Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History[1]

By Alistair Thomson

Abstract This paper reviews critical developments in the international history of oral history and outlines four paradigmatic revolutions in theory and practice: the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for 'people's history'; the development, from the late 1970s, of 'post-positivist' approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts are reflections upon four factors that have impacted oral history and, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory; the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory; and the evolving internationalism of oral history.

Keywords: oral history, memory, subjectivity, interdisciplinarity, internationalism

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[1] This essay derives from research conducted by myself and Rob Perks in our development of a second edition of *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

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The theory and practice of oral history has changed profoundly since its post-World War II origins, and these changes have paralleled—and influenced—wider historiographical and methodological shifts. Our work as oral historians today can be explained and enhanced by awareness of the history of our field and of the forces that have shaped its development.

This essay reviews critical developments in the history of oral history and outlines four paradigm[2] transformations in theory and practice: the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for 'people's history'; the development, from the late 1970s, of 'post-positivist' approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts are reflections upon four factors that have impacted oral history and, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory; the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory; and the evolving internationalism of oral history. I do not attempt to survey the distinctive national or regional histories of oral history, which are readily available in other publications.[3] Although the points of genesis and patterns of development for oral history have varied from one country to another, particular social and intellectual forces have shaped contemporary approaches to oral history and have influenced oral historians around the world.

[2] The physicist Thomas Kuhn popularized the idea of paradigm change in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Kuhn was also a pioneering oral historian of American science: see Ronald E. Doel, "Oral History of American Science: A Forty-Year Review," *History of Science* 41, no. 134 (December 2003): 349–78.

[3] See Paul Thompson, "Historians and Oral History," in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25–82; Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19–46.

Oral History and People's History: The Renaissance of Memory as an Historical Source

The first paradigm transformation—and the genesis of contemporary oral history—was the post-World War II renaissance in the use of memory as a source for historical research. Paul Thompson, among others, charts the prehistory of the modern oral history movement, explaining that historians from ancient times relied upon eyewitness accounts of significant events, until the nineteenth-century development of an academic history discipline led to the primacy of archival research and documentary sources, and a marginalization of oral evidence.[4] Gradual acceptance of the usefulness and validity of oral evidence, and the increasing availability of portable tape recorders, underpinned the development of oral history after the Second World War. The timing and pattern of this emergence differed markedly around the world. For example, the first organized oral history project was initiated by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in New York in 1948, and his interest in archival recordings with white male elites was representative of early oral history activity in the United States. In Britain in the 1950s and 1960s oral history pioneers were more interested in recording the experiences of so-called "ordinary" working people and had initial links with folklore studies;[5] George Ewart Evans, for example, famously determined to "ask the fellows who cut

[4] Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 25–81.

[5] The relationship between folklore studies and oral history has varied in different parts of the world. In England, despite initial links, oral history and folklore studies tended to travel different paths; Paul Thompson argues that English folklore studies "never escaped from the stigma of amateurism" (Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 71–2). A shared interest in aurality—fuelled by digital technologies, may be bringing the two fields closer again (see Rob Perks and Jonnie Robinson, "'The way we speak': web-based representations of changing communities in England," *Oral History* 33, no. 2 (2005): 79–90). The nationalist politics of Britain's Celtic nations—Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—have forged closer relationships between folklore studies and oral history, and in Scandinavia folklore studies has had a profound impact upon the development of oral history. Studies of memory and 'oral tradition' in non-Western societies and indigenous cultures have also made important contributions to our understanding of the nature and meaning of oral history accounts. See: Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Joseph Calder Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts* (London: Routledge, 1991); Isabel Hofmeyer, "*We spend our*

hay."[6] The lived experience of working class, women's or black history was undocumented or ill-recorded and oral history was an essential source for the "history from below" fostered by politically-committed social historians in Britain and around the world from the 1960s onwards.

Paul Thompson, a social historian at the University of Essex, played a leading role in the creation of the British Oral History Society in the early 1970s and the subsequent development of an international oral history movement from the end of that decade. His pioneering book, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, became a standard textbook—and a standard-bearer—for oral historians around the world when it was first published in 1978.[7] Thompson sought to defend oral history against critics who claimed that memory was an unreliable historical source, and determined to prove the legitimacy and value of the approach. As a socialist, he was committed to a history which drew upon the words and experiences of working-class people, and argued that oral history was transforming both the content of history—"by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored"—and the processes of writing history, breaking "through the boundaries between the educational institution and the world, between the professional and the ordinary public."[8] For many oral historians, recording experiences which have been ignored in history and involving

years as a tale that is told": Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom (London: James Currey, 1993); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan, eds., *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001); Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, eds., *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

[6] George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (London: Faber, 1956).

[7] Subsequent editions published in 1988 and 2000 expanded the initial chapters about the history and achievements of oral history, and explored new thinking about memory, subjectivity and psychoanalysis.

[8] Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 8–12.

people in exploring and making their own histories, continue to be primary justifications for the use of oral history.[9] For example, Susan Armitage and Sherna Gluck argue that oral history retains an urgent political importance in many parts of the world where women's oppression is reinforced by the silencing of women's voices and histories.[10] And in many countries oral history has developed powerful roots outside higher education, in schools, community projects and reminiscence work.[11]

Post-Positivist Approaches to Memory and Subjectivity

The second paradigm shift in oral history was, in part, a response to positivist critics—for the most part traditional documentary historians of a conservative political persuasion—who feared the politics of people's history and who targeted the "unreliability" of memory as its weakness.[12] At the core of criticisms of oral history in the early 1970s was the assertion that memory was distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, by the personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past. For example, the Australian historian Patrick O'Farrell wrote in 1979 that oral history was moving into "the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity . . . And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into

[9] A recent example of how oral history continues to be used to recover hidden histories—as noted in a series of reviews in the June 2001 issue of the *American Historical Review*—is the use of oral history to recover African experiences of and perspectives on the First World War: Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999); Ashley Jackson, *Botswana 1939–1945: An African Country at War* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1999); Melvin E. Page, *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War* (Boulder: Westview, 2000).

[10] Susan H. Armitage and Sherna B. Gluck, "Reflections on Women's Oral History: An Exchange," *Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 3 (1998): 1–11.

[11] Joana Bornat, "Oral History as a Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People," *Oral History* 17, no. 2 (1989): 17.

[12] Among early critics were: William Cutler III, "Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, no. 3 (1970): 1–7; Barbara Tuchman, "Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant," *Radcliffe Quarterly*, no. 56 (1972): 9–10; Enoch Powell, "Old men forget," *The Times*, November 5, 1981. For a critique from the Left of oral historians' naïve use of memory see Eric Hobsbawm, "On History From Below," in *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 266–286 (written in 1985 and first published in 1988).

myth."[13] Goaded by these critics, early oral historians developed their own handbook guidelines to assess the reliability of oral memory (while shrewdly reminding the traditionalists that documentary sources—many of which were created as records of spoken events—were no less selective and biased). From social psychology and anthropology they showed how to determine the bias and fabulation of memory, the significance of retrospection and the effects of the interviewer upon remembering. From sociology they adopted methods of representative sampling, and from documentary history they brought rules for checking the reliability and internal consistency of their sources. These guidelines provided useful signposts for reading memories and for combining them with other historical sources to find out what happened in the past.[14]

In the late 1970s imaginative oral historians turned these criticisms on their head and argued that the so-called unreliability of memory was also its strength, and that the subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory. For example, Luisa Passerini's study of Italian memories of interwar fascism highlighted the role of subjectivity in history—the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered— and showed how the influences of public culture and ideology upon individual memory might be revealed in the silences, discrepancies and idiosyncrasies of personal testimony.[15] Also writing in the 1970s, North American oral historian Michael Frisch argued against the attitude that oral history provided "a pure sense of how it 'really' was," and asserted that memory—"personal and historical, individual and generational"—should be moved to

[13] Patrick O'Farrell, "Oral History: Facts and Fiction," *Oral History Association of Australia Journal,* no. 5 (1982–83): 3–9 (Previously published in *Quadrant,* November 1979).

[14] See, for example, the first 1978 edition of Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* for a defense of oral history in these terms.

[15] Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop*, no. 8 (1979): 82–108.

center stage "as the object, not merely the method, of oral history." Used in this way, oral history could be "a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them."[16] Memory thus became the subject as well as the source of oral history, and oral historians began to use an exhilarating array of approaches—linguistic, narrative, cultural, psychoanalytic and ethnographic—in their analysis and use of oral history interviews.

The work of Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli exemplifies the second paradigm shift in approaches to memory and oral history. In "What Makes Oral History Different," first published in 1979, Portelli challenged the critics of "unreliable memory" head-on by arguing that "the peculiarities of oral history"—orality, narrative form, subjectivity, the 'different credibility' of memory, and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee—should be considered as strengths rather than as weaknesses, a resource rather than a problem. Portelli, perhaps the most influential writer about oral history and memory, has since demonstrated these strengths in a series of outstandingly imaginative oral history studies.[17]

Though conservative historians were the most vocal critics of oral history in the 1970s, oral history was also challenged from the Left. In the late 1970s and early 1980s some socialist

[16] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 188 (from his article "Oral history and *Hard Times:* A Review Essay," first published in 1972). See also, Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch and Paula Hamilton, "The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives," *Oral History* 22, no. 2 (1994): 33–43. Ron Grele was another notable North America critic of oral history's theoretical naivety in the 1970s who suggested new ways of working with memory. See Ronald Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

[17] Portelli's seminal work includes: *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); *The Order Has been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). See also, the special section on "History, Memory and the Work of Alessandro Portelli" in the *Oral History Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 1–34.

historians were particularly critical of the notion that the method of oral history was necessarily radical and democratic. Luisa Passerini cautioned against the "facile democratization" and "complacent populism" of oral history projects which encouraged members of oppressed groups to "speak for themselves" but which did not see how memories might be influenced by dominant histories and thus require critical interpretation.[18] At the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, the Popular Memory Group developed a similar critique of British oral history in their writings about "popular memory." The Group situated academic and other historical practices within the much wider process of "the social production of memory," and argued that public struggles over the construction of the past are profoundly significant both in contemporary politics and for individual remembering. For example, oral history as used within the community and women's history movements could be a significant resource for making more democratic and transformative histories, and might in turn enable people to tell stories that had been silenced because they did not match the dominant cultural memory.[19] Yet the Popular Memory Group concluded that this radical potential was often undermined by superficial understandings of the connections in oral testimony between individual and social memory and between past and present, and by the unequal relationships between professional historians and other participants in oral history projects.

These arguments overlap with two interconnected concerns that continue to trouble some oral historians: that the increasing

[18] Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," 84. Michael Frisch also criticized the populist 'no history' approach to oral history in "Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay." Louise Tilly criticized oral historians' atheoretical and individualist tendencies, though from a more conventional academic standpoint, in her article, "People's History and Social Science History," *Social Science History* 7, no. 4 (1983): 457–74, reprinted with responses from leading oral historians in the *International Journal of Oral History* 6, no. 2 (1985): 5–46. For a comparable and contemporary Australian critique see John Murphy, "The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory," *Historical Studies* 22, no. 87 (1986): 157–75.

[19] Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 206–20. A contemporary overview of oral history's radical potential is provided in the introduction to James R. Green, "Engaging in People's History: The Massachusetts History Workshop," in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 337–59.

theoretical sophistication of academic oral history is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside the academy, for example those working in schools, community projects and the media, and that our interviewees may be bewildered by the deconstruction of their memories.[20] A reflective, critical approach to memory and history undoubtedly makes for better oral history—as Linda Shopes has argued recently in the context of community history—yet at the same time oral historians who are committed to a dialogue with their interviewees and a wider public audience need to write and speak in terms that make accessible sense.[21] Oral historians are sometimes better at this dialogue than other academic theorists: because unlike much social science research we rarely anonymize interviewees (who usually want their stories to be part of history and their names on the record); because we hope that our interviewees will understand what we write and say about their lives; and because memory is an intriguing, universal topic that can be written about in ways that will interest most people.

Oral History and Political Memory Work in a Biographical Era

The Popular Memory Group's writing highlighted the political possibilities and contradictions for oral history projects which have a radical agenda.[22] Yet in the early 1980s the political scope and impact of oral history and memory work was still comparatively limited. Since then memory has come to be used for advocacy and empowerment in an increasingly diverse range of contexts: intergenerational oral history projects with elders[23] and

[20] See Armitage and Gluck, "Reflections on Women's Oral History"; Perry K. Blatz, "Craftsmanship and Flexibility in Oral History: A Pluralistic Approach to Methodology and Theory," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 4 (1990): 7–22.

[21] Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes and Possibilities," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 588–98.

[22] For a critique of the Popular Memory Group, see Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

[23] See Joanna Bornat, ed., *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994); Barbara K. Haight and Jeffrey D. Webster, eds., *The Art and Science of Reminiscing: Theory, Research, Methods and Applications* (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Jane Lawrence and Jane Mace, *Remembering in Groups: Ideas From Reminiscence and Literacy Groups* (London: Oral History Society, 1980); Mary Breen and David Sobel, *Popular Oral History and Literacy* (Toronto: Storylinks, 1991).

young people;[24] health, social care and development work;[25] community-based projects with marginalized groups such as the homeless and refugees;[26] and the use of testimony in legal and political processes related to indigenous people's rights and restitution, post-conflict resolution and national truth and reconciliation.[27] Indeed, though oral history has often played a significant role within such projects, commentators such as Fuyuki Kurusawa

[24] On oral history in schools see: Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling, eds., *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Publishers, 2006); Donald A. Ritchie, "Teaching Oral History," in *Doing Oral History*, 188–221; Glenn Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards Through Oral History* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004); Dora Schwarzstein, *Una Introducción al Uso de la Historia Oral en el Aula* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001); Allan Redfern, *Talking in Class: Oral History and the National Curriculum* (Colchester: Oral History Society, 1996); "Practice and Pedagogy: Oral History in the Classroom," eds. Charles R. Lee and Kathryn L. Nasstrom, special issue, *Oral History Review* 25, nos. 1–2 (1998); "Oral History and the National Curriculum," special issue, *Oral History* 20, no. 1 (1992); "Oral History, Children and Schools," special issue, *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 8 (1986); Patrick Hagopian, "Voices from Vietnam: Veterans' Oral Histories in the Classroom," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 593–601.

[25] See Joanna Bornat, Rob Perks, Paul Thompson and Jan Walmsley, eds., *Oral History, Health and Welfare* (London: Routledge, 2000); Ruth R. Martin, *Oral History in Social Work* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1995); "Health and Welfare," special issue, *Oral History* 23, no. 1 (1995). On development work see Hugo Slim and Paul Thomson, eds., *Listening For a Change: Oral History and Development* (London: Panos, 1993); Olivia Bennett, "Review article: Oral Testimony as a Tool for Overseas Development," *Oral History* 23, no. 1 (1995): 89–92; Mark Riley, "'Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay': Farm Practices, Oral History and Nature Conservation," *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 45–53; Christine Landorf, "A Sense of Identity and A Sense of Place: Oral History and Preserving the Past in the Mining Community of Broken Hill," *Oral History* 28, no. 1 (2000): 91–102.

[26] Daniel Kerr, "'We Know What the Problem Is': Using Video and Radio Oral History to Develop Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 27–45.

[27] On the use of personal testimony in quasi-legal contexts see: Marie-Bénédicte Dembour and Emily Haslam, "Silenced hearings? Victim-witnesses at war crimes tribunals," *European Journal of International Law* 15, no. 1 (2004): 151–177; Alessandro Portelli, "The Oral Shape of the Law: The 'April 7 Case,'" in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 241–69. On truth commissions see: Deborah Levenson, "The Past Can Be An Open Question: Oral History, Memory and Violence in Guatemala," *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, n.s. 2, no. 2 (2004): 23–29; Kenneth Christie, *The South Africa Truth Commission* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000); Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, "Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa," in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89–99; Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull:*

argue that memory and testimony have become critical constituents of a more general "witnessing fever" in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in which "bearing witness" is "a mode of ethico-political practice."[28] Several factors have contributed to the development of our biographical era. The catastrophic violence of the twentieth century generated a culture of symbolic and material claims by individual and collective victims of immense suffering. A post-Freudian acceptance that talking about one's life could have positive, therapeutic benefits has encouraged remembering for recognition and reconciliation. And the extraordinary growth and diversification of communication media has contributed to the growth and impact of commemorative practices, while also generating dominant cultural memories that both articulate and silence people's life stories.

Two examples highlight the potent contribution that oral history can make to this politics of memory in twenty-first century nations. In Australia the contested memory of aborigines who were removed from their families and placed in foster families or state institutions—the so-called "Stolen Generation"—has been at the heart of debates about race relations, restitution and national identity. Rosanne Kennedy has noted how Stolen Generation memory is produced and treated differently in diverse contexts: oral history recordings compared with autobiographical writing; in law courts and national inquiries or "memory commissions"; by historians and in self-help advocacy

Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998). On oral history and land rights see Christine Choo and Shawn Hollback, *History and Native Title, Contemporary Theoretical, Historiographical and Political Perspectives* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2004); John A. Neuenschwander, "Native American Oral Tradition/History as Evidence in American Federal Courts," *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, n.s. 2, no. 2 (2004): 11–17; Ann Parsonson, "Stories for Land: Oral Narratives in the Maori Land Court," in *Telling Stories*, 21–40; Ann McGrath, "'Stories for Country': Oral History and Aboriginal Land Claims," *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 9 (1987): 34–46; Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1994): 403–18.

[28] Fuyuki Kurasawa, "A Message in a Bottle: Bearing Witness as a Mode of Ethico-Political Practice," http://research.yale.edu/ccs/research/working-papers/#kurasawa (accessed November 6, 2006).

groups.[29] Drawing upon theoretical approaches to Holocaust and abuse survivor testimony, she argues against the assumption that personal accounts by removed aborigines have been unduly influenced by the collective memory of a Stolen Generation, and asserts that these accounts should be regarded as sophisticated interpretative narratives that incorporate sharp social and historical insights, and not simply as evidence for interpretation (or rejection) by historical "experts." Yet Kennedy also notes that some aboriginal witnesses "may not have had the cultural resources available to them that would enable them to interpret their own experience," and thus highlights the important though problematic supporting role of oral historians and other memory workers.

In a second example, from Northern Ireland, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern explore their role as memory workers with the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) in a Catholic working-class Belfast enclave.[30] Lundy and McGovern explain that "in the last three decades truth-telling has come to be seen as a key element of post-conflict transition in societies throughout the world," and they identify at least twenty-four national "truth commissions," of which the most famous was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Despite good intentions and many positive outcomes, the political compromises required by official truth-telling sometimes marginalize memories that do not fit their conciliatory aims, and official commissions can reinforce the trauma of silence or misrecognition. Ironically, Northern Ireland has not had a truth commission because "*not* confronting the causes and competing explanations" of the northern Irish conflict "was part of a deliberate State strategy to obtain a *realpolitik* consensus" following the Good Friday Agreement that more or less ended armed conflict in 1998. In the absence of official truth-telling, Lundy and

[29] Rosanne Kennedy, "Stolen Generations Testimony: Trauma, Historiography and the Question of 'Truth'," *Aboriginal History* 25 (2001): 116–31. See also Bain Attwood, "'Learning About the Truth.' The Stolen Generations Narrative," in *Telling Stories*, 183–212; Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).

[30] Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, "'You Understand Again': Testimony and Post-Conflict Resolution in the North of Ireland," *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, n.s. 2, no. 2 (2004): 30–35.

McGovern describe how they worked with a group of Ardoyne residents to produce an oral history book commemorating local people who died in "the Troubles." They detail the significant practical challenges of participatory oral history. For example, interviewees "had complete control to add, take out or change words in their own transcripts," in discussion with ACP volunteers, and although participants could not change words in other people's accounts they were encouraged to read other transcripts and raise questions or make suggestions for consideration in the final production. Through this painstaking process of recording and editing their stories, individuals were helped to deal with traumatic memories and "make peace with the past."[31] Furthermore, Lundy and McGovern argue, a "victim-centered approach . . . to community-based truth-telling" contributes to the wider project of "achieving truth and justice" in Northern Ireland, and offers a model "that can be transferred not only to other communities in the north but to other parts of the world."

The Subjectivity of Oral History Relationships—Interdisciplinary Approaches

A third transformation in oral history involved a paradigmatic shift in our approach to the "objectivity" of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst. One of the primary concerns of critics of oral history in the 1970s was that historians were creating, and thus unduly influencing, their sources. By the end of that decade oral historians like Portelli and Passerini in Europe, and Frisch and Grele in North America, had begun to question the possibility of objectivity and to celebrate the subjectivity of the interview relationship. Throughout the 1980s positivist notions of researcher objectivity were increasingly questioned by feminist theorists, post-modern anthropologists and qualitative sociologists—and by oral history interviewers who were deeply reflective about the relationships they formed with their narrators. Oral historians were also influenced by developments in reminiscence work that highlighted the benefits of remembering for older

[31] See Graham Dawson, "Trauma, Place and the Politics of Memory: Bloody Sunday, Derry, 1972–2004," *History Workshop Journal,* issue 59 (2005): 151–178; Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past? Cultural Memory, the Irish Troubles and the Peace Process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2007).

people and reminded interviewers to consider the value of the exchange for both parties.[32] In an article published in the *Oral History Review* in 1997, Valerie Yow argued that from the late 1980s a new oral history "paradigm . . . permits awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content."[33] Oral historians were increasingly alert to the ways that they were affected by their interviews and how the interviewer, in turn, affected the interview relationship, the data it generated and the interpretative process and product. Feminist oral historians have made especially important contributions in this regard, illuminating issues about oral history relationships and the interconnections between language, power and meaning.[34] Quoting Victor Turner, Yow called for "an objective relation to our own subjectivity," and proposed some extremely useful questions to help oral historians develop a reflexive alertness that would enhance interviews and their interpretation:

1. What am I feeling about this narrator?
2. What similarities and differences impinge on this interpersonal situation?
3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?
4. Why am I doing the project in the first place?
5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn't I choose these?
6. What other possibilities are there? Why did I reject them?
7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?[35]

Valerie Yow's article also exemplifies the interdisciplinarity that has been one of the most significant features of oral history from the 1980s onwards. Though memory is now a respected historical source, history is just one of many academic disciplines

[32] Bornat, "Oral History as a Social Movement."
[33] Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?' Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa," *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (1997): 55–79.
[34] The core texts for feminist oral history are Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); and Susan H. Armitage, ed., *Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
[35] Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?,'" 79.

and emergent intellectual fields that work with memories. Yow writes about the "trickle over effect" from other disciplines such as qualitative sociology,[36] anthropology,[37] biographical and literary studies,[38] and life review psychology.[39] To this list we could add cultural studies,[40] linguistics, communication and narrative studies,[41] folklore studies[42] and interdisciplinary work exploring the relationship between memory, narrative and

[36] See Daniel Bertaux, ed., *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Science*s (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981); Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism* (London: Sage, 2001); Prue Chamberlayne, Joann Bornat and Tom Wengraf, eds., *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2000); Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001).

[37] See L.L. Langness and Geyla Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp, 1981); Lawrence Craig Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985); Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, eds., *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Jacob J. Climo and Maria G. Cattell, eds., *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2002).

[38] See James Olney, ed., *Studies in Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Julia Swindells, ed., *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[39] See William McKinley Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Theodore R. Sarbin, ed., *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Leiblich, eds., *Narrative Study of Lives* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).

[40] Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography, History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994); Molly Andrews, Shelly Day Sclater, Corinne Squire and Amel Treacher, eds., *The Uses of Narrative: Explorations in Sociology, Psychology and Cultural Studies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004; previously published by Routledge, 2000, as *Lines of Narrative: Psychosocial Perspectives*).

[41] See Eva M. McMahan, *Elite Oral History Discourse: A Study of Cooperation and Coherence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Leiblich, eds., *Making Meaning of Narrative, Narrative Study of Lives, Vol. 6* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999); Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004; previously published by Routledge, 1998); Amia Leiblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach and Tamar Zilber, eds., *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998).

[42] William Schneider, *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002).

personal identity.[43] While theoretical and methodological developments in each of these fields have enriched the practice of oral history, oral historians have themselves made substantial contributions to the theory, method and politics of qualitative research through their interdisciplinary reflections on interview relationships and about the interpretation and use of recorded memories.

To cite just one recent example, Daniel James' book, *Dona María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, published in 2000, is an exemplary work of women's oral history from South America.[44] The first half of the book comprises Dona María's own testimony, as recorded and edited by James, and vividly recalls the life and times of a working-class woman activist in a twentieth-century Argentinean industrial community. The interpretative essays that follow consider Dona María's experience and testimony, and the history and memory of her community, from cutting-edge interdisciplinary perspectives. For example, "Listening in the cold" explores the challenges of recording, hearing and comprehending testimony that is influenced by prevalent narrative forms, by the political and psychological identity of the narrator, and by an interview relationship that can enable or disable recollection. "Stories, anecdotes and other performances" draws upon narrative theory to analyze the nature and meaning of personal testimony. "Tales told out on the borderlands" reads Dona María's story for gender and argues that clues about gender tension and dissonance are found on the narrative "borderlands" between personal memory and the cultural frames of communal myth and public ideology. James argues that Dona María's oral testimony—shaped by a dynamic ongoing relationship between personal and public memory, and between narrator and interviewer—is "more messy, more paradoxical, more contradiction-laden

[43] George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg, eds., *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1992); Bruce M. Ross, *Remembering the Autobiographical Past: Descriptions of Autobiographical Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Mark Philip Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds., *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003).

[44] Daniel James, *Dona María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

[than most written autobiographies], and perhaps because of this, more faithful to the complexity of working-class lives and working-class memory."[45]

The Ascent of Memory Studies

Daniel James also considers the importance of remembering—as "embodied in cultural practices such as storytelling"—for individuals and for their communities, and poses the problem of modern memory for working-class communities faced with deindustrialization and the destruction of sites for collective memory. In this regard his work exemplifies the "ascent of 'memory' as an object of investigation by historians" in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Omer Bartov offers a compelling explanation for this trend, in which the memory work of oral historians has played a significant role:

> The stream of "memory studies" was clearly related to the pervasive cultural sense of an end of an era, both as a chronological fact and as a reflection of rapid socioeconomic transformation. The "rediscovery" of Maurice Halbwach's theories on collective memory; the publication of Pierre Nora's massive tomes on *lieux de mémoire*; the growing scholarly interest in the links between history and memory, documentation and testimony; the popularity of works of fiction and films on memory; debates among psychologists over "deep" and repressed memory; and, not least, the public controversies on forms and implications of official commemoration. All seemed to indicate that "memory" had firmly established itself as a central historical category.[46]

[45] James, *Dona María's Story*, 242.

[46] Omer Bartov, in a review of three books about the European memory of the Holocaust and World War II, in *American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (2001): 660. Bartov also notes signs that in the new millennium "this preoccupation with memory will gradually diminish," particularly in relation to the scholarly focus on "the Nazi occupation of Europe and the material reconstruction and identity reformation of the postwar period." Books about history and modern memory include: David Thelen, *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, eds., *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995); David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, eds., *Regimes of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003).

The ascent of memory studies poses two significant challenges for oral historians. Firstly, we need to keep abreast of a daunting interdisciplinary literature in the field. Secondly, oral historians can ensure that memory studies does not retreat into an arcane intellectual world of rarified debate, but rather is informed by our relationship with the men and women who tell us their memories and by our efforts to engage memory in political debate for social change.

The Internationalism of Oral History

Our response to these challenges has been bolstered by the increasing internationalism of oral history. In 1979 a number of North American oral historians met up with their European counterparts at an International Conference on Oral History held in Essex, England. This meeting was to be the first of many international exchanges, and was a catalyst for the publication of an *International Journal of Oral History* (from 1980 until 1990) and a series of collaborative, international oral history anthologies.[47] In 1996 the international oral history conferences were formalized within a newly constituted International Oral History Association (IOHA), for which representatives from each geographical region were elected to a Council responsible for the biennial conference and a bilingual (Spanish and English) newsletter and journal, *Words and Silences*/*Palabras y Silencios*. The conferences and publications have sustained and propelled a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices across the different national contexts of oral history, and have shifted the center of gravity in oral history away from Europe and North

[47] Early examples included: Paul Thompson and Natasha Burchardt, eds., *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe* (London: Pluto, 1982); Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990). There have been several successors or alternatives to the *International Journal of Oral History*, which lapsed in the late 1980s: *Life Stories/Recits de Vie*, Colchester, Biography and Society Research Committee, International Sociological Association, 1985–1989; Ronald Grele, ed., *Subjectivity and Multi-Culturalism in Oral History, The International Annual of Oral History* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992–1996); *Memory and Narrative*, book series (London: Routledge, 1997–2004; from 2004 published by Transaction); *Words and Silences* (journal of the IOHA from 1997).

America. The recent sequence of IOHA conferences in Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and Australia (with the 2008 conference scheduled for Mexico) has showcased the rich histories and extraordinary growth of oral history in the "South."

Indeed, Latin American oral historians are challenging the European and North American oral history hegemony. In an editorial introducing a 2003 issue of *Words and Silences* about "Oral history and the experience of politics," the Mexican oral historian Gerardo Necoechea suggested that, whereas in western Europe and the United States oral history is often "directed to problems of identity and cultural recognition within democratic regimes. . . . Latin America continues to be a space for utopia, for thinking about the far-away relatively just society and fearing the fracture of the ever fragile present. Politics there jumps at you," and oral history is intertwined with politics.[48] In the same issue Brazilian José Sebe Bom Meihy argued that the international conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1998 was a turning point, with Latin American oral history in particular offering a more radical political context and purpose.[49]

The political circumstances of countries and regions emerging from—or struggling within—political turmoil undoubtedly generate important, often transformative, memory work. And it is certainly true that different national and regional contexts make for different types of oral history, and that all oral historians gain from international dialogue and comparative insights. But there are plenty of European and North American projects where oral history is also "intertwined with politics." For example, Daniel Kerr has shown how oral history promoted "dialogue in the streets among the homeless" of the U.S. city of Cleveland, Ohio, and how "a democratically organized project built on the framework of what Michael Frisch terms 'shared authority' can play a significant role in movement building."[50] Kerr's project started with life history interviews but then shifted away from a victim model and refocused on homeless people's own analysis of homelessness. He brought homeless people

[48] Gerardo Necoechea, "Editorial," *Words and Silences*, n.s. 2, no. 1 (2003): 2.
[49] José Sebe Bom Meihy, "The Radicalization of Oral History," *Words and Silences*, n.s. 2, no. 1 (2003): 31–41.
[50] Kerr, "'We Know What the Problem Is.'" See Frisch, *A Shared Authority.*

into a structured dialogue by presenting their video interviews in public, producing a radio program focusing each week on one person's account of homelessness, and convening workshops at a drop-in center in which participants analyzed their experiences and drew out common themes about the history and causes of homelessness. Perhaps most importantly, the project built upon and linked existing discussions among homeless people, "identified avenues of resistance," and "emboldened people" to campaign for social change. Kerr notes tensions in the oral historian's role between scholarship and advocacy and argues, perhaps controversially, that research can be *more* objective if it is more inclusive.

The Digital Revolution in Oral History

We are in the middle of a fourth, dizzying digital revolution in oral history, and its outcomes are impossible to predict. E-mail and the Internet are certainly fostering oral history's international dialogue. But, more than that, new digital technologies are transforming the ways in which we record, preserve, catalogue, interpret, share and present oral histories. Very soon we will all be recording interviews on computers, and we can already use web-cams to conduct virtual interviews with people on the other side of the world. Audio-visual digital recordings will be readily accessible in their entirety via the Internet, and sophisticated digital indexing and cataloguing tools—perhaps assisted in large projects by artificial intelligence—will enable anyone, anywhere to make extraordinary and unexpected creative connections within and across oral history collections, using sound and image as well as text. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software can already be used to support, extend and refine the interpretation of large sets of oral history interviews, and will, inevitably, become more sophisticated and powerful.

Michael Frisch argues that the digitization of sound and image will challenge the current dominance of transcription and return aurality to oral history, as digital technology makes it easier to navigate audio (and video) material, and as we extend our text-based literacy to new forms of literacy with sound and image. Furthermore, non-text-reliant digital index and search mechanisms will enable users to find and hear the

extracts they are looking for in their own interviews—and across countless interviews from other projects—and will enable imaginative, unforeseen interpretations.[51] Frisch proposes the emergence of a "post-documentary sensibility" which breaks down the distinction between the oral history document source and the oral history documentary product. He offers the prosaic but instructive example of family video collections and asks whether "instead of one, two, or even a file folder full of such pre-cast movies, it wouldn't be more interesting to imagine the material so organized and accessible that . . . a path could be instantly generated in response to any visiting relative, or a child's birthday, or a grandparent's funeral, or the sale of a house in the hometown, or whatever might be occasioning interest in the relevant resources found in the video record. Such a located selection could easily be displayed, saved, and worked into a presentational form, if it proved interesting. Or, it could be released to return to the database, awaiting some later inquiry or use." Frisch suggests a comparable future for oral history recordings and productions, and concludes that "new digital tools and the rich landscape of practice they define may become powerful resources in restoring one of the original appeals of oral history—to open new dimensions of understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory."

The future that Frisch proposes may still be years away in terms of being widely adopted. How receptive are libraries and archives to moves away from the 'document'? Who will have the time and inclination to generate non-text-reliant digital indexing of audio and video interviews? Who will have access to the software? At what point will extensive collections of indexed audio and video oral history recordings be readily accessible and searchable via the Internet? Furthermore, our interviewees may well think rather differently about telling a story that will be instantly accessible and easily manipulated.

Throughout the past decade oral historians have been grappling with the technical, ethical and epistemological implications

[51] Michael Frisch, "Towards a Post-Documentary Sensibility: Theoretical and Political Implications of New Information Technologies in Oral History," (paper presented to the XIIIth International Oral History Conference, Rome, June 2004) and in Perks and Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (2006), 102–14.

of the digital revolution.[52] But are we dealing with a paradigm transformation in the terms articulated by Thomas Kuhn, a profound change in understanding that revolutionizes our practice as oral historians? Is this technological revolution also a cognitive revolution? It is hard to tell, in the midst of such rapid change and when the technological changes in oral history are just a small sideshow in the global digital revolution in information and communication technologies. Personally, I find this future especially difficult to predict precisely because the global digital frontier is so foreign to someone who grew up in a pre-digital age and who feels comfortable and literate with text but profoundly uncomfortable and illiterate with these new technologies (to be honest, I was never very competent with old technologies). My children and my younger students—who have only known a digital age and instinctively understand the ways in which mobile phones and web-cams create different ways of communicating and web-logs offer new processes for making and sharing personal stories—may well have a better sense of where these technologies might take us.

But I do think that the medium is part of the message, and that digital technologies are transforming so many aspects of our work as oral historians—and indeed the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives—that they will, over time, also change the way we think about memory and personal narrative, about telling and collecting life stories, and about sharing memories and making histories. This digital revolution—the fourth paradigm transformation of oral history—is still in process, and life on the cusp of change before an ever-shifting horizon can be uncomfortable. The future of oral history, and the role of the oral historian, has never been so exciting, or so uncertain.

[52] Sherna Berger Gluck, Donald A. Ritchie and Bret Eynon, "Reflections on Oral History in the New Millennium: Roundtable Comments," *Oral History Review* 26, no. 2 (1999): 1–27; Mary A. Larson, "Potential, Potential, Potential: The Marriage of Oral History and the World Wide Web," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (2001): 596–603; Sherna B. Gluck, "Pitch, Pace, Performance—And Even Poetry: Returning to Orality: The CSULB Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive Model" (paper presented to the XIIIth International Oral History Conference, Rome, June 2004); Karen Brewster, "Internet Access to Oral Recordings: Finding the Issues," www.uaf. edu/library/oralhistory/brewster1/research.html (accessed November 6, 2006).