

# The Intellectual Journey of Dr. James H. Morrison

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In 2009, Governor General Michelle Jean inducted James H. Morrison, a prominent oral historian, into the Order of Canada in acknowledgment of his contributions to the field of oral history.<sup>1</sup> Morrison began his career in the field of African History, but in later decades, his career followed a distinctly non-linear path in Public and Asian history. The major unifier of these different branches was oral history. Morrison's research interests encompass oral history, the fields of military history, ethnic history, immigration history, and, most recently, Asian history. Oral history has provided the common denominator for a career that has spanned over three decades. As James Morrison emphasized in our lengthy conversation about his intellectual trajectory, "oral history served as an important lens or prism in which I can view the past."<sup>2</sup> When describing his first encounters with oral history, Morrison recalled his younger self growing up in Economy, Nova-Scotia and listening to the elders tell stories about his community.<sup>3</sup> Through an interesting mix of passion and serendipity Morrison found himself studying oral tradition in an academic setting and in turn expanding the practice in Canada. He described how his interest shifted to African History during the Civil Rights movement which began in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Morrison questioned that people were left out of history texts, explaining that "Africa was not anywhere in my textbooks nor were a lot of other individuals; farmers weren't there, women weren't there."<sup>5</sup> Throughout his career, Morrison was determined to discover the silences in history and provide a voice to those previously ignored or overlooked. This essay does not attempt to explore the trajectory of Morrison's entire career. Rather, it focuses on three aspects of his journey: education, oral history, and the importance of interdisciplinary research.

In our interview, Morrison mused that in one's early twenties there is rarely a linear path laid out in one's mind concerning the future. Yet it was teaching at Frontier College from 1964 to 1965 that would seemingly shape James Morrison's career trajectory. Alfred Fitzpatrick founded Frontier College in 1899 with the intention of providing education and literacy to all labouring adults.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Freund, "Oral Historian James Morrison Named to the Order of Canada," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. James H. Morrison, interview by author, via Skype, 5 November 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Morrison, "The Man, The Mission and the Book," in *University in Overalls: a plea for part-time study* (Toronto: Thompson Education Publishing, 1999) 13.

students of Frontier College worked on projects which shaped the Canadian landscape, for example, “welding the grain chain which has enriched the West, up to Alaska Highway, the Sheslay Dam and the atomic-energy plant at Chalk River.”<sup>7</sup> Alfred Fitzpatrick’s was a Presbyterian minister-educator, so his methodology was largely based within a religious framework that also promoted assimilation. Hundreds of university educators were “sent out by the college to work and teach alongside men in hopes that this would promote their “Canadianization.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the beginnings of Frontier College did have a secondary purpose: to mould immigrants to be devout and “better” Canadians. The classes, apart from teaching English, would try to infuse Canadian geography, history, science, and politics into the lectures. In 1934, Edward Baldwin took over as principal of Frontier College and changed the focus from religion to education. This is not to suggest that Baldwin was not a religious man, but he was quoted as saying, “these men have their own powerful faiths. What they need is a little education to keep them from being shorn by the nonreligious wolves.”<sup>9</sup> Despite Frontier College’s underpinnings of assimilation, the experience of workers and educators was largely a reciprocal one, as workers and educators learned from each other. Morrison commented that during his time as an educator he became, “aware of immigrants and immigration because I was teaching immigrants and working with them during the day, but more importantly, it awakened in me an interest in pedagogy and andragogy in teaching.”<sup>10</sup>

Working towards helping your fellow “man” while being self-reflective in the process was an appealing aspect of the college. Frontier College never lacked for students as the average camp had “3,000 men enrolled in formal classes and another 12,000 in discussion groups.” The life was not easy, as Morrison remarked: “I was tired, I was exhausted and all those kinds of things. Yet, I had established myself as a person in relation to the men who worked there, as a worker and as a teacher.” Furthermore, he added, “I think that essentially gave me a lot of self-confidence in terms who and what I was.”<sup>11</sup> Frontier College allowed educators to expand their knowledge and gain experience in an unconventional setting. Morrison, like countless others, worked side by side with immigrants to Canada, expanding his understanding of life stories and multiculturalism. Morrison commented that if you remained open to different experiences, you are “therefore open to things like oral history, collective memory and history [, for

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<sup>7</sup> William Stephenson, “There Are No Sissies at Frontier College,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 224, No. 17 (October 27, 1951), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Walter, “Literacy, Imagined National and Imperialism: Frontier College and the Construction of British Canada, 1899-1933,” *Adult Education Quarterly* 54, No. 1, (2003), 44.

<sup>9</sup> William Stephenson, “There Are No Sissies at Frontier College,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 224, No. 17 (October 27, 1951), 83.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Morrison interview.

example,] of the Sikh community, and so on.” He made it clear that “people have these things [different cultures], which are of value, and you are not dismissive about it.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1966, after his time at Frontier College, James Morrison began his life in academia, obtaining a Bachelor’s of Arts (Major History) in 1966 and a Bachelors of Education in 1967 from Acadia University.<sup>13</sup> Morrison was studying during the 1960s, which was a very interesting decade for history, because social history was beginning to rise to the forefront of research. Social history was more concerned with questions of subaltern experiences and the consciousness of those often left out of the history books.<sup>14</sup> Morrison vividly explained his interest in those marginalized by history: “it was to take into account the perspective from the ‘other’ ... it was the people who lived the history and were directly affected by it which made me so passionate about the past.”<sup>15</sup> As E.P. Thompson stated so memorably in *The Making of the English Working Class*, “only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> Although the terminology “lost causes” and “losers” seems extreme, his main argument was towards advancing the history of those who had often been ignored in history. Social historians aimed to provide a complex depiction of the past and “the main effects of their works has been to reveal how limited the previous histories were.”<sup>17</sup>

During the same time Morrison developed a passion for African history from his interest in the African-American Civil Rights movement. The movement is often associated to large figures such as Martin Luther King Jr or Rosa Parks, yet African American students in the United States were also very active. For example, in 1960 a group of black college students held a “sit-in” inside a lunchroom reserved for whites and this “demonstration received mass attention from the media, eventually bringing their concerns to a national level.”<sup>18</sup> Although, this is just one example of the numerous occurrences of student activism at the time, these stories had an effect on Morrison’s intellectual journey. Morrison admitted that he was “very taken on with what was going on in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Eley Geoff, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>16</sup> E. P. Thompson, “The Making of the English Working Class,” in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 427.

<sup>17</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W & Company, 1994), 200.

<sup>18</sup> Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc, 1968) 29.

United States and Black History ... and [I] began to say to myself I know where my Scots heritage came from and the Irish heritage and all that, but where did the Black community [in Nova Scotia] come from?"<sup>19</sup>

After graduating from the University of Acadia, Morrison decided to pursue his budding interest in African history by moving to Africa. The development of African Studies in Canada was just beginning and the official association for African Studies in Canada only came into being at Laval University in 1970.<sup>20</sup> The president of the 1963 *Canadian Journal of African Studies* in his opening address even stated, "I recommend to all my students who are seriously interested in African studies that they leave Canada as soon as possible."<sup>21</sup> Morrison went to Legon, Africa with a passion to help; he volunteered for two years.<sup>22</sup> This occasioned a period of self-reflection and Morrison thought about where his life would lead him and whether or not he would continue academically. He decided he wanted to further his knowledge of African History and was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study at the University of Ibadan. Thus, in 1969, he moved to Ibadan, Nigeria and began working towards his Ph.D. in History.<sup>23</sup>

The University of Ibadan was founded in 1947 and the founding principal, Kenneth Mellanby, published a biography concerning his experiences. In the early years of the University, the colonial tone was evident in many of their governing policies. It was at the 1885 conference in Berlin, with all European world powers present but no African nations that the partitioning of West Africa began. The guidelines were based on Europeans traders, administrators, and missionaries, and as far as West Africa was concerned, "it was rather like a game of Monopoly, with France and Britain the only serious contestants."<sup>24</sup> Mellanby's biography had an undertone of colonialism as he discussed how his educated African students were Christian, because they had cast-off their pagan religions for a more "civilized" worldview.<sup>25</sup> Mellanby was also the object of public criticism for racial discrimination of staff as "Nigerian members of staff were leaving the college in great numbers, and the reason for their departure was 'disgust' with the treatment they had received."<sup>26</sup> The Nigerian members of staff were lower paid

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<sup>19</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>20</sup> Front Matter. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1977), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Cohen. *Bulletin of African Studies in Canada / Bulletin des Études Africaines au Canada*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov., 1963), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Crowder. *Colonial West Africa* (London: Frank Crass, 1978) 42.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth, Mellanby. *The Birth of Nigeria's University* (London: Methuen and Co LTD, 1958) 230.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 248.

and were given no respect or chance of promotion; furthermore, Mellanby was succeeded by British academics.<sup>27</sup>

J. H. Parry's final year of term as university president was significant because the University and Nigeria would soon undergo a tremendous change. On October 1, 1960, Great Britain declared Nigeria's independence and the Nigerians established a federal republic with a parliamentary government.<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Onwuka Dike took over in 1960 as the first Nigerian president of the university and the first African head of the department of history.<sup>29</sup> When Dike began his career the Ibadan history department only offered courses in European history. Thus, he pioneered and formed a new curriculum making "the Ibadan history department widely recognized as a leader in pioneering the new historiography in Africa" and included a focus on oral tradition.<sup>30</sup> Historians in the department shifted their focus to reclaiming the African history that the British had for so long undermined. The British not only asserted their power, they also "asserted that there was no African history because the African ancestors had done nothing worthy of historical attention."<sup>31</sup> Historian J. F. Ajayi had a large role in the development of oral history in the history department at the University of Ibadan. Although Dike pioneered the research, it was "Dr. Ajayi who enhanced the respectability of these techniques by masterful application which represented an evolution in African historiography."<sup>32</sup> Ajayi was interested in researching nineteenth century Yoruba history for which written sources did not exist; thus he "depended upon the use of written records of non-Yoruba origins and upon Yoruba oral traditions."<sup>33</sup> The influence of this historian on Morrison's work was evident during his interview as he listed him as one of the pioneer historians in oral history research.<sup>34</sup> As noted, the shifts in the department had already occurred by the time Morrison arrived in 1969 and so he became immersed in a university with a strong emphasis on oral tradition and expanding African history research.

Morrison's doctoral dissertation focused on the Jos Plateau, an area that had approximately fourteen different ethnic groups, yet, "[b]y 1906, most of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, "Bill of Rights in Action," (Volume 26, No. 1, Fall 2010), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ebere Nwaubani, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, "Trade and Politics and the Restoration of the African in History," *History in Africa*, Vol. 27 (2000), 230.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>31</sup> J.F.Ade Ajayi, E.J.Alagoa, "Black Africa: The Historians' Perspective," *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism* Vol. 103, No. 2 (Spring, 1974), 126-7.

<sup>32</sup> Robert A. Hess, "J. F. Ade Ajayi and the new Historiography of West Africa," *African Studies Review*, Vol 14, No 2 (1971), 276.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>34</sup> Morrison interview.

ethnic groups inhabiting the Plateau had succumbed to the British guns.”<sup>35</sup> As Morrison explained: “It was an interesting area in terms of its resistance to Islam, Hausa conquest, and Jihad, but also because it was initially resisting the British directly as well as indirectly in terms of cooperation. Something original, something that measured resistance and not just to colonialism, but also to conquest by people’s different from the Plateau’s people.”<sup>36</sup>

The theme of resistance is found in most literature concerning the Jos Plateau. Until the British arrived the Jos Plateau emerged as a hill refuge inhabited by people “who lived in the most inaccessible reaches, were economically self-sufficient, and who at best maintained minimal links with each other.”<sup>37</sup> Their isolation was seen to contribute to the idea of resistance and change to external pressures. The people who lived on the Plateau had rich farming and tin fields which other indigenous populations were always interested in exploiting. The Hausa, an indigenous competitor for the tin mining in the Plateau area, initially thought that British conquest was positive because it would give them access to tin fields which the hostile inhabitants protected. The Hausa would be surprised to discover that the British were intent on completely controlling the mines and they would have even less power.<sup>38</sup>

When Morrison began his fieldwork in the 1960s, he was interested in the genealogy of the Plateau people and their intricate but previously unwritten history. To discover their stories, Morrison, like Ajayi, turned to oral history as a methodology. Morrison described the difficulties in conducting oral history interviews and integrating with the communities. Tape recorders and electronic equipment were not as widely available at the time. As a result, Morrison described his fieldwork as being extensive, taking a year and a half to complete. Furthermore, he explained how he had to train up to fourteen translators in oral history research because of the many different dialects and ethnic groups in the regions. He would take time to train the interpreters for about a week to give them the appropriate oral history skills.<sup>39</sup> Morrison’s methodology consisted of asking the chief to call a meeting of all the elders; he would then have a group meeting that would “go on for two to three hours and I would pass around cigarettes because cigarettes were the currency so to speak and then at the end of it we’d have a big calabash of Pito which was an alcoholic beverage that was used. We then tried to sort out who among these elders we’d want to interview individually

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<sup>35</sup> James H. Morrison, “Early Tin Production and Labour on the Jos Plateau 1906-1921,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol.11, No. 2 (1977), 209.

<sup>36</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>37</sup> David C. Tamb, “The Hill Refuges of the Jos Plateau: A Historiographical Examination,” *History of Africa*, vol. 5 (1975), 202.

<sup>38</sup> Morrison, “Early Tin Production,” 207.

<sup>39</sup> Morrison interview.

apart from the group.”<sup>40</sup> In the end Morrison had a diverse account of the Jos Plateau’s resistance to external pressures and self-sufficiency. By the end of his fieldwork he had “six journals that are full size probably about 200 pages” to complete his dissertation all of which now reside at the library of Dalhousie University.<sup>41</sup>

Morrison stressed the importance of external research after conducting oral history interviews. In his experience this was the method used to try and distinguish the justification and possible truth in the stories. When conducting the interviews he explained how “the elders were telling you they would be able to trace back their ancestry twelve generations ... so I have no paper verification of this; it is all oral, it is a whole series of witnesses I am collecting from.”<sup>42</sup> However, in some instances the accounts would not match and he explained how “you end up simply including both versions because you have no documentary evidence other than the oral testimony people are giving you.”<sup>43</sup> This is the difference between oral tradition as a long line of memory compared to what Jan Vansina calls “immediate history,” that is, the stories which are recounted by contemporaries and should always be compared with available sources.<sup>44</sup> Using other markers of time such as wars, floods, and droughts, one could verify accounts. Morrison also explained that in most cases the secondary sources paralleled the oral history testimony.<sup>45</sup>

The oral history interviews also provided illustrations of a significant divide between African and British records. Morrison conducted research in the British archives to supplement his oral testimony but the archives were built upon a colonial viewpoint.<sup>46</sup> This aspect of Morrison’s work has a significant connection to the archival turn and the problems with information found within an archive. Jacques Derrida in his text *Archive Fever* presented the argument that the archive is a symbol of authority and power.<sup>47</sup> There are inherent silences in archival sources, and the voices strongly heard are normally of those with power over historical production.<sup>48</sup> The archive represented not only state power and authority, but also the power of the archivists and those who have power to shift

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>47</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archives and Cultural History* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 51.

the focus of research to those sources they deem fit. Researchers in an archive must always take these considerations into account because when they “encounter such documentary artifacts – whether archivists, scholars, curators, or anyone else – [they] ignore those different levels at their peril.”<sup>49</sup> For example, the archival sources on the Jos Plateau conquest merely mentioned the British meeting the chiefs and pacifying the tribe. However, during Morrison’s interviews with one elder a very different story was remembered. Morrison recalled that the elder seemed passionate as he re-enacted the events passed down from 1603, as he explained: “Then I heard the sound Wok, Wok, Wok, Wok, Wok come from him and so I leaned over to the interpreter when the man had finished his answer and said, well what was that? What was that noise? And my interpreter said that was the British guns that were used to kill the people in the village.”<sup>50</sup>

This example illustrates the distinctive divide between information provided by British archival sources and the experiences of people being colonized by the British. The British archives are based upon an argument of “colonial regime, one that either sought to eradicate the past or to represent it in ways that seemed at best ... in favour of one or another colonial rhetoric’s of rule.”<sup>51</sup> When the British wrote their reports on the possession of the tin field there was no mention of exploitation or an overt misuse of power. The memories of Morrison’s interviewees commented on deeper social problems within the tribe. For example, most chiefs would leave it to the elders to tell Morrison their community heritage. However, in the cases where the British forcefully implanted a chief into the tribe, they would stay during the interview because “there was the possibility that there would be questions raised about his chieftaincy.”<sup>52</sup> The British used an indirect form of colonial government before independence by implanting chiefs who “exercised an important function by ventilating opinions, but they had no real power.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, the elders would perhaps reflect on this during the interview and that created unease for the British selected chief. These instances of discord were only made apparent through Morrison’s interviews, making them important as reflections on a society not previously known.

Morrison continued to remain open and flexible immersing himself in the communities to discover untold stories. Michael Frisch, in his text *Shared Authority*, explained how “we need projects that will involve people in exploring

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<sup>49</sup> Kathleen Marquis, “Not Dragon at the Gate but Research Partner: the reference archivist as mediator” in Francis X. Blouin, William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory* (Massachusetts: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>50</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Dirks, “Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic notes on the sources of history,” in Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 52.

<sup>52</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>53</sup> Kenneth Mellanby, *The Birth of Nigeria’s University* (London: Methuen, 1958), 3.



what it means to remember, and what to do with the memories to make them active and alive.”<sup>54</sup> Morrison was accepted into these tribes sharing in their drinks and taking part in their culture. He displayed a keen sense of the group and the importance of sharing his authority as a researcher. Furthermore, he mentioned how the elders of the tribe would often “tell them what I was doing and how important that history was to the community and the children would benefit from it and the village because then they would know their past.”<sup>55</sup> This was a manner in which they would contribute to remembering and actively interacting with their past. As noted above, the British had long distorted African history, so this was a chance to reclaim their history. As African historian Ajayi explained, “The data needed for a rehabilitation of African history had to come from within Africa, first in the recordings of oral tradition, ancient lore, customs, and laws.”<sup>56</sup> Morrison’s research and resulting dissertation followed this methodology and offered a new facet to the one-dimensional colonial historiography.

One criticism of Morrison’s methodology, which he conceded to during his interview, was his underdeveloped research on women. He tended to focus primarily on the men of the tribe and he even asked himself, “But what about the women? Why didn’t I interview the women? Because it was within a particular period of time ... yet at the same time in this day and age I would have done it totally different, but I can’t go back and redo that.”<sup>57</sup> His acknowledgment of “this day and age” is important because it represents how the interpretation of history changes depending on the period or lens in which we examine it from. At the time, research into the lives of African women was largely undeveloped. Audrey Smedley, an anthropologist who examined women’s roles in Africa in the 1960s, explained how there were taboos against men interacting with women. Although female researchers had full access to the women, it was a “reality that male scholars have been restricted in their access to women’s private lives by the conventions of the societies they studied.”<sup>58</sup> Morrison was self-reflective about this gap in his oral history research, which was partly due to the historical perspective at the time, yet arguably, was also due to the social taboos of the tribe.

Morrison’s acceptance and exploration of oral history and African history at a time when they were not widely recognized exhibited his openness to different perspectives. As a result, upon his return to Canada in 1976 he found himself an expert in two facets of history not widely studied and he noted that it

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 27.

<sup>55</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>56</sup> J.F. Ade Ajayi and E. J. Alagoa, “Black Africa: The Historians’ Perspective,” *Daedalus* 103/2 (Spring, 1974): 129.

<sup>57</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>58</sup> Audrey Smedley, *Women Creating Patriliney: Gender and Environment in West Africa* (Altamira Press, 2004) 2.

was hard to discover teaching positions in African History.<sup>59</sup> He also noted that “oral history research reflected the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s and began to expand with tape recorders becoming more prevalent”<sup>60</sup> Although the field of oral history was beginning to expand in Canada, Morrison explained that in 1977 “there were very few of us as trained historians doing oral history; it certainly wasn’t taught as a discipline.” He also explained that “older historians were much more resistant to it because, of course, it was not in their training and they wanted to interact with books and documents, not with real live people.”<sup>61</sup>

Morrison exhibits a disconnection from historians who used written text as a sole source of research. The social aspects and dealing with “real life” people are some of the reasons historians are not enthused about oral history. However, with the turn to social history, as shown, historians were no longer bound to books and “the critical effect of this new approach is to allow evidence from a new direction.”<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, a position for an oral historian became available at Parks Canada, a government agency with a mandate to present nationally significant examples of Canada’s natural and cultural heritage.<sup>63</sup> Morrison began his career at Parks Canada in 1977, marking the first instance he was officially titled as an oral historian.

An important part of Morrison’s journey, as previously mentioned, was his commitment to education and passing on knowledge. In 1979, Morrison’s inherent passion for education drew him away from Parks Canada where he felt unsatisfied and unchallenged and took a position at The International Education Centre at Saint-Mary’s University. It is here that his passion for teaching that had begun at Frontier College came full circle. He describes the Centre as “a development education kind of program where you were informing the community about some of the global issues that were going on.”<sup>64</sup> During the same time, in 1978-9, Morrison became president of the Canadian Oral History Association and founded the Atlantic Oral History Association. Keeping in mind that he initiated numerous oral history, ethnic, and multicultural workshops in Nova Scotia, these two developments were important points in his intellectual journey.<sup>65</sup> This view is supported by Ronald Labelle, who wrote that “James Morrison has been, from the start, one of the main proponents of oral history in

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<sup>59</sup> Ashley Clarkson interview with Dr. James H. Morrison. 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Rebecca Sharpless, “The History of Oral History” in Thomas L Charlton, Lois E Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *The Handbook of Oral History* (Maryland: Altamira Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>61</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (London: Oxford Press, 1978), 6.

<sup>63</sup> Parks Canada, “Parks Canada’s Mandate,” (2012) online at: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/agen/index.aspx>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Canada.”<sup>66</sup> Morrison remained passionate about oral history even through in the 1980s and 1990s when “heated debates around the significance of memory and narrative construction energized many oral historians across the globe.”<sup>67</sup> Alessandro Portelli introduced interesting perspectives concerning these debates, especially how memory can be more important than “truth.” Portelli suggests that oral history is different and it “tells us less about events as such than about their meanings.”<sup>68</sup> The stance is not to argue that there is no factual evidence in oral history, but to explore how interviews can tell historians “not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.”<sup>69</sup> The subjectivity of interviewees is interesting, for even if it does not alter the overall foundation of history, they add a psychological perspective that is important. The task of the historian is to remain critical and open to different sources. As previously illustrated, Morrison understood that sources needed to be examined from a critical perspective and he helped pioneer the growth that hindered the negative viewpoints on oral history. In 1979, during his first presidential address to the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA), he explained, “the COHA will provide adequate guidelines for oral researchers with regard to interview ethics.”<sup>70</sup> He wanted to aid in rectifying the fact that students are not taught extensively about oral history; as he explained, “not all documents are true, not all newspapers tell you the truth, and neither do all diaries. We teach our students how to critique these sources and how to use the archives, but we do not teach them how to do an appropriate oral history interview.”<sup>71</sup>

Morrison became Dean of Arts and Professor of History at Saint-Mary’s University in 1983, yet he continued to have an active presence in various educational centres in the university and abroad. For example, in 1989 he was a visiting fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. The Oral History Centre of Singapore was established in 1979 with a mandate to record the voices “of people who have been eyewitnesses to events and developments that marked the growth of Singapore from a British Colony to an independence country.”<sup>72</sup> In an article concerning the Japanese occupation of Singapore,

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<sup>66</sup> Ronald Labelle, “Reflections on Thirty Years of Oral History in Canada,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 25 (2005): 10.

<sup>67</sup> Sean Field, “From Stepchild to Elder: Has Oral History Become ‘Respectable’?” *International Oral History Association* (2009) online at <http://www.iohanet.org/debate/?p=23>:

<sup>68</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop*, No 12 (Autumn 1981), 99.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> James H. Morrison, “The President’s Message / Le mot du président,” *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 4/1 (1979), 1.

<sup>71</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>72</sup> *Memories and Reflections, The Singapore Experience: Documenting a Nation’s History Through Oral History* (Singapore: Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2007).

Morrison explained how before and during the occupation, the citizens of Singapore had very little voice. This changed when well over two hundred interviews were collected by the staff of the Oral History Centre to fill in the gaps.<sup>73</sup> Morrison's knowledge of Asian Oral History had a strong impact on the next direction of his academic career. Morrison decided he wanted a change and shifted his focus at Saint-Mary's University to Asian History using oral history as a lens, to help once again educate others from a different perspective. The ways in which oral history can allow for transitions into what one considers a different field is extremely interesting. Oral history can cross what some would argue are strict categories or structures of history. Morrison's intellectual journey was explicitly non-linear and it is arguable that it is somewhat attributed to his work in oral history as a connector allowing him to cross boundaries. The workshops on oral history and his work in various education centres helped rectify the gap in scholarly knowledge on oral history. Morrison's education journey also turned him once again towards public history working with the Pier 21 Society.

In 1996, the Pier 21 Society approached Morrison with the possibility of opening an immigration museum. In 1995, at the Halifax G7 Summit, Ruth Goldbloom, President of the Pier 21 Society, approached Prime Minister Jean Chretien for support and received a \$4.5 million pledge towards the project.<sup>74</sup> The museum officially opened to the public on Canada Day in 1999, eleven years after volunteers began to renovate and restore the immigrant shed.<sup>75</sup> Pier 21 has a rich intangible heritage which was waiting to be exposed through oral history. Morrison began the oral history project at Pier 21 believing that staff and immigrant stories were extremely valuable. This resulted in Pier 21 being referred to colloquially as "the museum of memories." Returning to the aspect of education, Morrison conceded that he was doing fewer interviews in his final years working with Pier 21 and more teaching because he felt that if he "could spread the ripples a little wider, throw a handful of pebbles out instead of just one big one, it would be more beneficial."<sup>76</sup> In the end, he acknowledged the benefit and need to teach the methodologies of oral research more widely, through workshops and seminars, to further the expansion of the practice. Morrison explained that when he teaches, no matter what the material, he attempts "to instil in my students, not a presentism that the moment we are now living in is the most important, but an appreciation of the present from a historical perspective."<sup>77</sup> The

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<sup>73</sup> James. H. Morrison, "Japanese Occupation of Singapore Oral Sources," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, Vol. 14 (1994), 92.

<sup>74</sup> Trudy Duivenvooden Mitic, J.P. Leblanc, *Pier 21: The Gateway That Changed Canada*. (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2011), 127.

<sup>75</sup> CBC News, "Halifax Celebrates gateway to Canada: Pier 21," *CBC News Canada*, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999, online at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/1999/07/01/pier990701.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Morrison interview.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

award bestowed upon him by the Canadian Government reflects his dedication and passion. He relayed his amazement at being inducted in the Order of Canada in 2009. Morrison spoke humbly of this honour as though all oral historians received the award, as he explained that it gave “validation to oral history as a technique and as a means to understand history and is tremendous validation of what we do as historians.”<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion, Morrison’s intellectual journey illustrates his commitment to education as he expanded his knowledge about African and oral history while continually reaching out to educate others. The many facets of his journey and the manner in which he remains open and flexible to new methodologies and theory are inspiring. As a budding historian interested in oral history, the interview with James Morrison’s provided me with a compelling introduction to the developments of the practice in Canada and abroad. Morrison’s career marked the ways in which oral history can surpass the boundaries of history as a discipline. He concedes that his journey is a rare one and that contemporary historians are often forced into more rigid frameworks. However, when examining Morrison’s diverse journey it seems that anything can be possible as long as you remain open, driven, and passionate.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.