

## PART I



# ORDER

## Reinventing Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

—JOAN DIDION

### INTRODUCTION

The power of oral history lies in the power of storytelling. Whether an oral history project embraces and describes the story of one person's life or a collection of individual stories told together, the power resides in the meaning made of the storytelling and what we learn from the stories. Although there are quite a few books on oral history methods, in this book I focus on oral history for the qualitative researcher, with an emphasis on oral history as a social justice project and how using poetry may augment representation of oral history data. Because oral history captures the lived experience of a person or persons, the social justice goals become more definite when the stories are of those left on the periphery of society. Oral history is a vehicle for the outsiders and the forgotten to tell their stories. In recent history, the many sets of oral histories of the 9/11 Oral History Project are just one example of how oral history can be used

to help understand current events through the lived experience of participants. Another fine example is Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Archive housed at the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute. In the Shoah (Holocaust) study, oral histories document events of World War II through the words of the survivors and their families. Both of these examples are discussed further later in this book. In addition, the oral history project of Hurricane Katrina survivors serves to punctuate the underlying social justice implications of doing oral history. I use the metaphor of choreography as needed to illustrate key points, as choreography is all about telling a story through dance. In oral history we tell the story through spoken text, written text, video text, or all of these media.

Oral history is a technique with its very own history (see Thompson, 1988). Oral history grew out of the oral tradition. Formal written work about oral history emerged in the last century. Since then we have experienced many evolutionary stages in the development of the field. Today we are in the center of a monumental stage—the digital movement. Digital technology enables us to move forward, experimenting with new lenses and technologies. This leads us to ask, What is oral history? There are many definitions of oral history, but for this book, I define oral history as it is often understood in this era:

*Oral history is the collection of stories and reminiscences of a person or persons who have firsthand knowledge of any number of experiences.*

Naturally, because oral history projects span multiple disciplines in addition to history, there are multiple approaches and multiple types of oral history. For example, you may find in the literature **stand-alone individual oral histories**. This type of oral history relies on one person's story, often in a type of stream-of-consciousness narrative, may be analyzed or not, and may be in tape format or printed as hard text. Another type of oral history is a **collective oral history**. Here you may find many individual stories around a particular theme or stories in which all people share a particular experience. For example, the current oral histories being taped of Hurricane

Katrina survivors, when published, would constitute a collective of many individual stories similar to the 9/11 oral history and memory project. Another collection or set of oral histories might include those kept by the U.S. military. The military has an extensive collection of oral histories, and, in fact, their guide to doing oral history is on the World Wide Web. The collection of oral histories includes the testimonials of soldiers returning from war; currently, these include the soldiers returning from Iraq. Sometimes a collection of oral histories may follow a theme, such as Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah project. On the other hand, stand-alone oral histories of the individual genre may also rely on themes but take an idiosyncratic approach. To offer a few examples, the University of South Florida (USF) is in the process of collecting oral histories through various projects, such as:

1. Oral histories of prominent individuals in the field of public health, collected to better understand the field from their perspectives.
2. The USF 25th and 50th Anniversary Projects, collecting information from faculty, staff, students, and alumni.
3. West Central Florida Land Use Project.
4. Florida Citrus Industry Project on the impact of globalization on the industry.
5. The *Tampa Tribune* Project, collecting oral histories from staff writers of this newspaper.

In addition, at least a dozen local oral history projects are under way here in Tampa alone. Regardless of the type of oral history, oral historians rely on intensive interviewing of one genre or another, such as the long interview. Many oral historians—myself included—prefer to interview a participant over time, more than once and as needed to get a fuller picture and more detail. This type of interviewing relies on what Rubin and Rubin (2005) call **hearing** the data, or qualitative interviewing. Clark (1999) also reminds us that oral history is “located in the space between ethnography, sociology, and history” (p. 3), mostly qualitative disciplines. The connection for me to dance is natural. In dance, the choreographer and dancer together

tell a story through the performance of the dance, just as the oral historian eventually must tell the story of the participants in the study. In the postmodern era, this story can be any person's story. This is the social justice link. Instead of interviewing only prominent or elite participants, now *all voices have the potential to be documented*. With ease, this can be facilitated by access to media such as photographs, videos, blogs, vlogs (video logs), and social networking sites.

Early in the last century, oral history focused on interviewing elite persons, such as generals, famous artists or scientists, great leaders of nations, and anyone who surfaced as distinctive. At the same time, local individuals who had a strong memory of a town, city, state, or region were sometimes seen as knowledgeable only in terms of historical events, not necessarily in terms of their own lived experience of those events. Thus it is helpful to view oral history itself on a continuum in order to understand where we are in this time period. On one end, the most sophisticated individual elite may be interviewed; on the other end, we have the most ordinary everyday citizen. Each person has much to tell us as we come to understand society in all its complexity.

Of course, the specific techniques of oral history are also the techniques of the qualitative researcher—the techniques of interview, observation, document analysis, journal writing, and, more recently, digital photography and videotaping and analysis. Likewise, the use of ordinary language to convey a story has its roots in qualitative research. It is easy to see how oral history can be a valuable tool in the qualitative researcher's tool kit, so to speak. Furthermore, we as qualitative researchers have experienced various transformations, from a traditionalist to a reconceptualist approach and now to the postmodern orientation. Consequently, I argue in this text that oral history can be extended to be understood as a postmodern social justice project by virtue of including those voices of individuals left on the margins and periphery of society or those generally forgotten. Many such stories will raise questions for our society from the oral histories that are documented. In my own field of education, I hope that oral history will be considered as a solid and viable approach to research for dissertations. In the field of education, although qualitative work in general and narrative approaches such as oral his-

tory are gaining acceptability, respectability, and use, we still have a long way to go. The reasons are the long tradition of quantitative research approaches used in education and the deep-seated influence of educational psychology in our work. Practically speaking, as grant money evaporates for work in the social sciences, oral history becomes a manageable approach to research for full-time working students, as the cost of travel and transcriptions is far less than the cost of using other approaches to research.

### **ORAL HISTORY EVOLVING AND A WORK IN PROGRESS**

In this book, I take a dynamic view of oral history. I am asking the reader to give up the notion that oral history is simply a collection of tapes and transcripts on file in a library archive. There are many oral histories sitting on library shelves, and that is where they stay; they may never have been checked out or listened to. Rather, I am asking the reader to take a journey with me in viewing oral history as dynamic, ever changing, and evolving to match the evolution in our understanding of research and society.

Any research project requires analysis and interpretation. In the postmodern era, oral history can indeed consist of tapes and transcripts and other documents. However, that is only the first step. In the next step, analysis and interpretation, how we represent our data becomes important. For example, in my case, I try to use poetry to capture the themes of a given oral history project through found data poems, that is, poems constructed from the words of the narrator of the oral history. Then the question becomes, What can we learn from oral histories? Thus the interviewer as oral historian shares an interpretive role with the participant being interviewed. This in turn may become part of raising social justice questions. In fact, in my own collective oral history research project on women teachers, a participant asked me, "What are you calling me in the write-up?" I answered that I usually use the word "participant" to describe members in a study. She then said to me, "Wouldn't it be better to call us both interpreters?" She then went on to say that she gave so much thought to the interview questions and her responses that she,

in fact, could not stop thinking about her role as a middle school teacher turned professor of teacher education. What she was talking about was the evolutionary, vibrant nature of oral history. Thus for me the reason for connecting oral history to this moment in time with qualitative research rests on the notion of interpretation.

Why do we want to hear the stories of individuals? Why do we take pains to record on tape and even type transcripts of stories about the past? Why do researchers undertake such projects? We do this to understand the lives of those whom we interview in order to understand ourselves and our worlds. Thus oral history becomes particularly useful to qualitative researchers, for we are regularly documenting multiple histories of multiple individuals to make sense of our world. Experience and what sense we make of experience are critical components of our work. Here is where oral history and qualitative research meet. We converge in various ways:

1. The *basic techniques* of oral history are the basic techniques of qualitative research. Both use interviews, observations, documents, photographs, videos, and drawings as evidence.

2. The researcher is the research instrument in oral history, as in qualitative research approaches in general. Just as the dancer stretches to sharpen technique, the oral historian sharpens and stretches the research instrument, too. Sharpening listening skills to hear the data is one part of the equation. Then sharpening the eyes to observe and really see the context of the narrator/interviewee is another. Practicing narrative writing and sharpening and exercising the fingers as one writes in coordination with the brain is yet another. When one is aware that the body is the research instrument in this type of work, the eventual narrative product is more focused, sharper, and nuanced. This comes with practice.

3. Telling someone's story, particularly through remembering key events and *lived experience*, is a major goal both for the oral historian and for many qualitative research projects.

4. Using *ordinary language* to tell the story is required for both the oral historian and the qualitative researcher.

5. There is *no one set explanation or interpretation for a given set of data*. Oral historians as qualitative researchers use the data at

hand and render the best explanation and interpretation possible at that moment in time.

6. Historians and qualitative researchers in general are involved in *describing and explaining someone's recollection* of events and activities. It is a memory of the self.

7. *Oral historians and qualitative researchers, like the choreographer, fashion a narrative to represent the lived experience*, and analysis and interpretation by the researcher and participant are often left open to further interpretation by the audience for the narrative. In other words, all good narratives have a point of view, and any audience may agree or disagree with the narrative. Readers of an oral history are like audience members experiencing a dance concert.

8. Oral historians include the voices of all potential participants, thereby acknowledging *multiculturalism and diversity* by documenting the stories of women, minorities, the disabled, and *those generally excluded from research* in general.

9. Oral history and qualitative research work in general validate a public pedagogy. That is, the documentation of someone's lived experience invites public reading, dialogue, and discussion. A person's lived experience is impossible to invalidate.

10. Oral history and qualitative work in general resist collapsing into some market entity. At least up to this point, no marketers have taken to oral history, and it has not been appropriated for mass marketing and ownership. In other words, oral history is not chasing money; it cannot be consumed and cannot be resold as some marketable product. It is what it is.

11. Oral history and qualitative research projects in general may raise uncomfortable and troublesome social questions that may ultimately affect social policy. For example, the number of firsthand accounts of 9/11 and those of Hurricane Katrina survivors may to some extent have influenced subsequent social policy on homeland security, for example, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Likewise, consider that oral history has been around for all of time. In whatever era humankind has developed and evolved, real stories of persons' lives have been told. Consider the following time

line as you process the connection between oral history techniques and qualitative research techniques. I use this as a broad overview for students starting an oral history project.

Traditionalist era	Reconceptualist era	Postmodernist era
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cave paintings to taped recordings</li> <li>• Storytelling as basic component told from generation to generation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taped recordings on audiotape and videotape</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Storytelling continues; may be tied to a social issue and use of analysis for change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taped interview</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Co-researching</li> <li>• Digital stories</li> <li>• Storytelling is co-constructed and possibly ties to a social issue with additional analysis and awareness of social justice</li> </ul>

#### *Oral History in Traditionalist Era*

- Marked by social circumstances of the time; tells someone's story with tools at hand (e.g., cave painting, hieroglyphs, petroglyphs, oral tradition).
- Developed in the technological age into recordings on tape and some photography, usually documenting the remembered history of well-known elites, such as generals, corporate leaders, and famous citizens.
- Storyteller primarily constructs the narrative.
- Researcher takes special care to avoid interpretation.
- Stories usually of great male warriors or leaders.
- Stories primarily told of those in power.
- Often, even in the last century, consisted of taped interviews stored in a library or archive to be checked out for listening.

#### *Oral History in Reconceptualist Era*

- Uses audiotapes and possibly videotapes, photography, and interactive interviews; beginning of naming interviewers and



interviewees as co-researchers; sometimes cowriting the text as well.

- Beginning to identify a theoretical frame for analysis of interviews.
- Beginning to work with participants to craft the narrative.
- May have some social issue for the narrative.
- Validates the lived experience of the participants by member-checking information.
- Consists mostly of taped interviews on file in a library or archive.
- Beginning to note ethical issues and analysis of same, such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity.

#### *Oral History of Postmodern Era*

- Uses all possible audio, video, and written recording techniques.
- Includes participant in interpretation.
- Uses digital storytelling and co-researching.
- Co-constructs the narrative with participants.
- May tie the lived experience narrative purposefully to a social justice issue.
- May include newer theoretical frames for interpreting the narrative, such as feminist theories and critical theories.
- Acknowledges multiculturalism and diversity by documenting voices of those outside the mainstream of society.
- Resists marketers, marketing, and overall mass consumption.
- Purposely looks to document the stories of the outsiders in society, including women, minorities, disabled members, those who are not members of the mainstream group or society.
- Intentionally makes available on the Internet oral histories and oral history projects, in entirety, of a particular group, such as projects on YouTube.

- Includes ethical issues for discussion.
- Seeks transparency throughout the entire research project.

For the purpose of this book, I work predominately from a post-modern perspective to emphasize the evolution of oral history. In this perspective oral history takes on more texture and possibly more credibility. Thus *postmodern oral history* is characterized by:

- An interpretive approach that may include the participant in the project as a co-researcher.
- Both interviewer and interviewee taking active roles in the project.
- Use of ordinary language in the final report to make the story understandable to the widest possible audience.
- Use of technology to enhance the power of the story being told; may use multiple technologies and the written word to complete the storytelling; regular use of digital cameras, digital video cameras, cell phones, and other devices as part of the narrative itself; possible posting on YouTube or other Internet site for easier rapid access by a larger audience.
- Discussing ethical issues and bringing them to the forefront of the project and throughout the project.
- An approach to qualitative research work that continually persists and prevails in public spaces such as libraries and websites; one of the most transparent and most public of approaches, regardless of the discipline base, which may be history, sociology, education, gerontology, medicine, or others.
- A pride in validating the subjectivities of participants; acknowledging and celebrating subjectivity in order to reach new understanding of someone's lived experience.
- Inclusion of voices and stories of those members of society typically disenfranchised and marginalized for study and documentation.
- A view of oral history as a democratic project, acknowledging that any person's story may be documented using accessible

means to the data. For example, the New York City firefighters' oral history of 9/11 project ([www.freedomstories.org](http://www.freedomstories.org)) includes more than 12,000 pages of oral histories from 503 firefighters and emergency medical technicians. These oral histories are available on the Web (see Appendix A).

In addition, to use the metaphor of choreography to help in understanding oral history, it is helpful to understand something about the work of choreography. Not to oversimplify, but often the choreographer asks the following questions as a general beginning to any dance/art work. My favorite ballet teacher framed it this way:

**Who** (or what) is doing

**What** to whom (or what) and

**Where**, in what context, and

**Why**, what were the difficulties?

I wish to describe the ways in which choreography interfaces with oral history as a qualitative research technique, as I have done elsewhere (Janesick, 2000, 2004, 2007a). In oral history, eventually a finished report is completed. Completing this report is like choreographing a dance. The story or narrative of the dance is like the story or narrative of any given oral history. In dealing with the basic *who*, *what*, *where*, *why* of a story, it is inevitable that we get to the interpretation of someone's life as lived. Granted that a good deal of oral history work focuses on people experiencing traumatic events and stories of elites and quasi-elites, there is a steady movement, due to technology, toward documenting lives of ordinary people who have lived on the margins of society and who have stories to tell. All this is done while including a respect for history and for the memory of individuals and their lived experience. Memory is, in fact, often used as a synonym for the work of oral history. Sociologists, in particular, and others have written of the importance of memory, and oral historians value the memory of participants.

## MNEMOSYNE, GODDESS OF MEMORY

It would be difficult to write about oral history without going back to Greek mythology for inspiration. In Greek storytelling Mnemosyne is the Titaness daughter of Gaia and Uranus who became the mother of the Muses by Zeus. Mnemosyne is considered pivotal in Greek mythology, for she is the goddess of and personification of memory. To be the holder of all memory was critical, for it was also Mnemosyne who discovered the power of thought, reason, and memory. She is said to have named every object, value, belief, and feeling on this earth. Because without language there would be little communication among mortals, she gave the power of memory and language to all mortals. The Greek story told of Mnemosyne is that Zeus visited her, and she bore the nine Muses, who are believed to have been born in this order:

Calliope, Muse of epic poetry

Clio, Muse of history

Melpomene, Muse of tragedy

Enterpe, Muse of lyric poetry

Erato, Muse of love poetry

Terpsichore, Muse of dance and music

Urania, Muse of astronomy

Thalia, Muse of comedy

Polymnia, Muse of sacred poetry

In Greek lore, the nine Muses preside over the arts and sciences and inspire us all. Obviously, historians and oral historians have an affinity for the symbolic importance of Clio, the Muse of history. In Web-based contemporary culture, there are numerous oral history projects named for Clio—for example, CLIOPATRIA, is a group blog, subtitled Oral History, at YouTube (see Appendix A). Likewise, Mnemosyne is used in many digital stories as an avatar and as an action figure on so many sites on the World Wide Web that it would take days to visit them. In the classical world, poetics and the arts in

general were thought to be a divine gift. If any mortal was an artist, that person was favored by the gods and goddesses. Poets, philosophers, and musicians were revered in Greek society as a result of this widely held notion. In addition, the thought patterns of the human psyche were believed to be manifested in the physical realm by the Muses and what they represented. The Muses were thought to ride the winged horse Pegasus to soar high above the earth to imagine and create poetry, music, dance, and so on. It is remarkable that in the evolution of medicine, to this day the center of the brain that houses memory is called the hippocampus. The word *hippocampus* means seahorse, which relates to Pegasus (whose father is Poseidon, god of the sea).

Thus the Greeks sought to explain the classical ideal of poetics as elevating the mortals in a kind of symmetry and beauty, something artists, especially choreographers, and some researchers do as well. Later writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Aristophanes, and others would extend theories and explanations of the human psyche and intellectual illumination with a nod to the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne. Poetry was important in Greek and subsequently Roman society. After all, Homer, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, recorded the stories of his society in the form of poetry, with an able storytelling narrator. One might think of history as a thread from the Greeks, running through Mnemosyne and Clio to the present day. So the question, Why oral history now? is of considerable and notable importance.

### WHY ORAL HISTORY NOW?

Oral history is of interest in many disciplines—such as history, sociology, anthropology, nursing, mental health, medicine, education, and business—and to social science researchers in general. It may also be considered an art form employing the art of storytelling. Historical fiction based on firsthand oral and written historical accounts often provides powerful storytelling, such as the works of James Michener. His thoroughly researched works, such as *Hawaii*, *Texas*, *Chesapeake*, and others, were based on oral histories, documents, and his vivid imagination. Likewise, oral history is an inter-

pretive activity of communication that is extremely active in the technological environment of the postmodern era. In addition, in this postmodern era, in-depth interviews are still the quintessential substantive dataset. Most important, memory is a fascinating part of the social world and of our individual lives and contributes to the documentation of oral history projects. When a person interviews another human being, the transcript becomes a written record. The knowledge of the past helps to refute myths, half-truths, fabrications, and faulty perspectives and validates the story of the lived experience being described.

In addition, with a renewed sense of interest in oral history, as evidenced by journal articles and books printed since the 1970s, there will always be an open space for qualitative researchers to pursue in-depth interviews in any given research project. Once a student asked me, "How do I know I am doing oral history?" As with any research project, the researcher has an idea of the history and foundations for designing a project and has some compelling need to find out about the lived experience of an individual or a group of individuals. There are a multitude of oral traditions, and one has to make a decision to learn about the tradition of choice, has to spell out clearly that tradition, and has to jump into doing the project. This is true of any type of research project, qualitative or quantitative. One would not, for example, simply send out a survey without being grounded in some theoretical perspective and knowledge of the processes of follow-up and statistical framework. Likewise, in any qualitative work a researcher needs to be able to identify, describe, and explain the perspective of an oral history project, as well as the compelling nature of the inquiry. Because this book is about oral history as a qualitative *research* technique, that is what I focus on; it is not my intent to differentiate it from every possible other qualitative technique, such as ethnography, case studies, action research, or other field-based studies.

## **SORTING OUT ORAL TRADITIONS**

Some writers seem to feel that there is only one way to define oral history. The reason may be various terms are used interchangeably.

Some of the terms include *oral history*, *folklore*, *memory*, *déjà-vu*, *narrative*, *storytelling*, *autobiography*, *autoethnography*, *portraiture*, *biography*, the *long interview*, *reminiscence*, *photovoice*, *life history*, and *photoethnography*. I list these terms not to confuse the issue but to point out that each of these terms overlap in many ways. For example, they overlap in their overall **purpose**—that is, to tell someone's story. They overlap in **method**—that is, using interviews and some written documents as primary research techniques. They overlap in **rationale** in terms of the need to uncover stories from the past so that we can preserve more than a bureaucratic account of a person's life. A bureaucratic account might consist of a person's social security number, driver's license, business cards, deeds of sale, bank account records, and will. True, these can give some fascinating information regarding a person's life, and an oral historian may include them to complement a life story. But in the oral history genre, we seek to get the real texture of the story of a real person's life in all its depth, complexity, misery, joy, and purpose. By telling a real person's story we create a **sense of history**, and this can accomplish much:

1. A sense of history empowers us.
2. A sense of history may serve to illuminate the present situation.
3. A sense of history forces us to make sense of who we are.
4. A sense of history requires us to document a life.
5. A sense of history inspires respect and awareness that other persons' stories are as valid as our own.

Thus, whatever oral and narrative tradition is selected as the basis for conducting an oral history, qualitative researchers may be comfortable with the tried-and-true techniques of the field. Also, oral historians, like all qualitative researchers, need to describe and explain their purposes, their theoretical frames for the study, their methods, and their approaches to analysis and interpretation. We acknowledge that there is no one way to do oral history or qualitative work but that there are many guidelines, practices, and traditions. These are continually discussed and debated and added to our knowledge base.

## PERSPECTIVES

I bring various philosophies into the discussion. First, my view of history is that history is both a process and a point of view. What we study is dynamic and, in terms of the postmodernist outlook, is affected by outlook, experience, and reinterpretation of a given experience. I hope to provide a critical perspective to the study of oral history. As discussed in the preface, I have been influenced by the writings of critical pedagogists Freire, Giroux, Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Macedo, to want to bring oral history to life. As someone who started out studying John Dewey's (1859–1952) writings on experience as education, art as experience, and democracy and education, I see my work as an extension of those ideas. I like to think of my work and that of all of us as placed along the continuum of the history of ideas and that we all take part in extending those ideas as we publish our research and interpretation of research. I would have to say that oral history is a type of revisiting of experience, and so a type of educative activity. I see history as a method in and of itself and interpretation as both a goal and a benefit of studying oral history methods. Oral history is also dialogical. I think it is important to illuminate the importance of that fact. Both the researcher and the researched are active in oral history. Oral history is about the excitement and engagement of some lived experience. Oral history validates subjectivity and embraces it. Oral history can be a key element in documenting stories of those on the periphery of society. Thus it validates a multicultural and diverse approach to documenting the lived experience of individuals and groups and becomes an important path to social justice. Qualitative work in general in this, the postmodern, era often raises questions of a social justice nature.

### ORAL HISTORY AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE PROJECT

If we take a view of oral history as a social justice project, think of all the potential and possibility. Individuals who may have been overlooked in traditional projects may now have the opportunity to have a voice. Not only that, but we may also all learn from those on the outside of the mainstream. We may learn more about the human



condition all the way around. By learning about the lives, ways of knowing, culture, speech, and behavior of those on the periphery of society, we stand to learn more about our society as a whole and more about ourselves as individuals. In fact, we may become more reflexive as we come to understand the perspectives of another. In terms of actually doing oral history, majority members of society may help equalize the record by conducting oral histories of those members traditionally left out of the written record.

Another side of social justice and oral history is the potential for recording the stories of protected populations, such as disabled persons, prisoners, individuals with mental problems, and quite possibly selected children. Overall, each person has a story to tell. It is the work of the oral historian to craft the narratives from the recorded memories of those in a given oral history project. Most recently, testimony given by truth commissions continues to be a good example of oral history for social justice. If we view the case of South Africa and its truth commissions, we see that we have much to learn about this matter. This is not to overlook other truth commissions, such as those in Central or South America, but the South African example offers a unique approach and perspective to testimony as oral history because of its public nature and its focus on reconciliation.

### **ON THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF TESTIMONY AS ORAL HISTORY**

One of the useful prototypes of oral history is testimony. Globally, testimony has been used to document the stories of victims and those perpetrators who committed crimes against them in various parts of Africa and Central America, for example. Testimony of individuals allowed a written record of a catalogue of misdeeds, which then facilitated some measure of social justice. Most often, those victimized faced their perpetrators in court. To use a prime example, let us consider the case of South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was a vehicle for capturing the witnesses' stories of the events occurring in South Africa under the then system of apartheid. Obviously, there have been many truth commissions throughout history, beginning with Nuremberg. I focus on

the case of South Africa because it is still so close in time to our own experience. It is fresh in the annals of history, and numerous books, such as Desmond Tutu's (1999), are a result of the TRC. Testimony in the case of South Africa allows all of us to more fully understand the political, cultural, emotional, psychological, and social justice aspects of apartheid as never before. Because Africa retains storytelling as part of its culture, the brave individuals who took part in the TRC testimony gave straightforward descriptions, often emotional, of what had occurred while facing those who had committed crimes against them. The perpetrators and victims publicly acknowledged events, which then became the first step toward reconciliation. In fact, Desmond Tutu (1999) has argued that one cannot arrive at forgiveness without factual truth and data as a starting point. Tutu and other writers often catalogue **four types of truth**:

1. **Factual and forensic truth**, that is, the actual evidence of what occurred, such as number of beatings, murders, and violent crimes and where they took place.
2. **Personal or narrative truth**, that is, the person's story and narrative of how something occurred, as well as what occurred and the effect that had on the individual and the family.
3. **Social or cultural truth**, that is, basically, the social context and history of what occurred; in this case, the genesis, activities, development, and sustenance of problems of apartheid.
4. **Healing or restorative truth**, that is, what is needed to heal the wounds uncovered by the engagement with the three previously listed types of truth. When victims faced the perpetrators in court in testimony, the perpetrators had to admit what they had done in order to apply for amnesty. In this instance, South Africa did something no one had seen before, for no blanket amnesty was granted. In addition, the TRC was a public forum, unlike previous commissions.

The power of testimony is simply that people are allowed to tell their stories. Usually, the people in question have had their voices either erased or diminished prior to the testimony. In fact, some testimony providers had no voice whatsoever in the political or social

arena. Thus testimony as oral history opens up society to new ways of knowing history. This history may have been completely unavailable to the public had there been no testimony at all. In the case of South Africa, during the testimony of the TRC, all testimony was public, a unique characteristic. In previous truth commissions, in Africa or elsewhere, this was not the case. Everything took place behind closed doors.

Likewise, the South African TRC granted amnesty to select perpetrators under specified conditions and regularly granted compensation to victims in specific cases. What the South African TRC offers us is a living example of how oral history may be used as a social justice project through testimony. Testimony such as that of the survivors of apartheid may emerge as a key element in oral history as a social justice project.

In addition, everyday testimonials are also critical to our understanding and practice of social justice. See this example of Leona, an African American female who participated in my oral history project on women leaders. I am using lengthy sections of the narrative because it helps to capture the voice of the person in question. It is impossible to do a short oral history or even a brief excerpt, and so I hope the reader will agree to read each excerpted example in its entirety.

#### CASE I.1.



### **An Excerpt from an Oral History Narrative**

*Toward Becoming an Educator: A Journey of Self-Discovery—  
The Story of Leona M. Graham, in Response to the Statement  
“Describe Yourself and Your Work.”*

Every journey has a beginning, and—although I didn’t realize it back then—my journey toward becoming an educator began the day I awoke to realize that I was trapped in a deathbed of my own making, hopeless, alone, and just waiting to die. At 450 pounds I had become extremely depressed, lonely, and isolated. I spent most of my days lazing in bed, watching TV and eating junk food. At the time, I was living in seclusion in a small trailer on an isolated stretch of land on a Pacific Northwest

mountain range. My doctors told me that the various health problems I had (e.g., asthma, diabetes, hypertension) were directly related to my morbid obesity. And although I faithfully consumed the medicines they administered to me, I had very little faith in their ability to sustain my life.

On reflection I don't rightfully know if it was an epiphany, or just opportunity knocking, and I don't suppose that it really matters which, because whatever it was I am surely glad that I pursued it when I did. One morning as I lay in bed, my torso propped up on several pillows to help me breathe, I was thumbing through a free newspaper I had picked up at one of the doctors' offices I had recently visited. Tears were burning my eyes as I lifted my head to take a look around my bedroom. Cluttering my nightstand were 12 pill bottles, a nebulizer, a couple of inhalers and a CPAP [continuous positive airway pressure] machine to help me breathe during the night. I had become, in a relatively short period of time, indoctrinated in some morbid sickly daily routine. Each morning I took a pill for my diabetes and a couple of pills for my high blood pressure, a pill for my asthma, and then there was another pill that I took for my high cholesterol, too. Throughout the day I also took iron supplements and daily vitamins and minerals as well. My asthma management regimen also consisted of both metered-dose inhalers and periodic treatments using the nebulizer. I didn't particularly have faith in these medicines—I didn't believe they would make a difference in my life. But I was willing to give them a try nonetheless. Blurry-eyed and feeling hopeless, I slowly thumbed through the newspaper, half-heartedly searching for a new distraction. I wanted something to keep my mind off of my illnesses. I had long grown tired of watching movies, and I was having difficulty concentrating on anything other than my thoughts of being so sick and so fat. When there, on one of the pages of the newspaper, was a 4-inch advertisement about a distance-learning program at a state university.

I hadn't necessarily been thinking about returning to school, because I had no particular desire to ever reenter the workforce. Besides, I didn't think I would be alive long enough to realistically carve out a substantial new career for myself. But I told myself that I needed some sort of distraction during my long days in bed. Sadly, I had dropped out of college years ago, vowing to return to school again someday. But obtaining a college degree had remained one of many promises to me that I had not kept. Nevertheless, I figured that it wouldn't hurt to get

more information about this distance-learning program. I liked the idea of being able to get an education from the sanctuary of my home. This way, I reasoned, I could continue to avoid contact with others, being that I was so embarrassed by my weight and all. So I phoned the toll-free number in the newspaper advertisement and within a few weeks my financial aid was in place and I was enrolled in the bachelor's degree program as a full-time student.

One of the three courses I took during that first semester was in women's studies, titled "Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspective." There were a dozen or so videotapes that arrived at my home at the beginning of the semester, along with the syllabus and course assignments for each class. Each of the videotapes contained a 2-hour prerecorded class lecture to accompany the reading assignment for each class session during that semester. The first required reading assignment in that course forever changed my life. Marjorie Shostak's anthropological classic, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, connected with me in a way that is somewhat hard for me to describe, even today. Truthfully, I don't know what it is about Nisa and her intimate story of being a !Kung woman in her early 50s, living in the Kalahari Desert, that seemed to resonate so powerfully with me. Perhaps it was the tribe's isolation; perhaps it was the harsh environment; perhaps it was Nisa's victimization or her strong will to survive. Maybe it was a combination of several factors concerning that story, who knows? But whatever it was, as I journeyed with Nisa, I felt stronger about the possibility of overcoming my own illnesses, both physical and emotional.

I also believe the instructor for the course was undeniably instrumental in making a real difference in my life. She, too, seemed to embody a sort of resiliency and determination to succeed that instantly captured my attention and admiration. And I immediately noticed a difference in the way that I viewed myself and in the way I perceived my value as a human being. Whatever it was, it worked! On the first day of class, at the beginning of the introductory video, the professor told the viewing audience a little bit about herself. She, too, had returned to school as an older student to pursue a degree. Initially she hadn't planned on becoming an educator. She had experienced some difficulties as a younger learner, too. The way I remember it, she also seemed to poke fun at her own weight problem and appearance, and yet she seemed to be delightfully at ease with her rounded body, thinning hair, and older age. Her clothing was somewhat outdated but looked extremely comfortable

and appropriate for her body size. She didn't wear makeup, but she was fond of adorning her ears and neckline with jewelry that looked Native American or Mexican in origin. Her speaking style was soothing and reassuring to me. Her real appeal, I think, was that she taught class with an amazingly relaxed method of communicating. She presented material and permitted us to make sense of it in any way we wished. And as I watched her on tape I remember thinking, "Wow, what a self-affirming career choice; I bet I could one day do this, too." And at that instant, I pictured myself one day teaching a class and using my life experiences to help others along their way.

I ended up watching that videotape for that first class several more times, just because it felt so good to hear the professor recount her triumph over her past struggles in school and problems in life. Seemingly she acknowledged some of the common challenges that one faces in juggling schoolwork with the responsibilities of family life and a job. She encouraged us to stick with the distance-learning program and to not give up when things inevitably got tough. Surprisingly, she also required us to begin journaling as a means of communication and gaining personal insight, which I admittedly hadn't done in years! Each day I diligently wrote a little bit more in my journal. And in doing so, I immediately seemed to begin connecting the dots, so to speak, in the areas of my life that previously seemed befuddled, severed, and amorphous. Then I would rewatch the videotapes again. And as the professor spoke, week after week, I became more comfortable in my own skin and with my own struggles.

Once I started to accept the possibility of my own recovery, I began searching for assistance to help me in other areas of my life. For instance, I bought some workout videos to help me establish a daily exercise routine. I joined a study group to enhance my understanding of course materials. I searched for online information and Internet support groups for the various diagnoses I had been given. And I sought counseling to help me deal with the layers of emotional turmoil and cognitive dissonance that had originally caused me to isolate myself and turn to food for comfort. In no time at all, I was feeling alive again, and I wanted to do everything in my power to live well and to live long. So I moved back to the city and began interacting with people again. In time I shed about 250 pounds. As a result, I no longer had to sleep with a CPAP machine. I no longer had diabetes or high blood pressure or asthma or high cholesterol, either. They all disappeared with the extra

weight. Going back to school and learning more about myself made me a healthier person—both inside and out.

My journey to becoming an educator is inextricably linked to my journey of self-discovery and physical–emotional recovery. In time I was able to begin integrating myself with others. As I lost weight, I gained confidence. Eventually I was even comfortable with sitting in a classroom with other students. After I received my bachelor of arts degree, I went on to earn a master of science in marriage and family therapy. I chose this field because I wanted to help other people who may have experienced similar life crises. Once I became a therapist, I was able to help hundreds of individuals from various walks of life as they struggled with emotional problems and serious mental illness. I treated dozens of women like myself, who had turned to food or alcohol or drugs or sex or whatever in dealing with their depression. Many of them had become isolated or had cocooned themselves in one type of addiction or another in an effort to cope with their feelings of loss, guilt, helplessness, and/or hopelessness. I provided them with individual and group therapy in order to help them discover for themselves the keys to their own recovery and self-awareness. In addition, I conducted workshops to help both women and men manage the symptoms of their various emotional problems.

I eventually accepted a position as bicultural specialist at the community mental health center where I had been working as a therapist. It was in this capacity that I discovered an affinity for teaching. As a bicultural specialist, it was my responsibility to provide training and consultation to fellow mental health care clinicians in the area of multicultural services and cross-cultural treatment. On several occasions I was asked to speak to large groups of practitioners in an effort to teach them how to provide culturally relevant and appropriate treatment interventions to mental health care consumers from various ethnic groups. In doing so, I discovered that I had a natural talent for engaging the audience and connecting with my “students” in a meaningful way.

My success as a trainer led me to decide to continue my education in order to acquire the necessary tools I would need in becoming an agent of change in the mental health care industry overall. My goal was to help change the way that mental health care professionals are trained in the area of working with minority mental health care consumers and ethnically different clientele. So I packed up my belongings and moved 2,000 miles away to become a doctoral student in an educational lead-

ership program at a university in Chicago, Illinois. Soon after arriving in Chicago, I accepted a job position in the psychiatric rehabilitation field at a major university, as part of a training team charged with the responsibility of developing curricula and conducting training for paraprofessionals who are providing treatment for individuals with serious mental illness.

A large part of my job on the psychiatric rehabilitation training team is focused on training mental health care providers on how to engage their clients (or patients) to participate in the treatment process. Most recently I have dedicated my time to training staff members employed at long-term-care facilities (i.e., nursing homes). The focus of my attention is specifically devoted to training staff at the facilities that provide residency for individuals who suffer from pervasive and serious mental illnesses. These illnesses range in scope from depression to schizophrenia and, understandably, can become extremely disabling to the residents at these facilities. Generally speaking, the paraprofessional staff members at these facilities have relatively very little formal training. Many of them possess only a high school education. Some have merely an eighth-grade equivalency. Staff burnout is quite common. Staff turnover is so high in these facilities that employees generally don't hang around long enough to participate in rigorous continuing education programs. And once on duty, they generally don't have the luxury of having extra staff on hand to cover the floor so that they may take an afternoon away from their duties in order to attend an extensive training session. So my team members and I have discovered that short-term training series involving a combination of 1-hour interactive sessions and on-site learning exercises (e.g., role playing at the nurses' station) tend to be most successful in this busy, demanding environment.

The employees at these kinds of facilities often feel frustrated about their inability to motivate the residents of these facilities to care for themselves. According to the staff, many of the residents seem unmotivated to get out of bed, to take their medicine, or to set goals toward their own recovery and eventual discharge from the facility. Fortunately, I recognize a lot of the apathy that these residents appear to be feeling. I know firsthand how easy it is to become depressed, hopeless, and even self-destructive. Like the residents in these long-term-care facilities, at one time I too felt unmotivated to get out of bed. I remember the days



when I didn't have much faith in the efficacy of medical treatment. And I also know what it takes to overcome painful past experiences in life in order to prevail. So I use my intimate knowledge of depression, along with my education and experience as a therapist, in an effort to provide insight to the staff members at the long-term-care facilities on how they might be successful in helping the residents recover.

It is tremendously rewarding for me to be able to help these staff members be successful in their jobs. More so, it is rewarding for me to be instrumental in providing treatment (albeit vicariously) to individuals with serious mental illness. These individuals are often forgotten and easily overlooked in our nation's health care system riddled with budgetary constraints, managed care, and a scarcity of available professionals willing to take on these tough cases. It isn't easy working with individuals who suffer from pervasive mental health problems. But research indicates that through the application of current best practices in providing clinical care and case management for these people, many of the problems associated with their mental illnesses can be successfully reduced, managed, and often even prevented. One important way to effect change within these long-term-care facilities is to develop skills among staff members and among the residents themselves. And this is what our training and curricula are designed to do: (a) teach staff new skills, and (b) teach staff how to teach residents new skills toward recovery and symptom management.

I try to keep the curricular materials as user friendly as possible, keeping in mind that the reader may feel overworked, underpaid, and unappreciated (a.k.a. burned out). Working in a long-term-care environment is extremely difficult to do. It becomes even more difficult when one is expected to add to the existing workload by trying to teach residents new psychosocial skills that the residents themselves may not necessarily wish to learn. Consequently, the training materials that I produce are purposely designed to provide a basic understanding of psychosocial rehabilitation through the use of simple language and easy-to-understand PowerPoint presentations. I also try to remember that when presenting the content of the material, it is important to use the level of language being used by the staff members who are being trained at the facilities. It is hoped that this will, in turn, model for staff members how they, too, should use the level of language used by the residents who they will in turn be training. Otherwise, both the staff

members and the residents are likely to reject psychosocial rehabilitation (along with my training materials) as being too lofty a concept or too difficult to grasp.

Of chief importance, I do my best to make the training experience contextually based. To be effective, I believe the learning process has to mean something to the training participants. Otherwise it isn't authentic, and it isn't going to stick. As such, I carefully incorporate real-life examples and exercises that make sense in both the paraprofessionals' world and in the world of the individuals who reside in the long-term-care facilities. This I have found to be most significant in engaging the learner during training sessions. You have got to keep it real!

At the time of this interview and writing, I am entering my final semester in the program. Once completed, I will write my dissertation, graduate, and then continue my journey as a lifelong learner. At this point I plan to spend the next decade continuing my research and writing in the area of best practices in psychiatric rehabilitation, teaching mental health care practitioners who are working with individuals with mental illness. I believe I have a unique perspective as an educational leader in the mental health care field because I've been on the "other side of the fence," so to speak. I've also had the honor of accompanying many individuals as they journeyed to their own psychiatric recoveries.

On a personal level, I will soon celebrate my first-year wedding anniversary with my husband, whom I met shortly after arriving in Chicago. He has consistently been my biggest cheerleader and source of emotional support and encouragement. He's a remarkable man with a fascinating and inspirational recovery story of his own. Our newborn is a joy to come home to. She helps me to laugh, to relax, and to just be in the moment (which is something that I admit with which I still have some struggle). Nevertheless, I am having fun being an educator at the parenting level now, too. With Lisa, I continue to experience a lot of self-discovery for myself as I interact with her and as I observe her grow and develop. Above all else, my prayer for her is that she will be a strong and independent female. I never want her to be afraid to take a chance, to leap, or to dance. I feel blessed to have been the one chosen to guide her and to help her spirit soar. I am very excited about taking this journey alongside Lisa.

Indeed, there is something magical about being an educator. I don't think the magic can be found in how we teach or what we teach . . . or

even necessarily who we teach. To me, the magic exists in our willingness to walk that gentle journey alongside an active learner, no matter how long that journey may take. As an educator I feel spiritually whole, emotionally fulfilled, and physically strong when I take that learning journey with another individual. When I have the privilege of accompanying the learner on his or her personal journey, the destination is of little or no consequence because it is the experience of the journey that I find most rewarding. I tend to think of being an educator as being a willing participant in a reciprocal process in which I may teach, but I consequently also learn so much more! Perhaps that is the real magic of being an educator—committing oneself to being a co-learner rather than having to be the trailblazer or tour guide all the time. For me, as I think about the journey I took in getting to where I am today, I am reminded of all that I had to learn about myself in order to be able to help others. Mind you, my journey is far from being over. I still have much to learn. And I look forward to doing so. Truthfully, I really enjoy being a co-learner in life. In essence, what I truly treasure about my journey thus far is not necessarily the stuff I gleaned from books but how I utilized the experiences in my life, along with the experiences in the lives of others, in order to know which path in life to take next.

The reader can see the power of oral history techniques in this example. You may be happy to know that, since the completion of that oral history project, Leona has achieved her goal of completing and earning a doctorate and has started her own company consulting in her field. Her history can be seen as part of the mosaic of oral history as a social justice project. In terms of social justice, she is a minority female once also marginalized because of her weight. Now she has come into balance and redirected her story. This brings up another important value of oral history: the fact that an oral history of an individual may provide hope, inspiration, and transformation for those reading the narrative. Readers of an oral history may find something in the narrative to inspire them and even stand as a model for them, as an additional bonus. In fact, I hope that oral history as a qualitative research technique will be considered in my own field, education, and in others related to the field of history as a worthwhile research approach. Now is a good time to document stories of

educators who have stories to tell. Currently, in education, we are experiencing one of the great debates that often take place when the public sphere is under critique. As high-stakes testing and one-size-fits-all technocratic measures of testing are hotly debated, we need to get at the reasons for the sharp divisions in the field of education. Educators and educational researchers do use other narrative approaches from time to time. Hopefully, oral history methods will help a great deal in documenting this time of debate, dissent, and occasional acrimony.

Of course, this example of a narrative is written in the voice of the narrator and provides us with a good example of understanding the narrator's story. Another technique that oral historians and other qualitative researchers use to their advantage is observation. We can use observation to set a context, to describe that context, and to place the narrator in a specific context. I use an observation activity in my research class, which is described in Appendix L. I have students train themselves to be better observers by going to a public setting at least twice and describing it. Then they need to try to connect what they observe to some of the history and social context of whatever it is they are observing. The following case example is well written, and I use it to point out the power of observation. Like the choreographer who has to tell a story within a context, a researcher in training has to, as well.

### CASE 1.2.



## Observing in Spring Hill Cemetery

BY JODY J. JAMISON

This study is based on observations completed at the Spring Hill Cemetery, aka Brooksville Civil War Cemetery, located just off Fort Dade Avenue, between Brooksville and Spring Hill in Hernando County, Florida. Prior to this assignment, I had not visited this cemetery, although I had heard rumors of paranormal activity at the gravesites. Though not a fan of paranormal activity, I am interested in cemeteries as locations of historical artifacts. Sadly, Hernando County is rife with documented accounts of human atrocities and unspeakable acts of violence. While

also known for its strategic role in the Civil War, Hernando County's rich history is overshadowed by reports of abuse and tragedy of a marginalized community of African Americans.

In this report, I will take you on a tour of Hernando County's history as we pass through the Spring Hill Cemetery and unearth stories that lie buried deeply beneath the layers of a community that screams out for justice. Even though no one visited the cemetery during the times I conducted my observations, I believe I was able to observe the citizens of a lost community through the small, unassuming artifacts left behind in the form of grave markers. By observing these remnants of a community, I gained a new appreciation for close examination. Though I could not observe movements of people as they maneuvered through a room, I did observe movements of people as their gravesites were carefully positioned into patterns; though I could not observe expressions as people looked at one another in conversation, I could observe the print on the grave markers telling me whether a child or adult lay beneath; though I could not observe hand or facial gestures, I could observe the angst of frustration of broken lives reflected in small, unmarked stones left unclaimed and untended. Therefore, I believe my observations rendered data about a community whose voices can no longer be hushed.

Located just off Fort Dade Avenue in Brooksville, Florida, the cemetery lies isolated from the main community. Although the cemetery is also known as the Brooksville Civil War Cemetery, very few Civil War soldiers are buried there. Rather, it houses a Black community, many of whom were victims of brutal lynchings between 1900 and 1930. A website called *Ghostvillage.com* hosts ghost research, evidence, and discussion and is home to lively conversations from people who claim to have seen spectral residents of Spring Hill Cemetery.

### **THE COMMUNITY OF SPRING HILL CEMETERY: THE SETTING**

Fort Dade Avenue, the road off which Spring Hill Cemetery is located, begins like most any other small, two-lane, rural road. It is a long road that extends from the east end of the county to the west, bridging the two communities of Brooksville and Spring Hill. Shortly after crossing Cobb Road, a two-lane road dividing Fort Dade Avenue into east and west sections, the scenery quickly changes. Massive and regal oak

trees bend into the shape of an arch by a natural phenomenon known as the Florida Hammocks. As I drive west on Fort Dade Avenue, I feel as if I were entering a different world. Traffic is nearly nonexistent, the sky disappears behind a dense mass of green, and sounds draw near as the



trees trap them near to the ground. Nature is so close; I can feel it as I put my hand outside the window, and smell it as it fills my car.

Consistent with the humble lives of those residing in the cemetery, a simple green sign announces the entrance. After a few feet of roadway, the lane transforms into dirt and sugar sand, making it difficult to avoid getting trapped. Invisible from Fort Dade Avenue, nothing draws attention to the community residing at the end of the winding dirt road. Large oak trees border the lane, and the sounds of crickets and birds accompany me on the journey. Nature abounds along the entrance; no attention has been given to the area by road crews or county maintenance. The grass remains untended, allowing weeds and underbrush to flourish. Signs of disrespect—a filthy mattress, a broken chair—line the diminutive lane leading to the cemetery. Trash is strewn as bottles, paper plates, and plastics gather into piles under the oak trees. The oaks, many of which are several feet in diameter, are largely free of the Spanish moss for which they are so famous. The smell of walnut trees—sharp, and yet mellow, but distinctly different from oaks—pierces the air. The air is dry and hot. Each of the two cars that drive by as I examine the entrance leaves a cyclone of dust that floats in the air for several minutes after they pass. I think it ironic how the floating dust parallels the lives of those I would soon visit—living in a flurry, floating in the air for several moments as they pass.

Returning to my car, I venture into the cemetery. The oak trees, once tightly connected and overlapping one another at the entrance, now open as a welcoming gesture to an unfamiliar visitor. Spanish moss, nonexistent on the entrance oaks, now wraps the lane in a boa of grey flannel. Lowering my car windows, I notice how quiet this site is;

the trees make a slight sound as their tiny leaves chatter in the wind. The sound of a passing vehicle makes a distant whirring noise. The smells of oak and walnut provoke thoughts about an old Florida—an antebellum Florida—which incites memories of a book I read, entitled *A Land Remembered*, that depicts the life of cattle rustling in an antebellum Florida where beach property is useless because of its inability to produce crops. Life depended on practicality; thus I am once again reminded of how that relates to the residents of Spring Hill Cemetery. Their lives, too, often depended on practicality.



Once again forcing myself to focus on the purpose of this visit, I prepare to observe my host setting. As the density of great oak trees begins to thin, I see the first signs of the cemetery community. The first grave marker stands taller than any other in the cemetery. Appearing as if to have at one time housed a plaque or nameplate, the brick enclosure is now empty. Three smaller markers lying beneath the tall monument contain the nearly invisible names of their residents. These small white stones lie just behind it, yet remain anonymous. The only marker whose writing remains legible contains the name Pearl Mobley; however, the date embossed below is too faded to read.

As I walk in this community, I feel an obligation to carefully avoid stepping on the lives buried beneath. My plastic Crocs tentatively step across the terrain, crunching dry grass and dead leaves as they echo in the absence of all other sound. I no longer hear the chattering leaves of the oak trees that greeted me as I entered the cemetery; I no longer hear the crickets and birds that accompanied my journey down the dusty lane that brought me to this community. Only the sounds of my footsteps exist.



Unlike some cemeteries where the only marker is that of the monument, many of the Spring Hill Cemetery plots contain above-ground burials. Something I find particularly interesting is that the above-ground sites are enclosed in what appear to be concrete structures rather than marble ones, and some of them have been sprayed with grey metallic paint to resemble a metal container. While the paint makes it difficult to read the inscriptions, it appears to resist black mold that covers some of the unpainted tombs.

The family plots, in particular, are maintained with plastic and silk flowers. Some are enclosed with white picket fences; others are enclosed by chains. Very little grass grows in the cemetery, and some family plots are dotted with sprigs of grass, while others appear to be completely free of any grass. Only the fallen leaves of the giant oak trees carpet the ground surrounding the graves and provide a path for visitors to follow.



Close to the cemetery entrance stands a tall oak tree bent over at the top. Beneath is a white cross marking it as, according to some, the “hanging tree,” where Black men were lynched. Because of the isolated location of the cemetery, atrocities could go unnoticed by the towns-





people. Archival records likewise corroborate that this location served as a meeting place for the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and 1930s. The tree thus stands as a monument, much like the grave markers, that speaks to the lives of Spring Hill Cemetery's residents and to the shame of a county that conceded to the will of unsavory leaders.

### OBSERVATION 1

A tiny grave marker rests on its side as if it were intentionally placed in this position so visitors could read its message. Shaped like a park bench, with two tiny footstools as its support, it now rests on its side. A beautiful angel wearing a pale green and pink gown floating over raised, white clouds graces the marker. A black metal plate is embedded into a ridge of flowers encircling it; however, what was written has since been lost to the natural elements. My inclination is to set the marker upright; but I pull my hand back, as it is not my place to correct anything in this community. Perhaps the marker's position was intentionally changed; perhaps it would be a sign of disrespect for a visitor to impose her sense of balance and proportion on a community that survived the greatest example of imbalance and disproportion imposed upon it by those who thought they should make changes. So I leave this little marker while I imagine the tiny resident it represents.

As I walk a few paces, I am drawn to a most shy resident, as I notice the marker heavily burdened by mold that serves to obscure its name. Identified only as "Edmund," this resident informs me of its birth in 1831 and its death in 1901; it boasts a long life of 70 years, some of which no doubt witnessed the brutalities imposed upon its friends and family by ruthless people inflamed by ugly and unjust hatred. Many markers share characteristics with that of Edmund. Carved from marble, shaped into rectangular posts, they show the wear of time and proclaim their presence in quiet dignity.

An even shier resident marks its place in the cemetery, yet keeps its name a mystery. A simple stone that marks the place where a life once existed sits quietly just beyond where Edmund's rests. Betraying no concern for fanfare or remembrance, the grave marker serves only to announce that a resident lies here.



One of the most intriguing grave markers is that of “Mammie,” B—5/5/1895, D—5/30/1953. Carved by hand, the marker appears to be homemade. Seemingly molded from concrete, it rests at the head of approximately 15 ceramic tiles of varying colors, creating a most unique gravesite. It is unclear whether Mammie’s last name is Delaine, or if Delaine is the person who crafted the marker. Nonetheless, it makes me curious how Mammie, a 58-year-old woman, came to reside here.



## OBSERVATION 2

Upon my return for the second observation, the road is a bit more difficult to drive on because of a storm the previous evening. As I near the cemetery, I notice a silver pickup truck with the logo of the State Forestry Department on its doors exiting the cemetery very slowly, most likely checking for signs of illegal activity. Since beginning this project, I have learned that the Spring Hill Cemetery is frequented by drug dealers; so both state and local officials regularly sweep the area. I find it perplexing, however, that of the many state and local officials who apparently sweep the area for illegal activities, not one local or state official deems it worthy to remove the trash and other man-made debris from the cemetery’s community.

Today, I focus on individuals in the cemetery community. One grave marker catches my eye because it contains a photograph of a woman identified as Retha Timmons. That name interests me because of its history. According to a July 5, 2005, article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, journalist Dan DeWitt reports that in 1924, Retha Timmons’s uncle, Will Timmons, a “prosperous black farmer . . . bought a new car. . . . As she returned with him from the fields, he was confronted by a group of white men . . . and then beaten ‘half to death.’” The article likewise reported statements from people who were familiar with the incident, and one person reported that “the mob beat (Timmons) between the legs until they tore his testicles up. . . . They did castrate him because he bought a brand-new Ford.” Will’s grave lies just to the left of Waiters

Timmons and to the right of Retha Timmons, as if he is now under the protection of beloved sentries.

### **REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE SETTING AND MY APPROACH TO THIS PROJECT**

If I had all the time in the world to observe this site, I would list the names of all residents from their grave markers and try to find out who they were. Even though there may no longer be sanctioned lynchings in Brooksville, there still remain dramatic inequalities. Most of Brooksville's Black population lives off of Summit Avenue (now called Martin Luther King Blvd.). Their community has recently been the subject of an Environmental Protection Agency investigation because the old Hernando County Public Works Department dumped toxic waste in the creek behind the complex, which in turn feeds into the Black community's drinking water. After the incident became public, medical teams investigated what appeared to be unusually high infant mortality rates and deaths among children in the Black community along Martin Luther King Blvd. Yet, after a flurry of investigations, no changes have been made—no improvements, no restitutions, no fulfilled promises—as a legal or symbolic gesture by the county. In the recent past, county commissioners have felt an obligation to make a formal apology to the Black community for past atrocities; however, that apology has rarely, if ever, been accompanied by funding or community improvements.

What I would like to be able to do with the information I accumulate is, at the very least, use it to motivate the county commission to provide groundskeeping services for the Spring Hill Cemetery—if the Black community so wishes. But, if the county provides so little assistance to living residents, I am doubtful they will find it within their budgets or interests to provide assistance to the dead. Nonetheless, it is the choice of the Black community whether they want their loved ones to be bothered by county workers whose ancestors were, in part, responsible for populating the Spring Hill Cemetery community. This project attempted also to use photos to tell a story. In accord with Freirian philosophy, we all have the responsibility to advocate for the many who have neither the voice nor the opportunity to advocate for themselves, even if this means that we look to the dead for stories that often speak louder than words of the living.

As I examined community lives in the Spring Hill Cemetery, I realized that this activity shares characteristics of an oral history project. Likewise, my observations of past lives in the Spring Hill Cemetery through trying to understand gravestones and markers could contribute to a social justice project that repairs Hernando County's historical record by including voices from the Black community.

Perhaps the very best argument of all for my approach in this project is that it functions as a creative tool through which others may access past events. Creativity is imperative to counteract—if only symbolically—the effects of past actions inflicted upon a community.

### SELF-REFLECTION

Needless to say, this assignment has left me with more questions than answers, and the precious few answers I do have led me to more questions. Thus there is a circularity to qualitative research—a cycle that is perpetually fueled by inquiry. Though I was unable to observe a visitor to the Spring Hill Cemetery during this assignment, I believe this itself is an observation that leads me to ask: Where are the families? Where are the visitors? While working on this assignment, I drifted into the Brooksville Cemetery, which houses predominantly White residents. The grass is green, lush, and well maintained; a paved lane meanders through the cemetery, providing ample space for visitors to park and walk. Even the oldest grave marker, which dates to the early 1800s, is clean and free of mold. Trees are trimmed and clear of Spanish moss. On both days I glanced into the White cemetery, there were a number of people visiting grave sites, and I once again wonder: Why are there no visitors in the Spring Hill Cemetery?

As I consider this question, I realize that the Spring Hill Cemetery is located in a remote section of Hernando County, several miles from the Black community. Relatively few people—especially people who are old enough to remember the residents of the cemetery—have transportation. For those who do have transportation, the visit to Spring Hill Cemetery may be dangerous. The road leading to the cemetery, Fort Dade Avenue, is often patrolled by law enforcement trolling for illegal drug activity. Law enforcement has not been kind to Hernando County's Black community in the past, and there remains a tension between law enforcement and the Black community even today. The taken-for-

granted privilege of visiting the dead in our cemeteries is most often a White privilege, not a Black one.

Observing people in a social environment can render untold amounts of data; it can help us see the nuances of a person's personality through gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Observations prompt us to ask questions about what we see and what we do not see. Interestingly, it is often what we do not see that renders the most compelling data. As a species, humans have become very clever at creating the image they want others to see. However, they cannot mask that which cannot be readily seen, and this, for me, is the most fertile area to begin observations. Spring Hill Cemetery provided me with abundant data that has left pages of unanswered questions. Some of those questions can be answered by examining archival data; but others can be answered only by talking with people familiar with the person or incident in question.

Racial inequality and tensions continue to plague the United States, and my observations for this assignment have led me to believe that Hernando County, Florida, is an excellent site for researching the ways in which the past continues to guide what happens in the present. Though there exist many well-intentioned White people in Hernando County who are ashamed of its role in racial atrocities, they often mistakenly believe a political apology, a plaque in honor of a Black resident, or a street named in honor of a civil rights leader will set matters right. These White residents do not see that they continue to show disrespect to the Black community when they, for example, vote to discontinue bus service in the county to save money (as they have recently done) without calculating how this will affect a community with no personal transportation. They do not see how their actions complicate the lives of Black citizens when they wholeheartedly support road improvements that require Black children to cross a much wider road to catch a school bus, thus endangering their lives. They do not see how the privileges and conveniences they take for granted every day are inaccessible to the Black community. And they do not understand why the Black community does not appreciate their token apologies for past injustices.

Perhaps the most personally important part of this observation assignment is that it has enlightened me about a community of which I have been a part for nearly 30 years. Having lived in Hernando County longer than I have lived in any other state or county, I realize that I am more intimately attached to the history than I might have origi-

nally thought. As I walked the observation site, I recognized many of the names. They were connected to former coworkers, my children's schools, and Little League.

Perhaps paranormal enthusiasts are correct when they say the Spring Hill Cemetery is haunted, for **I am now truly haunted by questions raised during my observation of its residents.** So few questions have been answered about the lives of Black residents in Hernando County; so little is contained in the archival records that would provide those answers; only a handful of people remain who can provide first-hand accounts of Hernando County's history of dealing with the Black community. Therefore, this observation assignment has given me new insight into a community of which I have become a part—a community whose stories are screaming to be heard.



In this example, the writer uses photographs and her narrative style to capture the physical setting but also tries to connect the history of the setting with her narration and with her reflection on Spring Hill Cemetery. I ask learners to identify what they would go back to observe if they had all the time in the world. In this particular example, Jody, the author and observer, would go back to find out more about the history of race relations, although she had started looking for documents before she began. In addition, she was inspired to find documents about the markers she did see but was unsuccessful in finding any records. This to me is another reason to document our various histories.

## SUMMARY

Oral history is an age-old technique used to capture personal narratives that represent an individual's or sets of individuals' life stories. As I pointed out earlier, a number of terms are used interchangeably with the term *oral history*. All these approaches use the techniques of the qualitative researcher, which include interview, observation, document review, field notes, journaling, and, more recently, photography and/or photoethnography, digital stories, videotaping of a life or portion of someone's life, and narrative interpretive text in writ-

ten, spoken, or video format. In this book, interpretation is critical to understanding the story being told. In addition, the importance of testimony as a form of oral history and the use of oral history to include the voices previously silenced are steps toward developing a social justice perspective in oral history projects. An example of testimony as oral history contributing to social justice was provided. In addition, an example of an observation was provided to illustrate the strength of capturing a context and physical setting. In addition, both examples are examples of solid narrative storytelling.

As a suggestion for further study, a visit to a nearby local or university library may surprise you as you search for oral histories. There are many oral histories waiting to be read and reviewed. For example, a recent Web-based library search revealed numerous oral histories in the Tampa Bay area alone. Also found was the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida, Gainesville, a project begun in 1967, which has already collected more than 4,000 oral histories, making it the largest archive in the United States. In this collection, more than 900 interviews with Native Americans, including Seminoles, Creeks, Cherokee, and other nations' members, are available. This collection also contains the stories of African American civil rights activists, of women in Florida, of World War II veterans, and of Florida politicians, among others. I use these examples to suggest that you, the reader, if you should be inspired to continue this kind of work, might do well to check into what is available in your local area and see what types of oral history projects already exist. Because oral history is a qualitative research endeavor, this work may broaden your skill set and provide a vehicle to tell a previously untold story.

Even more astounding are the numbers of oral histories in process and documented on the World Wide Web. A visit to YouTube, Second Life, MySpace, and, in general, any oral history site will yield hundreds of thousands of oral history projects. On YouTube alone, nearly 2.5 million entries were listed recently under "oral histories." Numerous sites connected to the National Archives and other archives are also available on the Web. A list of examples of the many projects available is excerpted in the Appendices. In addition, many websites are totally dedicated to doing and documenting oral histories. All of these are available free and take only your time.

## PERFORMANCE EXERCISES

1. Visit your local library and find an oral history or oral history archive. Select one example to read and study. Use this as an example for practicing an oral history interview with someone in your family—a grandparent, aunt, or uncle, for example. Ask them to describe something memorable in each adult decade of their lives. Practice with a digital voice recorder and practice uploading the interview on your thumb drive to a CD for transcription.
2. Complete a transcription of an oral history interview. Read through the transcription carefully and see what themes emerge from the interview. Write three pages about the themes that emerge and what you want to know next about this person.
3. Write three pages describing your own theoretical framework or one big idea that influences your work and/or your life. Try to find the origin of that idea, trace it to yourself, and say something about how you are extending that idea in the history of ideas. For example, if you are a writer who writes with social justice as a theme, can you name who else currently or in the past also used social justice as a guiding theme.
4. Find an oral history project on the World Wide Web. Select two examples of oral histories and compare and contrast what you see in the interviews. Find three cultural issues raised by these stories. Write three pages reflecting on the implications for social justice emerging from these oral histories.
5. In order to document a setting, go to a public space and observe at least two different times to get a sense of action, setting, and people. Describe it and connect it to a social justice issue. Reflect on this in writing.

## WEB RESOURCES

[www.oralhistory.org](http://www.oralhistory.org) (Oral History Association)

[omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha](http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha)

[historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral)

[www.dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

[www.historians.org](http://www.historians.org) (American Historical Association)

[ohr.oxfordjournals.org](http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org) (Oral History Review)

[www.Studsterkel.org](http://www.Studsterkel.org) (Studs Terkel, Chicago Historical Society)

[www.personalhistorians.org](http://www.personalhistorians.org) (Association of Personal Historians)

[www.loc.gov/vets/about.html](http://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html) (Veterans Oral History Project at the Library of Congress)



**Digital Storytelling Sites, Some with How-to-Do History Guides**

[www.digitales.us](http://www.digitales.us)

[www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)

[www.historicalvoices.org](http://www.historicalvoices.org)

[www.dohistory.org](http://www.dohistory.org)

[www.photovoice.org](http://www.photovoice.org)

[www.positiveexposure.org](http://www.positiveexposure.org)

**OTHER RELATED USEFUL RESOURCES  
FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN ORAL HISTORY**

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