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Oral History Association

Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History: A Reconnaissance into Method and Theory
Author(s): Gary Y. Okihiro
Source: *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 9 (1981), pp. 27-46
Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Oral History Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675323
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ORAL HISTORY REVIEW 9 (1981), pp. 27-46

Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History: A Reconnaissance into Method and Theory

GARY Y. OKIHIRO

While ethnic historians have utilized oral history for a number of years, in varying degrees of sophistication, few have addressed themselves to the methodological problem of oral history as a tool for recovering history or the theoretical problem of what constitutes history which oral history proposes to answer. The intent of this paper is a modest one. It synthesizes the scattered body of literature on oral history method and seeks to show that oral history is not only method, but also is theory, in the loose sense of the word, and a way of conceptualizing history. The paper, therefore, is mainly concerned with the writing of history—particularly ethnic history—and is neither a primer on how to set up an ethnic oral history program nor a critical analysis of existing ones or the extant literature in ethnic studies. It is an essay on the writing of

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history and oral history as method and theory and is a reminder of oral history's significance to ethnic history.

The Writing of History

History is the knowledge of human beings in time. Marc Bloch argued that even if history were indifferent to political man/woman and were unable to promote social change, it would be justified by its necessity for the full development of human beings.[1] Still, history would be incomplete if it did not eventually help us to lead better lives. Historical explanation derives, in the first instance, from our need for explanation but thereafter enables us to act reasonably. Accordingly, this humanistic history advocated by Bloch springs from a desire to satisfy human intellectual needs/curiosity through an explanation of human lives—the human condition—for the guidance of human action.

Both of these aims in history—the needs for explanation and human guidance—require that historians reconstruct and explicate historical reality freed from the oppression of myths and lies. That objective reality, however, is independent of the historian's consciousness and may not even be approached. In his well-known 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association, Carl Becker expressed an extreme position on that subject. According to Becker, history which is past reality complete and unchanging is distinct from our knowledge of history which is merely our conception of that historical reality incomplete and subject to change. Thus, he concluded, every man was his own historian.[2]

Two decades later, C. Vann Woodward objected to Becker's relativism. While conceding that myths may influence human activity and constitute a part of intellectual history, Woodward nonetheless maintained that they must be separated from

[1]Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), pp. 9-10. See also, Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957). Cf. Staughton Lynd, "Guerilla History in Gary," *Liberation* 14 (October 1969):17-20, who argues that the reason for "guerilla history," or history from the bottom up, is to raise political consciousness and to promote action.

[2]Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (January 1932):221-36.

historical reality, the object toward which historians strive.[3] As his own work on segregation in the South underscored,[4] individuals may well behave on the basis of misconceptions or myths; these may constitute reality for them, but it was Woodward's contention that the historian must distinguish between those subjective perceptions and objective reality.

While in accord with Woodward's strictures on the subject, I share the sentiments voiced by those like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; Jan Vansina; Studs Terkel; and Staughton Lynd to the effect that the historian must shed intellectual arrogance which presumes that s/he knows better than the historical actors themselves or that nonliterate peoples have no conception of history.[5]

Still, a revival of the old extreme relativism in the form of what Gene Wise has labeled as "perspectivist history" is ill-conceived if the distinction is blurred between historical reality and individual reality.[6] Stanley Elkins's Sambo might have been reality to some southern whites who only saw that profile of black people,[7] but it was not historical reality to blacks in their accounts of plantation life. What blacks emphasize are the subjects of slave rebellions and the deceptions played on white masters. Sambo was not, then, an internalized image, as proposed by Elkins, but was merely a mask for survival.[8] The contrast here is elucidating. Elkins's thesis was derived from the traditional plantation sources—records,

[3]C. Vann Woodward, *American Attitudes Toward History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955).

[4]C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), demonstrates that point by showing how widely believed lies of the past have shaped Southern opinions of the future.

[5]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian as Participant," in *Historical Studies Today,* eds. Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), pp. 393-412; Jan Vansina, "Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa," *Daedalus* 100 (Spring 1971):442-68; Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); and Staughton Lynd, ed., "Personal Histories of the Early CIO," *Radical America* 5 (May-June 1971):49-76.

[6]Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1973); Arthur A. Hansen and David A. Hacker, "The Manzanar Riot: An Ethnic Perspective," *Amerasia Journal* 2 (Fall 1974):112-57.

[7]Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[8]Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), pp. 5-6; Ann Lane, ed., *The Debate Over Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

diaries, letters, et cetera—while the refutation came from the people themselves, the oral traditions of black folk. Further, the distinction between individual or group reality and historical reality is a necessary and liberating one.

Historians generally agree that historical explanations are really only propositions placed within a general interpretive framework postulated by the historian. "The history of societies," observed E. J. Hobsbaum, "requires us to apply, if not a formalized and elaborate model of such structures, then at least an approximate order of research priorities and a working assumption about what constitutes the central nexus or complex of connections of our subject, though of course these things imply a model. Every social historian does in fact make such assumptions and holds such priorities."[9] At the very first, therefore, historical research presumes that there is direction and purpose and that it is not value free.

The apparent paradox is that historians argue for the reconstruction of historical reality while, at the same time, they also admit that historical research begins with assumptions; and, in fact, they advocate the construction of models and theories to explain reality. If, however, one agrees that historical reality behaves in a systematic fashion, then theory which most closely resembles that reality best explains it; this is because theory provides boundaries for the system; identifies its elements, structure, and function; proposes explanations; poses questions; and provides a test of logical consistency for explanations. Even if the theory is divorced from reality, it at least provides expectations, things for the historian to look for; and if these are not found, the model can be modified accordingly.[10] The historian must, therefore, be sensitive and receptive to whatever the historical evidence may reveal.

A diagram of the process by which history is written is displayed in figure 1.

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[9]E. J. Hobsbaum, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971):31.

[10]John Habakkuk, "Economic History and Economic Theory," in *Historical Studies*, eds. Gilbert and Graubard, pp. 42-43; and Robert P. Baker, "Labor History, Social Science, and the Concept of Working Class," *Labor History* 14 (Winter 1973):98-105.

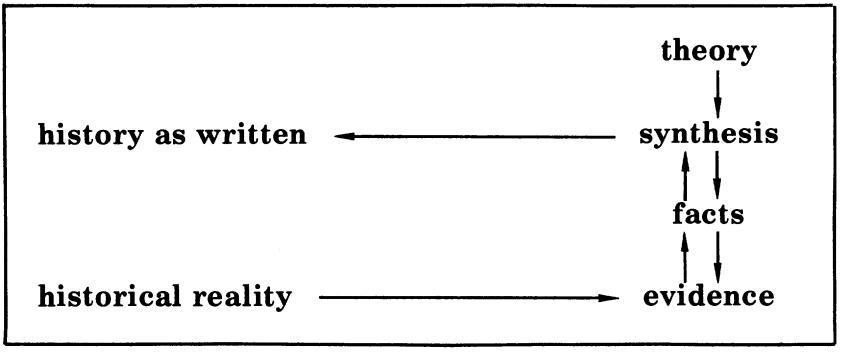

Fig. 1. The writing of history. From Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 20-23.

The Nature of Historical Evidence

While maintaining a receptive mind, the historian must also view the historical evidence critically. Apart from cultural and physical artifacts such as pottery, bones, and so forth, there are two broad categories of historical evidence—written documents and oral documents. Both of these varieties share common elements which are of concern to the historian. Historical documents derive from humans who have biases and prejudices, selective perceptions and memories, incomplete and limited powers of observation, and fallible memories. Further, people undergo changes over time and are subject to external influences and manipulation and, as such, are mirrors of their time and environment.

Besides these common human qualities which pervade historical documents, there is the question of audience to which the document is addressed. This assumes that historical documents are purposeful and that those purposes may determine, in a deliberate or unconscious way, the final shape of the document in which facts may be altered, emphases misplaced, or information suppressed. The historian must, therefore, distinguish between the behavioral or apparent meaning of the document and the ideational or internal, and thus hidden, meaning.[11]

[11]Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 9-10.

Because of these characteristics of historical documents, they cannot stand alone nor can they "speak for themselves." They are, in fact, parts of a human-communications system which consists of a network of elements within a pervasive environment over time. Thus, in historical documents, the critical historian must identify the author of the document in an identified position or vantage point at an identified moment.[12] The task, therefore, is a mapping of the terrain through a sociology of the systems or network to identify its elements and determine their relationships at a particular moment in time. That process, termed internal textual criticism, enables the historian to make a more valid evaluation of the reliability of the historical evidence.

When several historical documents are compared with each other, we say that the historian is engaged in external textual criticism. The comparative method of documentary evaluation is indispensable in reconstructing historical reality; for by comparing several texts, one is able to see variation, contradictions, and similarities. From that comparison, then, and through internal textual criticism and theory, the historian is better able to approach historical reality.

The reliance on theory increases as the quantity of historical documents diminishes because the less the number of witnesses to support, contradict, or modify a particular version, the greater the degree of uncertainty. Besides quantity, the quality or nature of the evidence may determine the extent for the need for theory. Thus, for example, one objective and perceptive witness is usually more valuable than three witnesses who had a particular ax to grind although that in itself could be illuminating;[13] and if the weight of the evidence supports a point of view which does not correspond with the historian's view of reality, the evidence may be used selectively to make it conform to the historian's theory of historical reality.

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[12]Jurgen Ruesch, "The Observer and the Observed: Human Communication Theory," in *Toward a Unified Theory of Human Behavior,* ed. Roy R. Grinker (New York: Basic Books, 1956), pp. 36-54.

[13]James W. Wilkie and Edna Monzon de Wilkie, "Dimensions of Elitelore: An Oral History Questionnaire," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 1 (Summer 1975):83; Saul Benison, "Oral History and Manuscript Collecting," *Isis* 53 (1963):113-17.

The end product of that process, history as written, may in an extreme case not even resemble the documents from which it was drawn; but the historian may claim that the interpretation is a closer approximation of historical reality because the theory more closely conforms to that reality. Some may see that claim as intellectual arrogance while others may view it as a breakthrough in interpretation; it depends on their world view or theory of history. Historical debate is fueled by the scarcity of reliable evidence—the lesser the amount of reliable evidence, the greater the dependence on theory and the greater the dependence on theory, the greater the opportunity for debate.

Types of Oral Documents

While sharing certain common features, oral documents are not identical to written ones. There is an important distinction which is of concern to the oral historian. The author of a written document is usually no longer living when the document is used by a historian—a feature of various privacy and ethical codes. In contrast, oral documents are derived from living persons; at least the initial recording of any such document on tape or paper is a product of living persons in conversation. Thus, whereas written documents are often referred to as dead letters, oral documents are generally styled living testimonies.

The difference here can be an important one if, as is commonly the case, a historian generates oral documents which s/he subsequently uses for historical interpretation. This is because the archival historian is limited to the written word and cannot go beyond what the author of a given document thought, what s/he thought happened or ought to happen, or what s/he wanted others to think happened; in other words, the distinction between the behavioral and ideational is blurred; and the historian is uncertain of the historicity of the evidence. On the other hand, the oral historian who employs a document which s/he has created with an interviewee is able to observe human behavior firsthand in all its complexity and under varying circumstances; and s/he is able to engage in dialogue with the historical actor.

Of course, this interaction between historian and historical actor can both illuminate and obscure historical reality. While a greater degree of precision may be obtained by direct observation and communication, greater uncertainty may also arise from the historian's role in altering behavior or in predetermining the responses by the nature of the questions or from the historian's diminished capacity to be objective because of any friendship so cultivated.[14]

There are several varieties of oral documents. Personal reminiscence or oral history is the most elemental of these. Oral history is the recollections of a single individual who participated in or was an observer of the events to which s/he testifies. The document, therefore, derives from the historical actor him/herself or from an eyewitness. When oral history is passed on to another person, usually of a succeeding generation in that family or lineage, it becomes oral tradition.[15] Thus, oral tradition is derived from a transmission of testimony vertically. If that tradition spreads horizontally to a wider, definable group of people, it is referred to as folklore or elitelore, depending on the social class of the group.[16]

As indicated at the outset, this paper is limited to a discussion of oral history, and the distinction between that type of oral evidence and the other varieties such as oral tradition, folklore/elitelore, legend, epic, fable, and myth should be kept in mind.[17]

Oral History

Despite the claim that oral history is history, no more, no less, the distinctions remain between individual perceptions of

[14]Berkhofer, *Behavioral Approach,* pp. 10-11, 14-17; Daniel Aaron, "The Treachery of Recollection: The Inner and Outer History," in *Essays on History and Literature,* ed. Robert H. Bremner (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), pp. 7-10, 16-17.

[15]For definitions of oral tradition, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology,* trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

[16]Wilkie and Monzon de Wilkie, "Dimensions of Elitelore," pp. 82-83; Richard M. Dorson, "Oral Tradition and Written History," in *American Folklore and the Historian,* ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 129-44.

[17]See Vansina, *Oral Tradition,* pp. 157-60, for definitions of legend, epic, fable, and myth.

historical reality and historical reality and between the process by which archival history is written and by which history derived from oral documents is written. The latter process is more complex than archival history, as is evident by contrasting figure 2 with figure 1.

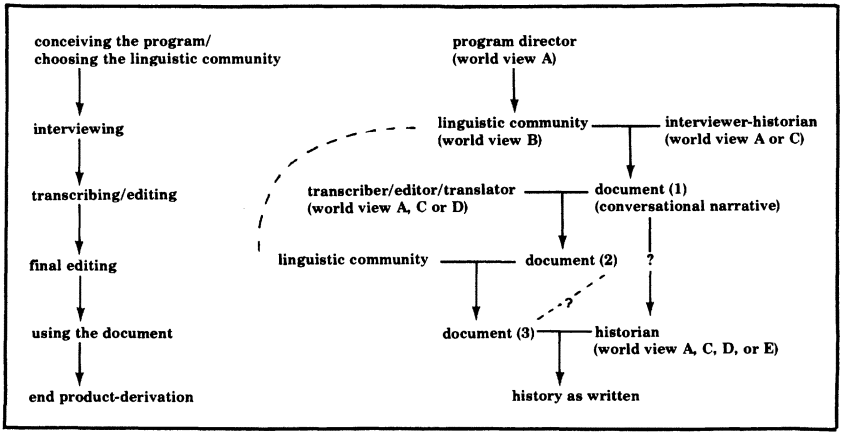

Fig. 2. Steps in oral history

The program director is the person who conceptualizes the oral history program, its purposes and direction. The director's world view or idea of history helps determine the linguistic community selected. ("Linguistic community" herein refers to those who share linguistic symbols and patterns of articulation, and a common world view and experiences.) Thus, for example, Joe Grant Masaoka, the director of the oral history collection of the Japanese American Research Project housed at the University of California, Los Angeles, generally chose to interview those who reflected his point of view about such controversial issues as the causes and conduct of the World War II evacuation and incarceration of West Coast Japanese Americans.[18] In that way, the collection to a large extent mirrored Masaoka's perceptions.

[18]Gary Y. Okihiro, *The Oral History Tapes of the Japanese American Research Project, Tapes 1-112: A Survey* (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, 1974), pp. iv-vi. The collection reflects a point of view characterized as a JACL-WRA interpretation. See Gary Y. Okihiro, "Japanese Resistance in America's Concentration Camps: A Reevaluation," *Amerasia Journal* 2 (Fall 1973):20-34, and Hansen and Hacker, "Manzanar Riot."

The selected individuals, however, need not be comprehensive nor statistically representative of the wider linguistic community from which they originate. Oral historians realize that the interview is a limited document. At the same time, they maintain that a given individual has as much right to be heard as anyone else and that his/her history is worthy of being recorded.[19] The difference is in one's conception of what constitutes history.

On the other hand, the oral historian (i.e., one who is a consumer of the interviews s/he has conducted) does not merely regurgitate the contents of the interview. As noted above, the historian must examine the oral document critically, both internally and externally and place that document within his/her theoretical framework. Thus, the oral historian must keep clearly in mind the distinction between an individual's right to be heard and the writing of history. The individual's perception of history need not necessarily coincide with historical reality. The oral historian is not a mere publicist of individual perceptions; the ultimate goal is the reconstruction of historical reality.

The second step in oral history, the interview, involves at least two different world views, that of the linguistic community and that of the interviewer or oral historian. A concern, therefore, is with these world views. Are they parallel, or do they clash, and what are the implications if they do not correspond? These questions are of particular relevance in cross-cultural situations in which the conceptions of what constitutes history differ.

When I did my fieldwork in Botswana, Africa, in 1974-75, at first, hoping not to bias the response, I invariably began with an open-ended question like "Tell me about the history of the Bakwena (the people I was studying)." The responses to that question were always very general and vague and indicated that the interviewees had little knowledge of Bakwena history. After numerous such disappointing interviews, I became

[19]See, for example, Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); and Louis M. Starr, "Studs Terkel and Oral History," *Chicago History* 3 (Fall 1974):123-26.

discouraged and began to think that no one in the community had a deep and clear understanding of history. Because I was getting nowhere with that question, I began to pursue a different tack by asking more localized questions about the interviewee, his/her family, lineage, and clan. And as the information gushed forth, it became apparent to me that our conceptions of what constituted history did not correspond. The people's view was limited to one's family, lineage, and kin while my conception was one of nation or "tribe"; and because of our different world views, there was a restricted flow of information, and I labored under false impressions.

A second concern arising from the interview situation is the extent to which external factors influence the responses. It is a recognized fact that the setting in which the interview is held, the nature of the questions, and even the appearance of the interviewer may bias responses and restrict the flow of information. Various authors have noted how a setting unfamiliar to the interviewee or a highly formalized list of questions tends to inhibit communication and how class- or culture-bound assumptions, mode of speech, or dress has a similarly stultifying effect.[20] In addition, the oral historian must concern him/herself with the motives of the interviewee in agreeing to be interviewed. Studs Terkel, for instance, pays his interviewees; the question then arises, to what extent does reimbursement or the promise of publication influence the nature of the responses? Certain bands of Bushmen (San) in southern Africa, frequently sought out by anthropologists, have grown astute in handling their visitors, giving them answers which the anthropologists want to hear in return for gifts.

One proposed solution to the problems of cross-cultural research has been participant observation. Oscar Lewis, in his studies of poverty and families, proposes that to understand the culture of the poor it is necessary to live with them, learn

[20]Donald C. Swain, "Problems for Practitioners of Oral History," *American Archivist* 28 (January 1965):66-67; William W. Cutler III, "Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing," *Historical Methods Newsletter* 3 (June 1970):3-4; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Introduction," in *Envelopes of Sound,* ed. Ronald J. Grele (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1975), pp. 2-3; and Victor Nee and Brett Nee, *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. xiv.

the language and customs, and identify oneself with their frustrations and aspirations.[21] That method stands in marked contrast to those studies done by Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, who relied on census data rather than engaging in ethnographic field research among the people themselves.[22] Then, too, there is the case of Victor and Brett Nee whose 1972 publication *Longtime Californ'* represents the most notable Asian American book to date using oral history. While claiming that it was an advantage to be outsiders because they could stand above local partisan conflict, the Nees nonetheless found that not being residents of Chinatown and not knowing Cantonese or other dialects restricted their full entry into the community and, no doubt, resulted in a less-than-complete picture of San Francisco Chinatown.[23]

Because of the many opportunities for distortions to arise in the interview, oral historians are cautioned to familiarize themselves with the extensive literature on interviewing techniques and to be aware of the various external factors which may influence the responses.[24] Further, they are urged to make thorough research preparations concerning the interviewee and subject matter before each session to provide the basis for a productive and meaningful conversation.[25] Oral historians maintain that the knowledge derived from those background researches coupled with the empathy and sensitivity developed through participant observation enables them to elicit signifi-

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[21]Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961); and *La Vida: A Puerto-Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966). Still, there are obvious limits to the efficacy of participant observation. For instance, it can never transform the researcher into the observed.

[22]Charles A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 101.

[23]Nee and Nee, *Longtime Californ'*, pp. xiv-xv, xx.

[24]See, for example, Lewis Anthony Dexter, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970); William H. Banaka, *Training in Depth Interviewing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Alfred Benjamin, *The Helping Interview* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969); and Robert K. Merton, Patricia Kendall, and Marjorie Fiske, *The Focused Interview* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956).

[25]Saul Benison, "Reflections on Oral History," *American Archivist* 28 (January 1965):73; Cutler, "Accuracy in Oral History," p. 4; and Ronald J. Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in *Envelopes of Sound,* ed. Grele, pp. 130-31.

cant and valid historical documents and to reconstruct historical reality.

As noted by Ronald Grele, the primary theoretical concern in writings on oral history has been the possibility for distortion in the interview while little discussion has focused on the exact nature of the oral document which is the end product of that interview. The document, observed Grele, is not simply a transcript or tape; nor is it an autobiography, biography, or memory; rather, it is a conversational narrative—conversational because it is a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee and narrative because it is a form of exposition. There are three sets of relationships in this conversational narrative: (1) internal to the interview, consisting of its linguistic and literary structure; (2) external to the text, the relationship created by interaction of interviewer and interviewee; and (3) external to the text, the relationship between the interviewee and the wider community which is both his/her audience and molder of his/her historical consciousness.[26]

All three relationships are enormously complex, but by untangling them invaluable insights can be gained. A linguistic analysis of the text, for example, may contribute toward a cultural definition of class; for, as demonstrated by William Labov, among ethnic groups and social classes there is a tendency of speakers to conform to certain unique patterns of speech.[27] In that way, those groups maintain their ethnic and class identity.

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee involves a reflexive process by which the interviewee's view of history is developed in relation to the historian's view, while the historian's questions, in turn, are developed in response to the interviewee's answers. Thus, *The Autobiography of Malcolm*

[26]Grele, "Movement Without Aim," pp. 131-33, 135-37; Cutler, "Accuracy in Oral History," p. 7; Saul Benison, "Oral History: A Personal View," in *Modern Methods in the History of Medicine,* ed. Edwin Clark (London: Athlone Press, 1971), p. 291; and Lynd, "Personal Histories," pp. 50-51, all touch upon this subject; but they do not deal with its theoretical implications.

[27]William Labov, "Phonological Correlates of Social Stratification," *American Anthropologist* 66 (December 1964):164-76; and *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966). See also, Baker, "Labor History," pp. 98-105.

X is not an autobiography; rather, it is the mutual creation of two men, Malcolm X and Alex Haley.[28] The task of the oral historian is to analyze carefully that relationship between interviewer and interviewee to understand what kind of communication is taking place, what meaning is being conveyed, and what mutual influences are at work in the shaping of the conversation.

The relationship between the interviewee and the wider community involves the ideological or theoretical context within which words or phrases are placed, the presence or absence of concepts, and the individual's vision of history. To extricate the interviewee from both the interviewer and his/her wider community, then, is an exceedingly complex and demanding task. But by being able to direct questions at the interviewee's conceptions of history and historical change, the oral historian, unlike the archival historian, is able to arrive at a deeper understanding of the people and their history.[29]

The end product of the interaction between interviewer-historian and linguistic community-interviewee is oral document (1) (see figure 2) defined as a conversational narrative and normally in the form of a tape recording. Next comes the transcription, editing, and sometimes translating of that recording onto paper.

When Allan Nevins, considered to be the founder of oral history in the United States, set up the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in 1948, he at first conceived his task to be a simple one. He interviewed well-known individuals about significant events, had the tapes transcribed onto paper, and saw the transcription as the raw stuff of which history would be written. The tapes were then erased, keeping only a small segment to give the flavor of the interview. During the transcription phase, there was free editing of the text which included the striking out of words and phrases.[30]

Later, on reflection, Nevins's procedure was seen to have posed serious methodological problems. The historian's inter-

[28]Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

[29]Grele, "Movement Without Aim," pp. 135-42.

[30]Kessler-Harris, "Introduction," pp. 1-2.

vention in transcribing and editing effectively altered the text so that entire meanings could be lost or changed. Thus, oral historians were cautioned to make certain that the transcriber faithfully recorded what was on the tape, including pauses, laughter, and coughs. In addition, the interviewer must be sure that everything which took place during the interview was recorded because oftentimes in the course of the interview the participants took a break, the duration for which the recorder was turned off. But a number of important things may transpire or be said during that period of relaxation. Thus, the interviewer was advised to keep the recorder on at all times.[31] And finally, the original tape recording must be kept intact for future reference.

Despite these cautions, there still remains the possibility of distortions in the transcribed text which may be the result of fatigue, hearing impairment, or misperceptions caused by divergent world views. This last factor is even more pronounced if the text is being translated as well as transcribed; translation, of course, introduces a whole new set of opportunities for distortion.

The end result of this interaction between transcriber and document (1) (see figure 2) is document (2) which is, ideally, an exact replica of the voices on the tape recording in written form. The usual procedure is then to give document (2) back to the interviewee for final editing. This is normally done because of the interviewee's ethical right to see the text before final release and out of courtesy to him/her who can if s/he so wishes delete or retract words, phrases, or expressions made during the interview. In effect, the interviewee acts as his/her own censor. Document (3) (see figure 2) is the end product of this interaction between interviewee and document (2), and the documents may or may not be the same.

Document (3) is used by the historian in the same way as other historical documents are used, as diagramed in figure 1; the text is critically examined both internally and externally,

[31]Gould P. Colman, "Oral History—An Appeal for More Systematic Procedures," *American Archivist* 28 (January 1965):79-83.

and the final outcome of that interaction is history as written.[32] There is little doubt, from the process outlined above, that oral documents are qualitatively different from written ones; there exist more possibilities for distortions to arise, and they are more complex and hazardous to use. At the same time, however, oral history provides a unique opportunity for the writing of Bloch's humanistic vision of history, a people's history.

Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History

> This work is an impression and the search for a silenced voice, a crucial part in the chorus of American voices.
>
> Black woman, silent, almost invisible in America, has been speaking for three hundred years in pantomime or at least in a borrowed voice. She has moved silently through the mythological roles forced upon her—from chattel to Mammy to Matriarch. She has solaced and fortified the entire South of the United States, black and white, male and female, a South which reveres and heeds her in secret, which confides in her and trusts her to rear its children, black and white, yet which—like the rest of America—has never asked her to speak, to reveal her private history, her knowledge, her imaginings, never asked her participation in anything but maintenance of humanity by way of the back door.[33]

The writing of ethnic history is both necessary and possible. It need neither be justified nor defended. The collective voice of the people, once silenced, has a right to be heard. Oral history is not only a tool or method for recovering history; it also is a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that this history must be written. At the same time, however, this is not to ignore the importance of elitelore and the history of the ruling class, nor does it intend to equate oral history with the working class and written documents with the ruling class. Instead, the point is that there has been an overemphasis on the elite at the

[32]See Hansen and Hacker, "Manzanar Riot"; Charles T. Morrissey, "Truman and the Presidency—Records and Oral Recollections," *American Archivist* 28 (January 1965):53-61; and Gould Colman, "Theoretical Models and Oral History Interviews," *Agricultural History* 41 (July 1967):255-66, for examples of how oral documents can complement written documents in the writing of history.

[33]Josephine Carson, *Silent Voices: The Southern Negro Woman Today* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), p. 1.

expense of the masses and that this imbalance has resulted in the writing of mythical histories.

Ethnic history does not deny the political importance of focusing on the dominant (oppressor) group in society and those institutions through which the majority represses and exploits the minority. Rather, ethnic history is the first step toward ultimate emancipation; for by freeing themselves from the bonds of a colonized history, they will be able to see their true condition, their own history. From that realization and from an understanding of the majority group and their institutions, minorities can proceed to devise means for their total liberation.

Oral history has been shown to be an invaluable means by which to recover the past of the inarticulate—women, the working class, ethnic and racial minorities, and people in nonliterate societies[34]—because these groups rarely leave written records of their lives; the meager documentary evidence about them is usually biased against them and rarely penetrates to the ideational, and they have largely been ignored by historians who view history in terms of "big men" and "important" events.[35] Besides being a tool for recovering history, oral history forges a link between the academy and the community through ethnographic field techniques and participant observation; and it has a potential for raising social consciousness and can provide strategies for social change.[36]

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[34]Richard M. Dorson, "Ethnohistory and Ethnic Folklore," *Ethnohistory* 8 (Winter 1961):12-30; Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Lee Rainwater, Richard P. Coleman, and Gerald Handel, *Workingman's Wife: Her Personality, World, and Life Style* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1959); Lynd, "Guerilla History"; Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); William Lynwood Montell, *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1970); Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974); Fry, *Night Riders;* John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and Daniel Francis McCall, *Africa in Time Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1964).

[35]Alice M. Hoffman, "Who Are the Elite, and What is a Non-Elitist?," *Oral History Review* (1976), pp. 1-5.

[36]Arthur J. Vidich, Joseph Bensman, and Maurice R. Stein, eds., *Reflections on Community Studies* (New York: John Wiley & Sons: 1964); Lynd, "Guerilla History"; Kessler-Harris, "Introduction," p. 4; and Willa K. Baum, "Building Community Identity Through Oral History—A New Role for the Local Library," *California Librarian* 31 (October 1970):271-84.

Terkel noted that the absence of knowledge about the past perpetuates myths about it and contributes to maintaining of the status quo.[37] A graphic illustration of that is the Republic of South Africa, where the official version of history is used to justify the repressive system of apartheid. Staughton Lynd, in his studies of American labor history, observed that rank-and-file unionists wanted to know the history of the 1930s so they could respond to the present upsurge of labor militancy in the CIO.[38] That knowledge was obtained by interviewing old-time activists; and, armed with those insights, the militants were able to understand how CIO unions had so rapidly grown bureaucratic and conservative and thereupon to devise effective tactics in seeking change. Socialist historians, though, like historians and intellectuals in general, must strive for maximum objectivity. Myths, both ideologically and racially inspired, must not be permitted to distort the historical landscape.[39]

The historiographical development in African history is of particular significance and relevance.[40] African history was first written by Europeans who saw Africans, in the words of the distinguished British historian Sir Reginald Coupland, as having no history and as having "stayed, for untold centuries, sunk in barbarism . . . [so that] the heart of Africa was scarcely beating."[41] African history, accordingly, was derived exclusively from European archives and the reminiscences and accounts of white colonialists, missionaries, and travelers. This variety of history portrayed Africa as being dark and peopled by primitive, faceless hordes; African history began with the arrival of the European who brought Christianity, enlightenment, and civilization. The focus, therefore, was on the white man who was the historical actor; and the African was merely a docile object to be manipulated.

During the 1950s, a new generation of historians broke away from that European tradition, pointing out that, besides its

[37]Kessler-Harris, "Introduction," p. 4.

[38]Lynd, "Guerilla History," pp. 17-20.

[39]Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

[40]For a similar development in Afro-American historiography, see Fry, *Night Riders*, pp. 3-29.

[41]Basil Davidson, *The African Past* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964), p. 4.

mythical qualities, the interpretation was not truly African history but merely the history of Europeans in Africa. Further, the official version was used to justify the colonization of Africa by Europeans. The revisionist historians sought to rewrite the history of Africa by seeing Africans as historical actors and as human beings; but the traditional archival and published sources provided only brief, superficial, and biased glimpses of African society. That impasse was finally broken when the historians went into the field to record the oral traditions of the African people themselves; new insights were gained and a more humane variety of African history was written.

The primary characteristic of "colonized" history is that it is the view of outsiders and not the people themselves. The historical evidence upon which that variety of history draws is from the colonizer. Usually this is in the form of written documents—letters, diaries, and reminiscences of visitors—which describe the author's position among the people and his/her perceptions of that people. For various reasons, from the presumption of the primacy of written documents over oral ones to the assumption that the elite are the only ones who matter historically, the people themselves are ignored and are not asked about their perceptions of history. As a consequence, the actions of the colonizers are magnified so they become the central figures in the narrative; they are portrayed as the historical actors while the people are rendered as passive, powerless objects.

What, then, are the implications for American ethnic history? To varying degrees, the written history of ethnic minorities in our country has suffered under the yoke of colonial oppression. Our collective histories have long been colonized, and our self-perceptions have been distorted by historical documents written by strangers who have sojourned among us but who have little knowledge of us. Oral history offers an alternative way of conceptualizing history and a means by which to recover that past. And while oral history does not maintain that each individual's view of history is equally legitimate or that every voice must be heard, it does argue that by going directly to the people for historical documents, a more valid variety of history

can be written. Oral history proposes that we rewrite our history to capture the human spirit of the people, to see how ethnic minorities solved or failed to solve particular problems, how they advanced or resisted change, and how they made or failed to make better lives for themselves and their children. In short, oral history proposes nothing less than the writing of a people's history, liberated from myths and imbued with humanity.