



Lessons from the Past: Listening to Our Stories, Reading Our Lives – The Place of Oral Histories in Our Lives

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Abstract

This chapter examines the role oral histories can and should play in moving marginalized populations and voices from the footnotes of history. By centering oral histories as an essential methodological tool in the writing of history, researcher and practitioners can challenge monolithic readings of lives and histories, especially from communities of color. Similarly, the chapter challenges the reader and practitioners to think of such methodology as sites of resistance, deconstructing power structures that relegated these voices to the margins. Further, this chapter highlights the role of educators/researchers in working alongside practitioners and students to bring in those voices, yes, but similarly to engage in ethical approaches in the collecting or engaging of those histories.

Keywords

Oral history · Memory · Corroboration · Voice · Silenced history

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How we remember is just as important as *what* we remember and even *why* we remember. But like any other institution or community in the United States, even memories are prescribed values. And like any nation, its collective memory is imagined, depended on a social hierarchy that further silences those living and *remembering* on the margins. For communities of color, our histories are often relegated to the margins, or existing within other community's memories, virtually forced to exist as footnotes in the writing of those histories. As communities often denied a sense of belonging, historically, even the archives work to exclude our contributions and realities. For scholars of color or even those working to reclaim the past for these very communities, piecing together what history has worked to exclude becomes a central and critical theme in our work. By contextualizing the role that historians and historians of education, particularly those from often silenced and marginalized communities' play in reclaiming the past, it becomes clear that oral history as a methodology in educational research has embraced the project of reconstructing a silenced past. For many, storytelling has been central to our community's survival and must now work to help those communities survive history. Further, the role of educators/researchers in working alongside practitioners and students to bring in those voices is a critical part of this method and necessarily engages scholars in the ethical approaches in collecting or reclaiming those histories. Part of oral history, as a methodology, is understanding how to reread history or understand the historical erasure that has negated certain communities a sense of belonging or inclusion in larger historical readings. Important questions of oral historians include asking for whose gain are these histories being collected, and how will researchers be mindful of their own privilege and positionality in conducting this work.

In educational research, there is a need to bring in the use of oral history to better frame the realities of those communities we hope to engage with and for and to also understand how to move forward in our individualized work. Leading texts on oral history methodologies and the history of American education fail to fully capture the histories of African American and Latina/Latinos, and when they are included, they are not central to the story. Richard Aldrich calls for educational historians to recognize their duty to the field, especially as we move to a broader inclusion in the collecting and writing of educational histories in the twenty-first century. Aldrich argues that as educational historians, we should function within three frameworks: duty to the people of the past, duty to our own generation, and duty to search after the truth (Aldrich 2003). As Aldrich further notes, the absence of particular groups (women, children, and those living in the margins) is further complicated in how we define formal education. Aldrich reminds us, "A very considerable amount of teaching and learning takes place outside formal educational institutions—via the media, through friendships, in the home, the family, the workplace, the club, the street" (2003, p. 135). Similarly, a considerable amount of storytelling occurs within those informal settings, and the stories risk being lost. What then shall we contend with in our work as researchers, to ensure that we don't further silence these stories, and instead center these experiences as critical tools to transform and inform education research? For as Thomas King warns us, "The truth about stories,

sometimes that's all we are" (King 2003). It is important to note that sometimes stories are all we have, especially when communities of color are absent from the physical archives.

Lessons from the Past

The rise and wide availability of technology such as tape recorders, particularly in the early to mid-twentieth century, allowed for the rapid increase in the collecting of community and individual voices and stories. It is not a coincidence that following local, national, and international tragedies, we see a trend in the collecting of oral histories. Survivors give us an important and much needed account of their past experiences that come to aid in our understanding how we even arrive at such tragedies. It's that objectivity, and detailed account of a life lived and past understood that distinguishes oral histories from other forms of qualitative research interviewing. The story is in the story itself, and oral historians work to offer the platform for stories to be shared and not necessarily offer a script for interviewees. These interviews, as the Oral History Association reminds us, are "grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events." It is in the asking of historically driven questions that the interviewers work to create a space for interviewees to offer a detailed account of the past, where they serve as the narrator. But more than just the narrator, the interviewee is respected as a partner in the telling of history and is free to do so in their own language, tone, and time. We as interviewers are not free to do what we wish with their words, interpreting their telling of history through our lens and experiences, but instead to engage in the collecting of these stories and writing of history in such a way where their stories are the guide.

Reclaiming the histories that shaped a generation is critical to truly understanding the story of a country or society or even American schools. *Recording* these stories, especially as populations age, is even more imperative. In speaking to survivors of the Nazi regime in Italy, Valerie R. Yow urges us to capture the stories of survivors and witnesses, for "the words of the oral histories become a memorial perhaps more potent than stone" (2005, p. 14). Remembering in many ways is akin to honoring the lives of those who have laid the foundation for us, no matter how brutal or tragic those memories and stories may be. Oral histories allow us to paint a vivid picture and create a narrative of situations and occurrences that have long been forgotten and ignored, and whose documenting may force others to acknowledge their indirect or direct culpability in creating inhospitable spaces for those relegated to the margins. History is a burden, yes, but ignoring it is a bigger hindrance. The collection of oral histories from Holocaust survivors offers a great example on how these stories could extend globally. The Jewish diaspora that expanded across the world post-World War II, in many ways offers a reminder of how histories work across borders and how these communities could remain connected through stories and experiences. It is no coincidence that the rise in organizing and mobilization that occurred across the globe in the postwar years similarly marks a rise in the collecting of oral histories.

As communities find themselves influx, it becomes more apparent that there is a clear need to collect the stories of individuals and document the collective memories of pivotal historical moments. As social historians note, it is no longer the history of important men that should anchor the past, but it is in the lives of ordinary people that we can better contextualize how we think of and remember historical events. Oral histories provide us the tools to do just that.

In the United States, the lives of communities of color have been marked by a history of inequality and violence, in every aspect of their lives from schools, homes, and labor participation, yet these stories are often silenced in the writing of historical text. The shift in the collecting and writing of histories that occurred during the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s encapsulates the need to question the absence of specific populations from early waves of historical projects, and beyond their absence, to critique how these groups (communities of color, in particular) were presented in limited texts under the gaze of others. Oral histories, as seen in the writings of Ronald Grele, allowed for new historical writings by offering “historians the opportunity to create documents were none existed and therefore capture a hidden history, and to more sympathetically understand the viewpoint of the people they studied” (1996, p. 67). Further, family and community histories not only allow us a glimpse of that hidden history but also create the opportunity for scholars in the field to unpack the richness of including these ordinary lives in the writing of extraordinary histories. Families, after all, are the first institutions in which we engage in and come to influence and shape our lives (whether good or not) in immeasurable ways. And communities similarly play a role in the socialization of individuals, and those collective community histories could teach us a lot about who we were and who we hope to become.

Recent works on the history of community formation, labor struggles, and gendered readings of history by and about communities of color and other marginalized populations have been instrumental in reminding us of what has been missing from larger historical works because of the absence of these voices. For example, the recent work of Lori Flores highlights the collective memory of Mexican and Mexican American workers in California. Through the use of oral histories, Flores brings to light the often overlooked history of Latina/Latinos whose work in organizing and mobilizing to confront their status as exploited laborers influenced the larger organizing of Cesar Chavez and others (Flores 2016). Chavez was a leading community and labor rights activist, who worked to improve the working conditions of farmworkers during the mid- to late twentieth century. The collection of oral histories can also inform those working to combat social inequalities and working to protect their communities in the present day about the ways their communities engaged in and survived the past. Mark Naison and Bob Gumbs’ collection of oral histories of African Americans in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City during the first half of the twentieth century challenges monolithic readings of the community, oftentimes seen as troubled, as they capture the rich lives of community members who remember a different history (Naison and Gumbs 2016). As Naison writes, in beginning his interviews he “stumbled upon a large, passionate, and knowledgeable group of people who had been waiting for years to

tell stories of communities long forgotten, communities whose very histories challenge deeply entrenched stereotypes about black and Latino settlement of the Bronx” (2016, xvi). But for every “Bronx tale,” there are hundreds of others indeed forgotten. Stories of community battles around schooling, labor, and survival can inform us how to navigate our present lives and enrich our work as researchers. There needs to be a shift in how we study history and how we write history, especially in relationship to these communities, and understanding how the past exists in multiple versions; one we remember, and one we choose to or are forced to forget. David Glassberg (2001, p. 9) argues that there is a shift in studying and understanding the institutions that “produce history,” to “studying the minds of the individuals where all these versions of the past converge and are understood.” Oral histories allow us the tools to merge history and understand how people, at times forgotten, have worked to make sense of their own lives. And in doing so, it helps us understand the larger historical implications of lives not only as individual choices, but as lives that come to inform our own positions and readings of history.

In his beautiful account on storytelling and family history, historian Richard White reminds scholars that stories make a claim on the past (White 1998, p. 21). Stories then remind us of things otherwise forgotten, but stories can also serve to make a claim to the history we already knew. This means that stories, or oral histories more specifically, can serve to validate what the archives tell us or sometimes do not tell us. Archives are physical remnants of history, reminders of lives lived, and the numerous events that framed those lives. From newspaper accounts, family photographs, letters, and even school records, archives are narratives on their own. But at times, depending solely on archives can leave the researcher with more questions than answers, and may not allow for a thorough discussion on a life lived, or help to fully understand the direct ramifications of events, or even history, on the lives of people. This means remembering archives are everywhere, not merely existing within institutional spaces, or seen as *institutionalized* memories. Oral histories allow the researcher, whether in academia or for those working on community and family projects, to engage deeper with history and to work with archives to challenge monolithic readings of history of how we make meaning of lives and fully represent them. These oral histories can similarly serve as educational tools to fill in the gap for educators, especially K-12 educators, where the textbooks may fail them. Collecting these oral histories to highlight what the archives tell us about communities and events and then become part of the archive themselves; materials to serve either individual interests or future research.

The Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Collection at the University of Oklahoma is a wonderful example of how oral histories can both coexist with (or within) the archives and similarly how the oral histories become their own archives, serving as an opportunity to make larger connections regarding the past that can and should inform the present. The collection serves as a reminder of the history of American Indians in Oklahoma and the ways that various populations experienced and understood their lives through the larger narrative surrounding the history of the state (<https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/whc/duke/>; Jordan 1972). Julia Jordan’s final report on the 5-year project (1967–1972) detailed the overall aims and long-term

goals of the project. But as Johnson herself recognized, the collection would of course serve various research interests, but more importantly, it would include the inquiries “Indian people themselves might have concerning their own history and culture” (Jordan 1972, p. 3). Further, although a few previous studies had already been conducted on Indigenous populations in Oklahoma since the late nineteenth century, Johnson understood the timeliness of the study and need to collect oral histories. Johnson maintained, “there is still valuable material to be collected, though much is already gone and much more will be lost forever when the [then] present generation has passed away” (Jordan 1972, p. 17). Aside from the critical importance of documenting tribal life *for* the benefit of subsequent Indigenous populations themselves, the oral histories part of the Doris Duke collection now are the archives of and for people relegated to the margins. Further, the oral histories that became the archives of populations of marginalized people will then serve as source material for future studies and accounts on life in Oklahoma (or the Oklahoma and Indian Territories before that). From Thomas Britten’s (1997) critical account of American Indians in World War II to Donald Lee Fixico’s (2017) beautiful account on reflections on Indigenous oral history traditions, the Doris Duke collection has served to both inform and challenge the work of existing scholarship. Those stories will continue to facilitate discussions on how the past can continue to inform our relationship as scholars and researchers today.

These testimonies of lives lived both complicate and enforce our understanding of history, becoming “living descendants of our memories” (White 1998, p. 21). The recent collection of family and community oral histories edited by Yoon Pak (2017) offer us a glimpse of how the stories of “ordinary people” can tell us more about who we are as a country, than the archives can sometimes do. In *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives: Oral Histories of (Mis)educational Opportunities in Challenging Notions of Achievement*, Pak reminds us “why capturing oral histories were vital to sustaining not only ourselves but of society as a whole” (2017, p. xix). These stories can exist side by side with the archives, not always in agreement, but working together to illuminate the past in order to survive history. We don’t always need to turn to the archives to invalidate people’s recollection of history and their position within and across history. And similarly, oral histories do not always have to work against what we see and read in the archives. William Schneider reminds us, “external tests of a story’s validity require that we compare the account with other sources” (2002, p. 127). Together, oral history and the archives work together, partners in the telling of history, learning to coexist in order to validate history while not silencing or harming populations. However, there is a with the need to validate stories at times, to ensure a clear and authentic representation of history, what of the community or the life for no physical evidence exist? For communities in constant flux, and who have faced displacement numerous times, how then will their truth be measured? Their stories *are* the archive.

It is important to note that history has many sides, and those sides, whether the oral histories we collect in our families or communities, or the archives we stumble across while conducting research can be true. We experience history differently, depending on our positions, and together oral histories and archives can work to tell

a broader story. This is not to say all stories and histories are valid, for many of us come from communities that have been silenced and erased from larger readings and accounts of history. But instead it is important to note how these methodological approaches can work together to reclaim a past, while simultaneously laying the foundation for the present and future.

Oral History as Methodological Interventions

Aside from enriching our lives as researchers and practitioners, oral histories can serve bigger purposes. For communities living, working, or fighting at the margins, they can both serve as placeholders for the past and work to capture the present. Oral histories serve as archives, living embodiments of histories at times erased or histories people wish to forget. The history of slavery in the United States and the stories of slaves themselves are an illustrative example. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, worked to capture the voices of former slaves, encapsulating not only the important histories but also the language and dialect of former slaves (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>). This project was critical at several levels. First, oral traditions were the means a population violently denied a sense of community, family, and individuality used to capture their lives, as even a written history was denied to them. Similarly, it allowed the population to capture and highlight the language of former slaves, as an example of cultural practices created by and for the population. Because of the lack of physical evidence or limited remnants of their lives during the previous 200-plus years, for many the oral histories are their archives and served to position their lives and voices as critical or central to any reading of American history. For again, what we remember is just as important as to why we remember. In this case, the trauma, violence, and subsequent resilience of former slaves could not or should not be forgotten, and their voices anchor them as active participants in the writing of history. And this is what oral histories should do: provide not just a narrative of a lived experience, although that is important, but also provide a deeper and more nuanced account of the consequences of history.

But there is a misconception that oral histories only serve to contain or sustain the past. Oral histories can and should be utilized in order to better understand how people and communities contend with their present status. The collection of oral histories collected today can help frame or understand the complicated relationship marginalized populations have with current power structures, limiting their full participation. History informs the present in a myriad of ways, and as such, oral histories can link our experiences and inform the way we work to confront or challenge our current positions. With our ever-evolving spaces, for example, communities undergoing gentrification, we can no longer depend on places to ground us or tell our histories. This constant shift in our physical spaces inform our positionalities as we become less and less rooted or see our physical spaces (such as our communities) as inherently part of our collective identities, especially in the

United States. As David Glassberg critiques, “Americans lack a sense of place because they lack a sense of history and commitment to community” (Glassberg 2001, p. 120). Given this shifting nature of global politics, this insight could be applied in an international context. This lack of commitment to community is often seen in the physical erasure of places that tell the stories of communities of color who have been denied a sense of belonging and at times powerless to confront the racial and social hierarchies that have framed their histories and subsequent identities. There then lies a sense of urgency in collecting the oral histories of such communities, as they can serve as markers to ground the histories of these communities as they face displacement and erasure. Oral histories become the living archives of these people and places, and history, especially in the United States, is populated with people, places, and memories long forgotten, with little physical reminders of who we were and how we maneuvered history. Oral histories then can be used to map out the history of people and places and to remind us of how our positions in society (class, gender, race, etc.) inform how we remember and experience history. So even when we can utilize oral histories to reclaim the past, whose memories are deemed valid or valuable are also reminders of social hierarchies and can recreate those very inequalities informed by power. What then is our responsibility as educators and practitioners, in utilizing oral histories as a tool to dismantle power and structural inequalities, or at least reduce the effects of those structures in how we approach our work? That is a question that needs to be addressed, as we can then engage in utilizing oral histories as a methodological intervention that can be used to disrupt power and thus disrupting history.

Today we see both students of history and community members alike engaging in historical recovery efforts that aim to challenge the erasure of diverse voices who in fact were intimately involved with creating collective memories. In the United States especially, there is a need for such a disruption in the master narrative surrounding history and that collective memory that is then responsible for informing a national identity. For example, US history is framed around war and military action, at times utilized to reinforce racial hierarchies (such as the Civil War). Wars, according to David Glassberg, “seem to furnish stories that make popular history” (2001, p. 89). While at the same time the participation of Americans in international war efforts through their membership in the armed forces has been utilized to measure patriotism and individual loyalty to the United States, its relationship to history has similarly served to equate “whiteness” to patriotism. Then what of the thousands of individuals from communities of color and the military companies consisting of only communities of color that have similarly aided in US military interventions and a system that would then systematically work against them. For example, even before extending citizenship rights to the newly acquired islanders, the United States created a military regiment of all Puerto Rican service men, who went on to fight alongside American service men since World War I. Until the release of the 2012 documentary *The Borinqueneers*, very little had been written or known about the regiment, which went on to earn numerous federal recognitions for their service. Although proportionally no other ethnic group was as represented in World War II as were Mexican Americans, both their treatment when they returned back home (for

those who did indeed survive) and their erasure from larger narratives surrounding US involvement in supporting the allied troops are quite contradictory to the values America was supposed to promote. The collection of essays in Maggie Rivás-Rodríguez' *Mexican Americans and World War II* (2005) seeks to reinsert the voices of the over 700,000 Mexican American service men and women who are indeed part of the larger story. Similarly, since 1999, the US Latina and Latino World War II Oral History Project has worked to preserve the voices and contributions of those men and women who were integral to the war efforts, as a way to both preserve a community history and challenge the misconceptions surrounding the history of communities. Since 2010, and now part of the VOCES Oral History Project at the University of Texas Libraries, the project has expanded to include the stories of Latina/Latinos involved in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, helping both preserve the actual voices of veterans and begin work on a physical archive that would include letters and other mementos from those once-silenced communities. Excited to see the contributions of family members and veterans in aiding in collecting these histories, Rivás-Rodríguez is reminded of the importance and urgency in this work, "But we have to wonder: How many more treasures are there in garages and attics that help to tell the story of how U.S. Americans lived through war periods?" (<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/voces/>). And Rivás-Rodríguez is correct in asking what stands to be lost if we do not work to preserve history. These stories, just as national monuments and our collective memories around them, should "prompt us to rethink our assumptions about the memory of war and national identity, and the ways in which a living memory of war passes into the history of a community" (Glassberg 2001, p. 27). But further what lessons do we stand to not learn from if we fail to challenge the monolithic readings of history that have worked to exclude and at times further erase already marginalized communities? And that exclusion becomes a living monument on its own.

Engaging in recovery efforts has become the work of many researchers and of communities seeking to reconceptualize the role of history in their lives. Further, working to preserve the voices of communities through oral history projects could remind us of the future of communities that once flourished and the role of economic and politic shifts that have worked to erase or silence those lives and voices. As communities of color and poor communities further face displacement as their homes and schools are torn down to build housing for the very communities that "Othered" them, or the newest coffee shops, those recorded voices may be the only reminders of lives once lived.

Teaching Others to Remember

The use of oral histories by researchers and practitioners is a necessary methodological step to give voice to individuals who may not be seen as major players in the telling of history or creation of spaces, as well as those whose lives have been affected and informed by the everyday practices of those around them (whether within the family or communities). Further, collecting oral histories, whether family

or community stories, challenges us to weave together a narrative that elevates these communities as intricate to a deeper understanding of loss and (mis)education. Richard White reminds us, “beneath these personal stories simmers an ongoing contest over what America is and means and who gets to define it” (White 1998, p. 6). Similarly, these stories also aid in contextualizing how societies have played a role in continuing to silence the traumas and violence of the past (as was the case in collecting the stories of former slaves in the early twentieth century). There needs to be a shift in how we study history and how we write history, especially in relationship to these communities. For these silenced communities in particular, it is then imperative to begin to listen to these stories and hear lessons from the past. But more so, collecting these stories centers the voices of community members (or even families) as central to capturing or creating a sense of history. Or as Linda Shopes (2015, p. 98) challenges us, to work with “local people to cultivate a useable past, a past that recognizes past struggles for freedom, equality and justice.” It means that engaging with oral histories should serve a purpose that cannot and should not be only measured within academic spaces and texts but to play a critical role in facilitating a community’s or populations sense of ownership over the past and more importantly the future. But these are more than just stories of hardship and/or survival, but community oral histories that can change monolithic readings of history itself and highlight the ways people analyze and synthesize the structures that come to frame their lives and their positions in history.

But before the researcher, student, or community practitioner moves to utilize oral histories as a tool to reclaim the past or ground a community’s claim to the past, we need to interrogate our own understanding of history. What history are we aiming to claim? What history are we returning to? And can we move forward without dismantling the power hierarchies that have informed master narratives of histories? In order to engage in teaching on the importance of oral histories, we must understand how we are all situated within a larger history. For example, for those involved in collecting the oral histories of Latina/Latino service men and women, it is important for them to understand a deeper history of Latina/Latinos in the United States. What communities were these individuals coming from? How was their community’s history part of larger labor or political histories? How were they positioned within the complicated racial discourse of the era? And further, how did their understanding of service and loyalty come to play out in their lived realities when they returned home. Their oral histories can’t stand alone unless we interrogate history. Part of their stories will help unveil a part of history not always present in the pages of textbooks or in larger readings of American history, but understanding their positionality within that history will enrich these projects.

In teaching the importance of oral histories in educational research and also working to assist others to engage in community-based research projects, we must be careful to not recreate or reinforce some of the same structural inequalities that we hope our work will challenge. The voices of marginalized communities should not be limited to the stories we record and write about but also be part in the writing of histories. There is indeed a lack of diversity in academic spaces, where we imagine history to be recorded and supported. And although those structures may be beyond

our concern and although historians of color have increased in number, we could at least work to create more inclusive spaces and opportunities for community-based projects to be better representative of marginalized voices, thus allowing us to move away from ideas of doing research on people and communities and instead work alongside them to recover the histories and voices often forgotten or neglected. Working alongside communities in oral history projects allows for us to be mindful of the way we retell stories and represent the lives and histories of communities. William Schneider reminds us that “getting a story right is not just a matter of how we understand what was said. . . It is also a matter of how we communicate the story to multiple audiences” (2002, p. 147). We must be mindful of how we open up the lives of people to the gaze of others, as there are traditions and histories not easily interpreted for mass consumption. There is an ethics of care that must be present when working with communities in oral history projects, to ensure the story we share with outsiders is as close to a version of the truth communities have shared with us. Allowing them to be partners in the telling of stories to better engage history opens up the possibility for this to occur. We tell stories to share, but what we share must serve as authentic representations of the lives we have engaged with, and history must similarly absorb those stories in the same way. Collecting these stories can be informative, as the interviewee understands their present status as a reading of the past. Who they are today is very much influenced by the life they have lived, and much can be learned from making those connections.

Future Directions and Implications in Oral History

It is important for scholars to not merely recount how organizations and communities evolved and sometimes are dissolved, but to contextualize the ways in which these communities and groups both imagined their own history, and reshape how others remember them. The stories we collect and engage with can contextualize the lived *learned* realities of populations and communities and how these individuals view themselves within a larger political, economic, or social history. Not only do individuals construct their own narratives from memories and experiences, but they present and inform how they view the past and their positions in it. What these stories do, or more importantly what our work as researchers should do, is challenge what is deemed valuable and legitimate scholarship in educational research and in the writing of history and remind us that even in the most ordinary of lives, there is much to be learned from. Engaging with oral histories allows us to do just that. But it is important to remember that the collecting of oral histories is not just something that should occur within or to benefit academic spaces, although that is important in itself. However, it is even more useful to work alongside communities, especially those in which our institutions reside, to reclaim the past and use that knowledge to challenge our reading of the past and misconceptions regarding our lives in the present. Similarly, it allows communities to remind the larger society of the many contributions these lives have made in developing ideas and spaces, even if often erased from the writing of histories. More importantly, it deconstructs or

dismantles power relationships that have negated a sense of justice and belonging for so many, perpetuating the harmful effects of history.

Stories, especially for communities of color in the United States, are the center of life. As Richard White reminds us, “lives are not stories. . . We turn our lives into stories” under our own terms (White, p. 292). Scholars engaging with oral histories should allow interviewees the agency to create their own spaces and frame their own histories, under their own terms. As interviewers, we must work to negotiate the power relations that come into play when researching families and communities. Oral histories allow us to look at our own families and communities as part of major trends in history, not merely existing as subtopics or footnotes in the writing of history. But similarly they must be careful to not create stories where they seek history or validation of history, as their families were acting under their own terms, on their own agendas. This however does not mean that history or our own learned understanding of history, through textbooks and academic training, is not represented in the pages of these stories. What we as historians must be careful not to do is betray one for the benefit of the other.

More so, oral histories could serve as a critical point of departure for us to evaluate both our privileged positions and similarly the role we can play in re-shifting power relationships that place values on some lives while devaluing others. As Valerie Yow reminds us, research projects reinforce to the practitioner that “history is something that happens to them, that it is not just something written in a textbook” (Yow 2005, pp. 253–254). Lives may not be stories, but the critical nature and inclusion of these lives can help us to rewrite the stories that have been written about our communities for many years.

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