

## (Where) Do Canadians Talk About Oral History?

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My first contact with the Canadian Oral History Association and its journal left only hazy traces in my memory. Twenty-two years ago, as I began conducting oral history interviews and studying the relevant oral history literature for my Master's thesis at Simon Fraser University (SFU), I frequently ascended SFU's library on Burnaby Mountain and, less frequently, descended into the depths of the "submarine" library at the University of British Columbia in order to browse through the *Journal of the Canadian Oral History Association*. As I flipped through the journal's pages and those of its companion journals from the United States and Great Britain, I noticed differences in tone, presentation, and authorship. The Canadian journal seemed detached from the international debates presented in the *Oral History Review*, *Oral History*, and the *International Journal of Oral History*. And for the most part, it did not seem to be the place where most of the Canadian debate on oral history took place. Indeed, except for occasional articles in the COHA journal and thoughtful reflections by feminist historians on ethical and methodological questions, dispersed in various journals and monographs, there seemed to be no connected, coherent debate among researchers about oral history. Why the journal was not used as a central platform for such debates was unclear.

I lost touch with the Canadian oral history scene during my doctoral studies in Germany and my post-doctoral work in the United States, including at Columbia University's Oral History Research Office (as it was known back then). At meetings of the International Oral History Association and of the U.S. Oral History Association, there were never more than a handful of Canadian participants. I became re-acquainted with the Canadian scene only after I took up my present position at the University of Winnipeg in 2002. Not much, it seemed, had changed over the preceding decade. Many researchers, especially labour and feminist historians, were using oral history, but they did not publish in the by now renamed *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*. My suspicions that the Canadian oral history movement was not as healthy and vibrant as the movements in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Spain, and many other places were confirmed when I attended the

meeting of the oral history interest group at the meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in Winnipeg in 2004. The only ones in attendance were my University of Winnipeg colleague, Nolan Reilly, and I. At this point, Nolan and I decided that something needed to be done.<sup>1</sup>

A year later, in 2005, Nolan and I organized a national oral history conference in Winnipeg, the first in perhaps a decade.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the meeting of some one hundred practitioners from around the country and the United States, including members of the COHA executive, we were asked to take on the leadership of the Canadian Oral History Association and its journal.<sup>3</sup> We did so because we believed that these were important institutions for Canadian historians and oral history practitioners and for a larger Canadian public. We believed that while many Canadians did oral history – even when, like activist historian Michael Riordan, they did not for a long time know that the kind of research they did was called oral history – they were not sufficiently connected with each other or with practitioners from around the world.<sup>4</sup> We hoped that reviving the association and its journal would give Canadians the necessary infrastructure to establish these national and international connections. Like many other scholarly associations and journals, COHA and *Forum* were “traveling institutions,” passed from one institution to the next, as new leaders took on responsibility for their maintenance and development. Therefore, Nolan and I also planned to establish an oral history centre at the University of Winnipeg that would ensure continuity of oral history infrastructure in our region. It was only along the way that we found out how many obstacles lay in our path.

We focused our energies on several projects, including COHA, *Forum*, an oral history reader, and the creation of an oral history centre. In terms of COHA, we re-designed the website without substantially updating the content. We also

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<sup>1</sup> We did not know that history was kind of repeating itself. In 2005, Wilma MacDonald recalled the 1989 COHA meeting at which members hotly debated whether COHA had run its course and should be voted out of existence. MacDonald vehemently opposed it and became COHA president. Wilma MacDonald, “Some Reminiscences of COHA,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 25 (2005), 15-28. At the 1989 meeting, there were at least enough members in attendance to have a debate, a quorum, and a vote!

<sup>2</sup> The last one may have been a meeting at Osgoode Hall in Toronto in May 1991. MacDonald, “Some Reminiscences,” 15.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Freund, “Guest Editorial,” *Oral History Review d’histoire orale* 26 (2006): 5-9. Several presentations from the 2005 Winnipeg conference were published in volume 26 of the *Forum*.

<sup>4</sup> I have written about this paradox in more detail in Alexander Freund, “Oral History in Canada: A Paradox,” in Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz, eds., *Canada in Grainau: A Multidisciplinary Survey after 30 Years / Le Canada à Grainau: un survol multidisciplinaire 30 ans après* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 305-335. On Michael Riordan’s experience, see Michael Riordan, *An Unauthorized Biography of the World: Oral History on the Front Lines* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 2004), 1.

digitized the *Guide to Canadian Oral History Collections* and made it into a searchable database, but we failed to receive funding for a necessary update.<sup>5</sup> We were also not successful in reviving the association or recruiting a significant number of members or volunteers. As Ronald Labelle noted in 2005: “One of the main problems faced by oral history in Canada has been that few academics have chosen to highlight it as their main focus of research.”<sup>6</sup> Why that is so, however, is unclear. In the past, oral historians have tried to explain the difficulty of making COHA into a vibrant and stable association by pointing to the vastness of Canada, region-centred research traditions, or oral history’s multi-disciplinarity but it seems that geography, population density, and research practices do not explain much.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Australian oral history association, dealing with a similarly sparse population in a large landmass, has been doing much better than COHA. On the other hand, there is no oral history association in densely populated Germany, despite a long tradition of oral history and history workshops there, and the Italian oral history society, despite Alessandro Portelli’s and Luisa Passerini’s globally influential work, was founded only in 2006. The German and Italian examples also show, however, that an oral history movement can survive and thrive without a formal association or society.

In terms of the Oral History Centre, after eight years of planning and fundraising, we established the Centre in 2012. The Centre is in part a response to the difficulty of maintaining (well, keeping alive) COHA. It provides a national centre that at present provides a suite of oral history workshops and other training, recording equipment, a recording studio, meeting space, and technical support for local practitioners. It hosts national and international scholars. Eventually, it will host conferences and bring together local, national, and international oral historians. It does for Winnipeg and the prairie region what Concordia University’s Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling does for the Montreal region. The Oral History Centre provides national and global resources through its website.<sup>8</sup>

Over the past few years, Kristina Llewellyn, Nolan Reilly, and I have worked on compiling and editing the *Canadian Oral History Reader* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015) to further enhance our objectives of re-connecting Canadian practitioners with practitioners from around the world and to introduce an international audience to relevant Canadian scholarship. Again, this was in part in response to the disconnectedness among Canadian practitioners and

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<sup>5</sup> The Guide is now based at the UW Oral History Centre Website: <http://oralhistorycentre.ca/archival-records>.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Labelle, “Reflections on Thirty Years of Oral History in Canada,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 25 (2005): 7-14, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Labelle, “Reflections.”

<sup>8</sup> See the website at <http://oralhistorycentre.ca>.

in part in response to the absence of Canadian scholarship in the global field, most evident in the lack of Canadian representation at conferences and in international oral history guides, handbooks, anthologies, and readers.

In terms of *Forum*, we were inspired by Charles Hardy and Alessandro Portelli's "essay in sound" to make full use of digital technology and re-configure the journal as a completely digital, online journal with integrated image, audio, and video files.<sup>9</sup> While we successfully transformed the journal into the first online open-access oral history journal in the world, we are still a far cry from the standards set by Hardy and Portelli or from the possibilities realized by better-funded journals.<sup>10</sup> Based in part on our experiences and advice, the journal of the International Oral History Association a few years after followed our lead and transformed its journal into an online journal on the same platform, OJS. The path to this transformation of *Forum* was full of obstacles.<sup>11</sup> The technical breakthrough came only when we moved the journal to Athabasca University Press, a Canadian academic press that specializes in OJS publishing. Over the past eight years, with the help of Kristina Llewellyn at the University of Waterloo and, later, Patrice Milewski at Laurentian University as co-editors as well as Sharon Wall and Janis Thiessen as book review editors, we generated the dissemination of new and exciting Canadian and international scholarship. In particular, we successfully created seven special issues on the themes of family, the environment, education, Latin America, the working class, mass atrocities, and human rights. In 2014, the four co-editors decided it was time for us to move on. With Janis Thiessen, we found an experienced and dynamic editor who will take the journal in new directions.

During our tenure as editors, we did not succeed in overcoming two obstacles. First, we received almost no submissions of manuscripts for our regular volume (outside of the special issues), demonstrating that despite a national conference in 2005, the founding of oral history centres in Montreal and Winnipeg in the 2000s, and ever-increasing research based on oral history, *Forum* was unable to connect with Canadian researchers around the theme of oral history. This has made it difficult for *Forum* to raise its profile or reputation –

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Hardy III and Alessandro Portelli, "I Can Almost See the Lights of Home ~ A Field Trip to Harlan County, Kentucky. An Essay-In-Sound," *The Journal for MultiMedia History* 2 (1999), <http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol2no1/lightssoundessay.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Forum has not been alone in its struggle to create digital multimedia scholarship and the obstacles go far beyond lack of funds. See, for example, Andrew Jakubowicz, "Beyond the Static Text: Multimedia Interactivity in Academic Journal Publishing in the JHumanities and Social Sciences (Not)," 361-370, in: *The Future of the Academic Journal*, ed. by Bill Cope and Angus Phillips (Oxford: Chandos, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> I have detailed the process of creating the journal here: "Oral History and Online Publishing: Establishing and Managing the Oral History Forum d'histoire orale," *Words and Silences: The Journal of the International Oral History Association* 6/1 (Dec. 2011): 12-17.

surely important considerations for authors. This, by the way, is not unique to Canada; oral history journals in other countries face similar struggles. Second, despite the bi-lingual title of the journal and a Franco-Canadian co-editor, we failed to establish connections with scholars in Quebec and other Francophone scholarship in Canada. This was not a new problem, as Ronald Labelle noted in 2005: “The participation of French speaking Quebec has, however, been almost absent in the COHA, although some of the most ambitious oral history projects have taken place in that province.”<sup>12</sup>

The transformation of *Forum* into a digital open access journal and the development of the Oral History Centre at the University of Winnipeg illuminate some of the promises and problems that the larger field of oral history has faced over the past two decades. Since the 1990s, oral historians have been marveling at the possibilities opened up by new digital technologies and the internet. Australian oral historian Alistair Thomson argued in 2007 that we are in the midst of a “dizzying digital revolution in oral history” that amplified global dialogue and “transform[ed] the ways in which we record, preserve, catalogue, interpret, share and present oral histories.”<sup>13</sup> While all of this is true in theory, few enthusiasts have considered the additional labour and its attendant costs in putting theory into practice. Nor have some of the ethical and legal implications been fully thought through.

Thomson was not alone in predicting that transcripts could be replaced by searchable audio and video files or that “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.”<sup>14</sup> But few authors pointed out that creating these new indexing tools and applying them to hours and hours of interview takes as much time as transcribing without guaranteeing the same long-term preservation of paper copies of transcripts. Digital technologies did not do away with old practices; rather, they added additional layers of processing and thus additional costs for labour. This is particularly worrisome in times of decreasing public funding. In some regard, the 1970s and 1980s were the heyday of oral history in Canada because there was significant public funding of oral history projects and preservation at archives throughout the country. Indeed, archivists were the leaders and mainstay of COHA and its journal. Yet, even back then, COHA members bemoaned budget cuts in the 1980s, and many archives did not have the resources to adequately describe their oral history collections or even respond to a

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<sup>12</sup> Labelle, “Reflections,” 10.

<sup>13</sup> Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* (2007) 34 (1): 49-70, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations,” 68.

COHA questionnaire used for compiling the 1994 *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada*. When we digitized the *Guide* in 2006, we contacted archives throughout the country to add their new collections to the *Guide* through a simple, but lengthy, online form. Less than a handful responded, and those who did told us they simply did not have the staff time to update their collections in our *Guide*. Over the past decade, staff dedicated to oral history has decreased at the Library and Archives Canada and at the Manitoba Archives and perhaps at other archives as well. Some archives do not even accept oral history collections anymore because of the massive backlog they are dealing with. Many collections on cassette tape or reel-to-reel tape will never be digitized and will simply disappear from the record.<sup>15</sup> In such a situation, new digital technologies that require additional resources just as likely lead to inertia as to innovation.

The ethical and legal challenges brought on by the Internet are similarly great. The Boston College case, of course, has only too clearly demonstrated the ethical and legal problems of making interviews available to the public and its various institutions of governance and surveillance, let alone to a global audience that can rip and remix bits of digital audio and video files for all kinds of artistic, political, or commercial purposes.<sup>16</sup> The creation of an archive of testimonies of survivors of the Indian Residential School system is under threat after an Ontario court ruled in 2014 that the testimonies should be destroyed.<sup>17</sup> Making people's names and stories known through a simple Google search creates a new, massive audience that brings to the archives new questions, concerns, complaints, and requests that can only be responded to by increasing staff – an unlikely proposition in a time of budget cuts for public archives or funding for humanities and social science projects.

There is a buzz these days about the digital humanities and it seems simple common sense that oral history research should be a main contributor and benefactor of this new development. In my experience as journal editor (and as an author), however, few authors are willing or able to move beyond a traditional textual presentation of their research. Hardy and Portelli's essay in sound remains, after over fifteen years, the state-of-the-art and unique in the presentation of oral

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<sup>15</sup> Labelle, "Reflections," 12.

<sup>16</sup> Jon Marcus, "Oral History: Where Next After the Belfast Project?" *Times Higher Education* (5 June 2014), <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/oral-history-where-next-after-the-belfast-project/2013679.article>; John Neuenschwander, "Major Legal Challenges Facing Oral History In The Digital Age," in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2014), <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/major-legal-challenges>.

<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Blaze Carlson, "Residential School Testimony Should Be Destroyed After 15 Years, Court Rules," *The Globe and Mail* (7 Aug. 2014), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/residential-school-testimony-should-be-destroyed-after-15-years-court-rules/article19966902/>.

history research. Occasionally, authors will add digital images, the easiest form of creating a multimedia product, but as in the traditional print use of images, there is often little integration of the images into the analysis and interpretation. *Forum* never had the funding to make text files into html files, thus preventing authors from embedding audio or video files. But even when offered the opportunity to include audio or video clips as additional files to their texts, few authors provided such resources. The legal and technical hurdles are often so high that authors have neither the time nor the money to spend additional days and weeks going through interviews one more time, learning about various kinds of audio or video editing software, purchasing such software (often through a complicated purchasing process at their university), learning how to use the software, and then actually using it to extract audio or video segments that are not integral to their research presentation in any case. At a time when we are under constant pressure to publish, this resistance to go beyond the text is not surprising.

At the Oral History Centre, we use many of these newest digital technologies, spearheading projects on digital storytelling, implementing the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) developed under Doug Boyd's leadership at the University of Kentucky, creating a resource-rich website, and developing a digital archive. Yet, while these are all helpful technologies, we have not made them the focus of our projects. In our projects, we promote traditional oral history standards, such as good project design, sound preparation and research, high audio quality, proper processing and archiving (including transcription if at all possible), and quality instead of quantity. Most of these projects are initiated and carried out by community groups, students, and other researchers. We believe that teaching research skills and providing equipment, space, an archive, and other resources is an important step in further democratizing history – not only by making history more inclusive, but also by breaking down barriers between researchers and research subjects. If we browse through the early volumes of oral history journals in Canada, the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere, we see that these are old ideas and motivations. They are inherent in the history workshops that sprang up in Western Europe and elsewhere during the 1970s as well as in the vibrant social history work of Canadian archivists, journalists, and teachers at the same time. We use the newest technologies, but we do so cautiously, knowing that much can be done with these technologies, but that all of this takes additional time.

There is much that oral historians in Canada have accomplished over the past half century. These accomplishments should be shared with other researchers and practitioners in Canada and around the world. Two objectives may therefore continue to guide the development of COHA and its journal: First, COHA activists and journal editors should strive to further increase connections and stimulate dialogue among Canadians using oral history. This includes further

attempts to create dialogue between Anglophone and Francophone oral historians, and to return to the multi-disciplinarity and cooperation with journalists and archivists that dominated the 1970s. Second, COHA activists and *Forum* editors should continue to initiate conversations between the Canadian and the international oral history movement in order to re-connect Canadians to global debates. As our special issue on Latin America demonstrated, such international conversations can go beyond the English-speaking world. These global conversations will inform oral historians around the world about the important work being done in Canada. I hope that the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* will become the vibrant platform for Canadian debates about oral history that Canada and the global oral history movement deserve.