

Oral History and Working Class History: A Rewarding Alliance

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Since the 1960s, if not before, oral history and working-class history have been a dynamic duo, complimenting and overlapping, but also challenging and questioning each other. Both lay and professional historians have been in the forefront of efforts to recuperate, interpret, and preserve the oral histories of working-class individuals and communities across the globe. They created written histories, archival collections, museum exhibits, and community projects that gave workers, their families, and their communities -- those who were less likely to leave archival and written sources for posterity -- a new voice, and a new place in history. Working-class oral history has also encompassed far more than recovery and preservation. Labour historians have enriched the field of oral history by addressing questions about method, theory, and approach, by offering critical reflections on our assumptions and expectations about oral history practice. Oral history has similarly enriched the field of working-class history, posing new questions, challenging existing interpretations, and encouraging the diversification of the themes and subjects we study. In recognition of this dynamic relationship, and the ongoing, mutually beneficial conversation between oral and working-class history, *Oral History Forum* commissioned this special issue.

Periodizing and classifying the historiography of working-class oral history is not an easy task. It is always dangerous to talk about the origins of a turn towards the use of oral history, since there are inevitably antecedents to consider: folklorists, anthropologists and popular writers were all using oral history long before the 1960s, sometimes with the expressed purpose of preserving the voices of 'ordinary' working people. Eye witness recollections, as Paul Thompson noted decades ago, have long been a historical source; however, the increased emphasis put on archives and documents, as history professionalized in the late nineteenth century, did marginalize oral accounts.¹ Nonetheless, after the Second World War in some countries, and certainly by late 1960s, there was a new openness towards oral history in the historical profession, as more practitioners embraced a method previously associated with the social sciences, especially anthropology, and journalism. As oral history assumed more

¹ Paul Thompson, "Historians and oral history," in *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), chap.2.

prominence in the 1970s, even academics writing about powerful elites contemplated its benefits as a method which provided multiple layers of evidence and interpretation. In 1977, a former Secretary-General of the National Museums of Canada, Bernard Ostry, argued that oral history was “growing in vitality and respectability,” and had spurred him to think about his interviews with prime ministers as sources that yielded something fundamentally different from more “reductive” written sources: “What we lose [in written sources], he argued “is the vast penumbra of doubt, the extraordinary untidiness and ambiguity of life,” and above all, the “revelation of personality.”²

Although Ostry was interviewing prime ministers, many oral historians were not. The turn to oral history was shaped profoundly by the new social history, the political climate, and movements of social transformation which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Historians intent on challenging the scholarly status quo, particularly the reigning emphasis on history ‘from above,’ and who wished to revive class analysis as a means of exploring the experiences of marginalized groups, welcomed a method that might feature historical actors who had left fewer written records created by their own hands, or in their own voices. The table of contents of the early issues of *Oral History Forum* confirm that oral history was welcomed enthusiastically by women’s, working class, and immigration/ethnic historians, many of whom worked in overlapping areas.³ This project of recovering subaltern histories was perceived to be an alternative to the political undertaking of more mainstream historians who focused their sights on nation building, foreign relations, and high politics. It also signified a de-centering of the power of the professional expert in favour of listening to the local knowledge of workers, a new emphasis on allowing workers themselves to interpret history as they saw it.

The knowledge interviewees offered was not necessary seen as unmediated, pure, and objective because it came from the mouths of the working class. While some later reflections on the emergence of oral history have assumed a whig narrative in which oral history practice became more sophisticated and complex over time, as a naïve belief in the objectivity of interviews was replaced by more discerning and critical cultural analysis of oral history, the actual writing on oral history suggests a more nuanced, and less linear story.⁴ Certainly, recuperation and preservation were strong themes in the early flush of enthusiasm

² Bernard Ostry, “The Illusion of Understanding: Making the Ambiguous Intelligible,” *Oral History Review*, 1977, 9.

³ For example, *Oral History Forum*, 4/2 (1980). Not all projects evolved from social history; for example, one explored mainstream politicians. See Peter Oliver, “One Oral Historian’s View,” *Oral History Forum*, 1 (1975-76): 13-19.

⁴ There are many historiographical treatments of the field of oral history: for one excellent overview, see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

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about oral history. Many of those initially drawn to the practice of oral history acknowledged a general political commitment to re-valuing working-class history and culture, and to understanding the complex history of class relations, by recording and preserving interviews with working-class people. However, their project was not characterized by an unquestioning faith in realism or objectivity. Indeed, many working-class and women's historians challenged claims to objectivity in the dominant historiography, arguing these masked a political investment in existing class and gender relations; they wanted to present a *different set of truths* drawn from social history, contesting what one influential American historian polemically referred to as "the propaganda of the victors."⁵ Questioning the reality of working-class memory may not have had a prominent place in some of the initial forays into interviewing because for those practitioners dedicated to labour history as a political project, turning a sceptical eye on such interviews, portraying them as constructed narratives, would likely have been seen as a deliberate undermining, if not dismissal of workers' voices.

The alliance of oral and working-class history was shaped by a new interest in social history from below, and it was incubated, not only within academe, but also by ad-hoc political groups, state-funded historical projects, new alternative presses, and vibrant social movements. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, collections of oral histories were sometimes tied to institutes, archives, museums, and journals, as oral history was aided by the growing institutionalization of labour history as a distinct area of study. Labour history journals, along with new international journals dedicated to oral history, became key sites for publishing the work of oral historians; there were also book series and collections dedicated to the publication of auto/biographies of workers, and oral histories created collaboratively by workers and academic interviewers, in the tradition of "plural authorship."⁶ Trade union organizations and labour studies programs within universities also encouraged the collection of oral histories of the labour movement, and while some were celebratory in tone, others addressed

⁵E.P. Thompson, Interview in *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 8. This view reflected a generation of American New Left scholars described by Jim Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 2.

⁶ Alessandro Portelli quoted in Jim Green, *Taking History to Heart*, 3. For example, trade unionist Gil Levine edited *Patrick Lenihan: From Irish Rebel to Founder of Canadian Public Sector Unionism* (St. John's: CCLH, 1998) while an academic and trade unionist, both leftists, talked "across their differences" to create a life history of Jack Scott: Bryan Palmer, ed., *Jack Scott: A Communist Life* (St. John's: CCLH, 1988).

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controversial issues relating to politics, anti-communism, and the exclusion of women from the union movement.⁷

The link between working-class history, political engagement and oral interviews was symbolized in popular, influential collections, such as Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* or the Lynds' *Rank and File*, in community projects of recovery – sometimes in the face of workplace closures -- and also by activists who linked oral history collecting to the goal of social change.⁸ In the U.S., projects intersected with the civil rights movement,⁹ while in Canada, youth involved in state-funded community groups collected oral testimonies from Indigenous peoples as part of their project of political mobilization of First Nations peoples.¹⁰ Graduate students writing working-class history interviewed and published interviews with wartime workers whose “viewpoints,” they argued, had been silenced in the mainstream heroic histories of war that focused on the battlefield, not the homefront.¹¹ The latter collective drew from Raymond Williams' theoretical writing on oral tradition, dialect, and the culture of language, adapting it to their own project. In many of these endeavours, oral history was seen as an alternative source that might uncover “authentic” renditions of popular experience, yet researchers also discussed the “active participation of the interviewer” in the interview, dissonances between written and oral sources, and the way in which oral testimony could bring to light aspects of social and cultural history “embedded in the spoken language.”¹² Recovery, in other words, was not conceived of as a pure, simple, and unmediated process. However, oral history efforts tied to social movements might be more

⁷ For one example, see Wayne Roberts: *Where Angels Fear to Tread: Eileen Tallman and the Labour Movement* (Hamilton: McMaster University Labour Studies, 1979); *A Miner's life: Bob Miner and union organizing in Timmins, Kirkland lake and Sudbury* (Hamilton: McMaster University Labour Studies Program, 1979); *Organizing Westinghouse: Alf Ready's Story* (Hamilton: McMaster University Labour Studies, 1979).

⁸ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: an oral history of the Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and file: personal histories of working-class organizers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). For an early community study, Janet McCalman, *Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond, 1900-1965* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1984).

⁹ From 1967 to 1973, Howard University ran a project documenting the civil rights movement. Rebecca Sharpless, “The History of Oral History,” in Thomas Charlton, Lois Myers, Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *The History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodologies* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 18.

¹⁰ Kelly Pineault, “Shifting the Balance: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Activism in the Company of Young Canadians, 1957-73”, MA Thesis, Trent University, 2011.

¹¹ Daphne Read and Russell Hann, eds., *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1978), 7.

¹² Russell Hann, “Introduction,” *The Great War and Canadian Society*, 10, 24, 30.

decentralized, uncoordinated, and reliant on disappearing funds; while some interview material was donated to archives, the tangible products of such activism were more difficult to preserve, particularly before the current academic requirements of research proposals, consent forms, and monitoring through ethics boards.¹³

The changing political and social context for scholarship shaped the contours of working-class oral history. In the 1970s, the presence of a Left and a vital woman's movement— and connections between the two — created a political climate in which feminist labour historians turned to oral history in order to understand both the politics of women's resistance and the gendering of class formation.¹⁴ Both labour and women's historians using oral history were interested in uncovering a 'hidden history' that encompassed the "everyday" and the "personal."¹⁵ The result was writing that focused on both women's paid and unpaid work; the latter had been largely obscured, not only in historical writing, but also in contemporary economic and social science measures of work. Feminist critiques of a male-centred scholarship, along with the emphasis of the new social history on working-class life, community, and culture, brought gender analysis more clearly into focus for working-class oral historians. Social scientists were engaged in similar, contemporary projects of interviewing, using oral histories as a means of understanding women's domestic labour, their family lives, and their subjective understandings of everyday life.¹⁶ Historians were interested in

¹³ There were exceptions: see Sara Diamond, *Chambermaids and Whistlepunks: An Oral History of Women in B.C. Labour, 1930-55* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1983). This collection of interviews was later put in the Simon Fraser University Archives. The current role of ethics boards varies across nations, but in some cases, historians have argued that the kind of oversight demanded has a "chilling" effect on oral history. For the American case, see Linda Shopes, "Legal and Ethical Issues in Oral History," in Thomas Charlton, Lois Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *The History of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 139.

¹⁴ Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving it Together: Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," *Labour/Le Travail* 7 (1981): 113-26; Joan Sangster "'Women of the New Era: Women in the Early CCF'" and Georgina Taylor, "The Women... Shall Help to Lead the Way: Saskatchewan CCF-NDP Women Candidates in Provincial and Federal Elections, 1934-65," in W. Brennan, ed., *Building the Cooperative Commonwealth: Essays on the Democratic Socialist Tradition in Canada* (Regina: University of Regina, 1985): 69-97 and 141-160; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1984); Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-50* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Sherna Berger Gluck, "From First Generation Oral Historians to Fourth and Beyond," *Oral History Review*, 26/2 (Summer 1999), 3.

¹⁶ Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1980); Lillian Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class*

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exploring both the exercise of power relations and women's negotiation, accommodation, and resistance to power, and they were often motivated by a belief in the potentially empowering nature of oral history, both in the sense of countering the prevailing elite picture of the past, and also in the sense of empowering individuals as they remembered and reinterpreted their pasts. While some writing was purposely popular and journalistic, reaching out to a general audience, other practitioners engaged in scholarly theoretical and conceptual debates, in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts.¹⁷ Indeed, the field as a whole developed as a multidisciplinary project, as historians have drawn ideas from literature, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology, into their work.

Increased attention to entirely new areas of social history aided the development of oral history practice, which in turn widened the gaze of working-class historians beyond the workplace to the broader community. Histories of gay and lesbian communities, for example, opened up new interpretive vistas for historians studying the intersection of sexuality and class,¹⁸ while those examining childhood turned to oral history as a means of reconstructing the lives of some of the most silent and silenced in history: working-class girls and boys. Neil Sutherland's engagement with adults remembering their childhood, for instance, assumed oral history might break down the class barriers that had resulted in a more powerful minority recording history, while the majority living it was erased from view. While motivated by this recuperative goal, he also asked how one's later life shaped the memory of childhood, how memory was organized around particular "schema, scripts and structures."¹⁹

Family (New York: Basic Books, 1976). These include reflection on method: Anne Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A contradiction in terms," in Dorothy Roberts, ed., *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1981), 30-61.

¹⁷ While the *outcome* of journalistic oral history efforts were sometimes critiqued by professional historians, there was also productive discussion between the two groups. In the Canadian context, Steven High suggests oral history assumed outsider status for a long time due to the intense hostility of professional historians who "responded with anger and sarcasm" to popular oral history, and claimed it was not "real history." This overestimates the opposition to this method. Steven High, "Sharing Authority in the Writing of Canadian History: The Case of Oral History," in *Contesting Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009), 23.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁹ Neil Sutherland, "When You Listen to the Winds of Childhood, How Much Can You Believe?" in Joy Parr and Nancy Janovicek, eds., *Histories of Canadian Children and Youth* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Neil Sutherland, "Everyone seemed happy in those days: The culture of Childhood in Vancouver between the 1930s and 1960s," *The History of Education Review*, 15 (1986): 37-51.

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The increased acceptance of oral history as a mode of scholarly inquiry did not necessarily make it less “engaged” or “committed,”²⁰ though the degree to which it became embedded in, and financially supported by, institutions did vary considerably across national borders. Countries with large academic communities, institutions of public history, and strong traditions of worker organization were often able to fund, and house collections of worker oral histories. In Britain, for example, local union and educational groups self organized to collect worker histories, while in France a lively debate about “la mémoire ouvrière” emerged, with one radical group critical of the “academization” of oral history, its relegation to “cultural gadget” rather than use as a tool of political mobilization.²¹ National and political context also mattered in how historians explained their scholarship: American and Canadian historians did not generally talk about “class memory,” a term used in France, where the language of class was more deeply incorporated into the daily political vocabulary.²² Nonetheless, many North American efforts were still imagined as *political* projects of recovery: they were intended to democratize history, challenge its silences and omissions, and take issue with the reigning definitions of historical significance. A form of historical ‘reparation,’ they were often examples of what James Green calls “movement history,” that is “academics and activists engaged in the study of social protest [with] moral and political as well as intellectual” goals in mind.²³

Did this emergent generation of oral historians see the project as one of simple recovery, transcription and “uncritical celebration”?²⁴ I am not so sure that we can parse working class oral history into moments of celebratory recovery, and later, moments of deeper investigation of meaning and subjectivity. The project of recuperation did not disappear after the 1990s, and the seeds of studying memory and subjectivity were already apparent in the 1970s. Michael Frisch and Ronald Grele, for instance, were both writing in the 1970s about the need to focus our discussion on how memory was created, by whom, and why.²⁵ Nonetheless, one can trace a new degree of attention to subjectivity, identity, narrativity, and memory by the 1990s, in social history more generally, which was

²⁰ Renate Rosaldo, “Celebrating Thompson’s Heroes: Social Analysis in History and Anthropology,” in Harvey Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1990), 103-25.

²¹ Mairanne Debouzy, “In search of working-class memory: Some questions and a tentative assessment,” *History and Anthropology* 2(1986): 276, 265.

²² *Ibid.*, 275.

²³ Jim Green, *Taking History to Heart*, 2.

²⁴ Gluck, “From First Generation,” 5.

²⁵ For example, Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1975); Michael Frisch, “Oral History and Hard Times: a review essay,” *Oral History Review*, 7/1 (1979): 70-79.

reflected in working-class oral history in particular. By the 1990s and into the new millennium, debates and priorities in oral history did shift course, a direction described by two scholars, in unnecessarily polarized language, as a move from “realism to narrativity.”²⁶ A more intensively self critical analysis of our process of interviewing came to the fore: one could see a shift from the third to the first person voice, from the erasure of the historian’s presence in the interview to a discussion of it, from a concern with objectivity to more focus on subjectivity, from an emphasis on “events” to understanding the “meaning” those events held for workers. Taking Alessandro Portelli as a guide, we looked to “oral sources to tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.” “Subjectivity,” he argued, “is as much the business of history as are the more visible “facts.”²⁷ There was increased discussion of Michael Frisch’s concept of “shared authority,”²⁸ the relationship between oral historians and the communities with which they collaborated, our obligations to our interviewees, as well as to conceptual paradigms emphasizing language, discourse, and narrativity. Attention to “Memory” replaced “individual memories,” as the relationship between memory and oral history, for some distinct and contentious, but for many others intertwined, was explored.²⁹

A changing international political and academic context framed these shifts. In working-class history more generally, Thompsonian notions of experience, an emphasis on conscious working-class agency, and an interest in ideology were less salient as historical materialism was under critique and the Left was in decline and disarray across globe. Historians defending the theoretical suppositions of the ‘new’ (now older) social history were challenged by those who decried what they saw as an ideological generation supposedly “patrolling

²⁶ George Rosenwald and Richard Ochberg, “Introduction: Life Stories, Cultural Politics, and Self-Understanding,” in Rosenwald and Ochberg, eds., *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 2.

²⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 50.

²⁸ The following are only a few examples: Valerie Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much?’ Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa,” *Oral History Review*, 42/1 (Summer 1997): 55-79; Linda Shopes, “Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities,” *The Journal of American History*, Sept. 2002: 588-98; Alistair Thomson, “Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process,” *Oral History Review*, 30/1 (2003): 23-26; Two good retrospective views are Sherna Berger Gluck, “From First Generation,” and Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *Oral History Review*, 34/1 (2006): 49-70.

²⁹ Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations*, 69 (Winter 2000): 127-50.

the boundaries”³⁰ of working-class history, not letting the light of post-structuralist theory shine in. In feminist scholarship, the academic “turn to culture”³¹ was perhaps more noticeable, as interest shifted from “consciousness to language, from the denotive to the performative”;³² however, the influence of cultural historians who questioned the boundaries between “history and literature” and saw the “context itself as a text” had an impact on the entire discipline.³³ The continuing influence of feminism also encouraged attention to the operation of multiple axes of power, both in the research process *and* as a historical theme emerging from the interview itself. More attention to identity and subjectivity reinforced the project of integrating race, gender and sexuality into working-class history, an interest that paralleled, in some countries, new attention to Indigenous history and oral tradition, particularly as Indigenous groups used oral histories in their courtroom battles over land and other rights.³⁴

Post-structuralist theory took on divergent permutations across disciplines, and was differentially received, and criticized, across the globe, due to divergent political contexts and intellectual traditions. Arguably, working-class history was more resistant than other areas to the demolition of materialist ways of seeing, however the mantras of deconstruction, contingency, and fluidity were transnational constants in social history scholarship. Fragmentation, pastiche, indeterminacy, and above all, the linguistic and cultural constructions of oral narratives were stressed: life histories, as one anthropologist wrote, may “provide us with a conventionalized gloss on a social reality that...we cannot know...we may be discussing the dynamics of narration rather the dynamics of society.”³⁵

³⁰ John Vernon, “Whose Afraid of the Linguistic Turn: the politics of social history and its discontents,” *Social History* 19 (1994): 81-98.

³¹ Michele Barrett, “Words and Things: Materialism and Method in Contemporary Feminist Analysis,” in Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds., *Destabilizing Feminist Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 204.

³² Seyla Benhabib, “Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard,” in Linda Nicolson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Routledge: New York, 1990), 125.

³³ Lloyd Kramer, “Literature, Criticism and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 100-114.

³⁴ There are some interesting differences between the way in which Indigenous voices and working class ones are discussed in the academic literature. The different engagement is likely shaped by the peoples and social movements we are working with. On Indigenous oral history see Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990); Nancy Wachowich, with Apphia Agalakti Awa, Rohoda Kaukjak Katsak and Sandra Pikujak Katsak, *Saqiyua: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women* (Montreal: McGill Queens, 1999); Julie Cruikshank, “Oral Tradition and Oral History,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 75/ 3 (1994): 403-18. On courtroom battles: Dara Culhane, *The Pleasure of the Crown: Anthropology, Law and the First Nations* (Burnaby: Talon Books, 1998).

³⁵ Vincent Crapanzano, “Life Histories,” *American Anthropologist*, 86/4 (1984), 955.

Oral historians, drawing on the reigning zeitgeist in social history, challenged existing notions of the subject, shifted their interpretive accent from the structural to the discursive, and reflected more openly on the interview as its own unique process of knowledge creation. They were prompted to reflect on the interview as a personal and social happening: self reflexivity became an end in itself, rather than an a priori contemplation of our sources before we wrote our monographs and articles. More emphasis was placed on the provenance, meaning, and textuality of the interview, along with non-textual forms of communication, including silences, hesitations, and avoidance. For historians of the working class, these international discussions prompted more intense discussion of *how* working-class people remembered the past, and why.

Although such reflection intensified under the influence of post-structuralist appraisals of knowledge production, it is important to remember that critiques of objectivity, scepticism concerning agency, forms of cultural relativism, and “incredulity concerning metanarratives” already had a place within the discipline.³⁶ So too did discussions of the making of working-class memory, which, as we have seen, emerged almost simultaneously with working-class oral history in the 1970s. Moreover, critical reflections on post-structuralist historical writing justifiably warned of its tendency to veer towards discursive determinism, and the danger of obscuring key questions about the social contexts framing discourse, the social location of those who are speaking.³⁷ The academic emphasis on subjectivity can become subjectivism, and textuality slip into textualism to the detriment of an analysis of the structures and ideologies shaping workers’ lives. Analyzing our own role in the interview also runs the risk of placing the researcher in the limelight, rather than the voices of our interviewees. Suggesting a whig historiography of ever increasing sophistication, then, problematically ignores some of the shortcomings and challenges posed by a culturally-inflected, post-structuralist oral history.

These debates are ongoing. The field of oral history, always a scene of difference and discussion, is not homogeneous in theoretical orientation. There remain differences in how we assess oral evidence, ranging from a preoccupation with its discursive construction to an emphasis on evidential truthfulness and a search for dispassionate judgement. For some scholars, searching out the experience of any identifiable group like the working class is a “seductive” but

³⁶ Perez Zagorin, “History, The Referent, and Narrative Reflections on Postmodernism Now,” *History and Theory*, 38/1 (Feb. 1999), 6.

³⁷ Paula Moya and Michael Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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ultimately dangerous term opening the door to “essentialism,”³⁸ while to others, this remains a valid analytic goal, particularly in the historian’s quest for subaltern voices.

We can also identify some important continuities in oral history practice with previous decades of writing. Despite the influence of theories stressing the fragmented and discursively produced subject, and concerted challenges to the concept of experience, some elements of the earlier recuperative project, including the notion that one can locate a ‘knowable’ working class experience, have had staying power in working-class oral history. Oral history remains appealing to historians of the working class precisely because it offers a window into the everyday experiences and feelings obscured in written sources, and because it suggests a story of working-class agency distinct from the history of those exerting class and political power. Whether our interviewees articulate discernable “counter memories”³⁹ – those which are an uncomfortable fit with, or challenge the status quo – is posed as a question, but not a certainty: working-class resistance has never been taken as inevitable, only possible, by labour historians.

While writing on memory and subjectivity has been influential, the recuperation of events, experiences, and beliefs co-exists as a key purpose of working-class oral history.⁴⁰ Many historians accept their interviewees’ statements as reliable renditions of the past; their words are granted a significant measure of realism, even if the interview process and the conventions of the interviewee’s story telling are analyzed more closely. Some of the same thematic queries have been posed to interviewees across the decades. For example, feminists interested in the lives of working-class women, particularly the intersection of class, ethnic, racial and gender identities, ask questions about longstanding themes of interest – unpaid and unpaid work, family relations, union activity, ethnic identity, and experiences of racism and cultural resilience⁴¹ – and

³⁸ Craig Ireland, “The Appeal to Experience and Its constituencies: variations on a persistent Thompsonian theme,” *Cultural Critique* 52 (Autumn, 2002), 95.

³⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, “Introduction,” *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), 5.

⁴⁰ Katrina Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-Era City, 1929-39* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 6.

⁴¹ Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hard Working People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1990); Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife; Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Carmela Patrias, *Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1990); Varpu Linstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society, 1992). Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920-1950s* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991).

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they remain committed to a method which “allows [women] to narrate their own experiences,”⁴² becoming authors of their own lives.

The perspective of feminist theorist Dorothy Smith resonates with such oral history practice. Smith suggests that the starting point for our inquiry should be the “standpoint” of the interviewee, not because her voice offers an unmediated, essentialized, superior, point of view, but rather because we need to think about the social and material texture of her everyday experiences, past and present, including her social relationships, her working, thinking, feeling life. Indeed, both the interviewer and the interviewee’s “location in the social order” matter, for the cumulative effects of our experiences shape both our understandings of the world.⁴³ We need to place our interviewees’ words in a social context, analyzing the “social relations pervading their world, but perhaps invisible to it,” and exploring the way in which their experiences are bound up with the ideological relations of ruling.⁴⁴

Focusing on the standpoint of a working-class interviewee does not assume that their words are taken at face value, that they offer unmediated remembrances, or that they will necessarily articulate views oppositional to the status quo: there is no direct line from the experience of exploitation to political consciousness for the views ‘from below’ are multiple and contradictory.⁴⁵ Indeed, as feminist theorists have argued, alternative, radical perspectives are often arrived at, or ‘achieved’ through human agency and political reflection – and the latter may well become part of telling one’s life history. This is not to say oral histories are either “therapeutic”⁴⁶ or automatically revelatory or radicalizing, simply that listening to the voices of the working class, poor, and marginalized, and understanding the contexts which shape their voices, remains important to oral history practice.

Moreover, paying attention to language and narrativity need not obscure the importance of ‘the social’ in the lives of our interviewees, for subjectivity is always embedded in social life: material context, coercion and consent, power and ideology profoundly shape our lives, as well as how we understand and recount them. The way we tell our life history may embody certain narrative patterns and

⁴² High, “Sharing Authority,” 41. For a discussion of the synergies between oral history and women’s history see Denyse Baillargeon, “Histoire Orale et histoire des femmes: itinéraires et points de recontre,” *Recherches féministes* 6/1 (1993): 53-68.

⁴³ Dorothy Smith, *Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling* (London: Routledge, 1990), 6, 90.

⁴⁴ See also Marie Campbell and Ann Manicom, “Introduction” to their edited *Knowledge, Experience, and Ruling Relations* (Toronto: UTP, 1995), 9.

⁴⁵ Nancy Hartstock, “Postmodernism and Political Change: issues for Feminist Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, 14 (1989/90), 24, 27.

⁴⁶ Paula Hamilton, “The Oral Historian as Memorist,” *Oral History Review*, 32/1, 13.

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conventions, and these will shift according to who is speaking, why, and the context, but the “life of language” resides in verbal interaction, in the “nexus of social relations, and in human relations of social conflict.”⁴⁷

Reflecting on decades of a rich tradition of working-class oral history, we need not, then, overemphasize a linear shift from the “objective observer to the subjective interaction,”⁴⁸ from mere commemorative writing to critical analysis. When working-class oral history was increasingly embraced as a methodology in the 1970s, many practitioners were guided by their political investment in a project which they hoped would reveal a different truth about history, and re-animate marginalized voices in history. For some historians, these remain important goals. This recuperative orientation was not solely celebratory, nor was oral history treated as a mere reflection of life events, or “mined for information and a bit of colour” as Steven High claims.⁴⁹ However, focusing too intently on recovery, we were subsequently warned, could become an illusory, “facile democratization” if we did not concurrently query “subjective reality,”⁵⁰ including the complex interaction between ideology and history, past and present. As a consequence, historians put more emphasis on exploring the way in which personal narratives were shaped by historically changing cultural norms and conventions, and reflected more openly on their own, as well as their interviewees’ subjective construction of memory. However, subjectivity and recovery, culture and context, may be inseparable, different sides of this coin, with heads or tails dominant at different times in our practice of oral history. As this special issue indicates, many historians continue to see oral history as a method which is distinct because of the nature of human interaction involved; which draws out new, often marginalized perspectives of working class knowledge holders; which reveals themes hidden from other kinds of textual sources; and which is animated by political questions.

Sandra Mendiola’s article on Mexican vendors, for instance, uncovers hidden layers of women’s work, particularly unpaid reproductive labour and small scale selling, that have been all too absent from the writing of labour history, and she places women’s voices within the context of their market selling to explain how and why some women became radicalized and supported left-wing groups. Her remarkable oral histories help us to understand women’s changing

⁴⁷ David McNally, ‘Language, History and Class Struggle,’ in Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, eds., *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 29. See also V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 86.

⁴⁸ Ronald Grele, ed., ‘Introduction,’ *International Annual of Oral History* (1990): 2.

⁴⁹ High, ‘Sharing Authority,’ 46.

⁵⁰ Lisa Passerini, ‘Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism,’ in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 57.

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consciousness, how it was shaped by daily life and labour, and the reasons their political resistance took the form it did. The agency of workers is also a theme in Emilia Salvanou's study of Pakistani migrants in Athens, Greece, over the past 20 years. Oral narratives are critical to her argument that these transnational migrants are able to construct an "alternative reality" in their leisure hours in response to their social and economic marginalization. This alternative reality, she contends, is not a form of escapism, but part of a "discourse of resistance" that stands in opposition to the dominant discourse through which these workers are represented.

Working-class historians have often used community case studies to great effect to explore the relations of class power that define these communities, and also shaped how their history has been written about, and remembered by different groups. Christine McLaughlin's oral histories with workers in Oshawa, a Canadian auto town, is testament to the ability of oral history to construct "counter narratives" that stand in opposition to the public memory intentionally promoted by those with power and privilege. The "captains of industry" are memorialized in the city through their charitable donations and the public naming of institutions after them, offering the impression that the town was built through their charity, paternalism, and economic leadership. However the workers she interviewed clearly have another history in mind, in which the gains and benefits they made, were not given to them by these leaders, but were fought for through unions, strikes, and solidarity.

Pauleena MacDougall's sympathetic study of a New England community coping with de-industrialization explores how workers responded to attacks on their livelihood; her oral histories provide insight into how paper mill workers came to understand the devastation wrought by local mill closures. Paralleling the case of other working-class communities facing economic closures or downturns, a dominant narrative or script emerged in many workers' explanations.⁵¹ In the case of Brewer, Maine, the workers often juxtaposed the knowledge inherent in the local community to the lack of knowledge of outsiders, with the latter far more interested in the bottom line than in facilitating community wellbeing. Interestingly, managers who were local also saw the closures this way, so that class was ideologically elided, and the ultimate cause of job loss – global capitalism – somewhat obscured in this local versus outsider narrative.

The closure of workplaces, as Alvin Finkel points out in his piece, understandably call up interviewees' feelings of being "bereft," and we cannot

⁵¹ John Bodnar, "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebakers," *Journal of American History*, 75/4 (March 1989) 1201-21; Joan Sangster, "The Softball Solution: Female Workers, Male Managers, and The Operation of Paternalism at Westclox, 1923-60," *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 32 (1993): 167-99.

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dismiss such views as mere “smokestack nostalgia,” as he notes American historians Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott do. His own involvement in a plant closure oral history project is analyzed from multiple perspectives, including his own academic inclinations, his political allegiances, and the workers’ interests in telling their own story. Finkel’s self critical reflection on his participation in the Alberta Labour History Institute’s oral history project is usefully reflective without ever falling into self preoccupation. He never loses sight of the central point of this working-class oral history project: the recovery, re-animation, and politicization of workers and their organizations. His discussion of the contradictions we face when we simultaneously don academic and activist hats is an excellent primer for many of us as we head out into the field.