Handbook of Oral History

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Women's Oral History: Is It So Special?

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Is women's oral history a distinct genre, clearly differentiated from other forms of oral history? Certainly at its origin we believed that to be the case, as reflected in 1977 in one of the first methodological articles on women's oral history published in the United States. Some thirteen years later, as more literature was published and women's studies had taken new turns, Susan Geiger challenged this somewhat naïve and seemingly essentialist feminist assumption, asking, "What is so feminist about doing women's oral history?" In the following dozen years, writings in women's oral history proliferated even further, and the practice today has become more highly nuanced and complex, compelling us to examine more closely the very notion of women's oral history—or feminist oral history—as a distinct genre. What kind of clues can be found in the nature of the work usually referred to as women's oral history? Is it a question of content, of who is the narrator, the interviewer? Is the methodology really distinct, or is it more a matter of the perspective that marks the analysis of interviews and their presentation and use? The questions themselves have changed over time, and so, too, have the answers.

Charting the history of these developments in the U.S. reveals both continuity and change in methodologies: continuity in interviewing techniques and in commitment to feminist ethics,
but change in the modes of analysis of both the interview process
and its resulting narrative. It also points to the ways in which
women practitioners imbued with a feminist sensibility have
influenced the general field of oral history and, in turn, have been
influenced by the writings of several leading male practitioners.
Perhaps it is time to question if women's oral history is really so
special—assuming that it ever was—and to talk instead about
the feminist practice of oral history, recognizing that men and
women alike might share the sensibility that produces women's
oral history. By taking a historical approach to a discussion of
women's oral history and drawing on selected examples to high-
light issues, one can assess the various approaches taken in re-
sponse to recurring questions. Some of these have evolved into
current "best practices," and others have entered the pantheon of
choices from which an oral historian can draw.

The Early Years

Although people came to women's oral history from different
points, the origin of what might be called the U.S. women's oral
history movement might be traced to the founding conference of
the National Women's Studies Association in January 1977. Some
ten years after the founding of the Oral History Association,
which had its base in academe, grassroots feminist activists and
scholars initiated an informal network of feminist oral historians.
While many women had been gathering oral histories for several
years as part of their involvement in community-based feminist
organizations, others had been using oral history as a pedagogi-
cal tool in the burgeoning women's history and women's studies
movements. Later in 1977, these practitioners and the voices of
the women they were helping to bring forth were made more vis-
ible and public with the launching of the first special issue on
women's oral history of Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies. Even
at this early stage, the number of oral history projects listed
in the resource section of that issue was staggering.

In the ensuing twenty-five years, two more special issues
of Frontiers focused on women's oral history, and an anthol-
ogy of original essays on the topic appeared. The proliferation of
English-language articles on women's oral history testified to
the expansion of the dialogue on feminist research methodology,
and their substance marked the increasingly sophisticated ques-
tions raised by practitioners, some of which went to the heart of
the question about genre.

What characterized the work in women's oral history from
the beginning was the effort to bring forth women's voices—an
effort shared by the new social historians who were seeking to
make visible and give voice to those who had been rendered his-
torically invisible and voiceless. At that stage of the enterprise,
women historians were mainly committed to what in the 1960s
and 1970s they characterized as "recovery." Their rhetoric, and
indeed practice, was rooted in the women's liberation move-
ment, on the one hand, and in the new social history movement,
on the other.

In contrast to the first generation of mainly academic histori-
arians and the archivists who ran oral history collections programs
in universities, many of the early women oral historians were
feminist advocates. And although much of the current discourse
was yet to be adopted, there is no doubt that they were oper-
ating on the assumption that women's experiences and, conse-
quently, their narratives, were gendered. As a result, the oral
histories conducted by this first generation of feminist practi-
tioners tended to focus on women's everyday lives, with par-
cular emphasis on ordinary women, especially from the working
class and communities of color. There was a near, though un-
spoken, consensus that this meant asking women about certain
aspects of sexuality, reproduction, and family relationships. The
commitment to pursuing such intimate subjects, based on the
belief that the "personal is political," often placed feminist oral
historians squarely in conflict with other women practitioners
who had been conducting interviews with elite women and be-
lieved that they couldn't possibly ask the women they inter-
viewed these kinds of personal questions. Their reluctance
revealed the vast differences in perspective on both class and
gender between themselves and the new feminist generation of
women oral historians.

Clearly, even in its earliest formulations in the 1970s, women's
oral history encompassed more than merely interviewing
that the role of the "outsider" was often a critical necessity. There was even a recognition that the outsider sometimes was able to do a better interview than an insider—or at least explore certain aspects of identity and experience better than the insider. In those days of binary distinctions, however, attention had not yet been called to the complexity of positionality.

Going against the Grain: Focusing on Orality/Aurality

While the first generation of oral historians, men and women alike, focused on creating text/transcriptions, many of the second generation focused more on voice, recognizing that the oral history was "a unique 'document,' one which above all is oral/aural"—a theme to which we will return. The politics of women's oral history, with its rhetoric of giving voice to the voiceless, coupled with limited resources and a commitment to advocacy and empowerment, led many second-generation practitioners to develop simple, alternative means of processing interviews. While anthropologists such as Dennis Tedlock were recommending creative transcription as early as 1972, keeping the focus on aurality often meant creating simple means of easily locating material on the sound recording. Passages might then be used in audio and audiovisual presentations, such as the tape-slide shows on woman's suffrage and on shipyard workers, and even in performances, such as the theatrical community presentations later introduced by women in Montana and Idaho. None of this is to say that women's oral history was not used as a documentary source in scholarly articles and books, or that it was never transcribed. In fact, in addition to their use as documentary sources, an increasing number of edited oral histories were being published.

Inspired, empowered, and flush with the new knowledge imparted by the voices of formerly unknown and unrecognized women, some feminist oral historians touted the oral history narratives as a reflection of women's experience. Indeed, they uncovered many secret aspects of women's lives: how women obtained abortions or how they practiced self-abortion; their relationships with other women and with the members of their families; ways that they were crushed by patriarchy, or alternatively, subverted it. Also, they tended to accept everything they heard as a transparent view of reality. In other words, during this age of recovery, feminist oral historians were not yet ready to problematize the oral history narrative. They focused more on content than on form, and even as they acknowledged the meaning imparted by subtle communication patterns and performance, they were not yet prepared to dig deeper.

The Second Decade—The Next Step(s)?

By 1983, some six years after the launching of the first systematic discussion of women's oral history in Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies, another special issue appeared with a promise that the second decade would lead to what Susan Armitage called "the next step." As she pointed out, the recovery/discovery stage had led to publications that emphasized the uniqueness of women's stories, and she urged moving "from the single story to the whole picture," with the full recognition that it was necessary to "be systematic and critical." As others would caution over the next decade, even as calls to be critical grew louder, Armitage counseled that caring and appreciativeness still served as guideposts. In other words, the hallmark emphasis on the relationship between interviewer and narrator remained primary. But Armitage pleaded for women's oral history to move beyond discovery, urging practitioners to "step back and ask questions about meaning, about comparability, about context." Failing that, she argued, the full potential of women's oral history would be unrealized. Other scholars of women's studies were likewise concerned about comparability, and several projects incorporated social science methods into their designs.

Many of the articles in this second collection of U.S. women's oral history work revealed a growing emphasis on women's subculture, paralleling to a great extent the kind of analysis in which earlier women historians had engaged in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In other words, it was uncovering another layer of women's reality, marking a shift from the individual and unique experience to the group experience. Nevertheless, few of the articles in the volume heralding the next step,
the second decade, really challenged the notion of the transparency of the account. New projects and new and creative uses of oral history were documented, most of these pointing to the continued adherence to the ethics and advocacy of women’s oral history promoted earlier.

Perhaps the most significant feature of this 1983 volume was the attention paid by Sherry Thomas, editor of a collection of farm women’s oral history interviews, to the question of orality, to the problems of rendering voice into text. Despite the title of her article—“Digging beneath the Surface: Oral History Techniques”—which suggests something different, Thomas did not really advocate any new interviewing methods or techniques. Rather, she focused on the difficulty of rendering voice into print. She was practically the first among women oral historians to discuss the problem in any depth, pointing out how “the material can absolutely lie, depending on the sentence structure and the spelling of the words . . . even if every word is exact.” Although as she edited the farm women’s interview transcripts—Thomas removed her own questions and did quite a bit of cutting and pasting to render a seamless, dramatic story—she remained cognizant of the meaning derived from orality. Ultimately, she depended on her sense of the person, her sense of “what they were trying to convey about their lives.” The fact that the women liked the final product confirmed her belief that she had rendered the material correctly. But we have to ask if that is enough. What exactly was the product? Isn’t it more like the “autobiography” that Alex Haley shaped of Malcolm X’s life? In other words, who assigned the meaning to the material, the narrator or the interviewer/editor? The question of assigning meaning, as we shall see, is one that began to dominate the field of women’s oral history as the end of the 1980s approached. But even in the earlier part of that decade, Thomas joined European practitioners such as Luisa Passerini in understanding the significance of silence.

Opening the Door: New Question, New Challenges

Just as questions about meaning were beginning to surface, rendering the oral history narrative a bit more opaque, the empowering potential of the oral history process also came into question. The validation that women seemed to experience in recounting their life stories, a validation referred to repeatedly by feminist interviewers and documented by quotes from their narrators, came under scrutiny. The packed and attentive audience at a 1988 Oral History Association roundtable titled “Appropriation or Empowerment: Oral History, Feminist Process, and Ethics” testified to the fact that the kinds of ethical questions about which feminists ruminated regularly had much broader resonance. Daphne Patai had tried several years earlier to concretize some of these concerns by surveying a range of oral historians, both men and women. Although feminist practitioners did not have a monopoly on ethics, the issues that they kept raising seemed to influence the larger oral history movement. For instance, although early versions of the Oral History Association’s Evaluation Guidelines addressed ethical considerations, their paramount concern was legal questions. Beginning with the 1989 review of the guidelines, the emphasis shifted considerably. Ultimately, a set of standards and principles were adopted that not only prescribed guidelines but also laid out a series of responsibilities. Most significantly, for the first time the relational and intersubjective nature of oral history received official recognition by the professional organization, a recognition that implicitly undermined the positivist practices long before abandoned by feminists.

It is no surprise that the inspiration for some of the changes in the standards and principles for the oral history profession, as well as some of the new terminology and concerns adopted by feminist oral historians, in particular, came from anthropology. After all, the life history interview, which feminist oral historians had largely adopted in the beginning of the recovery/discovery process, was a standard methodology in anthropology and qualitative sociology. Historians, however, had no professional guideposts of their own for women’s oral history. In their practice of oral history, they relied mainly on their commitments to “feminist process,” a guiding principle that remained relatively unchallenged by historians until well into the 1980s.

Shifting Sands

Where the first decade of women’s oral history had assumed unproblematically that “women’s oral history” was naturally
feminist, and that women’s experience, of course, was gendered, these terms and categories came under more critical scrutiny in the 1980s. Moreover, new language was developed that both challenged some of the early assumptions and gave a name to others. *Intersubjectivity* and *reflexivity* entered the lexicon, naming some of the processes that had been understood and often followed, but that had been rooted more in women’s liberation rhetoric and praxis than in anthropology. Coupled with these refinements and a logical outcome of their implications was a more highly nuanced understanding of positionality, moving away from the rather simplistic and oppositional insider/outside distinction.

One of the major developments that undermined some of the bedrock assumptions about women’s oral history was the problematizing of the category “woman.” Theoreticians such as Joan Scott challenged the unitary category “woman” and shifted the focus to gender. Although from the beginning feminist historians presupposed that women’s experiences were gendered, there was nevertheless a tendency to treat gender as primary, and even all encompassing. As a result, in most early women’s oral histories, even while acknowledging women’s multiple identities, the underlying premise of women’s unitary experience went unchallenged.

Indeed, the argument that there was something distinctly identified as women’s oral history stemmed from the principle of women’s unitary experience. In turn, this led to the implicit assumption that women’s oral history was a feminist enterprise and, like other feminist research, it was by, about, and for women. Toward the end of the second decade of women’s oral history, however, challenges arose against both this assumption and the formulaic definition of feminist research. Simultaneously, and largely as a result of the influence of post-structuralism, a very different lens was being used to analyze the oral history narrative, and the literature moved from characterizing the narrative as a transparent reproduction of real experience to discussing it as a more complex representation of that experience. As noted by the Personal Narratives Group at the close of the second decade of women’s oral history: “When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past ‘as it actually was,’ aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. . . . The truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them.”

The issue of interpretation had slowly transformed the use and presentation of women’s oral history. Grounded originally in the recovery/discovery process, feminist oral historians eagerly had grasped the new voices being heard through women’s oral narratives, voices that were often presented “raw,” justified by the paeans that they were letting women speak for themselves. By contrast, during the second decade, there emerged a call for and expectation that feminist oral historians would engage in interpretation and contextualization. Of course, with more attention paid to the creation of text, the fact was recognized that the printed version of an oral narrative was highly mediated, but the interpretation that had shaped the written form remained hidden from view.

**The Testimonio Tradition: Lessons from Latin America**

While many North American practitioners began to question the transparency of the “raw” narrative in which women were “speaking for themselves,” scholars of the Latin American *testimonio* genre were raising a different challenge. The oral narratives they produced there, though presented in the voice of an individual woman, such as the Guatemalan Indian civil rights organizer Rigoberta Menchú, were emblematic of a collectivity. In other words, another layer was added, making the narrative even more opaque. Not only did it have to be treated as a representation of reality rather than a transparent image, but also that representation had to be understood as standing for more than the depiction of the individual’s experience. This added layer challenged many of the assumptions inherent in life history, but instead of accepting the emblematic nature of the *testimonio*, some critics questioned the authenticity of the narrative because all the “facts” didn’t fit. Perhaps even more disturbing was the
way that the collective voice of the Third World testimonio often was erased as it was prepared for publication in the First World. The most dramatic example of this erasure is found in the English version of the title of Rigoberta Menchú's book: *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. As Claudia Salazar notes in her analysis of Menchú's testimony, the English title's individualistic proclamation completely contradicts the reference to the collectivity embodied in the original Spanish-language title: *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así Me Nació La Conciencia* (My Name Is Rigoberta Menchú and This Is How My Consciousness Was Born).²⁸

*Testimonio* literature contributed to the ongoing evaluation of feminist oral history practice by calling attention to the collective voice in the narrative, particularly if it was an oral history of an activist. It also raised another challenge to the presentation of the "raw" narrative—the tendency to "let them speak for themselves"—without any interpretive or contextual analysis.

**The Third Decade**

Despite the many challenges to earlier thinking and the provocative new—and sometimes troubling—approaches that were inspired by theoretical shifts in a host of disciplines, not until the approach of the next decade did practice catch up with theory in women's oral history. Then there was an explosion of provocative publications that dramatically changed the practice of oral history in general and women's oral history in particular.

Where earlier there was an implicit assumption that feminism was the defining feature and guiding light of what had come to be known as women's oral history, Geiger, a longtime commentator on life history, called for a more explicit and precise formulation. Noting that "there is nothing inherently feminist . . . about women's oral histories or women doing women's oral histories," she posited four objectives that determined whether or not women's oral histories were indeed feminist: "They presuppose gender as a (though not the only) central analytical concept; they generate their problematic from the study of women as embodying and creating historically and situationally specific economic, social, cultural, national and racial/ethnic realities; they serve as a corrective for androcentric notions and assumptions about what is 'normal' by establishing and contributing to a new knowledge base for understanding women's lives and the gendered elements of the broader social world; they accept women's own interpretations of their identities, their experiences, and social worlds as containing and reflecting important truths."²⁹

In addition to clearly articulating what had, in fact, been the implicit feminist objectives of women's oral history from its inception, Geiger, like Michael Frisch, called attention to the question of interpretive authority. As she pointed out, the issue of authority is grounded in "the relationship between the researcher and the living 'source.'"³⁰ Even as she called for accepting women's own interpretations of their identities, experiences, and social worlds, Geiger did not abdicate the scholar's responsibility of interpretation. Rather, she believed that feminist oral history methodology reflects and values the practice of the researcher and the narrator—whom she designated as the oral historian³¹—alike, and that "if she is careful, the feminist historian's own interpretive product will encompass radical, respectful, newly accessible truths, and realities about women's lives."³²

Geiger made it clear, however, that this does not necessarily mean that the researcher will have the same interpretation as the "living sources." Rather, the feminist practitioner cannot unwittingly or unwittingly violate the words of the individuals that have become the "subject matter." In other words, despite her attempt to make explicit the feminist determinants of women's oral history, Geiger ultimately relied on the same subjective standards that have been embodied in the feminist ethic governing women's oral history from its inception. It goes beyond the "do no harm" advice proffered in the earliest standards of the oral history field and comes closer to the new thinking reflected in the language of the current Oral History Association *Evaluation Guidelines* that references the letter and *spirit* of the narrator's agreement.

In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, co-editor Daphne Patai and I struggled with the question of what constitutes women's or feminist oral history. We rejected the "three little words"—by, for, and about women—and viewed this
requirement as a reflection of both feminist arrogance and essentialism. It had become increasingly clear that women did not necessarily or exclusively use what might be characterized as feminist methodologies in their work, and furthermore, that they might not necessarily be studying only women, but rather might be interviewing men and women. Moreover, it had also become obvious that some men, particularly those engaged in popular history, were also employing what had come to be referred to as feminist methods, that is, they were attentive to the relationship between narrator and researcher, questioned interpretive authority, and were advocates for social change and challenging the gender system.

As a result, Patai and I chose to characterize what previously had been referred to as women’s oral history as “the feminist practice of oral history.” As it turned out, all the contributors to *Women’s Words* were women, but the points had been made that women did not hold an exclusive franchise to the practice—in other words, just being a woman was not sufficient—and that a gendered analysis might also reflect feminist practice, even if the focus was not exclusively on women. Indeed, only one of the requisite “three little words” continued to have resonance: work for women. At a minimum, it was expected to serve as an alternative to the androcentric body of literature. Despite the other challenges to the defining characteristics of feminist research, and hence what had been labeled women’s oral history, the adherence to advocacy remained one of its hallmarks.

The Quest for Meaning

The turn to the analysis of gender, in contrast merely to a focus on and assumption of the unitary category “woman,” was part of a larger theoretical shift that influenced all disciplines, particularly those that dealt with narrative. The impact of this shift is reflected in many of the essays published in *Women’s Words*. Post-structuralist influence promoted problematizing of both the oral history interview itself and the sense that was made of the narrative. On the one hand, as alluded to earlier, it meant a more critical and complex analysis of the relationships of the researcher and the narrator, demanding, among other things, attention to all the implications and complexity of the positionality(ies) of the interviewer. On the other hand, this in turn led to more meaningful discussions of reflexivity, that is, the critical analysis of the researcher’s positionabilities, expectations, and subjectivities and how these factors affected the interview process.

Problematizing the interview process itself, including the complex relationship between the interviewer and narrator, and addressing questions about performance, language, and memory gained prominence in the work of all oral historians, with feminist practitioners adding gender to the mix. Earlier recognition that oral histories revealed only a partial truth about a life was extended to an understanding that there were multiple truths, multiple stories that unfold, not only among people involved in the same events and communities, but even for one narrator. Alessandro Portelli’s work probably has had the most far-reaching impact in oral history circles, in general, perhaps because it is also the most engaging and accessible. The work of Portelli and others led to deeper discussions of memory. Unlike the much earlier questions about the accuracy of memory, subsequent questions focused on the social construction of memory.

Gender, Memory, and Speech

If men’s and women’s lived experiences are gendered, then it is only logical to assume that the way they remember their experiences and narrate them is also gendered. Nevertheless, as Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson discovered, this idea, although noted early on in memory studies, remained long unexamined among oral historians. Recent studies of women in the Western world have certainly pointed to the different emphases on how women reconstruct and communicate their memories. For example, Richard Ely and Allyssa McCabe’s study of the narratives of white North American working- and middle-class children and adults found that girls and women used more reported speech and dialogue than boys and men. As the researchers explained, when telling stories, females were more likely than males to “include what someone once said.” Likewise, Caroline Daley’s analysis of the oral histories of four sets of brothers and sisters from a small New
Zealand town revealed how they “constructed themselves and their histories within a dominant gendered ideology,” a fact reflected both in the focus and emphasis of their stories/memories and in how these were communicated. The women, not unexpectedly, talked about “home and family, religion and community.” By contrast, Daley noted, the men “were more forthcoming when asked about crime and disorder, alcohol and fighting” than about domestic life or familial relationship. Their style of telling differed, too: “The men, who were much more likely to talk in long bursts, saw themselves as the natural storytellers of the community, and tended to place themselves as the heroes of the tale.” Daley concluded that “whether these women were home-loving or not, whether the men personally were involved in any bravado or not, this is the way they present their past. In this way memories and self-perceptions, and thus oral history, has a gendered form.” Moreover, in relating incidents from their early childhoods and family life, the siblings’ stories diverged so widely that it was almost as if they did not live in the same family. While a brother in a sibling pair presented an authoritative account of their father’s bookmaking activities, his sister was very tentative; she “only has a feeling” that her father participated in bookmaking. While it is obvious that gender-specific experiences led to gender-specific reporting, Daley reminded us that, at another level, the differences are also part of a gendered ideology.39

Just as current theories challenge the early work in women’s oral history that suggested an “essential” woman, feminist historians must also be careful not to essentialize gendered memory in exploring the complex interplay of experience, language, and discourse. Class and ethnicity must certainly be brought into the equation. Also, as Adriana Piscitelli noted, although “gender influences the themes, structure, shape, and expressive styles that form life narratives,” how gender impacts the transmission of memory is also determined by age (generation). Like Daley’s New Zealand research discussed above, Piscitelli’s work among three generations of Brazilians revealed that in the narratives of older Brazilian women, in contrast to those of the men of their age group, family life was the dominant theme. By contrast, the next generation of women, those who joined the professional world, no longer used kinship group memberships as a fundamental reference point. Nevertheless, they were still more inclined than their male peers to organize their life stories around affective life.40 It is not only generational age differences that reveal different modes of remembering and telling, but also the age at which experiences occurred. In analyzing her oral histories of African American professional women, sociolinguist Gwen Etter-Lewis noted that the women used black English to recount their childhood experiences, while they used highly nuanced standard English in recounting their professional lives.41

Some writers, heavily influenced by the post-structuralist turn, with its focus on the construction of meaning through language, began to subject the text produced from interviews to narrative analysis. An example of this approach is Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet’s narrative analysis of the text derived from the life histories of two working-class French women. Examining the text for key phrases and patterns, she borrowed from literature to construct three narrative models: the epic, Romanesque, and picaresque. Beyond that, she delineated myths that were at play in the narratives. While Chanfrault-Duchet’s emphasis on the “socio-symbolic” content of the two women’s narratives yielded interesting typologies, it ultimately relied on an overdetermination of “ideological blueprints,” which she assumed the women had internalized.42

Whatever Happened to Agency?

The ideological blueprints to which Chanfrault-Duchet referred reflected the growing influence of post-structuralism among feminist scholars and the shift in emphasis from experience to discourse. The earlier argument by Scott against using “woman” as a unitary category certainly challenged the near essentialist view of earlier work in women’s oral history and promoted more nuanced and complicated work. Beyond that, however, as noted by Penny Summerfield, Scott’s insistence that gender “is constantly constructed and reconstructed by powerful sources which define women and men and control the parameters of possibility in their lives” deeply upset the world of women’s history. Summerfield claimed, “It sounded like a recipe
for abandoning the focus on women, individually and collectively, which was so central to the ‘recovery’ of women from and for history in the 1970s. It appeared to recommend the study of discourses about women, produced by powerful institutions, rather than women’s words and women’s actions themselves.43

While the ensuing debates over experience, agency, and the role of discourse separated many women historians into two camps, Summerfield and others argued against the false dichotomy of experience and discourse. Instead, they subscribed to Judith Butler’s argument that “construction . . . is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible.”44 Following this line, Summerfield’s oral history of British women’s wartime experience relied heavily on discourse analysis. Even though wartime might very well produce a unified, dominant discourse, Summerfield observed that gender nevertheless differentiated the discourse, that “the war effort, national unity, and post-war reconstruction meant different things for men and women, as well as those of different social class and colonial status.” She argued that the personal narratives were both “products of a relationship between discourse and subjectivity” and products of the relationship “between subjects and their audiences . . . and the performance models available to them.” She used this framework to explore how the narrators understood and explained their wartime subjectivities and the reconstruction of their wartime lives. Based on their narrative forms, Summerfield categorized the women as “heroics” or “stoics” and illustrated how they drew on different wartime discourses of femininity.45

Other feminist oral historians, such as Canadian Joan Sangster, were more critical of post-structuralist writings but nevertheless sought to draw on insights derived from them. Sangster noted that she is attentive not only to the role of “past and current political ideology” in constructing historical memory, but also to the “ingredients of the narrative form, such as expression, intonation, and metaphors.” Nevertheless, she expressed grave concern about the latter:

While an emphasis on language and narrative form has enhanced our understanding of oral history, I worry about the dangers of emphasising form over context, of stressing deconstruction of individual narratives over analysis of social patterns. . . . Nor do we want to totally abandon the concept of experience, moving towards a notion of a de-politicised and “unknowable” past. We do not want to return to a history which either obscures power relationships or marginalises women’s voices. Without a firm grounding of oral narratives in their material and social context, and a probing analysis of the relation between the two, insights on narrative form and on representation may remain unconnected to any useful critique of oppression.46

Seeking to situate post-structuralist insights in a feminist materialist context, Sangster analyzed the strike stories of five Canadian women. She made sense of the very different versions of their strike experiences—versions that diverged considerably from the written accounts of labor militancy—by examining not only “the power relations of age, gender, ethnicity, and class,” but also “the dominant gender ideals of the time.” Her analysis enabled Sangster to detect “discernible patterns” in the strikers’ very diverse stories. The women remained real live actors whose stories reflected their lived experiences, as influenced by gender, class, family relations, and political ideology.47

Problematising Meaning

Attempts such as Sangster’s to draw on the insights of post-structuralism while retaining a solid grounding in lived experiences have proliferated, resulting in different kinds of analyses. The oral history process and resulting oral narratives have been problematized in a host of ways, leading both to more careful scrutiny of how language is used and how public discourse shapes the story. More consideration is also being given to the way that the present shapes the telling. All of these new directions have motivated some feminist oral historians of the “first generation” to return to their earlier work and reexamine their assumptions and conclusions.

Emily Honig, for example, in the mid-1990s, returned to her 1977–1978 interviews with Chicana garment workers who had participated in a two-year strike against Farah Manufacturing
Company in El Paso, Texas. At the time of the interviews, the women were still consumed by the 1972–1974 strike and still very involved with the union. Looking back with a more critical eye and with an ear attuned to the implications of the particular interview moment, Honig wondered if the language of social justice so prevalent during and immediately after the strike led the women to invoke stories of working-class heroism within family members and if accounts of their work life at Farah before the strike were more indicative of union discourse than of their lived experiences. Was the strong feeling of community that they attributed to the barrio another product of the poststrike “narrative moment”? And what sense could one make of the stories of rebellious childhood incidents, particularly since the women tended to characterize themselves as timid and passive in the past, in contrast to their self-confident poststrike present. Honig concluded that the “women are not inventing nonexistent past experiences, but they are telling them with the language, perceptions and mandates of the present.” Moreover, paying greater attention to the intersubjectivity of narrator and interviewer, Honig also questioned if the women’s claims of the transformative impact of the strike might have been a response to the interviewers who came to hear about their strike experience. Despite her questioning, Honig claimed, “This does not mean that oral history should be devalued or rejected. Rather, it should be problematized as one of many possible tellings of a woman’s life story and not the source of her single ‘true’ experience.”

The importance of the “narrative moment” in making sense of oral history interviews was revealed to me with even more clarity in my own reexamination of oral histories of Palestinian women’s movement activists. Tracking the changes in the narratives that I recorded in repeated interviews with the same women in 1989–1994, I initially pointed to an evolving feminist consciousness among women activists, contextualizing these in the shifting rhetoric on women in the Palestinian movement as a whole. However, in a study of the “memory of politics and the politics of memory,” in which I drew on both my own interviews and those done by someone else in the early 1980s with some of the same women, I discovered that the discourse of 1991 reflected the very same consciousness that some of the women had revealed almost ten years earlier. Drawing on the insights of Ted Swedenburg’s analysis of his interviews on the 1936–1939 revolt, I detected the same varying influence of the political environments, which alternated between pluralism and conformism. During the height of the 1987–1993 intifada, the pressure for political conformism muted expressions of feminist consciousness, whereas both before the intifada and toward its end political pluralism had prevailed, enabling the women’s movement to diverge from the discourse of national unity and more openly display a feminist consciousness.

Yet another model of the way that gender, memory, intersubjectivity, and political ideology can be problematized in women’s oral history is provided by Daniel James in his book on the life of Argentinian political activist María Roldán. James first presented Doña María’s “voice” through the transcript and then “read” her narrative. Because the central events and experiences of Roldán’s life were presented primarily in class terms, gender does not seem a promising theme. Yet, as James proceeded with his “reading” of the text, which is almost a “prototypical Peronist woman’s life script,” he unpacked other images, roles, and themes that gave her story a different “twist.” Rather than merely accepting the emblematic traditional, feminine model of Evita Perón, heroine for Peronistas such as Doña María, James worked at uncovering counter-discourses. Ultimately, he did not present a new, feminist “life script,” but rather saw Doña María’s story as being “told out on the borderlands” with all its “unresolved contradictions, silences, erasures and conflicting themes.”

The Fourth Decade

Launching the fourth decade of women’s oral history—or the feminist practice of oral history—two special issues of Frontiers: Journal of Women Studies appeared in 1998. As indicated by the titles of the special issues, the first highlighted varieties of women’s oral history, and the second, problems and perplexities in women’s oral history. That second issue opened with a reflective discussion between Armitage and me, two of the first generation of women oral historians, that acknowledged the new
directions in women's oral history but also expressed a certain level of uneasiness. While I traced my growing appreciation of the importance of complex power relations and the difficulties of representation, Armitage expressed her concerns that "undue emphasis on complexity encourages interviewer self-absorption at the cost of enthusiasm and interest"—a concern raised a decade earlier in *Women's Words*. Undoubtedly, this matter stemmed from the initial infatuation with post-structuralism and the erasure of experience in favor of disembodied textual analysis. However, as the third decade progressed, as evidenced by some of the works discussed above, feminist scholars were achieving a balance between the insights offered by post-structuralism and a respect for "lived experience." Indeed, the articles in the 1998 special issues of *Frontiers* on women's oral history, appearing some twenty-one years after the first, groundbreaking one, reflected both the more problematized approach to the narratives and the more naive presentation of recovery narratives.

**Re/Current Tensions/Contradictions**

The ongoing search for meaning in/derived from oral narratives certainly has been enhanced by the new analytical directions discussed earlier. However, while these might increase the understanding of women's lives, they too often grant the historian/interpreter a new hegemonic role. In other words, they seem to be counter to the feminist commitment to advocacy and ethics.

While historians can certainly maintain feminist ethical standards in the interview process, simultaneously adopting a critical stance of self-reflexivity and sensitivity to and appreciation of the narrator, the next stage of the oral history process presents a greater challenge. What role does/should the narrator have in the search for meaning? Does the application of sophisticated interpretive models mute her voice and strip her of her authorial control? These questions go to the heart of how/for whom historians produce their work.

Can historians share authorial control with the narrator, asking for her interpretation and/or her reaction to their interpretation? The latter requires that historians use accessible language, a goal to which many feminist scholars still subscribe, but that is too often undermined by some of the language used by advocates of postmodernism. And, of course, even if historians do manage to discuss their interpretations with their narrators, what if they disagree? Who has the last word? It is still very seldom that oral historians of any stripe engage in this effort at shared authority.

Presenting women's voices and writing them back into history was long considered a mode of advocacy, but has problematizing the oral history process and narrative stripped us of this pretense? Does it work to use a model where the narrator's "voice" is first presented without interpretation, followed by the scholars "reading" of the narrative? Perhaps. It must be acknowledged, however, that the "voice" has already been mediated when it is presented as written text, although new technology does facilitate presentation of the unmediated voice in its original oral form. Can we still view oral history as a medium for combining scholarship and activism in the form of advocacy? Or must we now separate our two roles and goals, presenting voice on the one hand and analysis on the other?

Another thorny set of questions persist with regard to ethics. As discussed previously, some early women oral historians, in their rejection of "objectivity," prescribed practices that attempted to remove the social distance between interviewer and narrator. However, others later began to realize that this attempt at erasure of a "professional" relationship was, instead, potentially more exploitative. Over the past decade, most feminist practitioners have attempted to develop a model that is based neither on forming a "friendship" nor on adopting the stance of the remote "observer/researcher."

Clearly, a host of ethical dilemmas, in addition to issues relating to power differentials and authority and control over the meaning of the narrative, will continue to face scholars in pursuit of a feminist practice of oral history. Do we resign ourselves to the impossibility of formulating a single prescription, a best practice? Written more than a decade ago, the words that close the *Women's Words* anthology probably remain the best advice...
for dealing with the re/current questions and contradictions faced by feminist oral historians:

There is not merely one appropriate methodology, nor one type of research project, that all scholars should rush to duplicate. No blanket prescription will help us; we need, rather, to engage in self-critical examination of our practices and to go on to develop a range of models from which to select our procedures according to the needs of specific, and often unique, research situations. It is possible to be temporarily immobilized by an awareness of serious problems in the oral history process, whether these relate to procedures, or to ethics, interpretation, or politics. . . . Alternatively, researchers can decide to ignore these problems for the sake of proceeding unimpeded. But a third path is possible . . . [that] shows us how to get on with our work even as we reflect on its procedures and its uses and take steps to change these where needed.55

Regardless of the decisions made about methods, the self-reflexivity engaged, and the theories employed for interpretation, feminist practice still requires that the narrator is not effaced.

Conclusion

At the opening of this chapter, I raised the question, Is women’s oral history a distinct genre? What can we now conclude? Certainly, it is now clear that not only women can produce women’s oral history; nor does the study of women by any woman necessarily produce women’s oral history. A feminist perspective is still the basic determinant, a perspective that not only understands how women’s experience is gendered, but that also understands the tension between women’s oppression and resistance. Does this perspective necessarily change the conduct of oral history interviews? It does, in the sense that sensitivity to the gendered nature of women’s experiences necessarily leads to an exploration of certain topics and attention to the complexity and layering of meaning in women’s responses. But other prescriptions about sensitivity to pluralism, the complex nature of intersubjectivity, and balancing the narrator’s and interviewer’s agendas should apply equally to the conduct of any good oral history interview.

What does the future hold for the feminist practice of oral history? Most likely it will mean a continued debate about ways to best balance the insights of post-structuralism with a commitment to women’s agency, to documenting women’s lived experiences. In this regard, the new technology that enables presentation of the unmediated voices of narrators might provide one solution, particularly if that presentation includes the unmediated voice along with our analysis.56 New online journals present a unique opportunity to do just that.57 The ethical issues raised by the online delivery of oral history recordings will be an ongoing consideration, and all historians will have to be attentive to them as new practices emerge.

Perhaps one of the most exciting developments in women’s oral history since its “official” inception in the U.S. twenty-five years ago is how its questions and processes have influenced the wider practice of oral history. James’s gendered analysis of the oral history of Doña Maria is one indication of this. So, too, is the way that some of the insights and practices of women’s oral history have become codified in the standards and practices of the Oral History Association.

Clearly, there is not any single answer to the increasingly complex questions raised about the practice of women’s oral history. Yet, even as the debate continues, many historians would still argue about the need to recover women’s voices. For one thing, as Armitage argues, women’s oral history remains a powerful discovery and connective tool in the classroom.58 Beyond that, it remains an important tool both for empowering women, by bringing forth their voices and their sometimes hidden forms of resistance, and for advocating on their behalf by documenting their experiences of discrimination and subordination.

Notes

2. Geiger, “What’s So Feminist.”


5. Gluck and Patai, *Women’s Words*.

6. Oakley, “Interviewing Women.”

7. Sociologists Joan Acker and Dorothy Smith were among the early promoters of this idea. See Acker, Barry, and Essevelt, “Objectivity and Truth”; D. Smith, “Sociology for Women”; and D. Smith, *Everyday World*.


10. Kristina Minister referred to a different mode of conversation embraced by women in Minister, “Feminist Frame.”


13. Ibid., 6–7. Yvonne Tixier y Vigil and Nan Elsasser, one a New Mexico Hispanic and the other an Anglo, were among the first to compare the differential results of their interviews with the same women. See Tixier y Vigil and Elsasser, “Effects of the Ethnicity.”


17. Sample projects included “Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women and the World War II Work Experience,” at California State University, Long Beach, and “Lives of Arizona Women: Past and Present,” at Arizona State University, Tempe. For descriptions of these projects, see Mann, “Directory.”

18. Thomas, *We Didn’t Have Much*; Thomas, “Digging beneath the Surface.”


26. See D. Sommer, “Women’s Testimonios.”

27. See Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.


30. Ibid., 175. See Frisch, *Shared Authority*.


32. Ibid., 180.


34. The persistence of advocacy as a hallmark of feminist research is evident in the host of books on feminist methodology, including Fonow and Cook, *Beyond Methodology*; DeVault, *Liberating Method*; and to some extent Reinharz and Davidman, *Feminist Methods*.

35. Hale, “Feminist Method,” is a preeminent example of this kind of reflexivity. It is no coincidence that Hale is an anthropologist.

36. Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*.


43. Summerfield, *Women’s Wartime Lives*, 10. See also Scott, “Useful Category.”


46. Sangster, “Telling Our Stories,” 8–9, 22.

47. Ibid., 21.


51. Armitage and Gluck, “Reflections.”


53. One of the most engaging discussions of this effort is Borland, “Not What I Said.” Interestingly, Borland changed the article’s original title, which was “When We Women Disagree.”


55. Gluck and Patai, afterword to *Women’s Words*, 222.

56. See, for example, California State University, Long Beach, VOHA: Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive, http://salticid.nmc.csulb.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/OralAural.woa/(accessed March 2, 2005).
