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Letra e Voz

INTRODUCTION

This volume brings together essays written over the past two decades on the intersection of oral sources with written texts and the plastic arts. Oral sources have been important elements in every book I have published, even *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*, with its focus on U.S.-French cultural interaction at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Having begun my career as a historian in oral history, the literature that has developed over the years on oral sources has shaped how I think about sources more broadly: how they are formed, how they come to be preserved, and how they might be interpreted as part of a chain of communicative action. Nonetheless, I have resisted writing about oral history. Other writers whose work is now canonical have handled vital methodological questions so well that I saw myself contributing little that would be new or could improve on the excellent work that so many others have done. I found myself in the fortunate position of being able to work with oral sources to explore the past and to develop my interpretations of what happened.

At times, editors have asked me, as the director of a university-based oral history research center or as a historian of U.S. cultural history, to reflect on interpretative challenges inherent to the use of oral sources or on the use of oral history in reconstructing the history of the plastic arts. The essays in this volume were the results of these commissions. The key themes treated in this collection of essays are:

- the inescapably dialogic nature of oral sources and the necessary place for interpretation if the chain of communication captured in an oral history interview is to continue;
- the continuity between different types of sources, linked together in what I have called “circuits of subjectivity”;
- the centrality of institutional communities that provide basic patterns for what various expressive forms say as well as for the life course of those who have found their professional identities within a community

The first three essays in this volume provide theorized perspectives on the place oral sources occupy in a circuit of responses individuals and the communities to which they belong develop as they interpret the worlds in which they live. The first chapter in this book, “Analytic Strategies for Oral History Interviews” (originally published in 2001), starts from the proposition that two distinctive ways of thinking of the past confront each other whenever an interview is recorded, with each participant trying to interpret what the other party is trying to say. Stressing the negotiated, dialogic nature of oral history, I explore how formal narrative analysis has allowed scholars to develop new historical interpretations of the topics discussed in oral history interviews. The focus on oral history as a language act shifts attention onto learned collective behavior that makes communication within and between communities possible. Two contradictory ideas must kept in mind as

one considers the content and structure of oral expressions recorded in an interview: language is a set of rules that impose categories of knowledge upon speakers, but all performative acts are unique expressions that push against the boundaries established by genre, medium, and language.

The second chapter, “Publishing Oral History: Oral Exchange and Print Culture” (2006), develops the idea of oral history as an inherently dialogic process to argue that interpretation is an inherent, inescapable element for each and every person involved in the creation, publication, and reception of oral history interviews. The process of research and publication are links in a larger, continuous chain of dialogic exchanges, one moment of which is captured for the archive in the interview recording and another part of which often leads to publication of interviews, in whole or in part, in print form. The third chapter, “Circuitos de subjetividade: História oral e o objeto de arte” (published originally in *Estudos Históricos* in 2003), begins a discussion of the relationship of oral to other types of sources, including the use of objects and gestural performance to express ideas and feelings that eluded people in words but which nonetheless can be recaptured in words once they are performed in other types of expression. Individuals and communities utilize a broad range of communicative methods, which are linked together in circuits through which identity and community take shape. As the essay argues, “Expressive forms—words, graphic and plastic objects, bodily and vocal gestures, spatial relationships—are not distinct, autonomous media except in the most narrow, professionalized sense. In actual social practice, both elite and everyday, enactive memory constantly circulates through a variety of creative

forms.” The essay examines the particular characteristics of oral narratives to suggest how they can help understand aspects of identity and subjectivity located in non-verbal expression.

The five essays that follow provide practical examples of how I have combined oral, written, and visual sources to craft interpretations of U.S. cultural life during the twentieth century. The subject matter is drawn from study of the formal institutions of the plastic arts, primarily in California during the twentieth century. Chapter 4, “Modern Art and Oral History in the United States: A Revolution Remembered” (1991), examines archival resources available for the study of U.S. art at the beginning of the 1990s as well as issues that oral sources have raised for how to interpret the history of modernism in the United States. Chapter 5, “Exquisite Corpse: The Sense of the Past in Oral History Interviews with California Artists,” (1989), was an early effort to explore the relationship of narrative style to the aesthetic strategies that artists used when they fabricated their objects. As I read oral histories with California artists, I noticed that assemblage artists typically told stories about their lives that involved many elaborate, interconnected stories, while the accounts of minimalist artists tended to be sparse in every way. Story-telling techniques echoed aesthetic preferences revealed in the form of the work artists created. In arts-related interviews, the formation and development of aesthetic values were always an important topic for discussion. I decided that exploring the relationship of narrative and professional object-making strategies could help develop a more theorized framework for interpreting life-history narratives more generally. Additionally, the essay considers the role of myth and stereotype in

forming interpretations of the past narrated in oral histories, regardless of the aesthetic strategy. Differences in aesthetic foundations however were not accidental, but pointed to very deeply rooted ideological divisions that I believed important for understanding the economic and social development of California, divisions that could be understood more easily by considering the contrasting myths different groups of artists proposed to understand their work and the society that had developed and recognized their talents.

The sixth chapter in this book is an excerpt from *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (1995). “A Woman’s Path to Maturation: Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo, and the Rat Bastards” uses a range of oral history accounts to interpret identity formation in California between 1945 and 1965. Gender, race, educational status, and opportunities for professionalization combine in a particular time and place to generate shared linguistic motifs, available for study through oral sources, that mark a defined community. At the end of the chapter, the argument is broadened to consider why in the 1950s and early 1960s, a “countercultural” identity had increasing resonance for young people entering the arts professions, but also as well for a broader public that began to utilize categories that a generation of younger artists in a provincial setting had developed to identify their claim to distinction. The seventh chapter, “The Light Foot Hears You and the Brightness Begins: Encountering Mortality in Jay DeFeo’s Last Paintings” (originally published in *Transit Circle: Revista Brasileira de Estudos Americanos* in 2003), explores aging, maturation, and mortality as cultural categories that shape subjectivity independently of the biological and psychological dimensions of life

trajectory. The essay applies lessons I learned from the practice of oral history to written sources, the fuller meaning of which is reconstructed within a circuit of subjectivity involving oral histories, letters, and paintings. The concluding chapter, “The Value of Objects: The Discussion of *Quality* in Oral History Interviews with Art Historians and Curators” (2011), begins by using oral history interviews to explore the “working concepts” that professionals use in their everyday activities. Debates over what constitutes *quality* occupy thousands of pages of philosophical literature. Those debates are important for both art historians and museum curators, but their practical activities require a less formalized set of concepts that can help them make decisions in a variety of situations. Tracing the shifting understandings of *quality* revealed in two multi-interview oral history projects, I show how questions of quality and the nature of the objects that interviewees worked with took them back into the formation of their professional identities and the unresolved problems of their careers that arose with every effort to help art objects speak more clearly.