

Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather: The Roots of Radical Oral History Practice in the United States

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Abstract: Oral historians in the United States have adopted a problematic history of our field that erases the contributions of our radical forerunners. By fixating on recording technologies, archives, and academia, we ignore those who have shaped the theories and methodologies we draw upon when we facilitate dialogues grounded in personal experiences and interpretive reflections on the past. This article identifies the direct contributions that popular educators such as Myles Horton, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Paolo Freire played in shaping the field of oral history in the United States. Furthermore, it highlights the role that Staughton and Alice Lynd, Helen Lewis, the Massachusetts History Workshop, and the Brass Workers History Project played in translating these popular education practices into current oral history theories and methods.

Keywords: consciousness raising, history of oral history, movement history, people's history, popular education, radical oral history

People know the basic answers to their problems, but they need to go further than that, and you can, by asking questions and getting them stimulated, coax them to move, in discussion, beyond their experience. . . . And when you begin to expand the experience and share your own, people will ask each other questions. . . . If you listen to people and work from what

I would like to thank Teresa Barnett and Kathy Nasstrom for inviting me to revisit my work for this special issue of *Oral History Review* and being very patient with me throughout the process. Teresa went well out of her way to discover and send old articles I never would have found on my own. I'd also like to thank Denise Meringolo, who first pushed me to start rethinking the genealogy of radical public history practice by inviting me to participate in a working group to that end for the National Council for Public History (NCPH). While Nevins may not have been my oral history grandfather, Linda Shopes most certainly has been my mentor since my earliest forays into the field. Conversations with her as part of that NCPH working group have been tremendously helpful in shaping my ideas.

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they tell you, within a few days their ideas get bigger and bigger. They go back in time, ahead in their imagination. You just continue to build on people's own experience; it is the basis for their learning.

—Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*¹

In the fall of 1996, I brought a recorder to Public Square in Cleveland, Ohio, to interview people experiencing homelessness. At the time, I had no idea who Allan Nevins was, nor did I have any formal training in oral history. Rather, the works of popular educators such as Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Augusto Boal inspired my decision to use a recorder to listen to people reflect on their own experiences.² Each of these educators embraced a pedagogy that emphasized working with oppressed communities, drawing on people's personal experiences as a starting point, relating these experiences to others within the community, and then moving beyond them to gain a greater understanding of structural oppression. For me, popular education was a process that was related to, but distinct from, the radical housing activism that I had participated in in the preceding years as a squatter in New York City. Rather than explain to people what the issues were that impacted their lives and then attempt to organize them to join an action that they had not planned, I would begin by listening. I ended up spending the next decade working on the Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project (CHOHP). I interviewed nearly two hundred people about their experiences with homelessness and, even more important, their analysis of its causes. The narrators defined the issues that shaped their lives and developed the strategies that they would use to address the issues of day-labor exploitation, the criminalization of homelessness, and miserable shelter conditions. When the narrators arrived at their strategies for making changes, I supported and joined in with their mobilizations. Reflection and action became intertwined; oral history proved to be a powerful tool for initiating change.

As I presented and published this work, I received a warm reception among other oral historians.³ I came to see myself as an oral historian, immersed myself in the literature of "the field," and eventually taught graduate-level courses that

¹ Myles Horton, *The Long Haul* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 136-137.

² Most notably, I read Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990); and Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1985).

³ An article I published about this work in *Oral History Review* in 2003 has since been included in the second and third editions of the *Oral History Reader* in its section titled "Advocacy and Empowerment." Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson drew upon my work as an example for how oral history "can play a significant role in movement building." Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996), 448. For more on my work, see Daniel Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is," *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 27-45; "Countering Corporate Narratives from the Streets: The Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 231-251; and *Derelict Paradise* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

trained others in the methods of oral history. By then I had learned who Allan Nevins was, and his name made its way onto my syllabus as the founder of oral history. Until I started researching more deeply for this article, I viewed my professional success as a product of fortuitous timing: I was lucky enough to bridge oral history practice with pedagogies drawn from popular education just at the moment when the field of oral history was ready for it. I believed the histories of oral history that traced a progressive advance in the field from an original fixation on elites and archives to one that had become more democratic, theoretically sophisticated, and ethically grounded. What neither I nor the existing histories of our field had taken into account, however, was that the very embrace of bottom-up oral history had in fact sprung from the same sources of inspiration that informed my work. It is, in fact, deeply inaccurate to assume that oral history originated in a concern with archival documentation and only later came to focus on social justice.

In every iteration I have encountered, the genealogy of oral history in North America begins with Allan Nevins. While many versions cursorily point to examples of earlier endeavors that drew upon oral accounts, such as the work of Herodotus, the Zhou dynasty's scribes, African griots, Hubert Howe Bancroft, and the Federal Writers' Project of the New Deal, these examples are treated as prehistories.⁴ The official history begins with Allan Nevins establishing "the oral history project" at Columbia University in 1948, the same year the first American-made tape recorders were sold.⁵ With our identification of Nevins as the founder of our field, we position the archival and technological aspects of oral history at the core of our practice. As the story goes, Nevins turned to recording interviews with elite men because he feared that the rise of the telephone age posed significant threats to the historical record as oral communication displaced letter writing. For Nevins, oral histories were evidentiary documents that needed to be preserved so that future historians could draw on them to produce better histories. His emphasis on oral history's evidentiary value, as well as his fixation on elites, have come to define what we consider to be the relevant past of oral history in the 1950s.⁶

Casting Allan Nevins as the founder of oral history promotes a simplistic view of what oral history is; it also misrepresents its development over time. In the first place, the focus on Nevins ignores the development of other contemporaneous practices that I will address here and thus makes the interest in interviewing everyday people in the 1960s and 1970s appear to be a major shift in

⁴ For one example of how this prehistory is dealt with, see Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *History of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 14-16.

⁵ Sharpless, 12.

⁶ See Ronald J. Grele, "Reflections on the Practice of Oral History: Retrieving What We Can from an Earlier Critique," *Suomen Antropologi* 4 (2007): 11-12.

the field. Secondly, our conventional origin story misrepresents that shift, in turn, by arguing that, while the practitioners of the sixties and seventies broadened the pool of narrators by interviewing the working class, women, people of color, and LGBT people, they continued to have a positivistic fixation and defined their oral histories solely as archival documents. Not yet understanding the concept of shared authority, they tasked themselves only with interpreting these documents as evidence. Finally, these oral historians' supposedly limited understanding of subjective narratives set the stage for what is presented as the next great shift in the field: By the late 1970s and 1980s, as the argument goes, oral historians began moving away from seeing their interviews as documents and began to view them as texts. They turned away from their earlier embrace of objectivity and positivism as they recognized the interpretive value of the intersubjective dimensions of the oral history interview.⁷

Linda Shopes has challenged the neatness and totality of these presumed shifts, arguing that some oral historians recognized the narrative elements of their interviews much earlier than the shifts would suggest. Furthermore, she points out that a substantial majority of oral history publications still utilize oral histories as documents rather than texts.⁸ Joan Sangster has also urged us to move beyond this "onward and upward story in which each new academic orientation theoretically surpasses the one before." This framing of oral history's past precludes us from seeing the "acuity of previous work" and "the limitations of current writing."⁹ These critiques by Sangster and Shopes suggest that we may in fact have simply imagined that there ever was a "theoretical turn in oral history." Many practitioners thought more complexly about narratives prior to the so-called turn, and others continue to think in a positivist fashion even today. The construct of an earlier turn away from a fixation on elites is just as troublesome. It ignores a whole body of work done by radicals outside of academia. While British oral historians have embraced their socialist and radical forbearers, in the United States oral historians have erased our own.¹⁰

⁷ Remarkably similar versions of this narrative of our past can be found in: Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5-7; Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 3; Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 2; Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 4-8; Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1991), 196-211; Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2006): 49-70. After the 1980s, the histories of oral history became a bit more muddled as the consensus of what has happened to the field became less clear, other than a general acknowledgement that we have entered a "digital age."

⁸ Linda Shopes, "'Insights and Oversights': Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 260.

⁹ Joan Sangster, "Politics and Praxis in Canadian Working-Class History," in *Oral History Off the Record*, ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 64.

¹⁰ The argument draws on Luisa Passerini's essay, "Mythbiography in Oral History," in *The Myths We Live By*, ed. Ralph Samuel and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1990). For an example of how British oral historians

Our founding myth served a purpose that is no longer helpful. Identifying Nevins as our founder and making a case for our newfound theoretical rigor helped legitimate the field of oral history within the halls of academia. Intriguingly, those whose contributions have either been erased or devalued by this narrative principally worked outside of academia or had been blacklisted from academia. Today, however, we have other more pressing needs than legitimating oral history in academia. We live in a historic moment marked by profound economic instabilities and dislocations, deepening inequalities, anti-immigrant attacks, and public displays of police violence. We also live amidst the emergence of new social movements and a flourishing of radical oral history projects that seek to do more than document the world; they seek to play a role in transforming it. The time has come to reclaim our more radical past so that we can as oral historians more effectively address our present.

With this article I do not intend to replace our founding mythology; doing so will require a collaborative endeavor, as there are many traditions that shape the practices of those of us who envision oral history as a powerful tool that can support movement building. The tradition I draw upon is the one that comes out of the pedagogies of popular education, where change and social transformation begin with personal reflection. What I seek to do here is reflect on the sources of inspiration for my own work and use that understanding to trace one now largely forgotten branch of our genealogy. My hope is that others will do the same and that together we can create a robust new family tree.

Recovering a Lost Branch of Oral History's Past

Our fixation on recording technologies, archives, and academia has prompted us to ignore substantial portions of what oral history is. More central to our practice than our production of recordings, transcripts, collections, articles, and monographs, is the fact that we facilitate dialogues grounded in personal experiences and interpretive reflections on the past. If we positioned that work at the center of what we do as oral historians, we could then look back and identify the people who have inspired this aspect of our practice, regardless of whether they considered themselves to be oral historians. When the Phillips Company introduced the portable cassette recorder in 1963, there was already a well-

tell a very different story about their past, see Alistair Thomson, "Oral History and Community History in Britain," *Oral History* 36 (Spring 2008): 95-104. Interestingly, Thomson draws on the established US narrative while drawing a contrast with the British history of oral history. Thomson argues, "By the end of the 1980s community oral history was arguably *the* dominant presence in the British oral history movement. That contrasts with other countries. In the United States oral history started as an elite and archive-based movement, which then broadened out to include people's history work in the seventies." Thomson, "Oral History and Community History in Britain," 96.

established social movement that recognized the power that grew out of reflections on personal experience.

This movement can be traced back to at least the 1930s, when Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School, began to develop practices for working with personal narratives that would play a pivotal role in the work of oral historians who followed in his footsteps. Horton began working on his vision to create a school for adult education in the mountains of Tennessee in 1931. The school, Horton argued, would need to be “yeasty,” one where small groups “could have the potential to multiply themselves and fundamentally change society.” Its principal goal would be to teach people to “value their own experience, to analyze their own experience, and to know how to make decisions.”¹¹ Horton had been an active Socialist and had studied with Socialist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary. He later went on to the University of Chicago, where he thought more deeply about conflict and social change through his discussions with sociologist Robert Park, drew upon ideas about progressive education from reading John Dewey, and reflected on the ideals of participatory democracy with Jane Addams. Horton himself was inspired by his predecessors and was unstinting in his efforts to understand all he could about past practices that could make his own future work more consequential. Through his connections to the Socialist Party of America, he raised funds to start the Highlander Folk School in the mountains west of Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1932.¹²

From the 1930s through the 1960s, Highlander played a significant role in two major social movements—the industrial union movement and the civil rights movement. Highlander’s earliest workshops included miners and workers from the textile, upholstery, and furniture industries. After the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO] formed in 1935, it designated Highlander as its official educational training center for the South. Highlander continued in that capacity until 1949, when it severed ties with the CIO as the union embraced anticommunism and banished left-wing unions from its fold. As its interest in working with unions waned, Highlander made a decision to focus on antiracist work in the South. Over the next decade and a half, figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, and Stokely Carmichael all attended workshops at the school.¹³

The workshops, which lasted from a weekend to several weeks, were always fluid and grounded in the realities of those who participated. Horton argued, “There is no method to learn from Highlander. What we do involves trusting

¹¹ Horton, 57.

¹² Horton, 44-62.

¹³ Horton, 86-87, 96-97.

people and believing in their ability to think for themselves.”¹⁴ While the participants designed the program and agenda, Highlander staff shaped the workshops by choosing the people to invite. The staff only invited grassroots leaders who represented the organizations that they belonged to back in their home communities. Thus when working with unions, they invited the shop stewards, people who worked directly with the rank and file. And during the civil rights movement in the early sixties, they led a series of workshops for black beauticians, barbers, and schoolteachers—people who were economically independent from whites and who were viewed as having the potential for grassroots leadership. Throughout, they only invited people deemed to be dealing with big problems and seeking “basic changes in the structure of society.”¹⁵

Myles Horton drew upon what he termed “a two-eye” theory of teaching, keeping one eye on the point people started from, while focusing the other eye on where they might arrive. As part of this approach, he sought to create “circles of learners” comprised of people who shared similar problems. The term *circle* was used intentionally, highlighting the fact that there was no lead educator: the goal of the staff was not to direct the learning but to create a relaxed atmosphere in which participants could share their personal experiences freely. The circle required participants to listen to each other’s stories and thus to stretch their thinking and put their own experiences in the context of others. Drawing on the group members’ knowledge, they then analyzed their problems and learned how to transform their society from the bottom up. Importantly, for Horton, the foundation of social transformation rested on narratives of personal experience. But these narratives were starting points, not ending points. And they were not seen as static, but emergent in the midst of collective dialogue. The goal was for learners to “*go beyond* their [current] state of thinking.”¹⁶

Highlander primarily envisioned its role as a retreat center where grassroots leaders came to reflect on their experiences from their home communities. By the mid-1950s, however, several workshop participants, including Septima Clark, a black schoolteacher from Charleston, South Carolina, called on Highlander to build a program of Citizenship Schools. Their goal was to bring the Highlander workshop approach to black people in the communities they lived in across the South. These schools would not only teach people to read and write, so that they could register to vote, but would also seek to cultivate activists. Rather than bring a program to people, Horton argued that the Citizenship Schools, if they were to be successful, needed to “start listening to the people themselves.” Horton turned the project over to Clark, who joined the Highlander staff.¹⁷

¹⁴ Horton, 157.

¹⁵ Horton, 147.

¹⁶ Horton and Freire, 98.

¹⁷ Horton, 100, 102, 104-105.

As the schools expanded in number under Clark's direction, they drew the attention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Ella Baker, a Socialist who had a long history as a community organizer, was then working with the SCLC and convinced Martin Luther King Jr. to partner with Highlander to run the schools.¹⁸ Worried about the growing size of the Citizenship Schools program, Horton turned it over entirely to SCLC in 1961. That same year, the state of Tennessee revoked Highlander's charter and seized the school, arguing that it was a Communist organization. It would be a decade before Highlander would get a new charter and start over as the Highlander Research and Education Center.¹⁹

Septima Clark continued to run the Citizenship Schools under the SCLC, which ultimately trained over 10,000 teachers for the program.²⁰ Implicitly critiquing the charismatic leadership style of Martin Luther King Jr., Baker argued, "Strong people don't need strong leaders."²¹ After the student-led sit-in movement spread across the South in 1960, she organized the conference of sit-in leaders at Shaw University that led to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She inspired them to embrace a radical and democratic approach to community organizing. And Baker and Clark would subsequently shape the curriculum of the Freedom Schools that SNCC established as the foundation of its efforts to organize sharecroppers in Mississippi in the mid-1960s. Mirroring Horton's approach, Baker believed "firmly in the right of the people who were under the heel to be the ones to decide what action they were going to take to get [out] from under their oppression."²² The Freedom Schools would provide the spaces where people could draw upon their experiences to think strategically about how they could transform the world around them. While Horton had focused on establishing a retreat for grassroots leaders, Baker and Clark extended the principles of popular education to base communities across the South.²³

Staughton Lynd, who served as the director of SNCC's Freedom Schools in 1964, played a pivotal role in translating the core principles of adult popular education into the field of oral history. He and his wife Alice Lynd engaged in one of the earliest efforts to incorporate the portable cassette recorder into their

¹⁸ Horton, 100, 104-105; Todd Moya, *Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

¹⁹ Horton, 108-112. For more on the schools, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997).

²⁰ Septima Poinsette Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, California: Wild Trees Press, 1986), 77.

²¹ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 188.

²² Ransby, 92.

²³ Ransby, 242-249.

popular education practice.²⁴ They also had the audacity to call what they did oral history, and our failure to understand how their methodology drew upon ideas from Horton, Clark, and Baker has impeded our ability to recognize their theoretical sophistication.

The Lynds' most significant contributions to the field of oral history happened after the history department at Yale University denied Staughton Lynd tenure as a result of his visit to Hanoi during the Vietnam War. His antiwar activities led to him being blacklisted in academia.²⁵ Since Staughton was unable to gain a university position, the Lynds moved to Chicago, where Staughton taught in Saul Alinsky's school for radicals in the late 1960s. It was during this period that they engaged in what they termed a "guerilla history" project in Gary, Indiana, in which they conducted oral histories with older rank-and-file workers in hopes of building cross-generational dialogues that could empower young working-class people.²⁶ Sharing Horton's interest in working with grassroots leaders, they also engaged self-identified organizers in a series of community forums and writers' workshops.²⁷

Their project had clear parallels to the structure of learning circles at Highlander. Recognizing the project participants as "equals" who had "expert knowledge," the Lynds sought to start with personal reflections from people who shared an experience of oppression in common: "Experience was the heart of the matter."²⁸ Through collective telling and listening, narrators put their individual experiences into the context of others' experiences and used their dialogue as a lens to understand structures of power. What was new, however, was that the Lynds explicitly sought to generate cross-generational discussions by interviewing elders and sharing the content of these interviews with a new generation of workers. Furthermore, they introduced the idea of recording these reflections and publishing edited portions of the interviews in a book, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*.

Staughton Lynd, who would become a leading figure in the bottom-up history movement, approached oral history in a very different way than our reductionist critique of the era suggests. Our histories of oral history credit bottom-up historians with including new voices in the historical record, but they also criticize the practitioners of that era for supposedly viewing oral histories

²⁴ In 1964 another historian, Howard Zinn, introduced Staughton Lynd to the potential of the portable cassette recorder (released in 1963) when Lynd stumbled upon Zinn conducting an interview of two SNCC field secretaries for his book, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964). Andrej Grubacic, ed., *From Here to There: The Staughton Lynd Reader* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 120.

²⁵ Carl Mirra, *The Admirable Radical: Staughton Lynd and Cold War Dissent, 1945-1970* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2010).

²⁶ Grubacic, 152-158.

²⁷ Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds., *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 7.

²⁸ Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Stepping Stones: Memoir of a Life Together* (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 61-64; Lynd and Lynd, *Rank and File*, 7.

simplistically as unmediated evidence that required no interpretation. In response to criticisms that their approach lacked sophistication, however, Staughton Lynd emphasized that they were not concerned with “rescuing the voices of the people ‘below’” in order to enrich the archives and benefit future academic historians.²⁹ Both he and Alice Lynd saw *Rank and File* as a means to extend the listening circle that was a central component of the pedagogical principles of popular education. The intended audience for their “oral history from the bottom up,” as they envisioned it, comprised other industrial workers: they conceived of the book less as an end product and more as a tool to facilitate further dialogue among workers who were geographically isolated from one another.³⁰ They thus made a deliberate choice not to offer their conclusive interpretations of the interviews; rather, they saw their role as that of “a catalyst, and organizer.”³¹ They also intended to unsettle the reader, as the narratives contained perspectives that were contradictory and had stark political and interpretive differences. The question was not whether the oral histories should be further interpreted, but rather who should be doing the interpreting. Recognizing their effort to de-center intellectual authority as a methodological contribution, Lynd argued that radical historians should embrace oral history, which was “like history from the bottom up carried a step further because it’s people at the bottom doing their own history.”³²

The Lynds’ work inspired a whole new generation of oral historians, and they introduced many of the ideas we associate with oral history’s theoretical turn. For example, in an essay published in *Oral History Review* in 1976, Alice Hoffman argued that the importance of the Lynds was not that they interviewed people from below, but rather that they had redefined what it meant to be a historian. “The oral history process unearths many natural historians in many settings, from steel towns to rural Appalachia.”³³ The Lynds’ work explicitly acknowledged the shared authority embedded within the oral histories they had conducted. The Lynds also thoughtfully worked out a resolution to the problems posed by power imbalances within the interview. They called for embracing a concept of “accompaniment,” where two people seeking to bridge a divide come together as they are, not pretending they are something they are not; recognize the expertise of the other; and walk “side by side with one another on a common journey.” Foreshadowing Alessandro Portelli’s essay, “Research as an

²⁹ Staughton Lynd, “The Battle Over Radical History,” *New Republic*, August 4, 2010.

³⁰ Grubacic, 160-62

³¹ Lynd and Lynd, *Rank and File*, 7.

³² Grubacic, 161.

³³ Alice Hoffman, “Who Are the Elite and What Is a Non-Elitest?” *Oral History Review*, 4 (1976): 4.

Experiment in Equality," Staughton Lynd concluded, "'Accompaniment' thus understood presupposes, not uncritical deference, but equality."³⁴

Paulo Freire further translated the core principles of popular education with the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which came out in English for the first time in 1970. While Freire, like Horton, Baker, and Clark, did not identify as an oral historian, his ideas would be quickly embraced by those who did. Freire, a Brazilian educator and Christian Socialist, had established literacy learning circles with sugarcane workers in Recife, Brazil, at the same time Septima Clark was directing the literacy campaigns of the Citizenship Schools. As the State of Tennessee shuttered Highlander, a military coup in Brazil led to Freire's imprisonment and eventual exile. While facing severe persecution in Brazil, he was offered a position as a visiting professor at Harvard in 1969. Unlike Staughton Lynd, who had been blacklisted from academia, Freire was uniquely positioned to lend academic credibility to many of the same pedagogical principles that informed the work of Horton, Baker, Clark, and the Lynds.³⁵

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued that in critical pedagogy oppression and its causes were the "objects of reflection by the oppressed." Like Horton, Freire envisioned this process of reflection beginning with the oppressed examining their own "concrete situation" and doing so in dialogue with others who shared a similar situation. Reality, for Freire, was not something that independently existed, in a static state, and merely needed to be observed. Rather, people socially constituted "reality in process, in transformation" through their experiences, perceptions, and dialogue. For the popular educator the goal was to work with the oppressed to identify the "generative themes" that were found within "the thought-language with which men refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world." Through intervening in that socially and linguistically constituted reality, the oppressed gained historical awareness and consciousness.³⁶

Freire distinguished his popular education approach both from traditional research practices and from top-down political approaches. He warned that there was a significant danger that the educator might shift the focus of investigation away from identifying "generative themes" towards a focus on the people themselves, "thereby treating the people as objects of investigation." Popular educators should neither manipulate people's ideas nor naively adopt those ideas as their own. Rather, Freire proposed a synthesis whereby educators identified with people's ideas *and* posed them as a problem for consideration by the people themselves. In a formulation similar to the Lynds' conception of accompaniment,

³⁴ Grubacic, 18-20. In his essay, Alessandro Portelli makes a remarkably similar argument: "Field work is meaningful as the encounter of two subjects who recognize each other as subjects, and therefore separate, and seek to build their equality upon their difference in order to work together." Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 43.

³⁵ James D. Kirylo, *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 50-59.

³⁶ Freire, 33, 52-53, 70-71, 86, 101.

he argued that the popular educator “does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side.”³⁷

Helen Lewis, the “grandmother of Appalachian studies,” one of the founders of the field of participatory action research and a self-proclaimed oral historian, became one of the first United States–based popular educators to draw on Freire’s work. When the newly named Highlander School for Research and Education reopened in 1971, Lewis also became a pivotal figure within that organization and played a role in widening its social justice work to include environmental and community health issues. Furthermore, she emphasized the importance of understanding regional change in a global context. These issues came to the forefront in the early 1970s as the coal industry initiated strip mining in Appalachia, prompting major social and environmental disruptions in the region.³⁸

Helen Lewis drew upon oral history as the starting point for the economics education curriculum she developed at Highlander and brought two long-term projects she worked on in Jellico, Tennessee, and Ivanhoe, Virginia. Rooted in participatory action research, this curriculum taught community members how to assess their community needs and recognize their existing resources as they began to conceive potential development strategies that would allow them to build sustainable economies for their own benefit. For Lewis, grounding the process in people’s personal experiences was essential, and initiating the research with an oral history project served that purpose. Community-based researchers interviewed each other, as well as hundreds of other members of their community, and they drew upon these interviews to analyze the economic changes that impacted their lives. In addition to gathering information, the interviews served as an important tool to mobilize widespread discussion about the economic problems that the community was facing. The project participants Lewis worked with produced theatrical performances that drew from the oral histories, developed history books and museum exhibits, and wrote poems and songs inspired by the interviews. Collective analysis of the interviews helped the local groups recognize common issues they were facing so that they could prioritize development strategies.³⁹

Like Freire, as well as a growing number of oral historians who would follow her in the 1980s, Lewis acknowledged the issue of unequal power relations in research. Whereas anxieties about exploitation in research would prove to be immobilizing for oral historians in the 1990s, Lewis identified community action research as an effective means to address these inequities. She argued that “the

³⁷ Freire, 99, 184, 23-24.

³⁸ Lewis, 5-6, 63, 74-75.

³⁹ Lewis, 142-144. For more on Lewis’s project in Ivanhoe, Virginia, see Mary Ann Hinsdale, Helen Lewis, and Maxine Waller, *It Comes From the People: Community Development and Local Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995).

process of gaining control over knowledge and skills normally considered to be the monopoly of the experts is an empowering one, which produces much more than just the information in question."⁴⁰ She also critiqued academic experts who studied communities without being accountable to them: "Experts are not objective," and their research is often "not accountable and responsible to the needs of ordinary people, but serves the power holders." Participatory research sought to give "validity to people's knowledge," allowing communities to systematize and analyze their own knowledge while also gathering additional information that spoke to their problems. Lewis urged all researchers working in communities to ask themselves who determined the need for and controlled the process and dissemination of research. "Where," she asked, "does accountability lie?"⁴¹

The Era of People's History

In the late 1970s and early 1980s a growing movement of historians drew inspiration from Myles Horton, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Staughton Lynd, Paulo Freire, and Helen Lewis as they organized dozens of people's history projects across the United States. The people's history movement sought to share the tools of historical production with people in communities outside of the halls of academia. The people were more than sources; they were "their own historians" who could draw on their power to interpret the past as a means to shape the future.⁴² The historians at the forefront of these projects turned to oral history as the primary tool they used to engage the broader public in a collaborative and democratic exercise in history making. Much of this work also benefited from access to significant funding streams during President Jimmy Carter's administration through the Comprehensive Employment Training Act and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).⁴³

While not all the projects had a foot in academic institutions, a significant number of professional historians began to embrace the radical collaborative practices that had been forged outside of universities. Academic historians' embrace of the people's history movement heralded many changes within the discipline of history as these professionals began reflecting and writing about methodological issues that were at the center of Lewis, Freire, Lynd, Clark, and Horton's work. What were the ethical implications of working across differences marked by social inequalities? How did one balance one's own interpretive

⁴⁰ Lewis, 143.

⁴¹ Lewis, 144.

⁴² Ronald Grele, "Whose Public? Whose History? What Is the Goal of a Public Historian?," *Public Historian* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 48.

⁴³ Linda Shopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement," in *Presenting the Past*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986), 254.

authority while working collaboratively with others? Who were the people who would be invited to participate in these projects? Who were the audiences that the work would seek to engage? These questions were not new; rather, they emerged from the popular education tradition that drew upon personal narratives as a starting point for movement building.

One of the earliest and most influential projects of the people's history era, the Massachusetts History Workshop, explicitly drew inspiration from the work of the Highlander Folk School. James Green, a professor at University of Massachusetts Boston and one of the group's founders, along with Marti Blatt and Susan Reverby, saw himself as a movement educator working in the footsteps of Myles Horton.⁴⁴ Like Helen Lewis, he turned to oral history as a tool to facilitate community dialogue: "Oral history projects were the medium we used to begin individual and group dialogues with working people. These experiences enabled us to expand the dialogue in less private settings, to experiment with a movement inspired version of public history."⁴⁵ Green was not primarily interested in collecting oral testimony "as raw evidence of experience," but rather as a "record of how people told their stories and made their own interpretations."⁴⁶ He understood that this new work was innovative precisely because the historians organizing the project worked for academic institutions. Even so he was not entirely convinced that it "was possible to be a movement historian in the university."⁴⁷

The Massachusetts History Workshop projects in Lynn and Lawrence did not adequately resolve the dilemma of whether it was possible to successfully translate methods drawn from movements to an academic setting. Green, Blatt, and Reverby organized well-attended reunions of retired mill hands, where historians presented their research and workers offered up recollections on their past experiences in both oral histories and public forums. As the projects came to a close, Green observed that they had put "activist historians" in "collaborative community settings" where they encountered agendas among the project participants that were at times at odds with their own. For example, the academic historians wanted to understand more about the everyday life experiences of workers, while many of the participants wanted to highlight their participation in dramatic struggles. These tensions came to a head in Lawrence in the spring of 1980 when the academic historians decided not to get involved with a commemorative Bread and Roses pageant that was being organized by a local hospital workers' union. The organizers sought to celebrate the unity and solidarity of the famous 1912 strike, but from the perspective of the historians, the

⁴⁴ Green, 81.

⁴⁵ Green, 54.

⁴⁶ Green, 64.

⁴⁷ Green, 31.

pageant organizers had failed “to explore the social history of mill worker communities, which was the workshop’s main concern.”⁴⁸ Rather than meet the workers where they were and find creative ways to raise these differences as problems for discussion, as Freire might have advised, the historians decided to preserve their integrity by not participating in the planned festivities. The historians thus lost an opportunity to engage a larger working-class audience, as the pageant went on to become a huge success that was held annually and that was embraced by young and retired workers alike.

The Massachusetts History Workshop did not immediately result in the kinds of dramatic social change we associate with Highlander or the Freedom Schools. It must be remembered, however, that Highlander conducted workshops for decades rather than for a few short years, and there were many years that Highlander worked unremittingly without any immediate signs of structural change to the conditions that African Americans and industrial workers had experienced. Furthermore, without devaluing the dire economic conditions of the Great Depression, when Highlander was founded, the realities of deindustrialization that shaped the lives of Massachusetts’ workers in the 1980s were unique. Lynn and Lawrence had become industrial graveyards as factory owners shut down their remaining mills and moved production elsewhere. Doing their projects in the midst of this dislocation, the organizers of the Massachusetts History Workshop were taken aback by the level of “cynicism and defeatism” expressed by the mill workers they interviewed.⁴⁹

While the Massachusetts History Workshop disbanded without any clear victories, it inspired other projects and served as a testing ground for the collaborative research practices that James Green would continue to embrace throughout his career as a labor educator at University of Massachusetts Boston and at the Harvard Trade Union Program. In his memoir, *Taking History to Heart*, Green documented his decades of work teaching labor history to union members using a “problem-posing approach” inspired by Horton and Freire.⁵⁰ Green referred to his approach as a “kind of oral history” that “involves a dialogue about the past, conversations in shared spaces, public and private.”⁵¹ The younger “worker students” in his classes—who engaged in dialogue with one another about their own personal experiences, and who interviewed and organized workshops with older labor activists—did end up playing major roles in the labor union revival in the 1990s. Green argued that this cross-generational work of union members had resulted in a “consciousness raising process” that informed a new social

⁴⁸ Green, 54-55, 60. The Massachusetts History Workshop regrouped and learned from these setbacks when it engaged in a clerical workers project in Boston, which more fully embraced collaborative history making. See Green, 65-68.

⁴⁹ Green, 60.

⁵⁰ Green, 96.

⁵¹ Green, 3.

movement that democratized and radicalized labor unions.⁵² Radical work rooted in the traditions of popular education, grounded in personal experiences, and drawing upon the tools of oral history could in fact be done with a foot firmly inside an academic institution.

In the late 1970s the National Endowment for the Humanities funded Jeremy Brecher, Jan Stackhouse, and Jerry Lombardi to do the Brass Workers History Project, another endeavor that would demonstrate oral history's potential to effect social change in the context of deindustrialization. The participatory project sought to bring together workers in the declining brass industry in Naugatuck Valley to discuss the past and present conditions they were experiencing at work and in their communities. It would continue through 1984, leading to the production of a feature-length documentary and a book, both titled *Brass Valley*. In 1984 Brecher wrote, "Perhaps the greatest lesson we have to pass on to future projects is that participation takes time—plan your project with plenty of it."⁵³ Brecher would continue his work in the same community for the next twenty-five years. The participants in the Brass Workers History Project would go on to form the Naugatuck Valley Project (NVP), a group that spearheaded countless creative projects to address issues related to affordable housing, healthcare, and the environment. NVP also organized several employee-owned factories as a response to the plant closings that ravaged the region in the 1980s. In 2011 Brecher would publish a second book, *Banded Together*, this time documenting the history of the NVP.⁵⁴

Brecher, Lombardi, and Stackhouse rooted their approach to people's history in oral history, and they understood that what they were doing entailed much more than recovering voices from below. They came to depend on oral history as a foundational organizing tool after their initial efforts to organize a history collaborative proved ineffective:

We initially defined the project as a way we could help people in the community tell their own history. Thus, we offered to help people do things: collect the history of their own organization, set up a history committee, or learn how to operate video equipment. We rapidly learned that most people defined participation very differently: as them helping us. I believe now that our initial approach was rather arrogant, and that theirs represented a more realistic picture of the situation.⁵⁵

⁵² Green, 279.

⁵³ Jeremy Brecher, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Community History: A 'Pet Outsider's' Report on the Brass Workers History Project," *Radical History Review* no. 28-30 (1984): 201.

⁵⁴ Jeremy Brecher, *Banded Together* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), xiv-xv.

⁵⁵ Brecher, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying," 199.

Brecher discovered it was much more appropriate to begin the project by asking community members to participate in oral history interviews, an approach that entailed listening and learning from community members in the earliest encounters. The interviews helped further deepen relationships and eventually did facilitate the creation of a robust community and labor advisory panel.

In conducting the oral history interviews with factory workers, Brecher, Lombardi, and Stackhouse envisioned their narrators as experts rather than merely as sources. And in editing the *Brass Valley* volume, they explicitly acknowledged the shared authority within the interviews; the excerpts were much more than what “a traditional historian would regard as raw sources.” Rather, the narrators offered descriptions of events from the past as well as “their own interpretations of their meaning.”⁵⁶ Like the Lynds before them, their role was to function as organizers and editors. They understood that the accounts they recorded were not just laden with facts but were rich with interpretation, and they prized the subjective elements: “The value of the materials is enhanced by the fact that they shed light, not only on what happened, but on the ways the various people organized their understandings of what happened.”

In accepting the narrators’ authority, the coordinators also “learned to be comfortable” with the fact that people who participated brought their own agendas and divergent interpretations to the project. Staking claim to an identity as “pet outsiders,” they navigated through intercommunity conflict and were careful to respect but move across antagonistic lines within the community. While they could play a role in helping people to see the larger context of their experience and perhaps gain an understanding of the commonalities they shared with their antagonists, they acknowledged that they could not presume that their work would reconcile long-standing divisions.⁵⁷ What they hoped to do instead was to generate a “dialogue between individual experiences, as lived and thought about by the participants, and their lives as viewed in a larger historical context.”⁵⁸ They hoped that participants and readers alike would gain a greater appreciation of their role as historical actors. As evidenced by the project’s role in facilitating the emergence of the Naugatuck Valley Project, it remains one of the most significant models demonstrating the potential for people’s history to play a role in mobilizing communities to further social change from the bottom up.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Jeremy Brecher, Jerry Lombardi, and Jan Stackhouse, eds., *Brass Valley: The Story of Working People’s Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982), 275–276.

⁵⁷ Brecher, “How I Learned to Quit Worrying,” 193.

⁵⁸ Brecher, Lombardi, Stackhouse, 275.

⁵⁹ In a review of *Brass Valley*, Ron Grele referred to the project as “genius” and “so much better than anything yet produced.” Ronald Grele, “Brass Valley: A Review,” *Radical America* 17, no. 5 (1983): 48, 53.

A plethora of people's history projects flourished during the 1980s. Collectively they made significant contributions to how many historians and activists think about the past, and they informed a broad array of social justice movements. Projects such as the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, the Chinatown History project in New York, and Philadelphia's Historymobile focused on specific urban neighborhoods and the marginalized working-class and ethnic residents that lived within them.⁶⁰ The black community museums that sprang up in places like Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cleveland drew inspiration from SNCC's Freedom Schools, engaged in oral history projects, and encouraged black communities to produce their own histories.⁶¹ The feminist oral history movement also flourished during this same period—coming together in 1977 with the founding of the National Women's Studies Association and the subsequent special issue of *Frontiers* that focused on women's oral history. While many feminist oral history projects had a foot in academia, they also sustained a broader commitment to the contemporary feminist movement.⁶² The period also saw the emergence of oral history projects that focused on lesbian and gay communities across the United States, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Buffalo Oral History Project, the Boston Area History Project, and the New York Lesbian and Gay Historical Society.⁶³ Collectively these projects redefined the very meaning of community, as they helped broaden the concept of oppression and social justice. By focusing on narratives of personal experience by people from communities experiencing marginalization, exploitation, and oppression, they have pushed forward our understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect in the lives of individuals.

With the election of Reagan and the appointment of William Bennet as the head of NEH in 1982, however, funding for community projects began to dry up. In the mid-1980s, Susan Porter Benson, Steven Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig concluded, "The most expensive efforts, such as films and large-scale community and oral history projects, face an uncertain future without federal funding."⁶⁴ Heavily staffed projects, such as the Baltimore Neighborhood

⁶⁰ Linda Shopes, "Community Oral History," *Oral History* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2015); Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 225-238; John Kuo Wei Tchen and Liz Ševčenko, "The 'Dialogic Museum' Revisited," in *Letting Go?*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia, PA: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011), 82.

⁶¹ Jeffrey C. Stewart and Faith Davis Ruffins, "A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective, 1828-1984," in *Presenting the Past*, 328-332; Samir Meghelli, "Remixing the Historical Record: Revolutions in Hip Hop Historiography," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 2 (2013): 95-97.

⁶² Sherna Berger Gluck, "What's So Special about Women," *Frontiers* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 5; Sherna Berger Gluck, "Has Feminist Oral History Lost Its Radical/Subversive Edge?," *Oral History* 39, no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 64-65.

⁶³ Lisa Duggan, "History's Gay Ghetto," in *Presenting the Past*, 282.

⁶⁴ Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig, *Presenting the Past*, xxvii.

History Project, collapsed when the grant funding disappeared.⁶⁵ In the wake of austerity, John “Jack” Tchen, the founder of Chinatown History Project in New York, asked, “Can a participatory social history be fostered in this era of flat public-sector support and the growing dependence on benevolent donor wealth?” Tchen’s response was, “We do our best. We work with limited time and limited resources. We do what we can.”⁶⁶

Paralysis and Movement

By the early 1990s the flourishing moment of people’s history projects had come to a close. Funding for community oral history projects dried up, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the tone of publications reflecting on people’s history had dramatically changed from the earlier visionary calls to action to more pessimistic critiques that sought to address the shortcomings of this work. Undoubtedly, there needed to be an assessment of the projects as they came to a close, and many of the people who critically reflected on the work from this era supported the larger aims of the movement. A growing number of scholars, however, published critiques that were hostile to the aims of people’s history and even went so far as to claim it had a greater potential to be exploitative than traditional scholarship.

After funding dried up and the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project (BNHP) came to an end in 1982, one of the project’s lead organizers, Linda Shopes, offered a critique of its shortcomings. Initially the BNHP had sought to facilitate cross-generational dialogue within working-class ethnic neighborhoods that could “nurture the self respect of senior citizens” and communicate to younger residents that their communities were “worth something.” She hoped that in revaluing their communities, the residents could “be so moved to take a more activist, critical stance with respect to their social and economic circumstances.” With the project completed, however, she lamented that the collection of oral histories consisted primarily of sentimental and nostalgic memories that “ultimately go nowhere.” Rather than put “individual memories into social context,” the senior citizens she worked with sought to communicate an individual sense of survival. The project failed to build relationships with established community organizations that would allow for it to continue after the funding and the organizers’ enthusiasm had run out. Even with her recommendation that projects be more grounded in the communities within which they worked, Shopes forthrightly concluded, “I am surer of the problems than the way to solve them.”⁶⁷ Her frustration may have been born more from the structural

⁶⁵ Shopes, “Community Oral History,” 105.

⁶⁶ Tchen and Ševčenko, 86; John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Homeland Insecurities,” *Foreseeable Futures* 5, Imagining America position paper, 6.

⁶⁷ Shopes, “Oral History and Community Involvement,” 249-250, 252-253, 260.

difficulty of building social movements in the communities that she worked with rather than from the methodological limitations of oral history.

Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenweig also contended that people's history projects, drawing on "pluralist and populist" notions of American history, had avoided difficult historical questions and needed to "sharpen their modes of historical analysis." They did not give up on people's history but argued that collaborations needed to be deeper and projects should make a greater effort to facilitate the "diffusion of skills of writing history." Rather than seeing critical perspective emerging out of community dialogue, as Freire and Horton had called for, Benson, Brier, and Rosenweig identified a need to merge "a nonhierarchical, democratic, and community-based historical practice" with a "theoretical understanding of class, racial, and sexual oppression." However, other than stating that this merger required the "energy and vision" of the organizers of people's history projects, they offered no clear guidance on how the synthesis between democratic practice and critical perspectives might take place.⁶⁸

While Shopes, Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig were clearly sympathetic to people's history, other scholars embraced an explicitly hostile critique that falsely characterized the approach as "facile democratization" and "complacent populism."⁶⁹ Rather than understanding the significance of seeing narrators as historians who had interpretive authority, the growing critique of people's history viewed it as merely seeking to encourage oppressed groups to "speak for themselves" in an effort to obtain history "pure . . . directly from people without the intervening ideology" of professional historians.⁷⁰

In their articles published in 1991 in the feminist collection of essays, *Women's Words*, Judith Stacey and Daphne Patai advanced the pessimistic critique further and argued that nontraditional approaches that embraced empathy, mutuality, and collaboration in research were fraught with an even greater risk of producing exploitation than traditional, hierarchical research models that were "positivist" and "impersonal." Judith Stacey questioned whether "the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation." By delving into challenging and potentially explosive topics related to gender and sexuality, the researcher, who had the power to leave when the project was over, intruded upon and unduly threatened the system of relationships that were integral to a community's survival. The embrace of mutuality functioned as a disguise that would ultimately lead to treachery and betrayal when the researcher got what she wanted and left. Stacey continued, "And the greater the

⁶⁸ Benson, Brier, and Rosenweig, xxii-xxiii.

⁶⁹ Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," 56.

⁷⁰ Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," 56; Grele, "Oral History as Evidence," in the *History of Oral History*, 45.

intimacy—the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship—the greater is the danger.”⁷¹ Patai also argued that promoting emotional intimacy and a sense of friendship or “spurious identification” in an interview was a form of manipulation that was even more troublesome when interviewing “down” (that is, interviewing less powerful groups). In addition to personal betrayals resulting from insincere promises of friendship, researchers also blundered when they implicitly or explicitly offered a false “expectation of positive intervention” to assist the informants in their daily struggles. These promises, she argued, were frequently unkept and further led to feelings of betrayal and injury. She rejected the notion of using oral history as a consciousness-raising tool, and she represented the process as one where researchers “turn interviews with other women into opportunities for imposing our own politically correct analysis.” For her, this was a form of “savage social therapy” that required “an arrogance incompatible with genuine respect for others.”⁷² Patai’s extreme framing of the narrator as a victim of ideologically driven feminists left her unable to acknowledge that the narrator could reflect on her own narrative, examine it dialogically in relationship to others, and come to her own new understandings through that process. Stacey and Patai’s critical framing of community-based research was paralyzing and offered no possibility that these kinds of projects could have any value.

Patai and Stacey appropriated a concern about exploitation in research that had long been addressed by popular educators and scholars interested in participatory research. Patai and Stacey, however, turned the critique on its head and argued that participatory research was more dangerous than traditional research. In the 1960s and 1970s both Paulo Freire and Helen Lewis critiqued as exploitative the work of academic experts who were only interested in studying communities for their own scholarly purposes and not interested in working with these communities to address the communities’ needs and ends. In the early 1980s the British Popular Memory group further articulated this critique as they specifically addressed the dynamics of power in “bottom-up” oral history. They worried that research that did not address the needs of a community and that was not carried out in an equal alliance with that community threatened to deepen “social divisions which are also relations of power and inequality.” Research not rooted in communities risked being exploitative because the returns for the academic would be “grossly unequal” in contrast to the lack of any return to the community.⁷³ These analyses of research exploitation, unlike Patai

⁷¹ Judith Stacey, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?,” in *Women’s Words*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113-114.

⁷² Daphne Patai, “U.S. Academics and Third World Women,” in *Women’s Words*, 137, 142, 144-45, 148.

⁷³ Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed, 52.

and Stacey's, buttressed the call to fully include communities in interpreting their past just as the people's history movement had sought to do.

Linda Shopes and Karen Olson, who were very forthright and critical of their own community-based work, pushed back against Stacey and Patai's despairing outlook in an essay they coauthored that also appeared in *Women's Words*. While they did not dismiss all concerns about exploitation in research, they argued that the threat had been exaggerated: "In our own sensitivities to inequality, we indulge ourselves a bit and perhaps overestimate our own privilege, even our own importance, in the eyes of the people we interview. Most in fact, seem not especially overwhelmed, intimidated, or impressed with us at all."⁷⁴ Given the constellation of forces that threatened communities, academics were relatively inconsequential.

While Olson and Shopes put the power of the interviewer into perspective, Michael Frisch and Alessandro Portelli highlighted the agency of the narrator within the interview process itself. Together they helped move the field of oral history beyond the anxiety that research exploitation was impossible to escape. Frisch argued that the process of oral history inherently produced "a shared authority." Emphasizing the distinction between "sharing authority" and "a shared authority," Frisch argued, "'Sharing Authority' suggests this is something we do—that in some important sense 'we' have the authority, and that we need or ought to share it." He countered, "We don't have the authority to give away, really, to the extent we might assume." In contrast, "a shared authority" recognizes that "the interpretive and meaning making process is shared by definition—it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview."⁷⁵ Narrators were neither vessels to be manipulated nor sources simply to be mined—a fact that had been recognized by the Lynds, the Massachusetts History Workshop, and the Brass Valley project.

Portelli, for his part, contended that the power differential between the researcher and researched was not something we should turn away from, as Stacey and Patai suggested. Rather, this inequality could lead to an uncomfortable and painful critical self-awareness on both sides that was a necessary part of building solidarity. For Portelli, fieldwork was "an experiment in equality." "There is no need," he argued, "to stoop to propaganda in order to use the fact itself of the interview as an opportunity to stimulate others, as well as ourselves, to a higher degree of self-scrutiny and self-awareness; to help them grow more aware of the relevance and meaning of their culture and knowledge; and to raise the question of the senselessness and injustice of the inequality between them and us." Indeed, consciousness raising was not a "savage" top-down affair;

⁷⁴ Karen Olson and Linda Shopes, "Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges," in *Women's Words*, 196.

⁷⁵ Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, xx, xxii; Michael Frisch, "From *A Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen, and Back," in *Letting Go?*, 127.

narrators were not victims but active historical agents who could consider questions of inequality, conceive of new strategies, mobilize new movements, and transform the world around them.⁷⁶ Frisch and Portelli brought the field back from paralysis to movement once again.

Groundswell

When I came down to Cleveland's Public Square in 1996 to begin my oral history project with those experiencing homelessness, I did so at a moment when people's history was at a nadir; funding had dried up and enthusiasm had waned. Even though Frisch and Portelli had helpfully reenvisioned the interview as a radical, democratic space, both were vague on how that dialogical space could inform a collective transformative process. Specifically, they focused on the dynamic between the oral historian and narrator and did not address how oral histories might mobilize communities outside of the interview process itself. Those I interviewed—people who faced daily degradations checking in and out of shelters, police harassment on the street, and ongoing exploitation in their work as day laborers—had a palpable sense that something in their world needed to change. I came with no answers and brought no promises. I brought audio and video recorders and a question: How had the phenomenon of homelessness become so entrenched in Cleveland, Ohio? The object of inquiry was not the lives of the people I interviewed but the structures of power and oppression that shaped their lives.

Between 1999 and 2004 I interviewed over one hundred narrators and facilitated dozens of workshops with people experiencing homelessness. Initially I conducted the oral histories on Public Square; then, over time, I did interviews in encampments, in shelters, and eventually live, on-air over the radio. The interviews, in which people drew on their personal experience to present their analysis of structural changes in housing and job markets and the welfare and criminal justice systems, were starting points for further group dialogue. I organized workshops in shelters and meal sites where project participants watched and listened to each other's interviews and identified shared "generative themes" that ran through the interviews. Organizing these dialogues required identifying points and times in which narrators gathered; negotiating access to rooms where we could host workshops; producing and distributing flyers announcing the gatherings; obtaining necessary supplies for the meetings; supplying the television, the VCR, the recorders, and the recordings; crafting an agenda; and facilitating discussion at the meetings. While authority was inherently shared within the frame of the interview as well as the workshops, my work as a popular educator entailed doing the background work that enabled

⁷⁶ Portelli, 44.

those dialogic spaces to exist in the first place. The willingness to do that work was an important part of what I had to offer.

The expressed needs and desires of the narrators shaped the focus of the interviews, as well as the products that emerged from the overall project. The iterative process of conducting interviews, reflecting on those interviews in workshops, and then going back to do new interviews led to numerous shifts in the project's direction and objectives. Early on, the interviews were broad and relatively unfocused, covering a wide range of significant issues. But as the narrators began to discuss the interviews, they focused on stories about their working lives, experiences with the shelters, and difficulties they had sustaining their encampments outside of the shelters. They did not shy away from interpretive disagreements, nor did they ever reach a single consensus on what the most important issues were. But through discussion, clusters of narrators began to mobilize around aspects of their shared experience. Some organized to prevent the demolition of encampments, and they protested police campaigns to "clean the streets" and arrest people for the act of sleeping on the sidewalk. Others sought to improve the horrific conditions within the shelters and confront the organizations responsible for those circumstances. Still others focused their attention on the abuses they faced in their working lives while employed by day-labor agencies. In response to these mobilizations, I was able to draw on the interviews to quickly design low-budget end products. The multiplicity of end products included edited videos, flyers and pamphlets, petitions, press releases, an ongoing weekly radio show, organized protests and public hearings, and reports for public officials. Project participants formed the Day Laborers' Organizing Committee and established a Community Hiring Hall, both of which effectively addressed issues of exploitation the narrators faced in their working lives. Furthermore, their actions ended the city's practice of arresting people on the street and prompted the Salvation Army's removal from operating the city's emergency shelters. As a result, conditions within the shelters significantly improved.

I began this project in 1996, and then at my first Oral History Association (OHA) conference in 1998, I discovered a community of committed people who were also very interested in the possibility that oral history could be an effective tool to strengthen movements for social change. These people, like myself, lacked funding and were working in marginalized communities that had largely been ignored by the earlier NEH-funded people's history projects, which predominately focused on industrial workers and their communities. For example, Wendy Rickard led a collaborative oral history project with sex workers; Alicia Rouverol organized an oral history and performance project with people experiencing incarceration; Alisa del Tufo used oral history in her work with survivors of domestic violence; Terry Easton focused on day laborers in Atlanta; Ellen Griffith Spears worked with activists confronting environmental racism; Horacio

Roque Ramírez orchestrated a project with queer Latinos in San Francisco; and Amy Starecheski had an ongoing project with squatters in New York City. Each of these projects sought to do more than document the communities under siege; they sought to further empower them.

This bubbling of activity led to the formation of a threaded discussion at the 2009 OHA annual meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, entitled “Oral History as Activism and Social Justice.” Participants in the concluding discussion agreed to form the OHA affinity group Oral Historians for Social Justice, and in 2011 a group of fifteen activist oral historians brought together by Sarah Loose and Alisa del Tufo formed an independent collective, Groundswell: Oral History for Social Change. The group coalesced around the idea that “oral history can be a source of power, knowledge and strength” as communities engage in their “struggles for justice.” “Oral history provides a unique space for those most impacted by injustice to speak and be heard in our own voices.”⁷⁷ Through speaking and hearing, people experiencing oppression and exploitation might gain a better understanding of how their subjective personal experience related to others and how their lives were shaped by structures of power. Personal narratives could function as a starting point for social change, just as Myles Horton had argued over eighty years earlier.

We live amidst a new groundswell of radical oral history practice. While this practice needs to be rooted in the needs, passions, and desires of communities today, it would be a mistake to discount the work of those who have come before us. The prevailing way we tell the history of oral history does just that. It ignores the important contributions of the field of popular education on radical oral history practice, and it dismisses as naive the work that stemmed from the people’s history moment. Rather, we should learn what we can and draw on the effective practices from that past as they resonate in the communities we work with in the present. People in communities under siege can reflect upon and interpret their own experiences, envision themselves as historical actors, and transform the world around them. And we, as radical oral historians, can accompany them along the way.

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⁷⁷ Groundswell: Oral History for Social Change, “About,” accessed June 11, 2015, <http://www.oralhistoryforsocialchange.org/about/>.