

Oral History and Archives in the New South Africa: Methodological Issues*

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RÉSUMÉ La flambée d'intérêt pour l'histoire orale en Afrique du Sud soulève plusieurs questions d'ordre méthodologique pour les archivistes. Les approches existantes en histoire orale, qu'elles soient folkloriques, historiques ou plus centrées sur la communauté et l'identité, abordent rarement la question de savoir si les histoires orales devaient être traitées comme des documents et, le cas échéant, quelle serait la meilleure façon de les évaluer. Cet article s'attache à ces questions et conclut en plaidant pour davantage de souplesse et de créativité dans l'évaluation des histoires orales.

ABSTRACT The upsurge of interest in oral history in South Africa raises a series of methodological questions for archivists. Existing approaches to oral history, whether folkloric, historical, or more focussed on community and identity, have rarely asked whether oral histories should function as records and, if so, how they should be appraised. This essay explores these questions and concludes with a call for more flexible, creative approaches to appraising oral histories.

Oral history in South Africa is experiencing an upsurge initiated by community and academic groups,¹ and embraced by the new government.² This active commitment by the state to collect oral history is nearly unprecedented. In other post-war or post-trauma situations, it is usually victim groups or

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1 While the author did not visit all these projects, they include the District Six Museum, the Western Cape Oral History Project (see <<http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/history/ohp1.htm>>), the Oral History Project at the School of Theology, University of Natal (see <<http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/ohp.htm>>), the research of Julie Wells at Rhodes University (Grahamstown) and oral history projects at the National Archives (Pretoria), Free State Archives (Bloemfontein) (see <<http://www.uovs.ac.za/lib/lib-home.asp>>), and KwaZulu-Natal Archives (Ulundi). The author is grateful to an anonymous reviewer for some of this information.

2 In particular, the *National Archives of South Africa Act* (Act No. 42 of 1996), the *National Heritage Resources Act* (Act No. 25 of 1999), and *Promotion of Access to Information*

academics who initiate efforts to preserve or amplify oral narratives. State archives have typically remained passive, responding to political pressure.³

Post-apartheid South Africa is in a particular moment of rapid change (described as turmoil or democratization, depending on perspective). As a result, many hegemonic concepts, including the idea of history and of factuality, are being questioned. As South African theorist Aletta Norval writes,

The dislocations experienced over the past few decades have put into question sedimented identities, and opened them up for rearticulation. This process has given rise to renewed reflection and scrutinising of the past in an effort to envisage alternative futures. In recent South African history, this has taken the form of memory-work, institutionalised in the form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).⁴

In the course of this memory work, predictably, colonial- and apartheid-era historical sources are questioned; the newly freed memories seek not just to be recorded, but to be honoured or commemorated. Thus oral history falls neatly into place in South Africa both as a challenge to nineteenth-century objectivist history, and as a celebration of heritage.⁵ The former is discussed immediately below, while heritage is taken up again later in this paper.

Existing Approaches to Oral History

Despite the recent upsurge of interest, collecting oral history in South Africa is

Act, 2000 (Act No. 2 of 2000). See South Africa Government Yearbook, arts, culture, and religion: <<http://www.gov.za/yearbook/culture.htm>>, <<http://www.gov.za/acts/1999/a25-99.pdf>>, <<http://www.parliament.gov.za/acts/1996/act96.043>>, <<http://www.parliament.gov.za/acts/2000/act2-2000.pdf>>, and Department of Arts, Culture, Science & Technology, five-year report by the previous Director-General Roger Jardine <http://www.dacst.gov.za/default_dacst5.htm> (no date on page).

3 Australia is an exception to this generalization. There, the National Library actively supports an oral history programme, and aboriginal oral records have been accepted in the courts as admissible evidence. See Shauna McRanor, "A Critical Analysis of Intrinsic Value," *American Archivist* (1996), pp. 400–411, and "Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records and their Material Manifestations: Implications for Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 64–88.

4 Aletta Norval, "Truth and Reconciliation: The Birth of the Present and the Reworking of History," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25, no. 3 (1999), p. 500.

5 I use heritage throughout this paper in counter-distinction to history. Heritage is understood here to mean a valorized historical narrative, one usually associated with a group identity, rituals of commemoration and monuments. In contrast, history is understood to refer to a wider range of possible narratives concerning the past, or a set of these (heterogeneous, even conflicting) narratives. For further discussion of these concepts, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992); David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1996); and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).

not new. In summing up oral history work, researchers generally distinguish three camps:⁶ folkloric or ethnographic collection and analysis of oral traditions; social history (which in turn falls into either “liberal” progress narratives or Marxist discourse on economic causes); and politically inspired community efforts such as the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) or the South African History Archives (SAHA).

All three approaches result in records that go to archives, although the last category is often more directly associated with or sponsored by archives, while the folkloric and historical materials may come to archives as part of an institutional or personal collection.

Folkloric Approaches

Folkloric approaches, in South Africa as well as abroad, are embedded in a discussion of rhetorical forms and of performance. Debates centre on whether African oral histories are structured enough to be considered a proper genre, like praise poetry. Folkloric approaches tend to concentrate on indigenous forms, ignoring oral traditions from Afrikaner, Malay, Indian, or the many other communities in South Africa. They also tend to ignore urban communities.

Folklorists have sometimes tried to take the moral high ground by claiming to “speak for the voiceless.” Harold Scheub, for example, offers a framing story to justify his research, in which he meets an old African man. This man begs him to preserve his generation’s stories for posterity. “From that moment, I was determined that people who were not normally heard would be heard.”⁷ This move has been criticized for assuming that people are “voiceless” rather than oppressed, and that they could not, given the opportunity, represent themselves. Speaking “for” people, activists point out, simply reinforces their silencing.

In contrast to historians, who are sometimes accused by anthropologists and folklorists of taking words too literally or removing them from performative context, folkloric studies treat narratives as part of local meaning systems.⁸ This commitment has encouraged a rich debate on the significance of varia-

6 See, for example, Charles Van Onselen, “The Reconstruction of a Rural Life from Oral Testimony: Critical Notes on the methodology Employed in the Study of a Black South African Sharecropper,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 20, no. 3 (1993), pp. 494–96; Robin Cohen, Yvonne Muthien and Abebe Zegeye, eds., *Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid* (Hans Zell, 1990), pp. 1–4; and Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘*We Spend Our Years as a Tale is Told*’: *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (Heinemann, 1993), pp. 1–3.

7 Harold Scheub, *The Tongue is Fire: South Africa, Storytellers and Apartheid* (Wisconsin, 1996), p. xvi.

8 Richard Bauman and Joel Scherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 6–12 and 89–91. Folkloristic approaches need not be conservative or exoticizing, however. Recent work by both Hofmeyr and Scheub demonstrates sophisticated efforts to bring poetics and historicity together.

tions among oral performances of the “same” narrative, and the recognition that various meanings may be attributed to an oral document depending on perspective and context.

Historical Approaches

Objectivist historians typically mistrust oral materials as historical evidence, pointing out the unreliability of memory, the contextual effects of interviews, and the risk of manipulation or bias.

While folklorists were oriented towards indigenous traditions, with a few exceptions, the politics of apartheid (and perhaps the nature of documentation) kept most South African historians focused on the history of White communities. In the 1970s, however, social history and Marxian approaches did rise in South Africa as alternatives to the older, liberal progress narratives; and in the 1980s the History Workshop (modeled after the British movement of the same name) concentrated on mining and forms of industrial labour.⁹ Additionally, Charles van Onselen pioneered a project on rural transformation under apartheid.

Van Onselen argues that historians incorrectly doubt the format of the information, when what matters is the quality of data collection. Historians must also evaluate written documents, after all.

Asking what sort of social order it was that generated a document, whether it be a public or a private one, who the author was and how reliable was his or her data, on what basis their judgments were made and if they were internally consistent, who the intended audience was and how it was received, all form the staple fare of working historians and they give rise to problems of verification that are no less vexed than those ordinarily faced by oral historians ... at the end of the day it is the skill of the surgeon's hand rather than the sharpness of the scalpel that should be assessed.¹⁰

Van Onselen's text, however, contains very little of the oral evidence he and his team gathered. He has interpreted (and translated) the narratives without allowing much room for alternatives, and he relies on his authorial position to write a history that is ultimately in his words, not those of his informants.

Community Approaches

The third type of oral history enthusiasts in South Africa are interested in her-

9 See Belinda Bozzoli, “Intellectuals, Audiences and Histories: South African Experiences 1978–88,” in *History from South Africa*, Joshua Brown, et. al., eds. (Temple University Press, 1991).

10 Van Onselen, “The Reconstruction of a Rural Life,” p. 513.

itage and identity more than constructing an authoritative historical narrative. For example, the District Six Museum and others such as the University of Western Cape attempt to avoid the role of folkloric clairvoyant, by allowing informants to “speak for themselves,” or even “ourselves.” The District Six Museum is mostly described in first person plural. One essay posted on its Web site concludes, “Memory can become myth. But the enduring reality of District Six, mythic and memorable, is how fiercely its spirit is cherished. That is what we have to build on.”¹¹

In 1998, a community archives workshop was sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA of South Africa) and the South Africa History Archives (SAHA).¹² The workshop emphasized grassroots participation in the construction of collective memory. This enthusiasm for community-constructed history is widespread in progressive South African circles. In a short article celebrating “the recovery of history,” Andor Skotnes (an American historian with family ties in South Africa) enthuses over a variety of oral history and community history projects, commenting with satisfaction that “more often than not, this activity is consciously political.” As Skotnes notes, the ruling African National Congress party itself has officially promoted “Peoples History” programmes, including oral documentation, to foster democratization and “empowerment of the voiceless.”¹³

Many projects have taken up this challenge, some privately and some under the auspices of state universities.¹⁴ The District Six Museum, for example, is a private venture operating on government and international grants to memorialize the destroyed neighbourhood for which it is named. It is actively collecting audio and video recordings of the personal memories of former residents, along with textual documentation and artifacts. A banner in the museum asserts the desire to “repossess the history of the area.”¹⁵

The Robben Island Museum, which also collects oral documents, was established as a public museum and national monument in 1996. Its motto reads, “Just as Robben Island helped shape our past and present, it should be reactivated in a way that contributes to future debates and developments in our society.”¹⁶ The representation and interpretation of Robben Island was still

11 Neville Dubow, “District with a View of the Bay,” <<http://www.districtsix.co.za/text/archtedv.htm>>.

12 “Refiguring the Archives,” *Update* (August/October 1998), viewed at <<http://fxi.org.za/update/augoctup/archives.htm>>.

13 Anton Skotnes, “People’s History and the South African Struggle,” *Radical Historians Newsletter* 73 (November 1995).

14 Paul La Hausse lists major oral history projects from the 1980s at the National University of Lesotho, University of Cape Town, and University of Natal: “Oral History and South African Historians” in *History from South Africa*, J. Brown, et. al., eds. (Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 348–9.

15 “Banner,” <<http://www.districtsix.co.za>>.

16 “Robben Island Museum Declaration,” <<http://www.robben-island.org.za/museum.htm>>.

under debate as of the summer of 1999. On my own visit to the island, a former inmate who was working as a host for tourists commented that there had been struggles over whether the buildings should be made museum-like, with videos, photographs, displays of artifacts, etc., or simply left as they were used in the 1980s. Despite these debates, the hosts I encountered on the island all repeated the same refrain: forgive but don't forget, the best revenge is learning from history and not repeating it. When I queried a host about other perspectives, he agreed that not all former inmates were comfortable with the mission of this museum.¹⁷ Such projects beg the question: who are "we," and who is left out? In such collections, will competing narratives be acknowledged? In some ways, this brings us full circle, back to traditional history telling, which, according to Hofmeyr, was hegemonic and chief-centred. Hofmeyr argues that traditional South African oral histories were tightly bound to landscape and social structure. With repeated forced resettlements, changes in political and cultural authority and the incursion of oppressive literacy (passes, maps, laws over which people had no say), the basis of oral traditions has dropped away.

Perhaps, however, new forms of oral tradition are emerging, modeled on the TRC and the therapeutic interview. If so, it is likely that they will challenge the place of the idealized archive as the repository of an unquestioned dominant narrative. It remains to be seen, however, whether one chief national storyteller will simply be replaced by another.

How Does Oral History Relate to Archives in South Africa?

Archives in South Africa have typically fallen into two categories. One is government archives, responsible for official records of the state, provinces, municipalities, etc. Until the change of power, these were secretive.¹⁸ The second category is academic or private archives for manuscript collections, primarily of the founding Europeans, both Afrikaner and English.¹⁹ What documentation of non-White South Africans took place did so under folklore or anthropology, not history, and with a heavy emphasis on the rural and the

17 Informal conversation with official guides, Summer 1999, Robben Island.

18 Christopher Merrett, "What's Public is Propaganda, What's Secret is Serious: Official Secrecy and Freedom of Information in South Africa," *Progressive Librarian* 9 (1995), pp. 1–21; and Verne Harris, "'They Should Have Destroyed More': The Destruction of Public Records by the South African State in the Final Years of Apartheid, 1990–1994," available at <<http://www.trcresearch.org.za/papers.htm>> (2000).

19 Letitia Coetzee, "Die Argiefwese en Plaaslike Geskiedenis; 'n Verwysingsraamwerk," *Mousaion* 12, no. 1 (1994), pp. 103–25; Van Herma Niekerk and Jan A. Kruger, "Die Ontwikkeling van die Staatsargiefdiens in Suid-Afrika, 1876–1910," *Mousaion* 14, no. 2 (1996), pp. 103–19; and Verne Harris, "Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 6–27.

primitive. Typically in South Africa, as in most colonized parts of the world, oral history was the tool of ethnographers, folklorists, and curiosity seekers from European backgrounds. It was used to collect the words of locals who then had no control over how the material was used. In post-colonial times, this work continued, with the softer, if patronizing claim to be “giving voice,” or gathering the fundamentals of a “dying” culture, or perhaps documenting a “living tradition” in the vocabulary of natural history.

What Do South Africans Want from Oral History?

In recent decades and accelerating towards the end of the apartheid regime, South Africans have been demanding more evidence of themselves and what they hold to be important, not just in archives, but in museums, libraries, concert halls, theatres, schools, news media, and just about every possible institution with a public or communicative function. Even before the end of apartheid, some activists and academics were using oral history as a method to create and keep records that were otherwise suppressed or simply not created in that oppressive system. Oral history, particularly when verging over into personal testimony, was a significant tool in the active witnessing against apartheid’s silencing effects.

With the end of apartheid, the TRC functioned, among other things, to codify a pattern in which personal narratives could be communicated. Speech, witnessing speech, recreating speech, cathartic speech, destructive, descriptive, redemptive speech, or perhaps not, this speech filled South African radios and televisions, newspapers, conversations. It provoked in turn more speech, as well as piles of documents and publications.²⁰

It is no surprise that in this moment of reclaiming and of speaking out, people see oral histories as an obvious basis for their new, inclusive national memory, and desire to have them valorized, as they have seen other “historical” materials valorized, by preservation in an archives. In 1996, for example, Nigel Worden reported that the newly created National Monuments Council had determined that over ninety-five per cent of the existing national monuments were “colonial,” and that almost no sites significant to non-Whites were so designated. In redressing this wrong, the Council has called for the concept of heritage to extend “beyond museums, monuments and archives to oral history and living culture.”²¹

Doubt, however, is also seeping in. Some South Africans are uneasy about

20 Among these is the stunning book by Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (1999), in which she provides ambivalent, bruised witness to the witnessing. For a collection of documents on the TRC and its effect on South Africa, see <<http://www.trcresearch.org.za/papers.htm>>.

21 Nigel Worden, “Missing Heads: Public History in South Africa,” *Itinerario* 20, no. 3 (1996), pp. 125–32.

the patterns of confession and therapeutic speech that were broadcast so widely in the first years after apartheid. Martin Terre Blanche and his colleagues, for example, wrote an ambivalent report on their “therapeutic” oral history project in a ghetto called Eldorado Park. They wrote that confession, “of which psychotherapy is a prototypical example,” is “a trap,” because it places the confessing person in a position of responsibility while erasing the power of “supra-individual discourses.” They feared that their oral history project did not function to empower their clients to speak out against domination (as if they hadn’t, or couldn’t, without outside empowerment), but rather that it became “a ritual in which people are made to confess dominant truths scripted for them in advance.”²²

In fact, the clients in this case may have been more able to speak out than Terre Blanche, et. al. realize. At the end of their article, they quote a local newspaper editorialist who wrote:

When they came to Eldorado Park, they promised to empower our community and then leave. This however has never happened. Instead they have used our community as a guineapig [*sic*] for outside scholars to become experts on our living habits. They have also created the impression nationally that we are a community of hooligans, gangsters, and women batterers.²³

Contemporary South Africans seem to desire heritage and oral history institutions that honour the majority non-White people of the country. Oral history holds a privileged position in the range of possible documentation, despite its ambiguous history in the hands of colonizers, because it is regarded as more appropriate and closer to the traditional historical practices of Black South Africans.²⁴

Do Oral Histories Belong in Archives?

If oral history is now being claimed as a source of heritage and as a more African form of historical documentation, then perhaps it requires its own institution with its own standards. Some private oral history archives were established under apartheid because the public apartheid-era archives were

22 Martin Terre Blanche, Alex Butchart, and Mohamed Seedat, “Community Psychology and Oral History in Eldorado Park: A Case Study in Surveillance, Confession and Resistance,” presented at *The Advanced Social Research Seminar Series* (University of Witwatersrand, 1994), pp. 2–5.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

24 One cannot help noting the irony of this reversion to what has recently been reviled as an infantilizing romantic stereotype (White = written history; Black = oral poetics). Further, it is not clear how the government plans to fit in, if at all, the South Africans who were defined as Coloured, Malay, Asiatic, Indian, etc.

not interested in the written documents of the majority, not to mention oral histories. Now that the National Archives has stated its readiness to support both, however, the question might be asked. Two paths of argument will be discussed here: one, that oral histories are not really records, and so do not belong in archives; and two, that oral histories represent a different kind of content, being not as much informational or evidential as symbolic. Both of these arguments circle back to the larger question of what role archives play in society.

Archives in South Africa face a set of choices concerning oral history projects. Public or private, they encounter pressure to right wrongs and to promote the new tropes of reconciliation and democratization. The public archives balance their aim of neutrality against the demands of a new government, which demands redress for a history of bias. Private collections and those sponsored by universities vacillate between the interests of academics and of community constituents.

Particularly when contrasted with the dismal history of the South African State Archives Service (SAS), the efforts to tell long-silenced stories suggests a heartening revitalization. Calls for caution, however, may be heard now and again. One such call was made, albeit gently, by Verne Harris, then an archivist of the SAS. Harris warned of creating a new dominant narrative that would repress alternatives. Public archives, he suggested, should receive oral documentation and coordinate efforts to gather and preserve oral records, but should not actively seek to shape history. "History is littered with examples of states controlling their public archives to manipulate social memory," he warned.²⁵

But what of those South Africans whose identity, history, and culture has been systematically excluded from the archives? Andor Skotnes celebrates the African National Congress's active promotion of people's history:

...the recovery of history – especially by means of personal testimony – is extremely important. ... But the need for historical recovery goes deeper. As the African National Congress (ANC) constantly reiterates, South Africa is in a period of "nation building," and a new, inclusive historical identity must be forged from the multiple histories of its peoples. The task is daunting, not only because of the diversity of the population (there are eleven official languages!), but also because its histories were so systematically suppressed and distorted by the apartheid regime.²⁶

While he does not explicitly state this, Skotnes appears to believe that there

25 Verne Harris, "Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), p. 16.

26 Andor Skotnes, "People's History and the South African Struggle," *Radical Historians Newsletter* 73 (November 1995).

is little risk to the political neutrality of public archives, because they have already been proven to have none.

In contrast, Eric Ketelaar (former General State Archivist of the Netherlands), who has also visited South Africa, calls for international standards and transparency in national archives and records management programmes. His point is that without such standards, the most compelling information cannot be trusted.²⁷

The questions raised here are significant for any country where large numbers have suffered violence, particularly civil strife and terror. South Africa's experiences have been compared to Germany's, to the Irish, to Afro-Americans, and to Native Americans. Other regions of Africa and Asia could also easily be invoked when comparing and contrasting twentieth-century experiences of total violence. Can oral histories provide a way for the dominated and violated to be heard over the dull roar of dominant narratives? Can archives provide refuge for stories that may be unpopular, painful, or malicious? At the same time, can archives offer contradictory or fragmentary accounts? Must collective memory always be a single, coherent narrative?

Who is Interviewed?

Narratives are constructed in part through the selection of the subjects to be interviewed. Oral history researchers have had to manage the competing demands of their own research interests, the interests of those who may wish to speak, and the interests of those who may not wish to speak. The University of Natal Web site, for example, states that they intend to "record a diversity of experiences across the political, cultural and social spectrum." It also states that, since they have begun, they have gathered interviews from famous Robben Island prisoners, members of Black Sash, and other anti-apartheid groups. Not mentioned, and presumably also not of interest, are those who were not active in the struggle, nor those who opposed it. This choice, whether conscious and explicit or not, affects the coherence and significance of the resulting collection and the stories it might (be used to) tell.

All researchers must make such choices. In some cases the potential interview subjects themselves influence who is selected to speak, or what is spoken about. For example, Harold Scheub notes that the older generation of his rural informants wanted a chance to be heard despite the disdain of urban youth.²⁸ As another example, Peter Delius, who worked in the Northern Transvaal, writes "My original intention was to deal only with the

27 Eric Ketelaar, "Can We Trust Information?" *The International Information and Library Review* 29, pp. 333–38; reprinted in Eric Ketelaar, *The Archival Image: Collected Essays* (Verloren, 1997).

28 Scheub, *The Tongue is Fire*, p. xvii.

Sekhukhuneland revolt of 1958. But it was difficult to ignore the context of the aftermath of the 1986 uprising. It also became clear to me that many of my older informants were keen to talk about the 1950s in part because they saw the youth as misguided in their methods, ignorant of previous struggles and contemptuous both of their elders and more broadly of bogosi [chieftainship].²⁹ In a different context, P. Reynolds found himself reaching out to younger people who felt eclipsed because they had not taken part in the more heroic periods of the struggle.³⁰

In addition to the claims of the old and the young, the rural and the urban, the political leaders and the silent observers, there are those people who were very much part of the social fabric, but playing more disturbing roles. If oral history shifts to the documentation of heroes great and small, who will interview the petty criminals, traitors, killers, and torturers?

Interviewing perpetrators, especially when they are defensive and possibly traumatized or afraid, is not easy. And yet history does demand the stories. How should researchers and historians gather the views of unsympathetic perpetrators? This problem has been addressed in the context of the Holocaust by Claudia Koontz, who studied Nazi women, as well as by Kathleen Blee in her study of women in the American KKK. Perhaps it is not chance that in both cases the subjects were the women, who, among Nazis and Klansmen, were expected to keep to domestic and rarely violent roles. Even so, these two historians both struggled to avoid appearing to condone or empower their subjects while still seeking to understand them.³¹

Stephen Ellis's research on the role of South Africa's Third Force uses interviews and archival data to evaluate the role of this secretive military organization. Ellis does not claim to give his subjects a voice; he uses the interviews to build up an historical narrative of his own construction about the institution.³²

Finally, in considering who is interviewed, there is the question of those who will not or cannot speak. How should researchers respond to the silence of the traumatized? In the spirit of people's history, some groups, such as the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), willingly treat testimony as therapy and vice versa. This organization offers therapeutic support for people traumatized by violence, and also gathers their stories (in

29 Peter Delius, *A Lion Amongst The Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Heinemann, 1996), p. 234.

30 P. Reynolds, "Not Known Because Not Looked For: Ethnographers Listening to the Young in Southern Africa," *Ethnos* 60, nos. 3-4 (1995), pp. 159-81.

31 Claudia Koontz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (St. Martin, 1987); and Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (1993), pp. 596-606.

32 Stephen Ellis, "The Historical Significance of South Africa's Third Force," *Journal of South African Studies* 24, no. 2 (1998), pp. 261-99.

aggregated, anonymous formats).³³ These records may prove quite useful for historians, but their provenance and the therapeutic context of the interview makes them very difficult to interpret. Holocaust researchers have noted that victims' stories pick up certain tropes and motives over time that may relate more to narrative structure than to actual experience.³⁴

In other cases, even therapeutic contexts may not be enough to allow a story to be told.³⁵ Not all experiences can be fit into stories. American historian William Cronon points out that a story, unlike a chronicle, has a plot, a conclusion, and thus a moral. Stories give meaning to what would otherwise be an unconnected sequence of events. Like Hofmeyr, Cronon also notes that many stories rely on the physical setting or landscape for structure, metaphor, and even moral. Because narrative is teleological, even nature must be fit in. Although his subjects are Crow Indians, not South Africans, Cronon comes to a conclusion very close to Hofmeyr's: a devastated people may not be able to sustain their narrative over a major dislocation. At the end of his story, a Crow man named Plenty Coups says, "When the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." Cronon explicates: "Few remarks more powerfully capture the importance of narrative to history than this last of Plenty Coups....the universe revolved around the bison herds, and life made sense only so long as the hunt continued. When the scene shifted – when the bison herds "went away" – that universe collapsed and history ended." Of course the Crow continued living on a reservation, but now they could only begin again to tell a different story with a different plot, disassociated from the old one.³⁶ As Hofmeyr writes, if the polity is fragmented, the landscape lost, and the chiefdom or other cultural centers of gravity knocked away, then historical narra-

33 CSVr "Aims and Objectives," <<http://www.wits.ac.za/csvr/aims.htm>>; see also <<http://www.wits.ac.za/csvr/trauma.htm>>.

34 See Marita Sturken, "Imaging Postmemory/Renegotiating History," *Afterimage* 26, no. 6 (1999), pp. 10–12; and Karein Goertz, "Transgenerational Representations of the Holocaust: from Memory to 'Post-Memory'," *World Literature Today* 72, no. 1 (1998), pp. 33–38.

35 This was the case for E.V. Daniel, who went to a different violence-torn place, Sri Lanka, to gather plantation folk songs, and was drawn into stories of terror, agony, and death. Daniel struggled with the meaning of the silences with which some of his informants answered him. Telling about extreme experiences, whether as victim or perpetrator, places both the teller and the listener in a dilemma: stories of violence are vulnerable to "prurience," he notes, so that anthropology risks becoming pornography. Yet at the same time, not to record the story is to betray the teller, "who wished to communicate ... some part of the experience of the passion and pain of violence in its brutal immediacy." For others, it is exactly that brutal immediacy which makes the pain impossible to tell. To fit it into a narrative is already to step away from it. In some cases, victims are still living in the suspended present of shock, terror or pain, and thus have no access to narrative devices. E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, 1996).

36 William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992), p. 1366.

tive can no longer be coherent. In some cases, it may become farce, or in others, silence.

Thus the question of who is to be interviewed is not only a question of choosing among heroes or villains, but also one of knowing who cannot speak, and perhaps finding other methods to record their experiences.

Is Oral History a Genre?

Documents described as oral histories range from personal reminiscences to structured interviews to recordings of contemporary thoughts or events saved for posterity. The arrangement of oral histories also range from raw tapes to edited tapes, translations, transcripts, re-wordings, syntheses and interpretations.³⁷ Formats may be magnetic tapes of various sorts, audio-visual film, paper in various forms, or digital on a variety of disks. Given this heterogeneity, it is useful to ask whether oral histories are distinct from (arguably equally heterogeneous) written records, and what consequences such a determination might have on archival practice.

It is sometimes assumed that what ties oral history together is the concept of orality. Articulated by Eric Havelock and Albert Lord, and further promoted by Jack Goody and Walter Ong,³⁸ the concept of orality grows directly from the European Enlightenment. It incorporates an assumption of the natural, linear progress of civilizations from the primitive (in both time and culture), mythical, and communal to the complex, rational, and socially complex. Literacy, these men argued, was directly causal of Western democracy.

This view has come under attack by some, but it is still widely accepted among historians, archivists, and even anthropologists (who are otherwise quite eager to deconstruct myths of progress). One of the more coherent critiques of this Cartesian view of orality has been given by Rosalind Thomas in

37 For examples of the various kinds of works considered to be oral histories, see Saliou Mbaye, "Oral Records in Senegal," *American Archivist* 53 (1990), pp. 566–74; Bill Schneider, "More Than Words on Tape: the Problematic in Converting Orality to Material Custody," *South African Archives Journal* 37 (1995), pp. 94–100; Motlatsi Thabane, "Personal Testimony as an Historical Source in Lesotho: some Methodological Guidelines" (Masters Thesis, National University of Lesotho, 1986); Hugo Slim, Paul Thompson, et. al., "Ways of Listening," in *The Oral History Reader*; Robert Perks and Alistain Thomsen, eds. (Routledge, 1998), pp. 114–25; Ruth Finnegan, "Problems in the Processing of 'Oral Texts': Some Reflections on the Researcher's Role in Innovation and Consolidation," in *Oral Tradition and Innovation: New Wine in Old Bottles?* Edgard R. Sienaert, A. Nigel Bell, and Meg Lewis, eds. (Natal, 1991), pp. 1–23; and Christopher Ann Paton, "Appraisal of Sound Recordings for Textual Archivists," *Archival Issues* 22, no. 2 (1997), pp. 117–32.

38 Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, 1982); Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Atheneum, 1976); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the World* (Methuen, 1982); Jack Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968).

her study of literacy among the ancient Greeks.³⁹ First, Thomas questions generalizations about innocent, natural, primitive societies into which orality is often lumped. Then she argues that treating literacy or orality as monolithic is fallacious. Both of these vary in extent, degree, and significance within societies. In some communities, for example, writing is only significant as ritual; in others, writing may not be seen as reliable compared to oral testimony. These examples are not what most historians mean when they claim writing promotes rationality. Further, Thomas points out, being able to read is not equivalent to being able to write, and reading itself comes in degrees, from semi-rote recognition of a few signs or texts, to reading aloud, to fluent, silent scanning of unfamiliar texts. Therefore it is erroneous to write of literate or oral societies as if they were homogenous, comparable, or aligned along a single scale. Thomas also attacks the assumption that “literacy” somehow naturally overruns “orality”: “Are we confusing ‘literacy’ with Western literacy?” she wonders.⁴⁰ Finally, she argues that claims of literacy causing progress, democracy, or a certain cultural type, such as those made by Goody or McLuhan, are simply misconstruing correlations. To remedy this, Thomas calls for relativistic, empirical research.⁴¹

Despite this critique, many supporters of oral history find it convenient to promote its significance as an alternative to the textual forms of history gathered and valorized by European-trained scholars. Oral history, these supporters claim, records the hidden, the voiceless, the non-rational. Some, such as Stanley Frielick, go so far as to claim that respect for “orality” is the only way we humans will be saved from disaster:

...the dominance of a digital/left brain/reductionistic mode of thought in Western culture, along with its self-assertive value system based on the principles of competition/exploitation/individualism, is one of the main roots of ecological crisis. Literacy is a factor in this crisis ... because the social, political and economic processes set in motion at the time of the printing press and the scientific/industrial revolutions are ultimately hostile to the ecological systems which sustain human existence on this planet. The epistemologies and cosmologies of oral cultures can contribute significantly to the emergence of a new paradigm of knowledge, which in turn can provide the foundation for a sustainable society and biosphere.⁴²

In contrast, Isabel Hofmeyr writes that such models “imprison orality and literacy in a deadly binary embrace.” She argues for a hybrid framework that

39 Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1992).

40 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

41 *Ibid.*, passim.

42 Stanley Frielick, “Orality and Ecology: Steps to a New Paradigm of Knowledge,” in *Oral Tradition and Innovation: New Wine in Old Bottles?* Edgard R. Sienaert, A. Nigel Bell, and Meg Lewis, eds. (Natal, 1991), pp. 420–21 (ellipses represent an elaborative sentence fragment).

allows for porous boundaries and more effective, creative research. It is not fair, she complains, for oral documents to be the residual category encompassing everything that is not written.⁴³

Given this debate, archivists ought to be asking whether “oral history” is really a genre at all. A quick survey of literature on oral history in Africa shows that the definitions are quite broad, covering a range that, were it of written materials, would not be lumped into a single category of “written history.” For example, Slim and others list group interviews, life story interviews, family tree interviews, single issue or single event interviews, and diary interviews (in which a person tapes or is taped repeatedly over time to document activities).⁴⁴ In an evaluation of “oral records” in Senegal, Mbaye lists oral histories, ethnographic texts, oral literary texts, oral traditions, and the written transcriptions or notes based on all of these.⁴⁵

If the concept of orality as an ideal category is rejected, and if the archivist wishes to go beyond the treatment of oral documents as that which is not written (or was not originally written), then what is left of the “oral” in oral history? Are records of spoken words really so different that they require segregation from the myriad of other kinds of documents, texts, images, and ephemera? There is one characteristic of oral histories proper (not necessarily other kinds of oral recordings) that does set them apart from most (but not all) written records, and that is that they are created explicitly for posterity, usually by an interlocutor and a speaker, and the content is usually related long after the activities in question, based on memory. This distinguishes oral histories from other kinds of oral records, and also from written records, the usual stuff of archives, because the latter are thought to be created in the process of an activity for immediate purposes, not posterity.⁴⁶ As a particular kind of memory document, then, oral histories are significant not as much for their origins in speech as for their non-official nature. This, however, brings us to the next debate: are oral histories reliable records?

Are Oral Histories Records?

Oral histories, and any similar document recorded on a medium other than paper, face the same difficulties as visual media and digital media in gaining recognition for their “recordness.” Some would keep them out of archives simply on the basis of format; others, because they do not seem to be records.

43 Isabel Hofmeyr, “‘Wailing for Purity’: Oral Studies in Southern African Studies,” *African Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995), p. 16.

44 Hugo Slim, Paul Thompson et al., “Ways of Listening” in *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomsen, eds. (Routledge, 1998), pp. 114–25.

45 Saliou Mbaye, “Oral Records in Senegal,” *American Archivist* 53 (1990), pp. 566–74.

46 Of course, paper diaries, memoirs, etc. are often accessioned into manuscript collections, where they play a similarly ambiguous role.

Writing about digital records, Terry Cook comments,

For the first time, we have records that do not exist to the human eye, unlike the foregoing worlds of Babylonian clay tablets, Egyptian papyrus, Roman and Medieval parchment, and modern paper, even modern microfilm.⁴⁷

While they are not mentioned in this passage, audio recordings apply as well: like digital documents, they require a machine in order to be made “readable.” Additionally, as with digital records, the medium is *not* the message for sound, at least in so far as it need not be preserved. The signals that make up the record may be (and often must be) moved to other media, even other formats, in order to maintain them. This is not considered a loss of information as long as a record is kept of all the manipulations.⁴⁸

This aspect of audio recordings goes far beyond the simple question of whether a repository can afford to maintain them and keep them accessible; it goes to the question of what, actually, counts as custody of a record.

In his article, “Electronic Records, Paper Minds,” Terry Cook takes the position that individual records can no longer be treated as bounded units of information standing on their own:

In this fluid electronic environment, the idea of a record physically belonging to one place or even in one system is crumbling before the new *conceptual* paradigms, where ‘creatorship’ is a more fluid process of manipulating information from many sources in a myriad of ways, or applications, rather than something leading to a static, fixed, *physical* product.... [our work will be defined by] an understanding of the conceptual or virtual interrelationships between creating structures, their animating functions, paradigms, and activities, the information systems, and the resulting records.⁴⁹

Cook has in mind official, institutional records, but the idea applies equally well to, for example, the records of a political group, a village, or a physically dispersed clan, and even more so when they are oral.

Archivists who are willing to accept that records come in many formats and may not exist in the singular, are also likely to have little difficulty accepting that the concept of “recordness” itself may be relative. This is definitely not a mainstream view, however. The mainstream holds strong to the argument that

47 Terry Cook, “Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 2 (1994), pp. 301–02.

48 Helen P. Harrison, “Section I: Introduction to Audiovisual Archives,” *Audiovisual Archives: A Practical Reader* (UNESCO, 1998). Available at <<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/audiovis/reader/preface.htm>>.

49 Terry Cook, “Electronic Records, Paper Minds,” p. 310, emphasis in original.

a record is a document that gives evidence of an action or transaction, and preferably one that is reliable and can be authenticated. Clanchy's research into the use of records in Medieval England, however, demonstrates that even within European societies the social norms on what makes a record reliable and authentic change over time.⁵⁰ Shauna McRanor extends the thought across space rather than time to argue that even contemporary societies may differ on this point. In the context of evaluating the veracity of aboriginal oral records, she writes,

the facts that are represented in documents made or received as a means or residue of human activity – that is, in records – are those that are recognized by the rules considered temporally and spatially binding by a given social group. Such facts cannot, therefore, be necessarily or universally guaranteed by all juridical systems....⁵¹

Historical constructions, just like authenticity and reliability, cannot be assumed to be established in the same way by all cultures.⁵²

Even within one society, recordness sometimes comes into debate. In the United States, for example, the federal government attempted to argue that e-mail, because of its format alone, was not an official record (should a record accidentally somehow be created in e-mail, it was supposed to be printed). Wallace argues that it is useless to appraise all e-mail as a record or not, because of course recordness depends on the content of the e-mail, not its format. And content in the case of e-mail is not just the typed words. Reporting on the court case that ensued when the White House tried to destroy its e-mail, Wallace writes,

The plaintiffs asserted that electronic records were not extra copies because their “form and content are unique” and printouts did not necessarily capture all of the information associated with a particular document. Items such as the identity of the sender and the recipient, acknowledgment receipts which provide the sender with a confirmation that their message was received, as well as the date and time of receipt and system usage statistics such as user log/logoff and connect times were some of the types of electronically stored metadata that appeared nowhere on printouts.⁵³

Unlike in e-mail, in sound recordings most metadata is not automatically captured. Someone must state, write down, or otherwise record the partici-

50 M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1993).

51 Shauna McRanor, “Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records and Their Material Manifestations: Implications for Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), p. 66.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

53 David A. Wallace, “Preserving the U.S. Government’s White House Electronic Mail: Archival Challenges and Policy Implications,” presented at the Sixth DELOS Workshop: Preserving Digital Information (1998).

pants, setting, date, time, etc. But oral documents also have unique characteristics that are lost in transcription, including background sounds, non-verbal utterances, pauses, characteristics of speech patterns, pronunciation, emphasis, and so on. Verne Harris, considering this problem, notes, "The recording of narrative, the archiving of orality, can so easily destroy the fluidity, destroy the contextual links, alienate the speaker from the word. And the attempt to give voice to the voiceless ironically becomes a reinforcement of voicelessness."⁵⁴

Harris also asserts that oral histories are not sources for history, but are in fact forms of history. Citing Hofmeyr, he admonishes we should not privilege academic history over popular forms. This statement puts Harris at odds with postmodernists who would consider *all* histories to be sources (i.e., narratives to be interpreted in yet more histories). In contrast, Peter Mazikana and William Moss emphasize simply that an oral history has a "double vision," and skirt whether or not it is history or something else:

It is essential to remember ... that the record produced by the oral history and oral tradition collection process is a recording of an interview or of a narration. It is not, properly speaking, a record of past events, even though those events may be narrated, recited, recollected, reflected upon, examined, and evaluated in the content of the recording. The product indeed may be consulted by historians to seek and find evidence of what took place in the past; but, for the archivists "the record" is a record of an interview or narration, or perhaps a conversation among several people, that took place in a time and perhaps a place well removed from the events discussed or narrated.⁵⁵

Objectivist historiography rejects most oral documentation as unreliable. Wallot and Fortier explain:

In effect, the basic principles of traditional archival science were articulated in the nineteenth century in tandem with the growth of "positivist," "empirical" historiography that pretended to be more exacting, and were concerned with political, diplomatic and military issues. The method on which the system is founded is based on textual criticism applied in particular to official documents and inspired by methods previously developed in diplomatics.⁵⁶

54 Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: a Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), p. 139.

55 Peter Mazikana and William W. Moss, "Section III Oral History: Collection and Management: 3.2 Oral Tradition and Oral History," in *Audiovisual Archives: a Practical Reader*, Helen P. Harrison, ed. and comp. (UNESCO, 1998), paragraph 2.1.1.

56 Jean-Pierre Wallot and Normand Fortier, "Archival Science and Oral Sources," in *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomsen, eds. (Routledge, 1998), p. 364.

In such a science, oral accounts are subjective and self-conscious, therefore unreliable. This assumes, of course, that written records do not represent a point of view, which is odd in that most positivists usually also try to argue that literacy leads to self-consciousness (and thus objectivity and critical thought), while the spoken word is said to be expressive and habitual. Perhaps oral histories are considered anomalous because they are both spoken aloud and induced and recorded by an interviewer who is usually from the world of science. In any event, the “history” in oral history is often questioned.

The response in recent years to this doubt has been to argue both that oral history provides a unique kind of history, and also that the written texts on which history is typically based are no less subjective and open to interpretation. Oral history is unique, supporters argue, precisely because it fills in the gaps where no records were, or could be, created. This applies not just to purely “oral” people, or the marginal or oppressed, but also to events and activities in all sectors of society that do not have paper residue. Thus Clive Kirkwood, in discussing the South African Archives new policy of macro-appraisal, states that when gaps in the documentation of government functions or structures are found, they may be filled “by non-public records or oral history.”⁵⁷ Sean Morrow’s research on the recent history of an African National Congress settlement is an example of the use of interviews to fill in information on poorly documented events and activities of literate people who had good reason not to create many records.⁵⁸

As to the subjectivity of oral histories, proponents acknowledge this but argue that most written documents are equally open to interpretation. The famous ethnographic research of James Stuart in South Africa, for example, is currently criticized not for the unreliability of the memories of those he interviewed, but for Stuart’s own bias in questioning, note taking, transcribing, and translating their words.⁵⁹

Indeed, there is a risk that oral documents may be taken too literally, based on a romantic belief in speech, particularly oral testimony, as spontaneous and based on experience. Citing the work of Minkley and Rassool, Aletta Norval comments on this problem as it relates to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: “Unwarranted assumptions about the transparency of the ‘voice of

57 Clive Kirkwood, “The National Archives’ Appraisal Programme,” *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998), p. 43.

58 Sean Morrow, “Dakawa Development Centre: An African National Congress Settlement in Tanzania, 1982–1992,” *African Affairs* 97 (1998), pp. 497–521.

59 Carolyn Hamilton, “James Stuart and ‘The Establishment of a Living Source of Tradition’,” presented at the Institute for Advanced Social Research Seminar, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa (1994), p. 3.

authenticity' and of memory prevents one from engaging with issues of power embedded in conversational narratives."⁶⁰

Whether the issues are of power or other narrative structures and tropes, history must engage with them. This means that for oral histories to be useful historical documents, they should be meticulously (and usually literally) contextualized. As most experienced ethnographers know, oral histories are communicative, constructive processes. Writing about oral history methodology, Motlatsi Thabane puts it thus:

...we need to recognize that (a) informants' social environments influence their responses in an interview situation and (b) an interview itself is a dynamic social interaction in which at least two people influence each other – and hence the interview results – in various ways.⁶¹

These "influences" can be the major factor in creating an oral history. In particular, the sense of what the interviewer wants to know and what he or she will be able to understand will strongly shape what and how someone narrates. Thus language, race, gender, shared histories, ongoing relationships, audiences, and so forth are all factors that must be noted.

If oral histories are stories, they are made into history (or at least become potentially valuable to history) by their relationship to other stories. Historians compare and contrast stories and account for the way in which each was created. As long as oral histories come with enough evidence of their provenance, they would seem to be, if not history, certainly appropriate raw material for a history.⁶²

So is an oral history a record? Properly recorded, with appropriate documentation, it is certainly, as Mazikana and Moss put it, a record of the collection process. And it is equally certainly not an actual relic from the past that might be narrated in it. In between these poles there lies uncertainty. Whether or not oral histories are better treated as alternative histories, or as source records to be analyzed, or both, depends mostly on the intent of the creators (did they think they were reminiscing, telling a story, doing history?) and the point of view of the researcher.

60 Aletta Norval, "Truth and Reconciliation: the Birth of the Present and the Reworking of History," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25, no. 3 (1999), p. 515.

61 Motlatsi Thabane, "Personal Testimony as an Historical Source in Lesotho: Some Methodological Guidelines," (Masters Thesis, National University of Lesotho, 1986), p. ii.

62 Hayden White has argued that historical texts rely on certain "linguistic protocols" to indicate their particular trope, and that they are evaluated and justified, in part, on the match between the trope and the data or information presented. Following this logic, it could be argued that oral histories have been rejected by historians in part because their structures and poetics are unfamiliar. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), p. 426.

*Does Societal Value Count?*⁶³

Whether the societal value of documents (or other items) should be considered in appraisal is debated among archivists, who range from the strictly utilitarian (if it is not evidence of action, then it is not a record and does not belong in an archives), to the broadly inclusive (if it is part of a social representation, part of memory and identity, then it should be taken in, record or not).⁶⁴

Societal value, however, is a two-edged sword. As many North American museums have discovered in the past two decades, what can be one man's specimen can be another's ancestor; what is a significant record of creative achievement to an ethnographer might be a sacred object that must be allowed to follow its life cycle to the descendants of its creators; and what may be evidence of past acts may offend current sensibilities to the point that only destruction will ameliorate the pain.

Despite this risk, however, it is clear that South African archives are acknowledging their own value in society and are beginning to take it into account during appraisal. This is significant for oral history, because much of the value placed on it by the communities who create it lies not in evidence, and not even entirely in information, but in the aesthetics of narrative forms, the intimacies and untranslatable power of the sound of a voice, and the immediacy of what linguists refer to as a "speech act."⁶⁵

In taking on societal values, archivists (and historians) also acknowledge that objectivity (not to mention objectivism) cannot be assumed. As Novick argued, facts don't speak for themselves.⁶⁶ Indeed, it could well be argued that people rarely "speak for themselves" either, in the sense of giving a purely evidentiary or informational account. People speak in narratives that, in their

63 I use the term "societal" here in distinction to "social" as a matter of relative emphasis rather than sharp definition. The term social has come to take on meanings of interdependent relationships ranging from friendships to small institutions such as clubs, up to larger institutions generally understood as societies. In using "societal" I hope to lay more emphasis on the concept of society as an enduring set of social groups and institutions with an organized pattern of relations.

64 James O'Toole, Terry Cook, and Verne Harris have all supported the latter point of view, with slight variations in emphasis.

65 The term "speech act" was coined by sociolinguists in the 1960s to refer to speech that is "illocutionary," that performs a meaning that is not simply contained in the words spoken, but in socially accepted rules of performance, proposition, intent, and so forth. For example, making a promise, invoking a blessing, and stating an oath are all speech acts. See Richard Bauman and Joel Scherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge, 1974) and Pier Paolo Giglioli, ed., *Language and Social Context* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1972).

66 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).

form, expression, and metaphor, may tell much more (or less) than the actual words could ever contain. By acknowledging societal value of oral histories – the value of simply having the record, for example, of a particular ceremony or important statement – archivists are also acknowledging that oral sources may be richer, or more complex and more significant than written ones of the same activity.

What Role Should Archivists Play?

“We must stop being custodians of things,” writes Terry Cook, “and start being purveyors of concepts.” In this new role, archives will become “post-custodial,” applying intellectual (and moral?) control rather than physical, over the archives.⁶⁷ This perspective allows greater flexibility to the archivist in dealing with non-paper records of all sorts. Oral documents that are on tape or paper will still require physical control (at least until they can be digitized), but one post-custodial solution could be the creation of a registry in which such records might be indexed or registered in a central location while the records themselves remain in their local context. In any case, the archives still faces another choice: whether to remain a passive repository of oral histories or to become involved in their creation.⁶⁸

The South African National Archives is supporting the concept of total archives, although it is too early to tell exactly how they plan to implement the concept.⁶⁹ It also appears to be committed to supporting and co-ordinating the collecting policies of private repositories, community libraries, and oral history projects, although again, the practical effect of this commitment has yet to be reported.⁷⁰ Supporting and co-ordinating is a long way from organizing or doing oral history research, however. While the move to become active

67 Terry Cook, “Electronic Records, Paper Minds: the Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 2 (1994), p. 304.

68 According to Andor Skotnes, South Africa does have a national register of manuscripts and a national register of audiovisual material, but they are not widely used. “People’s Archives and Oral History in South Africa: A Traveller’s Account,” *South African Archives Journal* 37 (1995), p. 61.

69 For thoughts on total archives, see Terry Cook, “From the Record to Its Context: The Theory and Practice of Archival Appraisal Since Jenkinson,” *South African Archives Journal* 37 (1995), pp. 32–52; Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 17–63; and Joan Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 173–81.

70 Nigel Worden, “Missing Heads: Public History in South Africa,” *Itinerario* 20, no. 3 (1996), pp. 125–32; Clive Kirkwood, “The National Archives’ Appraisal Programme,” *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998), pp. 41–44; and Verne Harris, “Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 6–27.

earlier in the records continuum for paper and electronic records makes practical sense given the changes in records creation and use, it is not clear that archivists need to move up the oral history stream as well.

In a now classic debate on this topic, Jean Dryden argued that archivists should not be historians. In addition to issues of cost, she cited the fact that archivists are not trained historians, and, crucially, that creating oral histories jeopardizes archivists' neutrality.⁷¹ Rebutting this, Derek Reimer followed the logic of Hans Booms and others in arguing that archivists do already create history, simply through appraisal (or non-appraisal); that an archivist is unlikely to be less objective than an historian; and that oral historians are not as much creating a record as collecting it: "The 'record' already exists in the mind of the interviewee. The archivist is simply giving it tangible form."⁷² In discussing this debate, David Bishop cites Rolf Schuursma's point that archivists are more aware of the need for contextual documentation and appropriate technical standards than historians. If archivists remain entirely passive, it will be too late when the oral historian arrives with undocumented tapes in poor condition. Bishop concludes:

Clearly, the only effective way of solving this problem is for the archivist to step out from his repository, and attempt to become involved in the oral history activities of others. Only by examining what is already being gathered, and influencing those who do the collecting, can the archivist hope to ensure that the minimum archival standards are maintained. By reaching out, as well as developing the technical quality of oral tapes, the archivist can guarantee that these testimonies are surrounded by an appropriate level of contextual documentation – which will again allow the researcher to place more faith in the tapes, and use them more extensively. Such interaction within a community will help to reduce the risk of duplication of oral material within separate archives, whilst also raising the profile of individual repositories.⁷³

On the other hand, the archivist, particularly in public archives, must be careful not to step too far. Kathy Eales, reporting on the view from a South African community archive, agrees that the state should encourage, fund, and co-ordinate with private oral history endeavours, but not regulate them: "Social memory should be contested – but the state should be a contestant,

71 Jean Dryden, "Oral History and Archives: The Case Against," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 5, no. 1 (1981–1982), pp. 34–37 as cited in David Bishop, "The Role of the Archivist in the Collecting of Oral History" (Masters Thesis, University of Liverpool, 1998), available at <www.pettarchiv.org.uk/fsg-db4.htm>.

72 Derek Reimer, "Oral History and Archives: the Case in Favour," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 5, no. 1 (1981–1982), p. 32 as cited by Bishop in his chapter section 3.2.

73 Bishop, "The Role of the Archivist in the Collecting of Oral History," chapter section 3.5.

not the referee.”⁷⁴ This is of particular importance in South Africa, where, National Archivist Clive Kirkwood admits that (in what many would consider to be an understatement) in the past the National Archives has lacked legitimacy.⁷⁵

The Importance of Documentation

Clearly, no matter how involved an archivist may be in the creation of oral history, documentation is crucial. Documenting oral history is far more extensive than simply noting the who, what, and where of a particular recording (although that is minimally necessary). The documentation, just like documentation of appraisal (which is also a weakness in the current practice of most archives), must provide the researcher with enough information to evaluate how this document came into being, what immediate and ultimate interests were involved, what materials or information were not collected, and as much of the social and cultural context as possible. Concerning the problems of transferring oral histories into physical formats, McRanor writes, “[I]n many ways, the objectification of oral memory is equivalent to keeping electronic memory without metadata and archival description: neither is self-validating nor self-explanatory.” For an utterance to be meaningful after the event, audience, speaker, context, ongoing conversation must all be known.⁷⁶ Similarly, Bill Schneider calls for archivists to become “archivist scholars” to contextualize and interpret the symbolism and references of an oral record. Every tape of stories has stories about the stories, which give them meaning. It is the archivist’s job, Schneider asserts, to collect this information too, because it is after all meaning that should be preserved, not tape nor talk.⁷⁷

Of course, this could be an unending task. Whole dissertations have been written, after all, just on the sociolinguistics of greeting rituals in one community. In order that documentation be complete enough without being too elaborate, archives, or preferably an international body such as UNESCO, should develop standards; perhaps a minimum and an ideal set of necessary information to accompany an oral history tape.

Macro-Appraisal and Oral History

The South African National Archives, as noted, is already committed to

74 Kathy Eales, “Community Archives: Introduction,” *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998), p. 13. One could argue further, in fact, that the state is always a contestant, whether it admits it or not.

75 Kirkwood, “The National Archives’ Appraisal Programme,” p. 44.

76 McRanor, “Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records,” p. 75.

77 Bill Schneider, “More Than Words on Tape: The Problematic in Converting Orality to Material Custody,” *South African Archives Journal* 37 (1995), p. 97.

macro-appraisal. What does this mean for oral history? Macro-appraisal, as championed by Cook, Harris, and Kirkwood, is useful in government archives because it deals with the impossible volume of government records. Based on empirical research, macro-appraisal is intended to result in an archives that documents processes and functions. If the functional analysis reveals gaps or overrepresentation in what is documented, then steps can be taken, including, for the former, the collecting of oral documents. In such a context, oral histories would not get special treatment at the outset because of their format (although at the end stage of micro-appraisal, they might be rejected for reasons of cost, format problems, duplication, lack of richness in content, etc.). If, for example, an administrator created an annual debriefing interview on tape, that would be appraised along with all the other records in his office.

In addition, since functional analysis pays particular attention to the relationship between citizens and the state, gaps might be identified that cannot be documented from within the government. In this case, the archives look to private records creators to supplement their materials. They may also rely on the collections of sister institutions, such as museums and libraries. This is where, presumably, the South African archives might reach out for oral histories from the citizenry.

Oral histories, however, do have some characteristics which make them difficult to slot into macro-appraisal. Like case files, they are highly personal and unique, and while they are rarely voluminous, if large projects were brought to completion, they could become so. Unlike case files, however, their format can be quite varied, and they are rarely duplicative. It is unlikely, then, that oral histories would be good candidates for sampling.

As noted above, the National Archives must also be sensitive to its role in the contestation of social memory. Memory politics will always play a role in appraisal decisions, and all the more so when the materials being appraised were gathered explicitly to generate new national narratives about the past. In 1997, Terry Cook called for archivists to take memory politics and memory scholarship more seriously.⁷⁸ In South Africa, at least, some people appear to be listening. Verne Harris's exhortation on macro-appraisal and the new subjectivity is a case in point:

...we need to rediscover ourselves as contextualizers in an age where context is more complex and more fluid than ever before. We need to broaden our concept of context to accommodate our own intervention, the interdependence of the many fields and institutions making up the arena of social memory, and the importance of disclosing what is absent from the archival sliver. We need to embrace *process* rather than *product*. And we need to foster the contestation of social memory, seeing ourselves not as referees

78 Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898," p. 18 and p. 46.

but as contestants. Some would regard all this as a sure way of handicapping ourselves.... I see it as a way toward providing a more profound and enriched transformation of South African archives.⁷⁹

Concluding Thoughts

South Africa's transformation from renegade totalitarianism to a stable democracy is one of the happier political and human wonders of the twentieth century. After decades in which information was difficult to obtain for all but the most privileged, and an impossible luxury for the majority, South Africa now proposes to leapfrog ahead of many other nations in its move to post-apartheid, post-Schellenbergian, postmodern, macro-appraisal-inspired archives programmes.

The trajectory of a leap is in part determined from the lay of the land at take-off, and in South Africa's case, this was a particularly uneven, muddy bit of dirt. In addition to the obvious injustices internally, because of its isolation South Africa had not enjoyed a great deal of intellectual give and take with the rest of the world. As a result, even the best-intentioned archivists and historians could not easily keep up with ideas beyond their borders. It is therefore all the more remarkable that some (at least enough to fill a conference hall) are so willing to put aside objectivist thinking and positivism for Foucault and Derrida. Or perhaps it is not that remarkable. After all, this is a period when just about every received truth is being questioned in South Africa. Why not Schellenberg as well?

Oral history finds a niche in this new South Africa that appears remarkably well suited. The rethinking of the purposes and audiences of memory institutions coincides with a great desire to speak out and testify. The questioning of the authority of writing coincides with the rise of self-help groups, pride groups, therapy theatres, and peoples' museums.

Some South African archivists are clearly on a mission to change the nature of archives. It behooves other nations to pay attention. While it is unlikely that large, powerful countries such as the United States or France will change their archival practices any time soon, South African archives may become the model for newer states, or those recovering from war or similar trauma. In the 1990s, a few Americans and Canadians travelled to South Africa to teach about new forms of appraisal. In twenty years, perhaps it will be South Africans who will travel to teach the rest of the world what they have accomplished, and how.

80 "Introductory Essay: Refiguring the Archive," pp. 139–140.