

Review: *Oral History in Latin America: Unlocking the Spoken Archive.*

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David Carey, Jr. *Oral History in Latin America: Unlocking the Spoken Archive.* Routledge: New York and London, 2017. 238 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-71759-5

This book by David Carey, a well-known historian of popular resistance and resilience in Latin America, has a double purpose: on one hand, it characterizes oral history as a unique historical methodology that focuses its analytical view on social actors' narratives, memories, and testimonies about past events; on the other, it conveys a complex and well-documented overview of the contemporary political violence in Latin America and its pervasive effects on subaltern subjects located at the margins of Latin American societies. This book comprises a wide range of technical recommendations on how to conduct social research drawing from mainly oral testimonies. Nevertheless, it is more than that; it offers thoughtful reflexive guidance on how to engage in respectful ways with local actors. As a teaching manual, it is organized in terms of methodological discussion of techniques and practical advice on how to organize and conduct oral research. At the same time, it offers an in-depth exploration of the politics in which oral history takes place.

Carey firmly anchors his reflexive teachings in the political, social and economic contexts in which he has travelled, lived, and collaborated as an academic, activist, and friend. For him, as well as for other scholars who embrace a long-term commitment to social justice, scenarios of terror and dispossession powerfully shape the very existence of poor, rural, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities and their relations with national states. Because of this compelling reality, trained professionals with well-honed academic skills have the moral and ethical responsibility to make known popular voices that denounce the repressive actions of state forces and the pervasive politics of powerful elites.

In light of the former, Carey narrates how oral history – as an academic and activist tradition – was born of and linked to both the teachings of populist education and socio-political unrest, encompassing uprisings, repressive state-led retaliations, massacres, genocides, displacements of population, left-inspired revolutions, and peace negotiation processes. Making an oral history of the working class and peasant sectors in Latin America is not the same as doing so in the United States or Europe, not only because of the ethno-racial composition of Latin American societies but also because of the colonial and neo-colonial violence that makes Latin America one of the world's most unjust and unequal regions. Carey's narratives of the Guatemalan, Peruvian, Colombian and

Mexican processes of national construction unveil the systemic efforts of national elites to impose by force a westernization that authors such as Jean Franco and Bradford Burns have characterized as a systematic criminalization and physical extermination of the poor and of ethnocultural minorities.¹

That Carey's teachings depart theoretically and politically from some common standpoints is crucial in informing his ethical commitment to conduct socio-historic research from a collaborative perspective. Oral history researchers and their academic production are located amidst bitter disagreements. On one side of these disagreements stand objectivist historians, who advocate for the proper production of knowledge based on proven facts. On the other side are on-the-ground activists, who respond to the imperative to condemn atrocities and crimes against humanity by recording and disseminating testimonies of those taken to be unauthorized to speak "the truth" because of their subaltern social condition (i.e., as illiterate, "ignorant", or non-Western language-speaking). The oral history practiced by Carey, as well as many other Latin American and foreign colleagues, is dedicated to revealing the life experience of the subaltern classes and the role they play in the construction of modern Latin American societies.

According to Carey, oral history should employ interpretative methodology relying primarily on accounts of injustices as they are experienced and embodied. As such, it is a basic means of obtaining information at first-hand from sources located in contested fields, where the past is diverse in its meanings and interpretations. Therefore, oral history should be a methodology that strongly draws from subjectivist analytical standpoints. It should seek to record experiences lived by men and women who have crossed paths with structural determinants and contentious life events, doing so with the understanding that individuals influence events but, in turn, are influenced by the moments of their era.

To Carey, such a vision of oral history entails the use of participatory methods, in which the local actor-researcher interaction is the basis of an inter-subjective exchange meant to produce knowledge about lived experiences and to interpret these experiences' multiple meanings. It is important to understand orality as a realm of knowledge for the revival of the past and recollection of given facts, as well as the vehicle for the production and transmission of knowledge of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. The point of view of disenfranchised people, such as leaders, mine workers, guerrillas, housewives, and social fighters of various strata – can be fluid, changing and not necessarily rigorous about recounting events in sequence. Therefore, oral historians must

¹ Franco, Jean. *Cruel modernity*. Duke University Press: Durham-London, 2013; E. Bradford Burns, *The poverty of progress: Latin America in the nineteenth century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

assume the challenge of making sense of cyclical and conflicting versions of events, in order to enrich our knowledge of crucial moments in the political history of Latin America. This challenge entails openness to non-Western ways of looking at the past, inspired by epistemologies of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

Further, to Carey, oral history is not an isolated methodology as it dialogues with other social science disciplines, such as anthropology, in order to complement and enrich its research practices, and thereby obtain a better approach to conducting *in situ* research. At the same time as oral history relies on the technique of in-depth interviewing, which gives an account of actors' perspective, the historian must additionally have a general knowledge of the actors' life contexts and approach actors, communities, and families in ways that create bonds of trust. In a respectful and collaborative approach to interviewing, the researcher must also be equipped with several key elements, such as knowing the local language, abiding by the community authorities' codes for *entrée*, adequately using technical instruments when collecting data, and bringing a sense of humor (and appropriate clothing) to the work. All these elements together comprise what anthropologists called the fieldwork experience, and influence the anthropological writing of ethnography.

From my perspective as a feminist anthropologist who has undertaken extensive research in collaboration with Indigenous women leaders and community-based social organizations, Carey's most important analytical insights are linked to his reflexive understanding of the dialectic relation between power and popular resistance as two sides of an equation, locked into mutual and ever-changing constitutive processes, which must to be historically reconstructed. Ethically and methodologically Carey identifies two basic worldviews polarized by power, gender and class relations: the victims' narratives (marked by pain, sorrow, courage and resilience), and those of the perpetrators of violence (with their own reasons and imperatives to inflict, repress, and eliminate). Looking critically at these contrasting visions and rationales, oral history aims to assist those who are subject to opprobrium, disdain, torture, repression and violence to represent themselves in a dignified manner, showing them to be authors of their own destinies. In this sense, Carey shows how the work of reconstructing testimonies of victims has been important in processes of transition to democracy, as well as in the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions scrutinizing the executioners of power and the perpetuation of their discriminatory practices.

The book is written for an Anglo audience that, in addition to be interested in learning oral history methodology and methods, may also be interested in knowing Latin America through the multiple narratives of researchers who have contributed and developed various historical investigations from Mexico to Argentina. Each chapter holds a recounting of key historical

events, references, and contextual narratives of the experience of doing research. Another quality of the book is that it illustrates linguistic differences and power asymmetries between the north and the south to North American readers by revelling in Carey's personal and professional challenges in undertaking research in Guatemala during the 1990s with Kaqchikel indigenous people. By criticizing the ideological and political effects of North American political and military intervention in many events occurring in the south during the Cold War, Carey also endows this work with a politically-situated perspective and reflective examination of the academic work of Anglo researchers who share his political views and his commitment to unveil the truth of the poor.

Another of the book's strengths lies in how Carey dialogues with postmodern perspectives on the limits and potentials of representation of "otherness", and on self-reflexivity about the researcher's positionality conducting research in minefields of power relations. I appreciate how smartly Carey solves these challenges, distancing himself from the temptation to locate himself as the central reference of the process of deconstructing meaning. With uncommon humbleness, he shows his expertise in reconstructing political events and the nuances of complex scenarios in which disenfranchised individuals and communities are compelled to take life-changing decisions or forget painful memories.

It is also noteworthy that Carey has a special sensitivity to work from a gender perspective, which enlightens his capacity to identify the social spaces in which women in rural communities assume their caregiver roles. He is attentive women's perspectives on the past and their specific participation in the political and social life of their communities. Indigenous women – and, in general, poor, rural, and Afro-descendent women – are portrayed as active local actors whose voices engender knowledge of the historical and the political at national and local levels. In powerful ways, he reviews and re-visits multiple sites and acts of rebellion in which women have assumed multiple roles, whether as peace negotiators, leftist militants, guerrilla leaders, or victims of various processes of dispossession and violence. Carey invites us to apprehend the tools and the sensibility necessary to re-inscribe women's voices in historical accounts that subvert gender regimes in subtle ways, from within their own culturally-determined frame.

Finally, I would mention that Carey's academic work is focused mainly on the political conflicts and military dictatorships of the Cold War era and that he concluded his book with promising remarks on the transition to democracy and the implementation of transitional justice framework. However, the arrival of neoliberalism and its multiculturalist and deregulatory market policies have sped the dispossession of the poor in far worse ways. The criminalization of poverty and the presence of organized crime networks and drug cartels in several regions in Latin America have made conducting participatory and collaborative social

research more dangerous. The courageous legacy of Carey's work must be taken on by younger historians in ways that enhance his theoretical and political commitment to make this world a better place for all, despite neoliberalist dictates.