

Introduction to the Review Forum on Alessandro Portelli's *They Say in Harlan County*

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Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli begins his book *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* with a description of a road trip through Harlan County, Kentucky. As a literary scholar, Portelli knows the importance of a narrative's opening. Thus, this road trip presages his narrative search into the American heart and soul. *They Say In Harlan County* is a road trip through a part of America that is barely known, let alone understood, by Americans and non-Americans. Equipped with a tape recorder that he never turns off and a passion for both social and poetic justice, Portelli set out on this road trip in the early 1970s, talking with people and mining archives in order to comprehend the local vernacular, the region's history, and working people's memories of individual and class struggle.

They Say in Harlan County is a history of the United States as it is remembered locally and by people, through folktale, family myths, local legend, and lore engraved in place names, stories of the supernatural, and school knowledge as it is refolded by nine-year-olds into the surroundings they know. Portelli takes us into the worlds of Kentuckians, exploring the rich cultural symbolism and mythmaking that inform everyday life and politics. At times, Portelli abducts us into fairytale woods of the Hansel and Gretel or Red Riding Hood kind – dark and scary, but also illuminating and rooted in a complex morality. His research is infused by a deep and loving respect for his narrators, his writing steeped in a humanity that transcends academic jargon.

They Say in Harlan County is a history and thus moves chronologically from creation stories to the Bush year. The history is interwoven with literary references to Faulkner, Morrison, and to all kinds of folk music. The narrators' and author's stories interweave nostalgia with the harsh realities of life and death and the injustices of poverty and exploitation. *They Say in Harlan County* is both, an inward-turned memorial to the endurance and courage of these working-class Americans, and an outward-turning testimony speaking to the world.

They Say In Harlan County is also a major event in the historiography of oral history. Portelli is one of the leaders in the field, his publications have shaped oral history scholarship for over three decades, his words continue to be among the most-quoted by oral historians around the world. *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* has therefore asked three Canadian historians to review this book. Janis Thiessen, Nelson Ouellet, and Steven High are oral historians and working-class historians. They review the book from different perspectives, highlight different aspects, but agree that this "labour of love," as Thiessen and Ouellet call it, is a major contribution to the field and a must-read for every oral historian.

Indeed, the book is an important new step in developing the writing of oral history as a genre. As Linda Shopes recently wrote in the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, in the field of oral history “presentational matters – including editing – remain, with a few exceptions, largely unaddressed.”¹ While Shopes provided readers with important guidance in considering different forms in which oral histories can be presented in print, *They Say In Harlan County* gives oral historians an excellent model for crafting an oral history that finds a right balance between the author’s and his narrators’ voices. This is not just an issue of editing and presentation, however, but also one of politics. One of oral history’s major objectives is to democratize history. Portelli’s new work speaks to this on many levels, most importantly perhaps on the level of presenting a collaborative, multi-vocal yet coherent narrative. Alessandro Portelli’s response to the reviews is also included in this review forum.

¹ Linda Shopes, “Editing Oral History For Publication,” *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 31 (2011): 1-24