

# Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience

Alessandro Portelli

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**Abstract:** Based on the experience of field research in oral history, this article describes the oral history interview as an exchange of gazes and a cocreated narrative between subjects—the interviewer and the interviewee—who are both observer and observed and speak to each other across the line of their significant otherness. The interviewee is both a tool for historical research and the opening of a narrative space for the subjectivity of the interviewee, which becomes in turn a significant historical fact.

**Keywords:** dialogue, interview, memory, narrative

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The personal encounter that we call an interview may be approached in many different forms and may acquire many different meanings, depending on disciplinary perspectives, on the technologies used, and on the subjectivities of the protagonists. In this opening to this special section of the *Oral History Review* I discuss some of the problems and possibilities of the oral history interview, based upon my own experiences in the field.<sup>1</sup>

I hope we all remember the opening scene of Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1979): an anthropologist interviews an old frontiersman, a survivor of the battle of Little Big Horn, and while the anthropologist is interested in rituals and beliefs, the interviewee wants to talk about his participation in the battle.<sup>2</sup> This is a good introduction to what may or may not occur in such encounters. An inter/view is an exchange of gazes, persons both *seeing* and *listening to* each other. Penn's opening scene is a wonderful example of a failed inter/view: two persons sitting on opposite sides of a tape recorder but not really *seeing* or *listening to* each other.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised and expanded version of an earlier article, "L'inter-vista nella storia orale," in *Vive voci: L'intervista come fonte di documentazione*, ed. Massimo Pistacchi (Rome: Donzelli, 2010), 3-12.

<sup>2</sup> The movie was based on a novel by Thomas Berger: *Little Big Man* (New York: Dial, 1964).

Mr. Crabb: My name is Jack Crabb and I am the sole white survivor of the battle of the Little Big Horn, popularly known as Custer's Last Stand.

Interviewer: Ehm, Mr. Crabb, I am more interested in the primitive life style than I am in—tall tales, about Custer.

Mr. Crabb: Tall tales? Are you calling me a liar?

Interviewer: No, it's just that I'm interested in the way of life of the Indian rather than in—shall we say—adventures.

Mr. Crabb: You think the battle of Little Big Horn was an *adventure*?

Interviewer: Little Big Horn was not representative of encounters between white and Indian, Mr. Crabb.

Clearly, this is comedy: not all anthropologists are so ridiculous, nor all informants so cranky. Yet, encounters in the field *are* often difficult and confrontational. They always include two people mediated by a technology—a tape recorder, a notebook, a video camera; and these two people have different agendas: what the researcher is interested in *hearing* is not necessarily what the narrator is interested in *telling*. Here, for instance, the scholar seeks the *representative*, while Jack Crabb, the narrator, insists on what makes him *unique*—“the *sole* white survivor of Little Big Horn.” The anthropologist sees Mr. Crabb not as a person but as an informant, a bearer of culture (in Gianni Bosio's terms, a “folkloric man” as opposed to a “historical man”).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Mr. Crabb insists on his own individuality and his own place in history; yet, in turn, he does not see the interviewer as a person either, but mainly as a vehicle for his own narrative agenda—a passive receptacle for the story he wants to tell, an adjunct to the tape recorder.

Both agendas are legitimate—the researchers' desire to gather knowledge relevant to their project, and the narrators' desire to speak about themselves and be heard. Indeed, the exchange quoted above embodies the tensions in oral history as a *social* methodology based on *personal* accounts.

This means that the interview is two things at once: a tool for research, and the opening of a narrative space. And, given that ultimate control is in the stories narrators wish to tell, often the agendas that prevail are the narrators'. This is the case with *Little Big Man*: although the moment in which the narrator takes over is not shown, the rest of the film is about his story.

A whole positivistic tradition requires the observer to be invisible—unobservable—lest he contaminate the supposed authenticity of the testimony. However, once we redefine the interview as an exchange of gazes—a mutual,

<sup>3</sup> Gianni Bosio, “Uomo folklorico/uomo storico (relazione sulle attività dell'Istituto E. de Martino, al luglio 1969),” in *L'intellettuale rovesciato: interventi e ricerche sulla emergenza d'interesse verso la forme di espressione e di organizzazione “spontanee” nel mondo popolare e proletario, gennaio 1963-agosto 1971* (Milan: Edizioni Bella Ciao, 1975), 255-62.

personal encounter based on some form of reciprocity—we are implicitly questioning the separation of the roles of observer and observed: when two persons meet, both of them are at once both observer and observed. I learned this lesson very early in my fieldwork practice, at a time when I still thought it was more scientifically correct for the observer to present himself as a neutral, impersonal presence. I have told the story elsewhere: in 1970 in Labro, on the border of Lazio and Umbria, Trento Pitotti, a former steelworker and perhaps the finest folk singer I ever met, sang a number of traditional and ritual songs as well as a couple of Fascist topical songs from the 1930s. I later found out, talking to his daughter, that he was a committed Communist. When I asked him why had he sung those songs, he said, “You asked me to sing the songs from back when I was young, and that’s what they made us sing!”<sup>4</sup>

This meant that he had not spoken to me as a person, but to a stereotype that he derived from the language I used, from my personal appearance, from the class and culture of which I was an obvious representative. I realized then that, precisely because I was trying not to distort the observed reality with my historical, social, and personal presence, I was being rewarded with biased data. Indeed, I was messing with the data to begin with by pretending that someone who was there—myself—did not really exist, just as in documentaries or publications in which the presence and voice of the interviewer is carefully excised, thus falsifying what was actually a dialogue by turning it into a monologue.

Since then, without overdoing it, I have always made sure that the people I interviewed had an idea of who I was, where I was coming from, and what I was looking for. I became aware that the interview is, ultimately, a form of dialogue: we are not in the field to extract data from informants, but to exchange knowledge with citizens of our own world and time, our contemporaries. In the words of the Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino, our task is not to “treat people [our] age, citizens of [our] own country, as objects of scientific research, almost of experimentation,” but rather to “reopen. . . a dialogue between two human worlds which long ago ceased to speak to each other.”<sup>5</sup>

The root meaning of the word *dialogue* is “to speak across,” “to speak beyond.” This suggests that the crucial element is space, both social and geographic: the distance, the difference, the *otherness* between the two partners involved. After all, the reason we are seeking the interview is because we are different: even so-called native anthropologists are different from their interlocutors, if only in terms of age, education, and profession. Of course, the interview could not happen unless there was some common ground—if only a common

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “The Interview As an Experiment in Equality,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 29–44.

<sup>5</sup> Ernesto De Martino, “Note di viaggio,” in *Il dibattito sul folklore in Italia*, ed. Pietro Clemente et al. (Milan: Edizioni di Cultura Popolare, 1970), 383–408.

language, or the mutual willingness to meet and talk. But what the interview is about is the distance we have to cross in order to speak to each other. Similarity makes the interview possible; difference makes it meaningful.

In 1983, I interviewed Mrs. Julia Cowans, an African American activist for the civil rights movement in Kentucky and the wife of Baptist preacher, coal miner, and union activist Rev. Hugh Cowans. The fact that I had been introduced by friends they trusted, and that I was in sympathy with the union and the movement, established our common ground. Yet, Reverend Cowans, who was also present, opened the conversation by further checking the common ground: "Are you in the United Mine Workers?" (I was not, but was able to reply that I had a union card back home). When Mrs. Cowans took the floor, her narrative was a progression from generic political statements all the way to more personal and problematic themes, such as black criticism of school integration, miscegenation and sexuality, lynchings, and the attitudes toward white people she had inherited from her slave ancestors. No white person had ever done anything to her personally, but because of the stories that had been handed down in the family, "Because you're white, I don't trust you."<sup>6</sup>

We are always told that we must gain the interviewee's trust (and often taught meaningless little techniques—old handbooks suggested offering a cigarette!). Yet what makes this interview memorable is precisely the *lack* of trust. Of course, I could have thought that hers was an impersonal *you*, she was speaking generically, present company not included, but it made much more sense to take it personally. Beyond the common ground—language, political sympathies, my desire to learn and her willingness to teach—there stood all the differences in the world: age, nationality, gender, color, class, religion. Indeed, after all, why ought she trust *me*? But more than that: how far could I trust *myself* to do the right thing, if push came to shove and color became a matter of life and death as it was in the civil rights movement (and still is, as the Trayvon Martin episode reminds us)?<sup>7</sup> One thing that the interview does is that it also induces the interviewer to look not only at the interviewee but also inside him- or herself. Later, while working on the memories of Nazi occupation in Rome and the Shoah, I was reminded of Mrs. Cowan's challenge: how far could I have trusted myself to do the right thing in 1938 Italy, when the discrimination against Jews became official state policy and persecution began? Would I have had the courage to speak up, to do

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "There's Gonna Always Be a Line: History-Telling As a Multivocal Art," in *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 24-39.

<sup>7</sup> Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American high school student, was killed on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, by a vigilante named George Zimmerman. Trayvon Martin was unarmed but Zimmerman assumed that a young black man in the wrong place was inherently dangerous. In 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter charges.

something (as some very few did), or would I have kept quiet, as did the majority?

"There's gon' always be a line," Mrs. Cowans concluded; yet, she trusted me enough to spend two hours of her life (and several more in a later interview) to teach me why she could not trust me. In the true meaning of the word *dialogue*, she was speaking across the line, beyond the line. Ultimately, the line is what the interview (the inter/view) is about, whether explicitly as in this case, or implicitly: we may be looking for information, but what we ultimately get is the relationship. Elsewhere, I have described the interview as an "experiment in equality," meaning exactly this: speaking to each other not as if the difference (often in terms of status, class, power) did not exist but rather recognizing it and endeavoring to communicate across and beyond, prefiguring a utopian world in which difference may not mean inequality.

This takes us back to the multiple agendas that meet in the oral history interview. Often we interview people who have not had a chance to speak about themselves and be heard before; thus, they seize the opportunity not only to answer our questions but also to volunteer stories of their own. Our task is not merely to extract information, but to open up narrative spaces. Some of these spaces are generated by our very presence and by our explicit and implicit questions; some are generated by the narrators' own subjectivity and self-image creation. The two may converge and overlap to some extent, but they never coincide entirely. Thus, it is important that we enter the interview with a great degree of flexibility, ready not only to accept the narrator's agenda but also to modify our own. After all, in *Little Big Man*, the narrator's story is much more interesting, and historically relevant, than the interviewer's preconceived anthropological patterns—which is why in the end it prevails.

These ideas bring to mind the fascinating interview with a woman in Terni that I sought out because I wanted her to tell me about her brother, who was an underground Communist activist in the 1930s; instead, the woman insisted on telling me the story of her long engagement to a Fascist who eventually jilted her. In the book I later wrote, there is perhaps one line about her brother and a whole chapter about her. In fact, the book I wrote was very different from the one I had set out to write. The original project was an oral history of labor struggles in Terni between 1949 and 1953. In the first interview I did, a steelworker told me about working conditions in the factory at that time, about how he was fired together with almost 3,000 workers in 1953, and about the rebellion and barricades that followed the layoffs. Then his wife seized the microphone and told me the story of how her great-grandfather had left his wife on their wedding day to follow Giuseppe Garibaldi in his wars of national liberation.<sup>8</sup> What

<sup>8</sup> Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) was one of the key protagonists in the Italian Risorgimento, the movement for national independence and unity, and is often perceived as Italy's national hero.

do you do with a story like that? Do you ignore it because it does not fit the project's time frame? Or do you change the project? The book I ended up writing was an oral history of Terni from 1831 to 1985.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes in the inter/view there is a third possible agenda beyond those of the narrator and the interviewer, about which neither are aware. When I spoke with Ms. Ada Pignotti in Rome, she told me the story of how her husband was killed in the Nazi massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine in March 1944. She has spent her whole life telling and retelling this story, and is acknowledged as one of the representative witnesses and storytellers of this event. After I had asked all the questions I had brought with me, and after she had told all the stories she had to tell, I had some blank tape left and left the tape recorder on while we chatted. Indeed, it is always difficult to tell when an interview is over; often, the most unexpected and revealing information emerges in these last informal moments (and, too often, on the doorstep as you are leaving and the machine is turned off). As we chatted, she talked about her health and complained about her pension and about how difficult it had been to collect it after her husband's death.

So I asked her to tell me about it, and she gave me an extraordinary description of widows in deep mourning making the rounds of offices to try to secure the means of survival for themselves and their children. This was an aspect of the aftermath of the Fosse Ardeatine that was virtually absent from the record. All the victims of the massacre were men, so the survivors were mainly women. Like Ada Pignotti, they had been interviewed and asked to testify any number of times. But what they were expected to speak about was their husbands or sons, to give testimony about a recognized historical event. They had never been asked to speak about themselves, which is the whole difference between *testimony* and *narrative*: the oral history interview is always, ultimately, about the life and subjectivity of the interviewee. I had been moved to investigate the memory of the Fosse Ardeatine less by a desire to reconstruct the (already well-documented) massacre than because I had been intrigued by the stories of the survivors. So for the first time Ada Pignotti was speaking to an interviewer who was more interested in her life than in her husband's death.

And, in another turn of the screw, she added that, as she made her rounds, all the men in the offices (and, later, at her city job) assumed that she was "at their disposal." So I queried: "Madam, what do you mean?" "I mean what you know I mean," she replied. Ms. Pignotti did not have the term for sexual harassment, but she had the experience. Neither her original agenda nor mine included this story. A very intelligent woman, she only had a third-grade education and was not aware of such later historical approaches as gender

<sup>9</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *Biografia di una città: Storia e racconto, Terni 1830-1985* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1985), 174-78, 78. The book has been recently republished in a much-enlarged edition, spanning 1831 to 2014: *La città dell'acciaio: Due secoli di storia operaia* (Rome: Donzelli, 2017). An English version is also available: *Biography of an Industrial Town: Terni, Italy, 1831-2014* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

history, social history, the history of sexuality, or the history of private life. She did not realize, therefore, that the harassment to which she and others were subjected in the late 1940s was also a historical fact of great importance, as it gave us a glimpse of gender roles and attitudes at a given historical time. It was not history as she had been taught to define it; it was about the personal self, not about public martyrs like her husband. So it had not occurred to her to mention it in her narrative. On the other hand, I was not aware that these things had happened, so it did not occur to me to ask about them (and to me, as a male descendant of that culture, it was a painful story to hear).

The next question, of course, is: was it, in truth, a social and historical fact, or was it just her? Was it history or was it just biography? The only way to find out was to listen to other Fosse Ardeatine widows; it is quite awkward, however, for a younger male interviewer to ask an older woman whether she was sexually harassed in the 1940s. The interview is not a question-and-answer session, but the offer of a narrative possibility. So I would say things like, “Madam, it must have been difficult for a young widow in those days,” or some such thing, and they would all, infallibly, tell the same kinds of stories. The women had talked about it among themselves but had never mentioned it in their testimony precisely because testimony does not encourage this kind of intimate, personal tale. Historians and the courts had never asked them about it, and the women had never recognized it as history as they had been taught to define it in their school days.<sup>10</sup>

The heart of the oral history interview, then, is the relationship. The interview is *about* the past—like all other historical sources, it provides us with factual information that can be verified and critically scrutinized—but is *of* the present. These are not only, as a classic book defined them, *les voix qui viennent du passé*, voices from the past.<sup>11</sup> These are *living voices*, voices that speak *with* us *now*. They tell us about events in the past, but the telling and its forms are also a historical fact *in themselves* that reveals not only what happened in the past but also what it means today, and includes not only memory but also the *history of memory*, the ways in which the meaning of the past has been constructed over time in the subjectivity of the speakers.

For instance, Mrs. Cowans did not just say, “My grandmother was the daughter of slaves.” Rather, she said, “My grandma, they, they—she was the daughter of s-s-slaves.” What is the information here? She was black, born and living in the South—of course one expects her to be the descendant of slaves. But the real information is not in this fact, but rather in the stutter and hesitation with which she mentioned it, in how hard it was for her, more than a century later, to wrest that word, *slaves*, out of her mouth. So the information is less about her ancestry

<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 215; 219.

<sup>11</sup> Philippe Joutard, *Ces voix qui nous viennent du passé* (Paris: Hachette, 1983).

than about her *relationship* to this ancestry, about the meaning of historical slavery in the speaker's present. To me, it was another revelation: I was expecting anger, perhaps pride of survival, not shame and humiliation.

An interview, then, is a moment in a relationship between times: the time of the events, the time of the telling, and, when we factor in the archive, the time of listening. In 2003, the Circolo Gianni Bosio (the independent research organization that I work with in Rome) was commissioned to create a CD-ROM about the fiftieth anniversary of the 1953 layoffs and rebellion in Terni. We went back to the interviews I had recorded between 1979 and 1984 and put them together, along with music and images. When the work was finished, we realized that the events of fifty years ago were apparently taking place all over again: once again, the town of Terni was in rebellion against mass layoffs at the steelworks, with roadblocks, picket lines, mass rallies, and physical attacks on management representatives, just as in 1953. Outwardly, the workers' actions were the same. But the difference was in the language. In 2004, workers spoke differently than in the period 1979 to 1984, because they were acting and speaking in the context of radically changed class relationships. In the early 1980s, they still remembered the struggle of 1953 with pride, as a step in a struggle for a future of justice, equality, freedom, socialism; in 2004, they spoke with anger and despair of a struggle for survival. What had changed between 1953, 1979, and 2004 was not something that was said *in* the interviews, but rather something that the interviews reveal in their interrelationship: the future has changed, perhaps has disappeared altogether.<sup>12</sup>

This complex stratification of meanings in time illuminates further the distinction between *testimony* and *narrative*, between a story about events seen and witnessed and a story about oneself in relationship to these events, between asking "Tell me about the strike, tell me about the Fosse Ardeatine," and asking "Where were *you* in the strike? How did *you* live after your loved one was killed at the Fosse Ardeatine?" The narrator is always the protagonist of the narrative; the story is always about him- or herself and what the past means to him/her now. Some of the early oral historians cultivated the somewhat naïve perception that by interviewing participants we gained direct access to the experience of the past. Of course it was much more complicated than that. The interview gives us access not to the experience but to a verbal rendition of the memory of that experience, generated by the presence of the interviewer. The speaker may have told the story a thousand times before, but the interview context, the interviewer's challenge to the narrator to place her or his life in a historical context, and the very fact that the interviewer is not a member of the narrator's immediate circle of family and neighbors, generate subtle but radical changes, and the oft-told story comes out different anyway.

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *Acciai speciali: Terni, la Thussen Krupp, la globalizzazione* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008), now also abridged as part 2 of *La città dell'acciaio*.

The interview, then, is a historical and social *event* that creates a bivocal dialogical linguistic construct and wreaks significant changes both in the narrator and in the interviewee. The *document*—the tape or sound file or video recording—that is generated in the interview is something else: a text that we may work with, read, and interpret just as we can do with any other archival document. What makes it different is its history: while archival documents are there for us to find, the document of the interview would not exist if we had not generated it. In the interview, we are the coauthors, the cocreators of a document that, to some extent, is about us as well as about the persons we interview.

This, in fact, was one of the early points of criticism raised against oral history: does not our presence interfere with, contaminate, falsify the narrative? Of course it does: that document would not exist if we had not been there. However, this is not a weakness, but rather one of the strengths of the oral history interview. On the wake of the linguistic and psychological turn in the human sciences in the 1970s, oral history also underwent a Copernican revolution of its own. From the original perception that for the sake of authenticity and factual reliability oral sources ought to be cleansed of the presence of the interviewer and of the subjectivity of the interviewee, we moved on to the realization that the real, deep meaning of the encounter lies precisely in these apparent impurities, in the staging of a relationship between differences—between different persons, cultures, classes, and times, and between different layers of the narrating and narrated self. It is, again, as Ernest de Martino expressed it, the reopening of a dialogue between worlds that hardly ever speak and listen to each other.

Thus, the reason I ended up working in oral history was because at one point I realized that some of the stories I was being told were not factually accurate. Yet, perhaps because I was not a historian but a teacher and critic of literature, I was aware that in literature we do not discard a good story just because it is not true—and the same, of course, applies to psychological and psychoanalytical approaches. Rather than dismissing errors, myths, inventions, lies, dreams, visions, we investigate their meaning and what they tell us about the narrator's world and about ourselves. In another story I have told over and over again, when I realized that many people in Terni misplace the date of the killing of their iconic working-class martyr (he was killed in 1949, but most narrators place the episode in the context of the rebellion of 1953), the question was not the reconstruction of the event in itself, which is well documented in archives, newspapers, and other historical markers, but rather what it meant to the narrators at the time of the telling—a story of class humiliation and pride.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, when the commonsense narratives about the Fosse Ardeatine massacre insist on

<sup>13</sup> The workers had been unable to do anything after the killing of their comrade, and this made them feel powerless and frustrated; moving the event to a context in which they reacted, with street fights and barricades, to the mass layoffs at the steelworks was a way of restoring their pride.

blaming the freedom fighters rather than the Nazis, and narrators invent details in order to support this belief, once we have set the facts straight we still need to interrogate the reasons for the error, its meaning. Perhaps the fact that so many people cling to a wrong narrative suggests that what actually happened—the efficient and cold-blooded massacre of 335 innocents—was so absurd that it literally cannot be believed.<sup>14</sup>

Working with oral history interviews means working on a number of different levels. Number one is the basic reason we are there: the historian's endeavor to reconstruct events of the past. Next is what we may describe as the cultural work: trying to understand what is on people's minds, how these events are remembered and told. And finally, there is the work of the oral historian: connecting what we know about the facts with what we know about the narratives, connecting the facts to the cultural and linguistic constructs generated about them. This is what oral history is ultimately about—it is a document that we do not find but rather *cocreate* inside the interview, and that we read and interpret on many levels, asking such questions as who were Mrs. Cowans's ancestors, how does she speak about them, and how does she speak about them *to me*?

"Never trust a white school teacher," says Baby Suggs, a character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.<sup>15</sup> So here I am, a white schoolteacher who learned the meaning of oral history because a black woman did not trust me, and because she trusted me enough to tell me why.

**Alessandro Portelli** has taught American literature at the University of Rome. He is the founder of the Circolo Gianni Bosio for the critical study of memory and popular cultures. Among his works are *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991), *The Text and the Voice: Speaking, Writing and Democracy in American Literature* (1994), *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (1997), *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (2003), *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (2011), *Biography of an Industrial Town: Terni, Italy, 1831-2014* (2018). Email: [alessandro.portelli@gmail.com](mailto:alessandro.portelli@gmail.com).

<sup>14</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 1-17; Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*.

<sup>15</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House, 1987).