REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE OF ORAL HISTORY RETRIEVING WHAT WE CAN FROM AN EARLIER CRITIQUE

RONALD J. GRELE

ABSTRACT

Oral history research as an academic discipline emerged in the 1940s and 1950s; this article explores its development and continuing challenges. During its first decades, the main focus was on the production of documents and new information, especially on the lives of people previously ignored by historians. A new perspective emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, when the oral history interview was reconceptualized as a dialogically constructed text, rather than a factual document. The interview is also discussed as a public and performative event, and as a blending and negotiation of individual and collective remembering. The author emphasizes the complex and creative relationship between history and collective memory. Oral history is defined as a conversational narrative created by the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee and determined by linguistic, social and ideological structures. Finally, the contemporary challenges of oral history are discussed. The practice of oral history is moving to the stage of Internet and digitalization, while oral historians are participating in the actual debate on colonization and "social death".

Key words: Oral history research, dialogic interview, collective memory, cultural construction, intersubjectivity, conversational narrative

This essay had its origins in a presentation at a conference: 'Memory and Narration: Oral History in the Northern European Context held in Helsinki in 2006'. It is an attempt to place my early work in oral history, in which there still seemed to be some interest, in the context of the development of the field, meanwhile speculating on ways in which that earlier work speaks to the continuing challenges of oral history.

Very often in the Western world we begin our discussions of historical practice by talking about the history of that practice. There is something so intriguing about the merging of cognition and time that we simply assume that this is the way to understand what it is we do when we 'do' history. But I want to be clear that in the following discussion I am talking about the history of oral history, not simply the history of the 'interview', which has of course been part of the historian's craft since Herodotus. In its initial incarnation, the aim of the practice of oral history, as it emerged in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, was the production of documents. There were essentially two aims, one having its origins in archival practice and the other in the so-called 'new social history'. In the first, the concern was that in the age of the telephone and ever-busier schedules, men of affairs
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would no longer keep diaries, write letters, or compose memoirs upon their retirement. Therefore it was incumbent upon the historian or the archivist, preferably the archivist, to interview people in order to build a body of documentation that the modern pace of life was making less and less possible. The aim was to complement the existing written record and fill in the gaps in that record. In the second case, the objective was to document the lives and past actions of classes of people heretofore ignored by historians; in particular the working class, but also racial and ethnic minorities, women, and sexual and political minorities. These are people whose lives were traditionally ignored or purposefully forgotten: people whose history was, at that time, understood by examining documents provided by those who were outsiders to the communities under study, upper class commentators for the most part, but also journalists, social and other service workers or anyone who had left a written record (Grele 1990, 2006).

Despite wide disagreements about the focus of one’s attention, the uses to be made of recorded interviews, and the aims and ambitions of the historical profession, both archival practice and social history interviewing, at this time, shared a number of assumptions. The interview was a document. The power of a particular interview lay in its ability to provide the historian with a body of information—facts about the past. Truth resided in those facts just waiting to be revealed to the historian who approached the task with ‘scientific precision’. The goal was to produce an accurate record that could be tested in the traditional ways in which historians tested their documents for reliability and validity. Talking their cue from the dominant modes of positivist and empiricist social science research, oral historians wanted to know with some precision what ‘actually happened’ in the past. If memory was considered at all it was discussed in terms of its accuracy or inaccuracy, and a good story was one that corresponded to the historian’s interpretation of the past, or provided a useful anecdote to illuminate that interpretation. The real interest was in sequence (what happened next?) rather than narrative. Rarely did we ask, “Tell me your story?”; but very often we asked, “What happened next?”

In terms of the attitudes of those promoting oral history to the historical profession, as it was then understood, the situation was brilliantly captured by Michael Frisch as one of “more history” or “escape from history” (Frisch 1979). In the first case, a defensive argument, oral history would alter our understanding of the past by providing more and more documents. In the second, the offensive argument popular with writers and community historians, oral history would revolutionize historical understanding by bypassing the historian and talking directly to the people who had lived through the events under study. The voice of the people was to be trusted because the voice of the historian was so compromised by all of the professional, social and political compromises that he or she (for the most part, he) had settled upon in a search for a career. At its most extreme, this populist position argued that the oral history interview was a moment in consciousness-raising for both historian and interviewee. Neither ‘more history’ nor ‘no history’, Frisch noted, spoke to the complexity of the oral history interview or the larger methodological problems of the practice, such as memory and narrative (Frisch 1979: 70–79).

In the 1970s and early 1980s a new and different view of our work emerged. Although it would be interesting in a different context to detail these changes and how they related to larger changes taking place in thinking about most of the humanities and social science disciplines, for our purposes we can abbreviate the discussion by noting the main concern: the transformation of the object of investigation (the oral history) from a docu-
ment revealing what had happened in the past to a dialogically constructed text. This was a basic epistemological shift from a concern with accuracy to a concern with narrative construction.

Since a text must have an author and an audience, this shift had meaningful consequences for our view of, and the relationship between, the interviewer and the interviewee. Firstly, it accented the role of the interviewer. No longer a figure of contemplation, anonymous and objective, the new role ascribed to the interviewer highlighted the unique feature of an oral history: the fact that it was created by the active intervention of the historian/interviewer. The interview, it was now argued, would not exist, if not for the aims and ambitions, views and values of the historian. Alone among documents used by historians, oral histories were created by the interest of the historian. They are thus not documents of the time under investigation, the then and there, but documents of the here and now and thus tell us not only about the past, but of how the past lives on in and informs the present. There are, of course, other documents produced in the present about the past but none with the active intervention of the historian bringing a public voice to a private conversation. It was thus clear that if historians were to build an interpretation upon their own interviews it was necessary that they be very clear about their position in the process of creation.

Secondly, and probably more important, the person interviewed was no longer simply a source but a key creator and interpreter of a history, which, it was argued, was best understood as a cultural construction. Thus interest was now equally focused upon how things were said as well as upon what was said. How did people create and structure their own histories? What did they bring to the negotiation between past and present? What were their repertoires? How could we reach out beyond the traditional social science disciplines to capture the full meaning of the interview and the methods by which we were to decipher that meaning? Rather than biases and prejudices that had to be countered, values, attitudes, histories were vital elements in explicating the testimony. The historian was no longer a collector of observations but a co-creator of verbal texts. Since the transformation of event into text in verbal form demanded structuring, interest was now focused upon narrative, the ways in which the story of change over time was told, and upon the ways in which memory was mobilized in the creation of a usable past. Dialogically, the interview was the meeting place of two distinct interpretations of the past, one derived from the study of that past, the other derived from living in that past. Neither was necessarily to be privileged.1

The key to the interview was negotiation: what Frisch called "a shared authority", and others a 'shared horizon' or 'intersubjectivity' (Frisch 1990; Passerini 2001: 219–226; Portelli 1991: 29–44). It is important to stress here, this authority and these horizons were shared not only because one respected the story being told and the teller, but also because the historian ceded interpretative monopoly. It was not to be the case that the people we interviewed were to be allowed to speak only about the immediate and concrete dimensions of their own experiences, providing in many cases stories of victimization and abuse, while we, the experts, were granted all rights to interpret those experiences. Sharing authority meant sharing interpretative rights. It was this aspect that would, it was hoped, transform historical practice. The promised democratization of the profession by oral history was not be achieved by simply bringing more people into history or escaping history but by taking seriously the rights of people to their own view of their own history;
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Serious enough to not only capture it on tape but to argue about it and dispute it in the same way that we opened ourselves up to argumentation and disputation by those to whom we spoke. Henry Glassie (1982) has argued that all folk history is history and all history is folk history. By this he means that those whose history is being told are searching for the truth about the past in the same way as the historian, and that when examined the history of the historian is as prey to contingent interpretation as the history being collected (Glassie 1982: 648–655).

In Alessandro Portelli’s (1991: 31) words the interview is the meeting place of difference. Each party to the interview brings to the meeting equal but differing ideas of what happened in the past. The dynamic of the interview is the back and forth of the conversation as the basic tensions between these visions are negotiated. The assumption here is, of course, that the conversation is based upon a pact to agree to disagree, that it is incumbent upon us to explain to those we interview that we will differ with them for any number of reasons, age, gender, ethnicity, politics, but most importantly because we have read the past in differing ways.

Thirdly is the question of audience. The oral history interview is more complicated than a conversation between two people both now seen as historians. Part of the negotiation over the interview is the recognition of its public nature. From the earliest days of the practice it had always been assumed that either as an archive or as a social history interview, the results of the conversation would be available publicly for interpretation and reinterpretation. In every project and every interview the initial stage of negotiation is informing the interviewee of the purposes of the interview and the public for whom it is intended. It is, essentially, setting the rules of the game, and one of those rules is that a recording is being made and eventually it will become available to others in one form or another. Thus, both parties to the conversation are involved in a very complicated dialogue with their own cultures. They speak to and through each other to other imagined audiences. The interview is thus a performative event as well as a conversation. In addition, because each party speaks within a set of socio-cultural constraints relying upon traditional ways of telling stories and learned repertoires of recollecting, the interview, and therefore the narrative, is multivocal. For instance, when interviewing for my doctoral thesis, many times I asked particular questions because my mentor or a member of my committee had expressed an interest in those questions. Through me a third voice was brought into the conversation. In the same manner the person I was interviewing was using the situation of the interview to speak to his or her inner voices, his or her imagined audience. A question I have always thought to be interesting to explore is the ways in which the imagined audience keeps us both honest to our own histories.

The interview as constructed text about a usable past is also deeply dependent upon remembering. Over the next few days we will talk at length about memory for the most part in a manner consistent with several decades of research that has shown time and time again that memory is more a matter of reorganizing and reconstructing bits of information into a scheme than a matter of accurate recall of those isolated bits themselves. Along the way we will talk about individual and collective memory, the distinction between remembering and memory, the differences between collective and social memory, the tension between memory and history, remembering and re-experiencing, episodic memory and long term memory, memory as process and memory as ideology, and remembering
and narrative templates. Here I just want to make a few points that may guide us in that discussion.³

It now seems obvious that in an oral history interview there is a very complex blending and negotiation between individual and collective remembering. The repertoires we mentioned earlier are, to a large extent, dependent upon what we would call collective or social memory. People, however, live through events and recall them from the perspective of their own experiences. Much of what we have to say in the next few days will revolve around that tension for it is within this matrix that we can understand the socio-cultural formations and mediations that inform our interviews and the political and moral economy from which they in turn spring. Here I just want to issue a warning that may not be as significant in this geographic context [Finland] as in an American context, and that is a warning that we guard against a tendency to accent the individualism of memory.

By definition collective memory is cohesive, based upon agreement, consensus, and deep communal longings: what the community believes is the truth of its past. In interviewing we often find that individual memories vary from socially defined collective remembrances, and often contradict them. As Alistair Thomson (1994) notes, “memory is a battleground” full of secret collective and social histories, private objections and resentments, and memories of lost battles. Often that battleground is between the collective and the individual. By accenting that difference we may, however, lose sight of the fundamental cohesion of the collective, the moral economy based upon mutual sharing and strong and viable ties between people who share social and political space. While it is true that individuals do not participate equally in the events being remembered and that collective memory is therefore not homogenous, we must be careful not to base our discussions on individualistic principles of human interaction. We must go beyond the categories of collective and individual memory to find the particular mediations that distribute both—mediations that range from state action, religious beliefs, family traditions, media representations, daily life and conversations to all the other subtle limits upon individual choice and impulse. This is a point most recently brought home to me in reading the various essays in Living Through the Soviet System edited by Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson and Anna Rotkirch (2004).

In addition, in an oral history interview we must remain aware of our own remembering and what we, as interviewers, bring to the conversation. Such memories would include what we remember of what we have read, what others have told us, the shared memories that we have of such larger historical processes such as the Cold War, the Second World War or the great depression. Most of you are, of course, not of a generation that had direct experience of many of those events but most of you do have a well of half-remembered stories, tales, fictions that have been passed down to you from other generations and that have remained with you despite your research and reading and which you will draw upon in an interview. It is important in the analysis of the interviews we create that we be aware of the template designed by our own memories. The view of the interview as dialogic demands that we have a self-consciousness of our own participation in that interview in all the forms it may take.

Lastly on the topic of memory, I think it is necessary for us to think carefully about the common distinctions made between history and memory. From the earliest discussions of collective memory by Halbwachs that distinction has been drawn. History, it was argued, is a record of changes, a journal kept by outsiders to the community; it is tied to
a perspective, it constantly reinvents a past, undermines traditions, and so on. Collective memory, on the other hand, has about it constancy with the past, a stability, a continuity, a timelessness that history can never replicate. It does not enshrine the ambiguity so loved by and taught by historians. It prefers a unilinear storyline. Thus, to some of a more romantic bent our present problem is that we have too much history and too little memory. As one critic put it, oral history is “the clearest expression yet of the terroristic effect of historicized memory” (Nora 1996: 9–10).

Recent work however, has questioned assumptions both about collective memory and history. Collective memory can change from generation to generation; it is constantly being formed and reformed by the mediations of collectivities, especially the state. History can no longer be seen as the work of objective outsiders, nor can it be limited only to the way it is created by political and social historians. In addition, the new forms of historical presentation in museums, on radio, on television and on the Internet have expanded our idea of history so significantly as to lead many to question whether or not the goal of history is to create analytic monographs or to discover new ways of presenting narratives of a usable past. It may be that as we expand what we think of as history, and who is a historian, we will have to view memory as simply another way to understand the past, a different kind of history. Two recent works in oral history illuminate the complex and creative relationship between history and memory in story telling as one becomes the other, as history becomes memory and memory becomes history: The Order Has Been Carried Out by Portelli (2003) and Dona Maria's Story by Daniel James (2000).

As with questions of memory, we must address questions of narrative: its nature, its structure in an oral history interview, the relationship between memory and narrative and what we can learn from a study of various theories of narrative. As noted, the focus of our historiography became not only what had happened in the past, but also how a narrative of a usable past is created as a text within the oral history interview and the social, political and cultural milieu of that construction. Since a divorce of the here and now from the then and there is impossible, the real questions are questions of the relations between past and present, between speaker and listener, and what those relations could tell us of the past. To start on this path it was then necessary to define oral history and our project within it.

I now want to return to a question I asked at the start of this paper about the relevance of the ideas in Envelopes of Sound (Grele 1975). In those essays, I defined an oral history as a conversational narrative created by the interaction of interviewer and interviewee. I still think that definition is a useful one. However, now I would add to it three other considerations. Firstly I think we have to make clear that the conversation is recorded. There are two particular aspects of recording to which I want to draw attention. If the interview is to be analyzed as a historical narrative, and if the interaction between interviewer and interviewee is fundamental to understanding the meaning of that creation, then we must have a full record of that interplay. Indeed, some have argued that even an audio record is not enough and that we must also have a video record. In addition, the fact that the document exists as a soundscape has dramatic consequences for our understanding of the interview. Not only does it raise serious questions about transcribing procedures that transform the spoken syntax into written syntax, but it also raises questions of language such as those posed by scholars who note the distinction between literacy and orality or the more practical considerations of the differences between writing and speaking.
Secondly, there are also issues of speech and performance and above all, if we are serious about our interest in intersubjectivity, the ways in which the physical fact of the surroundability and penetration of sound contributes to psychological awareness, the ways in which nearness becomes thereness, and the ways in which we deal with the problems of how a heard experience of time and space becomes the basis of our speculation about the process of the collaborative construction of the past.

Returning to the expanded definition of conversational narrative, I think we have to be aware that the oral history originates in a private discussion that is on the way to becoming a public record in some sense, a transcript or video to be consulted by others, the basis for citation and quotation in a written history, part of a radio or filmed production. As noted, the public nature of the interview raises issues of audience, ethics, self presentation, trust, performance and professional responsibilities. Lastly, we have to expand the definition to embrace the fact that it is a remembrance or recollection. In some sense it is always dependent upon remembering. When elaborated upon in this way, I think we can talk about oral history as a genre: a conceptualization raised a number of years ago by Portelli (1997: 2–23). Oral history is a recorded conversational narrative, which is meant to be a public record based upon reflections about the past.

Following from the definition of conversational narrative, now expanded, I would still argue that it is defined by three interlocking but analytically separate structures: a linguistic structure, a social structure and an ideological structure, each exhibiting, because of the nature of the differences between speaker and listener, a set of tensions that must be mediated by the rules of the genre.

When I initially talked about linguistic structure I had in mind a limited sense of language. That argument had some resonance with speech communications theorists who were interested in examining the interview in terms of speech acts, turn taking and so on (see MacMahan 1989). A few years later I tried to expand on these considerations by examining the differing languages that the interviewer and the interviewee bring to the interview (Grele 1994). The argument then was that the interviewer/historian, in the format of questions and answers, speaks in the language of analysis, breaking things apart and reconfiguring them. It is the language of the professional historian. It is the language of this paper. The interviewee, on the other hand, speaks in the language of story—seeking to articulate a consistent usable past, often, but not always, through a chronological format. When examined closely we can see that the language of analysis on the part of the historian/interviewer has its basis in the story (narrative) we tell ourselves about who we are (scientists, objective observers etc.), while the narrative, in its assemblage of metaphors, pauses, the interweaving of paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements, dramatic turns, emplotment, and especially silences, has within itself its own analysis. Any consideration of the mediation of the language performance of both interviewer and interviewee, today, would have to center on textual construction, which I have tried to argue is narrative construction. This is, I think, the task before us at this time and in this place.

Initially I thought of the tension in the social situation of the interview as something that could be described in the traditional language of interviewing manuals: rapport, turn taking, focus, follow up and so on. Now I think we have a much richer oral history bibliography beginning with Frisch's idea of shared authority, and especially Portelli's idea of the oral history interview as an "experiment in equality" based upon the inherent equality.
of the recognition of difference—an idea derived from feminist theory. These insights speak, I think, to a more complicated relationship than earlier imagined. Such considerations provide a deeper justification for many of our practices, from conduct within the interview to archiving and ethical and legal formalities.

The cognitive tensions of the oral history narrative appear in two forms: one based upon the difference in historical consciousness between interviewee and interviewer and the other between imagination and event inherent in the construction of a usable history. In my initial presentation of this idea I described those tensions as the tensions between ideology and myth. The concept of ideology I used was heavily influenced by what Louis Althusser termed “the lived relations between men and their world” (Althusser and Balibar 1970). Ideologies not only reflect and interpret the realities that sustain them but also construct those realities and remain in constant dialectical tension with them. They are plans of action, using the past to control the present in order to manipulate the future. They are based upon human agency with usually elaborate historical conceptualizations justifying the role and position of a particular class of people as the only group capable of leading us into the agreed upon future. Myth is also a mode of social consciousness through which shared interpretative frameworks are constructed. But the object is social cohesiveness and timelessness in values, their validity often resting upon the ability of the ritual and articulation of the myth to replicate the collective emotion at the heart of the myth. If humans are thought to be able to change social arrangements it is because they are seen to have some greater access to a controlling hierarchical power, such as gods or a God, or a representative of non-temporal relations. Such a concept of myth was, at the time, popular in many anthropological circles. Usually framed in a manner pointing to a tension between history and myth rather than ideology and myth, it was often seen as a tension between agency (history) and structure (myth).

My argument at the time was that in an oral history interview we could see how, in dialogue, a usable past and a history were created that merged and blended in complicated and elegant ways the myths at the base of collective memory and the ideologies of a life in history, and how they were woven to resolve the contradictions of the social order and the economic life of the culture.

I will return to some of these considerations but now I want to interject a consideration of our work in oral history that comes from rooting the practice in its history—a consideration that I think raises questions for which I have no answer, and a consideration that makes me feel personally like a man of a different generation passing on to a new generation a set of dilemmas for which I offer no resolution.

Recent reviews of the history of oral history have begun to argue that the practice is moving to a fourth stage. The first stage was that which I described to you as a stage of empiricism and positivism and a looking to social science methods for descriptions of the task of oral history. The second stage was the stage of concern with text, memory and narrative. The third stage was the enormous growth of oral history both geographically and heuristically. The geographic growth was especially evident in the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking regions of the world, but also in Asia and Africa. The practice also expanded into fields such as gerontology, all varieties of community history, differing forms of therapeutic practices such as trauma studies, narrative medicine, life review and counseling. At the same time, of course, oral history was finding a warm reception in feminist studies, ethnic and race studies, gay studies and now such fields as disability
studies, queer studies and post-colonial studies. All of this culminated instrumentally in the formation and expansion of the International Oral History Association, the creation of specialized journals, national organizations, and the attempt to institutionalize an oral history curriculum at high schools, colleges, and universities.

The fourth stage, it is argued, is the coming stage of the Internet and digitization, web page construction, instant access of resources and holdings and new forms of archives and presentation (Thomson 2007: 49-70). While I think most of that future holds exciting possibilities and wonderful new views of our work (just think of the consequences of students posting the results of their work in oral history on their own web sites), and while I agree with the descriptions of the three stages of our growth of the oral history movement, I want to offer a muted dissent to the overly optimistic view of the digital future. I think we face a new stage for our work but it is a stage defined not by advancements in technology but by changes in our ideas about history, which are in turn related to changes in the political economy of our world.

Let me illustrate by a point stressed by Saskia Sassen (1998: ix—xxxvi). When we think of the use of electronic space we usually think of the Internet and its attributes of distributed power, decentralization, openness, the possibility of expansion, lack of hierarchy or center and no conditions for authoritarian or monopoly control. And, of course, our sympathies lay with the hackers in their battle with threatening media monopolies. But the new electronic networks also make possible other forms of power such as the operation of financial markets, which are now dependent upon their speed and interconnectivity. What follows then, is a concentration of global capital heretofore never seen and the formation of new power structures with the ability to discipline the marketplace and, often, the nation state, and to create enormous social inequalities. I think the latter use of electronic space is as vital for our work as the former.

Initial work in oral history moved between two poles: collecting memories around, or publishing monographs dealing with, politics in the broadest sense of public policy, and collecting interviews and publishing monographs in social history. Both centered upon power. More recent work expanded that vision to issues of culture and cultural construction. Despite the differences over time and in our interests, all of our work was informed by, and conceptualized within, the history of the Western industrial world, a world in which relations of class, race and gender intersected with each other and became public issues. It was a world defined by the events of two world wars, economic depression and then expansion and the Cold War. If one interviewed and collected the history of 'movers and shakers' it was because they occupied a position atop a class system and a national and international order rooted in the history of the industrial world. If one interviewed the more popular classes it was, similarly, to understand the internal operations of a class-based society, the lived experiences of people who were on their way to becoming industrial workers. At times the justifications of some oral historians were talked about in terms of empowering people with a usable past, which would lead to their organizing themselves in order to create nodes of opposition and hopefully undermine that class system. This was a particularly important thrust in oral history circles because so much of the work we did was part of the New Left project. Both liberal and Marxist historians were, however, tied to the industrial moral economy.
Over time the interest in subjectivity, and projects and interests centering upon the culture of particular minorities and their communities, began to speak of micro histories, multiple differences, the politics of identity in all of its possible constructions, differing autobiographical practices, trauma, memory and forms of oppression outside of class oppression. As is clear from a glance at the programs of the last few international oral history conferences, one can see a fracture in an otherwise and heretofore seamless web bounded by issues of class and formulated in the traditional European language of class and class motive. Responding to challenges raised by feminist and other scholars who argued that the particularities of the minorities and others they studied were buried and discounted by this concentration upon class, and increasingly aware of the gap between culture studies and social history, there was a decided shift in our fieldwork and thinking about our work.

There is no time for a detailed discussion of these changes. For now just let me offer a few terms that describe many of our interests today: multiple colonization, marginal and minority discourse, repressed narrative structures, hybridity, heteroglossia, diasporic identities, the undermining of the Western ‘I’. Such interests, I would argue, speak to a globalized environment where the practice of oral history has a unique role to play in revealing in detail the ways in which the processes of that world impinge upon the everyday lives of those caught up in those changes: people who have a presence but no power, people who are subject to new employment regimes outside of traditional industrial models. In short, it represents a continued effort to bring into history the dispossessed but now with a far different conception of who they are and a richer idea of the cultures from which they speak.

Returning to the tension between myth and ideology I am now struck with what I sense is the resonance between the description of that tension, and the descriptions of the tensions between individual and collective memory and between history and collective memory mentioned earlier. I do not know if others may sense the same resonance but to me I think we should begin to map out the terrain between memory and myth in our interviews, in much the same manner as Anthony Smith in *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (1999).

More recently I have been intrigued with what I see to be a resonance with some of the ideas of Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2000). In his attempt to localize the European (Western) experience and undermine the universalistic claims of its traditional historiography he posits two distinct visions of history which he describes as the mobilization of the imagination to describe the past based upon “differing archives of thought and practices of human relations”. One is the history we all know and practice; historiography which has its origins in the Renaissance, the universalism of the Enlightenment and the great theorists of the European nineteenth century, especially Marx. This is history which focuses upon abstractions such as man, labor and time: what we now often term the master narrative, which Chakrabarty calls ‘History 1’. Particularly important in this historical vision for Chakrabarty, is the concept derived from Marx of abstract labor, which stands in for the whole concatenation of ideas of universality. It is in Marx’s discussion of abstract labor that Chakrabarty claims to find hints of a situation in which abstract labor does not describe human relations. This is a very complicated and tendentious argument into which we do not have to delve. For me, the interesting part of the argument is the idea that such a situation outside the world of capital revolves around a conceptually different view of the world and a different history, what he terms ‘History 2’.
This he finds in particular in the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century but notes that it can also be found among popular classes in many other places and many other times. This is a history based upon personal forms of work and identity, heavy on the collective understanding of ceaseless time, non-changing patterns of social and moral relations (somewhat akin to what Halbwachs described as 'memory'). In opposition to analytic history and its abstractions, this is a history of affective narrative, of human belonging. It is a history full of miracles, emotive identities and drama. In many ways it resonates with what anthropologists have traditionally called myth, although I find a closer identification with the conceptualizations of myth in the work of Ernst Cassirer (1955). Chakrabarty is at pains to tell us that History 2 is not a precursor to History 1, nor is it a deranged or partial view of History 1. It is, he says, a different history reflecting a different way of being in the world: no better at understanding the world and no worse. In my view, because he sees History 1 as geographically and temporally contingent—linked to the world of the bourgeoisie—and such a conception of history is ideological, History 2, I think, can be described as myth. The kind of tension described between these two visions is, I think, a better way of conceptualizing the deeper tension of a historical narrative: it posits two different histories, not a tension between history and a mythic form of cognition, carrying with it all the baggage of otherness and the suspect ideological patrimony of the claim that the European world had history while the lesser peoples of the world had only myth.

The idea of two histories poses a dilemma for our understanding of one another. Chakrabarty uses the example of the ways in which those of us from a secular world of capital development respond to claims of historical causality resting upon concepts such as, "God brought it into being" or, "Then God directed me". Our traditional position has been to historicize or anthropologize such statements rather than taking them at face value. I have in my mind two studies that challenge that opposition most clearly for us: Susan Harding's (2000) study of an evangelical Christian community and Dennis Tedlock's (1990, 1993) study of the Maya. For Harding, the attempt to bridge the gap between her and her interviewees led her to seriously question her own religious traditions. Tedlock, in turn, has argued that there is no way of understanding the Maya unless one accepts the validity and truth of magic. All I can do here is bring to the floor a concern that in our effort to use oral history to bring into history minority communities we are, in the process, re-colonizing them. Alternatively, must we admit to the limits of our historical practices in trying to understand a transnational history? Or, can we develop a way of living with multiple histories and multiple understandings about our past? Again, our task is to give room for those we study to pose their own agenda for the ways to build a usable past and, through our intervention in the process, to bring into existence a more complete expression of the basic tension contained within those multiple understandings.

In a different context, Orlando Paterson (1982), talking about the enslavement of Africans in the nineteenth century used the term 'social death'. It seems clear that one of the most oppressive aspects of the current ideology of globalization is the relegation of millions of people to social death; people disappear, they are obliterated, their lives consigned to a place beyond memory (as I was told in a recent interview: people will simply have to find new skills and/or move to new locations). Thus we are instructed that we have no right to know what we know. That is our challenge—oral history is an important method of
countering a social death. That is how we will understand our past and present. Oral history is a way to start the process, it is not, however, the end.

NOTES


2 On the term "multivocal" see Bakhtin 1981.

3 Much of this discussion follows from a reading of James V. Wertsch 2002.

4 Ong 1991. See also the essays in Tannen 1982.

5 For insight into the complexity and continuing problematic see Briggs 2001: 911–922.

6 See, for example the essays in Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous South American Perspectives on History, edited by Jonathan D. Hill (1988).

7 It should be borne in mind that in the following discussion the two distinct visions of history when articulated and expressed are done so with a discursive situation of inequality. A point made in a somewhat different context by Edward Said (1983: 48–50).

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RONALD J. GRELE
DIRECTOR
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
COLOMBIA UNIVERSITY
rjg5@columbia.edu