

Review

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Oral History in a Wounded Country: Interactive Interviewing in South Africa.
Edited by Philippe Denis and Radikobo Ntsimane. Scottsville, SA: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008. Vii + 196 pp. ISBN 1869141474.

African historians have long championed the value of interviews and furnished theoretical innovations in the interpretation and use of oral history. However, many of the seminal works on oral history from an Africanist perspective offer few practical guides for those just becoming familiar with conducting and evaluating interviews. Perhaps the very ubiquity of interviews for historians of Africa has made overviews of oral history for novices a rarity. Thankfully, this book provides an important exception to the lack of concise guides to interviewing. This study deserves attention from historians working with interviews generally; its advice is pertinent to any historians concerned about the complications created in fieldwork by race, gender, and economic inequalities. Also, this text gives an interesting point of departure for comparisons between oral history in South Africa with its counterparts in North America and Europe.

Oral history in South Africa had its first renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s, as academics and activists opposed to apartheid sought to construct “histories from below” to uncover the experiences of the many victims of state-sanctioned white supremacy. The end of National Party dominance in 1994 led to a shift towards heritage studies, and the ANC government has supported a broad range of oral history projects. Academic historians now find themselves with new colleagues and potential competitors from the private and public sector. While oral historians in the last 15 years do not face the colossal hurdles that challenged their predecessors in the apartheid era, interviewing in South Africa is hardly an easy task. Many women feel uncomfortable speaking in public to strangers, and well-off researchers unfamiliar with African languages and etiquette can unintentionally alienate potential informants. The profound class differences that sometimes separate oral historians from the people they interview can shape the context and the information shared in interviews.

Individual contributors to this collection examine the value of oral history to primary and secondary education, the positive role oral histories can provide to reassessing the legacy of apartheid, and the challenges that researchers face conducting interviews. This last subject is particularly valuable for readers without a strong background in South African history. Sean Field’s essay explores how researchers should treat the strong emotions that informants often feel as they discuss the hardships of the past. The author offers strategies for interviewers that

may aid the psychological well-being of the people with whom they speak. Mxolisi Mchunu asserts that oral historians need to respect the needs and agendas of indigenous communities, instead of believing that their work only involves individual informants and the researcher. This chapter might be of particular use for North American researchers dealing with marginalized communities. Furthermore, he and Radikobo Ntsimane denote how 'insider' status can sometimes prove to be a disadvantage for oral historians. Gender conventions, generational differences, and the simple fact that oral historians not from the community will depart rather than remain in close proximity to informants can influence how people speak differently to 'insider' and 'outsider' researchers.

Some might contend that such perspectives do not belong in a book on African oral history. Seminal works on African oral history by Jan Vansina, Joseph Miller, and others focused their attention on the problems that came with interpreting interviews, not the interviews themselves. However, the insights contained in this collection are important, especially for undergraduates and graduate students unfamiliar with the obstacles and unexpected consequences that can come with oral history. Cynthia Rose and Nicole Ulrich provide a very practical set of ideas about introducing oral history as a tool in the classroom from their efforts to bridge the gap between historians at universities with primary and secondary education teachers. This effort to promote oral history outside of its typical academic confines is laudable.

If a reader is expecting a set of essays primarily written by academic historians of South Africa, they will be disappointed with this book. They would be wrong to dismiss it, though, since this is a collection concerned with methodologies. *Oral History in a Wounded Country* is not meant to highlight research, but rather to give researchers a grounded overview of how to prepare and respect the interviewing process. This goal is a rare one in academic writing that draws on oral histories in Africa. Far too often, oral historians conducting their research on African topics are left to their own devices, instead of receiving a sound methodological training. Historians of Africa are hardly unique in this regard. This book is a good step away from this neglect. This book is not merely useful to Africanists alone. It can also serve in classes dedicated to oral history in other parts of the world as a point of comparison, as well as for classes dedicated to exposing students to different historical methodologies.