

# Editing Oral History for Publication

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*Linda Shopes, co-editor of Palgrave's Studies in Oral History series, describes in practical but theoretically informed ways how to edit oral history interviews for publication. After establishing a broad framework, she discusses two key practices involved in preparing interviews for publication: editing and contextualizing. She then details editorial issues specific to three different genres of oral history publications: biographical narratives of single individuals, a series of shorter interviews with several narrators pivoting around a specific topic, and interpretive studies. She concludes with remarks on the role of theory in published oral history. The article is an expanded version of notes Shopes prepared for editing workshops presented at the 2006 and 2008 meetings of the International Oral History Association and annually since 2007 at the Oral History Institute sponsored by the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University. It retains much of the informal, conversational tone of an oral presentation.*

In 1990, oral historian Michael Frisch averred that “discussions of oral history tend to focus on the process of the interview or the organizing of oral history projects; [...] relatively less attention [is] given to issues encountered in the reading and interpretation of [interviews]; much less to the theory and methodology of presentation – what is actually done *with* oral history, and how its documents appear, are used, and are perceived in publicly shared documentary forms.”<sup>1</sup> Two decades later, the same relative equation obtains: discussions of interview technique and project management, including, increasingly, digital concerns, remain paramount as new projects are initiated and novice interviewers continue to enter the field; issues of interpretation have gained considerable ground over the years; and presentational matters – including editing – remain, with a few exceptions, largely unaddressed.<sup>2</sup> Two of the most well respected oral

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Frisch, “Oral History, Documentary, and the Mystification of Power: A Critique of *Vietnam: A Television History*,” in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 159-178; quoted material on p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> Among the few exceptions are Frisch, “Preparing Interview Transcripts for Documentary Publication: A Line-by-Line Illustration of the Editing Process,” in *A Shared Authority*, 81-146; Raphael Samuel, “Perils of the transcript,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 389-392; and Richard Candida Smith, “Publishing Oral History: Oral Exchange and Print Culture,” in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2006), 411-24. All three address the politics and ethics of editing in broad terms; Frisch also presents a case study of a lengthy, edited interview. Additional articles, in which authors discuss their own editorial

history manuals, Donald A. Ritchie's *Doing Oral History*, and Valerie Raleigh Yow's *Recording Oral History*, devote three and three and a half pages respectively to editing interviews for publication.<sup>3</sup>

This article, based on several workshops I have given on the subject, editorial guidance I have given others, and my own recent experience with editing interviews, is an extended attempt to pay attention to "what is actually done with oral history" as it moves from transcript to print publication. I begin by defining a broad framework for editing; then suggest some general principles for two key elements of editing – "working with the words" of the actual narrative and providing context for it; and conclude with a discussion of editorial issues specific to three different genres or types of oral history publications:

- a lengthy biographical narrative of a single individual, as, for example, Sandy Polishuk's *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila*;
- a series of shorter interviews with several narrators pivoting around a similar topic or theme, for example, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* by D'Ann R. Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand; and
- a more traditional, interpretive or scholarly study that integrates interviews with multiple other sources, for example Kim Lacy Rogers's *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change*. In this type of work, the authorial voice rather than the narrator's tends to dominate, even as interviews play a key role in the unfolding argument.<sup>4</sup>

And an apologia before getting on with it: My own decades long commitment to oral history is rooted in my appreciation for its capacity to

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practices, include Andrew F. Clark, "The Challenges of Cross-Cultural Oral History: Collecting and Presenting Pulaar Traditions on Slavery from Bundu, Senegambia (West Africa)," *Oral History Review* 20:1 (Spring-Fall 1992): 1-21; Dennis Duffy, "Editing for Publication," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 6 (1983): 53-57, at <http://www.oralhistoryforum.ca>; Rebecca Jones, "Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews," *Oral History Review* 31:1 (Winter/Spring 2004): 32-42; Sandy Polishuk, Catherine Fosl, Deobrah A. Gershenowitz, and Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "The Challenge and Promise of Producing Oral History-Based Biographies," *Oral History Review* 32:2 (Fall 2005): 49-88; and J. A. Prögler, "Choices in Editing Oral History: The Distillation of Dr. Hiller," *Oral History Review* 10:1-2 (Spring-Fall 1991): 1-16.

<sup>3</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 128-130; Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2005), 325-328.

<sup>4</sup> Sandy Polishuk, *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); D'Ann R. Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

democratize the historical record, the practice of history, and, especially in this context, the audience for history. While the digital revolution may well explode the oxymoronic “written oral history,” for now, books and articles continue to play an important role in the presentation of oral history, both within the world of scholarship and for the broader public. Indeed, because personal stories engage people, published oral history can bring good and interesting history to broad swaths of the reading public. By linking the individual story to larger themes and questions, it can draw readers into a deeper appreciation of the complexity of the past. So, while elements of this discussion will, I hope, be applicable to oral history presented in a variety of formats and media, my default position, the assumption underlying much of what follows, is print publication, whether on paper or online.

### **A Framework for Publishing Oral History Interviews**

I must start with a cautionary word: turning an interview into a publication is, at best, an act of translation. It turns one kind of event – a conversation between two people – into another kind of event – reading about that conversation by a third party. The oral historian Alessandro Portelli has reminded me that the Italian word for “translator” is etymologically very close to the word for “traitor” – and indeed, there is a way in which we betray a speaker by turning his<sup>5</sup> words into print. We lose not only the nuances of voice – the meanings conveyed by tone, cadence, velocity, and volume and the significance of nonverbal utterances like sighs, laughter, and groans; but also the social relationship constituting an oral exchange, the interactive negotiation between speaker and listener, the rapport that may juice the conversation, and the mental process that occurs when two people encounter each other. As Richard Candida Smith, who directs the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California Berkeley, has written: “Alienation from the source is inevitable whenever an interview is prepared for public presentation.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, I think we must approach our work with a rather humbling sense of its inherent limitations, recognizing that we are transforming one mode of communication into another. Thus, as we work to transform talk into print with a measure of integrity, we must intervene radically into the interview text itself in order to convey its meaning. As I like to say, “oral history does not speak for itself.”

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<sup>5</sup> How to represent gender neutrality in a language in which singular pronouns are inevitably gendered continues to confound me. The repetitive use of “he/she” is awkward; the use of the neutral plural “they” to replace “he” or “she” is grammatically incorrect; the use of an alternative word like “co” is too distracting. So, my approach is simply to mix it up – to use he and she randomly when referring to an interviewer, interviewee, or some other unspecified individual.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, “Publishing Oral History,” p. 419.

## Editing

We undertake two forms of direct intervention as we prepare an interview for print publication: *editing* and *contextualizing*. We turn first to editing in the sense of “working with the words.” But I need to make a distinction here, between *transcribing*, that is production of an archival document that represents in writing what has been communicated orally and is filed along with the recorded oral history for use by future researchers, who then make of it what they will; and *editing for publication*, which I understand to be a more highly mediated form of representing what a person has said, a statement by the editor/author of what the narrator has said and intended for broad public distribution. Generally, oral historians agree that for archival purposes, a verbatim transcript is in order. We generally urge reproducing in written form all that is said in the interview, including false starts, repetitions, incorrect grammar, awkward or nonsensical word order, malapropisms, local idioms, profanity, incomplete sentences, and other variants of speech, as well as non-words like um, hmm, or whew. We also urge a judicious use of punctuation and restraint in representing the aural qualities of an interview. Hence, phonetic spelling is discouraged, unless the transcriptionist is especially skilled in capturing vernacular pronunciations. So is extensive use of cues about tone, velocity, laughter, etc. Some oral history programs edit and annotate transcripts for sense and accuracy, and best practice dictates that they are returned to narrators for correction or amplification. These practices are appropriate, but they are different from the more radical interventions required for publication. More confusing for our purposes, archival transcripts are sometimes referred to as publications and editing interviews for bone fide publication (i.e. not transcripts) is sometimes referred to as “transcribing.”<sup>7</sup>

Oral historians generally agree that a transcript only approximates what has been recorded. Anyone who has ever looked at a transcript will know what I mean – transcripts are generally replete with false starts, verbal crutches, non sequiturs, incomplete sentences, poorly transitioned leaps from topic to topic, and other forms of expression that are perfectly acceptable – and intelligible – in informal speech but generally not in writing and publication. Furthermore, by objectifying words on paper, transcripts also omit much that has actually

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of issues involved in editing transcripts for deposit in a publicly accessible archive, see Carl Wilmsen, “For the Record: Editing and the Production of Meaning in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 28/1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 65-85. For a discussion of editing practices for both transcription and publication – and the distinction between them – see Francis Good, “Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning, and Transcription,” in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 362-373.

transpired in an interview – not only paralinguistic cues to meaning but also gestures, emotional subtexts, and the synergy of two people talking.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike transcribing, editing for publication aims at making the spoken word – that is to say, the narrator – accessible to the reader, more or less according to the conventions of written language. Yet it aims at doing so in a manner that remains faithful to the oral, to the narrator's words and word order, speech patterns and rhythm – as well as to the sense of what she is trying to say and the way that sense unfolds. Editing does *not* mean paraphrasing, altering what a narrator has said to conform to the rules of standard English, incorporating significant explanatory material as if it were the narrator's own words, flattening out contradictions or inconsistencies, or otherwise distorting the narrator's unique voice. In other words, editing is not rewriting.<sup>9</sup>

I now want to outline a four step process for editing oral history for publication. I don't want to elevate these guidelines to fixed rules, for editing is as much art as technique, requiring subjective judgment over and over again, and my approach is certainly open to discussion. No generally accepted principles for editing oral history exist. That said:

*Step 1 – Creating a Structure:* I suggest starting the editorial process by working through the entire interview transcript to identify “chunks” of narrative on a given topic as they appear in the text. If you are using a standard word processing system, you can color code blocks of text on the same topic wherever they appear in the transcript, so that you can literally “see” where the narrator talks about the same topic in different parts of the narrative. The task then is to cut and paste topical chunks into a single block of rough text and, by studying the broad topics discussed in each block, to devise a coherent story line. Blocks of text can then be moved around to conform to this developing structure. Elements may shift and change as you work more closely with the material and understand more fully the inner logic of the narrator's account, but typically the structure is broadly chronological, with thematic issues folded into this general frame.

*Step 2 – Cutting extraneous material:* The next step is to shape the narrative more artfully, in a manner that will, in the words of anthropologist

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview of issues in transcribing, see Elinor A. Mazé, “The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History,” in Charlton, et al, *Handbook of Oral History*, 217-271. The article's endnotes include references to standard transcribing guides.

<sup>9</sup> Here I differ from the more highly interventionist approach described by Jones in “*Blended Voices*,” in which she advocates rewording interviewees' accounts into standard English in order to present non-native English speakers well, enhance accessibility for a local audience, and ensure that intended meaning is communicated. While the highly local context of Jones's work perhaps necessitated the choices she made, I believe that sensitive editing could have accomplished the same goal while also retaining more fully the narrators' individual voices and modes of expression.

Marjorie Shostak, “grab the attention and maintain the interest” of the reader.<sup>10</sup> First, cut those chunks of the interview that fall outside the structure you’ve created. Cut sidetracks and digressions, perfectly acceptable in talk, which is often meandering, but less so in writing, which seeks a greater formal coherence and requires focus and flow to be intelligible. Making these cuts can be difficult, especially if you have conducted the interview yourself, know the narrator, and value all he has said. Still, keep the reader in mind: you don’t want to lose her and her appreciation for the narrator by presenting a narrative that has her wondering, “Where are we going here?”

Then, combine multiple iterations of what is essentially the same story into one full account, pulling together details that are scattered throughout the interview and cutting unnecessary repetitions. Because you have grouped together all interview segments on a given topic, you’ll begin to see where the redundancies are - *not*, I wish to be clear, repetitions for emphasis because what is being said is so central to the narrator’s story, but restatements, often in very similar language, that are unnecessary for the reader to get the point. In speech, words fly by, and so repetition is often an appropriate rhetorical strategy for making a point; in writing, words are more fixed, deliberate; they can be reread, studied; and so there is not the same need for repetition. Again, the goal is to heighten the narrative effect for the reader.

For an outstanding example of the way one oral historian has handled Steps 1 and 2, see Michael Frisch, “Preparing Interview Transcripts for Documentary Publication: A Line-by-Line Illustration of the Editing Process, in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 89 – 146.

*Step 3 – Refining the Text:* The next step involves working line by line, sometimes word by word, to create an intelligible, coherent, readable narrative while retaining the voice of the narrator. It is a more fine grained editing than that described in the previous step and likely much more time consuming. At this point, you cut false starts, self corrections, hesitations, interjections, asides and verbal tics – constantly repeated “you knows,” “uh huhs,” “wells,” and the like.

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<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Shostak, “‘What the Wind Won’t Take Away’: The Genesis of *Nisa – The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*,” in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 382-392; quoted material on p. 388.

You also cut repetitive or extraneous words and phrases appearing in close proximity to concentrate meaning. This is different from the sort of cutting discussed in Step 2, which seeks to locate in one “place” and condense repetitive material that appears throughout the interview. Here I’m referring to the habit many of us have of saying something more than once, of adding an unnecessary phrase, distracting detail, or aside, and of simply uttering something that doesn’t make sense in print. Still, you want to retain enough of the informality of the spoken word to convey a narrator’s mode of expression, retaining, for example, a phrase like “Well, you know, it was like this,” to introduce a story or a reflective looking back; or a series of “no, no, nos” to emphasize deep disagreement or disapproval. And you want to retain those hesitations and false starts, those searchings for words, that signal perhaps discomfort or unease or excitement, or an effort to gather one’s thoughts.

Also in this step you may need to move words around, splicing or transposing different parts of a short passage to facilitate comprehension. Speech, especially informal talk, is often elliptical, moving by phrases, fits and starts, rather than neat sentences. And again, your goal is to create a coherent narrative. But you also don’t want to distort the basic structure and cadence of a person’s talk, for example by restructuring speech into standard subject – verb – predicate format; rather, the point is to manipulate it only enough to make it readable, intelligible. Nor do you want to alter meaning – be careful of the way small shifts in the order of words can subtly shift their meaning.

Thoughtful use of punctuation – periods, commas, dashes, parentheses – can also help make sense of a string of words whose meaning is not easily grasped or is ambiguous. Many narrators, for example, speak in what are essentially long run on sentences by using the word “and” to connect a series of separate thoughts. Break these up with semicolons and periods, and consider omitting some of the “ands” (while retaining enough to convey the narrator’s way of speaking). Discussing her own editing practice, author Sherry Thomas has noted that “sometimes I would experiment . . . three or four ways, . . . simply taking exactly the same words in the same order and restructuring how they were punctuated” in order to make sense of what was said.<sup>11</sup>

This level of editing is a complex balancing act, requiring dozens – hundreds – of small judgment calls, as you work to retain the narrator’s voice while also sharpening that voice for the reader. But what about retaining or correcting “nonstandard” – and I use this word advisedly – English, including vernacular speech, grammatical errors, “incorrect” word usage, and the like? This raises a complicated set of issues, for which there are no established rules, indeed

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<sup>11</sup> Sherry Thomas, “Digging beneath the Surface: Oral History Techniques,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7:1 (1983): 50-55.

a variety of opinions and individual approaches.<sup>12</sup> In general, as with transcripts, rendering words phonetically (e.g. summah instead of summer) and using apostrophes to indicate dropped letters (e.g. 'cause instead of because, goin' instead of going) are discouraged. Not only is phonetic spelling hard to do well and difficult to read, it has often been used historically to signal ignorance and demean those whose speech deviates from a culturally defined standard.

But other nonstandard modes of speech – like vernacular uses of certain words (e.g. leave for let), irregular word forms (e.g. onliest for only), slang (e.g. like or ain't), and double negatives – are generally retained if they accurately reflect the narrator's typical speech patterns. Keep readability in mind, but don't be afraid to make the reader work a bit to get what the person is saying. My one exception here, if it may be thought of as that, is that I tend to correct grammatical errors like incorrect agreement of subject and verb and the use of the nominative instead of the objective case of a pronoun after a preposition if it is an obvious lapse from the way a person typically speaks. I think to do otherwise makes the narrator look stupid unnecessarily.

Consider the following examples. First is an excerpt from the written version of an interview with Emma Fraser, a black woman and former slave interviewed by the Federal Writers Project in the late 1930s:

I wants to go to Hebben now an' when de roll is call up dere an' I be dere, de Lord, he find a hiding place for me. I goes to chu'ch when I kin an' sing too, but ef I sing an' it doan mobe (move) me any, den dat a sin on de Holy Ghost; I be tell a lie on de Lord. No I aint sing when it doan move me. You mus'n ax me to do dat.

Second is Theodore Rosengarten's representation of Nate Shaw's speech in his oral biography of Shaw, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. Shaw was also African American living in the deep South:

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of these different approaches, see Bob Blauner, "Problems of Editing 'First-Person' Sociology," *Qualitative Sociology* 10:1 (Spring 1987): 46- 64, especially pp. 48-50. For a detailed discussion of one approach to editing nonstandard English, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 42-44; also Frisch, "Preparing Interview Transcripts," pp. 85-86.



Well, I'd been handlin heavy stuff, big forks of cotton seed every day, from that to haulin guano and natural soda and all that mess. Them fertilize bags was two-hundred-pound bags, ought to been handled by two men, one on each end pickin it up. John Thomas – he was a young fellow too but he was a little older than I was, he was stouter-built than I was – he was used to that heavy work. He stood it better than I did. I give out at it. By spring of the year, crop time come, I weakened down.

Both represent vernacular speech, but the former, with its apostrophes and phonetic spelling, has the effect of demeaning the narrator while the latter suggests Shaw's eloquence.

Sources: Emma Fraser, interviewed by Cassels R. Tiedeman, WPA Slave Narratives Project, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Pt. 2; Federal Writer's Project, United States Works Projects Administration, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field%28STATE+@od1%28South+Carolina%29%29>. Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers" The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974), 80.

*Step 4 – Intervening in the Text:* This last step in the editing process requires more direct intervention in and around the narrative to adjust for differences between spoken and written language, clarify what is unclear, and create a logical progression from topic to topic. It can mean, for example, inserting seamlessly a necessary word that was swallowed or simply remained unspoken; small bits of information that were assumed in the telling, like the name for which a pronoun was used; and also short phrases needed to make sense of what the narrator has said. While these insertions can be understood as formal deviations from what the narrator actually said, I think they do not need to be bracketed – they do not change meaning but rather enhance it, and reading text that is peppered with bracketed words and phrases can be quite distracting, impeding rather than enhancing understanding. I use brackets rarely, mostly when I've inserted a word or phrase that is a significant fact needed for sense rather than a clarifying detail. In general I prefer to use footnotes to identify events, people, and other references that appear in the text that are not explained in other contextual material accompanying the interview.

This step can also include inserting what might be termed short narrative bridges – a sentence or two or a brief paragraph – to fill in missing information and move the narrative along, often serving as a transition from one topic to another. These are written in the editor/author's voice, not the narrator's, and are typically distinguished by a different type face.

A question often arises about retaining the interviewer's questions in a published narrative. This practice has a certain currency, insofar as it reminds the reader of the dialogic nature of oral history, that what a narrator says is often in response to the interviewer's question. Personally, I do not favor it; I think it is a bit self conscious and impedes the flow of the narrative. I would prefer to see questions folded into responses, e.g. "On the subject of . . ." or, "To turn to the topic of . . .," or even, "You ask about . . ." as a means of making a transition. But if you do wish to retain the questions, I urge judiciousness and the same sort of care in editing as you accord the interviewee.

To conclude this discussion of working with the words: in an interview, the quality of the telling, the way a person talks about his life, experiences, and views, is intrinsic to the meaning of what is told. But paradoxically, literal fidelity to the spoken word – or the transcript of the spoken word – can betray meaning, can obscure rather than clarify what the narrator is trying to get at, as she meanders or thrashes around, misspeaks, says things that make sense when spoken but loose meaning when rendered in print. To refer again to Smith: He argues that to edit, we must manipulate the spoken word to restore the *hierarchy of thought* within in a person's oral narrative. I understand this hierarchy of thought to mean what a narrator considers most important and the relationships among the various subjects addressed in the interview. In oral communication, this hierarchy of thought can be conveyed by dialogue, voice, and gesture. In writing, however, it must be ordered more logically.

Finding "what's important" requires deep familiarity with the spoken text: where does the narrator become impassioned, speak with force, repeat himself? Alternatively, where does she recede, speak reflectively, as if to herself? These are clues to what is important – the underlying meaning – and what we must try to retain as an editor. What's the subtext of what he's saying? What's the interview about – not just what information is it trying to convey? Assessing this requires that we *listen* to the interview, not work solely with transcripts, a point I cannot emphasize enough. We must try to *hear* what the narrator is saying in and around the words to understand what he is trying to communicate, what is important, the hierarchy of her thought. We edit, therefore, for meaning.

I also refer again to Frisch's work, which argues that one must violate the authenticity of the transcript to avoid patronizing the narrator, however eloquent he might be in talk. *Not* to rework the transcript, often radically, can inadvertently render a narrator inarticulate in print. Many of the people we interview have little

social power and without our interventions would likely have no access to a wide audience. It is imperative, Frisch argues, that we present them well in writing, so as not to replicate the social dismissal or disrespect they often endure.

Editing then is an art, perhaps like filmmaking, because it involves cutting, splicing, rearranging; and sometimes the insertion of a “talking head.” It requires subjective judgment calls, in order to create a work that is coherent, pleasing, even beautiful.

Here is an example of an interview transcript closely edited for publication. Stricken material is ~~crossed out~~, material spliced in from elsewhere in the interview is *in italics*; words not spoken by the narrator but inserted for sense are in SMALL CAPS.

The excerpt is from an interview with Robert Birt conducted by Nyasha Chikowore and Maria Paoletti in July 2007 as part of the Baltimore '68 oral history project at the University of Baltimore. Interviews focused on memories of the racial disturbances that broke out in Baltimore shortly after Martin Luther King's assassination on April 4, 1968, as well as the larger context of race relations in Baltimore pre- and post riot. I edited this interview for inclusion in the volume *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City*, to be published by Temple University Press in 2011. Birt, who is African American, is currently professor of philosophy at Bowie State University; he was fifteen years old in 1968 and living with his family in the Latrobe Homes public housing project in the heart of the riot area.

~~How would you describe the racial mood in Baltimore at that time, like before the riots?~~

~~I don't know, I mean I guess it was you could call it the mood of the sixties, you know. There had been activism there, you know. The activists, at least the—I wouldn't call them career activists, but the ones that were more, the most persistent were of course usually not the majority. Although at times significant numbers people could be drawn into something, you know. I would gather that~~ The RACIAL mood of the ~~community~~ IN BALTIMORE BEFORE THE RIOTS was more

or less like the mood of, of I guess in most communities during the sixties. *Civil rights was large enough for everybody to know about it.* People were talking about *what WAS happened* ~~ING in the South.~~ ~~it, you know, things, it was in the barber shops, you know, people talked about it, you know, people—~~ kids talked about things, too, you know. I— you know I can't even remember what part of town it was, but Dr. King HAD come to Baltimore. I'm trying to remember what year it was. Was it '66 or '67, I don't remem— well, it was, it was, it would have been after the major, you know, in ~~Birmingham, Selma and all that, right.~~ He came to the Civic Center, and I think it was around '66 or '67. *It would have been after the major, you know, in Birmingham, Selma and all that, right.*<sup>1</sup> I wasn't there WHEN KING SPOKE. ~~I probably couldn't have gone unless somebody took me—I was a minor.~~ Neighborhoods were a little different than they are now, a little more cohesive than they are now. Kids didn't just go wherever they felt like going. But I remember, and I can't—the geography now fades in my mind and things have changed because the racial composition of the cities also change, but I remember being in a group of people, it was kind of interesting, I remember being in a group of people, you know, teenagers, we were about thirteen or fourteen, and so, we were going skating, ~~and I wasn't, I wasn't very good at as an ice skater, in fact I was bad at it, but I think~~ On the way back we, I don't know if we took a wrong turn or something, and we ended up in this clearly predominantly white area, which -- let's put it mildly -- was not very friendly, you know. And so, ~~w~~We started getting cat calls; and we were called ~~everything from~~ porch monkeys and niggers and what have you. And we were just trying to— and ~~w~~We had girls with us, you know, and so, you know, as, you know, we're teenage guys, we're sort of thinking, well, we have to, you know, avoid -- ~~this kind,~~ we have to at least get the girls out of here, you know, and so forth and so on and get ourselves out as soon as we could. And you know, a couple of incidents where ~~r~~Rocks were thrown, but fortunately we were at enough distance that nobody connected., you know. And ~~o~~Once we had gotten safely out of their range, you know, and one kid, I think he was called, I think he was called Pretty

Boy Norman or something like that, I forget now. But anyway, one of the kids says, "Well, they'd better not cross this track. If they do I'll have their asses ARE ours." And he says, "By the way, you know, I hear, I heard, I heard it was a very good talk he gave at the Civic Center, but I'm not so sure I believe in Dr. King's nonviolent program." And SO, we were aware of things but, you know, we were kids. Everybody had heard their parents talking about what was *happening in the South*.

And Baltimore wasn't as mobilized as *Bull Connor's* Birmingham where you had, you know, children, you know, facing police dogs.<sup>2</sup> And of course the authorities here weren't quite as extreme as in the deep South. *I don't think Baltimore had the kind of extreme racial tension that some cities had. It was there -- it still is there -- but it seemed to be sort of undercover, so maybe that's the reason why there is a kind -- I don't know if it's civility, but there's almost a kind something.* Of course it's not like, I mean it was not like *Bull Connor's city*, either, bBut it's somewhere in between and the tensions were there and I think that's when they came out AND there had been activism there, you know. But everybody knew that things were going on and, you know, of course, you know, everybody had heard their parents talking about what was, what happened in the South and all this and that, you know. There were neighborhoods where we were told, we were advised not to go straying into, that it was unsafe. Your parents always told you those sort of things. So, I mean I think that probably I would gather that the mood and the attitude of this section of town was probably not unlike that of many communities at that time. So we knew things would happen — civil rights was large enough for everybody to know about it. There were sSome churches were involved and there were activists in communities who were always telling you that, you know, TO get off your butt and fight for your rights. The activists, at least the - I wouldn't call them career activists, but the ones that were *more*, the most persistent were *of course* usually not the majority, — Although at times significant numbers OF people could be drawn into something, you know. So that was always going

~~on, you know. So, it was, you know, b~~But that doesn't mean that everybody was always on the barricades. That's the image of the '60s sixties that's a little naïve. But there was; ~~there was~~ an attitude that was at least receptive, at least ~~on a~~ sympathetic level with, ~~you know,~~ the activists because after all they're supposed to be for us, you know. But everybody wasn't an activist, ~~obviously~~.

<sup>1</sup> King visited Baltimore several times between 1953 and 1966. Birt is probably referring to his visit of April 22, 1966, when he spoke to Methodist clergy at the Baltimore Civic Center. Birmingham and Selma had been key sites of the struggle against racial segregation and for civil rights in the early to mid-1960s.

<sup>2</sup> Theophilus "Bull" Connor (1897-1973) was police commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights movement. He employed fire hoses, attack dogs, and other extreme measures against civil rights protesters. During the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1963 Birmingham Campaign, he authorized the use of these methods against demonstrating children and young people.

## Contextualizing

We now turn to my second main point about editing, that is, contextualizing, or helping the reader make sense of what is said. Like editing, contextualizing is essential if we are to turn oral history interviews into publishable work. A narrator speaks of a particular history at a particular moment to a particular person, who himself is situated in a particular history. The editor – if she is not the interviewer – also brings a particular intellectual apparatus to the interview. The reader needs to be oriented to all of this; the reader needs context. More specifically, the reader needs to be oriented along three dimensions: to the history being presented, to the method informing the conduct and use of oral history, and to the theory underpinning the work. Let me explicate each briefly.

*History:* An author/editor needs to set the historical stage for the interview or interviews by providing the reader with broad historical background to the topic at hand. She needs to provide a frame of reference, essential information so that the interview/s fit into this broader context. She needs to think of a narrator as a historical actor – not an individual interviewee – and describe the milieu in which he acted. She needs to explain the social and intellectual position from which a narrator speaks to give his words historical meaning.

*Method:* The reader needs to know – and the author/editor needs to explain – the provenance of the interviews: how they were conducted, by whom, for what purpose, under what conditions; also how they have been edited for publication, the nature and degree of intervention into the original transcript (or recording); and where they have been archived so that others can use them.

*Theory:* The author/editor needs to explicate his own theoretical approach to oral history: how he understands the narrators as situated in their own story; what the interplay has been between interviewer and narrator, or among interviewer, narrator, and author/editor; how he is using oral history to develop an historical argument – is it being used as a source of information, like any other document, or is its unique, interpretive dimension being emphasized? In other words, he needs to let readers know how he has made sense of the interview/s and what intellectual tools he has used to do so.

Discussion of history, method, and theory can occur in several places within a work, depending on its overall shape and organization: it can go in a general introduction, in introductions to individual chapters, in authorial interventions within individual interviews, or be incorporated within the overall historical argument being developed within the work. It can appear in footnotes. It can go in an afterword (why must the author/editor get the first word, after all?).

Providing context also means triangulating interviews with other extant sources to assess veracity, check for errors, and place the narrator's story within existing historiography. Narrators routinely get details wrong – a name, a date. Often these errors are quite unintentional and can be corrected seamlessly in the narrative, without comment; or, if longer explanation is necessary, within a footnote. For example, in an interview I edited for publication, the narrator misremembered certain details of her college civil rights activism – understandable, given that it occurred more than forty years prior to the interview. I simply cut some incorrect information that was inessential to her discussion, addressed remaining errors in a footnote, and noted that such unintentional misremembering of details is typical of oral history.

But sometimes errors need fuller explanation. Narrators also misrepresent the circumstances and events of their lives – sometimes wilfully, sometimes not. Sometimes they lie. Significant discrepancies between what the narrator has said, what others have said, and what is in the written record need to be noted and addressed. Portelli makes the important point that a narrative can be factually false but emotionally true. In his much quoted essay “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event,” he analyzes why oral accounts of the death of Italian steel worker Luigi Trastulli, who was shot during a workers’ rally protesting NATO in 1949, routinely got the date, place, and reason for his death wrong. Narrators, he argues, manipulated the facts of Trastulli’s death to render it

less senseless and more comprehensible to them; or, in his words, “errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings.”<sup>13</sup>

Not identifying and analyzing ways an interview diverges from the extant record - whether intentional or not – opens your work to easy criticism; doing so is intellectually responsible and gives your work credibility. For example, by checking the genealogical record for her biographical subject Julia Ruuttila, interviewer/editor Sandy Polishuk discovered that Ruuttila had misrepresented her racial identity. She claimed that her paternal grandmother had been a slave who, after the Civil War, married her former (white) owner, Ruuttila’s grandfather. Yet all extant records show this to be false: census records for her grandfather’s household prior to the Civil War did not list any slaves; their marriage record does not record her grandmother as black; and at the time of their marriage in Ohio, antimiscegenation laws were in force. While Polishuk lets this misrepresentation stand in Ruuttila’s narrative, she addresses it in her introduction, explaining that Ruuttila, a dedicated progressive unionist, “wanted to be identified with the underdog, the victim, and the persecuted,” and that “in addition, saying she was black presented an opportunity to educate others about racism.”<sup>14</sup> In this and other instances, Polishuk’s diligence in assessing Ruuttila’s account against other sources received favourable comment from reviewers. To cite another example: Irum Shiekh, whose forthcoming book *Being Muslim in America* presents a series of interviews with Muslims detained for specious reasons in the wake of 9/11, took great pains to corroborate narrators’ assertions of innocence and mistreatment with the documentary record, to substantiate, as much as possible, their often shocking stories.<sup>15</sup>

## Genres of Published Oral History

Let me now turn to a discussion of three different genres or types of oral history publication – biographical narratives of one individual, works that pivot around multiple narrators talking about a single topic or theme, and more traditional, interpretive studies that draw upon oral history as one of multiple sources – and suggest some of the particular editorial and contextualizing strategies relevant to each.

*Biographical studies of a single narrator:* These are works based on many hours of interviews with a single individual, generally conducted by the person writing the book. Sometimes the work also includes interviews with the subject’s

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<sup>13</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories. Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991); quotes material on p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Polishuk, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Irum Shiekh, *Being Muslim in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).



family and associates and also interviews conducted by others with the biographical subject. The first task in editing this kind of work is to identify the thematic focus – or in Smith’s language, the hierarchy of thought – within the interview/s. What’s important? What are the key themes the narrator wants to get across? And how to organize the material in a manner that conveys this? Consider Jo Ann Robinson’s *Education As My Agenda: Gertrude Williams, Race, and the Baltimore Public Schools*, an oral biography of a black woman who began her career in 1949 teaching third grade in Baltimore’s segregated school system and retired forty-nine years later as principal of an integrated elementary and middle school. The book focuses on Williams’s educational activism with the Baltimore City school system, as she sought to provide for her increasingly black, increasingly impoverished students the sort of opportunities generally available only to more privileged white students. It is a study of race and politics in an American urban school system during the last half of the twentieth century as exemplified by the career of one outstanding educator. Hence, the book is organized as a series of chronological chapters: The first couple of chapters recount Williams’s early life and schooling, particularly the development of her belief in education as a means of personal empowerment; the remaining chapters pivot around successive struggles in her career as an education activist. There is very little on Williams’s non-working, personal life. Or to cite another example: Diana Bahr’s *The Unquiet Nisei: An Oral History of the Life of Sue Kunitomi Embrey* focuses on Embrey’s efforts to break the silence about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and to seek recognition and redress for internees. It too is structured chronologically, though a good bit of the book focuses on her family’s internment at Manzanar War Relocation Center because Embrey’s postwar activism was so grounded in her own internment experience.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, most biographical narratives are broadly chronological in structure, with each period in a narrator’s life story emphasizing some particular theme or topic. Most people – narrators and readers – do tend to think of individual biography in chronological terms; that is how historical narrative generally proceeds. Adopting a less linear approach, one that approximates the way a narrator moved from topic to topic by association rather than in formal chronological order, can be done, but it takes considerable editorial skill to keep the reader from getting lost. In their *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Detention and Exile*, Jehanne Gheith and Katherine Jolluck adopt such an approach occasionally, but they alert the reader at the outset that the narratives are not entirely chronological and insert their own commentary at appropriate points to explain breaks in chronology and the underlying linkages among apparently

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<sup>16</sup> Jo Ann Robinson, *Education As My Agenda: Gertrude Williams, Race, and the Baltimore Public Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Diana Meyers Bahr, *The Unquiet Nisei: An Oral History of the Life of Sue Kunitomi Embrey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

disparate topics. The work is also a collection of several narratives, organized by narrator and emphasizing the gulag experience and its aftermath – a trajectory that itself was often deeply disruptive of any sense of personal coherence.<sup>17</sup>

But to return to the single biographical narrative: Once the focus and structure are determined – the hierarchy of ideas worked out – the task is to edit and contextualize. Generally, biographical narratives require significant editing – rearranging and cutting as I have outlined above. If the author/editor has also been the interviewer and thus been involved with the narrator in a fairly intimate way over a period of time, cutting material may feel like cutting off a body part but is essential to creating a coherent, tight narrative. Tangents or side stories may be vitally interesting to the author – and indeed might be so – but if they are off the point, if they distend or bloat the narrative, if they are redundant – cut, cut, cut.<sup>18</sup>

*Editing* a biographical narrative also generally involves putting a few words in the narrator's mouth to fill in missing details or provide essential information elided in the actual interview. Sometimes this material can be spliced in from the narrator's written work – speeches, memo, diary entries, etc. -- an approach taken by Kathryn Nasstrom in her biography of Frances Freeborn Pauley.<sup>19</sup> Or, if the subject is alive, one can work with the narrator to fill in the details. Again, I believe these insertions can be made without drawing attention to them by the use of brackets or some other orthographic marker – though the fact that one has done so should be noted in the discussion of methodology. Per above, editing the narrative can also mean providing short narrative bridges, in your own words, filling in a bit of missing information that links or provides a transition between two topics under discussion.

*Contextualizing* means providing enough background for the reader to make sense of the narrator's individual story, connect the individual vignettes and reflections into a whole, and understand how one person's story fits within a broader history. It means helping the reader understand the narrator as more than a single exemplary individual but also as a historical character, acting within a specific set of historical circumstances. Narrators tend to make themselves not only the protagonists, but also the heroes of their own stories – which is not surprising given the ego-centered nature of an interview and the progressive, hero-conquers-all trope of popular storytelling in Western culture. The

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<sup>17</sup> Jehanne M. Gheith and Katherine R. Jolluck, *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Detention and Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> For a useful discussion of the art of shaping a biography based on oral history interviews, see Deborah A. Gershenowitz, "Negotiating Voices: Biography and the Curious Triangle Between Subject, Author, and Editor," *Oral History Review* 32:2 (Summer/Fall 2005): 71-76, especially pp. 74-75 on cutting material.

<sup>19</sup> Kathryn L. Nasstrom, *Everybody's Grandmother and Nobody's Fool: Frances Freeborn Pauley and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

editor/author therefore needs to give a judicious assessment of the subject's historical role and significance, not simply accept the narrator's view of the matter. He needs to help the reader make sense of what the narrator has said. Robinson contextualizes Gertrude Williams's biography masterfully by introducing each chapter with an essay that assesses both the state of urban education in and the political and racial troubles plaguing Baltimore City schools during the period under discussion. What you have, then, are successive sections in each chapter, with Robinson's voice alternating with Williams's and, at times, disagreeing about the significance of events under discussion. Alternatively, Diana Bahr's approach in her biography of Embrey is more integrative: the book embeds lengthy quotes from Embrey's interviews within Bahr's contextualizing and interpretive frame.

*Studies that include multiple narrators talking about a given topic:* Work in this format presents many of the same issues as a single biographical narrative, but it also has its own particular challenges. A sequence of accounts on a given topic can be numbing, whether it is organized biographically by individual narrators or thematically, with individual narrators showing up in several thematic sections. So, in addition to considering thematic focus, organizing principles, and issues of editing and contextualization, the author/editor of this kind of publication needs to consider carefully what these interviews all add up to. She needs to consider:

- Why these six or twelve or twenty biographical accounts or thematic chapters?
- What is the arc of development – how do individual biographical accounts or chapters build on each other to develop some broader story? How are they *not* simply multiple versions of the same story?
- What is the plot, if you will – what does each interview or interview excerpt add to the story?

I've seen manuscripts that include upwards of fifty narrators talking about the same subject from different vantage points, running to perhaps 200,000 or more words. This is simply too many people for a reader to absorb, even reading more or less randomly at several sittings. The stories tend to become repetitious; the narrators run together. And 200,000 words is about twice as many as most publishers prefer. So it's important to pay attention to the pacing of the work and to differences among narrators. Do not cram in every single person interviewed. Choose judiciously. Ask: why this person? Why this quote? How does the person or quote build on the previous chapter or excerpt? How does it lead into the next? And help the reader understand the flow of the book. I recommend a short introduction to each individual or each section, both to introduce the person or topic and to identify what it adds to the story being told, how it fits into a broader pattern.

Thomas Dublin's *When the Mines Closed*,<sup>20</sup> for example, is structured as a series of biographical narratives exploring how individual men and women adapted to the closing of the coal mines in northeastern Pennsylvania, where they had been the mainstay of the local economy for generations. From approximately ninety interviews he and colleagues had conducted, he carefully selected twelve, to represent men and women; a variety of work experiences both in the mines and in the garment industry, where women had clustered; and various adaptive strategies, including those who left the coal region for economic opportunities elsewhere. One cluster includes a husband and wife in separate interviews; and then their daughter and her husband in a third interview, giving an especially rich portrait of a family's experience over two generations. The book is exemplary for its judicious decisions and clear arc of development. Or consider David Cline's *Creating Choice*, a collection of twenty-three interviews focusing on pre-Roe abortion activism in western Massachusetts.<sup>21</sup> Individual narratives are grouped into five categories – women who survived illegal abortions, health care providers, clergymen and their allies, feminist lay abortion counsellors, and what he terms “connectors,” women who linked medical care, activism, and feminism. Each narrator (or, in the case of the feminist counsellors, group of narrators) is situated differently within each category; each tells a different part of the story. While they sometimes refer to one another, they do not repeat each other.

The *third genre* is interpretive studies that draw upon interviews as one of multiple sources. In these studies, oral history material may dominate, but it is the author's voice that controls the narrative, drawing upon interviews in service to an overarching argument or interpretation. Here I would like to make an important distinction between oral history as a *document* and oral history as a *text*. Most historians continue to use oral history interviews as they do traditional *documents* – that is, as a source of information, often rendered as illustrative anecdotes, about a given topic for which the written record is scant, silent, or otherwise limited. An example is *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* by Jacqueline Hall, et al,<sup>22</sup> which draws extensively upon oral history to identify work rhythms and the family economy of mill communities as part of a broader argument about the transition from rural to urban forms of work and life.

Oral history in the documentary sense can also give an insider's view of a particular historical experience; it can document consciousness as well as

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Dublin, photographs by George Harvan, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> David P. Cline, *Creating Choice: A Community Responds to the Need for Abortion and Birth Control, 1961 – 1973* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

experience. Child labour, for example, in most historiography has been understood as deeply exploitative, one of the social problems attendant upon industrialization, and a problem successfully addressed by public and private reforms. Yet interviews with former child workers, including those in *Like a Family*, reveal a different view: both the children themselves and their parents valued their labour as a contribution to the family economy and as important preparation for what they anticipated would be a lifetime of hard work. For these narrators, child labour is not understood as a social problem, as a deprivation of the pleasures of childhood, an insight that leads to a deeper understanding of working class consciousness in the early twentieth century.

From an editorial standpoint, the danger in using oral history as documentary evidence – of either experience or consciousness – is that the author can cut-and-paste quotes to corroborate his own point of view, using interviews as a source of colourful anecdotes, not fully appreciating the complexity of the story that has been told. I am not suggesting a wilful misrepresentation of what the narrator means; what I am suggesting is that a rather casual approach to oral history, treating it as any other source, often does an injustice to the richness of the source, flattens it, fails to recognize new insights oral history can offer. In this type of work, too, there is a tendency to take what the narrator says at face value, quoting or paraphrasing the interview in a way that supports the larger argument, without subjecting the source to critical scrutiny, without assessing its accuracy, veracity, or, most importantly, its inherent subjectivity.

In publications that draw upon oral history as *text*, on the other hand, the interview itself is problematized. It is not used as evidence of fact, of experience or consciousness – though evidence can be embedded in it – but rather is understood as a text, a crafted, storied, subjective account situated in the time and place and circumstances of its telling. Explicating the narrative text becomes the historical problem the author addresses. Generally these sorts of works shape themselves as authorial analysis wrapped around lengthy quotes. Kim Lacy Rogers's work *Life and Death in the Delta*, to give an example, is not so much a story about the American civil rights movement as an explication of the narratives activists tell about their activism,<sup>23</sup> an effort to tease out the meaning activists give to their struggles.

An editorial issue here is finding the appropriate balance between narrator voices and the authorial voice, neither capitulating to the authority of the narrator nor erasing it, but writing in dialogic tension with it, if you will. Some authors are playing with ways of accommodating the tension – and even disagreement – between their own voice and that of the narrator. In her biography of the social activist Anne Braden, for example, Catherine Fosl rendered Braden's words in

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<sup>23</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

italics, “to retain her voice as clearly distinct from mine, [...in order to] allow me a free hand at interpretation without creating a power differential in which [Braden] felt suppressed, particularly at points when our perspectives on her life diverged.”<sup>24</sup> In her book based on interviews with poultry worker Linda Lord, Alice Rouverol wrote that she had to “surrender to the text” as Lord’s words “fought back” against her own interpretive biases about unions and deindustrialization.<sup>25</sup> Rouverol also notes how she had to resist imposing a false coherence on Lord’s apparently contradictory views on many matters. In these and other ways, oral historians are seeking to represent the dialogue – the open-ended back and forth – that lies at the heart of the oral history enterprise and to recognize that work resulting from this dialogue is a co-creation of interviewer and narrator.

### **Theory In Published Oral History**

Finally, a few words about the use of theory in these more interpretive works. Theory here is understood as a substratum of ideas that provide the framework for or basis of interpretation. Theory can be enormously valuable in understanding the meaning of interviews, but theoretically informed work can also be enormously dense, for theory deals in abstractions and abstractions are more difficult to grasp than narrative. Yet, some writers tend to mystify theory – they do not work to make it accessible. In my experience, a lot of bad writing is excused in the name of “theory.” I also think there’s a certain irony in the use of the forms of academic culture to present reflections on the lives of people one has learned about through rather ordinary face-to-face interaction and who might reasonably be expected to read what you have to say about them.

That said, there are a number of ways to demystify theory and, as with interviews themselves, make it accessible for the reader:

- Be judicious in referencing – and especially quoting – other authors in your text. Don’t use the work of others as a scaffold or crutch or showcase for explicating your own ideas. Rather, lead with your own ideas and integrate the work of others into your thinking. Reference those whose work informs your own, primarily in your footnotes. (This is the opposite of what you do in graduate school, and is often the first step in turning a dissertation into a book or a paper into a published article.)
- Related to this, don’t assume knowledge on the part of your reader – don’t write in intellectual shorthand, assuming the reader understands the

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<sup>24</sup> Polishuk, Fosl, et al., “The Challenge and Promise,” 65.

<sup>25</sup> Cedric N. Chatterly, Alicia J. Rouverol, and Stephen A. Cole, “‘I Was Content and Not Content’: The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 200), 124.

theoretical substratum of ideas driving your work. Lay them out for the reader.

- And do so in clear prose. While you will need to use abstract and sometimes rather specialized language, don't get caught up in it. Try to spin out complex ideas in everyday language.
- Make connections – explicitly and clearly - between theory and text and among theoretical ideas. It's often the case, I find, that the actual evidence from oral history doesn't quite mesh with the theoretical structure presumably used to explicate it. Or that various theoretical ideas spun out in sequence don't really link together very well – it's as if the author has to jam in every bit of theory he's conversant with whether or not they fit together in a coherent way.
- Finally, illustrate abstract or theoretical points by example. Strive to fold theory and text into a seamless narrative. Often we get long theoretical introductions and only after many pages do we get to the actual oral history material. This is neither an elegant or very readable way to present theory or interviews. Instead, play them off each other; use theory to explain evidence as you develop your narrative. And use it judiciously – essays sometimes begin with a great deal of theoretical heft, but then the interviews themselves are quite modest, even unremarkable – not up to the theory that precedes them, a situation I refer to as “a chicken on the legs of an elephant.”

As with authors who try to balance their own voice with that of their narrators, some of the most creative work in oral history is being done by those who attempt to integrate interviews with theoretical assessments, recognizing that most readers can respond to complex ideas if they are presented in clear language and respect the reader's desire for stories as well as for the meaning of stories. They do this by creating new forms of presentation, alternating narrative and analytic chapters in a book or within an essay; by playing theoretical speculations off of concrete examples from interviews; by moving seamlessly between author's voice and narrator's voice, interlacing one with the other. In his *Doña Maria's Story*, for example, Daniel James begins his edited biographical narrative of Doña María Roldán, a union activist, Peronist, and worker in Argentina's meatpacking industry, with a context-setting prologue; and follows it with four interpretive essays that reflect on the interactive and formal qualities of oral history.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Alesandro Portelli's masterful *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, focusing on a 1944 Nazi massacre of unarmed civilians in occupied Rome, takes a more integrative approach, combining numerous narrator voices, historical context, and assessments of the memory and meaning of this event into

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel James, *Doña Maria's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

a seamless narrative that puts into practice many of the insights from his more theoretical work.<sup>27</sup>

Let me conclude by saying that the principles I have outlined and the suggestions I have offered notwithstanding, editing oral history for publication in the end is a series of informed judgment calls: informed by an understanding of what the narrator said and what he was trying to communicate, the meaning underneath the words; by an appreciation for the nuances of language; and by a recognition of some of the complexities of transforming oral into written communication and knowledge of some of the methods and techniques for doing so. You might think of your work as a skilful melding of text, context, and meaning:

- The text is the oral narrative/s you are working with.
- The context is the historical and methodological background, what the reader needs to know to situate the narratives in time and place, and the provenance of and editorial approach to the interviews.
- Meaning is what you make of the interviews, what they all add up to, the answer to the fundamental question: “So what?”

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<sup>27</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). For his theoretical essays, see his *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*; and also *The Battle of Via Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).