

Trauma and Orality: New Publications on Mass Violence and Oral History

CAVE, Mark and Stephen M. Sloan, (eds.)—*Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 295.

HIGH, Steven—*Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014. Pp. 441.

HIGH, Steven, (ed.)—*Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015. Pp. 378.

HIGH, Steven, Edward Little and Thi Rhy Duong (eds.)—*Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp. 376.

Daily, the news brings more stories of horrifying violence and suffering. From the terrorist attacks in Paris and the plight of Syrian refugees, to the very recent attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, this seems like an important moment for historians to consider the relationship between academic history and the public, the meaning of public history and commemoration, and the extent to which historians, community leaders and activists, and historical subjects should interact. These are all questions raised in four new publications on oral history and mass violence. Three of these books come out of the SSHRC-sponsored project, “Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and other Human Rights Violence” (hereafter Montreal Life Stories). As part of this project, approximately 500 Montrealers were interviewed by oral historians in collaboration with survivors and community leaders. *Oral History at the Crossroads*, by Stephen High, is a monograph that speaks to the project as a whole. *Remembering Mass Violence*, edited by High, Edward Little and Thi Rhy Duong, and *Beyond Testimony and Trauma*, edited by High, emerged out of conferences held in conjunction with the Montreal Life Stories project. The final book in this review, *Listening on the Edge*, edited by Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, is a collection of work by individuals involved in numerous oral history projects, reflects on the relationship between oral history and crisis. All of these books question the function of history as a discipline and showcase historians wrestling with the ethical and practical questions raised by the field of oral history.

Oral History at the Crossroads is a meditation or reflection on the goals and accomplishments of the Montreal Life Stories project by its director, Steven High. The book outlines how the project was conceived, its underlying principles, and the challenges faced by High and his team. Montreal Life Stories was premised on the concept of “shared authority,” when both interviewer and interviewee work to understand the experiences of the interviewee. This was achieved in the Montreal Life Stories through extensive collaboration between community members and the academic community. The goal was to produce scholarship that served both parties. The Montreal Life Stories project produced seven distinct working groups, each of which had different agendas: the Cambodian Working Group, the Experiences of Refugee Youth in Montreal Working Group, the Rwanda Working Group, the Haiti Working Group, the Holocaust and Other Persecutions Against Jews Working Group, the Life Stories in Education Working Group, and the Oral History and Performance Working Group. In order to maintain an equitable relationship, everyone involved in the project was required to participate in an interview in some way and invited to reflect upon their experiences. As High emphasizes, “we wanted team members to *feel* these stories in their chests.” (p. 23) Community members and academics were also united in their commitment to digital storytelling, and ensuring that the material collected was curated to make it more accessible to the public. The goal was not simply to collect and store narratives, but to democratize stories, to “expand our discussion outward from the interview itself to encompass other spaces of collaboration and collective-storytelling.” (p. 24)

The book as a whole is divided into two sections. The first six chapters deal with case studies of the technique of “life story interviewing.” When employing this technique, detailed in the first chapter, interviewees were encouraged to narrate their own experiences according to what was important to them rather than focusing on one specific event. The goal is to restore agency to interviewees and consider the larger context of an individual’s life and the long-term impact traumatic events have on a person’s life. High encourages oral historians to embrace the subjectivity inherent in the field, and to be open, honest, and reflective about the process of doing history. The following five chapters in this section explore how life story interviewing and an emphasis on community collaboration shaped the research process and subsequent results. The second chapter looks at public remembering of the Rwandan Genocide in the Montreal Rwandan community, with a focus on a community memorial walk. Chapter three, co-written with Stacey Zembrzycki, explores child survivors of the Holocaust and the way in which their activism intersects with their memories of the Holocaust. The healing possibilities inherent in the act of sharing memories and how children and grandchildren can forge relationships in memory-making are discussed in the fourth chapter. In chapter five, High looks at different generations of activists in the Haitian community, each with their own agendas and relationship to the past, and their efforts to build a strong community despite these problems. The final chapter in this section focuses on Rupert Bazambanza, a survivor of the Rwandan Genocide, and his authorship

of the graphic novel, *Sourir malgré tout*, which chronicles the experiences of a fellow survivor.

The second section focuses on storytelling efforts and connections with communities, especially with respect to public history projects. The first chapter in this section looks at digital storytelling and how technology can be used to share stories more effectively, rather than keeping testimonies filed away in an archive. As High notes, this is essential to make history relevant to the present:

Talk of open access and infinite archives is often disconnected from issues of collaboration and social change. Everything depends on how we approach digital technologies and how we use them. Thinking of oral history as a curatorial process rather than simply as an act of collection is therefore useful. ... What happens after the interview is now central to the work we do as oral historians. (p. 195)

As a part of these efforts, the Montreal Life Stories project produced forty-eight public events in March 2012. I was fascinated by the audio-portrait public exhibit, which involved posters being placed in 400 Metro cars with QR codes linking to excerpts from certain interviews. The next two chapters focus on two of these projects. Chapter eight centres on a walking audio tour created by and for the Rwandan community that explores the negotiations between the personal meaning and legacy of the massacre. Chapter nine is an experimental chapter on the usefulness of theatrical performance as a tool to enhance oral history, to connect the body to history, and reinsert body-language into the conversation. The final chapter of this section comments on the successes and challenges that emerged out of a project involving collaboration between universities and communities.

This book and the Montreal Life Stories project as a whole provide an important model for historians seeking to make history relevant to the public. The sheer amount of material collected and the way in which it was projected in public spaces alone is impressive. However, the ambitious goals established at the start of the project were not always realized. The very format of using case studies to explore the issues emerging from the Montreal Life Stories project is an example of this very problem. There simply was not enough space to provide enough details to fully contextualize the case studies. I was also saddened to find that despite the emphasis on creating a project that would be accessible to the public, few of the public projects survive in any form online. The Metro car audio portraits remain available online, but the posters are gone and they present only a fraction of the total archive. The project does survive in the form of curriculum content for high schools, but the book says nothing about how this kind of research could be used in university classrooms.

I found that *Oral History at the Crossroads* succeeded most when High openly and honestly discussed what did and did not work, particularly in the area of collaboration between universities, historians, community leaders, and survivors. The polished monograph that often emerges from academic study is divorced from the very process of scholarship, and apart from a brief discussion of historiography, the work that goes into producing history is too often erased. But the challenges,

failures, insecurities, and set-backs discussed in *Oral History at the Crossroads*, such as competing agendas between university administrators and community leaders or when interviewers failed to establish a rapport with interviewees, enrich the final results and create the kind of transparency that I think dovetails beautifully with High's emphasis on collaboration. The transparency, self-awareness, and reflexivity present through the book are emphasized in the conclusion, when High relates his life story and how his life has been shaped by collaboration through involvement in left-wing politics, activism, and volunteering. He decided to become a historian in large part because of his experiences and his desire to make a difference in the world. This exploration of the personal meaning of scholarship is one that more historians would do well to emulate.

Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance emerged out of the November 2009 conference, "Remembering War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations: Oral History, New Media, and the Arts". This book is the most experimental of the four, and examines ways in which academic historians can work together with communities and artists. The editors note that stories are embedded in relationships; thus, they are interested in the "productive tensions between public and private remembering." (p. 5) The authors of this collection come from a wide range of backgrounds, including academic, art, activism, education, and communities. The focus on collaboration extends even to the authorship of articles—a full seven out of seventeen articles are co-authored. The first section, titled "Turning Private History into Public Knowledge," establishes the framework for the rest of the collection. Psychologist and noted scholar on Holocaust survivors, Henry Greenspan, begins the collection by considering the relationship between researchers and survivors, and how they can form productive partnerships that neither glorify stories nor impose psychological discourses of trauma. His piece is contrasted by Lorne Shirinian's piece, where he reflects on his experiences as a second-generation survivor of the Armenian genocide, and emphasizes the importance of story telling "as a means of converting private history into public knowledge." (p. 12)

Part two, "Performing Human Rights," examines the social justice potential of live performances of oral histories. The concept of shared authority is central here, as does the importance of interdisciplinary work. The first chapter of this section, by Michael Kilburn, focuses on classical musician and composer Shaw Pong Liu and how he employs theatrical conventions to portray the impact that PTSD has on memories and narratives. Sandeep Bhagwati looks at how actors can embody the body language presented by videotaped interviewees in the next chapter. Chapter five is co-authored by the members of the Living Histories Ensemble, and explores Playback Theatre, where the audience is invited to share their stories, which are then acted out by performers. The final chapter in this section comes out of the "Stories Scorched from the Desert Sun" performance of stories from the Montreal Life Histories project, and the ethical quandaries that emerge from performing the most graphically violent aspects of survivor testimony.

The next section, "Oral History and Digital Media," explores the impact that new forms of technology have had on publicly disseminating oral histories. Reisa

Levine begins this section by reflecting on her collaboration with the Montreal Life Stories project as a video producer. The next chapter, by Megan Webster and Noelia Gravotta, looks at one of the stories produced by Levine's organization, *Life in the Open Prison*, and examines the pedagogical challenges of integrating oral histories from the Cambodian genocide into high school classrooms in a meaningful way. Next, Jessica Anderson and Rachel Bergenfield describe their experiences using new media to understand how communities in Northern Uganda are struggling following the Barlonyo massacre. Finally, Michele Luchs and Liz Miller discuss their creation of a "participative photo-story media" series of workshops as a tool for newly arrived male refugees to assist in healing and integration.

The penultimate section of this collection, "Life Stories," expands on the life story interviewing techniques discussed in *Oral History at the Crossroads* and uses individual case studies as examples. The first of these case studies, by Robin Jarvis Brownlie and Roewan Crowe, was originally conceived as community-based research with young Indigenous women, but morphs into a deep discussion of the authors' positionality as privileged Settlers. The following chapter, by D'Ann R. Penner, focuses on Hurricane Katrina, and how race and power intersected in the failure to help the citizens of New Orleans. Anthropologist Lindsay Dubois, the author of chapter thirteen, encourages researchers to interrogate the way in which oral histories are produced, and the impact that the politics of both interviewees and interviewers play in their authorship of testimony. The final chapter in this section, by Yolanda Cohen, focuses on Moroccan Jews who fled to Montreal after World War 2, the impact that migration has on personal and community identities.

Part five, "Rwanda in the Aftermath of Genocide," focuses on the Rwandan Working Group mentioned above. The first chapter in this section includes a transcription of testimony by Athanasie Mukarwego, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, and discusses how public readings and reflections are an important part of grieving and healing. The next chapter is authored by four members of the Rwandan community of Montreal and explores the prevalence of rape as a tool during the genocide, and how the experiences of rape survivors are often silenced in the larger narrative. The final chapter in this collection, by Valerie Love, examines the centrality of oral histories to the activism of Rwanda's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and intersex individuals, as they struggle to be recognized by their government and society. The afterword to this collection is by Thi Ry Duong, and in it she shares the story of her father, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge, and personal reflections on the impact that his experiences had on her life.

Like *Oral History at the Crossroads*, one of the strengths of *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance* is the reflexivity and self-awareness demonstrated by the authors of several articles. I was struck by the way in which actors used their personal experiences to bring stories to life, such as in Bhagwati's "*Lamentations: A Gestural Theatre in the Realm of Shadows*" and Nisha Sajani et al.'s "Turning Together: Playback Theatre, Oral History, Trauma, and Arts-Based Research in the Montreal Life Stories Project." The blurring of the line between performance, performer, and audience was fascinating and

contains many insights for historians exploring the relationship between historian and historical subject. The frank discussion about the problems of academics going into marginalized communities presented in Brownlie and Crowe's "'So You Want to Hear our Ghetto Stories?': Oral History at Ndinawe Youth Resource Centre" is a highlight of this edited collection. The authors do an impressive job of examining their own positionality, the role that power plays in research, and how well-intentioned academics can often do great harm to the communities they study. The sheer geographic range of this collection, principally the focus on Rwanda and Cambodia, is also remarkable.

There are two aspects of this collection that can be considered both strengths and weaknesses. First, while the diversity presented in this collection is inspiring, it also requires a great deal of knowledge of various fields and/or background reading. For example, the two chapters on theatrical performance discussed concepts that were very unfamiliar. Second, many of the articles use the style of narrative conversation as a frame. This seemed to work better in some articles than in others. While I believe that this is the weakest book in this review, I still found its insights into the possibilities of collaboration between historians and actors to be thoughtful, and the book as a whole to be a worthwhile read.

The final book from the Montreal Life Stories project is *Beyond Testimony and Trauma*, an edited collection that emerged from the March 2012 conference, "Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence." This edited collection focuses on the agency of survivors and urges historians to avoid seeing survivors either as eyewitnesses or as traumatized victims, but instead as potential collaborators narrating their own stories. The articles in this collection are wide-ranging in topic and international in scope. The book is organized into three parts. The first part, "The Political Work of Witness," considers the political aspects of testimony, and the context in which testimony is "invited, recorded, heard, and diffused." (p. 10) Ari Gandsman begins the collection with an article on survivors of the military dictatorship in Argentina that lasted from 1976 and 1983 and their subsequent political activism. Robert Storey examines testimony from injured workers in chapter two, how these workers are doubly victimized through a lack of protection at work and problems with compensation, as well as how workers can build solidarity by sharing their stories. Chapter three, by Lisa Taylor et al., considers the ethical and philosophical questions that emerge when communities and individuals try to learn from the past by exploring the development of a curriculum module on the Rwandan Genocide for Quebec high schools. In the final chapter of this section, Robert A. Wilson showcases the development of the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada, a research project that brought together survivors and academics in an effort to restore agency to survivors and make information on the eugenics movement more widely available.

Part two, "Working with Survivors," focuses on the theme of collaboration between researchers and survivors, with particular attention to the issue of power. Henry Greenspan, reflects on his career documenting the experiences of Holocaust survivors in the first chapter. Carolyn Ellis and Jerry Rawicki discuss

their experiences—the first a researcher, the second a Holocaust survivor—in “collaborative witnessing,” where interviewer and interviewee work together in constructing a historical narrative through multiple sessions. Chris Patti builds on these themes in chapter seven by looking at the intimate relationships that can be formed between interviewers and interviewees. Chapter eight focuses on a series of workshops created Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki for Holocaust survivors who are also public speakers, and discusses the relationship between education and testimony. The final chapter in this section, by Michele Luchs and Elizabeth Miller, showcases the Mapping Memories Project, one of the public events held as part of the Montreal Life Stories project, where refugee youths reimagined a bus tour as an “immersive storytelling space.” (p. 17)

The last section, “Acts of Composure and Framing,” examines the meaning of forms and structures in recorded narratives, with particular attention to silences, symbols, and logic. In the first chapter, Arthur McIvor describes how testimony by Scottish miners with asbestos-related diseases was framed by their desire to seek compensation and recognition of workplace violence and trauma. Next, Catherine Baker looks at the use of language in the testimony of survivors from the Bosnian War by critically examining the impact of interpreters on testimony. Chapter twelve, by Yolanda Cohen et al. features interviews with Sephardic Jews in Montreal about their emigration from Muslim-dominant countries, and how researchers and interviewees often see events very differently. The final chapter, by Marie Pelletier, considers the impact of religion with respect to one survivor of the Khmer Rouge’s narration of her experiences.

While *Beyond Testimony and Trauma* focuses on the agency of survivors and negotiations of power in the relationship between interviewers and interviewees, I was most struck by the emphasis on pedagogy that was woven throughout the collection. All historians struggle with how to make academic research accessible to the public and how to integrate it into classrooms. Several articles in this book present exciting solutions to these questions. I was struck by Wilson’s piece, “The Role of Oral History in Surviving a Eugenic Past.” While reviewing this book, I happened to be teaching a Post-Confederation Canadian history class. I was pleased to discover the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada, and even more impressed by the website design, thoughtful consideration of the relationship between survivors and academics, and the accessibility of carefully curated material. Both the website and the accompanying article not only consider a number of important questions, like how academics can enable survivors to narrate their own stories and how to balance academic history and public history, but also present a number of possible solutions. I also found the reflections of Greenspan, both in his chapter “From Testimony to Recounting: Reflections from Forty Years of Listening to Holocaust Survivors,” and the afterword which he authored, to be extremely valuable. He notes that testimonies and stories are by their very nature compromises, imperfect efforts to give meaning to past events by imperfect narrators and imperfect researchers. I was also very much struck by his observation that we live in an age of testimony, not one of survivors. While

testimonies are valued, survivors seem to only matter as symbols, trotted out when needed, and then put away and forgotten afterwards.

My one criticism of this collection is that I would have liked to see much more discussion devoted to the problems that emerge when authority is shared in interviewing. For example, "Collaborative Witnesses and Sharing Authority in Conversations with Holocaust Survivors," by Ellis and Rawicki examines one particular event as recounted by Rawicki, and how he and Ellis worked together to bring it from a vague reference to a full-fledged story. While reading, I kept asking myself, was this memory or the creation of a fascinating story? And does this even matter? Ellis points out that interviewers and interviewees often have different agendas and interpretations. For example, Rawicki emphasized that luck was the most important factor, while Ellis wanted to interrogate this concept further. Ellis also noted that oral historians must have a certain tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. But I question whether the concept of shared authority works in practice, particularly when stories might not paint the narrators in a positive light or when the agendas of interviewees eventually overshadow the historical analysis of researchers. Nonetheless, this is a valuable piece of scholarship, and one that I would highly recommend, particularly with respect to its treatment of pedagogy. Too often historical scholarship seems to exist in a vacuum, without any meaningful discussion about how to integrate these findings into classrooms.

Listening on the Edge serves as a counterpoint to the previous three books. This collection emerged out of the 2008 Oral History Association meeting and subsequent discussions between the editors. The intent was to create a collection that reflected on the nature of crisis and its meaning for oral historians. As the editors note, "crisis is a historical constant," (p. 1), but the ways in which it impacts individuals and community varies widely. Oral history is well suited to the process of documenting crisis, specifically when the trauma that results from crisis is considered a social issue. Individuals and communities that have lived through crisis often struggle to make sense of what happened and to deal with difficult emotions. Oral historians can provide assistance for individuals and communities that have been traumatized, allowing for healing to take place. It can also provide victims of mass violence with a voice as well as inspiring social change.

This collection is organized into two parts and contains a total of thirteen chapters. Many are direct transcripts of interviews followed by commentary. Part one, "Clamor," focuses on the relationship between interviewees and interviewers in times of crisis. The first chapter, by Selma Leydesdorff, focuses on the life story interview method and how historians need to focus on more than just a traumatic event and consider its place in the larger narrative of a person's life. In the following chapter, Denise Phillips speaks to her experiences doing serialized interviews with Hazara refugees in Australia, and the difficulties she encountered when she tried to protect herself and her interviewees from emotional trauma. Tamara Kennelly and Susan E. Fleming-Cook, in the next chapter, feature interviews with three of the survivors of the Virginia Tech Shootings, and argue that survivors who tell their stories become historical agents, shaping the narrative of the larger crisis.

Elizabeth Campisi interviews Cuban rafters survivors in chapter four, and focuses on how interviews can act as a tool to allow survivors to create new lives. Chapter five, by Taylor Krauss, features interviews from the Voices of Rwanda archive, a project established in 2006 to document and preserve the stories of the survivors of the Rwandan genocide. Krauss discusses the emotional impact of this project, and how this served to make him a better scholar. The final chapter in this section, by psychologist Ghislaine Boulanger focuses on the differences between psychology, which should focus on the healing of the individual, and oral history, which should focus on documenting the individual's experience.

Part 2, "Resonance," engages with the larger issues that arise out of the oral history of mass violence in terms of representations. The first chapter, by Mark Cave, focuses on the experiences of first-responders and the evacuation of the Orleans Parish Prison during Hurricane Katrina. Eric Rodrigo Meringer interviewed residents in Ciudad Juárez in the next chapter and argues that oral history can represent the experiences of ordinary citizens rather than sensationalized media narratives. Chapter nine, by Karin Mak, discusses the working conditions faced by Chinese women in factories, how oral history can bring attention to important narratives that are outside of the current public interest, and the danger inherent in such work. The next chapter, by Eleonora Rohland et al., comes out of the Memories of Disaster research group, and seeks to understand why individuals continue to live in places that have been devastated by natural disasters. Chapter eleven, by Steven High, is a reworking of the chapter in *Beyond Testimony and Trauma* that focuses on graphic novelist Rupert Bazambanza. David W. Peters focuses on PTSD among chaplains during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in chapter twelve, and how the religious faith of these chaplains framed their traumatic experiences. The final chapter, by Mary Marshall Clark, is based on her work with the Columbia Centre for Oral History's efforts to document the experiences of survivors of September 11, 2001. In this chapter, she features interviews with Muslims, Arab Americans, and Sikhs, with their testimony serving as alternatives to the dominant narratives of 9/11.

Though *Listening on the Edge* is written much in the same style as *Beyond Testimony and Trauma* and *Remembering Mass Violence*, it more successfully contextualizes the wide variety of topics contained within the collection. Each chapter opens with a short paragraph explaining the research project presented therein, along with details about the interviewees featured in each article. This strengthens the impact of each article's argument. The articles "Unlocked: Perspective and the New Orleans Prison Evacuation Crisis" and "Living Too In Murder City: Oral History As Alternative Perspective to the Drug War in Ciudad Juárez," are particularly successful in this respect. Clark's article, "A Long Song: Oral History in the Time of Emergency and After" is a high point. She argues that history is fundamentally a process, and that "the effort it takes to break through the circumstances of catastrophe by standing outside the time of emergency, drawing from the past, and betting on a different future in the accumulation of personal, cultural, and historical narratives is a momentous one." (p. 259) I have two major criticisms of this collection. The first is that the interview transcript-

and-commentary style that is present throughout much of this collection would have been served by a frank discussion that appears in the previous books about the compromises involved in transforming a verbal narrative into a textual one. While *Listening on the Edge* presents a wide range of topics, it suffers from a lack of deep critical analysis. Nonetheless, it should be an essential read for any oral historian for its consideration of the meaning of trauma and crisis and the insights presented from a range of oral history projects from all over the world.

While all of these books focus on oral history and mass violence, they all make important contributions to the larger field of history itself. The relationship between historian and history, the process of *doing* history, the struggle to make academic work accessible to the public and integrated into classrooms, and the importance of interdisciplinarity and dialogue between historians from different countries are issues that are not limited to the field of oral history. These books are well-suited for graduate students and oral historians. *Oral History at the Crossroads* should be mandatory reading for all graduate students, if only for its detailed discussion about conceiving research projects.

Andrea Eiding
Kwantlen Polytechnic University