

Conference Report: Oral History Association Annual Meeting, Denver, Colorado, 12-16 October 2011

Janis Thiessen, University of Winnipeg

The 45th annual meeting of the Oral History Association took place October 12-16, 2011 in Colorado's "mile-high city" of Denver. While some conference attendees mentioned the effects on their constitution of the high altitude, it was agreed that the physical challenge was more than worthwhile. Often overheard was the sentiment: "I wasn't sure what I might learn from the session I just attended, but..." as people went on to explain that, though the topic of the session was outside their own field(s), they had been introduced to new sources, techniques, and ideas that informed their own work in unexpected and useful ways.

The conference theme this year was "Memories of Conflict and Disaster: Oral History and the Politics of Truth, Trauma, and Reconciliation." A number of panels dealt explicitly with this theme, including ones on military veterans, war in Uganda, Soviet 'refuseniks', 9/11 and its aftermath, the U.S. civil rights movement, peace and conflict in religious communities, and the Holocaust. Conference goers also had the opportunity to learn about oral history projects on gay-straight alliances, Native American history, mental health, Chicano/a history, labour and unions, environmental history, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and the special preparation needed to interview scientists – to name just a few session topics. A roundtable (one of several at the conference) addressed the provocative question: "Should oral historians abandon life history?" No easy answers were provided, and the discussion extended well beyond the bounds of the time allotted. Workshops on digital preservation, self-publication, organization of community oral history projects, the legal and education issues associated with oral history, and the writing of grant proposals were offered as well.

The two presenters in the session on "The Ethics of Withholding Information" were prime examples of the kind of interesting and diverse work being done by the mix of academics, independent scholars, and community activists that oral history conferences attract. Dorothy Day Ciarlo (Carnegie Library for Local History) shared how secrecy continues to shape the lives of workers and community members long after the closure of Rocky Flats, the facility near Denver that produced nuclear weapons from 1952 to 1992. Ciarlo is the founder of the Colorado Psychologists for Social Responsibility. Maria Faini, a graduate student in ethnic studies (University of California, Berkeley), presented in this same session on her interviews with military service members and

interpreters serving in the Iraq war. She described the difficulties involved in interviewing members of the armed forces while they were stationed in Iraq, and the ethical issues associated with interviewing Iraqi interpreters whose identities must be kept secret to protect their lives. She made interesting use of both theory (for example, Argentine poet and human rights activist Alicia Partnoy's notion of co/labor/action)¹ and technology (her interviews were conducted via Skype).

Doug Boyd (Director of the Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries) delivered one of the conference's two keynote addresses. His talk on "Oral History in the Digital Age" explained how and why technology now requires us to consider simultaneously the collection, preservation, and dissemination of oral histories. In the old days of audio recording onto cassette tapes, oral historians only had to worry about collection; preservation and dissemination largely were the tasks of others (particularly archivists). With the complexity of today's digital audio and video, questions about end use and long-term stability of data become the responsibility of the researcher, as such issues must be addressed well before the first interview is conducted.

Demonstrations of innovative methods of presentation and dissemination were well in evidence at the conference. Warren Linds (Concordia University), Lisa Ndejuru (Concordia University), and Nisha Sajnani (Yale University) – three members of the Living Histories Ensemble – presented about their work with the Montreal Life Stories Project using the technique of "playback theatre."² This project works with communities in Montreal affected by trauma, war, genocide, and displacement. By using improvised and interactive theatrical movement to reflect the emotions as much as the content of the first person testimony shared in collective settings, they create an opening for people to share their stories and make room for conversations. Their work, they explain, "artfully embodies a 'shared authority'" and is "a contribution to reconciliation and transitional justice."

The conference venue was not situated within walking distance of downtown Denver, but a variety of entertaining and informative social events were planned for conference attendees. A bourbon tasting sponsored by the Buffalo Trace Distillery (Kentucky),³ together with a screening of several short films that made use of oral history, was described by Doug Boyd as an example of

¹ See, for example, Alicia Partnoy, "Disclaimer Intraducible: My Life/Is Based/on a Real Story," *Biography* 32 no. 1 (Winter 2009): 16-25.

² See www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca; <http://www.creativealternatives.co>; <http://www.playbacktheatre.org>; and Nisha Sajnani, Warren Linds, Lisa Ndejuru, Alan Wong, and members of the Living Histories Ensemble, "The Bridge: Toward Relational Aesthetic Inquiry in the Montreal *Life Stories* Project," *Canadian Theatre Review* 148 (Fall 2011): 18-24.

³ Buffalo Trace Distillery, <http://www.buffalotrace.com/>.

“best practices for opening a conference.” Other activities included a multi-media presentation on Colorado’s Buddhist community (together with a poetry reading and a yodeling demonstration) at the Dushanbe Tea House in nearby Boulder,⁴ and a presentation of “A People’s History of Colorado” by the Romero Theater Troupe.⁵

One of many inspiring moments at the conference came at the Presidential Reception. This event was held at the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, which includes an archives and a remarkable museum of African American history. The venue, located in Denver’s historic “Five Points” area (which conference organizers described as “one of the few predominantly African American-owned commercial strips in the country”), was an appropriate choice for this reception in honour of Timuel D. Black, a long time member of the OHA. Dr. Black has been a scholar, author, and activist for the great majority of his 92 years. He delivered a moving acceptance speech, in which he discussed his creation of a multi-volume people’s history of Black Chicago,⁶ his association with Studs Terkel, and some of his extensive activities promoting racial and social justice. Referring to his service during the Second World War, he recalled being challenged by French and British soldiers about the presence of racism in the American Armed Services. He noted that “as an American,” he was angered by such questions, thinking, “It’s none of your god-damned business.” And anyway, he concluded, “We’ll clean up that shit when we go back home.” Cleaning it up – through his work together with Martin Luther King, former Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, President Barak Obama, and others – continues to be a task in which he is actively engaged. His words and his example reminded all present that the work of oral history also should be the work of social change.

⁴ Dushanbe Tea House, <http://www.boulderteahouse.com/>.

⁵ Romero Theater Troupe, <http://romerotroupe.org/>.

⁶ *Bridges of Memory: Chicago’s First Wave of Black Migration* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005); *Bridges of Memory, Chicago’s Second Generation of Black Migration* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008).