable. Those who use oral memoirs from the Web must carefully evaluate who created the site and their point of view. Developing critical thinking skills is important for any use of the Web. Happily, oral historians are no stranger to the issues of subjectivity, critical thinking, and the evaluation of sources. In this sense, the challenges long confronted by oral historians may be particularly relevant for the emerging issues of the coming decades.

This highlights another problem for the field: the on-going need for sophisticated training. Since the 1980s, American oral historians have become increasingly aware of the theoretical questions and approaches modeled by European scholars. Raising questions about narrative, identity, and historical memory, Ronald Grele, Michael Frisch and others have deepened our thinking about the nature of oral memoirs. But many practitioners have had limited exposure to this sophisticated discussion. The “how to do oral history” guides now published on the Web, while valuable, are in themselves not sufficient. There is a great need for training in oral history theory and methodology; and if technology spurs the growth of the field, the need will only increase.

This last point reminds us of an obvious but fundamental truth that may be reassuring or troubling, depending on your point of view. No matter how the technology evolves, the human element will remain crucial to the future of our field. Digital technology may provide us with tools that can help us build our field, transform our representational craft, and move toward our vision of a democratic practice. Ultimately, however, the impact of the technology—and the vitality and direction of our field in the twenty-first century—will depend on us.

### **A sampling of oral history related Web sites, including those discussed in this article**

About Re: Vietnam—Stories Since the War

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/stories/vietnam/about.html>

AIC: Chicago Architects Oral History: Edward C. Bassett  
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/deptarchitecture/bassett.html>

A Marple Family Web site to Encourage Oral History Interviews and Written  
<http://www.marple.com>

American Communities: An Oral History  
<http://www.duke.edu/web/hst195.15/>

Behind the Veil—Home Page  
<http://www-cds.aas.duke.edu/btv/>

Billy Graham Center Archives Home Page  
<http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/archhp1.html>

Black Women's Oral History Project home page  
<http://scholar2.lib.vt.edu/spec/bwhp/bwhproj.htm>

Center for Oral History, University of Connecticut  
<http://www.oralhistory.uconn.edu>

Center for Oral History, University of Hawai'i  
[http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/oral\\_hist/index.html](http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/oral_hist/index.html)

Historic Ferry Yankee  
<http://historicferryyankee.com/Defaulta.htm>

History Matters: Browse Many Past  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browsemp.html>

Hogan Jazz Archive  
<http://www.tulane.edu/~lmiller/OralHistory.html>

Hoover Dam Visitor Center  
<http://www.hooverdam.com/service/index.html>

James Cook University Archives Oral History  
<http://www.jcu.edu.au/gen/Archivist/oral.html>

Japanese American National Museum: Life History Program  
<http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/janm/lifehist/index.html>

Journal for MultiMedia History—Volume 1 Number 1 Contents Page  
<http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/>

Junior Historians Doing Oral Histories  
<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/tesol/tesoljournal/juniorhi.html>

Mamie Ella—An Oral History  
<http://www.dmgi.com/mamiella.html>

**Miami Valley Cultural Heritage Project**

<http://www.muohio.edu/~oralhxcwis/index.htmlx>

**Oral History Index**

<http://www.vcmha.org/oralhist.html>

**Oral History Internet Resources**

<http://scnc.leslie.k12.mi.us/~charnle2/ohlinks.html>

**RRLC: Guidelines for Oral History Interviews**

<http://www.rric.org/hrac/oralhis.html>

**Sacramento ALC Office of History WWW Home Page**

<http://www.mcclellan.af.mil/HO/ho-hmpg.html>

**Searchlight Battalion—Memories**

<http://www.strandlab.com/225thsb/memories.html>

**The Whole World Was Watching**

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/>

**UF Oral History**

<http://web.history.ufl.edu/oral/>

**University of New Mexico Archives Oral History Collection**

<http://www.unm.edu/~unmarchv/oralhist.html>

**Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project**

<http://www.vietvet.org/vethist.htm>

**Voices from the Thirties: Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project**

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/exhome.html>

**Voices.html**

<http://hs1.hst.msu.edu/~history/faculty/hnetgrants/voices.html>