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“Memory and Narration”

*Historical Waves of Oral History:
Reflections on New Trends and Changing Practice*

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Abstract

The practice of history as we conceive of it today began with the transition from orality to literacy, which led to written records and the earliest works we recognize as history. But the utility and validity of written and orally transmitted evidence depends on its user for the particular purpose intended. It is the duty of the historian to sift evidence of all nature to draw his own inferences where oral history is no more or no less valuable than other sources. The gradual acceptance and validity of the oral evidence emerged with scientific inventions as tools – portable tape recorders, videotapes, films and CDs – for repository of orally transmitted evidence especially after the Second World War. Gradual waves and changing practices influenced oral historians to continue to favor audio over video as their recording equipment of preference, partly through habit and concerns about the intruding presence of a camera (and camera operator), but also because of cost and skill deficit.

So, using this approach of new trends and waves of oral history, let us examine the ethical and methodological implications of database and indexing software, of putting our interviews on the internet, and of engaging with tech capitalism. Oral history interviewing and interpretation are, ideally, intentionally slow processes, while digital technology prides itself on its speed. This leads to the question: How do we reconcile the two?

Keywords: Waves, Ethics, Digital, Methodology, Oral history

Introduction

An epoch in the practice of history is coming to a close, for hundreds of years the printed word has been the dominant mode of communication for the historical profession in the process shaping its basic assumptions and structures. Today, the printed word is being superseded by a diversity of communication forms with the greatest impetus coming from oral narratives. As a methodology rooted in multiple modes of communication, oral history can play a pivotal role in accelerating the historical profession's comprehension of this radical shift in the nature of communication. In return, audio-video can more fully express oral history's reflexive dimension, which makes more explicit the human role in the creation of history. The relationship between audio-video and oral history, always reciprocal, holds particular promise amidst the present revolution in communications.

A challenging manifestation of this communication change is the rapidly growing disjunction between the practice of professionals based in academia and the practice of history in society. On the one hand we find history professionals who remain deeply wedded to writing, as they examine more areas and fields with more numerous and sophisticated methodologies than ever before. On the other hand, film and video, especially as broadcast on television, have spawned a staggering array of historical works which arguably are the major influence on the public's historical consciousness. Closer to home, consider the number of people creating family and local histories with oral narratives; better yet, note the number of video yearbooks for schools being produced. The glaring contradiction is that these two major trends have intersected very little: professional historians have had limited effect on the history presented through oral

narratives; the changes in communication wrought by oral history have wielded influence on the historical profession.

The core of the conundrum lies in the role of communication in the history of history. The historical profession has always been structured around the medium of the written word. Writing and history have been synonymous, as evidenced by the word "historiography." Writing is an essential part of the "deep structure" of the practice of history; it is the form of our content, but in Hayden White's words, we have not questioned "the content of our form."¹

The practice of history as we conceive of it today began with the transition from orality to literacy, which led to written records and the earliest works we recognize as history.² The next great shift came with the advent of the printed word, which transformed society and the practice of history. As the era dominated by the printed word winds down, historians are faced with complicated questions about the use of a variety of mixed and changing forms of communication, ranging from simple audiotapes to the promising complexities of videodiscs linked with computers.

The technologies of oral history are changing at a bewildering pace, yet history using oral narratives does not even have a rubric, a commonly agreed upon title. It is not that oral histories have been rejected by historians. The majority of historians seem to find the concept of history using oral narratives at least somewhat intriguing and a goodly number are enthusiastic; historians seem to be accepting the idea of a relationship between oral narratives and history.

Changing Trends and Practices

¹ Hayden White, *the Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

² Walter J., *Ong, Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982)

I do think that the medium is part of the message, and that digital technologies are transforming so many aspects of our work as oral historians—and indeed the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives—that they will, over time, also change the way we think about memory and personal narrative, about telling and collecting life stories, and about sharing memories and making histories.³

In his 2007 article reflecting on the state of oral history, Alistair Thomson mused about the ways the digital revolution was beginning to affect the field. He noted that however we incorporated the new wave of digital technology into oral history practice, it would transform not only the technical processes of recording people’s life stories, but also how we, as oral historians, understand what it is we do and why we ought to do it at all.⁴ Thomson was right. Since the publication of his article, digital technology has worked its way into nearly every aspect of oral history, fundamentally changing how we record and disseminate our work.⁵ It has also altered our relationship to the craft. Many of us no longer see oral history primarily in terms of the recording and preservation of life stories. We now pay as much attention to editing, indexing, and incorporation into a database, dissemination, curation, presentation, and manipulation for research purposes, public consumption, and greater interactivity. All of these have become more possible—and therefore more prevalent—in the digital age.

As a result of these new trends and practices, nearly every oral history conference or workshop devotes a significant amount of time to providing participants with opportunities to

³ Alistair Thomson, “*Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History*,” *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2007), p. 70

⁴ Thomson, “*Four Paradigm Transformations*”

⁵ Digital technology’s impact on oral history practice was showcased in Douglas Boyd, ed., “*Special Issue on Oral History in the Digital Age*,” *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013), and the conversation continued in Douglas Boyd and Mary Larson, eds., *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access and Engagement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

learn about new technological tools and how to use them, with the assumption that at least some of their interviews must be put online. Projects such as Oral History in the Digital Age collect information and resources about this now-integral component of our work in the hopes of helping us navigate the processes and possibilities of using technology in varied oral history practices.⁶ The resources on the project website are principally related to the logistics of the digital revolution. They cover topics as simple as recording an interview using newer technology and as complex as protecting intellectual property on the Internet, as well as ensuring digital preservation in the context of work that is much more public and fluid than it once was. However, what is still marginal in these discussions, and within the field more generally, is a reflection on Thomson's important musings about how this embrace of technology changes "the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives," as well as everything that comes afterwards, especially in regard to our increasing concerns over the ethical dissemination of stories. The field is full of promise about the digital revolution, but there is relatively little critique of that promise.⁷ We suspect that one challenge of having this conversation has to do with trends in academic funding, especially in our institution.

Practitioners have tended to deploy new technology in three principal ways: to record interviews and other oral history encounters; to process, analyze, and database those recordings; and, lastly, to disseminate the content of these exchanges to a wider public through the Internet.⁸ In all of these areas, technology holds great potential. It can help us to create more inclusive

⁶ See Oral History in the Digital Age, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu>

⁷ For discussions on the promise of digital oral history, see Douglas Boyd, "Achieving the Promise of Oral History in the Digital Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 285-302; Steven High, Jessica Mills, and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Telling Our Stories/Animating Our Past: A Status Report on Oral History and Digital Media," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 3 (September 2012), p. 1-22

⁸ See Boyd, "Special Issue on Oral History in the Digital Age."

interview spaces by accessing different communities. It can also allow us to document the whole interview process; the relationships we build on and off the record, are just as important as the stories we record, because they inform them and largely determine how they emerge.⁹

Moreover, it can expand significantly the potential for processing and disseminating our narrators' stories, since online tools enable us to reach a wider audience that can, through a range of interactive possibilities, more comprehensively engage with the content we upload to the Internet. Thus there is no doubt that these new trends and practices can create the conditions for an equitable, engaged, and collaborative research model. It is not, however, a foregone conclusion that technology will always lead us in such a fruitful direction. We must consider the ways that the digital both conflicts and converges with our ethical sensibilities and methodological commitments.¹⁰

Oral history has always valued slow, thoughtful, and engaged listening, but what happens when we adjust our work to the pace of the newest digital possibilities, which we prize precisely because they are quicker and more efficient? Can we maintain the essential virtues of our slow practice while also incorporating technologies that give our work new possibilities? In raising these questions, our purpose is not to argue against the use of digital tools.¹¹ Rather, we believe that because technology plays such an important role in a field that has always taken questions about ethics and process seriously, we need to engage meaningfully and critically with the

⁹ Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, eds., *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

¹⁰ For reflections on the use of technology in oral history as a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself, see, for example, Anne Valk and Holly Ewald, "Bringing a Hidden Pond to Public Attention: Increasing Impact through Digital Tools," *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013), p. 8–24; Stacey Zembrzycki, "Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews," *Oral History* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2013), p. 98–107.

¹¹ For discussions on the promise of digital oral history, see Boyd, "Achieving the Promise"; High, Mills, and Zembrzycki, "Telling Our Stories"

implications of these advances. How does technology change both the purpose and the product of oral history? In what ways does it both democratize and constrain our practice? How does the presence of technology impact how people speak with us and remember their lives? Do we lose anything when we put everything online?

Ethics and the Digital Turn

Oral history is a diverse field that encompasses many approaches. The reflections we offer here on the impact of the digital turn come out of our own particular understandings of what it means to interview people about their lives.¹² Before discussing the digital, therefore, it is necessary to contextualize our critiques within the scholarship that has most impacted our work in this regard. Although pivotal texts written by oral and public historians, including Alessandro Portelli and Michael Frisch, have played formative roles in this practice, it is the work done by oral historians in the latter part of the twentieth century that has most affected our views of the digital.¹³ While the early literature, including *Women's Words: The Practice of Oral History* and *Women's Oral History: The "Frontiers" Reader*, did not comment explicitly on technology, it brought together previously disparate voices to envision what oral history could be and to

¹² By digital turn, we mean “*the digital, computerized, or networked information and communication technologies that developed in the final decades of the twentieth century*” and how they are used in, and have impacted, the field of oral history in particular; See Sonia Cancian and Donna Gabaccia, “*Old Archives Respond to New Media: The Example of the SITLOMIA Project*,” paper presented to the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Montreal, Canada

¹³ Although feminist oral historians and oral and public historians like Portelli and Frisch were thinking about and publishing on the collaborative dynamics of the interview throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they made little reference to each other in their work, also see Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Scholars are just now bringing the two approaches together, see, for example, Steven High, Lisa Ndejuru, and Kristen O'Hare, eds., “*Special Issue on Sharing Authority: Community-University Collaboration in Oral History, Digital Storytelling, and Engaged Scholarship*,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009); Sheftel and Zembrzycki, *Oral History Off the Record*; Stacey Zembrzycki, *According to Baba: A Collaborative Oral History of Sudbury's Ukrainian Community* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

consider the ethical considerations that were at the heart of this approach.¹⁴ The essays in these collections offered insights into the complexities of language, culture, and power in the interview space and the specificities of interviewing women. These were early multidisciplinary and intergenerational articulations of oral history as collaboration, and they emerged from an engaged perspective that was cognizant of the significant power differential between interviewers and their narrators. Contributors privileged the voices of their narrators, reminding us of the particularities of listening to the varied and gendered ways that women speak about the past. Gaining this kind of understanding required time, patience, and hard work. The building of relationships, the establishment of trust, and a willingness to be reflexive about all aspects of each exchange were, as Kristina Minister argued, “not only legitimate” but “inseparable from the process.”¹⁵ By offering concrete, honest, and telling examples of their own work in the field, this group of scholars transformed oral history methodology and practice, forcing us to contemplate the very real circumstances—uncomfortable and difficult moments, silences, interpretive conflicts, ethics of inequality, and the distance created by political differences—in which stories are told. For the most part, these oral historians established a framework for understanding the specificities of interviewing women by offering an articulation of what Michael Frisch, writing at the same time, called a “shared authority.” Through this literature, oral history became an ethical and political practice that has since been shown to have value in and of itself—as a process and not just as a means of collecting primary source material.

¹⁴ See Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Susan H. Armitage with Patricia Hart and Karen Weather mon, eds., *Women's Oral History: The "Frontiers" Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). Note that Sherna Berger Gluck has since pondered the important role that Women's Words played in shaping the field of feminist oral history in “Has Feminist Oral History Lost Its Radical/Subversive Edge?” *Oral History* 39, no. 2 (Autumn 2011), p. 63-72.

¹⁵ Kristina Minister, “A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview,” in *Women's Words*, p. 38

Like the work of most oral historians of our generation, our own oral history practice was informed in important ways by these seminal texts. As a result, we have worked hard to adopt collaborative, democratic, and humanistic approaches when working with our narrators. We are committed to facilitating democratic research spaces and building authentic relationships that respect our needs as well as the needs of those with whom we work. We approach narrators with the explicit goal of understanding their complex life stories and the layered meanings they attach to them. For us, the process, which often involves many telephone calls, written correspondence and informal meetings, is just as important as the outcomes of each exchange. In short, we are interested in much more than simply getting the story.¹⁶ The kind of oral history we value is inherently messy in that it involves subjective encounters and complex research relationships—and it takes time. We articulate this approach, because it is the place from where our questions and critique of how we use technology in our practice emerge. But how can we continue to engage in the kind of sustained, engaged, and human-centered work that we discuss above in the brave new world of audio-video clipping, data-basing, and social media sharing?

Michael Frisch, one of the leaders of the digital turn in oral history, has dubbed the push for making interviews accessible and usable by scholars and the public as the development of a “post-documentary sensibility.” This means that our job as oral historians necessitates moving away from merely documenting lives to making them accessible for people to listen to and engage with. This move raises significant technical, ethical, and epistemological questions.¹⁷ As Frisch himself asked, might narrators “think rather differently about telling a story that will be

¹⁶ For more on our own approach, see Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Introduction,” in *Oral History Off the Record*, p. 1-19

¹⁷ See Michael Frisch, “*Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-Documentary Sensibility*,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 102-122; Michael Frisch, “*Three Dimensions and More: Oral History beyond the Paradoxes of Method*,” in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hess-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), p. 221-238

instantly accessible and easily manipulated”¹⁸ The context of our interviews changes when our purposes change in this regard; what exactly are the implications of putting the aural back into oral history? How do people think differently about narrating their lives because of this changing context?

Concerned with many of the above questions, scholars like Joy Parr, Linda Shopes, and Sherna Berger Gluck, have begun to comment on the use of new technologies in oral history. While they have engaged with the exciting developments made possible by the digital, they often temper their remarks with caution, reflecting the ethics of practice that guides their work in the field. Privileging the “sharing” that has always been central to her work, Parr “welcome[s] the new kinds of authority enabled by new media forms while remaining critical of the tendency to celebrate such forms as being particularly democratic, as yielding ‘unauthorized,’ ‘direct,’ and ‘open’ opportunities for historical authorship that are not themselves limiting and marginalizing other points of view.”¹⁹ For her part, Linda Shopes, somewhat like Frisch, notes how the digital turn in oral history has increasingly steered the field away from its archival roots (wherein the purpose of doing interviews was to capture life stories for posterity) to a broader presentational purpose (wherein doing the interviews is only the beginning). In particular, the move away from transcription to digital means of organizing and accessing interviews, such as audio-video clipping and tagging, has altered our communication and accountability processes with narrators by removing what was previously an obligation to return transcripts as a means of checking that what we had recorded was acceptable to them.²⁰ Berger Gluck, herself the project leader of the

¹⁸ Thomson, “*Four Paradigm Transformations*,” p. 69

¹⁹ Joy Parr, Jessica Van Horssen, and Jon van der Veen, “*The Practice of History Shared across Differences: Needs, Technologies, and Ways of Knowing in the Mega projects New Media Project*,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Hiver/Winter 2009), p. 56; Also see *Mega projects New Media*, accessed September 24, 2015, <http://megaprojects.uwo.ca>

²⁰ Linda Shopes, “*Transcribing Oral History in the Digital Age*,” in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, ed. Douglas

award-winning Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive at California State University, is convinced that posting oral histories to the Internet also requires a cautious approach regarding the ethics and impact of doing so. Unrestricted public access raises a host of related issues, such as what control we have over dissemination and representation of our narrators' voices, and it requires interviewers and their narrators to remain vigilant throughout every exchange about how what they are recording might find life on the Web. This new context complicates the work of building and maintaining trust. "Rather than a new conundrum," Gluck notes, "perhaps this harks back to the contradictions [around our obligations to our narrators] inherent in our earlier ideal of collaborative process."²¹ Indeed, our concerns over the digital turn in oral history all involve tensions that practitioners have voiced for some time, but new technologies add another level of complexity to them.

Oral History as Tech Start-Up

The turn toward the greater integration of digital technology in oral history practice requires us to build our tech capacity: we have to know how the technology works if we are going to engage with it and ultimately adopt it. And while it is both desirable and reasonable for the average oral historian to master the use of a digital audio recorder, or learn how to build a basic website, or manipulate user-friendly software, the increasing centrality of technology in our practice also requires us to invite new kinds of experts into our field. For example, we might be able to learn how to use software for audio-video clipping, editing, or tagging our interviews, but

Boyd et al. (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012), accessed September 23, 2015, <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/transcribing-oral-history-in-the-digital-age/>; Linda Shopes, "Oral History," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th edition, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011), p. 451-66.

²¹ Sherna Berger Gluck, "*From California to Kufr Nameh and Back: Reflections on Forty Years of Feminist Oral History*," in *Oral History Off the Record*, 39. Also see VOAHA II: Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive, accessed September 23, 2015, www.csulb.edu/voaha

very few of us will learn enough to be able to design, build, or customize that software ourselves. This leaves us with two options: hire someone to build it for us, or use existing software, whether or not it is particularly appropriate for our purposes and despite the ways it might restrict our work. Both raise important questions about our practice.

Oral historians have already devoted considerable energy to assessing the various tools—whether custom-built or not—that are now available to us.²² What we have not done is assess the implications of partnering with computer programmers and private companies to create and use these tools. There is a cost, financial and ethical, to the speed and accessibility that the digital turn allows us. If we design our own software, this means hiring programmers, whose expected salaries are often far higher than that of the university or community researcher, and ensuring that they understand the community-oriented vision of our practice. This may be a relatively easy negotiation when working with an individual programmer, but it becomes infinitely more difficult when contracting out to private firms that have their own policies, particularly regarding their rights and claims on what they are designing. There is also the potential that oral historians and related researchers will use their own software projects to move into for-profit work, perhaps undermining our integrity as scholars. While oral historians have thus far rightly privileged open-source coding and open-access knowledge, the meaning of these terms remains contested in the wider computing world. Some have argued that this movement has been manipulated by proprietary companies capitalizing on open-access coding for free labor.²³ If we use pre-existing software or digital platforms, then we must often work with

²² See, for example, Dean Rehberger, “*Getting Oral History Online: Collections Management Applications*,” *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013), p. 83-94; Sara Price, “*Collection Management Systems: Tools for Managing Oral History Collections*,” in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, accessed September 23, 2017, <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/collection-management-systems>; High, Mills, and Zembrzycki, “Our Stories/Animating Our Past”

²³ Georg von Krogh and Eric von Hippel, “*Editorial: Special Issue on Open Source Software Development*,”

tools—and rules—that are proprietary and outside of our control. Most social media platforms, for example, require abdicating one’s ownership over the information and media one posts to the company hosting it. What are the implications for the promises we make on our consent forms if we post an oral history video clip to Facebook, a company that reserves the right to make use of any media posted for advertising and data mining?²⁴

As we are increasingly coming to understand, the fields of new technology and digital media are both lucrative and ruthless. Google, for example, is famous for leading the way to a new form of tech capitalism.²⁵ While oral historians have devoted a great deal of attention to the democratic potential of the digital turn, we have yet to fully acknowledge the darker side of this shift: the digital world is rooted in competitive private industry, which thrives on selling us products and commodifying everything from how we communicate with our loved ones, to how we read the news and absorb information, and even how we make decisions. We may labor under the impression that the Internet data makes everything possible, but accessing it increasingly means paying people more money for specific tools, thus rendering that world more elusive and elitist than it was before. For instance, one needs a smart-phone to access apps and an e-reader to use digital books, all of which cost money and encourage customer loyalty to a

Research Policy 32 (2003): 1149–1157; Andrea Bonaccorsi and Cristina Rossi, “Comparing Motivations of Individual Programmers and Firms to Take Part in the Open Source Movement: From Community to Business,” Knowledge, Technology and Policy 18, no. 4 (2006): p. 40-64; Teemu Mikkonen, Tere Vaden, and Niklas Vainio, “The Protestant Ethic Strikes Back: Open Source Developers and the Ethic of Capitalism,” First Monday 12, no. 2, last modified February 5, 2007, <http://pear.accc.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1623/1538>

²⁴ Since companies like Facebook frequently change their policies, there is much online debate about who owns the information one posts to them; that said, in general, participating in these spaces does grant these Companies license to use a contributor’s information for their own purposes. See, for example, Oliver Smith, “Facebook Terms and Conditions: Why You Don’t Own Your Online Life,” The Daily Telegraph, January 4, 2013, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/social-media/9780565/Facebookterms-and-conditions-why-you-dont-own-your-online-life.html>

²⁵ Christian Fuchs, “Google Capitalism,” *Triple C* (Cognition, Communication, Co-operation) 10, no. 1 (2012), p 42-48

particular brand²⁶ Then, when we put our lives, or our oral histories, online, we willingly commodify them, whether it is through historical data mining, targeted advertising, or the selling of our photographs or personal information to advertisers or security agencies. Additionally, the social media platforms that we employ as part of our dissemination processes do not exist out of some altruistic desire to make communication easier and more accessible to all. They exist because they make people a lot of money. This can come into conflict with oral history's commitment to not owning or copyrighting stories and valuing a democratic approach to collecting and sharing them.²⁷ Transforming lives into products is one of the troubling consequences of the digital age that has yet to be fully understood. Oral historians need to be wary of the ways the logic of tech capitalism might well creep into our own practice. What are the implications of this for our research, particularly in a field like oral history where researchers tend to identify as progressive and are critical of capitalism's control over people's lives and how those lives are understood?²⁸ It would be naive to think that any research or dissemination exists outside the wide reach of the capitalist system, but it is important that we reflect on this reality: the more we become entangled with digital tools, the more we become entangled with tech capitalism.

²⁶ Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff, "*The Web is Dead. Long Live the Internet*," *Wired*, August 17, 2010, accessed September 23, 2015, http://www.wired.com/2010/08/ff_webrip/; Asher Moses, "*How the Internet Became a Closed Shop*," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 22, 2012, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/how-the-internet-became-a-closed-shop-20121221-2brcp.html>

²⁷ See, for example, Jack Dougherty and Candace Simpson, "*Who Owns Oral History? A Creative Commons Solution*," in *On the Line: How Schooling, Housing, and Civil Rights Shaped Hartford and Its Suburbs*, ed. Jack Dougherty (Hartford, CT: Trinity College, 2015), <http://epress.trincoll.edu/ontheline2015>

²⁸ Alexander Freund has been critical of oral history's supposed progressivism and the politics in which we interview; See Freund, "*'Confessing Animals': Toward a Longue Dure'e of the Oral History Interview*," *Oral History Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): p. 1-26; and Freund, "*Under Storytelling's Spell: Oral History in a Neoliberal Age*," *Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (2015), p. 96-132.

Thus, oral historians must also reflect on whether the digital turn is affecting the gender dynamics of a field that has historically had excellent female representation and has worked hard to include diverse and underrepresented voices. The importance of oral history scholarship to the field is a reminder of the centrality of oral history ethics and standards of practice to the development of methodology, particularly its commitment to social justice, representation, and collaborative approaches. Because oral history enables us to value people's lives as well as the concrete ways in which the personal can be political, it has always needed scientific perspectives, as well as other subaltern perspectives at the margins of conventional power structures. We should not assume that oral history is, or will be, immune from the biases of the tech field. Therefore, as we move toward integrating technology more centrally into our work, we need to be able to address the problems of representation that this shift brings with it. While the digital turn is often invoked as a means for making our work more accessible and better able to represent wider sectors of the population, the questions we raise in this section point out that it can be a double-edged sword. Only critical and deliberate evaluation of how we incorporate these tools into our work will ensure that they do not undermine our craft. It is hard to make room for a conversation about how and why we use technology and the ways we do so when that world is necessarily fast-paced and constantly evolving, but such deliberation is essential to maintaining our integrity as a field.

Conclusion: In Defense of Slowness

Our period is given over to the demon of speed, and that is the reason it so easily forgets its own self. Our period is obsessed by the desire to forget, and it is to fulfill that desire that it gives over to the demon of speed; it picks up the pace to show us that it no longer wishes to be

remembered; that it is tired of itself; sick of itself; that it wants to blow out the tiny trembling flame of memory.²⁹ Although, it is important for us to reiterate that we are not against the use of new practices and technologies. We recognize that digital tools hold tremendous potential, especially for the ways that they can enhance the collaborative potential of oral history research. Realistically, we also cannot pretend that it is possible to turn back the clock on what is now a global phenomenon. Digital technology has become an integral part of oral history, and it will continue to be more fully and seamlessly integrated in the coming years. In short, it is here to stay.³⁰ Rather, we raise these issues in the spirit of critical reflection. If it is inevitable that oral history will become a more digital practice, then it is our obligation as oral historians to have a meaningful and rigorous conversation about what that means, just as we have done for every other important development in the field. Without critical dialogue and reflection, we run the risk of fetishizing technology, rather than allowing it to deepen our practice.

We have referred to “slowness” as an important principle in oral history practice throughout this piece. Our point is not only that relationship building, interviewing, and careful analysis, all of which are at the core of oral history, take time, but also that slowness allows us to consider the impact, context, trajectory, and implications of our work. The problem is not just that digital tools speed up oral history, but that speed itself is an ethos in the digital world. We are encouraged to scroll through content quickly, and making things accessible equates with making them quick to access. Likewise, the super-capitalist nature of the tech world is intimately connected to its pace; one’s worth is rooted in the newest development one can produce and in

²⁹ Milan Kundera, *Slowness* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), p. 135.

³⁰ Douglas Boyd also makes this point in “*Guest Editor’s Introduction*,” *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013), p. i-iii.

producing it more quickly than competitors. Oral history, while engaging with that world as it benefits us, nevertheless needs to avoid adopting such a *modus operandi*.

As Milan Kundera argues, the speed of modernity is not just antithetical to the deliberative slowness of memory (and, by extension, oral history), but it is an intentional bid to erase it. We live in a technological culture of planned obsolescence. We need to grapple with this temporal contradiction, since oral history at its best values the opposite of obsolescence.

Technology seeks to move constantly onward and forget, while oral history wants to remember. And yet, as oral historians, we have increasingly come to need and value technology. How will we reconcile the two?

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