

Introduction: The Third Meaning of Oral History

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This importance given to the narrative is necessary in order *to be understood* in a society, which, unable to resolve the contradictions of history without a long political transaction, draws support (provisionally?) from mythical (narrative) solutions.

–Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning”

This volume builds on the previous special issue of *Oral History Forum d’Histoire Orale*, “Confronting Mass Atrocities,” in exploring oral history’s engagement with human rights. Beyond documentation, memorialization, and confrontation, this new collection explores the uses of oral history, narrative practice, and listening for survival, healing, reconciliation, and justice in the aftermath of atrocity and abuse. As Alessandro Portelli has proposed, “Stories are tools we need, not just to survive, but to overcome.”¹

In the variety of case studies presented in this volume, oral history methods are medium and message, means and ends. Interviews with survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators constitute the substance of the historical research, but the process of engagement itself produces an excess perhaps akin to what Roland Barthes described in a different context as the “third meaning.”² (While Barthes was trying to theorize the ineffable in cinema, not oral history, he does point out in a footnote that the “third meaning” corresponds to *listening* in the classical paradigm of the five senses.) Beyond communication and signification, this “obtuse meaning” supplements the dialogic exchange with a subtler *signifiante*, a signifier without a signified. The acts of speaking and listening in the oral history encounter establish a human connection and empathy, a rapport or flow that distinguishes oral history from other methodologies. It is perhaps in this inarticulate, obtuse space that the transformative power of orality resides; the capacity to comfort, heal, and reconcile. Stories are not only “tools for thinking”

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 40.

² Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on some Eisenstein Stills.” *The Responsibility of Forms*, (Hill and Wang, 1984), 44-68. While Barthes was trying to theorize the ineffable in cinema, not oral history, he does point out in a footnote that the “third meaning” corresponds to *listening* in the classical paradigm of the five senses. (53).

but the basis of our common humanity.³ Shared authority subverts the abuse of power. This is the moral of the story.

Each in its own way, the articles, reflections, and artistic responses in this volume grapple with the capacity of people to make narrative sense of their lives through stories; to reassert their humanity in the face of historical cruelty, caprice, and injustice. But this third meaning of oral history is necessarily fragmentary and elusive. The “play of presence/absence” that Barthes describes is typical of traumatic memory and the halting efforts at truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness in the aftermath of atrocity. Absence is a pervasive if ghostly presence in the works that comprise this volume. After all, listening requires respecting the silence as much as the words.

The first article in this special issue, by Marica Sapro-Ficovic, gives an insider’s perspective on the role of public libraries during the war of Yugoslav succession in Croatia. As repositories of narrative - literally, symbolically, and socially - public libraries were islands of culture, civilization, and community in a context of mass violence and brutality. The deliberate destruction of cultural spaces and artefacts -burning books and bombing world heritage sites- constituted not just war crimes, but an assault on community and history itself. Interviews with librarians and patrons who provided and used library services during the sieges in various Croatian towns reveal the desperate measures people would go to for the solace of a story and the sanctuary of the library space. That the simple pleasures of reading and communing became acts of defiance is testament to the importance of narrative, both literary and in terms of social capital.

Musiwaro Ndakaripa’s well researched account of the role of ethnic narratives in abetting violence and misunderstanding between the Ndebele and Shona peoples in Zimbabwe demonstrates the cost of resorting to the metanarratives of ideology rather than “political transactions” to resolve the “contradictions of history.” These contradictions are particularly close to the surface in a post-colonial context, but given the absence or failure of counternarratives of national unity and reconciliation, and the unwillingness of the current regime to provide a full accounting of past violence, ethnic stereotypes and orature provide a ready-made mythology that justifies and perpetuates divisions in contemporary Zimbabwe. Tracing the roots of these mythologies of ethnic animosity in colonial literature and education, Ndakaripa demonstrates the irony and tragedy of the colonial legacy and the daunting task of controlling the past to control the future.

The play of presence/absence takes on a literal and tragic human dimension in Joannie Jean’s research on the families of the disappeared in Chile’s

³ See David Herman, “Stories as a Tool for Thinking” in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

dirty war. Her analysis of the contemporary identity construction of members of the NGO, the Association of Families of Detained-Disappeared suggests that coming to terms with the grief and loss of forced disappearance is a more dynamic and proactive process than typical narratives of victimization would suggest. Whether identifying as political activists or victims of the Pinochet regime, the absence of missing loved ones continues to haunt present self-understanding.

In addition to the featured articles, several shorter reflections address specific issues in a more reflective mode. Here Joseph Kaifala describes the work of the Sierra Leone Memory Project, which uses an oral history framework to help individuals and society understand, process, and hopefully transcend the brutal violence of the civil war in that country. He places his work in the context of both the indigenous storytelling traditions of the griots and the more recent mechanism of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in the service of transitional justice. While attesting to the power of storytelling and listening to restore dignity and facilitate community reconciliation, he laments also the absences, failures, and political compromises that have precluded a full accounting of and accountability for the atrocities of the war. Sally Carlton's reflection on her documentary project with refugee background people in New Zealand in the aftermath of the 2012 Christchurch earthquake illustrates the interconnectedness of stories of survival and the central role of storytelling, listening, and acting for the recovery of communities faced with catastrophe. She focuses on the proactive role played by refugee populations in the aftermath of the 2012 earthquake, who drew on their own experience, resilience, and networks to help rebuild their host community. The potential of oral history practices to promote healing, empowerment, and justice among another refugee population is the subject of Kathryn Fobear's research with LGBTQ asylum seekers in Vancouver. Among other expressions of identity and community, the immigration interview itself is highlighted as a clear and tangible reminder of how "stories matter." For some, the interview is not only a technical requirement to make a compelling case for asylum, but a general plea for recognition, understanding, and community. Echoing Joannie Jean's study on sexual violence in Chile, Hannah Loney discusses the role of silence and absence in the reflections of survivors of sexual violence during the Indonesian occupation of Timor Leste. Given the psychological trauma and cultural stigma, rape survivors there present various narrative strategies to tell their stories, often employing discontinuity, allusion, and deflection in what Loney describes as a Derridean supplement to the life story. And in the context of her work with the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at Ole Miss (University of Mississippi), Dr. Susan Glisson reflects on lessons learned in adapting the Truth and Reconciliation model to address the lingering trauma of slavery and segregation in the American South. While most

TRCs are instituted in the context of broad socio-political transformation, she suggests certain elements can be meaningfully instituted in functioning democracies as well, particularly at the local level.

Three artists who employ narrative and oral history practices in their work were also invited to contribute to this special issue. Montreal based artist Khadija Baker uses fragments of voices and memories drawn from her Syrian-Kurdish roots to evoke themes of loss and reconciliation. Like other contributors to the volume, she artfully pieces together fragments of understanding, memory, and history from verbal and visual traces that fade and transform even as we try to grasp them. Photographer Larry Volk discusses his multimedia profile of his mother's oral history of her internment at the Vittel concentration camp during the Holocaust. Framed by the "four questions" of the Passover Seder, the work explores the contiguities and contradictions of the often unspoken history of individuals and families within the broader context of ritualized Jewish remembrance. Martin Ray, a photographer, sculptor, and writer offers his reflections on a lifelong project to make sense of the experience of American involvement in Vietnam. His respect for the voices and perspectives of his fellow veterans and the incongruous juxtaposition of images and text privilege the ambiguity of life over the metanarratives of history. As the narrators reconsider the experience of their younger selves and its transformation over time, the silent images frozen in time remind us of the truth and witness of other perspectives.

The issue concludes with Sam Alexander's review of *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance*, edited by Steven High, Edward Little and Thi Ry Duong. This new collection of essays, rooted in a 2009 conference at Concordia University and the *Montreal Life Stories* project, is resonant with the theme of this special issue, examining how the memory and commemoration of mass violence is mediated, performed, and transformed in the process.

The scholarly articles, reviews, reflections and artistic responses collected in this issue illustrate the potential of oral history to not only document, but engage the participants in deeper understanding, reconsideration, and empathy. Oral history is not just a methodology but a human dynamic; it not only documents, but establishes terms of engagement that has the potential to transform our understanding of history and ourselves.

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