COMMENTARY

Sharing Authority

by Linda Shopes

"Shared authority" has become something of a mantra among oral historians. Coined by Michael Frisch as the title of his 1990 collection of essays,[1] this resonant phrase neatly captures that which lies at the heart of both the method and the ethic—or perhaps one should say the politics—of the oral history enterprise: the dialogue that defines the interview process itself and the potential for this dialogue to extend outward—in public forums, radio programs, dramatic productions, publications, and other forms—towards a more broadly democratic cultural practice. Like all conceptual shorthand, the phrase has at times been glibly invoked to give authority to otherwise quite unremarkable work; all the more reason, then, to appreciate the four essays under discussion here, whose authors, with an appealing sense of dialogue among themselves, reflect upon their own creative and self-conscious efforts to "share authority" with narrators.

In his own commentary on these essays, Frisch emphasizes that he intended the phrase to encompass a rather more limited—if no less perceptive—concept than that developed by these authors, to "the history-making offered by both interviewer and narrator" within the context of the interview itself, rather than to the more long-term effort at sharing the work of history-making through sustained collaborative endeavors. Like Frisch,

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[1] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

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I would like to see greater attention to the "shared authority" in the talk itself. Example! Example! I kept writing in the margins of these papers: How did the granddaughter/grandfather relationship Lorraine Sitza and Arthur Thickett enacted in their interviews inflect the content of the interviews, the questions asked, the answers given? How did sex workers' complex views of their work redound on Wendy Rickard's own equally complex views, the one undoubtedly playing off the other in the back-and-forthing of their talk? What stories about their lives did the inmates of Brown Creek Correctional Institution tell to Alicia Rouverol and her colleagues and what do they add up to? Although Daniel Kerr comes closest to tracking what the homeless men he interviewed said about their circumstances and the context within which they said it, greater attention to the narrative context of the material quoted—the dialogue that elicited it—is worth our attention.

While sharing authority is surely intrinsic to the interview, equipoise between narrator and interviewer hardly is: interviewers at times run over narrators with their questions, failing to wrap them around what's really on a narrator's mind; narrators don't answer questions asked but use interviews to comment on subjects far removed from the presumed topic of inquiry. Close analyses of interview texts would thus help clarify how a theoretical understanding of "shared authority" works in practice—the moves and countermoves in the structure of the conversation, the manner in which an historical interpretation emerges from this structure, and the various ways what happens within the interview are connected to relationships and structures external to it.

Nonetheless, I think it is no accident that Sitza, Rickard, Rouverol, and Kerr have all drawn upon a rather expanded view of "shared authority," reframing Frisch's original concept to mean—as he puts it—"sharing authority" through the entire oral history process, from project design to fieldwork protocols to the uses to which interviews are put. Frisch's work itself suggests this more expansive view. The introduction to *A Shared Authority* explicitly addresses the public dimension of oral historical work, arguing that "dialogue [about the meaning of the past might] more regularly inform the process of participation in project design and development . . . [and] more deeply char-

acterize the experience of finished products themselves."[2] More importantly, the essays that comprise the book are shot through with Frisch's deep and passionate understanding of the politics of culture and of oral history's potential for both redistributing cultural authority and challenging popularly held—as well as hegemonically imposed—cultural categories. Nor is Frisch alone in understanding oral history's capacity for decentering authority, creating opportunities for a more engaged public culture, and opening up possibilities for change; though few have articulated these views as consistently, coherently, and persuasively as he, they comprise an important theme in the historiography of the field and define the impulses, if not the fully formed views, of many attracted to doing oral history.

Few, however, have grounded these ideas in practice—and reflected upon this practice—as carefully as the four whose work is under discussion here. All are writing from the vantage point of many years' investment in the collaborative process; all, with perhaps the exception of Sitza, also describe what are very much works in progress ("perhaps" in the case of Sitzia because although the book she and Arthur Thickett worked on together has been published,[3] their relationship—and the ramifications of their collaboration—surely is not over). All are rigorously and refreshingly self-critical about the challenges of collaboration.

I identify four key issues raised by these essays. First, collaborative oral history—or reciprocal ethnography as Rouverol and Kerr, citing Elaine Lawless, refer to it—is long haul work. This is so in part because such work must be fit within the constraints of often exceedingly complex lives—both our own and those of the people with whom we collaborate—with multiple claims upon them; in part because external support is often limited or nonexistent; but mostly because collaboration requires the cultivation of trust and a working out of the rules of shared decision-making, and these simply cannot be rushed. It may take months of informal conversation before any interviews are recorded; additional months to record even a modest number

[2] Ibid, xxii.

[3] Lorraine Sitzia and Arthur Thickett, *Seeking the Enemy* (London: Working Press, 2002).

of interviews; years to develop a project outcome. This is especially true when, like our authors, one is working with individuals who have been marginalized in some way, who have less social power than the investigator, who have therefore good reason to be wary of what we're doing and why we're doing it. Often, in fact, such wariness leads to a sort of "test," an implicit request for proof of commitment to being on the narrator's side: Rouveral admits, not entirely comfortably, that "constancy, fairness toward all of the inmates . . . and my sheer determination to keep the project going," along with breaking the prison's rules and practicing modest forms of reciprocity with inmates, created conditions for the sometimes difficult give and take collaboration requires. Rickard suggests that her willingness to share some risk with narrators by working as a maid in a brothel, thereby subjecting herself to possible legal sanction, helped cultivate trust and perhaps attenuate a level of inequality.

Second, and related to the first point, collaborative work is personally and intellectually demanding, requiring an ability—even the courage—to deal with people and situations that can be difficult; a certain tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty about how a project will work out; a willingness to take risks, not follow established protocols, and make decisions based on the logic of the work itself. Sitzia writes most poignantly of her troubles with Thickett, troubles both intellectual—who owns the book they were writing and who has final say about what's included, what's not—and personal, as Thickett revealed himself to be an emotionally fragile person, for whom Sitzia felt enormous responsibility. She reminds us of the need for a clearly identified set of ground rules when entering into a collaborative relationship and a mature recognition of one's own boundaries; of the right to claim one's own authority at certain times; and most especially of an understanding of "sharing authority" as not so much a goal as a negotiated process that perhaps characterizes all historical inquiry. Rouverol emphasizes the need to confront head-on the inevitable breakdowns in the collaborative process, a self-scrutiny that is unfamiliar to many, difficult for all. And Rickard, noting sex workers' reluctance to share administrative authority for their interviews, reminds us that "we"—those of us who initiate and sustain

projects and interview others—don't necessarily share authority with "them," that "they" may find certain elements of academic culture boring, irrelevant, or simply too unfamiliar and hence difficult to participate in, and throughout the process pick and choose what and how they will share, what authority they will cede to us. And all four authors describe unorthodox research practices even for oral historians—recording in brothels, public spaces, and prisons; creating opportunities for narrators to comment on a body of interviews and engage in dialogue with each other; sharing the stage with narrators in diverse academic and community settings. Here they show enormous creativity and flexibility, adopting method to goal while recognizing the constraints and exploiting the possibilities of a given research setting.

Third, because collaborative oral history projects are frequently linked to broader social goals—here community publishing, prison reform, health care for sex workers, and an amelioration of the conditions of homelessness—they inevitably raise the "objectivity question," or as Daniel Kerr bluntly puts it: "By providing a 'bullhorn' to the oppressed and excluded, do we give up our critical authority and give in to 'bad science'?" Drawing upon the work of Helen Longino, Kerr rather deftly answers the question in terms of his own work with Cleveland's homeless people: because research is de facto interpretive, the more who are involved in addressing a research problem, the richer is the response to it. Thus involving homeless people in the analysis of homelessness is not only an ethical or moral imperative; it is an intellectual one, for homeless people too—even especially—can bring a critical edge to understanding their condition. More importantly, though, Kerr is not seeking "objectivity" for some disembodied research project. Of all the authors under discussion, he is the most directly activist in his research agenda, extending Frisch's view that oral history can open up possibilities for a more democratic cultural practice into the more explicitly political view that it can catalyze a social movement. Insofar as his work with Cleveland's homeless men has resulted in positive change, his collaborative approach seems on the one hand "objectively" better than a more top down approach and on the other to obviate abstract concerns about objectivity altogether.

Reflecting on the charged sexual politics underlying oral histories with sex workers, Rickard similarly wonders if a commitment to sharing authority and to an activist role compromises scholarship. Certainly the overtly sex positive perspective she and others bring to their work does inhibit former sex workers who now repudiate that life from coming forward to be interviewed. But, as Rickard makes quite clear, her political views have not inhibited those she has interviewed from asserting contrary views within the interview itself, reminding us once again that narrators really do have minds of their own, that they can speak for themselves. The biggest challenge, however, comes in analyzing the interviews gathered and presenting them as published scholarship: on the one hand, it is all too easy, as Rickard notes, to manipulate narrators' words to fit our own analytic categories; on the other, a commitment to rendering narrators' perspectives, to "the voice of experience," can perhaps silence the scholar's imperative to generalize, critique, and theorize. One way out of this dilemma, it seems to me, is to take "sharing authority" seriously, to recognize, in other words, that while both parties may need to cede some interpretive authority, neither party needs to relinquish it altogether. This may mean working toward some resolution of differences; it may mean allowing for differences, even disagreements, to come out in the published work or other product, as Alicia Rouverol and Linda Lord did in "*I Was Content and Not Content*"; it may mean allowing for multiple publications/products with different purposes and audiences, as Sitzia and Thickett have done. Yet such resolution may not always be possible; there is, I believe, an inherent tension in both "shared" and "sharing" authority: sometimes "we" do need to mute our voices out of respect for narrators; sometimes "they" don't get to have the last word. And compromise, I find, is disquieting.

Nor is resolution always desirable, which gets me to my fourth point. Running as a subtext in these four essays is a comment I made on their original versions at the 2002 International Oral History Association:

> Collaboration may well be desirable in certain kinds of oral history practice; it may well not be in others. Here all four of our presenters share both a general intellectual orientation and broad social goals with the narrators they are working with. . . .

> But what about those cases where we don't share an intellectual or broadly social agenda with narrators, where we do not especially respect their views, where a commitment to mutuality may not be possible to establish? I'm thinking here of Kathleen Blee's interviews with former Klanswomen, who simply assumed that because she was a white woman, she would share their racist views;[4] of interviews with perpetrators of political atrocities or human rights violations; or less dramatically, with people who may not share the critical perspective of the intellectual. As oral historians, we have a bias towards interviewing people with whom we often share a fundamental sympathy—hence our valuation of sharing authority. At a basic level, I do think that the interview dynamic is collaborative. But I also think we need to think carefully where we wish to share intellectual control over our work and where we don't. We do need to be clear where and how we want to differ with narrators, perhaps in the interview itself, more likely in what we write based on interviews. We need to be clear when we wish to be critical of narrators, when there is no room for a shared perspective.

I still hold these views: collaboration is a responsible, challenging, and deeply humane ideal for some oral history work, but in certain kinds of projects, beyond a basic respect for the dignity of all persons, it seems not an appropriate goal. Alicia Rouverol presses hardest against this line of mine, in her discussion of her efforts to collaborate with prison officials and in her well taken point about the need to remain open to views different from our own. I am aware too that some human relations workers find that perpetrators of hateful views change their minds and hearts only when approached in a spirit of reconciliation. Yet, I remain uneasy, skeptical. Taking the full measures of views other than our own is one thing; failing to subject them to critical scrutiny yet another. Is presenting differing views in point/counterpoint fashion itself a form of critical inquiry? Is it enough? We need to think more about the limits and possibilities of oral history work with those with whom we do not share a fundamental sympathy.

Let me conclude, however, with a couple of final comments on the very fine work under discussion here. While the authors suggest some of the reasons why the people they have worked with agreed to be interviewed, and in varying degrees, have col-

[4] Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *Journal of American History* 80:2 (September 1993): 596–606.

laborated with them in making these interviews public, I would like to hear more from these—and other—narrator-collaborators, in our journals, our books, our conferences. I understand the multiple difficulties in doing so, not the least of which is the possibility that such a practice could wind up objectifying a narrator. I also understand the need for both—or all—parties in a collaboration to be able to communicate separately, with separate audiences. Nonetheless, the work described here is a creative cultural practice that fruitfully suggests ways of opening up the forums in which we present our work.

I would also like to know more about how differences between parties in a collaboration are not simply impediments that need to be resolved but actually enable the work to proceed. Alessandro Portelli writes about "the line" that makes dialogue possible;[5] talking across that line—recognizing it as the ground of our curiosity, the rationale for inquiry, the basis of the conversation, as well as something that cannot be erased—seems to me a useful way to deepen our understanding of what "shared authority" means in an interview. How have differences enlivened, advanced, even made possible the projects under discussion here?

Finally, I want to know how these collaborations continue to work themselves out over time. Sitzia and Thickett may have reached a natural end to their working together; for the others, I look forward to hearing and reading more about their projects in coming years.

[5] Alessandro Portelli, "There's Gonna Always Be a Line: History-Telling as a Multivocal Art," in *The Battle of Valle Giula: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 24–39, see esp. pp. 34–39.