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# What Makes Oral Literary History Different?

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Oral Literary History (OLH) is one of the primary research axes of the SpokenWeb project. This post offers an overview of what we perceive to be unique about OLH as a discipline, with attention to its theoretical underpinnings, ethics, and methods.

The SpokenWeb project began conducting Oral History interviews in 2012, with people who participated in the Sir George Williams University Poetry Reading Series as readers, organizers, recordists, and audience members. At the time, the project defined its interview mandate in the following terms:

Oral history offers a different perspective from traditional forms of sources. Language has a certain set of meanings in syllables, words, phrases and “it has been shown that tonal range, volume range, and rhythm of popular speech, carry many class connotations which are not reproducible in writing.” (Alessandro Portelli, 1981). Oral history tells us “not just what people did, but what they intended to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (Portelli, 1981); its stories unfold on both factual and narrative planes, in the present as well as the past. Similar to the transcription of an interview the written poem loses a fundamental piece of its essence. However, when the poem is returned to its aural form it allows for deeper engagement and analysis. ([Oral Literary History](#), SpokenWeb)

As the SpokenWeb project developed into a larger partnership, we began to conceptualize how this framework could be expanded to address other collections in partnership archives, with diverse media, genres, and communities of production. In 2020, we began drafting an Oral History Protocol document with the goal of offering a general roadmap for preparing OLH interviews. This post reflects on the process of composing that document and extends into some theoretical and philosophical considerations about the discipline.

## 1. What can be learned from OLH and why pursue this method?

In crafting SpokenWeb’s OLH protocol, we reflected upon our experiences as oral literary historians, the reasons why we pursued OLH as a practice, and what we learned from developing relationships and listening to the many different people who make literature possible. Having been trained in close text analysis, archival research, and digital humanities methods, Mathieu gravitated towards OLH as a means of learning from the people whose voices were not represented in more traditional archives, especially LGBTQ2+ people, and how these interviews could complement other literary analysis methods. Deanna came from a background in creative writing and was interested in contextualizing the histories of the communities that were important to her as

a poet, organizer, and performer. Her doctoral work also drew on theories of the event as a way of thinking through the connection of material records with the circumstances of their production, and the ways that Oral History could fill in the omissions in those records.

Together, we determined that OLH interviews are valuable for the fact that they offer an opportunity to fill in gaps in the extant archival/historical record. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, archives are sites structured by, and productive of, social and political power (*Archive Fever* 2-3). One systemic omission across archival collections of the spoken word is that subjects who do not view themselves as public figures, based on their position vis-à-vis social forces, are less likely to appear on the record. For this reason, a major impetus of SpokenWeb's Oral History axis is to create space for those voices that have been traditionally muted in the archive such as: BIPOC writers, organizers, and community members; women, femme, and non-binary folks; LGBTQ2+ people; working-class and poor people; people with disabilities; and subjects whose labour is less likely to be recognized in a public way, such as hosts, organizers, facilitators, technicians, audience members, students, etc.

OLH is an opportunity for the people represented by or excluded from the archive to speak back, be heard, and share new knowledge about the literary objects, communities, and events that we study. In other words, OLH opens new dialogues with people whose personal and communal experiences that are intertwined with the lived life of literature rather than relying solely on more static representations of literary life that are structured by the archive.

## 2. The intersections between Oral History and Literary Study

As a discipline, Oral History is interested not only in objective historical facts, but also the ways in which those facts are related through individual speakers' specific ways of telling. Michael Frisch, for example, points us toward "the tone, stance, and voice of a speaker" (*Sharing Authority* 71), meaning that historical "truth" is in the formal unfolding of the story itself, rather than merely in its symbolic content. Alessandro Portelli similarly comments upon the "velocity" at which a speaker's story unfolds—that is, "the ratio between the duration of events described and the duration of the narration" ("What Makes Oral History Different?" 65). Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez point out that silence can be as powerful as speech as a way of evoking the symbolic significance of lived experiences (*Bodies of Evidence* 12-15). All of these theorists point us to the narrative *construction* of oral historical interviews, and the ways that these formal cues can be read and interpreted in their own right. Indeed, this is not too far afield from the work that we do as literary scholars. In the practice of close reading, we use the tools of literary analysis—attention to figuration, phrasing, tone, and rhetorical construction—to connect a work to its broader personal, social, and historical significance. In the study of poetry, we pay attention to line breaks and caesura—the visual signals of silence and stillness on the page—that instruct our reading of the text. In short, the tools of literary text analysis help us illuminate the oral texts produced in interviews.

OLH is also interested in the social milieu that surrounds the production of literary texts. In this, it builds upon the work of bibliographers of the social turn such as D.F. Mackenzie and Pierre Bourdieu, who have outlined the diverse agents and institutions that comprise the literary field of production. Bourdieu in particular states that it is the social historian's task to reconstruct "the self-evident givens of the situation" of production: "information about institutions – e.g. academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc. – and about persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are 'in the air' and circulate orally in gossip and rumour" (*The Field of Cultural Production* 31-32). Reading and interpreting the "mood of the age" (32) composed in the minute details that Bourdieu enumerates, is a task for which OLH is uniquely suited. Beyond the data of names, dates, and places, we get a sense of the organic *relations* between agents and actors—information that helps us to make sense of a historical moment and its cultural objects as a whole.

## 3. Ethical Framework for OLH study

As a fundamental facet of all oral historical research, ethics shape OLH projects from the beginning and throughout the whole process. The guiding ethical principles grounding our own approaches to OLH include:

- a. Following non-extractive listening practices *against* colonial forms of audition and cognition that are based in consumption and mastery. Here, we are guided by Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson's work *Hungry Listening*, in which he writes, "listeners are told to 'listen for the x,' where 'x' may be an animal, or story, or an emotion [...] this 'listening for' satiates through familiarity (to feel pleasure from the satisfaction of identification and recognition) but also through certainty (to feel pleasure from finding the 'fit' of content within a predetermined framework" (50-51). Efforts toward non-extractive listening practices in OLH cultivate a sense of openness to dialogue's natural pace, direction, and reciprocity; acknowledge and accept difference, contradiction, and misunderstanding in the communion between speakers; and centre a self-reflexive consideration of the listener's own positionality—their position within the social forms of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, age, cultural and personal background—that shapes the ways that they receive sound and its meaning.
- b. Demonstrating ongoing care for the individuals and communities that we interview. We believe that conducting OLH research enters us into a meaningful relationship with the interviewees who entrust us with the preservation, interpretation, and framing of their stories. This means that the relationship extends beyond the timeframe in which the interview takes place, involving participants in the creation and dissemination of any scholarly outputs arising from their interview (if that involvement is something they desire). It also involves partaking in the emotional labour that is at the heart of all successful relationships: communicating intentions and desires, honouring promises, setting boundaries, and cultivating an atmosphere of honesty, generosity, and respect.
- c. Sharing authority with interviewees across the interviewing process. Rather than reproducing a top-down dynamic of creating historical information about persons or communities, oral history is grounded in a shared authority made possible by dialogical discourse. As Michael Frisch states in *A Shared Authority*, "historical material is produced in an interview situation, one in which the subject is triangulated between the interviewer and the experience being discussed. No matter how controlled the schedule of questions, the information is produced in a dialogue between individuals, each with a social position and identity" (61). While an oral historian may have questions in mind, the dialogue will be informed and shaped by the lived experiences and responses of the interviewee(s). As such, when a person or community shares lived experiences in an oral history interview, they are producing historical information in dialogue with an oral historian and are actively involved in the process of creating meaning about the experiences.
- d. Centring community-led interests and concerns. Since it should not be grounded in extractive questions, OLH research needs to be co-led by researchers and the people being researched. This means that the people being researched are actively engaged in determining the types of topics and questions to be discussed, the format and length of the interviews, how they and their community may benefit from the interview(s), as well as how their information will be shared. For instance, the interviewee(s) may be more involved in the production of the interview's transcript. They may also choose who is allowed to read or hear specific parts of the interview. In this way, OLH needs to be grounded in the concerns of the community rather than in institutional concerns imposed onto the research. For this reason, consent forms should offer as many different options as possible for access, privacy, and secondary analysis to account for speakers' different levels of comfort and approaches to disclosure.
- e. OLH scholars who use content from interviews in text and audiovisual publications need to ensure that they properly contextualize the interviews, give space for the selected parts of the recording or transcript to "breathe." That is to say, when quoting from an interview, we should avoid picking what have been called "juicy quotes" to support their claims. In this way, we need to ensure that they are ethically

representing their interviewees so that their stories are not mined for content or taken out of context. Additionally, permissions need to be sought whenever the presentation of the interview changes contexts. That is, just because an interviewee has given permission for quotations to appear in a printed article does not mean that they have given permission for audio excerpts to be included in a podcast. In this way, the interviewee always maintains informed control over how their words are represented.

#### 4. Relationship-building and listening

As mentioned above, OLH interviews require time, commitment, and reciprocity to ensure that researchers build mutually fruitful relationships grounded in shared respect and understanding. This kind of work *takes time* and thus oftentimes does not fit into the university's demands for an accelerated pace of knowledge-production. It takes time to determine the scope of a project (i.e. who will be interviewed; how many sessions are necessary, etc.); to establish contact and build rapport in scenarios apart from the research; to explain the purpose of the project and consent forms; and to transcribe and edit the interviews. OLH is a *commitment* to individuals and communities first and foremost, and thus the parameters of the project should adapt to address their concerns.

The relationships we build over the course of our research are based on reciprocity: we ensure that interviewees feel heard, and know that they deserve our respect for offering us their time. We show reciprocity by listening, responding, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and offering insights from our own experience and point-of-view. While the research has a definitive start and end date, relationships formed in the process of interviewing are long-term. We nurture those relationships over time by following up after an interview, maintaining contact with interviewees (if this is something they wish), and involving them in the afterlife of their interview through any channels of dissemination. Friendly emails and phone calls, invitations to events of interest, and sharing copies of publications are all ways to maintain strong relationships.

#### 5. Types of OLH interviews and their purposes

For members within the SpokenWeb network and other literary historical researchers, we envision several types of OLH interviews as being of interest. They position the interviewee in different relation to events and their documentary recordings. These can include, but are not limited to:

- *Provenance interviews* that gather contextualizing information about a collection, either at the moment of its acquisition or shortly afterward (i.e. the Mordecai Richler research project)
- *Informational interviews* that gather information about a recording or collection of recordings and/or the events they record
- *Performance interviews* that ask a speaker to read alongside their archival voice and reflect upon the experience (i.e. the "ghost reading" series)
- *Participant interviews* that gather the general recollections of those who participated in an event, for example: speakers/performers, series organizers, recordists, audience members, etc. (i.e. the SGWU Poetry Reading Series interviews)
- *Life story interviews* that ask a participant about various aspects of their lives, such as family of origin, career, community involvement, or other questions of literary and historical import
- *Memory space (in situ) interviews* that use a physical place as a prompt for memory retrieval, during which interviewees revisit locations significant to literary events
- *Other types of interviews* may be used as the interviewer or interviewees see fit, so long as they conform to the ethical and technical protocols outlined by the project's mandate

#### 6. Conclusion

OLH is an emerging discipline with its own unique theoretical approaches, methods and, above all, ethical considerations. It is grounded in slow, care-full, and collaborative research practices that centre the people and literary communities that are its subjects. It seeks wherever possible to share authority with the interviewees whose stories drive the research, and acknowledges that every interview is an instance of co-producing meaning. We hope that this brief post will encourage team members and other researchers to engage in this rewarding scholarship. Any questions about this article or the discipline can be directed to the authors: Mathieu Aubin ([mathieu.aubin@concordia.ca](mailto:mathieu.aubin@concordia.ca)) and Deanna Fong ([deanna.fong@concordia.ca](mailto:deanna.fong@concordia.ca)).

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