

Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age

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Abstract: Storytelling—in the form of public talk about oneself—has become a new social phenomenon over the past quarter century. The case of StoryCorps illuminates how autobiographical (often confessional) storytelling in public comes out of the simultaneous democratization and neoliberalization of Western society since the 1970s. The storytelling phenomenon, which frequently aligns itself with (or appropriates) oral history, reinforces neoliberal values of competitive individualism and thus depoliticizes public discourse. Oral historians, rather than embracing storytelling, need to investigate it as a historically situated social phenomenon that often undercuts the epistemological, methodological, ethical, and political aims of oral history.

Keywords: Oral history theory, storytelling, StoryCorps, neoliberalism, individualism, therapy culture

The Storytelling Phenomenon

Every Friday morning, millions of Americans tune in to National Public Radio (NPR) on their way to work and their hearts swell when they hear the NPR host announce: “Time now for StoryCorps. Across the country, people come to StoryCorps to record interviews with friends and loved ones.” They become misty-eyed or may even have to pull over to have a good cry as they savor yet another American’s story of hardship and eventual triumph. One morning, ten-year-old Ida Cortez from San Francisco tells her mother how she came to love reading despite her dyslexia; another morning, three blind brothers tell of a blind savior who gave them what their mother failed to provide. Since 2003, StoryCorps and NPR have produced and broadcast over 500 of these

I thank OHR editor Kathryn L. Nasstrom for her early encouragement and insightful comments as well as OHR editor Stephanie Gilmore and editor Elinor Mazé for their fine editorial work.

doi:10.1093/ohr/ohv002. Advance Access publication 11 March 2015

The Oral History Review 2015, Vol 42, No. 1, pp. 96–132

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three-minute stories.¹ They are part of a new phenomenon in the West: the storytelling phenomenon. This article explores the storytelling phenomenon and its implications for oral historians.

Storytelling has become a buzzword in Western societies, especially in North America. In this article, I focus on public autobiographical storytelling—talking about one's life in public. Public, autobiographical storytelling—storytelling for short—is a new social phenomenon that has emerged over the past quarter century. This new phenomenon is made up of individual practices of making part of one's life public in the form of a story, often in a confessional mode; an enabling industry, including academia as well as for-profit and non-profit organizations; and a broader culture and *mentalité* that motivate the individual practices, the industry, and a general public to produce, disseminate, sell, buy, and consume confessional stories. The storytelling phenomenon is grounded in Western societies' processes of, on the one hand, democratization and greater social and legal equality and, on the other hand, greater economic inequality, the demise of the welfare state, and the emergence of a crass hyperindividualism in the wake of neoliberalism. Furthermore, storytelling is shaped by Western societies' discourses of emotion, therapy, survival, and trauma that emerged in the 1970s, and it has roots in a centuries-long history of confessional and psychologizing interviewing practices that inform self-monitoring and self-reporting.

I argue that this kind of autobiographical, public storytelling is a technology of the self. As such, it is a powerful means of forming individual and collective identities through unifying narratives. With its focus on the individual, the new kind of storytelling tends to atomize society, proposing the narrator as a protagonist who overcomes seemingly personal challenges in a world of inexplicable circumstances such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression. It is motivated by liberal beliefs in individual autonomy, freedom, and rights. Inadvertently, however, it supports neoliberal values of consumerism, competition, and free market solutions to all economic, social, and cultural problems. The storytelling industry thrives on sympathy but fails to create empathy or understanding. The rise of storytelling has led to a depoliticization of narrative and public discourse—replacing politics with nostalgia, hero-worship, nationalism, myth-making, and self-help mantras such as the belief in positive thinking, self-sufficiency, and self-empowerment.

Let me be clear that I am not talking about all storytelling practices here. Storytelling has always been with us; it is “one of our basic social acts.”²

¹ All stories are available on the two organizations' websites: <http://storycorps.org/listen/> and <http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps>.

² On the fundamental role of storytelling in society, see Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013); Bruce Jackson, *The Story Is True: The*

Rather, I am talking about a new discourse about storytelling that has emerged in the West over the past quarter century. A simple Google search for “storytelling” makes clear that storytelling is now talked about in every sector of society, and it is discussed in the same way, whether in medicine and health care, business and marketing, or pedagogy and therapy: telling a story, especially about yourself and particularly if it reveals intimate details of your life, is always positive and usually offers a solution to otherwise intractable problems. This one-sidedly positive view is often either naïve or calculating (towards exploiting others’ naivety about the “magic” of storytelling).

Rather than embracing this new discourse of storytelling, oral historians need to investigate it as a historically situated social phenomenon. We need to ask: Why and how did this kind of storytelling emerge as a new social movement and industry in the late twentieth century? How has it come to assume cultural, social, and economic power over the past quarter century? What are its social, political, cultural, economic, and mental effects on society? Finally: What are the methodological, interpretive, ethical, and political implications for the practice of oral history? Studying storytelling as a social phenomenon is part of a larger task oral historians need to attend to, namely that of positioning oral history in a *longue durée* history of interviewing that attends to both specific technologies and larger social, economic, and cultural forces.³ In this article, I continue this task of historicizing oral history by focusing on the most recent time period.

In the following, I outline the phenomenal growth of commercial and non-commercial storytelling over the past few decades. I take the development of StoryCorps, and the public’s as well as oral historians’ response to its products, as a case study. I contextualize the storytelling phenomenon by linking it to the economic and social changes in the United States since the 1970s, in particular the increasing gap between political equality and economic inequality. I pay particular attention to attendant sociocultural developments such as the rise of therapeutic culture, a societal obsession with emotion, survival, trauma, and remembrance, and the rise of positive thinking and the self-help movement. I conclude by exploring what is at stake in this discussion of storytelling and oral history and suggest some questions for future investigation, an investigation that oral historians as students of narrative, interactive communication, history, and politics are particularly well equipped to undertake.

The new storytelling phenomenon that I describe in the following is most evident in the United States, but also in other Western societies such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. An exhaustive description of the storytelling

Art and Meaning of Telling Stories (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007). Quote in: Jackson, *The Story is True*, x.

³ Alexander Freund, “Confessing Animals’: Toward a *Longue Durée* History of the Oral History Interview,” *Oral History Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2014): 1–26.

phenomenon is beyond the limits of this article, and, more importantly, beyond the limits of our current knowledge. As much as I can tell, the social sciences and humanities have not yet identified the recent storytelling craze as a phenomenon in need of greater scrutiny. Lacking any substantive research, at this point, we can only describe some of its most visible features.

An Internet search for “storytelling” reveals the scope and diversity of “storytelling.” Wikipedia describes storytelling in the broadest terms as “the conveying of events in words, and images, often by improvisation or embellishment. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation, and instilling moral values.” The Wikipedia authors also tell us that “storytelling predates writing” and that “contemporary storytelling” has moved beyond oral tradition and traditional genres such as fairy tales to include “history, personal narrative, political commentary, and evolving cultural norms.” It is used for education, therapy, games, interactive fiction, and documentaries.⁴ In this definition, the stories that are told can be about anything, take any form, and be used for everything. Clearly, then, storytelling permeates our everyday lives. This is also American literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall’s argument; he calls humans “the storytelling animal.”⁵

A Google search leads to tens of millions of hits for “storytelling”; they reinforce the Wikipedia claim that telling stories has become an accepted and popular method in therapy, education, knowledge management, business communication and strategy, conflict resolution, advertising, music, and film, at times referencing, even if implicitly, ancient and traditional indigenous storytelling in Africa and the Americas. More than anything, storytelling has become a new managerial tool. Storytelling, we learn from Wikipedia, is now widely used in business as “a more compelling and effective route of delivering information than that of using only dry facts.” Storytelling is used to resolve workplace conflicts, build team spirit, craft business strategies, and advertise goods and services. “Organizational storytelling” is considered a “key leadership competency for the 21st century.”⁶ Indeed, the book market is awash with titles that promise storytelling as a powerful strategy for managing corporate reorganization, layoffs, and “diversity.” Managers learn that “facts tell, stories sell” and that *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*.⁷

⁴ “Storytelling,” *Wikipedia*, accessed March 3, 2014.

⁵ Gottschall, *Storytelling Animal*. Gottschall argues for a broad definition of story, from dreams and advertisements to songs and televised sports; see 1–20.

⁶ “Organizational Storytelling,” *Wikipedia*, accessed March 3, 2014.

⁷ J. S. Brown, S. Denning, K. Groh, and L. Prusak, *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling Is Transforming 21st Century Organizations and Management* (Boston: Butterworth Heinemann, 2004); Steve Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007); Terrence L. Gargiulo, *Stories at Work: Using Stories to Improve Communication and Build Relationships* (Westport, CT: Praeger and Signorelli, 2006) and *StoryBranding: Creating Standout Brands*

In *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, author Annette Simmons encourages her readers to use a personal story to gain people's trust. Other guide books encourage readers to use storytelling to (re)gain trust in themselves. Storytelling self-help guides are designed to help readers work through various personal problems or relationship issues with the help of autobiographical storytelling. These self-help guides are part of a much larger industry, the so-called self-help and actualization movement. It was identified by journalist Steve Salerno in 2005 as a multibillion dollar industry that in 2003 alone churned out 3,500 to 4,000 books and in 2005 grossed 8.56 billion dollars.⁸ Storytelling is now marketed as a coaching strategy for improving personal relationships and life in general. From the classic confession—*Tell My Story* (Step 5 of Alcoholics Anonymous's 1939 Twelve-Step Program)—to the newest "storytelling solution to low self-esteem," a large audience is told that to "change your story [means to] change your life" and that storytelling is a "way of healing" and "experiencing spirituality."⁹ Together, these books, DVDs, workshops, seminars, retreats, and personal coaching sessions demonstrate a growing popular belief in the "power of story" to transform oneself and influence others. They are part of the self-help industry's mantra of empowerment through self-help and positive thinking.¹⁰

The confessional approach to storytelling is modeled and replicated in popular news media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television, online platforms, and fundraising campaigns. Almost all reporting on the

Through the Power of Story (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Books 2011); Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) and, with a new subtitle, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling* 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Annette Simmons, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact* (New York: Amacom, 2007); Doug Lipman, *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play* (Atlanta, GA: August House, 1999); Ty Bennett, "Facts Tell - Stories Sell," 4 DVD Set (<http://tybennett.com/product/facts-tell-stories-sell-4-dvd-set/>); Ty Bennett and Don Yaeger, *The Power of Storytelling* ([Columbia MO?]: Sound Concepts, 2013); Mazzocchi, Rudy A., *Storytelling: The Indispensable Art of Entrepreneurism* (Kingsport, TN: Paladin Timeless Books, 2013); Philip N. Meyer, *Storytelling for Lawyers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸ Steve Salerno, *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

⁹ *Step 5 AA Telling My Story: Hazelden Classic Step Pamphlets* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010); Anna R. Van Heerden Johnson, *The Storytelling Solution to Low Self-esteem* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2014); Stephanie S. Tolan, *Change Your Story, Change Your Life* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011); Jim Loehr, *The Power of Story: Change Your Story, Change Your Destiny in Business and in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008); Louise Desalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999); Allison M. Cox and David H. Alberts, eds., *The Healing Heart Families: Storytelling to Encourage Caring and Healthy Families* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003); James H. O'Keefe and Joan O'Keefe, *Let Me Tell You a Story: Inspirational Stories for Health, Happiness, and a Sexy Waist* (Riverside, NJ: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2013); Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning Through Storytelling* (New York: Tarcher, 2014).

¹⁰ Salerno, *SHAM*, 32–34; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America* (New York: Macmillan, 2009).

entertainment industry, a large portion of professional sports reporting, as well as reporting about politicians, is based on the exposure of private lives and the quest for scandalous confessions.¹¹ We only need to think of the many public confessions on Oprah Winfrey's couch—"a site that blends therapy with commerce in the production of 'talk'"—to see the prevalence and power of this new storytelling phenomenon.¹² This kind of storytelling is at times sold under the guise of oral history—whether in *Vanity Fair*, *Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, *Buzz Feed*, *The Wire*, or any number of media, a pastiche of interview excerpts about a theater, a television show, a rock band, or a musical event is now regularly called oral history. This is grating to oral historians, but more importantly, a growing part of the population has been learning to think and talk about themselves in the same ways in which stars make public the most intimate details of their lives.

Outside of the commercial marketplace, the storytelling movement is most manifest in the not-for-profit and academic sectors, where many storytelling practitioners would see themselves in opposition to the self-help movement or other business-oriented applications of storytelling. In the nonprofit sector, storytelling websites, storytelling projects, storytelling circuits, and storytelling festivals cover a wide range of practices and genres, from fairy tales to autobiographical accounts. Storytellers include both professionals and amateurs, career and one-time storytellers. The Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, founded by theater producer Joe Lambert and others, offers "custom project services" to help people use "storytelling for professional development, as a reflective practice, as a pedagogical strategy, or as a vehicle for education, community mobilization, or advocacy."¹³ On its website, the center claims that it "has worked with nearly a thousand organizations around the world and trained more than fifteen thousand people in hundreds of workshops to share stories from their lives."¹⁴ Many other nonprofit organizations as well as commercial companies offer similar services. Other individuals and groups have established projects to record stories and present edited versions online. These include "Interview Project," the Kitchen Sisters, and the Moth.¹⁵ Storytelling festivals,

¹¹ For more examples, see Alexander Freund and Erin Jesse, "'Confessing Animals,' Redux: A Conversation between Alexander Freund and Erin Jessee," edited by Troy Reeves and Caitlin Tyler-Richards, *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 314–324, 317. See also the "Feel No Shame" fundraising campaign by the Sentebale charity, which includes supposed confessions of secrets by celebrities such as Prince Harry, cofounder of Sentebale: <http://sentebale.org>, accessed December 3, 2014.

¹² Leigh Gilmore, "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch," *Biography* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 657–689; quote 662.

¹³ Center for Digital Storytelling, "About us," <http://storycenter.org/about-us/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

¹⁴ Center for Digital Storytelling, "How it all began," <http://storycenter.org/history/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

¹⁵ DavidLynch.Com, "Interview Project," <http://interviewproject.davidlynch.com/www>; Brooke Bryan, "Interview Project," *Oral History Review* 37, no. 1 (2010): 71–77; The Kitchen Sisters, "About," <http://www.kitchensisters.org/about>, accessed March 3, 2014.; *The Moth: True Stories Told Live*, <http://themoth.org>, accessed March 3, 2014.

dating back to the early 1970s, often bring together tellers of fairy tales and other traditional stories. The global celebration of stories and storytelling has spawned a World Storytelling Day that is celebrated with festivals and events around the world. In many of these venues and in the diverse practices discussed, autobiographical storytelling is mixed up, intertwined, and conflated with other genres. Again, the point here is not that I wish to subsume all of these diverse practices under the label “storytelling.” Rather, the point I am making here is the opposite: that an increasing number of practitioners—including oral historians—call their work storytelling, and they sometimes do so without sufficiently reflecting on the broader implications of this shift in terminology. While traditional storytellers, including oral historians, have been around much longer, the popular exposure and impact of more recent storytelling games, apps, commercial products, and Internet-based projects is much greater.

In academia, storytelling seems to have emerged initially in education as a pedagogical tool. A search on WorldCat for books, articles, and other media with the title “Storytelling” provided nearly 16,000 hits (almost all of them non-fictional and nonjuvenile literature). Hovering below ten hits per year until 1959, publications slowly took off in the late 1960s, reaching one hundred in 1979, increasing faster after the mid-1980s, and again after 1990 (245 titles), after 2000 (524 titles) and after 2010 (1,056 titles). The largest topics were “language, linguistics and literature” (1,012 titles), education (873), and anthropology (373). There were more storytelling publications on “Business and Economics” (218) than on the traditionally narrative topic of “history and auxiliary sciences” (188). Much of this academic interest in storytelling can be explained by the linguistic turn of the 1960s and the subsequent narrative turn of the 1980s. There are now narrative subfields in almost all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁶ In history, in addition to oral history, there has been a return to narrative. Philosophy has discovered narrative as a field of research. Next to cognitive psychology, clinical psychology has focused attention on narrative therapy.¹⁷ Anthropology, ethnography, folklore studies, literature, and linguistics have of course a much longer interest in storytelling. Storytelling is also a major focus in newly emerging disciplines such as cultural studies, film and media studies, and digital humanities.

Overall, there is now a huge marketplace, both online and offline, in the for-profit, nonprofit, and academic sectors, for the production, dissemination, and consumption of stories and storytelling that is distinctive and different from

¹⁶ David Herman, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–21.

¹⁷ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

the previous history of storytelling. As one of storytelling's major advocates, Barbara Ganley, wrote in 2012: "Indeed, we're awash in such stories." There is a flood of all kinds of stories produced and disseminated by museums, libraries, radio, television, Internet forums, "and oral history centers across the planet."¹⁸ The difference from earlier periods is that everyone now wants to "do" storytelling and that storytelling has assumed a nearly magical halo of providing effective, powerful solutions to all kinds of individual, social, and economic problems. Ganley lays out the power of storytelling in transforming the world: "Medical, business, and law schools are paying attention to the power of stories in healing, and in developing ethical, effective business leaders. Citizen journalism, as seen in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, is grounding the big moment in the mural of individual experience. We're telling it as it is. As we experience it. We're forming communities around our stories."¹⁹ These are grand, ambitious claims that motivate oral historians, confirming their belief that with storytelling, they are on the right track. Motivational as this story of storytelling may be, oral historians should be alarmed—or at the very least, sceptical.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the private telling and public distribution of autobiographical (often confessional) stories is being generated, motivated, embedded, produced, and consumed in a broader socioeconomic and cultural context. There is now a multinational, social and cultural movement carried by a wide range of individuals as well as academic, nonprofit, and nongovernment organizations that believe in or at least pronounce storytelling as a powerful means for changing individuals and society. Storytelling is also an international, multibillion-dollar industry that spans government and nongovernment agencies, the private economy, and all levels of education; it is deeply entwined with a multibillion-dollar digital economy that seeks profits from selling products that seemingly enable and improve people's ability to produce, disseminate, preserve, and consume stories. Indeed, storytelling is a new mass creed that makes people believe in storytelling as a panacea for all the ills of the world and their own lives.

Before moving on to explore where our tiny band of oral historians fits into this multibillion dollar, multinational, transcultural phenomenon, let us look at one storytelling organization that has captured the attention of oral historians, not least because it claims to create no less than "An Oral History of America."²⁰ StoryCorps.

¹⁸ Barbara Ganley, "Foreword," in Joe Lambert, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), ix-xi; here x.

¹⁹ Ganley, "Foreword," x.

²⁰ "StoryCorps, An Oral History of America: Sound Booths Will Record Ordinary People's Life Stories," National Public Radio, October 23, 2003, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1475619>, accessed March 3, 2014.

Telling America's Stories Story: StoryCorps's "Oral History of America"

When it comes to storytelling, digital humanities, and oral history, StoryCorps is the story of the early twenty-first century. StoryCorps, as it is described at the beginning of many of the three-minute story segments regularly broadcast on National Public Radio, is "the project recording conversations between loved ones."²¹ On its website, NPR describes the project goal as "sharing and preserving the stories of our lives."²² StoryCorps itself claims that it "is one of the largest oral history projects of its kind, and millions listen to our weekly broadcasts on NPR's Morning Edition and on our Listen pages."²³ StoryCorps wants to give every American "the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives."²⁴ Wherever the project sets up recording facilities, people are allowed to record one forty-minute session; they are encouraged to donate \$25; and they receive a CD copy of their conversation. Since 2003, StoryCorps has collected 50,000 interviews with 100,000 participants. The recordings are archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The mission and scope are grand: "We do this to remind one another of our shared humanity, strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters. At the same time, we will create an invaluable archive of American voices and wisdom for future generations." Further: "In the coming years we will build StoryCorps into an enduring institution that will touch the lives of every American family."²⁵

StoryCorps has been met with widespread support and enthusiasm in the United States and other Western countries. The organization has received the Peabody Award, and the three books of stories collected by StoryCorps founder David Isay are bestsellers.²⁶ Similar projects, although with a lower public profile, have been around the United States for a couple of decades. The Berkeley-based Center for Digital Storytelling claims on its website: "Through its wide-ranging work, the Center for Digital Storytelling has

²¹ For an example, see/listen to National Public Radio, "The Lives of Blind Brothers Changed When 'Dad' Came Knocking," February 21, 2014, available at URL <http://www.npr.org/2014/02/21/280277459/the-lives-of-blind-brothers-changed-when-dad-came-knocking>, accessed March 3, 2014.

²² National Public Radio, "StoryCorps: Sharing and Preserving the Stories of Our Lives," <http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps>, accessed March 3, 2014.

²³ StoryCorps, "About Us," <http://storycorps.org/about/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

²⁴ StoryCorps, "Frequently Asked Questions," <http://storycorps.org/about/faqs/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

²⁵ StoryCorps, "About Us."

²⁶ Isay also won the 2015 TED Prize: Noam Cohen, "David Isay Wins 2015 TED Prize for StoryCorps, an Oral History Project," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2014, online at <http://nyti.ms/11cqenr>, accessed November 17, 2014.

transformed the way that community activists, educators, health and human services agencies, business professionals, and artists think about the power of personal voice in creating change.”²⁷ Community Expressions, LLC, founded in 2008 after the directors had taken workshops with Lambert, offers “workshops and consultation on storytelling, dialogue, facilitation, community mapping and social media” in order to “assist communities of all sorts work towards a healthy, sustainable future.”²⁸

Projects modelled on StoryCorps have been set up in other countries. In the United Kingdom, the BBC recently initiated the Listening Project, which archives all recordings in the British Library’s oral history collection. Its goal: “Capturing the nation in conversation to build a unique picture of our lives today and preserve it for future generations.”²⁹ In Australia, The Story Project, “an independent not-for-profit cultural organisation” modelled on StoryCorps, “brings people together to record and share the stories of their lives.” Story snippets are disseminated via local radio stations and online.³⁰ In Canada, The Tale of a Town describes itself as “a national oral history and theatre initiative aiming to capture the collective community memory of our country’s main streets, one story at a time.”³¹

For almost every supporter of such storytelling projects, at the heart is the conviction that telling and listening to stories is positive, healing, and empowering, and can lead to personal transformation and even social change. In the words of Isay: “Listening is an act of love . . . If we spent a little less time listening to the racket of divisive radio and TV talk shows and a little more time listening to each other, we would be a better, more thoughtful, and more compassionate nation.”³² The Australian Story Project states: “We believe this simple act of sharing stories helps bring people together.”³³ The Center for Digital Storytelling views storytelling as “a tool for change” and therefore has as its mission to “promote the value of story as a means for compassionate community action.”³⁴ Community Expressions is “dedicated to helping rural

²⁷ Center for Digital Storytelling, “How it all began,” <http://storycenter.org/history/>, accessed March 4, 2014.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ BBC, “The Listening Project,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/the-listening-project>, accessed March 3, 2014.

³⁰ The Story Project, “About,” <http://www.thestoryproject.org.au/about/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

³¹ “What is the Tale of a Town—Canada,” <http://thetaleofatown.com/about-tale-of-a-town/>, accessed November 28, 2014.

³² David Isay, *Listening is An Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the Storycorps Project* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 269. See also Benjamin Filene, “Listening Intently: Can StoryCorps Teach Museums How to Win the Hearts of New Audiences?” in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, distributed by Left Coast Press, 2011), 181.

³³ The Story Project, “About,” <http://www.thestoryproject.org.au/about/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

³⁴ Center for Digital Storytelling, “About us,” <http://storycenter.org/about-us>, accessed March 3, 2014.

communities, nonprofits and individuals weave together the old and the new, the slow and the fast to create better worlds.”³⁵ In the (nonsatirical) words of political satirist Stephen Colbert at StoryCorps’s tenth anniversary gala in New York City on 30 October 2013: “There is really only one plot: the need to give and receive love. And that’s what every human story is really about.”³⁶

Such sentiments are familiar to social historians who have been employing oral history to write a more inclusive history and to practitioners who have viewed oral history as a powerful tool for activism. Collecting the narratives of both victims and perpetrators, oppressed and oppressors, they have subjected their evidence to historical scrutiny rather than relying simply on the power of story. Thus, practices of storytelling and oral history differ widely, and so do the outcomes and the ways in which they are made public. As will become clear later on, social history and StoryCorps stand at opposite poles of the politics of history. While social historians have emphasized diversity and differences and asked for the economic, social, and cultural causes and effects of hierarchies and oppression, StoryCorps stands squarely in the camp of consensus history that is built on the themes of American exceptionalism, the idea of “one nation, one people,” and “a nostalgia for a less complex past in which we were all one.” As Roger D. Launius, senior curator at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, has shown, this consensus history is particularly popular among those of the political and social Right.³⁷

Before moving on to examine oral historians’ response to StoryCorps and the larger storytelling phenomenon, let me briefly describe a typical StoryCorps story and the typical online response by the listening public.³⁸ The story “The Lives of Blind Brothers Changed When ‘Dad’ Came Knocking” was broadcast on NPR on the morning of 21 February 2014 and disseminated via its Facebook blog.³⁹ In just under three minutes, Ollie Cantos and

³⁵ Community Expressions, “About community Expressions,” <http://community-expressions.com/about-3/about/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

³⁶ StoryCorps, “StoryCorps 10th Anniversary Gala—The Recap!” November 1, 2013 <http://storycorps.org/storycorps-10th-anniversary-gala-the-recap/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

³⁷ Roger D. Launius, “Public History Wars, the ‘One Nation/One People’ Consensus, and the Continuing Search for a Usable Past,” *OAH Magazine of History* 27, no. 1 (2013): 31–36, quotes 31 and 33. On the anti-democratic, antipartisan, proconsensus politics of neoliberals, see Amable, “Morals and Politics,” 18–21.

³⁸ A caveat, though: The 40-minute StoryCorps conversations are archived and not yet accessible. The main way in which the listening US public hears StoryCorps stories is through National Public Radio. StoryCorps and NPR have professional editors who craft a three-minute story from the “best” of the recorded audio interviews.

³⁹ NPR, “The Lives Of Blind Brothers Changed When ‘Dad’ Came Knocking,” February 21, 2014 <http://www.npr.org/2014/02/21/280277459/the-lives-of-blind-brothers-changed-when-dad-came-knocking>, accessed March 3, 2014; at the StoryCorps website, the story was filed under the title “I didn’t know that there were other blind people except me and my brothers,” <http://storycorps.org/listen/ollie-cantos-and-leo-nick-and-steven-argel/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

three fourteen-year-old triplets, all from Arlington, Virginia, tell their story of overcoming hardship. The three boys had been born blind and as children and teenagers struggled with systemic discrimination and poverty. According to the NPR narrator, "their single mother had a hard time caring for them." Leo, one of the brothers, recalled: "Every day was, like, wake up, go to school, come back home, and then you stay there for the rest of the day." Their mother did not let them go outside to play. The highlight of their childhood was a visit to McDonald's when they were seven years old. Nick, another brother, states that at one point it was so bad he wanted to commit suicide. "That all changed when they were ten," the NPR/StoryCorps announcer explains, when an older man from their community, Ollie, "got word of their situation and knocked on their door." He too had been born blind and struggled with hardship. Ollie slowly won the brothers' trust. They now call him Dad. According to StoryCorps, "He's now in the process of formally adopting the brothers."⁴⁰ As Ollie recounts the story of being called Dad for the first time, his voice breaks with emotion.

Listeners and readers could leave comments on the NPR website and on NPR's Facebook page. Within a few hours, there were 29 NPR website comments and 376 NPR Facebook comments and some 6,500 Facebook Likes. Within three days, there were 56 NPR website comments, and 1,675 Facebook comments and over 14,000 Facebook Likes. Almost all of them were supportive and positive, describing the story as "great," "heartwarming," "beautiful," "amazing," "moving," and "inspirational." Many commented that they became "misty-eyed" or were moved to tears. This uniform response seemed to suggest that the story demonstrated what could be called the "American spirit" or "humanity at its best." The public's response to this and many other StoryCorps/NPR stories was in fact reminiscent of the responses Michael Frisch had identified in reviews of Studs Terkel's 1970 book *Hard Times*.⁴¹

In one way this uniformity in responses is not surprising. I have analyzed dozens of NPR-StoryCorps stories and hundreds of comments left by listeners on the two organizations' websites. Most stories focus on overcoming hardship, which comes in many forms: a bout with cancer, the loss of a loved one, a disfiguring injury, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, mental or physical disabilities, learning disabilities, posttraumatic stress syndrome, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, bullying, prejudice, racism, a child's illness or death, parents' divorce, a shipwreck, even homosexuality and transgender identity. A good number of the hardships come as a result of the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past thirteen years, almost all focusing on U.S. military

⁴⁰ The transcript of the NPR story is at <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=280277459>, accessed November 28, 2014.

⁴¹ Michael Frisch, "Oral History and *Hard Times*, A Review Essay," *Red Buffalo: A Journal of American Studies* 1/2, no. 3 (1972): 217-231, repr. in *Oral History Review* 7, no.1 (1979): 70-79.

personnel wounded, maimed, or mentally scarred. There are also stories of inspiration and thanks, such as a neurosurgeon thanking his middle-school science teacher, a twenty-year-old man thanking his quirky grandmother, a homeless man thanking an undocumented immigrant woman for feeding him, two siblings being thankful for the birth of a baby that transformed their family. At times, there is a witnessing-history story: the widow and step-daughter of Spalding Gray recounting the day he disappeared; nurses who attended to Jackie Kennedy on the day of her husband's assassination; a rancher recounting his days as a Hollywood stunt double in numerous Westerns; or a young man remembering his participation in the 1963 March on Washington.⁴²

Almost always NPR/StoryCorps stories tell a tale of survival, and almost always with the help of someone else. A homeless boy is taken in by his teacher; a woman's child is saved by her best friend; a family takes care of a son brain-damaged in the Iraq War; a father helps his son through "a rough period"; a single mom protects her son from the reality of poverty; a mom helps her daughter overcome dyslexia. Absent from these stories are state, social, and cultural institutions; the economic system; religion; and any social, economic, or cultural critique. This is to some degree the result of the StoryCorps aesthetic that tends to shear the stories of some of their more thorny complexities and that, by keeping all potentially controversial aspects out of the story, allows "us the listeners to project ourselves into the story: that could be me; people are people."⁴³ It is also, and more importantly, as I argue below, a result of recent social and cultural undercurrents that pressure all publicly told, autobiographical, confessional stories into the interpretive straightjacket of the neoliberal belief that people have their fates in their own hands.

This then is what StoryCorps and similar projects do: A mass production, dissemination, and consumption of stories of love, generosity, overcoming hardship, and survival. They are often touching and almost always appear to be apolitical. They are based on the explicit assumption that taking time to tell stories and to listen to stories heals individuals and society. They are based on the implicit assumption that hardship can affect every American equally, that hardship is a matter of fate and thus unpredictable, and that survival is up to the individual (and perhaps a helper or two). The underlying ideology of these stories is the neoliberal notion of a hyperindividualism that sees no role for the state or solidarity in the lives of individual Americans. If we fail, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Such stories preclude and reject any political analysis of inequality and injustice. Taken together, these survivor stories silence citizen

⁴² One of the anonymous reviewers of this article suggested that as listeners became familiar with the genre of NPR/StoryCorps stories, they may have adapted their storytelling style so that their conversations would have become even more homogenous. This is an excellent point whose substantiation awaits detailed research on the archived stories.

⁴³ Filene, "Listening Intently," 188.

critique. This effect of storytelling is not simply the result of a StoryCorps or NPR aesthetic. More broadly, it is the effect of how storytelling happens in the modern West. Unless we critically investigate the underlying politics of storytelling and its effects on society and democracy, we will be swept up by its ideological undercurrents. We can investigate it most effectively by historically contextualizing it and drawing on our understanding of narrative and the dialogic constructions of history and memory in interviews.

As I have said elsewhere, the point of such an investigation is not to figure out whether StoryCorps and similar storytelling projects produce good or bad oral history, or even historical narratives of any fashion. I am not setting out to discredit StoryCorps or any other well-intentioned project. Rather, the point is to call on oral historians to use their tools and skills to critically examine and historically situate StoryCorps, digital storytelling, and other forms of what one might call the “fast food” production and consumption of stories.⁴⁴

Do We Really Want to Get Back to the Campfire? Oral Historians’ Confusion about StoryCorps

Oral historians, at least in North America, seem to have responded rather positively to StoryCorps and the broader storytelling hype. StoryCorps was first discussed in the *Oral History Review* in 2005 in a media review by Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner, who drew attention to the project’s ambition: “One press release hopes for up to 250,000 interviews recorded over the next ten years.”⁴⁵ A year later, Peter Lamothe and Andrew Horowitz wrote a review of StoryCorps for the exhibition reviews section of the *Journal of American History*. While both reviews had questions about some aspects of the projects, they were supportive of it.⁴⁶ At the same time, major anthologies included StoryCorps and similar projects as examples of Web-based audio sound productions and as models for public history.⁴⁷ Oral historians’ positive response to StoryCorps was also evident when the Oral History Association invited Isay to give a keynote lecture at its 2008 annual meeting. He spoke on “Listening is an Act of Love,” which is also the title of his 2007 book, subtitled *A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project*. The following year, four oral historians wrote an extensive

⁴⁴ Alexander Freund, “Letter to the Editor,” *Oral History Association Newsletter* 43, no.1 (Spring 2009): 3, 6.

⁴⁵ Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner, “Storycorps,” *Oral History Review* 32, no. 2 (2005): 103–4; quote 103.

⁴⁶ Peter Lamothe and Andrew Horowitz, “StoryCorps. Biltmore Room, Grand Central Terminal, 42d St. between Park and Lexington Avenues, New York, NY 10017,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (June 2006): 171–4; quote 171.

⁴⁷ Charles Hardy III and Pamela Dean, “Oral History in Sound and Moving Image Documentaries,” in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2006), 553–4; Filene, “Listening Intently.”

review of this book and the larger project. Again, while raising questions about it, they were fundamentally supportive of it.⁴⁸

Although oral historians have embraced StoryCorps and similar ventures, they have also raised questions and concerns, mostly about whether StoryCorps actually does oral history and whether it is viable as a historical archive.⁴⁹ Nancy Abelmann, Susan Davis, Cara Finnegan and Peggy Miller cautiously suggested that StoryCorps's claims to do oral history may be a bit of a stretch; at least their "techniques," they wrote, "diverge from the current practice of oral history."⁵⁰ The authors argued that the stories were crafted as "poignant moments" that conformed to the "tastes of the project and its connection to NPR programs like All Things Considered."⁵¹ The authors also questioned StoryCorps's claim to stand in the tradition of the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s. They suggested that StoryCorps produced "fragments of emotion from seemingly individualized lives," but not, like the FWP, historical documentation about specific social groups.⁵² Indeed, they concluded, the narratives produced by StoryCorps were not oral history, but rather a process by which people use a specific formula to produce "an enduring nugget" of self-documentation within a larger "culture of self-documentation."⁵³ Many of the critics' concerns were also expressed in the discussion period following Isay's keynote address to the 2008 gathering of oral historians, some of whom "saw in the emotional power of StoryCorps programming evidence of a highly problematic, manipulative, even voyeuristic sensibility even further removed from oral history standards."⁵⁴

All of these critiques were useful to establish that StoryCorps did not really do oral history. But the white elephant remained in the room: Why was StoryCorps so vastly more successful—in scope, funding, and public exposure—than any oral history project? One path to an answer can be found in oral historians' warm embrace—despite their reservations—of StoryCorps and the broader storytelling phenomenon. Even though they have pointed out the great diversity in storytelling and even pointed to the fundamental differences between storytelling à la StoryCorps/NPR and the stories produced in their own projects, oral historians have been quite eager to jump on the storytelling bandwagon, suggesting that it is not problematic at all to call all kinds of practices, including oral history, "storytelling" and thus erase, at least on the surface, all differences in epistemology, method, ethics, and politics. The shift is obvious in the program

⁴⁸ Nancy Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps, Anyway?" *Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 255–260.

⁴⁹ See Pozzi-Thanner, "Storycorps," 104; Lamothe and Horowitz, "StoryCorps," 173–4.

⁵⁰ Abelmann et al, "What Is StoryCorps," 256.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵⁴ Michael Frisch, "From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back," in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, distributed by Left Coast Press, 2011), 134–5.

titles of the Oral History Association's annual meetings, where over the past few years, "story" and "storytelling" have replaced "voice," "memory," and "oral history" as the main keywords.

Oral historians have embraced storytelling, and they have done so with great emotion. This emotion has been fuelled by nostalgic assumptions about a better past as well as a romanticization of storytelling as a panacea for our world's ills. Pozzi-Thanner underwrote the project's broader goal of helping us to listen to each other: "In our electronic times, how often do people still sit down together and deeply listen to each other's stories?" StoryCorps, she argued, "might encourage people to ask deeper questions about each other, to listen to each other more carefully, if only for that one hour."⁵⁵ Abelmann et al. agreed: "The stories are also about the need to slow down and pay attention. We concur with Isay that our fast-paced lives are driven by hypermediation and hypermobility and that we rarely make the time to honor the stories of those we love: to slow down, to talk, and most importantly, to listen."⁵⁶ The premise of this argument is that there once was a time when we sat down and listened to each other and that we now no longer do so.

This nostalgia is the mantra of much of the storytelling circuit. For Lambert, it is all about "find[ing] our way back to the campfire. Through digital storytelling, we all can become storytellers *again*."⁵⁷ Abelmann et al. see this as "perfect communication": "While everyday life offers only fragmentation, divisiveness, and distraction, StoryCorps creates a parallel universe that is quite the opposite: an intimate yet semipublic space in which to share ourselves. In the world of StoryCorps, the impossible dream of perfect communication may not be so impossible at all: all one needs is a partner, a silent, gently lit space, a microphone, and forty minutes."⁵⁸ This premise—that StoryCorps and other storytelling ventures offer us a long-lost path to a better world— is myth and make-belief, not history or politics. Implied in this premise is the assumption that if only we found our way back to the campfire, if only we took the time and started listening more deeply to each other's stories, if only we achieved the "dream of perfect communication," then everything will be better—individual lives and society at large. And all of this can be accomplished in forty minutes in a fake living room with a microphone. As I argue below, this myth is driven by neoliberal hyperindividualism and its attendant social discourses of survival, therapy, and trauma.

Online comments by NPR listeners show that this belief in the goodness of sharing stories has become deeply rooted in American culture and society. Oral

⁵⁵ Pozzi-Thanner, "Storycorps," 104.

⁵⁶ Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 258.

⁵⁷ Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*, 5 (emphasis added).

⁵⁸ Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 258.

historians, in their reviews of StoryCorps, are similarly affected. Lamothe and Horowitz described their own experience of recording an interview with each other in the recording booth. They “were greeted by two upbeat staff members. The small space, designed to resemble a comfortable living room, put us at ease despite the potentially imposing recording equipment. We were given some simple instructions, signed a release form . . . , and then one of us (Andrew Horowitz) proceeded to interview the other (Peter Lamothe). We were surprised at how quickly the allotted forty minutes passed.” They were “tremendously impressed” by the experience:

As the interviewee, Peter spoke about personal experiences he had not revisited in years. The intimacy of the setting made him want to be honest, and opinions, biases, and some strong personal feelings came to the surface quickly. Peter left feeling that for him the most significant benefit of StoryCorps was an emotional one: the chance to reflect on his past awakened at once the conscience and the soul, the mind and the heart. For his part, Andrew felt privileged to have a venue for getting to know Peter in a far more personal way than their relationship would have otherwise allowed. If the two of us arrived as colleagues, we left as friends.⁵⁹

Storytelling fans would wholeheartedly embrace these responses and sentiments. The authors described an almost therapeutic and deeply transformative effect of storytelling. Both knew that they were producing a recording that could be made available to an audience of millions. Oral historians know that this was an unusual experience, not an everyday life occurrence. Most of our moments are much more private, our conversations around the kitchen table or around the water cooler overheard by not more than a half dozen people. Yet, it was in the most public of circumstances that the two men felt such a deep level of intimacy and privacy that they could “be honest” and share stories and feelings they presumably could not share in the privacy of their offices, over dinner, in a car ride, or during a game of golf. The effects Horowitz and Lamothe describe are reminiscent of catharsis through confession or psychoanalysis. The difference is, however, that Lamothe’s confession could potentially be broadcast to the world instantaneously, and that both of them were fully aware of it, having signed over their rights to StoryCorps and NPR. And yet, the only thing they found “daunting” was the recording equipment, not the fact that their “inner selves” were broadcast to the world. Was this an experience of trust or of self-deceit? How did we get to this place—we have not always been there and have not been there for very long—where we find it completely normal and

⁵⁹ Lamothe and Horowitz, “StoryCorps,” 172–3.

even healing to share the most intimate aspects of our lives in public? What are the implications for oral history?

Abelmann et al. viewed StoryCorps more critically, but similarly disclosed their emotionally charged support of the project. They shared a "fascination with StoryCorps": "Our discussions were inspired by: the weekly story broadcast's emotional 'driveway moments,' our knowledge of the Corps's dedicated facilitators, the public's active participation in the traveling recording booths, and the announcement that StoryCorps interviews would be archived in the Library of Congress." Although they did not see it as oral history, they nevertheless wanted "to think about its place in the genealogy of oral history."⁶⁰ The authors likened the StoryCorps stories to "snapshots in a scrapbook" and "short public tributes to the power of story." They also viewed them as "part of a long American legacy of celebrating the 'ordinary,'" without elaborating what that tradition may be. They described the stories as "tender celebrations of intimacy, communicated paradoxically through StoryCorps's larger media web." They did not elaborate this paradox, even though it seems to be at the core of explaining the storytelling phenomenon. Instead, they focused on the emotionality of the stories, and they did so in a personal and supportive fashion.

Emotion, indeed, drives much of the public's and oral historians' response to StoryCorps and the storytelling phenomenon. "What makes StoryCorps so powerful?" asks American public historian Benjamin Filene. "Why do millions of people sob their way to work and come back for more?"⁶¹ These are important questions, answered by Filene only through another question: "Does the project illustrate the power of letting people tell their own stories?" But of course, as Filene points out himself, these are not their own stories.⁶² Most people cannot tell stories in three minutes and move millions to tears. As both Abelmann et al. and Filene show, the Friday morning tears are the product of professional editing, not some mysterious power innate to the act of storytelling. StoryCorps and NPR carefully select from the raw footage and craft stories by selecting, rearranging, and producing a story arc that is intended to make listeners cry. Just like the stories, the effect is homogenous. Abelmann et al. write: "What unites the StoryCorps interviews as celebrations, rituals, or snapshots is the similar, almost uniform way in which they evoke the emotions of the listener/reader. The listener, as the title proclaims, will love listening, and we would add, be moved (even to tears). The reader may experience the same emotional tug. . . . These are, it seems, the conversations that we would wish to have (or wish we had had) with a dying loved one."⁶³ Being moved to tears is the

⁶⁰ Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 255.

⁶¹ Filene, "Listening Intently," 175.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 259.

emotion most often expressed in the listening public's online response to these stories. And academics are not ashamed to open their articles with the admission: "I can count on Friday mornings for a good cry."⁶⁴ Crying seems to be an integral part of the storytelling phenomenon. NPR Morning Edition host Steve Inskeep reveled in the fact that he regularly cried listening to StoryCorps sound bites.⁶⁵

Have oral historians bought into the emotionality of storytelling, even though they know that the NPR stories, like Hollywood dramas, are edited with the purpose of making them cry? Have they bought into the idea that storytelling is always sharing and empowering even though they know that the StoryCorps participants have no control over the editing? Do they agree that experience can be reduced to emotion, especially when the range of emotions allowed in StoryCorps seems quite narrow and appears to exclude emotions presumably discomfiting for the consuming public, such as outrage at political injustices and economic inequalities or hate born out of nationalism or poverty? It is difficult to resist the "emotional tug of storytelling as healing and empowering. Many of those who write about StoryCorps seem to agree with Filene, who argues that "the project shows that emotion powerfully conveys meaning and is meaningful in itself." If oral history has taught us anything, however, it is that emotion is deceptive, misleading, and never self-explanatory. We never know why people cry when they tell a story, but we can be sure that they cry for other reasons than our reasons for crying along. Further, although the storytelling movement reduces emotion to love and crying (usually about a happy end), our interviewees tell us of other emotions as well, including anger, hate, outrage, and fear.⁶⁶ Finally, emotion in particular fools us into mistaking sympathy for empathy. Too often, we believe we have achieved empathy when all we have done is felt sympathy. But only one, as Allison Landsberg emphasizes, demands intellectual work: empathy.⁶⁷ That is why historians do not trade in sympathy; they trade in empathy. Nevertheless, the emotional tug is difficult to resist, because it is rooted in deeper social forces: the early twenty-first century's mass culture of public confession, the rise of a neoliberal hyperindividualism, and the emergence of therapeutic culture and an obsession with trauma and survival

⁶⁴ Filene, "Listening Intently," 174.

⁶⁵ National Public Radio, "Air The StoryCorps Theme, Cue The Tears," October 21, 2013 <http://www.npr.org/2013/10/21/236383017/air-the-storycorps-theme-cue-the-tears> and <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=236383017>, accessed March 3, 2014.

⁶⁶ Although other emotions are absent from the edited NPR stories, it would be interesting to see how much they are present in the 40-minute conversations. While this corpus of sources will help us write a history of mentality of American society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its use for a history of emotions may be rather limited.

⁶⁷ Allison Landsberg, "Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification," in "Memory and Media Space," special issue, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 2, (June 2009): 222-3.

since the 1970s.⁶⁸ All of these social forces must be considered when contextualizing the storytelling phenomenon.

Why Do We Talk about Ourselves? Neoliberalism, Hyperindividualism and Therapy Culture

There is a widely held belief that storytelling is part of the rush of democratizing social forces that emerged after the Second World War, including the rise of the middle class, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the expansion of higher education and the student movement, and more generally the power surge of the left and liberalism. In academia, social history and the writing of a more inclusive history were expressions of the sixties.⁶⁹ Oral history commonly sees itself in this tradition, providing both a methodology that uncovers the voice of the past and a field of research that critically discusses the methods and ethics of interviewing and interpretation. Museum curators and other public historians, who have been under great pressure to make the public active participants in and contributors to their exhibitions, have chimed in: "Having worked for a generation to tell stories that de-center elites, museums now are de-centering elite storytellers, too."⁷⁰ Indeed, storytelling by everyone for everyone, widely shared online, has increasingly been viewed as a democratizing tool of individual empowerment and social change. But this is only part of the story. The attempt to democratize society through storytelling has also been shaped by neoliberalism's crass individualism and the attendant rise of therapy culture. We need to look at both democratization and the free-market hyperindividualism to understand why, only a generation after oral historians complained that ordinary Americans were reluctant to tell their stories, they are now chomping at the bit to upload the most intimate details of their lives to the World Wide Web.⁷¹

The American historian Thomas Borstelmann has identified the 1970s as a crucial decade in US history. Two major undercurrents emerged at that time. It was an era of increasing social equality and increasing economic inequality.⁷² In the first half of the twentieth century, Americans increasingly embraced a spirit of egalitarianism that saw all people as equal and that rejected traditional hierarchies and authorities. After the Second World War, and during the

⁶⁸ Freund, "Confessing Animals."

⁶⁹ Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, "Introduction," *Letting Go?*, 11

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11

⁷¹ On the generational shift from Holocaust survivors' forgetting to the Second Generation's remembering, see Arlene Stein, "Feminism, Therapeutic Culture, and the Holocaust in the United States: The Second-Generation Phenomenon," *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 37–38.

⁷² Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3–4, 17, 21–22, 153–62, 175, 214.

affluence of the postwar economic boom, social and legal democratization further extended this movement toward greater equality. In the wake of the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other minorities gained greater access to legal protection, education, employment, housing, and health care. Racial segregation was abolished; African Americans could now attend better schools and, increasingly, go to college and university. Sexism and patriarchy were at least acknowledged if not tackled through affirmative action policies. At the same time, social norms and moral values regarding sexuality, family, recreational drug use, dress, or being out in public all loosened.⁷³

The dramatic changes, crises, and shocks of the 1970s deeply unsettled a large part of the US population. In the wake of the oil crisis of 1973, stock markets fell, one recession followed another, there was massive inflation, deindustrialization, and a shift from manufacturing to service industries, all of which resulted in declining real wages, rising unemployment, increasing poverty, and a growing concentration of wealth in the upper class.⁷⁴ The status of the recently expanded middle class became precarious and its members anxious. Inflation hit the poor the hardest, and poverty levels increased steadily after 1973.⁷⁵ The political shocks of the time, in particular the Vietnam War and the Watergate Affair, were just as great. Many Americans lost trust in their government to positively affect their lives. There was also a backlash against the hippie culture, which a newly emerging Christian Right blamed for declining family values, an increase in divorces and family breakdowns, and rising rates of drug use and crime.⁷⁶ Reeling from these shocks, Americans drew inward and focused their attention on themselves. And they put all of their trust in the private economy, believing the dogma that individual competition provided the best solutions for every aspect of life. This cleared the path for neoliberal ideas of unfettered free-market competition, deregulation, and individualism at all costs, which slowly at first and more forcefully from the 1980s onward, replaced government regulation and welfare. Neoliberalism caused a shift from citizenship to consumerism and from the common good to individual choice. It also led to increasing economic inequality.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid., 53–63, 123.

⁷⁴ Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 9; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 133–4.

⁷⁵ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 134–5.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 8, 53–63, 123.

⁷⁷ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 126–133, 153–55; Steger and Roy, *Neoliberalism*, 12, 14, 27–8, 47; Bruno Amable, “Morals and Politics in the Ideology of Neo-liberalism,” *Socio-Economic Review* 9, no. 1 (2011): 3–30. Tim Flannery argues that the rise of Neo-Darwinism and the popularity of its exponents such as Richard Dawkins coincided with the rise of neoliberalism: “We have a tendency to use ideas such as selfish gene theory to justify our own selfish and socially destructive practices. It’s significant, I think, that Dawkins’s books received wide acclaim on the eve of the 1980s—the era when greed was seen as good, and when the free market was

These two countercurrents—increasing social democratization and legal equality on the one hand, and increasing economic inequality and the neoliberal ethic of self-reliance on the other hand—have only increased over the past few decades.⁷⁸ But even though these two developments contradicted each other on the notion of equality, they also both supported and reinforced a crass hyper-individualism.⁷⁹ Individualism has a long history in the United States and an even longer connection to capitalism, which is “based on an individualistic ethic of intensive work.”⁸⁰ It surfaced in oral history interviews long before the 1970s. In the 1960s, as Frisch argued, those who told of their experience of the Great Depression “tended to view their problems in atomized, alienating ways. Shame, a sense of personal failure, unavoidable obsession with personal concerns, paralytic insecurity in several dimensions—all these are repeatedly described as the predominant personal responses.”⁸¹ People viewed history through their individual experiences; indeed, they collapsed history and individual memory. The consequences, according to Frisch, were personal—including “psychic scarring, searing memory, and sense of crushing responsibility”—and political: “Anyone who has wondered why the Depression crisis did not produce more focused critiques of American capitalism and culture, more sustained efforts to see fundamental structural change, will find more evidence in the interior of these testimonies than in any other source I know. By seeing people turn history into biographical memory, general into particular, we see how they tried to retain deeper validation of their life and society, and how they deferred the deeper cultural judgement implied by the Depression crisis.”⁸² Despite the heavy-handed editing, the NPR/StoryCorps stories and similar storytelling products reveal similarly “searing memory” of the early twenty-first century’s “disaster capitalism.”⁸³

The underlying effects of individualism, including the “sense of crushing responsibility,” did not abate in the 1970s, but several factors led to a reinterpretation that gave such experiences a positive spin, moving it from shame to survival and triumph. A focus on the self and its public expression were

worshipped.” Tim F. Flannery, *Here on Earth: A Natural History of the Planet* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010), 18.

⁷⁸ Amable, “Morals and Politics,” 6.

⁷⁹ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 21–22, 175, 214.

⁸⁰ Peter Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), viii; quote from Amable, “Morals and Politics,” 14.

⁸¹ Frisch, “Oral History,” 77. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” *Commentary* 99, 6 (June 1995): 35–40, describes the American public’s response to the story of Anne Frank in similar ways; since the 1950s, American audiences and critics have felt “uplifted” and “inspired” by the “triumphant humanity.” The story often triggered identification and even “fantasies of survival” (37). Rosenfeld argues that all great American monuments to the Holocaust—from Broadway productions of Anne Frank to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Hollywood films—allow audiences to look away from the darkness of history and instead focus on the (at times imagined) survival of the individual (38).

⁸² Frisch, “Oral History,” 77.

⁸³ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Belknap Press, 2014).

increasingly celebrated. Some observers were appalled at what they perceived as hedonistic narcissism. Journalist Tom Wolfe called the 1970s the “Me Decade.”⁸⁴ Historian and cultural critic Christopher Lasch described this new US culture in 1979 as a “culture of narcissism.”⁸⁵ In the same year, American sociologist Charles Derber identified an increasing pursuit of attention in American society.⁸⁶ Even President Jimmy Carter chimed in, berating his fellow Americans: “In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption.”⁸⁷ Certainly, in the 1970s, civic engagement declined steadily from its peaks in the 1950s and 1960s. Americans focused on self-improvement, self-expression, self-gratification, and self-indulgence.⁸⁸ They turned en masse to “the private sphere of consumerism” facilitated by twenty-four-hour shopping, an expanding credit industry, and the introduction of personal credit cards.⁸⁹

This criticism has only become harsher over the past three decades. In 2000, Derber reviewed his earlier study of attention-seeking Americans and found that the problem had deepened and widened. He argued that “the pursuit of attention is now being diffused and institutionalized, hardwired into our beings through new systems of media, business, and technology, and fueled by new, aching deprivations that prey on our psyches. The result is a spreading virus of prosaic but dehumanizing behavior that subtly alienates us from one another and turns daily interaction into a veiled competition for recognition and respect.”⁹⁰ Among the trends he identified, he noted “the rise of intimate self-exposure as a fashionable artistic and media genre” including confessional novels and “trash talk” shows that trickled down into everyday life: “Most people never appear on talk shows, but many practice a kindred pursuit in their own social lives, seeking attention from friends or workmates by talking endlessly about their own intimate problems. Whether it be the lingering traumas from a difficult childhood, current marital troubles, or simply neurotic obsessions that plague one’s daily state of mind, such topics have become the stuff of ordinary conversation . . . [that] often mutates into uninhibited outpourings of personal problems and becomes a plea or contest for support.” This attention-seeking was facilitated by new technology that allowed them to explore “previously

⁸⁴ Tom Wolfe, *The “Me” Decade and the Third Great Awakening* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

⁸⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

⁸⁶ Charles Derber, *The Pursuit of Attention: Power and Ego in Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸⁷ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 12; see also 125, 146.

⁸⁸ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 125, 146; Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard Kulka, *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

⁸⁹ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 144–5.

⁹⁰ Derber, *Pursuit of Attention*, xxv.

unimaginable ways of pursuing attention."⁹¹ Derber noted drily: "An age of self-absorption is not friendly to either democracy or community."⁹²

Other social critics were just as biting in their assessment of the American psyche. In Chris Hedges's gloomy view of US society, the majority of Americans in 2009 are semiliterate and defeated by a corrupt political system and an exploitative economic system. They escape into worlds of fantasy, victim narratives, and self-pity.⁹³ Others agreed, but argued that Americans were under increasing pressure to succeed. Psychologist Jean M. Twenge identified the large group of middle-class Americans born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as "Generation Me"—a generation that was told by television, schools, and parents to put themselves first. Considering the economic problems of this era, it is not a generation that is spoiled or selfish, but a generation with high expectations—expectations that are ever harder to meet. Generation Me was evidence of an "epidemic" of narcissism.⁹⁴ Twenge and her colleague W. Keith Campbell write: "American culture's focus on self-admiration has caused a flight from reality to the land of grandiose fantasy."⁹⁵ Even if we do not agree with the excessiveness and moral conservatism of these social critics' diagnosis of Western individualism, we can position storytelling within Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" that "gives rise to the emergence of 'privatized identity'—of short-term, market-oriented, episodic fabrications of the self."⁹⁶

In focusing on the individual in the interview, oral historians have long walked on the tightrope of individualism, trying to balance the successes of their narrators with the socioeconomic structures and larger historical patterns that constrained their lives. But in the marketplace of stories, oral historians' stories are often too complex, too gloomy, and too critical of the nation. Storytelling's unambiguous and often patriotic celebration of individual survival and success is unhindered by historical context. Such simple stories, celebrating a nation of survivors and the American Spirit, are much easier to digest. I fear that in their confusion of oral history and storytelling, or in their attempt to emulate the success of StoryCorps, oral historians are increasingly in danger of following this model of storytelling.

The attempt to stay clear of storytelling is particularly difficult, because storytelling makes big claims about its power to heal individuals and society. From the 1970s onward, Americans learned to talk about themselves, and they

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁹² *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁹³ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Toronto: Knopf, 2009).

⁹⁴ Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable—Than Ever Before* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

⁹⁵ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 4.

⁹⁶ Anthony Elliot, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Contemporary Bauman*, ed. Anthony Elliot (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.

learned to talk about themselves in a specific way: as survivors. The new language of survival came out of a growing Holocaust remembrance, driven in particular by the generation of children of Holocaust survivors, and by feminist activists who argued that survivors of sexual abuse needed to tell their experiences in public in order to end the widespread epidemic of incest and violence against children and women. Telling a tale of survival removed the stigma of being a victim and allowed audiences to connect via the “spirit of humanity” and the underlying narrative of hope.⁹⁷

In the 1970s, Americans not only learned to talk about themselves as survivors; they also came to expect benefits from publicly telling their stories of survival. Accounts of one’s self were shaped by the language of psychoanalysis and therapy that became popularized in the 1970s as a means of monitoring, diagnosing, and reporting oneself, one’s family, and one’s life world. Indeed, some social critics have argued that over the past half century, a therapeutic culture or therapy culture has emerged in the West. In the early 1960s, US psychologist Philip Rieff argued that people had turned from a commitment to community, church, or party to a commitment to themselves, focusing all attention on their inner lives and seeking release with the help of therapists and therapy. Americans, Rieff argued, no longer found purpose in life through community, but rather through ensuring that they felt good.⁹⁸ Indeed, during the 1970s, the demand for therapy increased and the number of clinical psychologists in the United States tripled.⁹⁹ Since the 1980s, an increasing number of critics have pointed to the rise of therapeutic culture and a resulting depoliticization of society.¹⁰⁰

The British sociologist Frank Furedi has most recently written about the “therapy culture” in Western society and found that people were much less self-aggrandizing and narcissistic than earlier critics had charged. Indeed, people had become victims of a therapy culture in which every negative emotion is diagnosed as in need of medical treatment, where people are encouraged to view themselves as ill, and, consequently, “to make sense of dramatic episodes through mental health terms.” Furedi writes: “Today we fear that individuals lack the resilience to deal with feelings of isolation, disappointment and failure. Through pathologizing negative emotional responses to the pressures of life,

⁹⁷ Stein, “Feminism,” 27–53; Rosenfeld, “Americanization,” 38; Gilmore, “American Neoconfessional.” Alyson M. Cole argues that Americans have denounced narratives of victimization and victimhood in order to gloss over suffering, injuries, and injustices and the required political response. See her book *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

⁹⁹ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 125.

¹⁰⁰ Dana Becker, *Myth of Empowerment: Women and the Therapeutic Culture in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Katie Wright, *The Rise of the Therapeutic Society: Psychological Knowledge and the Contradictions of Cultural Change* (Washington DC: New Academia, 2011); Stein, “Feminism.”

contemporary culture unwittingly encourages people to feel traumatised and depressed by experiences hitherto regarded as routine.”¹⁰¹ This trend to view a great range of individual and collective ills through the therapeutic language of trauma, and to turn to public forms of testimony, confession, and therapy, has been identified by other critics as well.¹⁰² According to these critics, therapeutics has become a worldview that dominates Western society. Furedi writes: “Today, with the rise of the confessional mode, the blurring of the line between the private and the public and the powerful affirmation for emotionalism, there is little doubt that it has become a formidable cultural force.”¹⁰³ Furedi sees therapy culture as a recent phenomenon: “It is easy to forget that the promiscuous application of therapeutic diagnosis to describe the condition of people confronting misfortune is a product of the past decade or so. Today, every minor tragedy has become a site for the intervention of trauma counsellors and therapeutic professionals.”¹⁰⁴ The “management of the self” is now open to intervention by state, public, and private institutions.

Therapeutic culture, Furedi claims, also shapes historical interpretation and public commemoration. He even claims that we now have “a veritable industry of rewriting history in line with current therapeutic imagination.”¹⁰⁵ Commemoration is now enacted in the form of public mass therapy, which “may dispose people to react to major events, like 9/11, as potential trauma victims rather than as concerned citizens.”¹⁰⁶ Furedi argues that the 9/11 memorialization, following the memorialization of the Oklahoma City bombing, shifted commemoration from communal purpose to individual therapy, “from a bereaved community to a community of bereaved . . . Bereavement becomes not so much an act of remembrance about the dead, but a therapeutic statement about the survivor.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Frank Furedi, *Therapeutic Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6–7, 16. Illouz’s and Wright’s accounts are more nuanced than Rieff’s or Furedi’s. Wright argues against the “excessively negative theorizing” (5) and complicates the theory of the therapeutic turn by focusing attention on “the messy reality of everyday life” (4) that is reflected in her interviews with people about their therapeutic experiences.

¹⁰² Christina Hoff and Sally Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006); Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Janice Peck, “The Secret of Her Success: Oprah Winfrey and the Seductions of Self-Transformation,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (2010): 7–14.

¹⁰³ Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, 17, 22; Furedi, like Rieff and Lasch, argues that therapy culture could emerge in the vacuum of meaning-making left by the decline of the church and religion. Considering the vibrancy of church and religion in the United States and other parts of the Western world, I believe we need to better understand how church practices and religion have fed into therapeutic culture. Foucault’s analysis of psychoanalysis emerging from religious confessional practices is one beginning. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Freund, “Confessing Animals.”

¹⁰⁴ Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

Being at the crossroads of history and memory, oral historians cannot but be unnerved by Furedi's suggestion that by association with storytelling, oral history has become entangled in therapy culture. Unfortunately, our emotional, and at times uncritical, response to the storytelling phenomenon provides further evidence that at least in some regards we need to regain our scepticism.

The rise of therapy culture is closely linked to the rise of the self-help movement, which in turn thrives on storytelling. Storytelling—to segment life into uplifting episodes of individual survival—is, no doubt, related to what American social critic Barbara Ehrenreich calls the American “ideology of positive thinking.” Ehrenreich has identified a multimillion dollar industry—self-help books, DVDs, positive thinking workshops, “tens of thousands of ‘life coaches,’ ‘executive coaches,’ and motivational speakers,” as well as various other “coaches, preachers, and gurus of various sorts”—that makes a profit from playing on Americans’ fears that they have little control over their lives by teaching them “unwarranted optimism” and “deliberate self-deception.” Positive thinking is not a cause or an effect of success, but rather “is driven by a terrible insecurity.” Positive thinking, Ehrenreich argues, is closely allied with the two driving forces of the twentieth and early twenty-first century: nationalism and capitalism. Ehrenreich writes that “positive thinking has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy. If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure. The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must [be] because you didn’t try hard enough, didn’t believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success. As the economy has brought more layoffs and financial turbulence to the middle class, the promoters of positive thinking have increasingly emphasized this negative judgment: to be disappointed, resentful, or downcast is to be a ‘victim’ and a ‘whiner.’”¹⁰⁸

We see this positive thinking buttress not only many of the stories manufactured in the storytelling sector. We see it also, through comments on Facebook and elsewhere, in the consuming public. Ehrenreich’s analysis points to another area which we need to consider when contextualizing the storytelling phenomenon. StoryCorps may have been born in the context of 9/11 and Katrina, but these two events—skillfully retold by government agencies and Fox as “national catastrophes”—are only surface events. Below, the American angst is built on the massive economic, military, social, and cultural insecurities that have dominated American life since the 1970s. From deindustrialization to the financial crisis of 2008, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, from the

¹⁰⁸ Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*.

deterioration of the educational and health care systems, and from the race wars of the 1970s to the massive increase of violence in popular culture, Americans have had good reasons to flee to positive thinking and uplifting stories à la *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.¹⁰⁹

Storytelling versus Oral History: The Politics of History and Memory

Storytelling proponents claim that storytelling promises a path to a better world precisely by avoiding politics. To Colbert and others, the storytelling that happens with StoryCorps is the opposite of politics: “We live in a time when absolutely everything is a source of division. Everything plays as a political statement. Coastal cities vs. small towns. Republicans vs. Democrats, MSNBC vs. FOX, Costco vs. Sam’s Club. But you don’t hear any political agenda on StoryCorps—you don’t hear any agenda at all. You just hear a desire to share.”¹¹⁰ Have oral historians accepted these claims? Lamothe and Horowitz argued: “Through the broadcast of interview excerpts on National Public Radio, StoryCorps gives a wide audience the best of what oral history can offer: focusing on personal anecdotes that resonate with the broadest themes of human experience, these stories insist on the inclusion of ordinary individuals in the historical record and force a democratic understanding of history.”¹¹¹ Similarly, Abelmann et al. believe that “StoryCorps interviews are a complex form of ritual among intimates. What binds them are not sociological coordinates, grand narrative, or historical integrity but their sensibility.”¹¹²

As Michael Frisch pointed out in 1972, one of the three basic questions to ask about any corpus of oral histories is, who is talking? While it seems that StoryCorps covers a broad range of people, the lack of basic biographical data obscures the demographic composition of participants. Do men and women participate equally? Do people of all ages, races, ethnic groups, and social classes participate proportionally to the overall population? Are people of all political convictions and religious creeds proportionally represented? As Filene has pointed out, at least for the purposes of NPR storytelling, such data are intentionally withheld. StoryCorps wants to make the point that every American is the same. It does so under the cover of democratization, inclusion, and humanism. For example, the racial background or social class status of the blind triplets

¹⁰⁹ Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul : 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1993). This is the first in a long and continuing series of books and other inspirational products based on compilations of personal stories.

¹¹⁰ StoryCorps, “StoryCorps 10th Anniversary Gala—The Recap!” November 1, 2013 <http://storycorps.org/storycorps-10th-anniversary-gala-the-recap/>, accessed March 3, 2014.

¹¹¹ Lamothe and Horowitz, “StoryCorps,” 173

¹¹² Abelmann et al., “What is StoryCorps,” 258.

whose story we read earlier play no role in their story—and neither does their or their mothers' access (or lack of access) to public or private support. They are Americans, and whether they are white or black, poor or rich, StoryCorps's underlying message is that the story would be the same. Such a move, however, together with populist claims that all debate is divisive, is a political strategy to preempt social critique. And it prevents oral historians from investigating the larger public culture and the shaping forces of NPR and StoryCorps that generate survival stories.

Thus, what binds the stories is not their sensibility (whatever that may concretely be), but the fact that they are implicitly and mostly unintentionally (at least on the part of the narrators) informed by the values of a crass antistate individualism. Individualism in early twenty-first century America ignores the sociological insight that, in C. Wright Mills's words, "personal troubles" are usually connected to "social issues"; it also ignores the historical insight that individuals think and act, in Karl Marx's famous phrase, "under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."¹¹³ Rather than documenting and critiquing the effects of neoliberalism, has the storytelling phenomenon instead supported and reinforced neoliberal values of free-market competition?

We can find a preliminary answer by exploring how storytelling has reframed the debate about the politics of history and memory. Abelmann et al. took initial steps to place StoryCorps in a larger context of history, memory, and public remembrance and commemoration. The project, they wrote, came out of the American national catastrophes of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and it was part of the "era of self-publication."¹¹⁴ From the former emerged an emphasis on "the heroic in the banal . . . a way to make sense in a vacuum of meaning." StoryCorps, they wrote, arose in the context "of our insistently commemorative culture." In the case of 9/11 and Katrina, "StoryCorps' documenting, commemorating practices celebrated the endurance and heroism of the victims and the rescuers."¹¹⁵ This analysis is an important first step and can easily be linked to the development of hyperindividualism and therapy culture since the 1970s. This allows us to see that rather than a "vacuum of meaning" there was a competition for meaning that was quickly won by the government and conservative media. To identify "the heroic in the banal" was part of their winning strategy. This narrative spoke powerfully to a public that had come to believe, over the previous decades, that everyone was a survivor and had a story to tell, and that to tell this story publicly was a means of empowerment and healing.

StoryCorps also partook of a culture of self-documentation and self-publication, as Abelmann et al. noted: "Although StoryCorps presents itself as

¹¹³ Mills and Marx quotes from Callero, *Myth of Individualism*, 8–9.

¹¹⁴ Abelmann et al., "What is StoryCorps," 260.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

universal in its interest and deeply historical in its tradition, it is very much of the present, part of the FaceBooking, scrapbooking, blogging flow of endless self-documentation." Rather than recording a historical experience, many people use StoryCorps, just as they use Twitter, Facebook, and the digital storytelling movement, to document themselves in the present.¹¹⁶ The promise that this self-documentation is archived, whether in the Library of Congress or the ether of the Internet, creates hope that one won't be forgotten, that the attention of the now will carry on after one's death. Furthermore, as the self-help movement began to use digital media for selling its products, the digital technology industry saw a market for pushing its products. Easy online access and interactivity merged with the need for public confession to create StoryCorps, Facebook, and other digital storytelling platforms. Thus, if we see self-publication not solely as a democratizing force, but also as a result of a multibillion dollar industry that makes a profit from self-publication, then we can better understand how the industry's values become embedded in the public's seemingly individualistic and autonomous self-expression.

True, as one of this article's anonymous reviewers pointed out, I am here conflating all kinds of diverse commercial and noncommercial storytelling practices, but that is exactly the point I am trying to get across at this early stage of analysis: the umbrella concept of (public, autobiographical, confessional) storytelling binds all of these practices together through its promises of attention, healing, and empowerment. One of oral historians' future research agendas may be to disentangle how exactly Facebooking, digital storytelling, and other practices of self-publishing inform interviewees and interviewers alike as they sit down for an oral history interview.

For now, I wish to focus on the idea that storytelling conflates history and individual memory and thus depoliticizes public discourse. This is not a new phenomenon. Forty years ago, Michael Frisch examined storytelling products and popular responses of another time: Studs Terkel's collection of memories of the Great Depression and the popular media's reviews. Frisch agreed with most other critics and readers that reading the memories of 150 Americans who had either lived through the Depression or heard about it afterwards was "moving, poignant, intense, human, and instructive." The current public response to StoryCorps/NPR stories is similar. Frisch disagreed, however, on another point. He did not agree with *Newsweek* that the book "will resurrect our faith in all of us" or with *Saturday Review* that this was "a huge anthem in praise of the American Spirit." Indeed, he had found the book "more depressing than anything else," because it demonstrated "the Depression's destructive impact on the lives people lived." Similarly, StoryCorps/NPR stories demonstrate neoliberalism's destructive impact on current Americans' lives. Terkel's stories, Frisch

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

argued, showed “why Americans find it so hard to examine their culture and institutions critically, even when massive breakdowns make such examination imperative.”¹¹⁷ The current storytelling phenomenon presents similar evidence.

The major problem with the critics’ reading of the book, according to Frisch, was that they took the oral testimonies at face value, as simple but true representations of what the Depression was actually like, not as the well-ordered, smoothed-over memories recounted in the 1960s, at a time when people were trying to make sense of so many social, political, and cultural crises: the lasting legacy of the poverty, unemployment, and missed opportunities in the wake of the Great Depression, the resonances of the Second World War, the pressing implications of the civil rights movement and increasing racial tensions, the war in Vietnam, the assassinations of political and religious leaders, further economic recessions, and the overthrow of cultural and moral values. The critics, Frisch claimed, understood oral history to work in two ways: either as more information about the past (“more history”) or as direct access to authentic experience that speaks for itself and needs no expert interpretation (“no history”). This simplistic reading of oral history as evidence was even more surprising, Frisch noted, because Terkel himself had been clear that his was a memory book, not a history book.¹¹⁸

What has changed in the intervening forty years? Today, more than ever, it seems, the consumers of memory stories believe that their emotional response is an indication that the stories they hear provide access to authentic experience. Ganley writes about what storytelling accomplishes: “We’re telling it as it is. As we experience it. We’re forming communities around our stories.”¹¹⁹ For historians, this is troubling news; just as troubling is that (unlike Terkel) the producers of these “oral history” stories share the same belief. For example, StoryCorps claims it is creating an archive and thus “more history.” Rather than a great-men history, Isay writes, “StoryCorps will instead create a bottom-up history of our country through the stories and voices of everyday Americans.”¹²⁰ When Filene interviewed StoryCorps archivist Taylor Cooper, Cooper told him, “This is the history of America by America for America.” Filene concluded: “StoryCorps sets out to spark a shift in historical understanding: it wants to demonstrate powerfully, viscerally, exhaustively that ordinary people shape history.”¹²¹ At the same time it claims that out of respect for the storytellers, no contextualization of the individual stories (“no history”) is necessary. This populist view of history as simply the story of the past has become a vehicle for individualistic ideology under the cover of oral history.

¹¹⁷ Frisch, “Oral History,” 71.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Ganley, “Foreword,” x.

¹²⁰ Isay, *Listening*, 163.

¹²¹ Filene, “Listening Intently,” 176.

Some historians seem have been taken in by this argument. Filene claims that StoryCorps teaches people history simply by giving them the opportunity to record their stories. From their personal, emotionally charged experience, Lamothe and Horowitz, writing that StoryCorps offers “an experience in history,” extrapolated major claims about the project’s contributions to history: “Through this powerful personal experience, StoryCorps teaches broad lessons about the nature of history. The interviewee has the opportunity to interpret his or her own life history. The interviewer also assumes the role of historians by identifying someone whose stories seem worth learning and preserving.”¹²² Thus, if I understand correctly, the authors argue that a) a forty-minute conversation approaches something resembling a life history; b) experiences are always, and naturally interpreted from a historical perspective; c) anyone interviewing another person is a historian (that is, asks questions from a historical perspective); and d) identifying someone important in one’s own life (such as one’s mother) resembles a historian’s judgment on historical significance. Such claims are only possible to accept if we agreed with the underlying assumption that history is a natural way of thinking rather than a politically charged and controversial discourse about the past.¹²³

Filene similarly argued: “Through the hundreds of stories that StoryCorps has showcased, a collective portrait of America emerges—a citizenry of diversity and strength; committed to hard work and sustained by quiet pride; determined in adversity and imbued with an overwhelming decency.”¹²⁴ This is the “no history” point of view Frisch criticized in 1972. This view is problematic, as Frisch and many other oral historians have pointed out, because no testimony provides unfiltered access to the past. All memory is filtered by time and intervening experience. As Frisch wrote of Depression memories: “Failure forced people to reduce general experiences to personal terms, the intense pain thus sheltering them from deeper, more profoundly threatening historical truths; survival, however, seems to encourage them to elevate personal and biographical generalization into historical terms, at once a self-validating message and a culturally validating legacy for the next generation.”¹²⁵

Lamothe and Horowitz also embraced the “more history” view, claiming that “StoryCorps encourages an inclusive vision of who and what is historically significant.”¹²⁶ Again, this claim can only be accepted if we agreed with its

¹²² Lamothe and Horowitz, “StoryCorps,” 171, 173–4.

¹²³ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); see also Linda Shopes, “‘Insights and Oversights’: Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 257–268.

¹²⁴ Filene, “Listening Intently,” 178.

¹²⁵ Frisch, “Oral History,” 78.

¹²⁶ Lamothe and Horowitz, “StoryCorps,” 173.

underlying assumption that conflates the past and history, a view in which everything and everybody is history. But history is a social discourse and political struggle about what events and whose experiences are important. StoryCorps and all other storytelling projects make the same selections and judgments about who and what to include. StoryCorps's "Oral history of America" is a product of its time, not the ultimate, universal story, as the nod to "inclusivity" suggests. Thus, in StoryCorps's NPR stories, it is not the individual experiences that matter—as Filene points out, the characters are kept bland in order to help listeners identify with them.¹²⁷ Rather, at center is the morale of the story, which is almost always the "American" story of individuals overcoming hardship, the story of frontiersmen and pioneers, of explorers and adventurers, of heroes and heroines, the story of the "American Spirit." Stories of successful state intervention and a beneficial welfare state are as rare as stories of an economic system destroying lives and communities. The "miracle of Ollie" rejects the importance of publicly organized solidarity and structural support for the weak. The 50,000 StoryCorps stories sound like a broken record: As Americans, we overcome hardship the American way. We are all equals and our fortune is in our hands and in our hands only. There is no room for the state. And there is no room for social critique.

While we should be happy that forty years after Michael Frisch's analysis, oral history seems to have arrived in mainstream society, I suggest we ought to be alarmed that a large number of people—including the producers and consumers of StoryCorps/NPR stories—understand oral history to mean taking stories at face value, without any attempt to historicize them. Under the moniker of oral history, storytelling ventures produce for public consumption good-feel stories of personal triumph, apparently bereft of all politics. Can oral historians gain anything from such an approach? Filene, for example, argues that historians reject StoryCorps's approach to history because they can't handle stories' emotion. But such a claim is based on a misunderstanding of StoryCorps. As Filene himself admits, StoryCorps sidesteps the discipline's basic benchmarks (such as reason, chronology, causation) and asserts that everyone's "story stands on its own" and, at the same time, "stands for all of us." As Filene writes: "The project's books and radio broadcasts suggest timeless values and enduring humanity."¹²⁸ All of this is happening un-self-reflectedly within the nationalist confines of a US-centric worldview in which any American simply stands for any other American as well as for any other human being. This is not just ahistorical, as Filene rightly points out, but depoliticizing, based on a faith that just believing in our sameness will make us all equal. It is akin to the positive thinking

¹²⁷ Filene, "Listening Intently," 188.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 181–3.

movement identified by Barbara Ehrenreich.¹²⁹ Such an approach to history destroys people's capacity to study the past and to engage with the present in any critical and meaningful ways.

Filene's conclusions are problematic for historians. He argues that public historians should adopt StoryCorps's ideas because they are popular and successful, not because they provide a better understanding of the past. Indeed, he argues that public historians should bend themselves to StoryCorps, leaving behind conventional historical expectations which seem to include the most basic capstones of historical thinking, such as tracing continuity and change over time, understanding historical cause and effect, and evaluating historical significance: "StoryCorps has power because it demonstrates, over and over, a much more fundamental lesson: the past exists and we carry it with us every day. More than a project for documenting or interpreting history, in other words, StoryCorps is a brilliant tool for inculcating history-mindedness—the realization that we live poised between something that came before and something that will come after." Such a claim is only tenable if one believes that the past and history are the same, and if one believes that a sense of time is the same as a sense of history. As Filene argues, conflating past and history: "The power of StoryCorps stems from its ability to encourage people to take ownership of the past in the here and now—to claim history as their own and find personal meaning within it."¹³⁰ This is a depoliticized and misleading understanding of history. History is a discourse about the past that is informed by our present values and that teaches the values of the time to the next generation. It is a politically charged negotiation about what is important to remember and what is a reasonable and plausible way to explain and interpret the past. Simply recording a story about one's life does not lead to an understanding of history, and the meaning that many people find is distinctly ahistorical. As Frisch and so many other oral historians have ably shown, people generally do not look for historical explanations of their experiences.

Conclusion: What Is at Stake?

I began to become interested in oral history in graduate school in 1992 and began to record interviews a year later. I quickly bought into the idea that oral history was an undervalued but powerful research tool and that the field was marginalized and misunderstood. In the early 2000s, I began to sense a change. Oral history was mentioned more often in popular media and outside of academia, and in positive ways. Soon, I heard about nonacademic oral history projects that produced excellent recordings and websites, and there was a buzz about

¹²⁹ Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*.

¹³⁰ Filene, "Listening Intently."

narrative and storytelling. At that point, I was enthusiastic about storytelling—just like Pozzi-Thanner, Lamothe and Horowitz, Abelman et al., and Filene—because I believed that we—oral historians—had finally made it. With our history going back to the 1940s, we were clearly at the root of this new popular appreciation of oral history. As experienced practitioners, we were at the centre of it. And as well-read academics, we formed its intelligentsia.

Since around 2008, however, my enthusiasm has waned, in part because I noticed that oral historians play only a marginal role in this new storytelling movement. Our funding has not increased; creators of megaprojects like StoryCorps may present at our conferences, but they hardly read our research findings nor contribute to our discussions in any meaningful sense. Most importantly, they have shaped the public debate and understanding of oral history in a way that oral historians never could. I began to take a step back and rethink the connection between oral history and the larger storytelling phenomenon, a phenomenon whose participants often threw around the phrase *oral history* without any substantial knowledge of what it actually was. I did not want to return to the alienating debates of the 1960s and 1970s about what properly constituted oral history and what was journalism, folklore, etc. There is little value in arguing whether StoryCorps or a business strategy based on storytelling is oral history. Rather, we now have to take a step back from the massive storytelling phenomenon that has swept over us, disentangle ourselves from it, and begin to study it as a new social, cultural, economic, and intellectual phenomenon.

At stake is oral history, because we are no longer in charge of defining the parameters of oral history in the public realm. I doubt that our small band of oral historians can effectively change the terms of debate at the public and corporate level of the storytelling complex. But we can certainly attempt to resist the vortex of storytelling. For example, Barbara Ganley, the founder and director of Community Expressions, LLC, writes that digital storytelling takes “academics out from their comfort zones of the rational domain of critical discourse into the deeply affective process of locating, articulating and communicating personal stories.”¹³¹ This statement is based on flawed logic, like so much of the storytelling industry that teeters on the brink of the self-help movement. The assumption that critical discourse per se is a comfort zone is untenable; there is a contradiction here that posits digital storytelling as both a more comfortable space than academia and not a comfort zone. But it is not the flawed logic of the enterprise I am concerned with (indeed, whether flawed or not, such a statement makes for better advertising than a grant application). Rather, I am worried that while it may be of interest to academics to engage in a supposedly “deeply affective process”—as if reading archival documents and writing about people’s

¹³¹ Ganley, “Foreword,” ix.

oppression and discrimination and their daily political struggles were dispassionate processes—we may then forget to return to our domain of critical discourse, remaining in the comfort zone of narrative navel gazing instead of critically evaluating it.

At stake is history. Storytelling collapses individual memory—filtered through social discourses of individualism, survival, and therapy—and history. As a result, we are hearing only one story. And this one story is the neoliberal story of individual triumph and, implicitly, the success of the free market and the failure of the state. This is a powerful story. As historians, we have to take care not to be mesmerized by the emotional power of the storytelling phenomenon or by the economic success of the storytelling industry. Let me emphasize: I am not arguing against the value and validity of individual experiences and stories and I am not arguing against the power of storytelling. Storytelling is indeed powerful. But we must continue to insist that individual memory and history are not the same.

At stake is critical citizenship and democracy. Like the response to *Hard Times*, StoryCorps stories teach us that Americans continue to find it “hard to examine their culture and institutions critically.”¹³² Why is this so? I have argued elsewhere that, following Foucault, we can understand the interview as a technology of the self. Through the interview in its many forms—from confession and therapy to news interviews and oral history—we have learned to monitor ourselves and report our findings to experts in the hope of being absolved or healed. This self-monitoring and self-reporting is shaped by society’s and the experts’ expectations of what and how to report.¹³³ Do StoryCorps and similar forms of storytelling teach us that public confession and stories of personal survival or triumph are the only ways to talk about oneself?¹³⁴ Oral history, Frisch argued, “reveals patterns and choices that, taken together, begin to define the reinforcing and screening apparatus of the general culture, and the ways in which it encourages us to digest experience.”¹³⁵ Thus, one of the questions we need to ask more frequently and consistently is, in what ways do neoliberal values, languages of therapy and trauma, and the genre of survival story shape our interviewees’ self-interpretations.

One pressing task is to begin to write a history of the storytelling phenomenon. Historians need to investigate the origins and contributing factors to the rise of this phenomenon. While I have tried to accomplish some of that in this

¹³² Frisch, “Oral History,” 71.

¹³³ Freund, “Confessing Animals.”

¹³⁴ As Gilmore argues in “American Neoconfessional” (657–8), a new genre of memoirs of fall and redemption “displace[s] other life narratives, including those that . . . identified the systemic nature of disenfranchisement, unmasked middle-class pieties about privacy and sexual violence, linked suffering and violence to poverty and state indifference, and challenged dominant reading practices around truth-telling.”

¹³⁵ Frisch, “Oral History,” 76.

article, there are many more questions. Does storytelling have its roots in the disenchantment with the hard sciences in the wake two world wars, industrialized killing, and the atomic bomb? Should we view the discourse on storytelling as belonging to neoliberal “Newspeak”?¹³⁶ What are storytelling’s religious roots, if any?¹³⁷ What, for example, is the connection, if any, between the rise of storytelling and the rise of evangelism since the 1970s? What role does the Western infatuation since the 1960s with non-Christian religions, indigenous wisdom, New Age attitudes, survivalism, self-help, extraterrestrials, and such play in the rise of storytelling?¹³⁸ How has the rise of the digital media industry since the 1990s shaped storytelling? In what way is the storytelling labor market built on the ruins of print journalism, academic tenure, and the welfare state? What is the role of publicity? Why do individual storytelling, confession, and therapy all need the largest imaginable audiences possible?

Whether through StoryCorps, Oprah, or digital storytelling, in twenty-first century Western societies, interviewing, confessing, and publicity are deeply intertwined with a neoliberal individualism and the self-help and digital technology industries. Oral historians need to study this broader social phenomenon, not in order to discredit it, but rather in order to explain and understand it. Then they need to ask how their own practices and projects relate to it. Finally, they need to ponder the epistemological, methodological, interpretive, and ethical ramifications of and responses to the entanglement of oral history in the Western mass confessional practice of public storytelling. Let us not forget that the storytelling industry’s grandiose claims of healing individuals and society through storytelling and of writing an ultimate history divert attention and funding away from critical investigations of social and historical phenomena. It is time to wean ourselves from the mindless celebration of story and storytelling and to begin the task of historicizing oral history, interviewing, and storytelling.

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¹³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “New Liberal Speak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate,” *Radical Philosophy* 105 (January/February 2001): 2–5.

¹³⁷ On the moral order of neoliberalism, which resembles in many ways the moral order of storytelling’s individualism, see Amable, “Morals and Politics.” On the rise of conservative religion and neoliberalism in the United States, see Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 249–257, 275;

¹³⁸ Harry C. Meserve, “Editorial: The Therapeutic Age,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 16, no. 2 (April 1977): 77–80; specific reference, p. 77.