

Oral History, Biographic Memory, and Communication: From Descriptive to Analytic Reflexive Writing

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Writing up orality is a paradox that has overshadowed oral history from its inception, a paradox that gives weight to its performance and potency to its thinking. Writing up orality is a task that establishes conditions for the historian who wishes to go beyond careful documentation to the diffusion of the active oral sources. The transition from the basic platform of description to the intensity of biographic oral narrative requires a complex and hazardous mode of historical practice: it taps the reflexive and analytic intention of the sources; it also employs a theoretical perspective that provides both a foundation for and expands upon the task of the oral historian. The contributions of Alessandro Portelli support the development of this form of communication.

As an Autobiographic Introduction

A spectre is haunting the halls of the Academy: the spectre of ‘oral history.’ (Alessandro Portelli)

1. Oral history in our country, Mexico, is no longer the curious spectre that haunts the halls of Academy in the way some of the media perceived it towards the end of the seventies. With this phrase a little more than 30 years ago, Alessandro Portelli was introducing us to the peculiar field of oral history,¹ and we, a group of young anthropologists developing and learning the methods and research practices in the social sciences, found a new path to traverse that seemed both attractive and accessible. It was 1986 and we had no clear idea of what oral history was, where or how it originated or by whom, or what its results and contributions had been.² We

¹ Alessandro Portelli, “On the Peculiarities of Oral History” en: *History Workshop. A Journal of Social Historians* 12 (Autumn 1981): 96-107. The first Italian version was published in Milan in 1979: *Primo Maggio* 13 (Autumn 1979): 45-60.

²In 1971 Eugenia Meyer and Alicia Olivera had published, in the most prestigious national historical journal, one of the first articles explaining this method. *Historia Mexicana* 21, nr. 2 (1971): 372-387, printed by El Colegio de México. The title is very significant in its purpose to establish disciplinary guidelines: “La historia oral. Origen, metodología, desarrollo y perspectivas” [“Oral History. Origin, Methodology, Development and Perspectives.”]

were practically ignorant of the field and its development.³ In light of our incipient but enthusiastic academic careers, we had a large amount of reading to do, a review of the extensive literature, and we had many gaps in our theoretical, methodological, and empirical knowledge to fill.

2. In Mexico this road had already been traveled to some extent, but we did not know this at the time. As anthropologists the closest we had come to oral history were our incursions in the field of micro history, with the work of Luis Gonzalez always present.⁴ His spirit urged us to value and find regional and local literature, encouraged us to leave the university's academic halls, and immerse ourselves in everyday spaces. As social anthropologists, trained with the disciplinary disposition to do direct field research, the educational ideas and critical questions of Luis Gonzalez directed us to regional history on a local level and to seek the interaction with the social actors that produced and narrated their stories. Micro history, as a theory and method, was the most visible antecedent and most durable in our knowledge, both in terms of the imagination of its contributions and possibilities, and in the practices and work methods that sustained them. Another author, also a professional historian, who had made a mark on us through his work on regional history, was Jean Meyer, who had written an extensive documentary and testimonial study of the Cristero War in Mexico from 1926 to 1929.⁵ Some of us used the ideas of oral history in a more marginal manner while others became enthusiastic and integrated them in a more decisive manner. Some of us focused more on the practice of life stories, while others explored the multidisciplinary platform of oral history.⁶

3. Then, around the mid-eighties, as newcomers to the field of oral history and coming from other disciplines, like sociology, social psychology, and in particular social anthropology, we came across situations that alerted us to the use and abuse of this historiographical practice. We were surprised by the excessive

³Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco, testimonios de historia oral* [*The Night in Tlatelolco: Oral History Testimonies*] (ERA, México, 1971), a classic book on the Students Movement in 1968, a general reference to this era for any university student interested in politics.

⁴ His epistemology and methodological orientation is well known from his *Invitación a la microhistoria* [*Invitation to Micro History*] (SEP, México, 1973) to the memorable collection *sepeventas* and its continuation *Nueva invitación a la microhistoria* [*New Invitation to Micro History*] (SEP, México, 1982). His key work was *Pueblo en vilo. Micro History from San José de Gracia* (Colegio de México, 1968).

⁵ Cf. *La Cristiada*. Three Vols. (XXI century, México, 1974).

⁶ We were social anthropologists that just graduated from UAM-I University or from ENAH: Federico Besserer, Antonio Santoyo, Ana H. Castro, María Teresa Cárdenas, Daniel González and anthropologist friends and anthropologists from other regions like Patricia Ponce and Mariano Báez in Jalapa, Ver., among others. Cf. *Christus. Teología y ciencias humanas* [*Christus Magazine. Theology and Human Sciences*], Vol. LIII, No. 616, June 1988, on the topic of "Narrations, Alternatives to History" where we expressed some interests and essays around life stories and oral history.

credibility given to the testimony and the unexpected absence of theoretical frameworks that would provide a basis for the research. We were also surprised by researchers' lack of reflexivity about their own process of inquiry and even more so concerning the results of their interviews. Furthermore, the involvement of the investigators was hidden; the supposed neutrality and the wish to present objective arguments both aimed at making the oral historian invisible. The use of the available technology, the tape recorders, provided the concrete material resource to objectively document without mediations or noisy interference, the oral expression of raw human experience. Producing archives to file tapes of recorded interviews with social actors whose testimony required "rescuing" before they left this world seemed odd to us. More so because it was a State imposition prompted by its interests in maintaining cultural and ideological hegemony. The critique of public politics in the sphere of culture and science was perceived as an inevitable task. But then in the mid-eighties, this attitude was not fully developed or even incorporated with all of its implications in general academic praxis.

4. We believed that we had to have answers for all this and try other approaches. The National Museum of Popular Cultures was a space for experimentation and investigation that considered many of the new ideas and methods that combined an anthropological perspective and a complex view of the history and presence of Mexico's popular sectors.⁷ Since 1981 this research initiative, including the dissemination and promotion of popular cultural expressions, developed projects that integrated creative approaches and research practices. Regarding the initiatives and projects of the anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, several research approaches were tried and diverse projects were developed around the themes and central problems of social and cultural life in Mexico. Dr. Guillermo Bonfil, founder and director of the Museum, explained the purpose of this institution: "to become, more and more, a channel of expression for the popular sectors; to give a voice to those who do not have it ... that all the available resources become instruments of expression for the popular sectors, so they can show their own face and sing their own song."⁸ The intention was to retrieve, by collecting and researching, the memory of the majority in the country – farmers, workers, fisherman, and all working men and women. Bonfil claimed that "to recover memory, not as an academic activity that occupies only the specialists, but as a social practice in which the majority participates, is a necessary exercise ...

⁷ One of the few texts that back then addressed these aspects was titled *Culturas populares y política cultural* [*Popular Cultures and Cultural policies*], by Guillermo Bonfil et al. (México, National Museum of Popular Cultures/SEP, 1982). See also: Guillermo Bonfil, "Presentación: Mi pueblo durante la revolución, un ejercicio de memoria popular" [Presentation: My people during the revolution, a popular memory exercise], *Mi Pueblo Durante La Revolución* [*My People During the Revolution*], Vol. I, México: INAH: 7-17.

⁸ Bonfil, "Presentation," 9.

to recuperate the memory, because without the presence of the past it is impossible to reach a well-aimed consciousness of the present or to be able to formulate a project to move forward.”⁹ The Museum developed diverse research and dissemination projects of popular cultures in Mexico, having an exhibit as a central axis and a series of activities that complemented the investigation, including the compilation of all types of documents and artefacts, inviting those groups to participate and directly express themselves. The whole experience took from one to two years, while at the same time other activities were developing.¹⁰

To be able to participate in the Museum, space was provided to us, several young investigators, to creatively investigate in depth different national problems through research, documentation, and diffusion. Among the early experiences with oral history at the MNCP between 1981 and 1986 were the following projects: “Corn, foundation of Mexico’s popular culture,” “Workers culture in Mexico,” “The country of shifting performances” (about popular urban theatre), “Life on the coast” (about the culture of fishing communities), and “Life is a crested heron” (about the history and culture of bakeries).¹¹ In these projects the strategy was to be present in the field and from there carry on research relying on multiple sources and methods, where the focus on oral history and life was central. The exhibits in the Museum sustained the discourse of the social subjects under investigation. It was concise testimony and it guided the visitor through diverse spaces and moments throughout the Museum route. The “emic” perspective that we were looking for was molded in a dialogical manner in the museographic design. Finally, from that space and from the perspective of the institution – and everyone participating – a discourse was elaborated to know, value and promote the social group whose life and culture were exhibited, as well as its vision of the world, trying to preserve the specific part of their point of view. The encounter with another culture, by way of the museographic ethnotexts, unavoidably lead us to the subjective world of the investigators and institutional promoters, to evidence the flow of inter-subjective relations, to the unfinished, disturbed consciousness. Sometimes, it also led to the realization of existing distance and socio-cultural inequalities and to the perception of distant utopias and the difficulty of accomplishing future projects.

⁹ Bonfil, “Presentation,” 7.

¹⁰ J. Aceves, “Memorias convocadas. Los concursos de testimonios como fuente para la historia oral contemporánea” [“Commissioned Memories. The testimony competitions as a source for the contemporary oral history] en: *Espiral, Estudios sobre Estado y Sociedad*. Vol. XIV, No. 41, Enero-Abril 2008, Universidad de Guadalajara, pp.9-40, here 27-31.

¹¹ In Social Anthropology Victoria Novelo O. had a central role in this innovating and formative part of the MNCP, under her coordination, imagination and professionalism and a team of collaborators, this first projects were developed with the required quality and desired result. Cf: Museum catalogs giving credit to all the people involved. Also Aceves “Commissioned Memories.”

Crossing the Path: Clues and Orientations

5. The paths traveled by the participants of oral history are diverse, the options and styles are not all the same. There have always been signals at our disposal to transit them and guides to travel to the most significant points. Sometimes we advanced by trial and error, to then get back on the path with more experience. An initial navigation map currently in use was given to us by the Italian investigator mentioned earlier: Alessandro Portelli. In his essay about the peculiarities of oral history that we referred to before, we learned about the specifics of the practice of oral history. These peculiarities made it a particular method which led in different directions as it blended with national traditions and generated a field of tension. Portelli was not the adamant defender that some practicing few may have wished for, since he criticized what had been done up until then. He was – and still is – a sharp observer of all the populist practices and scientific speeches. The text in question¹² was a didactic resource for those students who wished to know and reflect on the risks and potential of the method. The article's structure is clear: five arguments that one by one were developed and articulated in a conjoint vision, as if they were ordaining principles for reflection and practice:

- a) The oral sources are recordings on tape (audio files).
- b) The oral sources are narrative sources.
- c) The character and foundation of their credibility is of a different sort.
- d) The oral sources are not objective.
- e) Oral history is not where the social class speaks to itself.

These points became the axis of discussion and constant debate about the oral historians' efforts to implement their practice and to legitimize their findings.¹³ I will refer only to a few points. The first point touches on a very polemic matter, still a subject of debate. The oral historian produces his or her sources; generally they are life stories told in situations where the interview is previously agreed upon and counts with the narrator's collaboration. The result is

¹² In Spanish we have the following: "Lo que hace diferente a la historia oral" [What Makes Oral History Different], en Dora Schwarzstein (comp.) *La historia oral. W. Moss. A. Portelli, R. Fraser y otros* (Buenos Aires, Centro editor de América Latina, 1991), pp. 36-52; "Las peculiaridades de la historia oral" [The Peculiarities of Oral History] en: *Historia oral e historias de vida* (Costa Rica, Cuadernos de Ciencias Sociales, no.18, FLACSO, 1988), pp.15-27; "Peculiaridades de la historia oral" [The peculiarities of oral history] en: *Christus. Revista de teología y ciencias humanas*. No. 616, vol. LIII, junio 1988, Centro de Reflexión Teológica, México, pp.35-44. The quotes employed in this work are taken from this last Spanish version and they are referred to as "Peculiaridades (1988)".

¹³ The available texts of Portelli were regularly incorporated in the workshops and courses on oral history we taught in history, anthropology, and related disciplines since the mid-eighties.

a recording that uses available technology. The corpus built will be the result of a set of interviews done and filed in a systematic way and orientated for public usage. The resulting sound or word archives, as it has been called, has a clear potential and limitations, particularly in its application for consultation as well as educational and social investigation. Unless there are institutional funds with a great operative and technological support base, it will be very difficult in Mexico or other Latin American countries to make easier, faster, or less expensive use of such sound documents. This is the reason for this dynamic where oral historians keep collecting their own recorded interviews but work with transcriptions. In some cases, they don't even have completely transcribed interviews, but rather fragments and selected sections. Ambivalence will be one of their most visible characteristics, as Portelli would put it in one of his first important studies, *Biography of a City*. In the book's introduction, he offered a series of ideas about the act of engaging with words, through dialogue and interaction with the narrators. Having the oral interview as the axis of the investigation created problems in the transcription process and setting up the testimony, which unequally affect and express the contents of memory and social imagination shared by the tellers. The production of oral sources will be closely related to the properties of language, not written but oral language.¹⁴

6. Oral history in the seventies seemed like a small caterpillar larva, with its own qualities and characteristics; now we see it as a full grown adult chrysalis. In the end, this metamorphosis did not modify the contradictions in its praxis. Historians and investigators of oral history who create oral sources, at the end of the process, analytically work and manipulate texts that are being transcribed, from spoken to written word. The spectre that haunted academic halls in the beginning lost some of its charm and came closer to well-known or even conventional approaches. What is left behind by no longer working with the tape recordings has already been enumerated and inventoried in many occasions by participants and by critics. Portelli describes the intervention of the transcriber in the oral source as "the equivalent of doing art critique on reproductions or literary criticism on translations."¹⁵ One must pay more attention to the oral forms and the implied traces that come with these, which means nonverbal communication. Emotions are difficult to translate or capture in the process of transcription. As a result the experience of what is being communicated is reduced and diminished by the manipulation of the text. With absolute trust in his own experience, Portelli writes that oral history "is after all work on relationships: between narrators and investigators, between facts from the past and dialogical narrations of the present; it is a forced and difficult job, because it demands the historian to work in a

¹⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *Biografia di una città. Storia e racconto: Terni 1830-1985* (Torino, Giulio Einaudi editore, 1985), 3-19.

¹⁵ Portelli, "Peculiaridades (1988)," 35.

matter-of-fact dimension as well as the narrative, in the reference and the significance, in the past and the present and overall in the space that runs between the two.”¹⁶

The challenge is to reflect on the capacity to listen, not only what the rules on writing dictate within the structure, form and punctuation for example, but in the tones, the volume, the pauses, the significant and expressive silences, and all of which our culture’s communication and interpreting codes permit us to understand by the mere act of listening to the other. With Portelli we conclude that working with oral sources and recognizing their richness is not only done by reading the transcriptions, but mainly by listening to the recorded material.¹⁷ As he has written in a later text, the oral historian “is mainly interested in rebuilding the past; the narrators search to show an image. This way the historian tends to look for a linear, chronological sequence; the narrator is more interested in continuing to pursue and reunite kin groups and themes along the linear extension of their life. A lot will depend on the historian’s approach. If his initial question is Tell me the story of your life, the starting point of the story can be very different than if he asks instead Tell me about yourself.”¹⁸ To ask the right and pertinent question in this situation goes hand in hand with knowing how to listen to what is possible in a concrete situation. An important dose of patience and attention is required in this situation when communicating. In a different text Portelli emphasizes: “the oral speech is a loss and a constant recovery of control. In its form, determined by time, the oral word disappears as soon as it is pronounced, it can appear again and accomplish some level of permanence only if it is repeated over and over. For this reason, repetition becomes a necessary technique in oral communication.”¹⁹ Portelli invites the hurried gatherers of oral stories to recognize and comprehend the functions and the consequences of the different forms to tell a story within the concrete cultures they interact with, in order to appreciate the experiences communicated and shared in its full integrity.

¹⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *La orden ya fue ejecutada. Roma, las fosas Ardeatinas, la memoria* (Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 2003), p.26 (available in English translation as *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).)

¹⁷ José Miguel Marinas in his book, *La escucha en la historia oral. Palabra dada [Listening to oral history. Given word]* (Madrid, Ed. Síntesis, 2007) addresses in depth the role of the act of listening in the discursive production in the field of biography, oral history, life stories.

¹⁸ Alessandro Portelli, “El tiempo de mi vida: Las funciones del tiempo en la historia oral,” in: J. Aceves (comp.) *Historia Oral* (México, Instituto Mora/ UAM, 1993) (Antologías Universitarias), pp. 195-218.

¹⁹ Alessandro Portelli, “¡Absalom, Absalom!: oral history and literature” in: Gerardo Necochea y Pablo Pozzi (comp.) *Cuéntame cómo fue. Introducción a la historia oral [Tell Me How It Happened: Introduction to Oral History]* (Buenos Aires, Imago Mundi, 2008), p.51.

Pointing out the possibilities of the oral sources does not exclude their own limitations. Neither fascination for the obtained testimony nor its annulment by tamed and restrained usage within the analyst's epistemic framework. In relation to the point of credibility, the emphasis is on sustaining that just as we do with other historical sources, written documents or material remains, the critical attitude towards design, construction and approach to oral sources must be scrupulous and systematically developed. Trust on oral sources must be afforded by the clear and explicit exposition of their constitution, intentionality and particular configuration of time and space, with and for specific social subjects. Their credibility consists "in the fact that, even if they do not correspond to the facts, the discrepancies and the mistakes made are facts themselves, revealing signs that send us to the desired time, the pain and difficult search of the meaning".²⁰

In a different text,²¹ Portelli refers to this particularity by recounting the works of the Circolo Gianni Bosio, and focusing on searching for the truth in stories, not as an opposition to the story, but with the purpose to confront another type of story. For this he writes: "history...is composed of facts, real and objective facts that one can see and touch; stories, on the other hand, are stories that people tell, and the words that these are made of are the nod in the imagination and memory that convert material facts into cultural meanings".²² In the materials gathered by the Circolo on singers and their tales, "what has less value is the fact told rather than the form in which it is said, the fact of telling it. Perhaps it is not a true story, but it was told by a real person."²³ The line is clear, what is of interest is the process of the construction of meaning and not verifying the truth outside the social experience of the subject in particular.

The Sense of the Oral Source: Version and Transcription of Autobiographical Narratives

7. In a later work Portelli revisited this matter and emphasized that one of the goals of oral history was to encounter the truth in narration, or what he called in a more poetic way "The truth of the human heart".²⁴ He wondered if it were more convenient for scientific purposes to allow the other's words in either the text or

²⁰ Portelli, *La orden ya fue ejecutada*, 27.

²¹ Alessandro Portelli, "Una historia (y celebración) del *Circolo Gianni Bosio*," [One story (and celebration) from *Circolo Gianni Bosio*] in: Necoechea and Pozzi, *Cuéntame cómo fue*, pp. 11-24.

²² Portelli, "Una historia," 13.

²³ Portelli, "Una historia," 13.

²⁴ Alessandro Portelli "La verdad del corazón humano. Sobre los fines actuales de la historia oral" [The truth of the human heart. About the actual purpose of oral history] in: *Secuencia. Revista Americana de Ciencias Sociales* Nr. 12 (Dec. 1988) (Instituto Mora, México), pp. 191-196. Reprinted in *Historia y fuente oral*. No. 2, (1989) (Barcelona), pp. 97-103.

public communication, in order to insure comprehension of and fidelity to the testimony or, on the contrary, to impose the analyst's speech in order to "insure" the meaning that the investigator wished for. The first option implied a literal transcription, as close as possible to the recorded oral testimony ; the second option, meant translating the interviewee's oral narrative to the codes and assumptions of the analyst. Relying on testimonies required an extensive narrative by the interviewee while the researcher became invisible. The given word explained itself. On the other hand, the analytical way reduced the plurality of meanings, pretending a one-way interpretation in accordance with the researcher's goals whether made explicit or not. The discursive agenda in the first option was deposited on the strong expression of the autobiographical testimony. In the second option, the agency's purpose was on the inquiring part, with the consequent exclusion of the narrator's word, who was the object of the study. Portelli did not censor the resolution given by the authors he reviewed; he instead exposed in one and the other the resulting bias that limited the use and contribution of oral sources to comprehending the human experience contained and expressed in them.

He explained that in his perspective, "oral history was useful, in the first instance, to face words, experiences and people that in my situation as an academic, I would not have been able to meet and interact with the professional and scientific capacity that I possess or is necessary for me to acquire, but also with the respectful emotion that I experience when meeting face to face with people and not documents."²⁵ The search for truth was not oral history's ambitious final goal, as the Italian professor understood it; he did not care to find out if such experiences were faithful to the facts of "reality," proven and verified. What was interesting was something more complex, more useful and more imprecise: The person's own vision and version of things. Their own "truth" manifested in their autobiographical narrations. Portelli said that "rather than collecting truth, reality, "what was lived," matters of experience, the immediateness of testimony; we compiled mediations, interpretations, representations, mystifications, memories, impressions, mistakes, lies. Only words..."²⁶ This produced a turn in the practice and reflection on oral history in the last two decades. Each time more distant from the objective and empirical canon, each time directed more towards working with the words, the memory, the narration, in sum, towards subjectivity.²⁷

²⁵ Portelli, "La verdad del corazón humano," 192.

²⁶ Portelli, "La verdad del corazón humano," 192.

²⁷ Lynn Abrams in "Revisiting Akenfield: Forty Years of an Iconic Text," *Oral History* 37, no.1 (Spring 2009), pp. 33-42, makes an important argument about testimonial literacy and the narrative of the final text.

8. Returning to the essay on the peculiarities of oral history, Portelli claimed that one of the things that allows oral history to be more interesting and different is “that it tells us less about what took place than about its meaning,” which does not necessarily imply that it is not interested in the real facts. What is valuable in this investigating practice is that it brings us closer to the narrator’s subjective realm; to the recognition of interconnections, since life stories tell us “not only what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”²⁸ What makes these autobiographical narratives unique is the elaboration of their particular “plot,” that is the way the narrator places the materials to tell his or her own story. It seems difficult that there should be two identical ways to resolve this unique expression of the narrating subject. The narrator’s expressive architecture takes multiple roads and forms of expression. Narrative genres and expressive forms used are as different as are the personalities and lived experiences of interviewees. The narrative plot in the way a personal life is organized may share social and cultural patterns, but the personal identity is contained and configured in each turn and each way that the tale is expressed. Besides, and to complicate the situation, the narrative’s architecture of the narrator-informant is adjusted to social expectations of the interview situation, as well as to the previous similar experiences, the expressive resources and the performance that will possibly come out from the evaluation and interaction with the investigator’s situation. This reminder of the subjective dimension of the oral sources allows Portelli to affirm that “the analysis, criticism, and integration (of the tales) become vulgar and empty exercises if one does not find the excitement in each instant by remembering the human fact that we established contact with at the beginning,” of the relationship established in the interviews.²⁹ On another occasion, Portelli pointed out the peculiarity of the oral sources by affirming that these were not only witness accounts of events but also expressed interpretations, perhaps through the explicit value of the tale, perhaps implied through the controlled and uncontrolled creative process, that introduces in the historical reconstruction materials taken from imagination, dreams, memory, and the art of verbal formalization... It is at this point that interpretation separates from testimony and the reconstruction of facts settles with the meanings.”³⁰

9. Oral sources are not objective, unlike those documentary sources that, sanctified by empiric disciplinary traditions, pretend to be. For Portelli, oral sources have the following characteristics: They are artificial, variable, and

²⁸ Portelli, “Peculiaridades (1988),” 38.

²⁹ Portelli, “La verdad del corazón humano,” 194.

³⁰ Alessandro Portelli, “Nosotros queríamos la piel de los fascistas. Violencia, imaginación y memoria en un episodio de la guerra partisana” in: Cuauhtémoc Velasco (coord.) *Historia y testimonios orales* (México, INAH, 1996), pp.105-122, 108.

partial. All this thanks to the oral source that produces contexts of social interaction. The oral sources, Portelli writes, are a result of how the interview relationship takes place – a shared project where the narrator and the interviewer are involved. In a ceremonial communication, the experimental energy flows in both directions, with intensity and unequal expectations, oriented towards a shared destination. When the investigator's voice is suppressed, as a consequence the narrator's or informant's voice becomes distorted. The oral historian also forms an integral part of the source. Oral historians intervene in such a way that their personal imprint becomes part of the resulting product. More than finding the sources, the oral historian produces them, at least in the part where they have to intervene, guide and systemize it. We have to consider as well whom we attempt to reach with our results. There are tangible and known destinations, and there are also "invisible" or not anticipated destinations. Some of them work as interpellation communities, others as communication and some perhaps are action oriented.

10. In another part of the essay over the peculiarity of oral history, Portelli emphasizes that the oral sources can be analyzed considering the conceptual frames and analytical models that come from literary theories.³¹This connects with the ways of using and handling the testimony, with the fragments of life stories and the way that these are managed and presented. The suggested process is a spiral analysis, where one first takes the whole narrative as a product of the interview. This is then fragmented for the purpose of analysis, and finally meaning is reintegrated into the narrative taking into account the narration in its totality. For example, taking into consideration the narration's time factor, we can proceed to make a detailed analysis, by listening attentively and creatively, or by a careful and imaginative reading, to detect or identify specific narrative forms that deal with yesterday or the past (balancing narrations), that speak to us about the future (projective narrations), or those that give us information about the present time (immediate narrations). What is of interest is not to get away from the expressed meaning, but to capture the significance of the narrated experience. What cannot be avoided is the interpretation of the conflict that seems to arise in the communicating situations where the analysis and results are elaborated by the oral historian.³²These supposed inconveniences in reality function as catalyst and feed the informed communication between the actors of the oral stories. The informed dialogue with the narrators allows the development of a shared intersubjectivity that can be negotiated, that undergoes semantics, and converts into the basis or seed of new communications and projects for future collaboration.

³¹ Portelli, "Peculiaridades (1988)," 36-37.

³² Cléria Botelho da Costa develops in a comprehensive way this conflict in her article "Conflicts of interpretation on oral history" in: *Recovered voices. Oral history magazine*. Year 8, no. 21, June 2006, Buenos Aires, pp.50-60.

This is not about the analyst imposing meaning on the biographic narrative but about understanding its context and in the conditions and determinations that the narrator-informant has been exposed to. In this dialogue one can affirm the original findings, revise the pertinence of the most relevant narrations in its nucleus, to base in a different way the social relationships that are more significant, and still discuss new questions and the emerging hypothesis that can be entailed to conceptual frames or wider theoretical frameworks where the memory's processes are central.³³ Memory, Portelli writes in a playful manner, "is not a document from the past, but the process that transforms those materials of the past into present materials, continuously re-elaborating them ... this is the place where the present transforms the past into today's material."³⁴ "We never see memory as a document, as a freezer that preserves all the data and its significance, but more like a processor, that transforms and elaborates in an osmotic way that produces new data and meaning that includes the old ones, even if it is just to deny them or be released from them."³⁵

From Description to Reflection: From the Work of Construction to the Work of Expression

To tell a story is to rise in arms against the threat of time, to resist time or dominate it. To tell a story preserves the narrator from oblivion; a story builds the identity of the narrator and the legacy that he will leave for the future.³⁶

11. In regards to strategy, the technique and the format for the use of life stories, Portelli contributes some alternatives in which many considerations exposed above are at stake.³⁷ The purpose in the construction of oral sources is not only to achieve descriptions based on the vision of the social actors preserving their specific "point of view" but mainly to move on to the writing of oral expression through multiple analytic resources and a reflexive and constant attitude from the oral historian's side. This reflexive analytical writing is one of the actual goals in the integral praxis of contemporary oral history. By getting away from the

³³ Example of the analysis on the symbolic work that operates the memory is his "History and memory: the death of Luigi Trastulli" in: *History and oral source*. No.1, 1989:5-33.

³⁴ Alessandro Portelli, "Elogio de la grabadora: Gianni Bosio y los orígenes de la historia oral" in: *Historias. Revista de la DEH-INAH*. No. 30, abril-septiembre 1993, México, pp. 3-8.

³⁵ Portelli, "Una historia," 15.

³⁶ Alessandro Portelli, "El tiempo de mi vida: Las funciones del tiempo en la historia oral" en: J. Aceves (comp.) *Historia Oral*, México, Instituto Mora/ UAM, 1993, (Antologías Universitarias), pp. 195-218, 195.

³⁷ A more recent work by Portelli is the essay "A dialogical relationship. An Approach to Oral History" <http://unjobs.org/authors/alessandro-portelli>

extremes: to give priority to the recordings or to impose meaning on the autobiographical stories. Here, like in many other places of thought in social science, dichotomies and dualism do not exist in a pure form, only in the analytic appreciation. The local cannot be conceived without its global connection, synchronicity is not understood without perceiving its diachronic location, the empiric without its theoretical pertinence, the everyday without its extraordinary expressions, the micro without the always present existence of the macro, scientific knowledge without the unending common knowledge, etc.³⁸ This writing is also in an unstable state given the actual development of technical support and communication. Audiovisual culture and new technical support give potential and multiply the ways and results of oral history production: video stories, diffusion of heritage and internet information, the proliferation of digital recorders for the production and archiving of testimonies, blogs, and sites of communicative interconnection, etc. Even Portelli perceives and engages himself in this new way in his personal blog.³⁹ The information era and globalization processes have also affected the memory process and the way that we can approach it, the policies of memory from the stand of civil society or of State institutions have also molded the practice of oral history in many parts of the world.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, reflecting on how to achieve the representation of others through autobiographical narratives remains an unresolved matter that produces never ending debates.⁴¹ Many times the aforementioned work on the peculiarities of oral history states that oral sources were not objective, given the artificiality, variability and partialness with which these are constructed. This is why the representation of the other necessarily goes through the experience of the inter-subjective relationship between the parties involved in the process. The narratives that we elaborate about others are in relation to the ways of self-representation that we can develop with the interlocutor's individual nature, as well as with the always present ambiguity of the communication dialogues that impregnate the oral source.

12. The influence of Portelli's work is internationally recognized, he is a professor who circulates as a global citizen in the connecting nodes of the academic field, which are not only of history and literature. As a relevant figure in the disciplinary dominance of oral history, his contribution is plural, always

³⁸ In "Form and significance of historic representation" (*Historia y Fuente Oral*. No.4, 1990:89-113, Portelli analyzes grammatical aspects of time, social paradigms, space references and a point of view when re-constructing the sense of the conflicts experienced by miners in Kentucky, USA, in 1931-1941.

³⁹<http://.alessandroportelli.blogspot.com>

⁴⁰ Alessandro Portelli "Memory and globalization in the Terni general strike of 2004," online: www.abdn.ac.uk/modern/node?page=3. Also as "Terni in strike: 2004," in *History, Anthropology and Oral Sources*. No.32, Barcelona, 2004:49-60.

⁴¹ Alessandro Portelli "Representing the poor" in: <http://www.hku.hk/sociodep/oralhistory/4/images/art/key%20portelli>

critical and revealing human tensions and conflicts. His guidance and intellectuality shine on the field of oral history, whether this is in the theory field, methodology, or the concrete ways of production and uses of oral sources where he has made the greatest impact; not only in Italy – the country where he resides – but also in many European and Latin American countries, the United States of North America, and many others spread in other geographical latitudes.

In Mexico, his influence has been famous in the last decade of the twentieth century and the current century. Those who are interested in oral, urban and popular history, have found in Portelli's work and thoughts a good "source" of inspiration and theoretical, methodological guidance for the historical writing endeavor. Those that have become interested in linking history with narrative have also been able to pick up many important, diverse contributions from the works of the Italian professor. For those that are motivated and choose the fields of general culture, the never ending vein of rural oral tradition, chants, and popular verse, etc., have had the opportunity to make the most of Portelli's work about these themes, including young people, students, sport enthusiasts, revolutionaries, union members, industrial workers and their movements. His work has been spread through translation from Italian into many languages, including English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese, among others. It is common to see him participate in the international IOHA conventions, and national conferences, whether they take place in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and many other countries on the American continent. Almost all oral history journals have published in their pages Portelli's work. There is no excuse not to be able to get to know the diverse works of the Italian historian who in the last four decades has not stopped being active.

13. The discussions written above have accompanied the development of the oral history practice for many years, perhaps since its origins. In my particular case, Alessandro Portelli's writings – and whenever I have had the opportunity to enjoy his conversation and presence – has given me reflexive clues as well as theoretical and methodological insights that I have integrated and used in my own work. More than twenty years have gone by since those initial personal approaches to the field of oral history. The oral historians' active presence such as his give us confidence to access a more promising future and that the shadows of tomorrow may seem, perhaps, less threatening.⁴²

⁴² My intention is not to make an exegesis of Alessandro Portelli's work, but to elaborate an ensemble of autobiographical reflections over some of the actual current issues that the praxis of oral history is facing, and Portelli seemed to me like an excellent reflexive mirror around this concern. The bibliographic work of this author is quite large; this is why I did not attempt to mention it or to grasp it in its totality.