

**Challenges of Cross-cultural History:
Language, Performance, and Translation in Oral History Research in Latin
America***

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In a field dominated by written sources, oral history often operates on the periphery of historical studies. Yet it remains one of the best ways to access alternative perspectives from people whose voices generally are muted in archival materials: poor and working classes, women, ethnic others, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and other marginalized groups. While few historians can interrogate the scribes who produced archival documents, oral historians can ask individuals about their motives, inspirations, aspirations, objectives, and ideals to better understand why aspects of the past transpired as they did and why people recollect them as they do.¹ Because it accesses stories and perspectives not found in archives and introduces new theoretical frameworks for reconstructing the past, oral history is crucial to understanding and practicing the historian's craft. Documents offer vivid detail about events, movements, and trends; oral history offers the potential to understand what these happenings meant to people. By putting lived experiences at the center of historical narratives, oral history provides access to the undocumented things of life such as fantasy, desire, or secrets recorded in whispers alone. Oral histories can go beyond accounts of events to descriptions of emotional responses to them. The twin aspects of historicity—acting in and narrating the past—enjoy a synergy through oral history. As the doers become the tellers, they at once represent and appropriate their own agency and subjectivity.

Like archival sources, oral sources are biased and problematic partly because they are informed by memory and imperfect communication. Co-created by interviewees and interviewers, oral histories are contingent upon clear communication—a quality that is often elusive, particularly among people of different cultures, nations, and languages. Even when both parties share a *lingua franca*, language and listening are fraught with flaws that can cloud meaning. When either party (or both) are compelled to speak a language other than their first, comprehension often falls short of intended meaning.

Through the lens of the practice of oral history in Latin America, this essay examines the potential and pitfalls in communication across linguistic and cultural differences.

The incredible diversity of languages and cultures in Latin America adds to the richness and complexity of conducting oral history research there. The multiple meanings of linguistic turns, body language, and physical gestures are difficult to ascertain in a second language and foreign setting. These conditions are as true for interviewers as they are for interviewees. Compelled to respond in Spanish, Portuguese, or another colonial language, indigenous and Afro-creole speakers may not convey the same information, sentiments, or perspectives that they would in their first language. Given that language is imbued with worldviews and culture, even fluent foreigners need time and experience in host settings to appreciate nuanced and subtle aspects of communication. Essential for some research projects and crucial for disseminating results to multiple audiences, translation (even at its best) seldom transfers the entirety of meaning from one language to another. Even when translators capture the multiple meanings embedded in single phrases, rarely can they concisely communicate them and thus the poignancy of the meanings suffers.

As is true in much of the world, language is intricately related to power and empowerment in Latin America. Associated with colonization and exploitation, Spanish, Portuguese, and French are not the preferred languages in many contexts. Many groups maintain their original or hybrid languages to stave off the effects of neocolonialism and assimilation. In her research with indigenous people, Brazilian scholar Marina Evaristo Wenceslau asserts, “Maintaining the Guaraní language is the most important weapon for the self-defense of the group.”² Such exceptions as the official recognition and widespread use of Guaraní in Paraguay notwithstanding, colonial languages generally enjoy privileged positions over indigenous, African, Creole, sign, or other marginalized languages. Conducting an interview in a colonial language that is not the interviewee’s first language perpetuates marginalization. In contrast, conducting interviews in native languages (whether they be indigenous, African, Asian, Creole) legitimizes the interviewee’s and the larger community’s voice by affirming their distinct culture and epistemology. In many ways, the very act of conducting an oral history interview undercuts the colonial power of archives whereby textuality is considered superior to

orality, which in turn discounts indigenous and other peoples' oral traditions and histories as inferior to European written knowledge. By legitimizing marginalized languages and contradicting the idea that orality is less valuable than writing, conducting interviews in indigenous and other subordinate languages undercuts neocolonialism on two levels.

In nations where indigenous people and Afro-Latin Americans have been told for generations that speaking their language makes them backwards and undermines national development, researchers who learn the local language can gain people's trust and confidence by conveying their commitment to the project and people. Historically, many Latin American elites, bureaucrats, teachers, and other authority figures have denigrated and derided indigenous people, Afro-Latin Americans, Asian-Latin Americans, and others who maintained their distinct languages. Haiti offers a particularly stark example where French-speaking elites consider the Haitian Creole spoken by the majority of people inferior and at times subversive. To denigrate indigenous languages in Chiapas (Mexico), Spanish language representations of Maya languages often intentionally included grammatical errors and "backwoods Spanish . . . suggesting a sort of minstrel-speak."³ Scholars struggle to balance respect for people's word choices and idioms with an awareness that the stigma of "improper speech" or "wrong" Spanish can denigrate and belittle interviewees.⁴

Similar to the way histories of colonial and neocolonial relations inform distinct knowledge and frameworks in different languages, in many contexts, foreign researchers must overcome animosity sowed by past and present geopolitical relations. A history of U.S. imperialism (political, economic, and academic) and intervention in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean informs how those Latin Americans respond to U.S. researchers. Learning national and local languages is a crucial first step to breaking down those barriers.

Since many bilingual indigenous peoples do not tell the same stories or relate the same concepts in Spanish that they do in their native languages, local fluency can lead to insights that would remain elusive in colonial languages. K'iche'-Maya (henceforth K'iche') Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú explains the depth of Maya languages: "Our languages express our culture, and speaking and understanding them means learning about a new world, and thinking about things in a new way."⁵ According

to Menchú, Spanish fails to capture the essence of the K'iche' language and, by extension, the culture and history. In addition to a cognitive gap between Spanish and Maya languages, Maya speakers often omit portions of stories or relate distinct details and happenings when they are not communicating in their native language.⁶ That people recounted different stories in Spanish with non-Maya speakers than they had shared with me in Kaqchikel-Maya (henceforth Kaqchikel) can be attributed to such factors as the context in which the story is told and a sense of trust and familiarity with the audience.⁷ For some, entire topics are only accessible in their native language. One Maya female elder explained, "I spoke about history to a man who was interested but I could not speak about it in Spanish. I only know history in Kaqchikel."⁸

Such cognitive variance may be related to the way language shapes memory; what people name things is one way in which they remember them. As a result, different languages elicit distinct memories and worldviews even in one individual. As Jan and Diane Rus note about their work in Chiapas, "Among Tzotzil-speakers speaking in Tzotzil there was an internal, indigenous conversation about history and politics that was not only different from, but also opposed to the ways those same themes were talked about in Spanish, even by the same people."⁹ Colonial and neocolonial social and political relations too influence narratives particular to a language.

Before they can analyze oral histories, scholars must first become attuned to multiple ways information, meaning, and emotion are conveyed by sharpening their listening and observation skills. In this essay, an initial exploration of the ways physical gestures and other nonverbal expressions convey meaning segues into the challenges and riches—particularly access to distinct worldviews and epistemologies—of translation since most foreign historians working in Latin America write their scholarship in a language different from the one in which they conduct their research. Appreciating the nuances of the original statement(s) and maintaining as much of the intended meaning as possible in the translation is crucial for accurate analysis. The essay concludes by demonstrating how performance—often deployed to undergird community cohesiveness—in interviews shapes communication and meaning.

Body Language and Other Nonverbal Cues

Context is crucial for understanding communication. Researchers who are oblivious to nonverbal cues risk losing much of what the interviewee is conveying. Since words and phrases have multiple meanings, context, tone, and body language help listeners move from grasping the apparent to understanding the intended meaning. As Louis Menand reminds us, “Speech is somatic, a bodily function, and it is accompanied by physical inflections—tone of voice, winks, smiles, raised eyebrows, hand gestures—that are not reproducible in writing.”¹⁰ For this reason, many researchers prefer video taping interviews; when that is not possible, interviewers can make notes about interviewees’ nonverbal behavior. In light of anthropologist Dennis Tedlock’s estimate that fifty percent of communication is nonverbal,¹¹ interpreting it is vital for understanding meaning. Facial expressions, gestures, and body language all hint at deeper meanings and rival consciousnesses. Historian Steven Striffler understood that “the pained expressions on their faces” conveyed Ecuadoran peasant activists’ frustrations at their inability to establish their economic and political autonomy even after several successful land invasions.¹² Behavior such as finger tapping, dancing eyebrows, avoiding eye contact, nuanced nostril flares, body tilts (such as sitting up straight or slouching), and changes in the velocity of speech also alert listeners that the events or circumstances being recounted affected and continue to affect the narrator.

Nonverbal communication also includes such vocalized puffs of air as sighs, exhalations, coughs, and moans. Whether short or extended, a pause accentuates the meaning of words. Some pauses correspond to a particular community’s narrative style or trope. In chants about their history, the San Blas Kuna of Panama use pauses to create melody.¹³ Often the content of speech clues interviewers in to significant patterns. For example, increased velocity of speech may suggest an attempt to gloss over well-known information or an especially sorrowful, controversial, or otherwise problematic memory. When interviewees articulate difficult or traumatic information, their speech may slow. Emotion, humor, sarcasm, sorrow, irony, and facetiousness can be communicated through a combination of body language and the pitch, speed, stress, intonation, volume, and inflection of speech. When raconteurs look away, pause, or change their voice in some way, they may be betraying that they have more to say about the topic or that it is particularly painful. Researchers are wise to note that and ask follow up questions later.

Some immediately obvious nonverbal cues can halt the interview. When recounting particularly harrowing or sad experiences, interviewees may cry. Such was the case for the Kaqchikel elder Ixq'anil when she first recounted how her young daughter answered a knock at the door of their highland home one night only to let in men who abducted and likely killed her father; Ixq'anil had to halt her account several times to control her tears.¹⁴ The pain of losing her husband and the sorrow she felt for her daughter who bore the cross of unwittingly aiding his murderers was a palpable manifestation of how the trauma of Guatemala's civil war continued to mark her life. Often interviewees can regain their composure and continue on the same topic. In some cases, the interviewer may need to change the subject or halt the interview.

When recounting trauma, shifts in body language can be particularly pronounced. Interviewing Violeta E., a member of the Chilean Pro-Peace Committee (later called the Vicaría de Solidaridad) about the discovery of human remains from a massacre at Longuén during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1989), historian Steve Stern noticed: "Violeta's body language took a restless almost writhing turn. She continually squeezed her hands hard and pulled at her nails. Perhaps this was because she recalled not only the impact of the news and the subsequent struggles to identify and bury the remains, but also what had happened *before* the discovery."¹⁵ In addition to the trauma communicated through her body language, Stern observed her speech was marked by "her difficulty of finding the right words." Attuned to her anguish as it manifested itself in gestures, words, and stutters, Stern came to appreciate how traumatic it was for her and others in the group when they realized the remains were of the *desaparecidos* or disappeared ones the committee had been searching for. Examined in all its nonverbal and verbal complexities, communication conveys emotions, ideas, memories, and perspectives that transcriptions and translations alone fail to capture.

Like interviewees, interviewers influence the interview with their body language and nonverbal cues. If an interviewer does not maintain eye contact or looks elsewhere, the interviewee may interpret that as boredom and shorten their responses. At the same time, since not all cultures promote direct eye contact with non-family members or people of different genders or statuses, avoiding eye contact may be appropriate. Indeed, in many African cultures, eye avoidance is viewed as a sign of respect.¹⁶ To encourage

storytellers to continue a narrative thread, a nod or a smile is better than a verbal yes or ahuh (or other distracting placeholders), which unnecessarily encumber the recording. Verbal and nonverbal forms of communication shape the cognitive and affective connection between the interviewer and interviewee.

For these reasons, when returning to an interview to interpret it, viewing or listening to the original recording affords richer communication detail than reading the transcript. If only an audio recording is available, researchers can listen along while reading the interviewer's notes regarding nonverbal communication.

Language and Translation:

Play on words and double meanings remind us that storytellers are performers, particularly in oral societies where specific individuals are recognized as keepers of history. Only after living in Guatemala for some time, could Daniel Wilkinson really listen to informants. When he asked one raconteur if his people were guerillas during the civil war, the man responded with a grin: "The only thing that made us *canches* [blonds also a gloss for guerrillas] was the dust." Only later did Wilkinson realize the man was not simply referring to dust literally lightening their skin; his double entendre also suggested that drought (as manifested in dust) and poverty had compelled them to resist the military government whose repression and economic development schemes marginalized poor and working class Mayas.¹⁷ The playfulness and poetry of language demand close attention to and deep knowledge of the history and culture of the people with whom one is collaborating.

To be effective, interpreters have to understand and to live in multiple worlds. To communicate across the different languages in which they research and publish, they must make sense of and convey disparate epistemologies, knowledges, and cultures. Language acquisition is an essential part of that process. Since speaking the national and oftentimes local language is imperative, most foreign historians working in Latin America must become fluent in at least one language other than English. A remarkably diverse group, Japanese Peruvians who the Peruvian and U.S. governments relocated to U.S. internment camps during World War II spoke English, Japanese, Okinawan, Spanish, and Hawai'i Creole English.¹⁸

Even when interviewers and interviewees speak the same language, communication can be challenging. Because they vary by region, idioms can cause comprehension problems even for native speakers. Comprehension becomes even more complicated when the language of communication is not native to everyone. When Mexican historian Gerardo Necochea Gracia and his colleagues offered oral history workshops to Zapotec and Mixtec farmers in Oaxaca (Mexico), they realized that their understanding of some Spanish words were different than those of workshop participants. Whereas Necochea used the word *problema* (problem) to evoke an abstract process of understanding events and their nature, the Zapotec and Mixtec participants deployed it to refer to “practical problems that needed solutions.”¹⁹ As a result, when Necochea and his team used the term *problema* to introduce topics such as education, emigration, and traditional medicine, the participants responded not with historical narratives about those topics but rather with how contemporary crises might be addressed. Their framework shifted from collecting oral histories to strategizing with planning developers. Once the project leaders replaced the phrase “research problem” with “aspects of their lives we wanted to know more about,” the participants grounded their responses and queries in oral histories.²⁰

As researchers’ language proficiency expands, their projects and analyses become more sophisticated. Such was the case during the Oaxaca Oral History project. Neither the Zapotec nor the Mixtec language had a word for artisan. Instead, speakers described specific labor such as stonemasonry, wood carving, weaving. According to Necochea, as Zapotec and Mixtec speakers used the word, “they added their own meanings to it.”²¹ Exploring those conceptualizations, Necochea and his team learned how local labor was intricately related to the environment and the past. Lengthy discussions about another word brought Zapotec and Mixtec conceptualizations of history into focus. Although they often use the word *costumbre* (custom), they did not have a literal translation for it in either language; they offered “norm,” “duty,” and “law” as approximations. Instead of tradition, *costumbre* meant continuity and was set against the threat of change represented by history in Zapotec and Mixtec worldviews. Associated with “the language of the conqueror,” history was in constant conflict with *costumbre*, which perpetuated practices and rituals aimed at resisting outside influences that brought about change. Idealizing

continuity and harmony over change and conflict, Zapotec and Mixtec narratives cast change in a negative light.²² When direct translations are elusive, rich meanings come forth and frequently provide windows into the conceptualizations and theories of marginalized people.

Based on their experience, Necoechea and his colleagues began to collaborate with Zapotec and Mixtec participants to develop a common language by working together to define the meanings of key terms and concepts. Interested in labor, the group had different conceptions of what constituted an artisan. As participants described intricate processes of weaving and stonemasonry learned from years of apprenticeship as well as objects made at home from reeds and wood, the instructors realized that their own definitions of artisans as highly skilled laborers failed to capture local renderings. In the process, Necoechea and his team “discovered a wider variety of feelings and attitudes toward work than” they expected.²³ They also came to appreciate how work connected people to the past. Whether they made goods at home or worked a trade outside it, Zapotecs and Mixtecs connected their activities to their parents and previous generations who had transmitted knowledge of those particular skills and crafts. Passing those techniques on to their children honored past generations. Working through the challenges of communication opened up the team’s awareness of how Zapotec and Mixtec participants preserved the past. When translating from one dialect of a language to another (let alone from one language to another), differences in understandings, connotations, and denotations arise.

Even when words are readily available, their fluidity can lead to confusion. Conducting research in Cuba, Nadine Fernandez came across this problem when she asked people to state their racial identity. In some cases, people of mixed race identified themselves as mulatos or mestizos whereas their families identified them as black or white. Racial categorizations also can change over time. Identified as black on her first government identification card, one woman was classified as mestiza on her second one. Another woman was thrilled when her official card changed from classifying her as mestiza to white since that lighter-skinned identity advanced her social position in Cuba’s pigmentocracy. Giving new meaning to the phrase, “a bad hair day,” hair can determine people’s identities as much as skin color.²⁴ Identifying race by phenotype is similarly

complex and contested in Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela and other Latin American nations. The mutability of such categorizations can complicate communication about race. Similarly shifting terms and malleable meanings are deployed to classify (or resist) sexual identity. While younger Cubans tend to use the words “gay” and “lesbian,” most men who have sex with men defined themselves as “homosexual.” Yet many interviewees refrained from using any term at all even when describing such relations.²⁵

Depending on the project, scholars may be working on the frontiers of more than two worlds. When working with indigenous peoples, Afro-Latin Americans, Asian-Latin Americans, or other groups who maintain their own language in addition to the colonial one that dominates their nation, foreign scholars may need to translate across colonial as well as foreign frontiers. Differences between marginalized and dominant groups in Latin American nations can be as stark as those between Latin American communities and the United States or Europe.

Although generally in response to assimilationist pressure, the disparagement of indigenous languages that accompanied the pressure to discontinue them came from within as well as outside ethnic communities. As early as the 1970s in El Salvador, children made fun of their parents and grandparents who spoke Nahuatl.²⁶ Often parents discontinued native language use to help their children avoid discrimination. For that reason, some Okinawan-Peruvian parents only spoke Spanish at home.²⁷ Attributing it to education, migration, racism, and other forces of assimilation, many Latin American indigenous peoples lament the loss of their language; conducting interviews in native languages can countervail that loss. As indigenous and other ethnic communities collaborate with foreign researchers they increasingly are expecting them to learn the local language. Some speakers cannot conceive of research without native languages. A Q’anjob’al-Maya man asked geographer and historian George Lovell, “How is it possible to write a book about our people without knowing our language?”²⁸

Aware of the way indigenous languages isolated and marginalized peoples, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists in Bolivia came together in the 1980s to form the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (Andean Oral History Workshop, THOA) to collect histories of Aymara and Quechua speakers. Although the focus on indigenous languages initially marginalized the organization, when the Bolivian

government began recognizing the importance of indigenous cultures in the late 1980s, THOA enjoyed increased support. The election of Aymara-speaking President Evo Morales further cemented THOA's position. Concerned as much with recovering indigenous knowledge, culture, and history as with empowering indigenous peoples, THOA investigators explore questions of indigenous people's relationships to mestizos and authorities. Since many of the participants are illiterate (and to reach as broad an audience as possible), THOA produces radio and video documentaries about indigenous history, culture, and rights.²⁹

Conduits between distinct epistemologies, worldviews, and cultures, researchers and interviewees who move from one epistemology to another often reinterpret concepts and ideas. Generally less concerned about literal equivalents, indigenous speakers who reconfigure their language to explain concepts and terms in a second language often transform narratives (and the ideas contained therein). When Nasa Yuwe speakers translated the Colombian Constitution, they applied their epistemology and worldviews to reconceptualize notions of justice and nation; from their perspective, they improved Spanish terms by injecting them "with a new Nasa significance."³⁰ Like other indigenous speakers who translate terms from a dominant language into their own, Nasa Yuwe reinterpreted the Spanish terms' original meanings. To fully grasp the concepts laid bare in this process, researchers must be fluent in both languages and willing to collaborate with native speakers. The window such cultural and linguistic translation affords into indigenous theorizing holds potential to transform our understanding of how the past is reconstructed and the multivariate processes that contribute to it.

Particularly striking when considered in light of the histories of colonialism and exploitation that mark social relations in Latin American nations, intercultural negotiations between foreign scholars and local organic intellectuals can facilitate creative explorations of new ways of thinking about scholarship, activism, and history, and the uses to which they are put. With sophisticated studies of languages and narratives, scholars have come to recognize that marginalized peoples' histories are only local from dominant viewpoints. Despite their subordinate positions, disenfranchised people often shape as much as they are shaped by globalization.³¹

Even when researchers achieve fluency, translation can be elusive; it invariably adds another layer of complexity to interpretation, particularly since many words and phrases contain multiple meanings. Often the exact meaning of a word or phrase is unclear or does not translate well. Many a turn of phrase in one language cannot be literally rendered comprehensible in another. Unavoidably creating another filter through which listeners and readers must sift, translations generally are approximations of the content of their statements that seek to remain true to the meaning, rhythm, and flavor of their words. Some words are reserved for specific contexts and topics and thus only exist in one language; among Yukatek-Maya speakers in Quintana Roo, Mexico, some Maya words are solely uttered when describing the Caste War.³² Capturing linguistic subtleties is crucial not just for conveying the richness of oral histories, but also for pursuing potential leads from storytellers as Wilkinson's anecdote demonstrates.

Gaps in communication and comprehension are not limited to language. Different cultures, epistemologies, and conceptions too can impede communication. Paul Sullivan argues that Maya and foreign researchers "were guided by very different motives; . . . had different senses of place, times, causality, and different knowledge of what had gone before. They could not share one set of answers to questions about their dialogues."³³ He characterizes that effect as a double monologue, which impedes the effective exchange of ideas between Mayas and foreigners. With such distinct backgrounds and ways of knowing, approximating meaning and significance is often the best scholars can do.

Performance:

Raconteurs often use history to teach, argue, or entertain. Such intentions can lead to distortions and fabrications through which the researcher must sift. More animated when discussing the use of chemical fertilizers and military service (particularly his experience as a parachutist) than he was when he addressed schooling or migrant labor, the Kaqchikel merchant B'eleje' Imox underscored what he considered significant about the past with gestures as well as words. A seasoned raconteur, he also deployed humor to accentuate certain points.³⁴ As entertaining a storyteller as he was, his embellishments and eye for the sensational made interpreting his narratives difficult. For example, his account of transporting moonshine by hiding it in coffins was plausible but nearly

impossible to corroborate. If authorities suspected the ruse, none were bold enough to confront corpses to reveal it. As a result, no written record of that bootlegging strategy exists. By eluding authorities, evasive moonshiners skirted clear of the archives. Such evidence is precisely what makes oral history indispensable, yet the performative aspects of his storytelling added another layer I had to scrutinize to get at the story's meaning, accuracy, and veracity.

Verbal accounts, animated explanations, and ritual reenactments are crucial to many indigenous peoples' understanding of how the past is reconstructed and related to the present. Community conventions regarding oral transmission shape narrative styles and content. In many indigenous communities, storytellers can conflate similar or related historical events (so as not to bore listeners) as long as the core of the narrative remains representative and unchanged. When in 1999 anthropologist David Stoll argued that Menchú's narrative about civil war and genocide in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* contained not only inaccuracies but lies intended to advance the political Left's agenda, he set off a heated debate that, among other things, brought the challenges of interpreting through performance to the fore. In addition to conveying a collective rather than a personal history or experience, Menchú refers to "secrets" among Mayas that outsiders would never learn.³⁵ To African scholar Jan Vansina historical information gleaned from poems, prayers, songs, and even storytelling is trustworthy precisely because it was unintentional.³⁶ Yet, in light of the creative license inherent in those sources, the information articulated in them may not be true to past events. To maintain audience attention, interviewees construct narratives that tap into what Richard Bauman calls the "essential artfulness" of oral accounts.³⁷ Such traits underscore the importance of approaching oral histories critically.

To express emotion or simply animate the telling, some narrators like B'eleje' Imox wave their arms or act out the story to emphasize aspects of it. When Ruth Ramírez opened her arms to draw attention to her simple home, historian Rob Alegre understood it was an expression of her disappointment: "When I married a *ferrocarrilero*, I expected something more. You expect something more than this."³⁸ In her study of sexuality in Cuba, historian Carrie Hamilton learned to listen not only for how speakers deployed sexuality as a metaphor for other forces and desires, but also "how sexuality expresses

itself through emotion.”³⁹ Whether absent or accompanied by words, emotions communicate particularly passionate perspectives.

Recognizing the performative aspects of storytelling helps researchers understand the significance of certain events and the nuanced meanings involved in recounting them. The motive and context of the performance, whether it be an oral history interview or another manifestation that reveals something about the past, are crucial for interpreting the information gathered. In his study of Chamulas in Mexico, ethnographer Gary Gossen identified three different speech patterns, two of which were contingent upon the speaker repeating words and phrases and deploying parallel syntax and metaphors. Audiences evaluated speakers on the way they spoke and thus interpreted content through performance. Among the San Blas Kuna of Panama, Joel Sherzer identified the performative aspects of chants that conveyed history and other information to assembled audiences.⁴⁰ The communicative efficacy of performance is as dependent on the audience’s interest and goals as the speaker’s competence.⁴¹ Because it offers a window through which researchers can learn about the meanings of events, the performative nature of oral histories is precisely what historian Alessandro Portelli finds most valuable about them.⁴² Performance conveys meaning.

The more theatrical and intricate an enactment, often the more significant its meaning. According to Rapa Nui oral tradition, when the Chilean navy captain Policarpo Toro Hurtado approached the Rapa Nui leader Atamu Tekena to annex Easter Island in the late 1800s, Tekena put soil in his own pocket while he handed grass to Toro to indicate that while Chileans were welcome to visit the island and even exploit its resources, the Rapa Nui chief was not conceding his people’s territorial rights. When Riet Desling conducted her research on Easter Island more than one hundred years later, Rapa Nui peoples enacted that scene for her whenever she asked them about the political relationship between the island and Chile.⁴³ Because the performative components of the interview extend beyond the dialogue itself, oral historians are increasingly turning to video cameras to record interviews. Paying attention to performance is not solely an academic endeavor aimed at getting close to raconteurs’ intended meanings.

As performers, interviewees alter their stories according to the audience and the lessons they want to convey.⁴⁴ Interviewed by two middle-aged white Cuban women, one

36 year-old black Cuban played up his sexual exploits and multiple partners partly to provoke the interviewers.⁴⁵ Acutely aware of stereotypes about the promiscuity of black Cuban men, he performed assumptions about masculinity and race. Without dismissing his hyperbole, historian Carrie Hamilton notes that his account reveals much about how experiences and expectations of male heterosexuality shape the dynamic process of masculinity.⁴⁶

Identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and generation shape how people tell stories and thus their content. After many hours of listening, Behar recognized Hernández' narrative pattern moved "from suffering to rage to redemption."⁴⁷ Even as scholars steer clear of essentialist observations, some commonalties emerge in broad brushstrokes. Shaped by a socialization process that proceeds from childhood, women do not necessarily shy away from recounting conflict, but men are more apt to highlight physical confrontation in their oral narratives.⁴⁸ In her study of fascism in Italy, Luisa Passerini noted that women recounted stories of rebellion as allegories of their struggle against oppression and discrimination not as descriptions of activities in which they actually engaged.⁴⁹ The way public discourse and public pressure encourage people to adhere to normative portrayals calls into the question the extent to which men and women veer from accuracy or shroud details to abide by social expectations of their gender. For instance, judicial records provide evidence that many women engaged in fights and other aggressive behavior and more than a few men fled such confrontations; yet, both women and men recount tales that approximate gender norms more than their life experiences. Women often respond to and reflect dominant narratives that portray women as weak, passive, and meek.⁵⁰ When María Elisa recounted her experience with labor movements and two incidents of rock throwing in Colombia, she distanced herself from the violence by condemning it and insisting others were the perpetrators, not her. "Throughout our long interviews, she negotiated a line between presenting herself as having been shy, almost over-modest, and slipping in stories that pointed to an earlier rebelliousness and a street-smart confidence gained from having come to the city as an orphan who had to fend for herself," observes historian Ann Farnsworth-Alvear.⁵¹ As an older respectable woman, María Elisa may have worried about her contemporary reputation and not have wished to draw attention to some of the gender-bending activities

in which she engaged while younger. Gender, class, humility, and a desire to evoke a pacifist personal past all shaped her narrative. Through their oral histories, interviewees tack between idealized and critical representations of themselves.

Even as discourse shapes women's retelling, many female narrators break from gender norms (often more so in their past behavior than in their present narratives, for the reasons stated above) in ways that more accurately evoke the disconnect between society's expectations and women's experience. Maya women's accounts of the midwife Germana Catu offer one example of how women break from narrative disenfranchisement (whereby historians less frequently interview them and local men devalue and discount women's stories) to craft oral histories that capture their experiences and uchronic imagination with their own protagonists and resolutions.⁵² At the center of the struggle between indigenous approaches to health care and the state's imposition of biomedicine, Catu not only maintained her traditional practices in the face of authorities' pressure to adhere to their regulations and biomedical practices, she also convinced a few doctors that Maya midwifery had much to offer. That male raconteurs never mentioned Catu or the struggle between indigenous midwifery and biomedicine in their narratives about health, illness, and state intervention can be explained partly by indigenous men's ignorance of reproductive health. But it also can be attributed to their inability to fit such stories into their broader historical narratives because Catu's experience did not jibe well with conventional cultural forms or gendered discourse in highland communities or Guatemala more broadly.⁵³ Public discourse and social pressure shape not only the content and performance of narratives, but also the ability of audiences (researchers included) to listen to and to comprehend their layered meanings.

Researchers too are performers in exchanges that begin before formal interviews. In subtle ways, interviewers are part of the performance. By adhering to appropriate dress, comportment, social codes, gender dynamics, class positions, and other norms, interviewers can facilitate a more relaxed and open exchange with interviewees. To do so, interviewers must be familiar with the local culture of communication. In addition to men and women greeting each other by touching each others' arms, for example, the highland Maya (and many other groups) customarily begin a meeting with inquiries about each other's family, health, and work and oftentimes share a drink or food prior to

commencing the purpose of the visit. Argentine scholars Alejandra Pisani and Ana Jemio noticed that drinking *mate* (tea) and socializing with interviewees before the interview and informal conversation after it were not distinguished from the formal interview itself but rather extensions or “constitutive parts of the work.”⁵⁴ Adhering to local customs in the initial greeting can set the tone for a relaxed interview. Failing to do so by dressing inappropriately, beginning “work” abruptly without making social inquiries, and refusing food or drink can result in interviewees feeling disinclined to reveal much to a disrespectful guest.

As the facilitator and audience, the interviewer shapes performative aspects of the interview and thus the information conveyed. In some cases, interviewers perform prominently. Although her privileged position as a U.S. academic contrasted starkly with the life of her collaborator the Mexican itinerant vendor Esperanza Hernández, anthropologist Ruth Behar noted their “mutual multistrandedness as women” made them “exaggerated, distorted mirrors of each other.”⁵⁵ As Behar shared her own story as a Cuban-American woman with Hernández, their narratives began to reflect each other. In an indication of how an interviewer’s conscious injection of self further complicates the impossibility of being an invisible observer, hearing each other’s story influenced how they reported their own.

The presence of kin, friends, and interlopers can shape what an interviewee shares. For this reason, interviews with women are often most productive when done in the absence of their husbands or fathers. In some traditional societies, husbands prohibit their wives from speaking alone with men. Alegre faced this challenge when he sought to interview women associated with the Mexican railroad. In addition to interrupting their wives’ interviews with him, husbands often insisted their wives did not know anything about politics and so were not worth interviewing.⁵⁶ Husbands’ concern about their wives chastity and propriety often informs their dismissal of female knowledge about history and politics. Although her narrative suggested how her ex-husband had shaped her life, living apart from him facilitated Hernández’s frank discussions with Behar.

Community Building:

Performance can also facilitate community building, particularly among marginalized groups as the Rapa Nui example demonstrates. As histories with an activist bent are passed down over generations, the politics of nostalgia become radicalized and storytellers recount them with organizational goals in mind. After years of persecution by the military government and their employer, Coca Cola union members in Guatemala crafted their own history to inform and to inspire their continued demands for improved wages and working conditions, which culminated in a year-long occupation of the Guatemala City bottling plant in 1984. Based on survivors' memories, they wrote an anthem and commissioned its score, erected a Plaza de Martyrs with a mural of defiant workers, hung photographs of murdered union leaders, and wrote a brief history of their struggle. Emphasizing the heroic aspects of their past and downplaying international solidarity, state power, divisions among workers, and other forces that shaped the union's development buoyed workers' confidence that they could achieve their goals against great odds.⁵⁷

The ability of language to empower speakers and build community cohesion may distort narratives by encouraging narrators to deploy creative license when recounting events of oppression and resistance. Historian Deborah Levenson points out that "this semimythemaking, which told as whole truths, important partial ones . . . denied workers access to many of their own problems."⁵⁸ Such distortions are part of the performative aspect of oral histories that researchers take into account in their analysis. Interviewees' long explanations tend to describe circumstances or justify representations of what narrators wished had happened—what Portelli calls *uchronic* imagination—not what actually did happen.⁵⁹ Even as her analysis captures a more nuanced history, she recognizes the redemptive powers and purposes of the union's version. Indeed, workers would not let her forget: "'You! You think we are poor,' a Coca Cola worker said to me. Pointing to his head, he continued, 'We are not poor, we are rich.'"⁶⁰

As anthropologists like Edward Bruner and Clifford Geertz make clear, stories are told within a larger master narrative. Recognizing that framework is crucial to unpacking how historic, official, mythical, and other narratives create meaning. Interviewees generally build their stories around themes and establish narrative patterns that may vary by gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. Discursive communities and dominant

social models advance norms and expectations by which people live that in turn shape their stories. During their research, Argentine historian Pablo Pozzi and his colleagues observed that mid-twentieth century militant workers' use of images, emphasis, and the way they crafted their explanations differed from that of middle and upper class Argentines.⁶¹ Interviewees often clue researchers in to the factors that shape their stories and lives. Guatemala City labor activists credited their religious convictions with buttressing their struggles in the face of death threats. Associating their activism with Christian principles gave them the strength to press forward.⁶² Within any narrative pattern, contradictory portrayals cast a dark hue on central themes thereby complicating the telling and interpretation.

Like individuals, communities develop narratives that reconstitute their integrity across time.⁶³ Highland Maya raconteurs generally build their stories around the challenges of colonial and neocolonial rule: forced labor, expropriated land, disease, limited education, famine, and disasters. As he moved from such topics as the devastating effects of epidemics, famine, and earthquakes to the challenges of life marked by dictatorial rule and mass migration, the Maya linguist Kab'lajuj Tijax (Martín Chacach) crafted an oral history that was similar to the more than 100 interviews I had recorded up to that point.⁶⁴ Even though his professional life compelled him to spend most of his time outside his hometown, his indigenous community's narrative form left an indelible mark on the way he recounted the past. Such commonalities reflect each individual's relationship with their community and its dominant discourses as well as the broader economic, political, and social models that shape their lives.

Generally an absent audience in the interview, the community influences an interviewee's historical consciousness. Recording an interview makes the community's presence more pronounced since (barring any restrictions) anyone has access to the recording thereafter. This virtual public created for posterity, to paraphrase Brazilian historian Verena Alberti, represents another audience that informs and influences the interview.⁶⁵ As their corpus of interviews grows, researchers can recognize patterns of narrative organization that reveal social groups' attempts to coherently reconstruct their pasts. Labor historians have demonstrated that social justice and political activism are common themes in working class oral narratives; more specific tales include interactions

between narrators and authority figures.⁶⁶ Understanding the relationship between the community and interviewee helps researchers interpret the meaning and significance of narrative strands.

Conclusion:

Crucial historical sources, oral histories are only as good as the communication and exchanges that produce them. In addition to the body language, nonverbal cues, and performative characteristics that convey information, which must be interpreted, communication across linguistic differences makes understanding intended meaning challenging. Scholars seek to convey what they learned as closely to the original intention and meaning as possible. Articulating the historical narratives and perspectives gathered in a second language and culture can be incomplete and frustrating. At the same time, the humbling experiences of interpretation and translation highlight that historians never capture the truth of what happened but only converging and competing perspectives of it. The very process that limits scholars as they write is a microcosm of the larger struggle of understanding the past they seek to express.

One of the ways researchers can fine tune cultural communication is by immersing themselves not only in the language and culture, but also in the specific communities with whom they engage. Familiarity is an antidote to miscommunication. Informed by local cultural, historical, and social knowledge, fluency facilitates a broad understanding of how and what people communicate. Passing time with interviewees outside formal interviews allows researchers to observe communicative nuances specific to individuals that can shed light on their intended meanings. Given that listeners bear as much responsibility as speakers for optimizing communication, ethnographic approaches to oral history research can deepen insights and analysis.⁶⁷ Establishing deep, respectful relationships also facilitates researchers' ability to build trust with interviewees and community members more broadly, which is paramount in societies that have been traumatized by (neo)colonialism, civil war, and other sorts of violence and oppression—especially if committed by ethnic, national, or racial outsiders similar to the interviewer.

As scholars move beyond ethnography to collaboration, communication becomes richer still. When locals shape the research processes, goals, and methods, they have a

vested interest in the project's success, which, of course, hinges upon clear communication. In light of the number and complexity of the elements that must be interpreted to understand interviewees' perspectives of the past, oral history research and analysis are best pursued in collaboration with local experts.

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