

ORAL HISTORY AND PUBLIC MEMORIES, PAULA HAMILTON AND
LINDA SHOPES (EDS).

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Back in the 1960s and 1970s, interviewing the common person and marginalized groups, giving voice to the voiceless and embracing 'multiple narratives' was going to shatter the elite, official historical narratives and provide a 'history from the bottom up' that was both more accurate and empowering. The essays in *Oral History and Public Memories* look back on what is now a 30 to 40-year old track record of oral history practice, with examples coming from around the world. In particular, the essays describe the varied ways in which oral history has functioned in the shaping and addressing of public memory, which, as the introduction suggests 'is often associated with "trauma"'. From First Nation perspectives on the Yukon Gold Rush to Albanian/Kosovar reflections on the 1990s Balkans War, the essays are global in scope and therefore reveal how diverse oral history projects can be. More than just collecting stories, oral history has taken on a host of tasks from marking New Zealand historic sites, to homeless advocacy in Cleveland to the Singapore government's use of oral history in the creation of a national narrative. The reader gains a sense of the perspectives involved, such as how Aboriginal Australians view a given location, how a Latina drag queen impacted the lives of so many in a particular neighborhood of San Francisco or how Turkish citizens view the history of Gallipoli.

Given that oral history is about collecting experiences and perspectives from living persons, interviews can tap into emotion as much as historic fact, a feature that is both a resource and a challenge. In some cases, oral history has played powerful, even therapeutic roles such as in helping those uprooted in Colombia's internal struggle make sense of what they went through. In Greece, oral history became a teaching tool used to break down barriers and stereotypes. In South Africa and Australia, they helped clarify and even rebuild a sense of place. In other cases, oral histories were as problematic as helpful in the shaping of historical memory and heritage. In the case of Singapore, for example, oral history tended to concentrate on the stories that reinforced the 'top down', progress-oriented national narrative and

conveniently ignored stories that challenged the narrative. In the case of Parks Canada, David Neufeld observed how attempts to graft First Nations accounts into the interpretation of Yukon historic sites presumed that indigenous peoples viewed certain events and locations as significant the way whites did. While some essays do talk about classic oral history projects in the sense of people going out to conduct formal interviews, others include 'oral history' in a much more informal sense to mean any venue where the voice of the marginalized 'other' provides depth and meaning on a given topic, location or event. Thus, the book also challenges us, not just to think about how oral history impacts our understanding of the past, but to perhaps broaden our minds to consider what oral history even is.

For a book with the title *Oral History and Public Memories* there is remarkably little discussion about actual oral history. The issues and settings for these projects are often unfamiliar to even the academic reader and somewhat extensive explanations are welcome rather than distracting. Each taking up most of the space for its given chapter, these background discussions are often the most insightful and thought-provoking parts of the book. If nothing else, the reader benefits from being made aware that there is Albanian immigration to Greece, that there were Croatians and Maori working in New Zealand gumfields, and that there were massive removals of people of African descent in Cape Town. In several parts, the book is as much about the framing of place and location as oral history.

Thus, the book is a welcome change from the often utilitarian discussions about oral history technique. Too often, oral histories take place with only vague goals of 'saving stories for posterity'. By contrast, these experiences highlight how useful personal narrative can be. Taken together, the essays in the book inform and challenge us to use our research in ways that benefit the larger society.

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