

## Trauma, Memory, and Oral History: How to Proceed

**“Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity.”**

**---Kali Tai<sup>1</sup>**

For decades, historians have shied away from the collection and analysis of traumatic testimonies, concerned about the narratives’ reliability and uneasy about facing strong emotions and fragile narrators. After joining the Women and War Oral History Project, conducting a dozen interviews, and reviewing the literature, I believe historians should confront difficult human stories. They should face them squarely, even seek them out to record and to archive. By providing a forum for giving testimony, the historian can help the narrator transform from victim to witness and, in the process, aid the speaker in reclaiming her agency.<sup>2</sup> The historian should understand she is not a therapist; it is not her job to heal the narrator, but she can preserve these memories and be a part of creating a new public history built from traumatic events, often bringing a voice to the silenced. She can contribute to generating new political solutions for those who need them or in bringing together people who have shared a common trauma.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, A Black Family Keepsake* (New York, Random House 2021), xv, 274; Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 14-22; Mary Marshall Clark, “Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe: Reflections on the September 11, 2001, Oral History Memory and Narrative Project, in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed., Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 257.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Steven High, ed., *Beyond Testimony and Trauma* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 12 (bringing together AIDS survivors and suffers through ACT UP oral history project).

I would like to present a brief overview of the development of oral history as a separate discipline with emphasis on how Holocaust studies have influenced the approach to traumatic testimonies. My discussion will also explore the reliability of oral history and the deeper meaning inherent in memory. Finally, I will offer suggestions to the student preparing to interview a narrator who may describe traumatic events.

### **Oral History Reborn**

Since the nineteenth century, historians have favored, even “fetishized,” written sources, documents in the archives, over oral testimonies.<sup>4</sup> Oral accounts were often viewed with suspicion, making oral history a “kind of stepchild” of academia<sup>5</sup>. Oral history seemed to hinge on memory, which was fallible. The lived experience could vary with each retelling.<sup>6</sup> For many centuries, historians favored documentary sources. Documents seemed fixed. Every researcher would read the same words on the same page each visit. Perhaps influenced by the natural sciences and the scientific method, the desire for data, historians came to prefer the immutability and reproducibility of the written word.<sup>7</sup>

A revival of interest in oral history began in the 1930s with the Federal Writers Project and its interview of 2,300 formerly enslaved people. The federal government hired educated, white-collar workers to gather and edit the narratives of America’s elderly population of freed slaves.<sup>8</sup> After World War II, this desire to collect firsthand narratives grew, driven in part by

---

<sup>4</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 80.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Marshall Clark, director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, quoted in Alexander Stille, “Prospecting for Truth in the Ore of Memory,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/10/arts/prospecting-for-truth-in-the-ore-of-memory.html>, accessed April 22, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Abrams, *Oral History*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 80.

<sup>8</sup> “The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection: The WPA and Americans’ Life Histories,” *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers->

technology, primarily the invention of the portable tape recorder, which made the collection of personal testimonies easier and more accurate.<sup>9</sup> In parallel to the technological breakthroughs, academic interest in the field increased. As one example of emergent awareness in the U.S. Alan Nevins, a former journalist, skilled and experienced at interviewing, founded an oral history center at Columbia University in 1948.<sup>10</sup> He focused on collecting and archiving the memories of white, male elites such as John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford.<sup>11</sup> Across the Atlantic, Paul Thompson, a social historian at the University of Essex, started the British Oral History Society in 1973.<sup>12</sup> Thompson, a socialist, wanted to capture the voices not of the elite but of the working class.<sup>13</sup> This desire to hear more voices, especially previously silenced or overlooked voices from the working class, became the predominant strain in oral history and a major current in academic history throughout Europe and ultimately beyond.<sup>14</sup> Seeking out regular people who did not leave behind memoirs or biographies and interviewing them was well suited to this new focus on social history.

When Alessandro Portelli set out to collect labor protest songs and snippets of local dialect in Italian villages in the early 1970s, he tapped into trauma as a literary scholar. In the process of interviewing people and hearing their stories, Portelli became aware of the distance

---

[project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/](https://www.library.columbia.edu/libraries/ccoh.html), accessed April 18, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2016), 2. Perks and Thomson quickly note that this was “not the motor for change, which rather lay in the subjects, methodologies, and politics of historical research.” Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> “Oral History Archives,” *Columbia University Libraries*, <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/ccoh.html>, accessed April 18, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 2-3; James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5.

between memories and the “official account” of events. Most famously in the instance of Luigi Trastulli, the young man killed at an anti-NATO protest in 1949 whose death was remembered as occurring in 1953 by the entire town of Terni, Italy, Portelli looked for the reasons behind the gap between memory and reality.<sup>15</sup> What factors would motivate people, a village full of people, to relocate an event in time? Suggesting that the townspeople wanted to give the death more meaning, he proposed that “(o)ral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”<sup>16</sup> Writing in a post-positivist period when truth was suspect and memory studies were in their infancy, Portelli declared “(t)he first thing that makes oral history different...is that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*.” (Emphasis in original)<sup>17</sup> He was more interested in “how the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story” than in their underlying veracity.<sup>18</sup>

Scholarship on trauma and oral history arises out of the intersection of these two trends in the field, the rise of social history and the emergence of memory studies. As more interviews of ordinary people are conducted, we learn about those affected by policy, about foot soldiers and citizens instead of generals and presidents. Additionally, oral history opens space to examine emotions as more stories describing traumatic events are collected. As more such accounts are gathered, the interpretive, meaning-giving effect of memory will become more pronounced. Narrators will recite dates and times and will relate factual reports of what happened, but they will also tell how it felt and what it meant to them. Jennifer Cramer suggested that trauma is

---

<sup>15</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, New York: The State University of New York Press, 1991), 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

inherent in any long life, and “anyone interviewed about the past eighty-five years of life on this planet could share a story of struggle.”<sup>19</sup>

Oral historians are not merely collectors, hoping to amass large numbers of narratives which describe a time period or an event. Often, they are inspired by a desire to shape public memory and, in some cases, to seek political and social justice.<sup>20</sup> One impetus for gathering these oral histories is to give voice to the voiceless by recording the stories of those who were harmed or ignored because they were not powerful.<sup>21</sup> Historians hope to discern patterns and trends out of a multitude of individual stories and to enrich our understanding of events.<sup>22</sup> **(still pretty brief, but now it has its own paragraph; could delete here and discuss more later)**

### **Emotion: Lessons from Holocaust Studies**

Historians have often avoided personal accounts of trauma as appropriate subjects for scholarship.<sup>23</sup> Emotions are messy. Data is clean. Historians eschewed analyzing terrible events, quick to label them as too horrible as to be comprehensible.<sup>24</sup> Oral history methodology challenged this tendency. Holocaust historian Henry Greenspan recalled being advised in the mid

---

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer A. Cramer, ““First, Do No Harm”: Tread Carefully Where Oral History, Trauma, and Current Crises Intersect.” *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 203-213.

See also High, *Beyond Testimony*, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, “Case Study,” 257; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 179.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), vii. “(t)he search for social justice remains central to our work.”

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?” *History and Theory* 55 (October 2016):384-385, 389-390. LaCapra describes how adding Native voices to the story of Custer’s defeat reframed and deepened our understanding of events.

<sup>23</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?” 377; See also Joan Tumblety, *Memory and History* (London: Routledge, 2013), 144; Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 3, 6. Tal argues that “(T)raumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention.” In this way, too, the historian sands off the emotion.

<sup>24</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, History, Memory,” 377.

1970s not to collect oral histories from survivors or to analyze them for his dissertation because '(a)ll the work on survivors has been done; and anyway, the survivors are all dying.'<sup>25</sup> Better he should focus on second generation memory and more attenuated trauma.<sup>26</sup> The explosion of writing on the Holocaust and on other traumatic events just a decade later belied that attitude.<sup>27</sup>

Some historians remain uncomfortable analyzing other people's emotions. Many oral history collections document an interviewer who quickly changed the subject or ended an interview that elicited tears.<sup>28</sup> Some critique oral history practices by suggesting that interviewing a narrator about traumatic events will injure the speaker by unearthing carefully buried memories.<sup>29</sup> Historians, like physicians should "first do no harm."<sup>30</sup> Some scholars question the motives of a narrator to share deeply personal anecdotes even as they eagerly record those painful memories.<sup>31</sup> Are narrators who share freely and candidly exploitable?<sup>32</sup> Should the interviewer beware of taking advantage of vulnerable people?<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Henry Greenspan, "From Testimony to Recounting: Reflections from Forty Years of Listening to Holocaust Survivors," in High, *Beyond Testimony*, 145. Writing his dissertation at the same time Portelli was interviewing Terni residents, Greenspan also hoped to investigate memory by scrutinizing how the language used by survivors protected their self-images. *Ibid.*, 145. Greenspan eschews the word "testimony" so often used by Holocaust scholars and instead uses the terms "accounts" or "retellings." He argues that a "testimony" is fixed, a monologue, a legal term, while a "retelling" is more dynamic and grows out of a dialogue with an interviewer. "Testimony" is a subset of "account." *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 146. See also earlier discussion on the turn to social history and the rise of collecting oral histories from ordinary people.

<sup>28</sup> David W. Jones, "Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing." *Oral History* 26, no. 2 (1998): 50.

<sup>29</sup> Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 92; Cramer, "First, Do No Harm," 205-206.

<sup>30</sup> Cramer, "First, Do No Harm," 203.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, "Distressing Histories," 50.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Jones concludes "So I came to feel that I owed those people. I owed them that I should help others understand their point of view, and some of their very mixed and difficult feelings." *Ibid.*, 54.

Lawrence Langer, another Holocaust scholar, argues that gathering oral histories involving trauma is uniquely difficult.<sup>34</sup> Reading a memoir about a traumatic event is emotionally demanding, he concedes, but the act of writing has processed the memory, made it more coherent.<sup>35</sup> The writer wants to connect with readers and has deployed literary techniques such as analogy and imagery to make this possible, to make his story comprehensible.<sup>36</sup> The reader interacts with buffered emotions.<sup>37</sup> He is not face-to-face with the memoirist; he can always close the book. “Oral testimony steers a less certain course, like a fragile craft veering through turbulent waters unsure where a safe harbor lies—or whether one exists at all!”<sup>38</sup> Langer observes oral testimony is less carefully presented and thus harder for the interviewer to hear: “The more painful, dramatic, and overwhelming the narrative, the more tense, wary, and self-protective is the audience, the quicker the instinct to withdraw.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Reliability**

Though historians have been uneasy about the emotional effects of collecting traumatic oral accounts, their main concern has been with their reliability. Are they credible? Can they be trusted on their own or must they be buttressed by written sources? Portelli insisted “(o)ral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire

---

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>35</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

emerge.”<sup>40</sup> To Portelli “there are no ‘false’ oral sources...’wrong’ statements are still psychologically true.”<sup>41</sup> **How do I flip this apostrophe?**

Historians who specialize in oral history and memory agree that the testimonies they collect are important historical records<sup>42</sup> They continue to substantiate oral histories with other written and oral historical sources and even while they point to their general immutability over time.<sup>43</sup> The more philosophical historians will argue that all sources, including written ones, suffer from some degree of subjectivity.<sup>44</sup> Some of the most revered written sources, newspaper accounts and court documents, are based largely on oral testimony.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, even historians who respect the value of oral testimony and rely on it concede that in certain situations it may require contextual analysis. Portelli, though unconcerned with veracity *per se*, is interested in what situations cause a narrator to misremember actual events. He focuses on two situations in which narrators struggle to make sense out of events: when they experience intense emotion or trauma, and when they are confronted with cognitive dissonance. Both are

---

<sup>40</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. Although postmodern in his orientation, Portelli is old-fashioned enough to use truth, or at least the quest for truth, as a guide. *Ibid.*, ix. Despite his supposed lack of concern with the relative credibility of oral testimony and written records, Portelli offers a strong defense of the reliability of oral histories when he recounts in detail the trial of Aldo Moro’s kidnappers, astutely pointing out that the law relies on a collection of oral histories, labeled sworn testimonies and transcribed by court reporters. *Ibid.*, 241-269. <sup>41</sup> Court documents are treated with great deference and solemnity, yet they are in fact state-sanctioned oral histories. *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>42</sup> Abrams, *Oral History*, 81, 92, Cave, “What Remains,” 96; Greenspan, “From Testimony to Accounting, 157-158 (mutable narrative may be due to intersubjectivity, the effect of a different interviewer asking different questions) 157-158, LaCapra, *Trauma, Memory, Identity: What Remains?*” 376-377.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Abrams, *Oral Theory History.*, 22; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), xxiii, 1-30.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 269.



threats to a narrator's identity and self-image. The story of Luigi Trastulli is an example of an emotional experience that challenges a community's self-understanding.<sup>46</sup> Terni suffered the loss of a young person during a protest for a cause that proved to be ephemeral.<sup>47</sup> To make the loss more meaningful, the town moved the death to a later year, the last major labor protest of this communist-leaning town, a time that was still generally contained in this era.<sup>48</sup> Without consciously planning to do so, the entire town of Terni revised its collective memory.<sup>49</sup> Portelli insists that this historical revision is as meaningful as the history itself.<sup>50</sup>

As part of his study of Terni, Portelli describes the memories of elderly Communist activists who reflect on missed opportunities and the cooptation of their formerly revolutionary cause.<sup>51</sup> Over the decades, the Party reinterpreted historical events until the official Communist Party narrative called its unsuccessful struggle for revolution "an almost unadulterated good:" the revolution never came but worker unity held, and local industry evolved.<sup>52</sup> Some individual workers were more willing to face failure and acknowledge their disappointment but did so by imagining alternate futures, by blaming certain leaders while elevating others.<sup>53</sup> Portelli observes these "uchronic dreams," or semi-fictional musings, save face and reconcile cognitive dissonance by keeping the movement at the center of town history, focusing on the importance of

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1-2, 8, 12, 15, 19, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>49</sup> That an entire town could misremember the date of an important event may seem incredible, but contemporary commentators point to the Mandela Effect, in which large groups of people collectively misrecall some detail or event in the same way. For example, many people believe Nelson Mandela died in prison in the 1980s rather than at home in 2013. See Mia Belle Frothingham, "What is the Mandela Effect?" *Simply Psychology*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-the-mandela-effect.html>, accessed April 19, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 1-2

<sup>51</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 99-116.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 103. Gramsci is lionized and compared to Garibaldi.

Communist missteps above all other historical causes, and blaming discrete individuals and events instead of the structure and theory of the party.<sup>54</sup>

When Portelli analyzes events in Harlan, Kentucky, another labor town, he writes as an outsider and so can more objectively observe the contradictions in its inhabitants' beliefs.<sup>55</sup> He studied a group of coal miners, who saw themselves as religious, patriotic, and fiercely self-reliant, but who were treated badly by their employer.<sup>56</sup> The miners' believed their best chance at a better life involved uniting and aligning with northern union organizers, though at the same time they perceive the unions as outsiders and as secular, un-American communists.<sup>57</sup> Portelli carefully parses the language the Harlan narrators used to describe their relationship with the exploitative company and with the Yankee union to understand how they struggled to make sense of the cognitive dissonance inherent in their choices.<sup>58</sup> Though the union improved their working conditions, miners referred to the organization as "it" not as "we."<sup>59</sup> They gave credit to John L. Lewis and mentioned him with respect but did not claim agency for themselves.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 195-238. Perceived as an insider in Terni, he obtained fuller and franker interviews than other scholars. Portelli meditates on how the relationship between interviewer and narrator can affect the story. A narrator may be more forthcoming with an interviewer he perceives as sympathetic, a fellow union man or Terni citizen, for example. In this way, different versions of the same story may emerge from the same narrator. Ibid., 30-34. See also Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007): 49-70 (the third paradigm is intersubjectivity, in which scholars recognize how the identity of the interviewer can change the interview); Greenspan, "From Testimony to Recounting," 157-159 (anecdote about differences in Holocaust retellings from same narrator).

<sup>56</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 196-199, 202-210, 218-222.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 230-232.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 204-206, 210-214. See also Portelli's discussion of aging Terni communists: "It takes a much higher emotional investment to admit to oneself that things are wrong, than it takes to consent to conventional truths." Ibid., 109.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 213-214.

Though the mine owners opposed their attempts to organize, miners differentiated between the company, which was labeled “they,” and individual overseers, with whom they had good personal relationships and whom they call by their names.<sup>61</sup> Portelli’s work centers language as a tool for historical insight.

### **More Lessons from Holocaust Studies**

Mark Roseman observed that “there is an understandable reluctance to challenge the accuracy or veracity” of Holocaust survivors’ testimony.<sup>62</sup> Their testimony is “often all there is” and to interrogate their accounts seems “an unwarranted imposition on individuals who have already suffered so much.”<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, Roseman explored the oral history of one survivor, Marianne Ellenbogen, to see how trauma had affected the veracity of her statements and explore how it affected “the process of memory.”<sup>64</sup>

Ellenbogen left behind an unusually well-documented story. She herself kept diaries and held on to letters, and her experiences could often be corroborated by either government or private sources.<sup>65</sup> Roseman discovered that while her testimony was substantially supported by other accounts and contemporaneous writings, her story did suffer from a few, notable defects.<sup>66</sup> For example, her narrative describes her fiancé as being blinded in a different manner than other accounts, and her retelling of her escape from the Gestapo has varied slightly over the years.<sup>67</sup> Rosenman concludes that her testimony diverged from other accounts at “moments of great

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Roseman, “Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Memory,” in *The Oral History Reader*, Perks and Thomson, eds (London: Routledge, 2016), 320.

<sup>63</sup> Roseman, “Surviving Memory,” 320.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 321-323.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 321-326

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 325-326.

trauma,” not “direct personal suffering,” but during “trauma related to guilt.”<sup>68</sup> Ellenbogen rewrote her story at times when she “felt guilt inspired by having left her family and having allowed others to leave her.”<sup>69</sup> The narrator made subtle changes to her testimony at pivotal moments when she made a choice that permitted her to survive but did not save another.<sup>70</sup>

Rosenman contends these inconsistencies reveal how she tried “to bring the past under control in some small way.”<sup>71</sup>

Portelli and Roseman are correct; historians should be alert to the presence of **interpretive effects** in certain kinds of traumatic memories. All oral histories offer a record of past events, and even narrators with traumatic testimonies are generally substantially reliable. But in a specific subset of cases, testimonies of traumatic events are suspect and should be examined more closely. The narrator may be consciously or unconsciously shaping his story to protect himself in some way, whether from guilt or from cognitive dissonance. Of course, the possibility of factual mistakes or interpretive memories due to trauma is not unique to oral history. A written account of an emotional event, whether preserved by the narrator or by a journalist collecting impressions from eyewitnesses, would also be prone to these sorts of errors. The storyteller would suffer from the same guilt and cognitive dissonance, and arguably could

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 327. Her quick thinking allowed her to escape the Gestapo when they came to her home. She recalls how she made a split decision to flee to freedom. Years later, Ellenbogen felt guilty that she did not somehow include her brother in her hasty plan, a scheme she devised on the spot, so she rewrote small parts of that encounter with the Gestapo to assuage her guilt, claiming, for example, that she asked to go to the cellar to get bread, an errand that required only one person. Ibid., 326-327.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 331. Roseman also describes how other impressions are affected by emotion, such as how pain, boredom, and fear cause the passage of time to seem to slow. Ibid., 323.

polish his testimony more finely if it were written down and edited<sup>72</sup> **Looking for new ways to describe “unreliable:” interpretive effects.**

Writing twenty-five years after Portelli, when memory studies were better established, Holocaust scholar Dominick LaCapra seeks to “approach the topic without opposing history and memory in a binary fashion” and to set out a new, “multifaceted...agenda...for further research and thought.”<sup>73</sup> His focus is on trauma and the proper role of testimony and oral history in understanding trauma.<sup>74</sup> Unlike Portelli, who claims to be primarily concerned with the construction of meaning, LaCapra is enthusiastic about how oral histories, especially traumatic accounts from non-elites, can supplement and correct the record, eagerly embracing testimonies by overlooked groups; LaCapra wants “more” history.<sup>75</sup> He points to the Native accounts of the Battle of Little Bighorn, for example, and how these clashed with the official version of Custer’s defeat.<sup>76</sup> Eventually, the indigenous oral history modified the accepted narrative. LaCapra emphasizes “the importance of oral history and the way it may challenge prevalent narratives or even become integrated into the...narrative.”<sup>77</sup> Yet, he also insists that “(o)ral testimonies are of course supplemented by written accounts,” evidencing his own reluctance to completely forsake official documentation.<sup>78</sup>

LaCapra warns against “mal d’archive,” or archive sickness, in which the researcher is either “overwhelmed by an excess or unsettled by a paucity of information.”<sup>79</sup> As a corrective,

---

<sup>72</sup> See earlier discussion by Langer contrasting oral and written testimony.

<sup>73</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, History, Memory,” 376.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 384; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 55-56.

<sup>76</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, History, Memory,” 384-385, 389-390.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

he offers oral history, particularly as a way to fill silences.<sup>80</sup> The author observes, for example, how a historian may explore trauma and morally grey areas by resort to testimony. Children of Nazi officials may speak about their parents and wrestle with the moral dilemmas their parents avoided.<sup>81</sup> *Sonderkommandoes* and *kapos* may in their statements explain why they made the choices they did and how they felt enacting them.<sup>82</sup> These moral accountings are seldom found in official archives.<sup>83</sup> Portelli might carefully examine the language they use for more clues to meaning, asking how, for example, the use of passive voice distances the actor from the action.

LaCapra observes that Holocaust scholars, while avidly collecting testimony from survivors and giving their accounts special status, are wary of relying on them too heavily for fear they are not credible.<sup>84</sup> He insists historians not “airbrush or deny” trauma nor construe it as “essentially incomprehensible,” but instead try to understand what they can in order to prevent future incidents of prejudice or scapegoating or even genocide.<sup>85</sup> Traumas inflicted by people on people can be comprehended and thereby potentially arrested.<sup>86</sup> “(T)he Shoah is comprehensible

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 386. LaCapra reminds the reader that people make choices about what goes into the archive and what is preserved. The archives are neither neutral nor objective. He points out French silence on the Holocaust even by Michel Foucault. Ibid., 387.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 378-381.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 382-383.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 380. Himmler denied on the record that murdering Jews had any effect on the German soul. Non-elite Germans may have differing opinions.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 382. See also Christopher R. Browning, “Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds., Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2016), 311-319; Roseman, “Surviving Memory,” 320-333.

<sup>85</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, History, Memory,” 378.

<sup>86</sup> Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2017), 326. To say that the subject is incomprehensible is to despair (and) to give up.” See also Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 8.

in the same way that any other catastrophic human or life experience is: with difficulty, patience, and application to the task.”<sup>87</sup>

And if the narrator tells the interviewer he cannot possibly understand the story being told? If she insists that no one who was not present can appreciate what happened? Langer found himself in this situation with Holocaust survivors who would freely recount their experiences and then insist that no one but another survivor could comprehend them.<sup>88</sup> “Witnesses' chronic frustration and skepticism about the audience's ability to understand their testimony is almost a premise of these encounters,” he observed.<sup>89</sup> He was sympathetic, “If I have discovered anything in my investigation, it is that oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives, ... by the quintessence of the experiences they record.”<sup>90</sup> He counseled historians to persevere and advised switching from “listening to the disagreeable task of interpretive hearing, which is much harder and requires the listener to step back from trying to impose a shape on a story which lacks narrative coherence.”<sup>91</sup>

### **Practical Advice for the Interviewer**

So how should the interviewer approach a narrator who might share traumatic memories, besides to steel himself and to “hear interpretively,” as Langer advises. First, the interviewer should remind himself that while collecting the oral history may have the effect of ameliorating trauma, he is not a therapist.<sup>92</sup> He is a historian, trained in interviewing but not in therapeutic techniques.<sup>93</sup> He wants to collect and then create a public memory or history, while the

---

<sup>87</sup> Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*, 326.

<sup>88</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 21

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Cramer, “First, Do No Harm,” 206.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

therapist's goal is to heal the patient.<sup>94</sup> The historian works publicly, he wants to share the information he gathers; the therapist works in private.<sup>95</sup> Nor does the historian have access to a therapist's skills, experience, or prescription pad, if more than talk is required.<sup>96</sup>

The historian can come to the interview prepared, however, and have taken the time to understand as much as he can about the narrator and her background. For example, if the narrator has filled out a pre-interview questionnaire, he can review it to be aware of potential sources of trauma. A woman veteran who describes her separation from the military as involuntary will likely have strong feelings about that episode in her life. She might be eager to share and get her experience on the record, or she may not be ready. The interviewer can be prepared for either reaction when he asks her why she left the service. He can think about the nature and manifestations of human emotion, so he is not caught off guard by its sudden appearance.<sup>97</sup> Tears or silence or anger might follow his question. The narrator might also resort to humor and irony to distance herself from a traumatic event.

He can listen empathetically, openly, and deeply, using pauses and silences to give the narrator time to think and to speak, to organize her thoughts and decide how much and how to tell her story.<sup>98</sup> Over time and with experience, the interviewer will learn when to probe and when to let a surprising revelation pass without pursuit.<sup>99</sup> He is not a journalist hoping to write an expose; he is a historian establishing rapport with a narrator.<sup>100</sup> Their relationship should be

---

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>97</sup> Sean Field, "Beyond 'Healing': Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration." *Oral History (Colchester)* 34, no. 1 (2006): 35-38.

<sup>98</sup> Field, "Beyond Healing," 35-38. Clark, "Case Study," 262-263.

<sup>99</sup> Jones, "Distressing Histories," 52-53.

<sup>100</sup> Cave, "What Remains," 95, 97.



interactive, respectful, and mutual.<sup>101</sup> “Trauma oral history relies, most of all, on the personal and interpersonal abilities of the interviewer to elicit, hold, and pass along the knowledge gained in the interview.”<sup>102</sup> The interviewer will learn how to balance the “interplay between connection and analysis.”<sup>103</sup>

Anticipating the possibility that the narrator will share traumatic memories, the interviewer can arrive armed with a general list of mental health organizations and with a list of specialized groups which might serve the narrator’s needs. An oral history project on women veterans could make a list of organizations devoted to PTSD or to military sexual harassment, for example. An effort devoted to collecting the stories of Hurricane Katrina survivors might create a list of support groups focusing on that event. After the interview, the historian could discretely offer the names of these groups in a follow up email or letter.

The interviewer should be aware of his own mental health. If he needs to take a break from listening to stories of suffering and horror, he should take one. He should not stoically keep going if he is troubled by the stories he hears.<sup>104</sup> Ideally, he will be a member of a group of interviewers or enjoy the supervision of an experienced mentor and can turn to them for advice and support.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Clark, “Case Study,” 262-263.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. Clark offers nine obligations of the crisis historian to the narrator, and she reminds the interviewer he may be among the first to interview a person suffering from fresh trauma.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>104</sup> Field, “Beyond ‘Healing,’” 39.

<sup>105</sup> In the Women and War project, we met weekly to share concerns and ask questions. Many of us were also in contact with each other outside of class more frequently.

The historian can help the narrator reclaim her agency by listening to her story and by gently prodding her to keep talking if she falters.<sup>106</sup> He can remind her that her story is important, and that other historians and future generations will want to hear it. In the Women and War project, some older women veterans were reluctant to participate, believing their service as secretaries or logistics specialists was not worth recounting when younger women were flying fighter planes and crewing AWACs. Interviewers explained that future scholars would place their stories in a larger context, searching for trends or for change over time. In order to discern these evolutions, historians must see the earlier manifestations of military service. In 1964 a woman who became pregnant had to leave the Women's Army Corps.<sup>107</sup> By 2010, a pregnant woman could continue to serve but in restricted capacities.<sup>108</sup> To appreciate the change, the scholar must see both ends of the spectrum.

The interviewer can remind the narrator that her testimony might also be used to create a public memory or to generate political action.<sup>109</sup> An abundance of testimonies about women veterans might cause a statue to be erected in their honor, for example. Often a website will be published offering tribute to their service and sacrifice.<sup>110</sup> The historian can assure the narrator

---

<sup>106</sup> Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 194; Clark, "Case Study," 257; Field, "Beyond 'Healing,'" 31; Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 104.

<sup>107</sup> See, e.g., Penelope Smith-Singleton, interview by Liz Reichman, March 29, 2022, interview, transcript and recording, University of Texas, San Antonio, UTSA Libraries, Special Collections, Oral Histories, Women and War Oral History Collection.

<sup>108</sup> See, e.g., Christina Lewry Bailey, interview by Liz Reichman, March 27, 2022, interview, transcript and recording, University of Texas, San Antonio, UTSA Libraries, Special Collections, Oral Histories, Women and War Oral History Collection.

<sup>109</sup> Clark, "Case Study," 257; Field, "Beyond 'Healing,'" 40; Ramsey Liem, "Silencing Historical Trauma: The Politics and Psychology of Memory and Voice." *Peace and Conflict* 13, no. 2 (2007): 153–174.

<sup>110</sup> "An Oral History Project Dedicated to Women and War," *Women's Voices of Military City U.S.A.*, <https://womenandwar.omeka.net/>, accessed April 23, 2022.

that her account will be archived and protected for later generations to view.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps her granddaughter or great granddaughter will listen to her testimony.

And if the narrator regrets her candor? Believes she has told too much or too much too soon? The interviewer's obligation is to respect her wishes.<sup>112</sup> The narrator should have been presented with a clearly written set of release forms before transcription and publication if not before the interview.<sup>113</sup> Names can be redacted, and release dates can be altered. If necessary, the interview can be destroyed.<sup>114</sup>

Both interviewer and narrator should be aware that future interpretations of the oral history might not agree with the narrator's current elucidation.<sup>115</sup> Langer observed the Holocaust survivor might declare her story contains no life lesson, no deeper meaning, that it is a tale of despair and nihilism.<sup>116</sup> Her children, however, might insist their mother's testimony is a monument to her resilience and courage.<sup>117</sup> In South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process, most citizens were satisfied with the overall effort and the resulting new public history, but some felt exploited or that their individual voices were not fully heard.<sup>118</sup> On a more prosaic level, a

---

<sup>111</sup> See Clark, "Case Study," 263; Field, "Beyond 'Healing,'" 40; Jones, "Distressing Histories," 54.

<sup>112</sup> "Best Practices," *Oral History Association*, <https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices/>, accessed April 24, 2022.

<sup>113</sup> "Best Practices," *Oral History Association*.

<sup>114</sup> Some narrators want to review the interview to listen for any regretted remarks. After reviewing what they said, many will decide to sign the release.

<sup>115</sup> Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said:' Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 412-422.

<sup>116</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, "Redemptive and Unredemptive Holocaust Memory," in *The Afterdeath of the Holocaust*, 37-61 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021); but see Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006) (Holocaust survivor argues in favor of redemptive interpretation and urges others to adopt one as well).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* Langer, however, urges strongly that historians not recast these stories as inspirational or their protagonists as heroes. He understands the current trend, particularly in America, is to do so.

<sup>118</sup> Field, "Beyond 'Healing,'" 31-34

granddaughter might view her grandmother's account of defying her father's wishes as a feminist act while the grandmother insists it was the result of mere youthful exuberance and not political at all.<sup>119</sup> Once a story is gathered and archived, it belongs to history.

### Conclusion

However, changing interpretations of traumatic events can also occur in ways that support the narrator's understanding. The collective memory of an event can be altered by the addition of more voices or by evolving moral standards or an increase in scientific or medical understanding.<sup>120</sup> World War I veterans suffering from PTSD, shellshock in the parlance of the early twentieth century, found themselves vindicated in later years.<sup>121</sup> Some stories of trauma which were ignored or silenced in official accounts resurfaced later due to the efforts of oral historians.<sup>122</sup> The National Park Service has created a monument to the 1957 Little Rock Central High School desegregation crisis, for example, and featured prominently in the museum are oral accounts spoken by students who experienced the event.<sup>123</sup> Though not embraced by their hometown in 1957, the Little Rock Nine are heroes in 2022.<sup>124</sup>

**CUT?** Rather than interview a narrator a single time, Henry Greenspan established a multiyear, even multidecade, relationship with his subjects, returning to interview them

---

<sup>119</sup> Borland, "That's Not What I Said," 412.

<sup>120</sup> LaCapra, "Trauma, Memory, Identity: What Remains?" 384-385, 389-390.

<sup>121</sup> Alistair Thomson, "Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia," in Perks and Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 343-352.

<sup>122</sup> Liem, "Silencing Historical Trauma," 153-174; Kevin Blackburn, "Recalling War Trauma of the Pacific War and the Japanese Occupation in the Oral History of Malaysia and Singapore." *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 231-252; Lindsey Dodd, "It Did Not Traumatise Me at All': Childhood 'Trauma' in French Oral Narratives of Wartime Bombing." *Oral History (Colchester)* 41, no. 2 (2013): 37-48.

<sup>123</sup> "Little Rock Central High School," *National Park Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/chsc/index.htm>, accessed April 18, 2022.

<sup>124</sup> "Little Rock Central High School," *National Park Service*.

repeatedly.<sup>125</sup> Over the years, they became comfortable with him and his questions, and he with their stories of trauma and loss. Greenspan was able to probe more deeply into their accounts and even to challenge their painful memories in a way historians conducting single, one-time interviews cannot. As one Treblinka survivor said ““You study me, and I study you.””<sup>126</sup> This “could stand as an epigram for every interview that has ever been done,” wrote Greenspan.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps adopting the approach of anthropologists and embedding in a community for a period of time would yield better oral histories of traumatic events.

Most oral historians will not have the luxury to interview their subjects many times or to become trusted enough by their narrators to question details of their accounts. They will not become fluent and confident in discussing other people’s trauma. But historians can become more adept and effective in confronting trauma in oral history, particularly if they remind themselves that the work they do is important both to the narrator and to the public. By gathering and publishing personal accounts, the historian can help the narrator transform from victim of trauma to witness of historical event and can shape the collective memory of the nation to include the narrator’s point of view.

---

<sup>125</sup> Greenspan, “From Testimony to Recounting,” 147-156.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*



**BIBLIOGRAPHY****Books**

Abrams, Lynn. *Oral History Theory*. London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

Hayes, Peter. *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2017.

High, Steven, ed. *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015.

Langer, Lawrence L. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Miles, Tiya. *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, A Black Family Keepsake*. New York: Random House, 2021.

Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York, 1991.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Thompson, Paul with Joanna Bornat. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015.

Tumblety, Joan. *Memory and History*. London: Routledge, 2013.

**Articles and Book Chapters**

Blackburn, Kevin. "Recalling War Trauma of the Pacific War and the Japanese Occupation in the Oral History of Malaysia and Singapore." *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 231–252.

Clark, Mary Marshall. "Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe: Reflections on the September 11, 2001, Oral History Memory and Narrative Project." In *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Donald Ritchie, 256-264. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Cook, James W., Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Cramer, Jennifer A. "'First, Do No Harm': Tread Carefully Where Oral History, Trauma, and Current Crises Intersect." *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 203-213.

Dodd, Lindsey. "'It Did Not Traumatise Me at All': Childhood 'Trauma' in French Oral Narratives of Wartime Bombing." *Oral History (Colchester)* 41, no. 2 (2013): 37-48.

Epelbaum, Diana, and Emilia Bush. "Our Silent Inheritance: The Death and Life of Traumatic Memory." *Shofar (West Lafayette, Ind.)* 39, no. 1 (2021): 100-119.

Field, Sean. "Beyond 'Healing': Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration." *Oral History (Colchester)* 34, no. 1 (2006): 31-42.

Frothingham, Mia Belle. "What is the Mandela Effect?" *Simply Psychology*, April 1, 2022. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-the-mandela-effect.html>. Accessed April 19, 2022.

Jones, David W. "Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing." *Oral History* 26, no. 2 (1998): 49-56.

LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?" *History and Theory* 55, no. 3 (2016): 375-400.

Langer, Lawrence L. "Redemptive and Unredemptive Holocaust Memory." In *The Afterdeath of the Holocaust*, 37-61. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021.

Liem, Ramsay. "Silencing Historical Trauma: The Politics and Psychology of Memory and Voice." *Peace and Conflict* 13, no. 2 (2007): 153-174.

Stille, Alexander. "Prospecting for Truth in the Ore of Memory." *The New York Times*, March 10, 2001. Accessed March 1, 2022.

Thomson, Alistair. (2015). "Anzac Memories Revisited: Trauma, Memory and Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (2015): 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohv010>.

Thomson, Alistair. "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007): 49-70.

Vickers, Emma L. "Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing." *The Oral History Review* 46, no. 1 (2019): 134-141.

### Websites

"An Oral History Project Dedicated to Women and War." *Women's Voices of Military City U.S.A.* [https://womenandwar.omeka.net/?fbclid=IwAR1DsEiM-cYe3V5ywsLUboK\\_h6cyUedte7uwpI-YiGIPhu8aWJrTZbUurOw](https://womenandwar.omeka.net/?fbclid=IwAR1DsEiM-cYe3V5ywsLUboK_h6cyUedte7uwpI-YiGIPhu8aWJrTZbUurOw). Accessed April 22, 2022.



“Best Practices.” *Oral History Association*. <https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices/>. Accessed April 24, 2022.

“Little Rock Central High School.” *National Park Service*. <https://www.nps.gov/chsc/index.htm>. Accessed April 22, 2022.

“Oral History Archives.” *Columbia University Libraries*. <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/ccoh.html>. Accessed April 22, 2022.

“The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection.” *Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/>. Accessed April 22, 2022.

### **Oral History Collections**

Women and War Oral History Collection. UTSA Libraries Special Collections. University of Texas, San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas.