

Foreword

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Welcome to the first-ever tri-lingual – Spanish, Portuguese, English – issue of the *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale*. We are particularly excited to officially launch this special issue on “Oral History in Latin America” at the meeting of the International Oral History Association in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in September 2012.

I have long been fascinated, albeit from a personal perspective and peripheral position, by Latin American cultural imaginations, particularly as they have been expressed in the visual arts and literature. I was drawn into the universe of Latin American oral history in 2000, when I briefly met Brazilian oral historian Jose Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy at the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in New York and learned that he interviewed people about their dreams. I was immediately intrigued by this fascinating approach to oral history. Yet, I soon found that much of this universe of Latin American oral history remained inaccessible to those like me who spoke or read no Spanish or Portuguese. At the same time, I believed that oral history in Latin America might be different in significant ways from the oral history I was familiar with from Germany and North America. I assumed that oral history in Latin America was not simply a replication of the oral history work done in North America and other English-language regions.

I was convinced for two reasons. First, if Latin American art – including the modern Mexican art I saw in Guadalajara during the International Oral History conference in 2008 and in Havana a year later – was any indication, Latin American art was different from the modern art I had seen in galleries in Europe and North America. It therefore seemed only logical to assume that this difference extended to the art of oral history. Admittedly, my assumption was based on a good amount of ignorance, naiveté, and Western exoticising and “othering” of Latin America, but reading through the contributions in this special issue on Oral History in Latin America, I am sure I was not completely wrong.

My second reason had a securer footing. Coming out of the German university system, I knew that a great amount of German oral history was significantly different from British, Australian, American, and Anglo-Canadian practices. This difference emerged not simply from different methodological approaches and traditions, but more importantly from the historical contexts within which oral history practices had emerged. In Germany, oral history came out of a desire to understand why the industrial working-class had consented to Nazism and how working men and women had dealt with the Second World War

and its aftermath. As Pablo Pozzi argues in his introduction to this special issue, oral history in Latin America too differs from practices elsewhere because of the specific experiences of colonialism and dictatorship.

After meeting Pablo Pozzi, working with him on the Council of the International Oral History Association, and conducting an interview with him during an oral history conference in Brazil in 2009 (an interview that is featured in this special issue), it was clear to me that if there was someone who could pull off such a special issue, it was him. Pablo is one of Latin America's most respected and widely published oral historians. Through his studies in and of the United States of America and his active engagement in the international movement, he is also deeply immersed and widely connected to the global oral history movement. The ten articles and two book reviews in this special issue, I believe, prove me right. I would like to take this foreword therefore also as a note of thanks to all contributors and especially to Pablo Pozzi.

Oral history, like most projects in the humanities, is plagued by a debilitating lack of resources for translation. This is as true of German-language oral history as it is of Spanish-language oral history, neither of which finds much translation into English. Our journal, *the Oral history Forum d'histoire orale* is an open access journal that relies on the membership fees paid by members of the Canadian Oral History Association. It is funded in part by a private donation, that of the Abraham and Bertha Arnold Community Oral History Fund at the University of Winnipeg. There is, however, no funding for translation. Thus, this issue was only possible because Pablo Pozzi was able to use his resources to have all articles translated. We then had two Spanish- and English-speaking research assistants at the University of Winnipeg, Laura Castillo from El Salvador and Susana Meza from Venezuela, help us with formatting and some translation.

This project of a special issue on Latin American oral history was particularly important to me, because since April 2011, I have been involved in an oral history project with the Salvadoran community of Manitoba. Members of that community have been engaged in an oral history project that documents the experiences of Salvadoran women and men who were forced to flee their home country and who, after multiple and long migrations, eventually settled in Winnipeg or other cities or towns in the Canadian province of Manitoba.¹ At the same time, several of my students have initiated oral history projects with refugees from Columbia and Chile and well as from other places around the world. There is much in the pages of this special collection that we can learn about oral history; but just as importantly, seeing the vibrancy of oral history in Latin America may serve as an inspiration for Latin American migrants around

¹ For more information, visit "Salvadoran Voices of Manitoba" on Facebook.

the world to tell their stories and connect with oral historians in their old homelands. The newly established Latin American Oral History Network (RELAHO) (<http://www.relaho.org>) should be a useful starting point for such global connections.

RELAHO was set up in part to help develop oral history outside of the “Big Three” in Latin American Oral History: Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Their dominance is clear in the pages of this special issue, which contains three articles each from Mexico and Brazil and four from Argentina, but none from any other Latin American country. This situation, however, is changing, as is evident in the two essay collections reviewed in this special issue. Oral history is developing in Chile and Colombia as well as in Nicaragua, Panama, and El Salvador.

This collection of essays demonstrates not only how oral history in Latin America has developed differently than in other regions of the world. It also shows both similarities and differences in the ways in which debates in the “West” have been received and reworked. As Aceves’s biographical piece demonstrates, Portelli’s influence in Latin America is as strong as it is in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and other parts of the English-reading world. Latin American oral historians are more likely to read his Italian studies that were never translated into English; looking at Portelli’s work through Latin American eyes may help us see Portelli’s work from yet another angle.

Even more important than Portelli, however, is clearly the influence of British Marxist historians and theorists, particularly Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Raphael Samuel. It is the analysis of 18th and 19th century British working-class culture that most seems to speak to the Latin American oral historians who have contributed to this collected. They use these works in order to explain and understand the 20th century experiences and narratives of the Latin American popular classes, both urban and rural workers. Pablo Pozzi explains why this is so in his Introduction.

As Pablo Pozzi makes clear, oral history in Latin America is as diverse as it is elsewhere, and other colleagues find inspiration in narrative theory, memory studies, or the study of concepts and time. Literary criticism is a great source of inspiration for the analysis of culture and world views, as is evident, among others, in the articles by Gerardo Necochea and Robson Laverdi. Thus, within this present collection, there is a great diversity of approaches and topics that is truly fascinating.

The topics that are investigated by the authors of this special issue range from Maricela González Félix’s study of the life stories of Mexican entrepreneurs in the Mexican-American borderlands to Mariana Mastrángelo’s and Pablo Pozzi’s deep analyses of Argentinean working-class culture. In these studies of

working-class culture, the interconnections of sexuality and class are investigated. Thus, Gerardo Médica and Viviana Villegas study working-class gay-rights activism in Argentina while Robson Laverdi writes about the work experiences of gay men in small cities in Brazil. Other authors also focus on working-class culture, ranging from Mexican cultural memory (Gerardo Necochea) to a study of the development of black Carnival Clubs in the Brazilian city of Pelotas in the first half of the twentieth century (Beatriz Ana Loner and Lorena Almeida Gill). The recent history of dictatorships, military coup d'états, political violence, torture, kidnappings, and other forms of state violence as well as the transitions to democratic structures have become another focus of oral history in Latin America. Maria Paula Araújo compares the Brazilian amnesty movement with truth commissions in South Africa and Argentina, while Alejandra Pisani and Ana Jemio consider the methodological implications of doing oral history with survivors of kidnapping and torture in Argentina.

Cultures differ from each other. When they come in contact, and there is a willingness and openness to understand each other; in tercultural they are tremendously enriching. When Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy told me he was asking people about their dreams, I was intrigued because I had never thought of asking anything like that. Despite Sigmund Freud's writings about dreams, there was nothing in my more narrow cultural socialization as a historian in Germany and North America that would have prompted me to ask such a question. Similarly, I come away from this collection with new questions and ideas, and I hope that the readers of this special issue will similarly be inspired.