

Summary

IOHA'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY
Institutionalization and expansion of oral history:10
years of IOHA

Marieta de Moraes Ferreira

International Oral History on the Move

Alexander von Plato

Going against the grain

Alessandro Portelli

From the intimate circle to globalized oral history

Ronald Grele

ORAL HISTORY AND TEACHING

How to Do Things with Words: African Oral
History and Its Textual Incarnations

Christopher J. Lee

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Afterthoughts on an experience teaching oral history

Mario Camarena Ocampo

Editorial

The present volume includes the issues for 2007 and 2008. The publication of *Words and Silences* was unfortunately delayed during this period. We apologize for this involuntary interruption and we thank our subscribers for their patience. The first part of the volume contains essays expressly written to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the International Oral History Association. The second part contains articles on the teaching of oral history.

The XIV International Oral History Conference convened in the city of Sydney, in Australia, during a few days in June of 2006. Numerous oral historians from all over the globe attended; most read a paper, sharing the outcome of research with the audience. Besides this central activity, there was another important event that marked the conference: the 10th anniversary of the International Oral History Association. Every two years, since 1996, oral historians from around the world have kept a date to meet at a particular and delightful city, located each time in a different continent, in order to engage in discussion, as they did in Sydney. Many, of course, had been doing that for a much longer time, and that explains why the conference in Sao Paulo was not the first but the tenth.

The pieces included in this issue were presented at a session particularly devoted to musing over the past ten years. Each author took on the job of describing and reflecting on what in his or her view had been the impact of the Association and on the intellectual and political issues involved in oral history research. The round table was chaired by Don Ritchie, and let me quote the precise and useful introductions he did for each of the presenters:

Frustrating interviews: the other point of view. The
Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign 1980-1991

Diana Covell

BOOK REVIEWS

Remembering: Oral History / Performance,

ed. by Della Pollock

Jeff Friedman

A Carved Cloak for Tabu, by Mere Whaanga

Paula Hamilton

“Alexander von Plato was the first executive secretary and the first representative for Europe in the International Oral History Association and actually his involvement goes back even before the IOHA began. He is the Director of the Institute for History and Biography in Hagen, Germany and is also the co-editor of *Bios* which is a journal of oral history. Marieta de Moraes Ferreira is a professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and is a former president of the International Oral History Association. Alessandro Portelli is a professor at the University of Rome; he is also a councilman on the Rome City Council. His books have had an enormous influence on the oral history movement in the last several decades. Ron Grele has held, over the last forty years or so, just about every important position in the United States in oral history. He recently retired as Director of the Columbia University Oral History Project Research Office. Ron Grele was the principal author of the IOHA Constitution. He has also been a very provocative member of the Association, challenging our assumptions and making us think twice about what we are doing”

As for the authors’ thoughts on the International Oral History Association and on oral history, the reader will be the best judge. In my own reading, each piece takes on the task from a quite different perspective. That perspective is rather institutional in the pieces by von Plato and de Moraes, although the former focuses on personal impressions while the latter did a careful analysis of available information for each conference in order to assess the strengths of the organization. Portelli and Grele, on the other hand, resort to their personal involvement over a long period of time to reflect on what they deem important about oral history—an importance that in their views affected orthodox academic history, radical politics and social theory. Not bad for ten years, would be the likely comment by an innocent observer. Perhaps, because the celebration

called for it, all four authors looked backward. Now we need to turn around and look ahead, as Grele's and Portelli's final words suggest: an impatient thrust forward with new ideas and new oral historians.

Ron Grele, Alexander von Plato and Marieta de Moraes Ferreira had a written version of their oral presentation, which is the one appearing here. The three essays were first published in Spanish by *Historia, Antropología y Fuente Oral* and we are grateful to its editors for permission to reprint the translations here. Alessandro Portelli's text is a transcription of his speech, revised and approved by him.

The second part of this volume is devoted to oral history and teaching. Some of the articles are about teaching oral history and others are about using oral history to enhance teaching. Situations go from the conventional classroom to the street meeting in community projects. Purposes vary from political action to plain intellectual curiosity. The authors of the articles gathered in this issue show, first, that the importance of teaching oral history advances along with its institutional acceptance, and second, that oral history may be a tool for changing the teaching of history, an effort that may create a different historical sensibility in future generations.

Reports on community projects that use oral history rarely describe in detail the teaching that goes along. A couple of phrases on training participants in interviewing techniques and the general purposes of oral history are deemed enough. The point is to show results, more so when there are flashy products like books or videos or museums. Mario Camarena, by way of contrast, begins his article by asking what happens after the book the book is published? Camarena stuck around after the book and followed the members of the community who participated in the research project. Diana Covell returns the look, in a way, since her article is written from the point of view of those who were interviewed. The combined thoughts of

the two articles will be important to take into account when planning a community project.

Lidia González and Silvana Luvera describe a course on urban and oral history for middle school teachers. Christopher Lee also describes a course, this one for college students who find history and African history in particular, too far from their experience. The former two authors concentrate on the course participants, and hence, on the impact upon their perception of history, which went from the subject taught everyday to the fiber from which dreams are woven. New possibilities arose as they turned old stuff found in a box stashed away into meaningful traces for the construction of knowledge about the past. Lee instead turns on to question of method, as his concern centers on how students may better understand the nature of oral evidence and of historical evidence generally. Those interested in using oral history to teach history will profit from reading both articles.

This issue raises some interesting problems. One present in all of the pieces has to do with a critical perspective toward memory, or rather, with how to avoid the complacent reception of memory tales. After all, reminiscences seem to be devoid of ideology, offering stories that recall and display the past as it really happened. The anecdotal description apparently without any intention other than remembering catches the interest of the audience, whether a group of teachers in Buenos Aires or a group of students in Cambridge (Massachusetts). For this reason it is important to continuously experiment with ways of placing a critical approach to memory at the center of discussion, very much in the way Lee experiments with the notion of words and voices.

Camarena and Covell write from within the problem of critical perspectives and touch upon an aspect common to community oral history projects. Almost all those projects devote effort and time to insure the participation of community people in

carrying out research and turning a product. Not much has been said, instead, on the effects once the project formally ends. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowsky prompted his students to dutifully register ritual conduct and then follow people into their everyday doings. And this is precisely what our two authors did. The conclusion, in the case of a working-class barrio in Mexico City, is that participants occupied a position of power because they were associated with the project and the writing of a book. And once in that position, the results were mixed, and the author warns about an unexpected and unwanted turn of events. Covell, also situated on the moment after research, describes the feelings of those interviewed and their negative evaluation of some or all of the practices of the researchers, ranging from forgivable lack of tact to inadmissible misuse of the interviews. The author points out the contrast between textbook principles and what really happens in fieldwork. After reading both texts, it becomes clear that teaching oral history is not only about technique or about the concepts of memory and orality but should also include learning to observe the communities the historian enters, to learn about their agendas for action and about their concerns, to then include such knowledge in the research project. Of course, neither researchers nor teachers are responsible for what others do with what they learn, but we should heed the invitation both Camarena and Covell extend to reflect upon the aftermath of such community projects.

The Buenos Aires teachers presented by González and Luvera were required to take a course. They were not required to respond enthusiastically to the course, and the fact they did speaks well of the course coordinators. Besides, their response invites a curious peak upon the tedium that may settle in middle school teaching, where teachers must fulfill a given syllabus and whose teaching loads leave nearly no time for thought and experimentation. The oral history

workshop digs deep into this mine of enthusiasm for thinking and doing new things. Those teachers will take on the challenge not only to use new knowledge but to provoke in their students the same lust for discovery and the satisfaction of finding themselves creating and transmitting knowledge.

This last point is equally valid for community projects: academics launching them should instill in participants the spirit required to continue on their own. At the same time, after reading Covell and Camarena, one wonders about who participates in these projects. Possibly community projects attract those whose enthusiasm and interests already look beyond the community or the neighborhood, and who consider political action a valid means to further the community's as well as their own interests. Possibly they would anyway gravitate toward leadership and positions of power. The experimental, open, horizontal and plural nature of oral history may offer a better channel for such energy than the more conventional and hierarchical political projects. And there is something else. Maybe some of those participants, as they become involved in oral history research, acquire the profile of the local philosopher who Robert Redfield expected to find in every community, reflecting about shared experience from deep within it while creating the communication vessels to the world without. We should celebrate that community projects may trigger the passing on of memory, and perhaps even more important, the passing on of the responsibility to safeguard and augment the reservoir of stories through which a community defines its existence.

Reading the following articles may provoke us into thinking about our own practice. No doubt it is important to think about oral history and teaching since, after all, we are reflecting upon our capacity to communicate.

Gerardo Necochea Gracia