

Edited by Mark Cave  
and Stephen M. Sloan

# LISTENING ON THE EDGE

ORAL HISTORY  
IN THE  
AFTERMATH  
OF CRISIS

# Listening on the Edge

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*To all of our narrators who have shared their  
experiences in the wake of catastrophe*



# Contents

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Acknowledgments [xi](#)

**INTRODUCTION** WHAT REMAINS: Reflections on  
Crisis Oral History [1](#)  
*Mark Cave*

## **PART I: CLAMOR**

- 1** WHEN ALL IS LOST: Metanarrative in the Oral History of Hanifa, Survivor of Srebrenica [17](#)  
*Selma Leydesdorff*  
Oral history by Selma Leydesdorff with “Hanifa,” refugee camp, northeastern Bosnia, April 2004
- 2** “TO DREAM MY FAMILY TONIGHT”: Listening to Stories of Grief and Hope Among Hazara Refugees in Australia [33](#)  
*Denise Phillips*  
Oral histories by Denise Phillips with Reza and Juma, Brisbane and Melbourne, Australia, 2004–11
- 3** EXHUMING THE SELF: Trauma and Student Survivors of the Shootings at Virginia Tech [55](#)  
*Tamara Kennelly and Susan E. Fleming-Cook*  
Oral histories by Susan E. Fleming-Cook with Yang Kim, Derek O’Dell, and Kristina Heeger-Anderson, Blacksburg, Virginia, 2009–10
- 4** TALKING CURE: Trauma, Narrative, and the Cuban Rafter Crisis [74](#)  
*Elizabeth Campisi*  
Oral histories by Elizabeth Campisi with Cuban rafter crisis survivors conducted in Miami, Florida; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Rochester, New York, 1998–2001



- 5 IN THE GHOST FOREST: Listening to Tutsi Rescapés 91  
*Taylor Krauss*  
Oral histories by Taylor Krauss with Rwandan rescapés, Kigali, Rwanda, 2007–08
- 6 THE CONTINUING AND UNFINISHED PRESENT: Oral History and Psychoanalysis in the Aftermath of Terror 110  
*Ghislaine Boulanger*

## PART II: RESONANCE

- 7 UNLOCKED: Perspective and the New Orleans Prison Evacuation Crisis 129  
*Mark Cave*  
Oral histories by Mark Cave with members of the Louisiana Department of Corrections, Angola, Pineville, and Keithville, Louisiana, March 23 and 24, June 17 and 18, 2009
- 8 LIVING TOO IN MURDER CITY: Oral History as Alternative Perspective to the Drug War in Ciudad Juárez 146  
*Eric Rodrigo Meringer*  
Oral histories by Eric Rodrigo Meringer with Juárez residents Jonathan, Rosa, and Raul, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, 2009–10
- 9 UNTIL OUR LAST BREATH: Voices of Poisoned Workers in China 166  
*Karin Mak*  
Oral histories by Karin Mak with “Ren,” “Min,” “Fu,” and “Wu,” Huizhou, Guangdong, and rural Sichuan, China, August and September 2007
- 10 WOVEN TOGETHER: Attachment to Place in the Aftermath of Disaster, Perspectives from Four Continents 183  
*Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullmann, Ingo Haltermann, Franz Mauelshagen*  
Oral histories by Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullmann, and Ingo Haltermann with residents of communities affected by natural disasters, New Orleans, Louisiana; Accra, Ghana; eastern Brandenburg, Germany; and Chaitén, Chile, 2009–10
- 11 SMILE THROUGH THE TEARS: Life, Art, and the Rwandan Genocide 207  
*Steven High*  
Oral history by Jessica Silva with Rupert Bazambanza, Montreal, Canada, June 3 and 12 and July 6, 2008

**12 A SPIRITUAL WAR: Crises of Faith in Combat Chaplains from Iraq and Afghanistan** 226

*David W. Peters*

Interviews by David W. Peters with "Christina," "Michael," "Timothy," "Craig," and "George," Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, DC, 2011

**13 A LONG SONG: Oral History in the Time of Emergency and After** 241

*Mary Marshall Clark*

Oral histories by Gerry Albarelli and Temma Kaplan with Mohammad Bilal-Mizra, Talat Hamdani, Zaheer Jaffery, Salmaan Jaffery, and Zohra Saed, New York City, October 2001 to June 2005

**CONCLUSION THE FABRIC OF CRISIS: Approaching the Heart of Oral History** 262

*Stephen M. Sloan*

Selected Bibliography 275

Contributors 279

Index 283



# Acknowledgments

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This project began with a conversation I had with Don Ritchie on a riverboat cruise excursion at the 2008 Oral History Association meeting in Pittsburgh. We talked about the work that I was doing with the Historic New Orleans Collection to document the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He introduced me to fellow Oxford Oral History Series editor Rob Perks and to Oxford executive editor Nancy Toff. My initial intent was to focus the book entirely on the Hurricane Katrina project that I had been working on, devoting each chapter to a different lesson learned. Nancy and the series editors (who also included Todd Moye and Kathryn Nasstrom) wisely recommended a broader approach as it would give the reader insight into the varied nature of crises. Nancy and Todd put me in contact with Stephen Sloan, who at the time was the chairman of OHA's Emerging Crises Research Fund. I had known Stephen for a number of years and was thrilled with the opportunity to partner with him on this project. The experience of working with both Stephen and Nancy has been an enjoyable one from start to finish.

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—Mark Cave

My interest in this project was spurred by my research documenting the experience of Mississippians after Hurricane Katrina while I was co-director of the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi. Mark Cave has been the ideal collaborator on the work, and Nancy Toff's encouragement and direction on this volume have been invaluable. I'd like to thank Linda VanZandt, my tireless colleague at USM, and all the members of our stellar team here at Baylor University's Institute for Oral History—Lois Myers, Elinor Mazé, Becky Shulda, and Michelle Holland. Their passion and commitment to excellence in oral history are inspiring. Most importantly, I'd like to thank my always supportive and encouraging family, Melissa, Jacob, and Riley. Sharing life with you is bliss.

—Stephen M. Sloan



# INTRODUCTION: WHAT REMAINS

## Reflections on Crisis Oral History

Mark Cave

Crisis is a historical constant. In 2011 alone, we watched the television news in horror as the ocean swallowed coastal communities in Japan. We were touched by the sight of families digging through rubble after tornadoes in Missouri and Alabama and after earthquakes in Turkey and New Zealand. We were sickened by the senselessness of a school shooting in Brazil; angered by terrorist attacks in Russia and Norway; and inspired by revolution in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Our attention to these events is held, but not for long. Our thoughts are consumed by daily routine or captured by the next headline. What remains when the cameras turn away, and reporters go home, are individuals and communities in the process of redefinition, forever changed by the event. Exploring the process of this change in a single life or the life of a community can tell us a great deal about who we are and who we are likely to become. Oral history as a methodology, with its patient, open-ended approach and emphasis on empathy, is well suited as a tool for this exploration.

Recording the experience of crisis is central to what the oral historian does, but most commonly such recollections have been captured long after events. In recent years, there has been a trend to conduct interviews soon after, or even in the midst of, crisis. This work presents unique possibilities, but also some significant concerns. Perhaps in reaction to the recent popularity of interviewing in the aftermath of crisis, many oral historians have expressed concerns regarding the psychological impact of the interview process on interviewees. Clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst Ghislaine Boulanger has been an important figure in recent years in bridging the gap between the psychology and oral history communities. She has taught at the Columbia Center for Oral History (CCOH) Summer Institute and worked with CCOH's Rule of Law Oral History Project. Boulanger suggests that if an interviewee is willing to talk about his or her experience, then it is generally safe to proceed with an interview. In fact, the process can serve to validate the individual's traumatic experience and help the survivor

begin to make meaning of the event.<sup>1</sup> Oral historians are in a unique position to provide this validation since they are often seen by interviewees as agents of a community's collective memory.

Boulanger first became involved with the oral history community as a narrator, interviewed by oral historian Mary Marshall Clark concerning Boulanger's psychotherapy work following the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City.<sup>2</sup> She and Clark brought attention to the issue of vicarious traumatization among interviewers who opened themselves up to a flood of horrific stories in the aftermath of the World Trade Center's destruction. The indicators of vicarious traumatization are similar to those of direct traumatization and can include preoccupation with the stories told by survivors, difficulties concentrating, sleeplessness, feelings of alienation, or emotional volatility. Interviewers and administrators of oral history projects should educate themselves about the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and be mindful of the impact that listening is having on the mental health of interviewers, particularly for projects in which large numbers of witnesses of traumatic events are being interviewed. Interviewers who have been affected by traumatic experience in their own lives may have an increased vulnerability to vicarious traumatization and should be particularly cautious.<sup>3</sup>

Dutch oral historian Selma Leydesdorff conducted life story interviews with women who survived the Bosnian genocide, and she has written and lectured extensively on the issue of trauma. Much of her work relates to the impact of traumatic experiences on memory. She notes how a traumatic experience can distort the recall of events, causing a chronological incoherence within narratives. For some, the traumatic event dominates their life story and colors the memories of their life both before and after the event. This obviously presents challenges for the oral historian. Interviewers need to be patient and empathic listeners and embrace the process of helping the interviewee create order in a chaotic memory.<sup>4</sup> Making sense of, and finding meaning in, what had happened is a necessary first step in healing. French oral historian Jean Hatzfeld remarked on interviewing survivors of the Rwandan genocide: "Alone, faced with the reality of genocide, a survivor chooses to speak, or to be silent. A survivor who chooses to speak accepts the constant need to question and challenge the confusion of his memory."<sup>5</sup>

Trauma is a social issue as well. Communities that have known the impact of a traumatic event often feel alienated or set apart by their experience from society at large. Carolyn Mears was the mother of a student exposed to the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. She was prompted by her experience as part of this grieving community to develop a research methodology that not only documents the event and its aftermath but also promotes recovery. Her work offers a unique model for conducting research in the aftermath of traumatic events. In this method of inquiry, which she calls the *gateway approach*, oral history interviewing creates a gateway between a traumatized community

and the larger society, helping to mitigate the alienation felt by the impacted community. Content from Mears's Columbine study has been used to shape documentary responses to school shootings at Virginia Tech; Jokela, Finland; Chardon, Ohio; and Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut.<sup>6</sup>

Although oral historians can help interviewees with the process of creating meaning from moments of crisis, they should never consider themselves healers. The methodology used by a psychoanalyst may seem similar to an oral historian's approach, but the intention is much different. A psychoanalyst's primary concern is with what is taking place in the session itself, with the ongoing therapeutic relationship and with the gradual unfolding of the survivor's story, as the survivor/patient strives to come to terms with the traumatic experience. The purpose of conducting an oral history is to document the emotional perspective of a witness or participant to events. The process of creating this document can validate an individual's traumatic experience and give him or her a sense of empowerment and purpose, but its essential purpose is to create a historical narrative.

South African oral historian Sean Field has written extensively on trauma, particularly in connection with testimonies provided to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as well as interviews with Rwandan genocide survivors.<sup>7</sup> Field stresses the differences between the psychoanalyst and the oral historian, but he advocates for placing an emphasis on childhood and family experience in interviews with those who have suffered traumatic events. He notes how important it is to consider these individual experiential and cultural influences when interpreting an individual's memory, and not to assume that people will react similarly to trauma. Gaining insight into an individual's life prior to the traumatic event is necessary to understand how memories of a traumatic event are shaped. Field states that "we must privilege the interviewees' powers of imagination and creativity in conveying their 'verbal pictures.' By providing opportunities for people to remember and narrate their disruptive pasts we provide space for the affective force of their memories to be articulated and imaginatively contained."<sup>8</sup>

Field explored how an interviewee's imagination frames what he or she remembers about personal thoughts or feelings in the past. He argues that meaningful and imaginative remembering is necessary for a survivor to move beyond a crisis.<sup>9</sup> This process of meaningful remembrance is a social process. Field notes that "it requires social ties to others who share these memories within spaces such as family homes, museums, schools, burial societies and other civic gatherings, where stories are told and re-told."<sup>10</sup>

A community's imagined memory, however, is shaped by the immediate needs of recovery and often has little to do with the truth. Any imaginative process of remembering requires an *explanation* for why the crisis occurred.<sup>11</sup> In humanity's distant past mythologies provided these explanations: an upset Poseidon pounding his trident on the seafloor caused the earthquake; the Judgment of



Paris led to the fall of Troy. In most modern societies, the media is the major force in contextualizing events. Journalists tell us why things happened. When the media cannot provide the answers, communities find it difficult to move beyond crisis.

Journalists and oral historians share a responsibility to help communities make sense of crisis. Communications scholar John Tisdale, in his study of the journalistic coverage of Hurricane Audrey, which struck Louisiana in 1957, notes that the observational style of reporting journalists often use while covering a crisis is very similar to oral history. In this style of reporting, the journalist becomes the narrator telling his or her story to a reader or viewer, who acts as the interviewer. Of course, in most instances, the reader or viewer cannot ask questions as an interviewer can, but he or she can choose to change the channel or read the sports page instead.<sup>12</sup> In Tisdale's words, "a dialogue of expectation exists between the writings of journalists and the expectations of the reader. If journalists do not retrieve and present certain information in a news story, the reader (interviewer) is likely to find another source of information (the competition)."<sup>13</sup> The need to respond to the demands of their readers or viewers limits the capability of journalists to document an event. To some extent, these demands are in response to what the public wants in order to contextualize the event. But what people *want* may not always be the truth, and thus the oral historian must be on the lookout for how the collective understanding of a crisis differs from the truth. Oral historians should target their work in a way that will provide future generations a clearer understanding.

An essential part of the explanation process is finding someone to blame. For a community to heal, it needs to transfer responsibility of an event, usually to a higher authority.<sup>14</sup> For most of our history, "the will of God" was used to free us from responsibility for events. Even in 2005, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, some saw the destruction of New Orleans as God's wrath on a sinful city. A more effective coping mechanism for most people in modern society is to blame the government or community leaders. Bureaucrats normally serve as good targets, and a few firings or the restructuring of governmental agencies generally enables the community to move on. In contextualizing crisis, one of the key roles of the media is to help the community find who is to blame. This role, however, often puts journalists at odds with important groups of witnesses. The oral historian, who in general is not seen as judgmental or opportunistic, may often gain access to people who will not talk to the "media." Offering oral history as a means for these individuals to contextualize their experience can lead to a more nuanced understanding of events. That said, the oral historian should be attentive to how interviewees may try to use the interview process for their own ends. Interviewers may also want to reevaluate current notions of shared authority.<sup>15</sup>

Oral history and journalism really are what Mark Feldstein called "kissing cousins."<sup>16</sup> They both play an important role in helping communities process

events. Journalists are the primary creators of the explanations needed to move beyond crisis, but they are inhibited in what they can do by their need to be responsive to the consumers of their product. They are also limited when they cannot get access or cooperation from witnesses. In the aftermath of crisis, the oral historian can do much to help prevent gaps in the journalistic coverage of an event from being reflected in the historical record by attending to how the event is being covered in the media and purposefully seeking out interviewees who can offer alternative perspectives. This work will undoubtedly create a more nuanced record of events. It can also provide a useful blueprint for further historical inquiry as well as a baseline of emotional perspective.

Emotion is a big part of truth, particularly in times of crisis. It dictates how we interpret what is going on around us and often determines what choices we make. To know what someone did is to know only half the story. No other archival methodology can record emotion as well as oral history. But passions fade, so the oral historian needs to act quickly to document experience. Not only is emotion the key to understanding the actions and attitudes of interviewees, it is often the glue that holds the memory of events together. As the powerful feelings associated with an event begin to fade, the memory of the details of the experience begin to degrade. Our weakened memories then become vulnerable to change, often influenced by changes in our own values and attitudes, as well as by collective interpretations of events.<sup>17</sup>

A possible exception to this pliability of long-term memory is what Alice and Howard Hoffman have called "archival memory." These are normally memories of important events that a witness/participant is frequently called on to remember. A story is told again and again, and every time it is polished more finely. Certain details deemed unnecessary for the narrative are omitted and, over time, forgotten. What is left is permanently etched in memory, and virtually nothing can alter it. To demonstrate their ideas on archival memory, the Hoffmans executed a long-term study on Howard's memory of his military service during World War II. Alice conducted interviews with Howard about his military service in 1978, 1982, and 1986. For the 1978 interview, Alice did not do research; she simply prompted him to tell his story. For the 1982 interview, she researched his service in the war and asked probing questions about his experiences. The 1986 interview was set in the backdrop of a reunion of men with whom Howard had served during the war. There was virtually no significant difference in Howard's responses. The questions that Alice had asked in the 1982 interview, posed again to Howard in 1986, did not trigger any new memories; nor did his interaction with the soldiers with whom he had served. The memory of Howard's war experience appeared unchangeable, but what was alarming was that Alice found evidence of episodes in Howard's war experience that he simply could not remember. These events were confirmed by other soldiers and by photographs, but nothing could trigger his memory. It was not a traumatic event that had been repressed, but simply an event that did not fit easily into

the story arc that Howard had created and “rehearsed” again and again through his adult life.<sup>18</sup>

By conducting oral history in the midst of a crisis or soon afterward, we can capture the emotions of those involved, providing future generations with greater insight into participants’ motivations. By capturing accounts while the feelings associated with events have not faded, we are able to record memories before they are influenced by changing circumstances or shifting collective interpretations. We can also salvage memories that may otherwise be lost in the process of creating “archival memory.” There is still much we do not know about how memory works, and the oral historian is in a position to add greatly to our understanding. By conducting interviews in crisis environments soon after events, and then interviewing again years later, we may be able to shed more light on the process of memory.

We have only just begun to explore the value of doing oral history in crisis environments. Although it may be presumptuous to think that what the oral historian does is “healing” for those who have experienced traumatic events, offering an attentive ear to people who want to talk about the experience does help them process and perhaps move forward. Although the media are the major force in contextualizing events, they are limited in what they can do by the demands of their consumers and by their ability to have access to witnesses. Oral historians, whose work is generally not as market driven as that of journalists, can often target their work in ways that add texture and nuance to our understanding of events. And since their work is generally not seen as judgmental or opportunistic, they can often get access to witnesses when journalists are unable to do so. Perhaps most importantly, the oral historian can record the perspective of an individual, capturing for posterity the emotional resonance of events and ultimately adding depth and feeling to our understanding of our past.

Although the practice is growing in popularity, recording narratives in the aftermath of crisis is not new. During World War II, in an attempt to give wounded soldiers the opportunity to understand the situations in which they were wounded, the U.S. military hired and trained combat historians. Academic historians or journalists by trade, these combat historians followed soldiers into battle, interviewing participants of conflicts sometimes mere hours after the activity had taken place.

In his memoir, the combat historian and eventual chief of the army’s historical branch, Samuel L. A. Marshall, wrote: “In the Pacific I had learned by trying it three times that a combat historian can get nothing effective done in the hour of landing amid the chaos of a littered beachhead. He but risks his life to no avail. His rule of action must ever be to push for the opportunity to deal with troops at the earliest moment when they will respond. That excludes the clinching hour when they are under flat trajectory fire, scattered and scared to death.”<sup>19</sup> Combat historian Forrest Pogue followed the troops who landed on Omaha Beach during the invasion of Normandy. He conducted his first interviews the

day after the initial assault, while stationed on a hospital ship. One of his first interviews was with a soldier “who was shot through both hands,” according to Pogue; the soldier “greeted me eagerly and expressed his willingness to talk if I would hold a milk bottle while he relieved himself. Someone had handed him the receptacle, forgetting that he was too completely swathed in bandages to make use of it. Thus, feeling not at all like Florence Nightingale, I started my interview.”<sup>20</sup>

Combat historians such as Pogue and Marshall were learning on the job, and as the war progressed they developed a system. They interviewed unit commanders first to acquire an overview of each unit’s activity. The historians asked about the exact location of an engagement, the nature of the terrain, weather conditions, the effectiveness of the weapons used, and the nature of support received by other units. The interviewers also inquired about problems encountered during a particular engagement and recorded the names of soldiers who distinguished themselves in the conflict. While the combat historian conducted the interview, the unit commander called in soldiers to help verify his memory, so that the interview evolved into a group discussion about the engagement. Often these forums became quite large, involving, as Pogue notes, as many as twenty soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Combat historians used this method for the remainder of World War II and employed the approach again during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.<sup>22</sup>

On the evening of October 2, 1968, hundreds of student protesters were killed or wounded by the Mexican army and special police in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City. The event, which occurred as the city was preparing for the opening of the Olympic Games, is known in Mexican history as the Night of Tlatelolco. The morning following the massacre, a shocked journalist and young mother, Elena Poniatowska, wandered around the blood-stained plaza with a tape recorder, interviewing eyewitnesses to the horrific event.<sup>23</sup> She continued her work for months, interviewing surviving protesters in prison, grieving parents of slain students, as well as poets and intellectuals who had inspired the student movement. She initially took her interviews to the local media, but they refused to print them in fear of retribution by the Mexican government. Ultimately she published selected excerpts of these interviews in a book called *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral*. The book was a montage not only of oral history excerpts but also of printed documents related to the event, such as posters and poetry. Poniatowska herself called the book a “collage.”<sup>24</sup> In many ways, it precipitated the nature of online memory websites that were so common after September 11 and Hurricane Katrina.<sup>25</sup>

When a major earthquake struck Mexico City on September 19, 1985, Poniatowska reacted once again.<sup>26</sup> She initially responded as a disaster relief volunteer, but she was convinced by her friends and colleagues to devote her time to oral history. She led a team of interviewers who were for all practical purposes embedded in the response effort. They visited shelters and hospitals and searched for missing persons. Following this experience, Poniatowska made

a poetic and passionate argument for the use of oral history in the immediate aftermath of events—particularly in documenting the experience of victims. She compares oral history to the faint sounds of survivors buried deep in the rubble: “I imagine that oral history is like those signals that the sensors detected under the layers of concrete and the beams that covered the survivors. Those voices are intertwined to make up the unique and plural voice of the anonymous suffering mass, the voice of those who have no voice, the voice of oral history.”<sup>27</sup> Poniatowska’s work in Mexico City was a turning point in crisis oral history. Her poetic arguments for conducting interviews in postdisaster environments inspired many others.

Peter Parkhill and Richard Raxworthy interviewed emergency personnel who responded to an earthquake that struck Newcastle, Australia, on December 29, 1989. The project was conducted with the cooperation of the National Library of Australia and the Newcastle Region Public Library. In the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake in northern California, Reserve Army officer Eve Iversen began an oral history project documenting the response of U.S. Army officers stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco. The quake occurred on October 17, 1989, just as a national TV audience was tuning in to see the third game of the World Series between the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants. It was the first time a nationwide American television audience viewed such an event live. The perspective this event provided was a precursor to the closeness to crisis that developed worldwide as twenty-four-hour news networks expanded in the 1990s. This “closeness” to moments of crisis undoubtedly nurtured further the interest in crisis oral history.<sup>28</sup>

The sudden and dramatic collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe beginning in March 1989 inspired important oral history fieldwork. The transformation in these societies is in many ways still a work in progress. Perspectives are in flux as individuals adapt to new economic and political systems. In connection to his work in the early nineties documenting the Velvet Revolution in Prague, journalist and oral historian David Leviatin remarked: “Oral history, by combining aspects of journalism and history, is ideally suited to capturing the *process of change* taking place between the headline and the monograph.”<sup>29</sup>

Although the international community sat on its hands during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the event provoked significant oral history work. Jean Hatzfeld, a correspondent for the French daily newspaper *Libération*, reported on this horrific event. On his decision to return to Rwanda, Hatzfeld wrote: “Today, some Tutsis explain that ‘life has broken down,’ whereas for others, it has ‘stopped,’ and still others say that it ‘absolutely must go on.’ They all admit, however, that among themselves they talk of nothing but the genocide. That was what convinced me to return to Rwanda and speak with them, to drink Primus beer in Marie-Louise’s shop or banana beer at the bar in Kibunga, to keep visiting the adobe houses and cabaret terraces, to chat in the shade of the acacias, hesitantly

at first, then with increasing confidence and familiarity.” He notes the isolation that many Tutsi felt, the distrust that inhibited them, and the guilt that many felt for being alive when so many of their own were dead.<sup>30</sup>

Hatzfeld went on to interview Hutu men imprisoned for the murders they committed during the genocide. When he first set out to interview these men, he admits, he felt nothing but hatred for them. But as their relationship developed, his curiosity over what motivated them overcame his aversion. To get these killers to open up to him, he used a tactic similar to that used by combat historians: that is, getting them together in a group. Hatzfeld notes: “Their friendly solidarity, their disconnection from the world they soaked in blood, their incomprehension of their new existence, their inability to notice how we see them—all this makes them more accessible. Their patience and serenity, and sometimes their naïveté, finally rub off on our relationship and touch particularly on their mysterious willingness to talk.”<sup>31</sup> In crisis oral history fieldwork, oral historians may find themselves interviewing individuals they don’t necessarily like or identify with. Hatzfeld’s work is a good case study in how this type of work can be done effectively.

Mary Marshall Clark, the director of the Columbia Center for Oral History in New York, initiated the September 11 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. According to Clark, the most difficult part of getting such a large-scale project off the ground was creating the “sociological framework” for the study. That is, how to select a diverse and representative pool of potential interviewees that would provide a snapshot of New York in 2001 for future generations? For help she turned to Columbia sociologist Peter Bearman, then head of the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy. Together they trained interviewers and selected a wide range of interviewees, from first responders and public health workers to taxi drivers and Muslim Americans. Sampling techniques used by sociologists can help oral historians achieve strategic goals for the selection of interviewees, and when this expertise is available, and if the nature of the project calls for it, as it did in Columbia’s September 11 project, these methods should be embraced.

The terrorist attacks triggered protracted and controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and significant suspicion and mistreatment of the Muslim American population in the United States. Shifts in perspective were inevitable, so from the outset Clark and Bearman planned multiple rounds of interviews with the same interviewees in order to capture changes in perspective over the course of the decade that followed September 11. Such longitudinal studies are challenging to execute and require institutional stability and the maintenance of relationships with the interviewees over a long period of time, but the outcomes can tell us a great deal about how the memory of events is shaped. The ongoing nature of the crisis triggered by the September 11 attacks and the shifting perspectives that followed also led Clark and the Columbia Center for Oral History to establish the Rule of Law Oral History Project in 2008. This project explores the state of

human and civil rights in the post–September 11 world and has recently focused on the use of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility.<sup>32</sup>

Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005, was the topic for a flood of oral history work. In the aftermath of the storm, the population of the city of New Orleans was evacuated after the levees that protected the city failed and it spiraled into chaos. Citizens ended up in evacuee shelters set up throughout the southeastern United States. For many of the city's poor African American population, returning home was difficult if not impossible. Obstacles were being placed on their ability to return home, and many felt they were not entirely welcomed in the communities to which they were evacuated. American historian D'Ann Penner directed the Saddest Days Oral History Project, which conducted interviews with New Orleanians who had been evacuated to seven southern states. The work not only provides a rich document of the events in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, but also reveals the difficulties that exiled individuals had in creating what Field referred to as "meaningful remembrance," because they did not have the community support necessary for constructing agency in the aftermath of traumatic events.<sup>33</sup>

The Historic New Orleans Collection, a museum and research center devoted to the history and culture of New Orleans, created a project focused on the experiences of local, state, and federal first responders. In the aftermath of the disaster, response groups were blamed for the slow response to the crisis; in many cases, responders such as policemen and firemen were reluctant or forbidden by their agencies from talking to the media for fear of being misrepresented. The agencies were more open to participating in oral history work. The Historic New Orleans Collection created formal partnerships with some of these agencies, and in some instances the agencies tied the oral history work into their own after-action studies of their response to Katrina. The project provides an interesting counterperspective to the work done by D'Ann Penner, and it has proved to be an important blueprint for further inquiry into the crisis.<sup>34</sup>

In 2005 author Dave Eggers and human rights activist Lola Vollen founded a nonprofit book series called *Voice of Witness*, devoted to using oral history to document human rights crises throughout the world. The series began with a project centered on post-Katrina New Orleans, but contributors have since worked in a wide range of crisis environments, interviewing survivors of Burma's military regime, abducted and displaced people from the Sudan, and undocumented workers and refugees living in the United States. The intention of their work has been not only to give a voice and thus empowerment to victims of human rights abuses, but also to use the humanizing function of oral history to nurture empathy in readers and hopefully inspire action on the part of the international community to the crisis to which they are bringing attention. Educational outreach has become a core function of their mission, and teaching

guides based on their oral history projects have been developed with the intention of bringing students closer to crisis.<sup>35</sup>

The growing awareness of crisis nurtured by the growth of television and the Internet has resulted in an increase in oral history responses to crisis. This trend was acknowledged in 2006 when the Oral History Association established the Emerging Crisis Oral History Research Fund. This fund sponsors oral historians working in crisis environments and by doing so encourages this work to take place. The fund has financed such work as filmmaker Karin Mak's interviews with women workers in China who had been poisoned by cadmium while employed by a multinational battery manufacturer. Her work was done in the midst of China's preparations for the Beijing Olympics, a time when the government was particularly sensitive to bad public relations and freedom of expression was even more limited. Another recipient was Eric Meringer's *Ciudad Juárez: Lives Interrupted* project. Meringer explored the impact of drug war violence on residents in the Mexican city of Juárez, and he revealed significant differences between how the international media reported the violence and how local residents perceived the violence.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that conducting interviews in crisis environments is no longer a tangential issue. Such work has become a fundamental part of what oral historians do. Today, interviews are being conducted in crisis environments in almost every area of the globe. Every interview is unique. Each one can offer lessons, not only in oral history methodology, but also in the complexities of the human heart and mind at the moments when the limits of individual fortitude and community cohesion face their greatest challenges.

Compassion and chance pull oral historians into crisis settings more often than academic agendas. Only seldom does circumstance involve the attention of established scholars in the field. As a result, literature on the best practices of oral history fieldwork in the aftermath of crisis is limited, particularly in relation to the volume of work being done. It is important that as a profession we acknowledge the unique problems that this work presents and make a concerted effort to better equip oral historians to meet these challenges. Crisis happens. A natural disaster or a mass shooting can destroy in an instant any community's sense of well-being. Individuals will be left traumatized and in search of meaning. Oral historians have an important role to play in helping them make sense in what remains.

## Notes

1. Interview with Ghislaine Boulanger by author, January 23, 2013; see also Ghislaine Boulanger, *Wounded by Reality: Understanding and Treating Adult Onset Trauma* (Mahwah, NJ: Analytic Press, 2007).
2. See Mary Marshall Clark's interview with psychologist Ghislaine Boulanger in *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001 and the Years That Followed* (New York: New Press, 2011).



3. The issue of vicarious traumatization has been a concern of those working in the mental health field. Boulanger conducted numerous interviews with mental health professionals in New Orleans about the impact of listening to the stories of survivors of Hurricane Katrina. The results of her work are outlined in "Fearful Symmetry: Shared Trauma in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 23 (2013): 31–44. Vicarious traumatization has been a concern for journalists as well. In her article "Aftershock: Journalists and Trauma," *Quill* 87, no. 9 (1999): 14, Michelle Johnson writes, "Many journalists believe they are not supposed to be among the traumatized and despite growing evidence and acceptance in the industry that traumatic stress is affecting journalists, the industry clings to images of valiant reporters unscathed by endless horrors and catastrophe." In her book *Beyond the Trauma Vortex: The Media's Role in Healing Fear, Terror, and Violence* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2003), Gina Ross devotes a chapter to the issue of vicarious traumatization. She uses the example of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, who committed suicide not long after winning the Pulitzer Prize for an image that he captured in Sudan of a vulture landing near a starving child. In his suicide note he mentions that he was being haunted by the horrific images seen on the job, and he stated that "the pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist." Ross recommends that journalists talk about disturbing experiences to those close to them and not isolate themselves.
4. Interview with Selma Leydesdorff by author, January 24, 2013; see also Kim Lacy Rogers and Selma Leydesdorff, *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Selma Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
5. Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage, Jean Hatzfeld nomination, 2004, <http://www.lettre-ulysses-award.org/authors04/hatzfeld.html>.
6. Interview with Carolyn Mears by author, January 31, 2013; see also Carolyn Mears, "A Columbine Study: Giving Voice, Hearing Meaning," *Oral History Review* 35, no. 2 (2008): 159–75; and Carolyn Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
7. The TRC took the oral testimony of twenty-two hundred people between 1995 and 1998. Victims of gross human rights violations during apartheid were invited to give testimony at public hearings, which were televised throughout South Africa. President Nelson Mandela said of the efforts of the TRC: "Only by knowing the truth can we hope to heal the terrible wounds of the past that are the legacy of apartheid. Only the truth can put the past to rest."
8. Interview with Sean Field by author, February 11, 2013.
9. Sean Field, "Beyond 'Healing' Trauma Oral History and Regeneration," *Oral History* 34, no. 1 (2006): 31–42; and "Disappointed Remains: Trauma, Testimony and Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142–58. See also Sean Field, *Oral History, Community and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
10. Field interview, February 11, 2013.
11. Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman writes, "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims." See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 1.
12. John R. Tisdale, "Observational Reporting as Oral History: How Journalists Interpreted the Death and Destruction of Hurricane Audrey," *Oral History Review* 27, no. 2 (2000): 41–65.
13. *Ibid.*, 43.
14. Katherine V. Cashman and Shane J. Cronin, "Welcoming a Monster to the World: Myths, Oral Tradition, and Modern Societal Response to Volcanic Disasters," *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 176, no. 3 (2008): 407–18.
15. Erin Jessee, "The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings," *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 289–307.
16. Mark Feldstein, "Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History," *Oral History Review* 31, no. 1 (2004): 1–22.

17. For more information on the relationship of emotion to memory, see David C. Rubin, *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Daniel Reisberg and Paula Hertel, *Memory and Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
18. Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History: The Case for Memory," in *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, ed. Jaelyn Jeffrey and Glenace Edwall (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 107–36.
19. S. L. A. Marshall, *Bringing Up the Rear: A Memoir* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1979), 90.
20. Forrest C. Pogue, *Pogue's War: Diaries of a WWII Combat Historian* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 58.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Professional literature in the field of oral history is sparse prior to the 1970s, so finding out what civilian oral historians were working on before that time is difficult. In the United States in the late 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project life history work undoubtedly sparked in many an interest in oral history. During the 1940s and 1950s jazz historians such as Alan Lomax, Frederic Ramsey Jr., William Russell, and Charles Smith collected life stories of American jazz musicians. With this much interest in oral history, it is likely that projects were carried out in crisis environments, and products of this work have found their way into an archive. For instance, the Historic New Orleans Collection contains the papers of Frederic Ramsey Jr. He is noted for his documentation of American musicians, but included in his papers are transcripts of interviews he conducted with a diverse sampling of citizens in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1964. The interviews focused on reactions to the civil rights movement in a small southern town that became a focal point in voter registration protests. The interviews are not extensive and the project is small in scope, but it is an example of documentation that may not be noted in archival cataloging records because the subject matter is not a primary focus of a particular historian's work.
23. Earlier that year the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University recorded the stories of participants and observers of the school's student protests of April and May 1968. The interviews, conducted that May, captured the emotions of this important turning point in the history of the university and are fairly significant in scope, producing 2,426 pages of transcript. Interviewers asked student activists, faculty members, administrators, and parents of students to comment on the student occupation of campus buildings, police intervention, the campus strike, and university reorganization.
24. Michael K. Schuessler, *Elena Poniatowska: An Intimate Biography* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007). See also Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2012).
25. The aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks also saw the proliferation of web-based documentation tools as means of gathering firsthand accounts. The September 11 Digital Archive, hosted by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, is the most comprehensive and boasts a collection of more than forty thousand firsthand accounts. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Center for History and New Media created the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, a site similar to its September 11 Digital Archive. In addition, a wide range of web-based testimony project sites appeared in the aftermath of the storm, including the I-10 Witness Project and the Alive in Truth: The New Orleans Disaster and Memory Project. These sites developed quickly and blurred distinctions between oral historian and journalist in the immediate aftermath of the storm.
26. See Elena Poniatowska, *Nada, nadi: Las voces del tembloer* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988).
27. Elena Poniatowska, "The Earthquake: To Carlos Monsiváis," *Oral History Review* 16, no. 1 (1988): 15.
28. For another example of an oral history project inspired by a natural disaster, see Joy Preston, "Collecting Personal Accounts of the Lewes Floods of October 2000," *Oral History* 30, no. 2 (2002): 79–84. In October 2000, torrential rain in England caused the River Ouse to overflow its banks and inundate the small town of Lewes in East Sussex. A group of amateur oral historians responded. The Lewes U3A (University of the Third Age) Oral History

Group, as they dubbed themselves, interviewed Lewesians who had lost their homes or businesses in the flooding, as well as first responders and politicians. Group member Joy Preston commented on the value of conducting the project over the course of the recovery, noting shifting perspectives as the community moved beyond crisis. Her article also examined the importance of capturing the emotional resonance of the event as a means to assess the human impact of the disaster.

29. David Leviatin, "Listening to the New World: Voices from the Velvet Revolution," *Oral History Review* 20, no. 1 (1993): 9–10.
30. Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Other Press, 2006), 4–5.
31. Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 242–243.
32. Interview with Mary Marshall Clark by author, February 19, 2013.
33. D'Ann Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also D'Ann Penner, "Assault Rifles, Separated Families, and Murder in Their Eyes: Unasked Questions after Hurricane Katrina," *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 3 (2010): 573–99.
34. Mark Cave, "Through Hell and High Water: New Orleans, August 29–September 15, 2005," *Oral History Review* 35, no. 1 (2008): 1–10.
35. See Chris Ying and Lola Vollen, *Voices from the Storm: The People of New Orleans on Hurricane Katrina* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2006); Peter Orner, *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2008); Craig Walzer and Dave Eggers, *Out of Exile: The Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2008); Peter Orner and Annie Holmes, *Hope Deferred: Narratives of Zimbabwean Lives* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2011); Maggie Lemere and Zoë West, *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma's Military Regime* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2011); *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2011).
36. The annual meetings of the Oral History Association in 2010 and 2011 had general themes related to oral history and crisis. The programs featured plenary sessions devoted to the work that had been done in the five years since Hurricane Katrina and the ten years since September 11, 2001. Other highlights included a presentation on work conducted on human rights crises by the editors of the Voice of Witness book series, numerous panels on the issue of trauma, and talks about projects related to the Haitian earthquake and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. It is clear that conducting interviews in crisis environments is no longer a tangential issue. Such work has become a fundamental part of what oral historians do.

PART I

CLAMOR



# 1

## WHEN ALL IS LOST

### Metanarrative in the Oral History of Hanifa, Survivor of Srebrenica

Selma Leydesdorff

**Oral history by Selma Leydesdorff with “Hanifa,” refugee camp,  
northeastern Bosnia, April 2004**

*In 1995, Serbian forces murdered more than eight thousand Bosniaks (mostly men) in Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. The massacre was the largest mass murder in Europe since the Second World War. Between 2002 and 2008, I interviewed female survivors of Srebrenica in villages and refugee camps throughout Bosnia. They shared with me their memories not only of the traumatic experience but also of their lives before the war, as well as how they have tried to cope with their fate in the war's aftermath. These interviews go beyond the rape, murder, and harsh atrocities of a dark time to show the agency of these women, despite their circumstances.*

HANIFA: My father died. In fact, I did not know him; I was two. Our mother took care of us, she worked in the fields. She was not educated. Tilled the land and fed the two of us. Two years later, she got sick. I never asked about her illness. I didn't even ask my uncles. She forced them to take her to the hospital. They carried her on their back—there were no cars, so they carried her. . . . My mother died four years after my father. My grandfather brought us up. . . . Our uncles and aunts loved us like their own children, but our aunts also sometimes shouted at us, hit us. . . . well, a lot happened. . . . You see, I would have been happy if I had had my parents, even without enough to eat. I went through a lot. When they hugged their children, it made me so sad; I would have given all my dinners for that. They used to tell their children, “Come here, Daddy loves you, Mommy loves you. . . .” I don't remember that I've ever used the word Mother or Father. Now it's different. My child has no father, but neither has this one or that one. But at the time, it wasn't common to have people dying so young. But our parents, they both died. I was young, healthy, I was happy with a piece of bread, but whenever somebody called out “mother, father. . . .”



Hanifa with her grandchildren and youngest daughter at a temporary settlement in northeast Bosnia where she has lived since 1996. The settlement is far from the world, and buses go by sporadically. Most people are unemployed. *Photograph by Selma Leydesdorff.*

*Hanifa got married at a young age to the boy she loved. When the war reached their village, she and her husband decided to go to Srebrenica, an area declared safe by the United Nations in 1993.*

HANIFA: So we left, I was barefoot, I only took some food, it was Ramadan. I just took some bread. Coffee was ready and stayed on the stove, everything was prepared for dinner. It was dark. We were given orders to go. We heard shooting; we walked along the river Jadar, below our houses. We did not dare to go along the asphalt road. Those who took the asphalt road didn't go anywhere. We left for Srebrenica in 1993....

We came to a village; we could not go directly to Srebrenica because of the shelling. We arrived in Srebrenica, I don't know when exactly, around April 2nd or 3rd. In 1993, relief started to be brought in. We were in the village called Milačevići. We were looking for accommodation, but no one let us into their house. They told us to go to the school, where there were people already. We went to the school, but they didn't let us in, the rooms were full. Snow, frost, snow, it was March 10th. No one let us go inside the school. My daughter, her child and I were sitting in the snow, and I was pregnant. I got pregnant in 1992. So we were sitting in the snow, me and my two girls. An old woman came and told us that we could get in, but only to sit there, because there was no room to sleep. So she let us stay over for the night in the school. We were

sitting in that room, a small one; it was a teacher's room. The old woman was there with her two grandchildren, her daughter, and two old persons. We sat on the clothes we had taken with us, we didn't have dinner.

I took my cow and milked her. Yes, I had a cow with me, because I had a small child. We drank that milk. My husband came in later; he was asking people for accommodation, begging for shelter. One man said, "Give me 50 kilos of wheat and you can stay for a month here." How can I get wheat in Srebrenica? But my sister-in-law managed to take out a cubic meter of wheat. She had a horse and she did it. We gave 50 kilos of wheat and we were in a house for three days, I think. But the man got angry and he threw us out. We cried and cried, where could we go? We found accommodation with another man and so I was there with my children and my husband. We were in a village; we didn't make it to Srebrenica itself, we were in the boroughs, in the villages which hadn't fallen yet, the villages which were still holding on.

SELMA: Was your husband with you all the time?

HANIFA: Yes, he was until the fall of Srebrenica in 1995. My younger son, who is now in America, was also with us. He was wounded on a playground and was transferred on a plane. Planes transported the wounded, including my son. The older one was with me till the fall of Srebrenica. The little one was in seventh grade. He went to a playground near the school to play soccer. The shooting started and he was wounded in the head. A piece of shrapnel was taken out; another was left in his head because they didn't have good instruments, so they transferred him to Tuzla. I had a baby and stayed there; trucks stopped getting people out. They brought us food, but they didn't send the people away any longer. So I stayed in Srebrenica from 1993 to 1995.

*Here, Hanifa speaks of Srebrenica in 1993.*

HANIFA: On the fourth day after my arrival in Srebrenica, I felt that I would deliver my baby. I was in pain all day. Then at about the same time, the shelling started on the playground while my child was there playing soccer. When firing started everybody went to the basement, which has a hard roof. People were afraid so they went there. I didn't want to go, I lay on the bed. My daughters were crying; they were in fourth and fifth grade in elementary school. Now they are married and have their own children. Around four or five in the afternoon, the shelling stopped. Then people started carrying their dead from down there, everybody was carrying their own family members. My sister-in-law's mother went to the balcony and told me that a young man was standing with a friend down there (it was my husband), his head in bandages. I told her that my family was probably in the village of Milačevići. She saw that it was my son but didn't want to tell me anything.

I lay on the bed a bit, then got up and walked, feeling pain, but I didn't say anything to anybody. My husband came in carrying my son's jacket, which was smeared with blood. I realized what had happened and I cried. He told



me to keep quiet, that it was nothing serious. I asked him where our older son was; he told me that he was in hospital with the younger one. I didn't believe him; I thought my son had been killed. I cried but he told me not to because he hadn't been killed. The pain increased so I told him to take me to the hospital. We got there but there was no midwife, there were only dead people, in the corridor, on stretchers, they had been brought to the hospital but had died there. The nurses had even taken them to the maternity ward because the hospital was full. One of the nurses told me to follow her. The room was full of people with bandaged heads, covered with sheets. She asked them who had put them there; they answered but I didn't hear what they said. She told me that there was more room on the other side, but I couldn't see anything in the dark. There were blankets piled up to the ceiling and a big table but I couldn't get onto it. "People are visiting their wounded, so the corridor is full. If you can't walk in the corridor, stay here. If you're ashamed, come here." But it was dark in there, so I was afraid to stay. I walked for a while in the corridor but the pain got worse so I couldn't walk any more.

The nurse told my husband that the midwife had gone home but she explained to him that she was living near a white mosque and that he could go and fetch her if he didn't mind. He didn't mind so he left. He went to fetch the midwife, but I gave birth to my baby even before he reached her. I delivered the baby by myself. I saw the nurses running from the first floor to the basement and they heard the baby crying. One of them came to me and said, "Oh, you delivered the baby, why didn't you call?" "Who could I call?" I wondered. She told me that she didn't dare to cut the umbilical cord. She went in the corridor and called another nurse: "Merka, Merka, come here and cut the umbilical cord, I haven't the courage to do it. This woman just delivered the baby." So the nurse came, brought a roll of paper and a jerry can with 5 liters of cold water. She poured the water over my baby, wrapped it into the paper towel and put it on the table. "If you don't live too far, you can go now," she said. "If you live far, lie down here on the table next to your baby until dawn." It was raining and I was cold, shivering. My husband went out and did not come back for about twenty minutes. When he returned, he brought me a cup of hot water. The water was sweet. "Drink it," he said. I drank it and it warmed me up. I asked him how he had got the water. He told me he had asked the receptionist, telling him that I had just had a baby. "He even added some sugar, although I didn't ask for it," he told me. As dawn was breaking, I went home, to the house where we lived. Later on there was no food, I didn't have anything to give to the baby. Some food was distributed; we got 2 or 3 kilograms of flour. I had all my children and I'd rather give food to my children than to myself, but then the baby cried. My husband went to a community representative to ask for more flour. "But I gave you flour," he said. My husband answered: "My children were so hungry, they ate everything."

*In this excerpt, Hanifa reflects on events in July 1995.*

HANIFA: Well, how can I tell you, they attacked us, I don't know if anybody was defending us. They attacked us, shells were falling all over, and we were in a house. The house was covered with corrugated sheets, metal sheets, and God knows what else. We hid in the bathroom because it was covered with a concrete roof; the rest of the house was covered with wood paneling. There were many of us in there, including people who simply passed by, because there was a road nearby. I wanted to go to the toilet which was a bit further from the house, but I didn't dare because of the shelling. A young man was passing by and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was living there. He asked who was living with me. My family, my brother-in-law, my sister-in-law, and more people who were running away from their homes and came to this part, not knowing where to go. "Run away, they've come to about a hundred meters from here, they've come to the water," he said. Serbs? "Yes, they're here." I don't know who that young man was. "Why don't you get out a bit and see how many people are leaving for Potočari. Run away, they've made it to the department store," he said. I told this to my family and the people in the house. Our men went out to have a look and said, "We cannot stay here; everyone is going to Potočari." The UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] people also told us to go to Potočari. But we couldn't believe we should go, we would never leave to go to Tuzla for example, we simply didn't think we should go. My little girl was two then. She was playing unaware of anything. "Let's go Mina, Mummy gives you a kiss"; "Where are we going?" "Come, let's go, dear." She took my hand and we left, taking some clothes with us.

We walked a bit, got back on the road and joined other people headed to Potočari. We arrived on the factory grounds, where our people used to work, not only our people but everybody else worked there. . . . We just sat on the ground behind a building. It was dark, so it was quiet, they didn't shoot or anything. We slept a bit sitting up, and the children lay on the grass. In the morning, it was hot, it was July, the sun was blazing, we were sweating.

The next day, trucks and buses came to take people away, whatever you managed to get on. I went with my husband. They set up a rope or something like that—I couldn't see out of fear. So they set up a rope and told us how many people could pass. For example if there were three trucks or ten, they knew how many people they could take on, so they told us and lifted the rope accordingly. So when our turn came, they said to my husband: "You old chap, you can't go with the women. Women and children on one side, men on the other. The trucks and buses will go together, but men and women with children go separately." I thought. . . .

SELMA: How old was your husband then?

HANIFA: Well, I don't know, was he born in 1946? In 1946, now let me think. . . . My child was crying: "Daddy, where are you going? Come here Daddy." "Whose child is it?" The policeman or soldier asked me. He was suspicious because we were elderly people with a child. "Is it your son's child?" "No, it's mine." He then said: "Your daddy will return, don't cry child, he'll come after you." "Is it a boy?" "No," I said. "Go down to the third bus," he said and showed us down to the third bus. We got on the bus, there was still room. I looked at the back, but couldn't see either buses or trucks. The ones in front of us were full. I couldn't see anything. I could only see the people, the policemen. Walking up and down. I thought my husband would come after me. The bus was now full, but there was no driver. The driver came at last and the bus started. After moving maybe 2 or 3 meters forward, I just looked to the left. I saw something long and blue. Like a storehouse, painted in blue. Blue. It was in the middle of a meadow, and nothing else was there. They—the Serbs—pointed guns at the windows on either end of the storehouse. A man got out of the house and closed the door. The door was facing the road. On that meadow, in front of the door, spreading over maybe 10 meters, there were rucksacks, caps, berets in high grass. They were hanging on the grass. There were blankets; people carried them around to lie down on them. There were many things there. Then I realized where my husband had been sent. I didn't see him again. We were crying on the bus. Everybody was crying. The driver told us: "Why are you crying?"

I know all the places around Srebrenica because I used to go there before. I knew where I was going but I didn't know where I was. I didn't know where I was because of fear. At one point, I don't know when, my child started crying in my arms. She was afraid of where they might take us. . . . Our drive continued. Again I didn't know where we were. These were all familiar places, but I couldn't recognize them because of fear. The bus stopped again. Two men stopped us and got on the bus. The driver went out; he stopped the bus and went out. I couldn't say whether he had stayed near the bus or whether he had gone somewhere, excuse me for saying this, to relieve himself. . . . We came to a village. . . . When we left the village, some people threw stones at us; they were harvesting hay and loosening the soil around corn plants, yes, they threw stones at us and their women were spitting at us. They threw stones and we were afraid they would hit somebody. And we arrived at Tišća. We were on a bus, but the elderly people who were in the trucks could not get out, so they gave them ladders to get out. We got off the bus, it was already dark. We left Srebrenica at twelve. The bus turned back. And they, the Serbs, told us to walk along the middle of the asphalt road, not on the side, because there were mines all around. "If something happens, don't blame us." They stood along the road, side by side, all the way while we were on their territory. But no one told us anything. Not to me and my family, I don't know about others. "Walk in a straight line, just straight, not on the side, it is mined." So we came to our

territory. We walked for a long time, because the bus couldn't go any further, so we walked quite a lot. We came to Kladanj. It got cold. There was food waiting for us, tins, milk, and rice with meat, white bread, beans—whatever you wanted to eat. I didn't eat, I couldn't think of food. I only cried. Many people did too. I knew that my family had stayed behind, so I just cried. It was already getting dark.

SELMA: When did you realize your husband and son had disappeared?

HANIFA: Well, I still don't know anything. They are missing but I don't know anything. You see that graveyard at Potočari. What can I do, for whom can I wait? If God gives. . . . Well, I think I have no hope. One moment I still hope that they may be alive somewhere, but the next moment all hope is gone. How can I hope when I see that so many people are dead? Many of us stayed alive; normally, none of us would want to stay alive, who would like his son or daughter to die? . . . but I have stayed alive.

### Commentary

During the war in Bosnia, the UN created so-called safe areas, territories protected by the United Nations where Muslims could take refuge from ethnic cleansing. One of these safe areas was Srebrenica. It was protected by the Dutch army under UN command. Srebrenica was declared a safe area in 1993 after images of ethnic cleansing and atrocities in prison camps in the former Yugoslavia were made public and shocked the world. By 1995, more than thirty-five thousand people had found refuge in this rather small territory. They lived there for years under the threat of heavy artillery while the Serbian army shelled the town. Conditions can best be described as very rough: the refugees were living in a large prison camp with scarce food supplies. Still, people trusted they would be protected, and there was hope for survival. Despite many international promises of protection, the town fell into Serbian hands on July 11, 1995.

Before the Srebrenica massacre began, UN soldiers herded women, children, and older men into the UN compound of Potočari, where they expected to find shelter. The compound was a large area composed of several old factories. Many younger men chose instead to take the risk of fleeing through the woods to territory controlled by the Bosnian army. Few of them made their way to safety, however. Serb paramilitary units killed them on the vast mountainous terrain they had to cross, while the men who went to Potočari perished in the massacre. In the days after the fall of Srebrenica, 7,749 people were killed.

For years I have been interviewing the women who survived.<sup>1</sup> My research included long trips to eastern Bosnia that allowed the sort of direct observation emphasized in traditional cultural anthropological research. But from the outset my aim was to produce a historical account that would include the voices of the victims and survivors of the genocide. At the time, I was distressed over the inquiries into the fall of Srebrenica. The United Nations and the governments

involved had commissioned official reports to investigate what went wrong and understand why the world had failed. Surprisingly, no one thought of including the voices of the survivors and their histories, even though historians agree that they simply cannot be left out of any historical account of genocide.<sup>2</sup> Was it fear, the inability to reach out, or perhaps the nature of the official reports that made it possible to ignore the suffering of the survivors? The team in charge of the Dutch national report, for instance, insisted that their sole focus was the responsibility of the failed military mission, while the parliamentary inquiry openly stated that there was no time to listen to the women and doing so was beyond its task.

Listening to those voices meant going there. That was not always easy. Most of the survivors are women from small agrarian communities, living in a world far removed from traditional academe. They were living in temporary shelters and refugee camps, and were often unable to tell a coherent narrative about the chaos, panic, and violence that lay at the core of their stories. Some lived in Sarajevo or in the provincial capital Tuzla, where they had formed their own associations. They were known to be angry, hostile, and reluctant to talk to outsiders. In the time since I began my interviews, they have become professional NGO representatives who speak up. But when I started working with them, I had to win their trust, and in particular overcome general hostility toward a nation (the Netherlands) that had forsaken their promise to defend them. I owe a lot to those who helped me back in those days.

When I interviewed Hanifa, I worked with an interpreter who was close to the women. From early on, I became aware that interpreters can be an enormous support if interviewees trust them, especially when they are not too formal and accept a variety of improvised situations. Despite my interpreter's thoughtful attitude and her familiarity with many of the women, the circumstances of the translation remained confusing and seemed to hinder direct interaction with the women who had survived the Srebrenica genocide. At the same time, I realized once again that speech is not the only precondition to connecting, not even during an oral history interview. Other ways of communication are equally important. I never really mastered the language to a sufficient degree that I was able to conduct the interviews on my own, but I started to understand what was being told. It was at this point that I began to build positive affective connections with some of the women.

Hanifa was one of the women I liked immediately. I met her during one of my early visits to Bosnia in 2004. Like many of the survivors, she was still displaced. She lived in one of the many refugee camps lacking basic amenities and hygienic conditions. At that time, survivors had not yet returned to Srebrenica, still a sad and barren place. Many eventually returned, but Hanifa has not. She says this is beyond her. Nightmares and anxiety plague her, and memories of her murdered husband and sons haunt her. In Hanifa's case, as with many interviewees, severe traumatization affected reminiscing, hindering memory performance.

Indeed, the women I interviewed were often too traumatized to describe what happened during the genocide. Starting with the story of their childhood and focusing on the good times before did, however, reveal an image of life and survival under extreme conditions, in spite of fragmented trauma memories. In their interviews, the voices of the narrating women brought back to life a world that had been lost and atrocities that would better have been left forgotten.

As Hanifa's interview unfolded, her voice transported me to her small Muslim village where a young peasant girl was so eager to go to school. As I interviewed her in her small house, we became friends, and I got to spend more and more time with her and her daughters. She was once a good-looking woman, but years of deprivation had coarsened her features and made her look clumsier. Still, there was the beauty that is the result of pervasive generosity, and there was her smile. Hanifa found joy looking at the children playing in front of her house. As she recalled in the interview, she lost her father at an early age. Two years later, her mother was taken to the hospital, carried on the shoulders of her uncles. Such tropes in her narrative provided me with important information showing that the village where she lived was far away from the "modern world." When her mother died, Hanifa's extended family took her in, but she missed the intimacy and unconditional love of her biological parents. At the time of the interview, she argued, it was less common to lose your parents at such a young age than "it is nowadays," referring to present-day Bosnia. The Balkan region is now a world where most children have lost at least one parent: the father. And in the case of the depressed surviving widows, they also often miss the attention of their own mothers. It is a world where the traditional large family pattern has disappeared and mourning is a common experience to all.

The relationship between parent and child is the central theme of Hanifa's story; it is the metanarrative of her life and of the genocide she survived.<sup>3</sup> Hanifa lost the people she loved, and love lost to death. In the interview excerpt presented here, it is clear that she also lost her husband, who was killed. She never said goodbye to him. Since the body of her husband was never found, there was no funeral, which is a precondition for closure. Hanifa escaped murder, but she does not know what life has in store for her. The future holds little hope for her. She shares her fate with many of the widows in the Bosnian camps; there is no work, no money, no escape from a miserable life, no prospect of living a decent life anytime soon. What remains are the ties with her daughters, though they can never replace her boys. But her past has taught her that children need love, and she provides it.

Envisioning the future, knowing what kind of life she envisions, how she can possibly relate to others, who might have helped her order her memories, since the present combined with what is coming shapes memory and sorts out the many impressions that come to the mind during an interview? In the absence of such a guiding principle, her story lacks structure.

As a result, her narrative initially seems chaotic; for someone who wants to know only about the genocide, it does not provide much more information than her personal pain, which of course elicits respect and compassion. One would expect the traumatized victim's story to provide an in-depth grasp of the suffering and strain endured, but as every oral historian knows from experience, trauma obscures straightforward narrative and narrators struggle with how the brain stores traumatic experience. Whenever I present the translated interview to M.A. students, their reaction is always the same: "It is chaotic; there is no plot, no timeline, and no information. This woman is too traumatized to give a good interview." But only a perfunctory reading brings up such a blunt dismissal.

Comprehensive reading and close analysis, however, show on the contrary that the parent-child relationship is a persistent concern of hers throughout the interview. During the discussion of Hanifa's lonely childhood and longing for love, she got extremely emotional. Her depiction of her childhood and loneliness was so moving that tears came to my eyes, and the interpreter started to cry too. It was clearly not a story about loss only: those were very deep emotions, which included intense mourning. Losing one's parents is generally described as loss, and losing them at such a young age certainly induces extreme suffering. However, one should refrain from using the word *trauma* in the case of the death of a parent, since nearly all of us survive our parents; the whole world population could be defined as traumatized if we were to use that word. I am familiar with the fact that the concept of trauma ensuing from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) has been stretched to less serious hurting events. I agree, however, with those authors who insist that there is a real distinction to be maintained between severe loss, including even extreme pain, and trauma, which involves profound and long-lasting psychological, as well as physiological changes.

Hanifa's account of loss at a very young age is the moving story of a small girl who wanted to be loved and sheltered. She then moved on to describe her daughter's birth in a hospital in Srebrenica in 1993, where attention was primarily directed to the many wounded soldiers coming in. She delivered lying on a rack of dirty cloth with nurses who were scared to cut the umbilical cord. The hospital "nurses" were actually not fully trained and did not know how to deal with injuries adequately. Hanifa's beloved husband, whom she would soon lose, managed to get her some hot water with sugar, a real treat in those days. He loved her and he proved it. Immediately after relating her birth story, she told of the death of her son and her resulting sadness. Again, her husband was central in her account: not only does he bring sugar, but he is the messenger who tries to break the bad news gently. She said he was the first person who had loved her unconditionally, the kind of love she so much longed for. Exactly the way she loves her children.

Later she and her husband were separated and she described that very last moment when she was still convinced she would see him again. He would probably join her on the bus or they would meet after the evacuation. Only much

later did she realize that he would not join her; during the days and nights she spent in the UN "peacekeepers" compound, she had never felt as scared as she did at that moment. Her account of her extended stay in the compound was less frantic than many other stories she shared because husband and wife had stayed together. When they both decided to go to the buses for evacuation, she was separated from him; their younger child asked her father not to leave, but he was taken away "to be interrogated." Only once inside the bus did she realize that he would be killed, which is when she started to cry.

Though all those scared women on the buses experienced severe trauma, as seen in their oral stories, the genocide added yet another dimension to their already harrowing sense of solitude. Without hesitation and on the basis of what we know about trauma, I would surmise that from that moment on, every single event that had affected her up to that time was now seen through the lens of that particular trauma. Her witnessing of the early stage of a mass murder, feeling the chaos and threat of that moment, and losing love now tinted every remembrance of her past life. After she had spent so many long days and nights in the compound with constant threat of murder and rape, the execution of her husband exacerbated the loneliness of the small girl in the story. We listened awestruck. When she talked about her childhood, Suada, who interpreted, started to cry. The story about the lonely girl, the orphan she had become, replaced the sorrow and pain she could not talk about. Surprisingly, listening to her account of the genocide, which she related in a more distant and unemotional way, left us less distraught than we had been listening to her childhood memories. Only one moment clearly stood out in her narrative: when her child lost her father and she lost her love. But she could not manage to draw a broader picture of her feelings during the genocide; nor could she be more specific and tell us about what she had seen.

To be fair, from the particular corner where they stood or sat, the women could not see very much. They felt awful, they had heard scary stories, seen evidence of cruelty, and become aware of the impending threat. Sitting on the bus, Hanifa was yet able to see more than when she was in the middle of the crowd. The magnitude of the murder dawned on her.

We may wonder here whether a more theoretical interpretation of the events would help us better comprehend her shattered world. Various concepts might give us clues to reach a more thorough understanding of her circumstances. I am not satisfied with merely stating that she has been traumatized, since traumatization is what happens to the individual. I am more exactly looking at a broader perspective that would encompass her present life, her past, how she sees it, and why. I assumed that the dire conditions she had been living in for nearly a decade after the war ended must have had a profound influence on the perception of her earlier life.

The British anthropologist Victor Turner has used the concept of "social drama" to analyze crisis and change over time in the social relationships within



African Ndembu village life. Social drama addresses eruptive disruptions in the social life of communities and constitutes a limited focus of deep transparency into the otherwise opaque, uneventful surface of social life. In his work, social drama consists of three successive phases: breach, crisis, and repair and redress. Turner also adds another possible outcome to the social drama: schism, rupture, and the destruction of social relations.<sup>4</sup> His model is often chosen as a method to study small societies undergoing change as a result of larger change.

When all is destroyed, people will build up alternative versions of the moral and social order that have little or no place in mundane reality and that serve as symbolic templates for reconstituting the being and social relationships. I would argue that in Hanifa's life story, the private relationship between parent and child has become such an alternative to the extent that it shapes her memory. This is when fiction gets in the way of the dominant historical discourse, as is generally the case with recall memory. Fiction is often less obviously focused on a single subject; the storyteller may bring into play fantasy, and chronology is less important.

Another concept found in the debate on the loss of trust might shed light on the matter. In normal conditions, people have to trust that there are boundaries to human behavior and to violence.<sup>5</sup> They have to trust that someone will intervene when boundaries are transgressed. It is a precondition to feeling safe. Trust is a contingent connection between social actors, when the trustor is dependent on the trustee. Trust is seen as an attractive alternative to control. But the only sense of trust Hanifa has known since she became a widow is the mutual trust between parent and child. No one else is to be trusted. Like thousands of forsaken refugees in Bosnian camps, Hanifa knows that their protectors, the government of their country, are not to be trusted. On a psychological level, a feeling of security has given way to a general sense of insecurity. Together with her trauma, this brings her to a stage in which she has lost all sense of community except for the parent-child relationship she so strongly believes in.<sup>6</sup>

Interpretations and theories came up later. When interviewing her, I did not look for social drama or for a concept of trust, though I knew she had lost trust and felt forsaken. One would expect resentment at the world responsible for her sufferings,<sup>7</sup> as I encountered in many other cases. When I, a Dutch woman, came into her life, my "Dutchness" epitomized that world which did not care. One of the most genuine hardships I faced was to overcome her hostility and win her trust. When I started my research, locals sometimes threw mud at me when it became known that a woman from the Netherlands had dared to interview Bosnian women about the "infamous behavior of the soldiers of her own country." They would call it that way, and it was repeated again and again. It took me years to overcome this hostility since, to the victim, the bystander who did not respond to the call for help and looked away is not that far removed from the threat of the aggressor. The women in Potočari had plainly seen that the members of Dutchbat (the Dutch contingent employed by the United Nations)

were incapable of stopping the violence in the compound and on the grounds around it. The separation of the men and women took place right under the noses of the Dutch soldiers; indeed, they helped to keep the situation “orderly.” I, however, always took ample time to explain that the soldier’s responsibility was not the primary interest of my research. Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer, in his study of small Jewish communities in Poland before they were wiped out,<sup>8</sup> notes that material on the actual killing and how this was perpetrated abounds, but what was lost with the killing is a vastly understudied terrain.<sup>9</sup>

Only if we know what was lost will we truly be able to understand the historical meaning of traumatizing events. Parallel to my interest in everyday lives in the former Yugoslavia, I strongly believed I would get another perception of history by gathering stories of lives that had been lost. Those are critical testimonies primarily because they come from real victims and not from people who described themselves as victimized as bystanders, and secondly because in spite of limited women’s military representation in Dutchbat, armed conflicts are almost always seen from a male perspective. Whoever looks at the Dutch public, where the failure to protect is a highly contested debate, will immediately notice that the suffering of Dutch soldiers has become so dominant that it replaces the suffering of these women.

Working on life stories, I have always tried to begin with early childhood. My Bosnian interviews, and Hanifa’s case in particular, confirmed how effective this approach is in spite of the language barrier. It means long sessions, which require the building of trust and intense coffee drinking after many hours of uncomfortable travel to the more remote areas. For most of the long and hard Bosnian winter, you drive through snow and ice between high walls of snow.

Had I interviewed Bosnian women about the genocidal experience only, the result would have been different. Hanifa did not say much about the killing except that she hoped the future might be better. The only story she narrated at length was the separation from her husband; after a silent break, she resumed her narrative and told how once she got on the bus, she realized he would not join her.

Of course I understood how bitter and painful talking about the killing of her husband was. All the women who lost their spouses in Potočari had found themselves unable to do anything. A few of them had tried to save their sons, arguing with the Serbs or holding tight to their boys, putting themselves at risk for doing so. But most were numb with shock after so many days in the compound, and they just walked on. We may also assume that there is a tremendous feeling of guilt and shame, which no one talks about. Judith Zur described in her article on Guatemalan war widows how difficult it was to talk about those feelings in the cases she studied.<sup>10</sup> Guilt and shame had turned into rage, visible on the faces of many of the surviving women. As a group, they were considered to be violent and were barred from the streets or from visiting their houses for five years after the war ended. They were treated as the pariahs of Bosnian

society, and when they asked the Bosnian government for help they were chased away. In one shocking instance an official told the weeping and crying women they were not human. Their appeals were silenced. Alessandro Portelli similarly describes how in postwar Rome, the community no longer accepted the sight of the women who had lost their husbands during a massacre.<sup>11</sup> Life was going on, and the women's grief was too confrontational. Only lately has the public image of surviving women changed from violent, hysterical crying to resolute demands for information and compensation. The victims now seem to be more self-contained. In her autobiographical review *Aftermath, Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Susan J. Brison underlined the ambivalence a survivor faces, in her case rape and an attempt to kill her.<sup>12</sup> She rightly notices that when survivors hold back and effectively contain their narratives and behavior, listeners have the impression their experience was not that horrific and they may not have been so badly traumatized. If, conversely, the survivor opens up, not trying to withhold the fragmentation and exposing the black hole of a life where there is no future, she is likely to be seen as a victim only, an undesirable presence, and she will not be taken seriously. In short, victims never behave as they are expected and are always seen as wanting in credibility.

Hanifa is not violent; she chooses to accept life and to accommodate instead. The only time I saw her with full self-control was when she was dealing with her children. She has no public agenda, she has not become political, and she is shattered. But as an empathic listener I was able to connect with her, and she loved the way she was given this opportunity to tell about what distressed her. She tried to accept life as it came, to make her house as neat as she could in the circumstances of the camp, and to raise her daughters. I believe that having lost so much in the early stages of her life and mourning her parents and all her beloved for so long made the genocide just one moment out of the many events that hurt her deeply.

I should also add, though this does not appear in the excerpt of the interview presented here, that Hanifa was always rejected. It started in the foster family who took care of her. Her treatment was different from that of the family's own children. This happened once again when she tried to escape from her village and chose to take to the road with her children and her cow. With so many people looking for a place to stay, no one wanted to give her a shelter for the night. She told me about the moment in 1993 when she arrived in Srebrenica, and she had no family in town to go to and no one took them in: "We went from door to door, from house to house asking to stay over for the night. Darkness all around. People didn't let us in their houses," she said. They found a place in a village that was not under enemy control yet: "The village was full; we had no place to go. We couldn't reach Srebrenica because of heavy shelling. I went to the kitchen, stood near the stove and started crying. Where shall I go, with my very pregnant belly? I had my baby on April 12th. In Srebrenica; I reached Srebrenica on April 12th. So I cried. My son, my husband, my younger son and two girls

were with me—five of them were with me. I cried.” She did not have any money to pay for shelter.

This is a very common story among refugees who have no resources. The more overcrowded the “safe” territory became, the more tension arose between the people who had found new stability and the hungry arrivals who were pouring in from the countryside. Being less cultivated, the newcomers seem to belong to a very different social world. I can imagine Hanifa’s predicament, a pregnant woman with her large family and a cow.

In Hanifa’s interpretation of herself and her metastory, being rejected had become part of her personality, especially since at the moment of the interview she had once again been cast out by society and put in a camp, isolated from the rest of the world. Her life is empty and whenever it is not raining she simply sits in front of her house. Love is gone and life is gone. Her life has been one of continual loss, and with the genocide loss has taken on a new meaning. It has become a deeper and more painful feeling. Remembering loss is possible, but remembering mass murder and the inability to defend those she loved seems to be like the intermittent flash of a beacon light: blocked memories that simply cannot be told.

Interviewing Hanifa, I learned about narrating trauma, about the inability to imagine a life in the future. I was aware that war was not the whole story, that she also wanted to tell me that together with her many personal losses, it was a whole world that had been obliterated.

## Notes

1. Indiana University Press published this book in 2011 under the title *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak*. The volume was published previously in the Netherlands and in Bosnia.
2. Nanci Adler, Selma Leydesdorff, et al., “Introduction,” in *Memories of Mass Repression: Narrating Stories in the Aftermath of Atrocity*, ed. Nanci Adler, Selma Leydesdorff, et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009), ix–xxi.
3. This is when, in several parts of her story, she rethinks what she has told, evaluating and interrupting the narrative. See also Katryn Anderson and Diana Jack, “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 152–72.
4. Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: Social Perception, Social, Ritual, Structure, Liminal, Ndembu, and Symbols* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1957).
5. See, for instance, Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1984).
6. Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2003).
7. See Natalie Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), esp. chap. 3, “The Victim’s Resentment,” 61–79. Wood states that this feeling of resentment is a “trenchant rebuke” against the moral decay within a society that was trusted by its victims.
8. Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
9. Selma Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 7–24.

10. Judith Zur, "Remembering and Forgetting: Guatemalan War Widows' Forbidden Memories," in *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors*, ed. Kim Lacey Rogers and Selma Leydesdorff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004), 29–45 (reprint).
11. Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), especially chap. 8, "A Strange Grief."
12. Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath, Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

# 2

## "TO DREAM MY FAMILY TONIGHT"

Listening to Stories of Grief and Hope  
Among Hazara Refugees in Australia

Denise Phillips

**Oral histories by Denise Phillips with Reza and Juma, Brisbane and Melbourne, Australia, 2004–11**

*This study is drawn from my Ph.D. research on experiences of grief and hope among Hazara refugees from Afghanistan as they resettle in Australia. Taken from four interviews conducted in Brisbane and Melbourne between 2004 and 2011, the excerpts trace the unfolding transitions of two brothers, Reza and Juma. They belong to an oppressed ethnic minority, the Hazaras; the Taliban murdered their father and both of them faced persecution in Afghanistan. Alone, Reza fled by boat to Australia as a teenager in 2001. Meanwhile, Juma was captured and tortured in his homeland before finally finding safety in Australia in 2010, bereft as he left behind his wife and children. Across the Hazara refugee diaspora, a crisis of uncertainty continues long after resettlement.*

### **REZA, APRIL 24, 2004**

*The first interview focused on Reza's memories of Afghanistan and experiences as a refugee. Here, Reza grieves his losses and expresses his distress at not knowing his fate, when initially granted only temporary protection in Australia.*

DENISE: . . . we were just talking about what life was like in Afghanistan, so maybe that's where I'd like to start, if you could just tell me a little bit about, about your home and whereabouts you lived, in Afghanistan.

REZA: . . . I born there, where I lived *there*, as all my life there. And that, that village was called . . . [withheld], it's there—Ghazni Province of the Jaghori. . . . I was the youngest of my family. And so I was going to school and to study, and so afterward, we had a lots of problem. Before the Russian attack on our countries [country], we had another government, so there was all the Pashtun

ethnic, and Tajiks, Uzbeks. I was just Hazara, Hazara Shia. So, as the Hazara have been subjected for up to hundred years ago, to under taxation of a different governments. So, because that's the way I was Hazara, always I was just persecuting [persecuted] and—just disturbing from other peoples, and then we had no any freedom there. . . . And we had no any way, and no, we had no any places to go. Just we, we was always suffering about our life, what should happen, where we can go, nowhere to stay. Just ah, we was like that, under pressure, different regimes, different government, different people. So, yeah. Until Taliban arrived. And Taliban arrived, when Taliban arrived we was getting worse, every day, so we had no any chance and then—the Taliban come they, unfortunately they killed my father. And then, after that we had no any things to do. . . . And then I left there.

DENISE: . . . How old were you?

REZA: Ah, I was seventeen years old. . . . I was just always thinking something, how I leave Afghanistan or how I—release from here. This is like a grave for us, this is like a darkness. . . .

*Reza explains that he does not know the whereabouts of various family members.*

DENISE: . . . you have no way of . . . finding out where, where they are or where your mother is?

REZA: No, I have no, even no idea from my mothers [mother]. No, nothing from my mothers [mother]. But none of them living there now . . . because getting worse, and then we miss our country, we miss our home, we miss our family. Everything, we had like this, we had land, we had house . . . had car, shop, and then when they started to persecuting us, then we had nothing to do. We had to leave Afghanistan . . . to put our life in the risk, like we did. . . . Just saying, "We, we are leaving Afghanistan, we should go other country, it should be better . . ."—because *everybody*, everyone *loves* his, them country, you know, them *own* countries . . . to live and stay with them own family. But . . . unfortunately it is hard and impossible to live with family—like, I like to stay with my family, it's even . . . one minute, one hour is hard for me to spend, to pass. Like, I think, it one hour is for me one day, one day I think it was one month, like I've been here for three months, oh for three years, I feeling it is all my life . . . sixty years, seventy years I've been here and then I *miss* them, I have no—, I, I can't recognize them now. When I go sleep I just thinking to dream my family tonight, "How, how are they, how they should be?" and then just getting tired, getting dizzy, and then getting bored, and then can't go to sleep. . . . When I left my mothers [mother], she was crying, and then—she said, "I, I should not see you again" . . . "because you are going" . . . she was crying 'cause, um, also they killed my father. . . .

DENISE: . . . you're waiting at the moment to find out . . . about your permanent visa, to see if you've been accepted?

REZA: Yeah, I'm just, ah, still waiting, and still suffering as well to what should happen, because I am not granted yet for a permanent residence. So, I'm a still afraid—because every day... Australia's really changing the law, changing the policy, you know. If they finding a terrorist somewhere, they saying, "This refugee. This from Afghanistan," or "...this belong to bin Laden..." But, they are not from Afghanistan. As we know, as all people should know, Hazara people is different, you know. They, they says the Muslim, but Hazaras different, different Muslim. We are Muslim—but very big different than them....

And I still worry here about my future, I can't make any plan. And also, when I thinking about my family, where they are, what I can do here, because I'm young, a young—boy, I have to make a plan for my future... when I come here, and first time, first year, when I arrived here, and I had a lots of problem.... I was thinking about my visa, about my family, what should happen about three years, for this three years, and also, no any *friends*, no contact with someone. I—and now with unknown people, unknown area, you know, unknown culture, *everything* was different for me. Everything was ah—like, huh, I don't know how to explain that, it was a very, very different for me.... It was unbelievable for me.

#### REZA, SEPTEMBER 19, 2010

*Six years later, a follow-up interview explored Reza's resettlement experiences. This interview shows that gaining citizenship brings hope but does not erase suffering as Reza then struggled to assist his brother Juma, who was waiting for a humanitarian placement. The despair of family separation experienced by the narrators and loved ones still in Afghanistan is heard throughout the interviews, with Juma's anguish likened to a loss of mind.*

DENISE: Perhaps we'll start with looking at how your life has changed since 2004 because when we were talking back then you were on a temporary protection visa, and a little bit after that you got a permanent protection visa... what are the main things that have changed for you in that time?

REZA: The main things changed in my life—I just got hope to, you know—to make a decision for my future... I got married and I got two son and at least I can make a decision and for my future... And I, I can stay here safely. That's the main thing for security. To changed my life... I was thinking the first time, I might send back to Afghanistan, when I had TPV [temporary protection visa]... I can decide whatever, I can study, you know, for my future. Yeah, that's the changes....

...we couldn't make any plan, you know, because we was thinking always we, we might send back. Or we was suffering, you know. We had—ah—no good time, like...we couldn't make a decision. Or we not feeling safe, and



not feeling happy, and was like had a problem with ah, like, getting mental problem because, because of temporary protection....

DENISE: ...so many changes.

REZA: So many changes, yeah. So sometime hard to describe, you know, because of our family left behind, you know. So we trying to, everyone just trying to forget about them because this the way of life... we just been—ah, I mean—disconnected with them.... We can't go back there and we can't bring them here.... They can't even visit us and we can't visit them as well, so because there is not safe....

I got at the moment citizenship, it still didn't solve my problem. Still thinking, still suffering a lot.... Because the Taliban when killed my father and then my mother is still alive. I'm still thinking of my mother—how to get my mother here. Even [if] one day, one week I stay here in Australia or live with my mother here and it's enough forever for me. You know? Because I just want to share what I had here, my history, you know, what happened to my life... and just want to talk with my mother... and that's I'm just thinking. But it's too hard to get her here....

DENISE: And can you tell me about Juma?... He's been given refugee status and he came to Port Moresby, I think it was in November 2008... we're just looking at photographs here of Juma and they're really, really sad photographs.... So Juma has been accepted as a refugee by UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], but he's still waiting for a placement, and I know, Reza, that we've been talking about how worried you are about Juma's health.... How do you think Juma is at the moment?...

REZA: ...When I talk with him, he's getting very nervous and he's very upset. He's thinking about his health, he saying, "I miss my family, and I, I can't survive here. And my family, my childrens, I don't know what's happened to them, no one there to support them." [Discussion about possible fate of family]... He says, "...I'm disabled now. I can't work, even if I come to Australia, I can't work, and I can't do anything. And my life is destroyed," he says. "So the whole of my life, I, I finished, my life is over. I'm just thinking of my children," you know. "It's very hard for me to—. I am here... How they feel without the father?" You know?... He's just *thinking*... we imagine, you know, he, anything could happen because they're young girls, you know....

[He says,] "...as long as my children and my wife getting survived... and their future be clear, or to stay safe, not been kidnapped, or not been harmed..." This is the only thing he want. Unfortunately, we've been trying for about three years. We can't get any good news from Department of Immigration or anything to helping us or to indicating it's OK... We say, "...This is the very urgent, this is hard situation." I don't know if any harder situation than this, because he got disabled, you know. He's disabled....

DENISE: What's it like for you as his little brother? How does it make you feel?...

REZA: ...When I was little in Afghanistan, they just organized for me, they paid for me to take me for, for a smuggler to take me to safe place. [Juma said], "...we can't go all together because can't afford it." ...And he saved my life and I have to save his life. ...If his life been destroyed, of course, it's affected, affected on me and my life is destroyed as well. ...

Every time he call me, he says, "Have you heard anything from family?" I say, "No." He says, "I dream too many messy things and I don't know what's happened to them." I said, "I, I don't know." I'm trying every week, I'm trying to make some words, good thoughts, for him before he call me, trying to ... make something to tell him, to support him, you know ... For one word, I, I try, you know, to repeat ten times ... he's just like flying in the air.

## REZA, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, SEPTEMBER 19, 2010

*While recording the second interview, Reza's children came to and from the room, talked with Reza, and sometimes sat on his lap. This next excerpt shows how sensitive adaptations brought a deeper understanding of Reza's joy in becoming a father.*

DENISE: If it's not too hard for you to talk about your father, what can you remember of him when you were a little boy?

REZA: Oh, just was remember when I was going to school, when I come back, he was like providing, giving me, like, some present ... keeping in his pocket, you know. Because I was very little and the other was big ... He was taking me to the farms ... and just take always vegetable for me, and play with me there ... especially he was *always* keeping something in his pocket for me [laughing] ... he loved me a lot ... sometime he was taking me, was hugging me to school and coming and stay there, wait for me and bring me back to home. Yeah ... he was always with me, you know ...

*[Interruptions from children]*

DENISE: ... keep telling me about being a father, Reza.

REZA: ... Ah yes, about to being a father, I'm just now at the moment very happy and, and you know, we just proud [that] I'm a father. Because when I come here, I'm, I was thinking, I may finish very soon and can't live in this world anymore because was had too much pressure ... even one night I was feeling, I am dying tonight ... So I was feeling so bad ... And to become a father, you know, now I, I'm think it's very good for me because at least, I lose my father, I miss my father, and I—I have now another two son, and *I'm a father*, you know ... And it's too good and I can love them and I can play with them and just to memorize, you know, to bring back my memory of my father's, to thinking *I'm a father*, you know, they are *my son*, they, they are *Reza*. So I'm a father. Just it's sometimes giving me hope ...

DENISE: ...when you were describing your father before, Reza, I was thinking that's the sort of father you are with your children.

REZA: Yeah. Yeah, that's right...the people say, "Don't give him a lots a hug or don't talk with him too much. Leave them alone a little bit because if you trying to, ah, love them too much, they will become naughty," you know... Because of I lose my father, I love them. I can't say *anything* to them, you know. Of course, we have to educate them... We have to teach them. But it's very hard for me to get upset with them, to get out with them...to reject them, you know. Any time my sons coming to me I say, "Okay." Even when if, when I come from work, I'm with work clothes and they come outside, you know...and I'm just coming, and just talk with them.

### JUMA AND REZA, MAY 19, 2011

*The interview with Juma, now resettled in Australia, was recorded with Reza acting as an interpreter. It captures Juma's experiences of forced separation from his family after escaping persecution in Afghanistan and highlights methodological challenges of engaging with traumatic experiences.*

DENISE: We've just been talking about this off tape, but—Juma, you were just showing me your foot and you telling me about what your foot feels like, the problems from the foot. Can, can, can you just tell me again about, about your foot?

REZA: His right foot is, as you can see, is white colored...And it's normal and but, that one is injured and...his toe's off and it is his left foot. [On Juma's left foot, the big toe has been amputated and the stump is disfigured, swollen and red.]

DENISE: Mmm. ["Mmm" often repeated softly as Reza describes Juma's injuries.]

REZA: Yeah. It's not normal, as you can see; it is hot and getting different color, and getting hot and cold. And getting red. And already swelling up and he always feeling pain and sore. It's not normal.

DENISE: What—, I mean, I mean, the-the-the-the-the *the toe* is, is missing. What is it like for you to walk, Juma?

JUMA: It is very hard for me when I want to walk. Every ten, fifteen minute I walk and getting pain and sore. Yeah, especially when I wear a sock and wear a, a boot...My feet [foot] are getting very hot and...my foot is very tight in the boot and I can't walk anymore...Because of my foot getting very hot and warm...I, I making wet, my sock, to get little bit cold...

DENISE: ...Did this happen in prison?...Was this done—? [Juma shows me other physical injuries on his back and stomach.]

JUMA: They was beating me and he slap and on my back. And they just tried to, when they, while they beating me, they cutted the, ah, the wire, with the wire,

the nerve. And the, the blood was there, dried... [An injury to the back and operation are described, and his imprisonment is discussed.]

DENISE: ...are they the scars you were just showing me, Juma? This big scar that you've got here? Is, i-is that from the beating?... Or from the operation?

JUMA: That, that's from the operation, from there....

REZA: From there, yeah.... And the hitting place, the mark is at the back....

*[Unclear if Reza is still translating or adding information]*

DENISE: ...what does your back feel like now? Is it still in pain?

JUMA: When I lifting heavy stuff it will start pain and sore. A few nights ago it was very pain and sore, because it was cold. When it's cold, it's very hard and it's painful.

DENISE: It makes it worse?

REZA: Makes it worse, yeah.

DENISE: And before we were recording, we were talking about, about Juma's family... At the moment, Juma is trying to bring his wife and his children.... With the problems that Juma is having, is there anything at all that helps him, each day?...

REZA: ...every day he feeling so bad... and nothing should make him happy except his family and children and his health. Especially... his family... have to process as soon as possible them application to join him or for him to go and see them.

DENISE: ...how many years is it now since Juma has seen his family?

JUMA: ...Ninth of June 2011, it will be three years.... [Long pause—Reza's children getting ready for bed in background]

DENISE: ...how often can you talk to your wife, Juma?

JUMA: ...If I get contact, it probably two weeks, after two weeks, three weeks, but sometime getting hard to contact there. The telephone, the communication is not good.... That's why; it's very hard... sometime... month time, sometime more. If... the receiver there is good, we can talk... but sometime getting longer....

DENISE: And what, what is Juma's wife saying to him when she rings? Does she understand how hard it is for Juma here?

JUMA: They, they feeling a lot, you know, they, they feeling me very much. Because every time I call them, my, my kids crying. They says, "When we can see you?" and, "We can't recognize you, how you looks like? And we just want to see you, how we can see you?" ... I don't know what's we should do....

DENISE: ...if you could get a message to our government... what would Juma want to say to, to the government, to help?

JUMA: ...the biggest problem is my family, because every day I lose my mind, getting worse and problem, because of my family, thinking of them... too much stress on me.... And, if they [government] can just help me to finish my stress and, and to help me to settlement... that's my best message for the

government. And also I say thanks a lot from Australian government to make me little bit happy and to resettle.

## REZA, MAY 22, 2011

*After locating his mother in Jaghori, now unwell, Reza planned to risk all by traveling to Afghanistan to visit her. This third interview was recorded two weeks before Reza embarked on his journey.*

DENISE: The last time that we did an interview, it was back in September 2010, and at that time, Reza...you'd found your mum and then you'd lost touch with her and, of course, you're about to go back to Afghanistan. So how did you find your mum again?...

REZA: I just found my mother by some other relatives. And I heard that she's worried about me and she's getting too old...she's become very weak. And she's losing her mind. She's getting a lots of problem. And I feel so bad about her...I decided to go and see her because I heard—and she's sick. And I been spoken with her, she told me, "I just want to see you..." And also, myself,...with my kids, I have three kids and they want to see all my family. She says, "Just I want to see you and all your family before I, I, I go to die," you know. Then, "That's the best my wishes..."

DENISE: Mmm.

REZA: ...that's the only reason. Don't know what's happening when I get there in Kabul or anything. Anything is possible to happen to us.

DENISE: ...how much of a risk is it for you, do you think, Reza?

REZA: There is about, mmm, 99 percent risk.... Only the 1 percent chance to get to survived because...we believe to God and God will protect us....Some people pray for us, and we pray to be safe and be protected and we return back to home. Like...Australia's our home now and return back, return safe, back to our second, second land. [Small laugh]...we feel not safe there, because the people, the first targeting us. The people going from overseas, they know. They already have all the documents, all the, the IDs [identification]. They can searching, they always investigate about foreign people.... We been complaining from them...Hazara is the most target. Even they see Hazara, and then they will kill...our face showing we are Hazara...if you be a Hazara, you're punishment, you know...Hazara people have nowhere to go.

DENISE: So when you arrive in Kabul, Reza, what will you have to do?...Is it not possible to travel from Kabul into Jaghori at the moment on the main road?

REZA: It is not the most possible, because they, the Taliban...are surrounding the people, they catching people, they is looking if someone is coming from foreign countries or someone coming, having something to carry or they just checking them.... It's not safe...people is being killed every day.... Especially from Ghazni [city] to Jaghori is very, is not safe, not security.... [Reza notes

that Taliban soldiers allow travelers with sick women or children to pass if taking them to hospital or relatives.]...we go by car...I'm not sure how we can go there and then it's too hard to reach there....Everyone, every Hazara traveling in Afghanistan, they using like a smuggler people to protect them as a guard and to take them, going from one city to another city...we can't go with ourself, by ourself....

DENISE: ...And with your mother's health, do you know what's wrong with her?...Because I know she's really unwell. Has the doctor told her what's wrong?

REZA: ...because I been away for about ten years. I'm her baby, she don't know where I am...I just separated, you know. Then after that, my other brother Juma....She have been getting more responsibility, and she getting scared of any part of ethnic groups and religion people. And, and the doctor been saying, "You been suffered a lot, you been thinking a lot, you have problem with the mental problem. And you getting shaking on your hands...and your body"...she didn't know that I come to Australia, 'cause we had no contact...when I just left Afghanistan, I just come. And she didn't know that where's Australia, where he's going, you know, just smuggler—took me here. He [she] never know that....And this is unbelievable now.—Mmm, the life is very changed, you know....I born there and I lived in my country, in my own place about seventeen years...always I remember, you know, I can't forget. And now I, I come here and I live here. It's very hard, and I lost all the family and relatives there and I remember where, where we had there a, a little farm, a land, I go there when maybe this time to have a look.—Yeah, if I couldn't have any problem, try to be safe and do it quick and—take some memory from there.

## Commentary

I am sitting on the floor beside Juma, and he shows me the scars on his body from being repeatedly beaten when held captive in Afghanistan. He holds out his hand, fingers crooked after being broken when robbed at knife-point in Papua New Guinea, where he sought asylum. His foot, resting in front of him, is deformed and painful after being tortured. I fluctuate between empathy, stammering, and silence. And I learn that Juma's physical disabilities are not his greatest crisis.

In 2010, the number of refugees globally was 15.4 million. Afghanistan continued to produce the largest number, with more than 3 million refugees in seventy-five countries. Although neighboring Pakistan and Iran host the majority,<sup>1</sup> a small number have fled to Australia since 1999, mostly arriving unauthorized by boat. Australia has resettled more than 700,000 refugees and displaced persons since 1945 but has generally been indifferent to their

suffering, selecting them on the basis of their suitability and its need to populate the nation.<sup>2</sup> Unauthorized entrants then challenge Australia's orderly migration program. Politicians and media have politicized their arrival as a national crisis threatening border integrity and Australia's way of life. They have been vilified as "illegals" taking places from "genuine" refugees and, as many are Muslims, suspected of terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

However, beneath the public hysteria, the real—and often prolonged crisis—belongs to the refugees themselves. Many of the Afghanis arriving in Australia are ethnic Hazaras, a Shiite minority fleeing Taliban persecution. After surviving perilous escapes, Hazaras suffer family separations and the loss of loved ones and place as their homeland remains war-torn. Juma is an Hazara. His greatest crisis is that he left his wife, son, and six daughters in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. He fears losing his mind as he imagines their possible fate and desperately seeks a reunion. Across various disciplines, scholars examine diverse facets of refugees' experiences and migration histories and debate current policies,<sup>4</sup> but research on crises faced by Hazaras as a new refugee community in Australia is in its infancy. Australian historiography explores Australia's war-time bereavement and memorialization, changing ways of death, and loss of place,<sup>5</sup> but some grief, such as perinatal or refugee grief, is less recognized.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, loss and grief—fundamental human experiences—are central to only a few oral history projects, exemplified by those on HIV/AIDS epidemics.<sup>7</sup> Though oral historians have been documenting unresolved crises in places such as Palestine since the 1970s,<sup>8</sup> numerous catastrophes in the early twenty-first century have spurred the growth of recording stories in an event's immediate aftermath rather than the more distant past. These projects capture the human drama often overlooked in official reports preoccupied with disaster responses, but only a few offer methodological insights.<sup>9</sup> The unfolding stories of Juma and his younger brother Reza are emblematic of the crises of grief and family separation among Hazara refugees in transition, and also reflective of the ethical and methodological challenges faced by oral history interviewers.

The Hazaras, although not a homogeneous group, traditionally lived semiautonomously in the Hazarajat, in central Afghanistan. Since being subjugated in a brutal sectarian and ethnic war to bring Afghanistan's disparate groups under a central authority in the 1890s, Hazaras have been marginalized and persecuted. As mostly Shiite Muslims among a predominantly Sunni Muslim population, they have been condemned as "infidels" and shunned as "second-class citizens." They have intermittently engaged in resistance and became politically organized in the 1980s. Their persecution was fiercely reignited during Afghanistan's civil war and by the Taliban, with thousands massacred in Afshar and Mazar-e Sharif.<sup>10</sup>

Juma and Reza are from Jaghori in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. I first interviewed Reza in 2004, when he was in extreme crisis. Follow-up interviews in 2010 and 2011 revealed competing tensions between hope and suffering within

his resettlement. After the Taliban killed Reza and Juma's father, Reza fled when he was seventeen years old, in 2001. Hidden in the back of a utility vehicle, beaten, and then passed between people smugglers in Pakistan, Singapore, and Indonesia, Reza finally made a terrifying voyage to Australia on an unseaworthy fishing boat. Reza experienced a culture of despair in Australia's immigration detention system, before being released into the community on a temporary protection visa (TPV).

Reza eventually gained Australian citizenship and got married, but he struggled to assist family members still in danger. With hopes flagging, he searched for his widowed mother and navigated bureaucratic processes from 2008 to 2010 to have Juma, then a refugee under the care of the UNHCR in Papua New Guinea (PNG), resettled in Australia. Having located his mother, Reza was fearful in 2011 as he prepared to travel with his wife and three young sons to visit her in his home village for the first time in ten years. Struggling with poor health, Reza says his family would no longer recognize him.<sup>11</sup>

Juma was resettled in Australia on a humanitarian visa in late 2010, and I interviewed him in 2011. Juma speaks Dari, one of Afghanistan's main languages. Although Reza is not an accredited translator, Juma chose Reza rather than a professional from his community to interpret and translate. This safeguarded against any shame of having fellow Hazaras hearing his story directly; moreover, his experience is shared as a family story of tragedy and survival. Reza clarified and added information throughout. Juma's interview exposes the trauma of torture and family separation. Held captive by Pashtun Taliban soldiers for nine months in a makeshift prison because of his Hazara ethnicity, his captors tortured him and demanded weapons. He witnessed the capture of other Hazaras and daily beatings, and he told that sixty or seventy detainees died in prison. When released, Juma required surgery in Quetta, Pakistan. Meanwhile, his family sheltered at Chaman, home to many refugees in Balochistan on the Pakistani-Afghani border, later returning to Afghanistan. After fleeing alone, Juma spent time in Indonesia and Malaysia until a people smuggler arranged for him to fly to Port Moresby, the capital of PNG, where he sought asylum. A despairing grief for his family is all-consuming, and his only wish is to be safely reunited with them.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of interviewing close to a traumatic event is controversial because history is traditionally seen as more objective with the benefit of reflection and distance. But this approach is uncovering diverse and uncensored voices that may already be silenced or will be excluded from collective memories over time. Changes also often occur rapidly during crises, sometimes leaving few traces of recent events.<sup>13</sup>

My interviews with Reza gained timely insights into immediate and longer-term effects of Australia's rapidly evolving refugee policies implemented since 1999 to deter arrivals. These policy changes have included temporary protection, sending asylum seekers to other countries for processing, excising



territories from Australia's migration zone, suspending processing of claims, and a failed deal with Malaysia to "swap" boat arrivals for UNHCR-registered refugees. After previous experiments with temporary safe haven, Australia introduced TPVs in 1999. Refugees arriving by boat received only temporary protection for three years, and then faced removal if unable to prove their continuing need for protection. TPV holders were denied access to normal resettlement services, including family reunions and right of return if they traveled overseas.<sup>14</sup>

At the time of our first interview, Reza was on a TPV, due to expire in one month. His fate was unknown. Widely condemned, the policy robbed refugees of predictability in daily life, an element vital to psychological well-being.<sup>15</sup> The interview records Reza's fears, inability to make plans, cultural disorientation, and intense yearning for his family. Suspended in a timeless, hazy grief, Reza can no longer imagine their faces. He says, "When I go to sleep I just thinking to dream my family tonight, 'How, how are they, how they should be?'" The interview had urgency and captured "responses at a critical time within an unresolved story."<sup>16</sup>

The second interview reveals the legacy of this policy, six years later. When describing how his life has changed, Reza lists major events of marriage, having children, and buying a home, but he also repeatedly emphasizes the importance of now having security and the power to make decisions. Recalling that time, he says he developed a "mental problem," slept in his car overnight to escape the stress of fellow TPV holders, and says prospective employers rejected them when learning they did not have permanent visas. He describes the debilitating pressure: "I was thinking, I . . . can't live in this world anymore," especially without his family.<sup>17</sup> The newly elected Labor government abolished the policy in 2008. Now, as the Liberal Coalition opposition demands its reintroduction, Reza's account is a potent testimony of how temporary protection exacerbates the crisis of displacement and leaves a lasting imprint on refugees' already troubled memories.

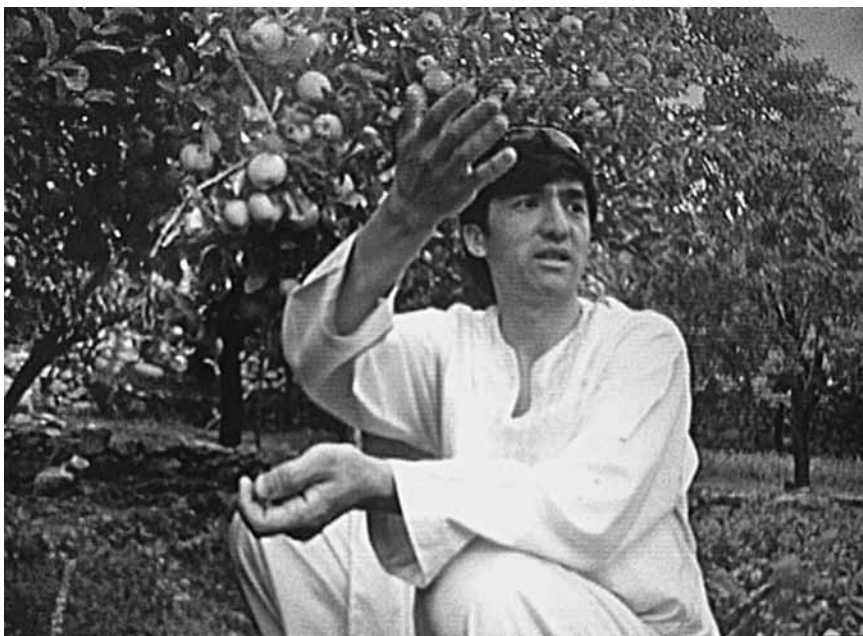
The follow-up interviews also highlight Hazaras' struggles to reunite their families and navigate grief while creating new lives. Reza says, "I got at the moment citizenship, [but] it still didn't solve my problem." He explains that refugees try to forget their loved ones because this is the "way of life" for them, but it is impossible.<sup>18</sup> Unfamiliar with concepts of individualism, Hazara identity and culture are inseparable from family and kin. Functioning in groups traditionally helped Hazaras fend against environmental hardships, superstitions, and warfare. Hazara families, particularly in rural regions, generally comprise extended family members from the husband's side living together or nearby, but Western humanitarian policies narrowly define the family as a nuclear entity.<sup>19</sup> In reuniting humanitarian entrants with family, Australia's Immigration Department draws from a restricted number of available placements and prioritizes resettlement for spouses and children,

and parents of unaccompanied minors, over other relatives.<sup>20</sup> Reza, however, emphasizes his duty to ensure his extended family's well-being and explains that belongings and culture are shared, along with "all the happiness and the sadness."<sup>21</sup>

Juma sacrificed his own safety to help Reza flee first; Reza must now save Juma's life. Deeply troubled, in his second interview Reza shares his difficulty in maintaining Juma's morale in their brief phone calls while Juma waits in Port Moresby for resettlement to a third country. Having lost contact with his family, Juma's despair escalates as he is "just *thinking*" and imagining his daughters may have been raped or kidnapped as bribes by rival ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Reza learned that Juma is waking up in terror that someone is hitting him and that he was robbed at knife-point on a public bus in Port Moresby and shot at in another incident. Juma desperately begs for news of his family, and Reza tries, in vain, to "make some words, good thoughts for him before he call me... to support him." But Juma's reality has turned to delirium, and hope to disbelief. Reza says when talking to Juma, Juma is "like flying in the air": life for Juma has become "'like a wind... Blowing up and nothing is real'."<sup>22</sup> Fearing for Juma, Reza pleaded for an urgent outcome from UNHCR and Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship but is powerless when advised that Juma's case is one of many. Their fate is symbolically entwined; Reza concludes that for as long as his brother remains in peril, his own life is destroyed and suffering will continue forever.

Crises can subside, only to reemerge later. As Reza prepares to make a return journey to Afghanistan in 2011, his anxiety and the plight of those left behind is heard in his third interview. Reza's mother, once a self-taught nurse in her community, is now vulnerable and debilitated by grief after her husband's death and the scattering of her family. Her final wish is to see Reza and his sons. While visiting, Reza will also tend his father's gravesite and pray for his soul. He hopes to show his sons his childhood home. But Reza is unsure of what he will find on his return, and he does not know whether some relatives are still alive or living there.

A study of a World War II Lithuanian refugee community in America shows that some refugees experience chronic grief, in which the "homeland becomes a shrine" in memory and the notion of return idealized.<sup>23</sup> Reza, however, makes no shrine of Afghanistan. As security continues to fail, civilian deaths rose sharply in 2011.<sup>24</sup> With their visible Hazara identity and increased Taliban activity in Ghazni Province, they face risks from roadside attacks or interrogation at roadblocks as they travel to Jaghori. Thomas Ruttig reported in June 2010 that the Taliban had issued "night letters," leaflets distributed at night containing directives and consequences of noncompliance, warning of road closures through Qarabagh, affecting the main route between Jaghori and Kabul. The night letters urged local residents not to block the Taliban from entering that region, signaling a possible attack on Jaghori. In neighboring Oruzgan Province,



A bittersweet return to his homeland in 2011: Reza visits a friend's apple orchard in Jaghori, Ghazni Province, while lamenting his many losses in Afghanistan. *Photograph courtesy of Denise Phillips.*

eleven Hazaras were decapitated in 2010, reportedly because of their ethnicity and religion, while *kuchi*, ethnic Pashtun nomads, set fire to Hazara homes in Wardak Province in continuing land disputes.<sup>25</sup> The prospect of return triggers persecution fears: Reza reverts to childhood memories of hardship and to the broader Hazara narrative of suffering over successive generations, their diaspora and political struggle against discrimination. He says, "I feel very—not safe. I feel very scared." Fatalism prevails. Compelled by love and duty to visit, Reza will entrust their safety to God and armed guards who will accompany them. The return journey will be one of snatching the memory of his homeland, as Reza says he will "try to . . . do it quick—and take some memory from there."<sup>26</sup>

After being resettled in Australia in 2011, Juma currently awaits an outcome of his application to sponsor his family's migration. Initial hopes of an interim reunion in Quetta, Pakistan, fade as his wife has neither a passport and resources, nor a male protector to accompany her on the dangerous journey across the Afghani border. Increasing sectarian attacks against Hazaras in Quetta also pose risks.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting extreme distress, Juma says, "My mind is not normal." He loses concentration when going out, sometimes finding himself in a location other than where he intended to go. Sleep is elusive and, when it comes, is a reprieve. Sporadic phone calls home are marred by grief, as his children plead to see him and say they can no longer "recognize" him. Juma says helplessly, "I don't know

what's we should do." Other memories and dates slip from Juma's grasp, but he knows the exact date when he saw his family three years ago. His only good memories are of playing and interacting with his children; he says, "Nothing better than that."<sup>28</sup>

The act of escape exercises significant agency; the refugee experience shatters Juma's identity and role as his family's provider. Unable to work while waiting in Port Moresby for resettlement, he feels "so bad" about his children.<sup>29</sup> He dismisses his serious disabilities, saying he will travel to seek farm work because "no one can look after my kids, and I have to find work and . . . send them some money and support them." Hopes of providing for them financially offer some control when helplessness dominates, but his desire to travel is also part of a pattern of restlessness. Juma explains his desire to "go away somewhere" to keep his mind occupied. Further agency is lost as Juma repeatedly thanks the Australian government for its support, and then pleads for a reunion, explaining that his "biggest problem is my family, because every day I lose my mind" and this is "too much stress on me."<sup>30</sup> While Juma waits on the UNHCR and government agencies for a resolution, family relationships and mental health dissipate.

There is a large body of scholarship on trauma and memory arguing that trauma defies representation,<sup>31</sup> along with recent criticisms calling for trauma narratives to be anchored within specific historical contexts to ensure at least partial knowledge of suffering.<sup>32</sup> A need exists, though, to reflect on skills for interviewing narrators still in crises or grief. Some suggest that oral history can "provide a cathartic release for . . . victims," facilitating a reflective process needed for recovery after tragic events.<sup>33</sup> I use interdisciplinary methodologies and value participating in the narrator's efforts to make sense of their experiences and derive meaning, but healing is beyond my role as an historian.<sup>34</sup> History's concern with change over time and its concepts of causality also differ from "those assumed by a model of guilt and reparation" or the therapeutic approaches stimulated by memory work.<sup>35</sup> I have written elsewhere about the ways that trauma and past injustice affect storytelling.<sup>36</sup> Here I discuss challenges encountered when interviewing distressed Hazara narrators and how I adapted my interviewing techniques in response.

In ensuring our narrators always come before our own research agendas, we may need to modify usual research approaches to decrease their anxiety.<sup>37</sup> If tortured, a person's ability to trust others can be damaged, and his or her sense of identity and usual belief systems challenged.<sup>38</sup> I exercised particular caution when interviewing Juma. After I confirmed agreement and traveled interstate to interview Juma, Reza told me Juma was leaving unexpectedly on a seven-hour trip the next morning to seek work in regional Victoria. That evening was the only opportunity to record his story. Reza added that Juma could not be still: Juma was often walking around, was "very, very sad," anxious and sometimes crying.<sup>39</sup> I accepted that the interview would probably not proceed.

However, as I sat with the family, Juma began willingly conversing and Reza interpreted. With permission, I made handwritten notes. Reza then moved us away from the television to continue talking and Juma read the interview information sheet previously sent. Interpreting, Reza asked me, "What do you want to ask Juma? What else do you want to ask him?" I realized I was being "given the interview" and gained permission to start recording partway through our conversation. This unconventional approach enabled Juma to proceed according to his level of trust in me, granting permission gradually and maintaining control of information shared.

Mary Marshall Clark suggests that when we listen to stories of tragedy, we adopt "a different level of consciousness about hearing." Drawing on contemporary trauma theory, this includes temporarily abandoning our own ego to engage more fully with the narrator's suffering and figuratively traveling to "the place and time where the trauma occurred." It entails a "frightening" timelessness in which "the narrator and the interviewer may be truly lost in the act of facing the abyss of catastrophic experience." Clark says that within this "abyss" the narrator may begin to tell what happened, prompting movement from "disorientation to reorientation."<sup>40</sup>

I favor abandoning scholarly reserve when interviewing and value Clark's groundbreaking scholarship on September 11 stories, but this approach requires particular caution against leading all participants into perilous territory.<sup>41</sup> Recalling past trauma can have a deleterious effect in the present. Traumatic memories can be triggered long after the event by associated external factors, such as talking, mood, smell, noises, or objects. Recall can be "overwhelming" and the traumatic event may become "potentially paralytic" for the narrator.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, when listening, interviewers can face universal fears of loss, death, aloneness, and human vulnerability. Not having had the narrator's experiences, we may lack coping mechanisms. We might not know how to respond or adopt defensive responses to block messages that threaten our own worldview. Interviewers' responses can include feelings of numbness, paralysis, and being overwhelmed.<sup>43</sup>

Sometimes I did not know what to say or ask next as Juma's evidence of torture and personal grief unfolded. Repeatedly beaten, his captors had tortured him with a knife and tried to pull his big toe off with an instrument, shown in hand actions to be like pliers. Doctors subsequently operated on what appears to have been internal injuries in his abdomen or back and amputated his toe because of infection. He needed more extensive surgery, for which he lacked funds. In broaching questions about his family, Juma sometimes stared straight ahead and explained that he suffers memory losses. He could speak more readily of his harrowing torture, while the pain of separation overshadowed all else: all-consuming and unbearable. I began avoiding direct questions about his family, and he seemed unable to verbalize his feelings. Effective listening skills include pausing to enable the narrator, particularly those traumatized, bereaved

or in cross-cultural settings, to process his or her thoughts and reflect on what he or she wants to share next.<sup>44</sup> Our dialogue has gaps and silences, some comfortable, others awkward and heavy; these reveal the rawness of Juma's circumstances, that all feels discordant for him, and underscore the challenges of engaging with present trauma and grief. Afterward, I was distressed and could not sleep.

In Reza's third interview, I subconsciously tried to shield him and possibly myself from the dangers he and his family face during their return journey to Afghanistan. Instead, I move toward Reza's hopes of seeing his extended family, saying, "It's going to be a big family reunion."<sup>45</sup> Reza responds politely, but my comment falls slightly flat and is short-sighted. I am later sobered by the fact that this is not a trip of joyous reunion but of uncertainty and unshakable dread. This is a return to a mother now depleted by years of grief, to his father's grave, to absences of family possibly scattered across the globe, and to his childhood home, which might be occupied by another. This is a return to the terror from which he fled as he navigates Taliban-controlled regions to be briefly reunited with his mother.

Interviewing in crisis settings can bring us face to face with life-threatening situations. Suffering intensifies when those with only temporary protection face reinterviews with the Department of Immigration or possible removal from Australia. It is not uncommon for asylum seekers to prefer suicide over returning to possible incarceration, torture, or death in their homeland. Some have committed suicide, tragically exemplified by Dr. Habibullah Wahedy, who hung himself in South Australia in 2003 after the department offered him \$2,000 to be "voluntarily" repatriated to Afghanistan. Other asylum seekers were returned to danger, such as Mohammadi Mussa Nazari, reportedly murdered by the Taliban within nine months of repatriation.<sup>46</sup> At the time of his first oral history interview, Reza feared being returned to Afghanistan. He graphically described how his persecutors would inflict retribution on him for fleeing, by cutting his hands, eyes, and nose and killing him slowly. Reza stated that he would kill himself if the Australian government rejected his application for permanent protection.

I acknowledged the seriousness of Reza's feelings and referred him to a culturally appropriate mental health and counseling service for refugees. I kept in close contact. Reza did not attempt suicide and received a permanent protection visa within the next few weeks. Yet this deeply troubling episode underscores the potential gravity of interviewing during crises. Reza may also have been desperately bidding for any form of influence with the Department of Immigration and we must not raise expectations that we have little power to fulfill. Additionally, as a sole interviewer in my projects, I have few outlets to express my own grief from listening. Within this emerging field of trauma oral history, we could develop an ethical charter to deal with critical situations and offer strategies to debrief secondary traumatization.

We should nevertheless resist paternalistic approaches that disempower the bereaved by ignoring their agency in choosing to tell their story.<sup>47</sup> In Juma's interview, I worried that probing might intensify his distress, even if he really wanted to participate. Rather than assuming what the narrator is capable or incapable of, we can ask what he or she is comfortable with. Acknowledging Juma's suffering, I asked, "Does it help to talk about it, or does it make it worse?" Unexpectedly pragmatic, he said, "Hmm, no I didn't feel anything. When something was the truth and a happen to me, then I just shared with you. . . . Nothing really make worse for me."<sup>48</sup> This proved a valuable lesson. Although his first sentence reflects numbness characteristic of being traumatized,<sup>49</sup> I realized afterward that Juma *was* comfortable talking with me. He was directly bearing witness to his daily reality, exemplifying the agency of traumatized or bereaved narrators.

Methodological adaptations can reveal information we might otherwise miss. Even in crises, Hazara culture revolves around family, community, and hospitality. Set appointments and one-to-one interviews in a quiet room are generally foreign constructs, belonging instead to Western contexts where individualism is the norm. In Reza's second interview, I adapted to a noisy family environment, with family members casually coming in and out of the room. After futile attempts to prevent these interruptions, I chose to respect Reza's home environment over my desire for unimpeded sound quality. Reza fondly recalled memories of his late father, always having a gift in his pocket for Reza, taking him to and from school, and playing with him on their farm where apricots, almonds, and apples grew. Then, as Reza's children sat on his lap while we recorded, occasionally chattering, they became part of what was until then an unspoken story. Their presence and my observations prompted Reza to share that it is through his adoration of them—never refusing them his affection—that he can honor and "bring back my memory of my father's."<sup>50</sup> Reza's greatest hope lies in being like his own father. Had I insisted on a controlled environment, this significant symbol of intergenerational love and hope would have been missed, while also possibly making Reza ill at ease.

With similar adaptations in Juma's interview, Juma describes his harrowing experiences while sounds of normalcy are heard around us; Reza's children laughing nearby and the sounds of us peeling and eating fruit, a customary dish served after dinner, are captured on the recording. These contrasts between normalcy and distress reveal how suffering is woven into daily life, with stories absorbed by every generation anew. I now better understand oral historians' ability to "adapt, be flexible and be creative" and "record interviews in a variety of circumstances."<sup>51</sup> There is no "single or universal 'right' way" to conduct interviews because "interviewing operates within culturally specific systems of communication."<sup>52</sup>

Although crisis recordings can contribute to the early formation of historical frameworks,<sup>53</sup> unresolved crises might require narrators' identities to be

protected and material withheld for a period of time. Fear features strongly in my projects. Some Hazara narrators fear that speaking publicly might adversely affect their asylum applications in Australia or endanger loved ones' lives. As complex narratives of both agency and victimization, they could also be misconstrued within Australia's deeply polarized refugee debate. Ethical responsibility includes consideration of both *how* and *when* material is disseminated, and careful negotiation of permission to publish. Sensitivity to grief also brings particular challenges in cross-cultural settings because ethnocentric attitudes may lessen our recognition of hardships borne by those from different cultural backgrounds.<sup>54</sup> Modern Western concepts of mortality are rationalized and scientific, with experiences of death often occurring in medicalized settings or vicariously through entertainment genres.<sup>55</sup> However, three decades of warfare in Afghanistan have made Hazaras crudely familiar with tragic loss, and I am still learning about their bereavement mores. Without a shared cultural background, it may be a long time before oral historians grasp unfamiliar meanings, if ever.<sup>56</sup> Yet we must guard against what Robert Canfield describes as a tendency to think "that if they do not complain as we do, they must not suffer as we do."<sup>57</sup>

By recording in crisis settings, we not only create primary sources historians traditionally seek out years afterward but also preserve raw emotions and experiences unique to particular time frames and engage with early processes of historical interpretation. In capturing Hazaras' stories at critical stages, my research shows how crises can become prolonged throughout refugees' lives. Grief spans across the interviews, changing but ever present. The effects of familial dislocation do not pass with gaining citizenship but continue. Separation from family members, or not knowing their fate, severely hampers the ability of both narrators to resettle and is likened to destruction of life. Although resilient in escaping, they are robbed of agency and tormented by uncertainty when awaiting outcomes of applications for asylum or family reunions. As families left behind become more distant within memory, love, longing and a culturally ingrained duty override survival mechanisms of forgetting.

My narrators' cross-cultural needs and traumatic experiences prompted me to abandon more formal approaches and relinquish control, thereby ensuring their well-being and allowing their cultural life to emerge. Interviewing required a balance between caution and confidence. This pilot study has identified rewards, risks, and concerns of such projects. It paves the way for further inquiry into the role of cultural influences in crisis settings and how traditional behaviors might serve to maintain fragile links with familiar pasts.<sup>58</sup> Finally, it is through willingness to listen to those in distress that we move beyond "otherness," connecting through our common humanity and enabling stories of injustice, trauma, and grief to be heard.



## Postscript

After a brief reunion with Reza, the mother of Reza and Juma passed away in Afghanistan on June 14, 2012.

## Notes

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# 3

## EXHUMING THE SELF

### Trauma and Student Survivors of the Shootings at Virginia Tech

Tamara Kennelly and Susan E. Fleming-Cook

**Oral histories by Susan E. Fleming-Cook with Yang Kim, Derek O'Dell, and Kristina Heeger-Anderson, Blacksburg, Virginia, 2009–10**

*On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho killed thirty-two people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg. He first shot and killed two students in West Ambler Johnston dormitory. Leaving a trail of blood behind him, he went back to his dorm room, changed his clothes, destroyed his hard drive, which was never found, and went to the post office and mailed a package with a video to NBC. He then proceeded to Norris Hall, where he killed five professors, twenty-five students, and himself. Yang Kim, Derek O'Dell, and Kristina Heeger-Anderson all survived Cho's shooting rampage. These three students were among the individuals whose voices are part of the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History Memory and Narrative Project.*

Yang Kim was born in Seoul, South Korea. His family moved to the United States when he was four, living first in California and then in Newport News, Virginia, where they own a service station and mechanic shop. He came to Virginia Tech because of the strong engineering program, the football team, and the fact that former Virginia Tech football star Michael Vick was from Newport News.

Yang stands out by his forthright presence countered by a slight hesitation. He appears strong and healthy—his dark eyes full of questions for me. Who am I? What is the purpose of the interview? What do I want to know? As I ask him to just tell me his story he appears to relax somewhat. He is an engineering student, but he is also an athlete, a soccer player. Athleticism can be an advantage when it comes to survival. Gonzales wrote about American survival rituals, "They are everywhere around us. . . . Sports are survival training in that they teach strength, agility, strategy and the endurance of pain."<sup>1</sup>

Yang's survival and healing process led him toward a life-changing decision. With the support of his family, he joined the military, a path he had not

considered before April 16. Thus, on graduation, his life is moving forward by serving his country and perhaps putting himself in harm's way again.

I believe Yang's survival and moving forward are the result of being the son of immigrant parents. They are a strong influence on his life. They are a hard-working team that refuses to quit, and Yang as their son has the same tenacity. His upbringing and background served him well and enabled him to make choices that led to his survival.

Yang was in Professor Liviu Librescu's Introduction to Solid Mechanics class when the shooting started.

YANG: We were just starting class...we heard a loud banging noise—maybe three—three loud bangs. People kind of laughed 'cause there was construction during that time. So we knew there was a lot of loud noises. At first we all laughed about it—what was that?

Then another three maybe six shots rang out again. And I knew those were gunshots because after I hear from my ex-girlfriend saying there were gunshots, I kind of put the two together.

SUSAN: Do you think you were the first one who might have recognized they were gunshots?

YANG: I have no idea.

SUSAN: I wonder if the professor did.

YANG: [The] Professor didn't 'cause I actually got up and grabbed all my stuff. Because I've been in—I was raised in Newport News, and in Newport News some places are bad neighborhoods. I've grown up in situations that I've taught myself if I ever...got into a bad situation, I would leave...That's what I did.

I grabbed all my stuff...I got up from my desk, walked toward the door. And Dr. Librescu asked me what was going on. I said, "Those are gunshots, and we need to get out of here!" That's the last time I saw him.

[Very slowly]

I walked to the doorway. I peeked out very slowly to make sure if there was anyone out there.

And I saw no one out there. I saw no one in the hallway.

About ten yards to the left, there was an exit door. That's our building, and we know that building very well...

You know, I played soccer all my life, so I knew I could sprint as fast as possible to get to that doorway, and that's what I did!...It was almost instant when I ran out that door and pushed open that door. I was running downstairs, and I heard a classmate of mine, Jamal. He actually followed behind me...

He says, "I've been shot!" I was shocked. I was like, "Are you serious? You've got to be joking!"

He [Jamal] was hunched over.

SUSAN: By this time were you in the stairwell?

YANG: Yes! We were running downstairs. So I went back, and he said, "Help me!"

I helped him out, and we were running downstairs. We met up with a girl that was waiting. I don't know why she was waiting. There's a little entrance door before you get to the hallway where the laboratories are, and she was standing there.

We went through the door, and I don't know if I told her there was gunshots or anything. I just tried to get out. We realized that for some reason that the door was barricaded. I was like, what's going on?!

I shook it kind of vigorously trying to get out and realized we couldn't get out the door and just turned around and went towards the first floor hallway. . . . The exit was barricaded. We turned around and went back toward the inside of the building, and a couple of grad students or researchers were out there, and a couple of them were asking, "What's going on? What's going on?"

We said, "There's shootings! Go back in!" I just screamed out, "*There's shooting! Get back inside!*"

SUSAN: You are such a strong person to get through all of that!

YANG: No—no—I don't really think that way. I think I would have been stronger if I had stayed and helped out . . . helped Dr. Librescu from passing away.

SUSAN: Would you tell me about him?

YANG: He was a great professor! He really *really* was passionate about his work, his class. . . . I remember that I wasn't ready for a test once, and he helped me out. He said, "It's OK. No problem. You can take it whenever you're ready." And he was always that person that . . . seemed like he really cared about his students. He wanted us to be very passionate about what we do.

SUSAN: You appear to be a very strong person. . . .

YANG: Very closed—I don't—well—a lot less social it seems like.

SUSAN: Oh, OK.

[Quiet]

YANG: I look at people differently.

[Pause]

I'm always kind of aware now of situations. I try to see what's this person all about really. But I've been trying to change. I've been trying to be more open—to be more friendly.

Because I've been less friendly ever since that happened.<sup>2</sup>

*Derek O'Dell was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. His family moved to Roanoke when he was five. He is quite a physical presence—much taller and more physically imposing than he appeared on the news. His face is handsome, though shadowed by what I perceived as deep suffering. His voice is quiet and controlled, and he almost sighs as he assures me that he is just fine about giving yet another interview. He says that it is his mission to tell everyone who will listen about what happened to him on April 16. He reveals that simple life choices aided him in surviving that day in Norris*

*Hall. For instance, his knowledge and experience as a chess player enabled him to instinctually anticipate the killer's next move and act accordingly. As the interview progresses, he smiles as he speaks about his close relationship with the girlfriend who was with him constantly following April 16, the fact he had just gotten accepted into the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, and the strength of his faith and love for family and community. The fact that he chose to stay at Virginia Tech to earn his advanced degree indicated the magnitude of his willingness to move forward.*

*He was in Christopher James Bishop's Elementary German class when they heard loud noises and were trying to figure out what they were.*

DEREK: So the gunshots... they seemed to stop for a second after multiple gunshots, maybe twenty or thirty of them, and then they stopped for maybe five or ten seconds and our door was still shut at that time. Then he [Cho] opened the door, and we heard the gunshots in our classroom.

And he started firing. He shot the professor first and then turned the gun on the rest of the class—on the students that were sitting closest to the door. Myself, Sean, Katelyn, Lauren were all shot pretty close in the same time frame.

Then after he unloaded one clip, he went over to the other side of the classroom while reloading and shot the students from the front row. He then went up the aisle-way and shot the students that were in fairly close proximity to the aisle. And he left our classroom after unloading a clip. So maybe twenty to twenty-four shots fired in the classroom.

SUSAN: When he came in, did he just leave the door open?

DEREK: Yeah—he just stood in the doorframe like he hardly entered our room when he fired the first magazine that he unloaded. So it was sort of eerie seeing someone in your doorway firing at you and firing at your classmates.

SUSAN: I would think because school is supposedly a safe environment that I don't even know how you would start to interpret that so quickly.

DEREK: I think for a lot of people it was difficult because you can't really—you let your guard down when you go into a classroom or even school....

Like my roommate during that semester was someone who was an Iraq war veteran. You come back from Iraq, and you feel safe, and you don't feel like you have to be on guard always until something triggers you! And now as a student and to survive something like this, it's like a classroom is not really somewhere that is safe for me. It's not somewhere I can let my security down.

So I think for a lot of students it was difficult to interpret it when it was happening. This wasn't just some nightmare I was having. For a lot of people, they were in shock first and just couldn't move—couldn't really comprehend things mentally in order to exert some physical reaction.

So after he left, we heard more gunshots down the hall.... I couldn't really comprehend what was going on. I knew this person was shooting at us, but it just didn't seem real.

Once he left our classroom, once I looked around at my classmates on the ground, it quickly became real.

He left our classroom door open. I could hear the shots echoing down the hall. At that point, I realized we had to do something, otherwise he would come back. We would be sitting ducks pretty much.

At that point I realized we couldn't make a run for it. A lot of our classmates weren't moving or weren't able to move at least. And then I realized that barricading ourselves in the classroom was really our only option. So myself and Katelyn went up to the door and kept it shut while Trey went around to check on a lot of people who had been shot....

Erin went over to the windows and tried to look out and find the police. The police had gotten there relatively quickly like after maybe two minutes or so.... She could see police down on the ground and [she was] yelling out to them. So it was just sort of confusing why they weren't up in our building.

We didn't realize that the doors were chained shut at that time. It was really difficult to see police down there and see Cho running around on our floor and not being able to do anything about it.

SUSAN: It was a small period of time, but did it seem like slow motion ever?

DEREK: Yeah, especially when he was in our classroom. I could only estimate how long he was in the classroom. It just seemed like forever.

Each trigger pull and each gunshot that was fired it just seemed like—I remember looking when he first fired at our professor, I remember seeing the casing pop out of the gun and just watching it twirl up in the air.

It is something that is just burned in my mind—not something I will ever be able to get rid of. It sticks in my mind. It was just like it was in slow motion. You can see it twirling. So it's something that time doesn't really seem—it's all relative in that case.

SUSAN: Can you tell me about how you just looked him in the face?

DEREK: Yes, while he was shooting in our classroom it sort of seemed like it was slow motion. I couldn't really react. I just sat there in shock in my seat. And this was probably all within five seconds or so.

I just remember as he shot the professor watching the casings pop out of his gun, and he turned the gun on Sean and then on the rest of us. I just remembered after he turned the gun on Sean, I got a brief glimpse of the barrel of his gun, up into his eyes and then just watching him pull the trigger and just remembering I had to move. That's when I started moving out of my desk and onto the floor.

Just looking into his eyes was pretty scary.

SUSAN: Just blank?

DEREK: Yeah there wasn't—it was just looking into emptiness almost—black and nothing there.<sup>3</sup>

*Kristina Heeger-Anderson was born in Ukraine, in a small town near the Black Sea by Crimea. When she was about seven, her family moved to Sacramento, California. Later they moved to Moscow and then moved to Fairfax, Virginia, where she went to high school.*



*It is difficult to associate the friendly, lively, talkative young woman with the familiar media image of her as a bloodied unconscious student pulled out of Norris Hall by two policemen. Kristina seems wise beyond her age. She is a slight, lovely young woman who exudes a remarkable spirit. In a matter-of-fact manner, she recounts the details of what happened in Madame Jocelyne Couture-Nowak's French class in Room 211, Norris Hall. Pings of ricocheting bullets caused the cinderblock wall to fracture in her face; chaos erupted around her as she hunkered over her desk chair and was shot three times. The images are forever burned into her mind. Yet as the interview progresses, Kristina moves forward, and her face lights up as she reveals she has started the Koshka Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to "safety and student awareness." Telling her story and making a difference by educating others is Kristina's chosen path toward recovery.*

KRISTINA: [Deep sigh] I remember—I guess the shooting started about 9:40. It was right before class ended. I remember class was winding down.

[Sigh]

I sat on the side of the wall, the closest end to the hallway. So I was—when the shots started going down the hallway I could kind of feel them the strongest. I remember just turning and thinking like—

[Pause]

I thought it was an ax personally. Later people said they thought it was construction because Norris was so close to all the building [construction] that was going on. But I remember thinking, Why was there an ax? It was very fast in a succession and rapid....

And that's not the first thing that pops in your head when you think of what's happening. So it was a little strange—caught us off guard, but people kind of looked around not knowing what's going on. At some point Madame walks over to the door...she peered out, and I don't remember her face, but Colin told me later that she came back with a look of panic, and well she saw him.

I'm assuming she saw the gun. And she darted back inside. She closed the door and said, "Call 911," and maybe "Get on the floor." 'Cause I don't remember her saying that, but I know we all dropped to the floor assuming the position of safety. I went to school in California where we had hurricane drills or tornado drills every so often. That's kind of what it felt like at first. Get under a desk; get under anything. I really thought, is this role-playing? Is this some kind of weird emergency procedure you do, like you practice?

SUSAN: Did your body just...did you just [automatically] respond?

KRISTINA: Your body—you just got under something. Whatever! I don't know.

I have *no idea* what told me to do it. They said—she said something. I saw everyone else around me get down. And so I remember she must have pulled a desk or something to the door because Henry Lee and Matthew La Porte went up—they were up in the front of the classroom eventually. They didn't sit in the front.

[Pause]

So really I was blocking my face. I was covering my eyes. The next thing really I knew, he came to the door. I assume he started shooting. I don't know. The first shot I heard, and I glanced back, and I saw him. He walked to the opposite side of our classroom by the windows. . . .

He crossed in front, which was, I guess, unlike the other classrooms; he started on the other side with us. He went to the other side. And I saw just the top of his torso, the sweater—the bullets that chopped the chest. I don't know what they're called. There's a name for them.

And—I'm pretty sure I saw the two guns. You know your mind blocks out a lot of things, but I think I saw the guns. I saw his face, and I think he was wearing a hat. And I just saw him looking down, and I just remember seeing his arms kind of moving in succession while he was firing shots, but I didn't realize it.

Somehow I knew this was bad. I glanced back, and I hid my face.

[Pause]

And firing—he starts shooting!

And it was very loud and people were screaming. Obviously, people are scared. I remember thinking—

[Pause]

You're going to get shot, so just take it and you know preparing myself for it mentally. And at that point I knew the word was "shot." But I didn't realize it was a bullet yet. I thought. I don't know what I thought!

I thought it was a paintball! When it hit me the first time—I've never been shot by a paintball or a real gun. That's what it felt like. It was a very dull rubber sensation, and he hit me in the back, my upper back the first time, and later that was the most searing pain—later that happened.

He left our classroom and came back three times. . . . I was curled on top of the desk. My knees were—It was one of those desks where the chair and the table were glued together. They're one piece, so my knees are on the floor facing the wall. And my head is on the chair, and my hands are covering my head. So my back is fully exposed. . . . I remember just well whenever he left—you didn't know when he left. People are talking; people are crying; people are coughing. People are around you saying, "Be quiet. Just be quiet. Everyone just shush."

I remember my chest. One bullet hit. He missed me by not very much. He hit the wall above my head. And the wall is like a fine gravel. I'm not sure what it was. The cement—the flakes fell off and hit my arm. And for some reason I looked up.

I don't know why to this day he didn't realize I was alive. I looked up, and I realized that the bullet was so close to my head. I was in so much shock. This was later.

I feel like that debris I inhaled—I started to get very, very thirsty. Then I couldn't speak. I actually from then on didn't say a word.... My back just hurt too much.... I somehow repositioned myself to lie back on the floor. And Colin told me not to move. And I said—I don't know if I said it—I said, "I *can't* help it!"

SUSAN: You were lying on your back?

KRISTINA: I repositioned myself to lie on my back. And we held hands! He took my hand, and we just lay there for a while. [Quietly]

And I guess by this point he had committed suicide.

Again looking back I didn't know that he did. And was like, what an idiot to move! Because the game was to play dead.

SUSAN: Did you ever look at his face? When you said you looked up?

KRISTINA: The first time. I never looked back. And his face was just [hesitates] put together, calm, stern. Just—this was a person that I felt knew what he was doing, and it was—it was methodical. And just the entire shooting itself was unfortunately very methodical. He planned it. He went in rows. And he went back. That's why many people were injured more than once.

SUSAN: How many times were you shot?

KRISTINA: I was shot twice in my back and once in my toe. And the one in my toe—I believe it was like—repelled off something else and went straight through my toe.

[Laughs] I'm trying to become more open. I'm trying to make it a more accessible part of myself. I feel like I closed it in for a while. I don't really talk about it with many people actually. You're one of the first people I've told what happened that day.

I'm going to start giving speeches through my foundation. I started a foundation after this happened. And my parents kind of want me to get out there.

I'm like (a) it's therapeutic, and (b) people want to hear about it. And know what happened and learn from it. So I feel like it is something that will help me move past it if I can talk about it the way I want to. And control it. It's definitely hard.

You know, I really don't want this to go—to be forgotten. So I hope spreading messages of hope and talking to other students like going to Northern Illinois and telling them that it will get better and that there's remembrance—*positive remembrance*.<sup>4</sup> You don't have to be stuck in this.

'Cause the biggest thing I fear is that I don't want this to define me.<sup>5</sup>

## Commentary

Between 9:15 and 9:30 A.M., Seung-Hui Cho, a twenty-three-year-old undergraduate student, chained the three main entrances of Norris Hall shut from the inside and left a note saying that a bomb would go off if anyone opened the doors. Cho was familiar with the building because he was taking a sociology course, *Deviant Behavior*, that met there that spring.<sup>6</sup>

A student unable to get into Norris because of the chained front door climbed in through a window to go to her class on the first floor. She thought the chains had something to do with building construction and did not report them. Students leaving early from an accounting exam on the third floor also noticed the chains but did not report them.<sup>7</sup>

Cho went into the Advanced Hydrology Engineering class of Professor G. V. Loganathan, shot and killed the professor, and continued shooting. Yang was in Professor Librescu's class when the shooting started in the classroom next door. On the way to class that morning, he did not pay much attention when his friend mentioned a school shooting. He did not realize she meant a shooting at Virginia Tech, but when he heard the banging noise, he recognized the sounds of gunshots and was able to act immediately.

Yang's quick assessment of the situation gave his professor a few more seconds to come up with a strategy to help his students escape. The seventy-six-year-old Holocaust survivor braced himself against the door, yelling for students to go out the windows. The first student out had to take down the screen, swing the upper window outward, climb over the lower window, and jump. Ten students escaped by jumping or dropping the nineteen feet to the ground below. The students asked Librescu to come with them, but he told them to go and stayed at his post. He was fatally shot through the door.<sup>8</sup>

Because of his background and experience, Kim had mentally prepared himself to act quickly in a dangerous situation. Although he escaped and helped another student escape, twice in the interview he expressed regret that he did not stay and help Professor Librescu barricade the door. His regrets may have been fueled by the fact that no one was killed in a computing class at the end of the hallway because the students successfully barricaded themselves in.

Cho ran across the hall to Christopher James Bishop's German class. He opened the door and started firing. When he left the room, those students who were conscious heard shots echoing down the hall. Although wounded, Derek acted quickly. He and Katelyn Carney barricaded the door with their bodies. They crouched down, wedged their bodies against the frame, and held the door with their feet and hands. Cho returned and managed to get the door open a few inches, and repeatedly shot at the door. Carney suffered head wounds from the door banging into her and was shot in her hand through the doorknob, but they kept him out. While barricading the door, Derek wanted to assist the wounded. As a biology student with plans to be a veterinarian, he hoped he could help stanch the bleeding.<sup>9</sup>

When Madame Couture-Nowak peeked out of her classroom and saw Cho, she asked Colin Goddard to call 911. The class tried to barricade the door with the teacher's desk, but Cho pushed into the classroom, killing her and some of her students. Goddard's call was the first call received by the Blacksburg police. He was shot in the leg and dropped the phone, but Emily Haas picked it up and begged the police to hurry. Cho heard her and shot her, grazing her twice in the head.

Haas lay there, playing dead with her eyes shut, but she kept the phone line open.<sup>10</sup>

Kristina Heeger-Anderson stressed the unreality of the situation as if it were some weird kind of role-playing emergency procedure. She remembered Cho's arms moving in succession while firing shots, but at the time she did not realize what he was doing. She tried to prepare herself for it mentally, but her comment, "I knew the word was 'shot.' But I didn't realize it was a bullet yet," indicates how difficult it was to process what was happening. Other students dropped to the floor or tried to get under their desks as if the lightweight desk-chair combinations would shelter them. Her words that the "game was to play dead" stressed the unreality of the situation, as if it were pretend, not a horrible, unthinkable reality.

As Kristina said, "School is the one place where you're supposed to be safe. You don't have to think about that in a school. I just think that for school to not to be the automatic safety place is a tragedy in itself... And the worse argument I hear, 'Well if I'd had a gun in Norris I could have stopped it.' I'm like, you have *no* idea until you're on the receiving end what your body is like, what your mind is like. How lucid you're *not*. How you're going to respond."

Even Yang, who correctly assessed the danger of the situation and responded quickly, was shocked when his classmate Jamal Carver said he had been shot. He thought he was joking. There is an unreality to violence. It is hard to instantly interpret. It goes against our expectations, particularly in a setting that should be safe. As Derek observed, a lot of people go into shock and are unable to fully comprehend or react to the horror of the situation. A kind of paralysis sets in before the violation of trauma.

All three students had strong family support after the shootings. Kristina said her family was very important in terms of healing: "One thing after this I couldn't be alone for a long time. I still have issues with that especially at night. I don't feel safe. I don't want to be alone. [They] gave me all the space and the time and were considerate. I'd say to my dad, 'Don't leave! Just don't even leave the room.' Because I was so scared. Even afterwards. I didn't think anyone was after me again, but you know you lose control. Someone takes out the stability. Who else but your parents to bring that back?"

Kristina lost two-thirds of her kidney, her gallbladder, and part of her intestines. She said, "I think I was in shock for weeks after because my body wouldn't allow me to think or process. I mean I didn't eat food or drink anything for seven days. I had a tube down my nose, and I couldn't walk." She was in pain and had to rebuild her physical core, as all her muscles had been torn apart. At first, she could not hold herself up. She focused on walking and eating. Her injuries affected how she processes food. She began by working on the physical part of healing; grappling with the emotional part came much later. She refused all counseling.

Once she was strong enough, her family focused on fun, and they traveled that summer to Málaga. After the shootings, her close relationship with her family intensified when she was legally adopted by her stepfather and took his last name.

Kristina was initially baffled by all the outreach of cards, wishes, and calls she received from people she had not spoken to in years. Then she realized there was a need for documentation and positive remembrance: "It needs to be learned from!" She hopes that by spreading a message of hope and talking to other students, people will not feel that they are mired in tragedy.

Her parents came up with the idea of the Koshka Foundation, which works toward improving school safety, creating student awareness, empowering student activism, and forging connections between survivors of various causes.<sup>11</sup> "Koshka" is Russian for little kitten, her mother's affectionate nickname for Kristina. At the time of the interview, she was planning to go to Finland to speak with survivors of the Kauhajoki vocational college shooting at Seinäjoki University of Applied Science.<sup>12</sup> She had already gone with a Virginia Tech group to Northern Illinois University to meet with survivors of the February 14, 2008, shootings there.

For Kristina, the focus on school safety and awareness is paramount. She said, "I realize I'm not fully satisfied by Virginia Tech's response to that since April 16th especially. So if I could just help other students to be aware of their surroundings." She observed that others had taken different approaches to violence prevention: "The discourse of violence after April 16 whether its gun violence or mental health issues, I'd rather leave that to someone else."

By talking about what happened in the way she wants to talk about it, Kristina is able to exert some control over the traumatic event. According to Dori Laub, a psychiatric educator and psychoanalyst engaged in the treatment of trauma survivors, the survivor remains entrapped both with the core of her traumatic reality and with the "fatedness of its reenactments." Heeger-Anderson found a way to escape entrapment by telling the narrative in her own way and, in Laub's terms, "re-externalizing" it, thus controlling an event that was out of control at the time it happened. By constructing her narrative in the way she likes to speak of it—whether she is speaking to the interviewer or to other trauma survivors—she puts outside of herself the contamination of evil. Through this articulation and transfer, she can break the cycle of entrapment and take the story back inside again.<sup>13</sup>

She fears being defined by the traumatic reality. By telling the story in her own way, she creates a new way of knowing the event and moves from being a victim of trauma to becoming an agent of history who defines her own reality.

Derek also emphasized not wanting to be defined by tragedy. He said he embodies the words of Dean Gerhardt Schurig of the veterinary school, who said, "Don't let this tragedy define Virginia Tech. Let your response define you

and define Virginia Tech." He takes very seriously the role of commemorating the thirty-two victims and providing hope for healing from the tragedy.

Once Derek's family realized that he was all right, they began to resume a "new normal." After graduation, he went with his girlfriend and family on an already planned vacation to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The trip felt like a reprieve. His girlfriend's support helped his recovery: "She never left my side for probably three weeks." Like Kristina, having a person right there was important. He also said the Hokie Nation and the outreach of the whole community helped the healing process.

O'Dell found writing about his experiences for Roland Lazenby's book *April 16th: Virginia Tech Remembers* cathartic and therapeutic: "I was able to almost exhume it from my body." His use of the word *exhume*, with its suggestion of digging up a grave, implies the kind of reexternalization that Laub discussed. O'Dell was in among the dead in the Norris classroom and needed to metaphorically dig himself out and separate himself from the contamination of violence in order to return to the living. Telling their stories compels the survivors to once again confront the agonies they previously endured, but it allows them to take control. Glenn Roberts, a psychiatrist with an interest in narrative in therapeutic encounters, said, "Suffering creates a silence, and it is in naming that silence that the beginning, and only the beginning, of a healing journey becomes possible."<sup>14</sup>

Derek wrote about the epiphany he had at the Relay for Life, just four nights after the shootings. The relay is an all-night fundraiser for the American Cancer Society akin to a camp-out on Virginia Tech's Drillfield, with participants bringing their own tents and settling in for a night of music, food, dance, camaraderie, and laps around the quarter-mile track. He completed thirty-two laps, one for each victim. During the final lap for Herr Bishop, he realized his professor's profound impact on his life and decided he would go back to school on Monday for Herr Bishop and his four classmates who were killed: "I could feel this resounding sensation that everyone who had been at the Relay for Life that night would be able to spread this message of hope to the new week's classes. It was our job to welcome back the frightened and anxious students and calm their fears and help them."<sup>15</sup>

Of the three students, Derek talked the most to the media. When he permitted a camera crew from CBS News to follow him to his first class since the shootings, he experienced a flashback to the violence of the week before.<sup>16</sup> "Eventually I learned that after doing the first couple of interviews, some good will come from this. That people will realize that this was a tragic event that happened to Virginia Tech and that people were suffering. We needed help in moving on from this," he said.<sup>17</sup>

He worked with Crystal Miller, a Columbine High School survivor, on a movie, *Columbine Everywhere*. He found it "comforting to meet her because with survivors it's sort of an understanding between us all that we know what we've

all been through, and I think in some way it makes us stronger.” He also volunteered with Teach for Jamie, a program to honor the legacy of Herr Bishop by teaching German to elementary school students.<sup>18</sup>

Healing does not come easily or all at once. Many stimuli can trigger traumatic memories. Even though Derek found some measure of catharsis, he said he did not feel safe in the classroom. He smelled gunpowder in his sleep and scanned every room he entered for an escape route.<sup>19</sup> The image of the bullet casing twirling out of the gun is burned in his mind. Almost two years later, Derek said he thought about the shootings every day. His method of dealing with trauma is to stay emotionally detached: “I’m more of a logical person, more of a scientific person. The manner of emotional detachment almost sounds devoid of emotion. But in a way, it helps me get through it.”<sup>20</sup>

Derek’s scientific detachment helped him speak. Kristina, in contrast, was struggling to make her story of trauma a more accessible part of herself. Considering how candid and communicative she was in the interview, it was surprising when she said she had not talked about it with many people. Yang avoided talking about that day unless people brought it up, and very few people have asked him about it. He said, “Any interviews I did were for him [Dr. Librescu] because the only interviews I would do were the ones that pertained to him to tell his story.”

Yang recalled his first dinner with his parents after the shootings. “My mom was, ‘I’m glad you’re OK. I’m glad you made it!’ My dad was like—My dad . . . he’s kind of a funny guy! He said, ‘See our son is strong enough! Our son can do that! Ha! Ha! See you can’t kill my son!’ I thought that is not as funny as you think, Dad! But my dad—he doesn’t show his emotions too much. He’s very old-fashioned—[he thinks] that a man should contain his emotions.”

Mr. Kim’s words imply a confidence in his son’s ability to handle dangerous situations. Yang does not mention a special family vacation after the shootings, but one senses the strength of their family unit. His response to his father seems wryly affectionate. Does he too think a man should contain his emotions? He said his decision to go to Officer Candidate School had a lot to do with his father, who thought joining the Air Force would be a wise decision because of the retirement benefits.

Yang mentioned an administrator from the Dean of Students’ office saying that people who go through traumatic events go through cycles: “And I don’t think I was really going through the cycles, but sometimes I would want to do different things during different times. During the fall, I was really committed to school. But during spring I wasn’t as committed it seems like. And I didn’t want to blame that on 4/16 or anything, but I’m usually not like that. So . . . I don’t know.”

When school resumed, Yang’s class had a small meeting. One of his friends was surprised to see him. People thought he was shot when he fell leaving the building. The meeting was not as emotional as he expected. He said, “It was



kind of more of a relief. We got to share each other's stories and know exactly what happened to every one of us. We were all still trying to make sense of what happened that day."

Sociologist Kai Erikson, who has focused on the social consequences of catastrophic events, wrote that trauma smashes through the mind's protective line of defense.<sup>21</sup> Yang's comments about being less open and friendly suggest that trauma adds a new line of defense between the self and others. Although he is trying to change, Kim said he is less social and more guarded with others. Trauma isolates the individual and erodes trust. It separates one from normal life.

In the wake of the shootings, Virginia Tech received more than eighty-eight thousand condolence items from all fifty states and more than eighty countries. People sent poems, banners, posters, songs, letters, cards, quilts, artworks, thousands of origami cranes, prayer chains, teddy bears, books of condolence, and even a car hood—inscribed with the names of the thirty-two victims—that had been driven in a race at Langley Speedway. People left items at a spontaneous shrine and wrote notes on the large white boards that appeared overnight on the Drillfield.

A kind of collective awareness grew out of the shootings. Across the country and around the world, people identified with the sentiments "I am a Hokie" or "Today we are all Hokies." People spoke of the Hokie Nation. Hokies United, a student-driven response group originally started after September 11, sprang into action the afternoon of the shootings. Residence advisors (RAs) at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) sent the Virginia Tech RA staff a book of black-and-white photographs of individual SCAD RAs holding the card, "We are all Hokies." A note that came with the book said, "We just want you to know that your extended RA family is there for you and will continue to be there for you. From now on there will be a bit of Hokie in all of us."

Engineers from the University of British Columbia sent a treasured "big Red" jacket, which is a red wool college varsity-type jacket with the UBC Engineers patch showing Lady Godiva on her horse. The card that came with it said, "We are traditionally very protective of the Red and strive to keep it within our University alone, but during this time of need, all schools must unify. Our strengths must be combined for such a tragedy shakes us all. You will be in our hearts and we hope that this Red will always remind you of this. Though many loved ones have been lost, hundreds of thousands more across our countries now stand by your sides... as we do."

Messages referenced the Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine, the Texas A&M bonfire tragedy, the Nickel Mines Amish shootings, the University of Texas shootings, the Hutus and the Tutsis, and many other tragedies and disasters.<sup>22</sup> Many artifacts included the peace sign or spoke of ending the cycle of a violent society. Stan, a student from the SMIC Shanghai school wrote, "The Virginia Tech incident left me feel [*sic*] a strong will of achieving the world peace.... People should love each other regardless of race, sex, and any backgrounds.... Peace,



Students visit the spontaneous shrine on the Drillfield on April 19, 2007. Using thirty-two stones from a local quarry, Hokies United students constructed the semicircular memorial on the night of the shootings. Another student added a stone for Seung-Hui Cho, the gunman. The cups contain candles used at a candlelight vigil. *Photograph by Michael Kiernan; courtesy of Virginia Tech.*

love, Freedom.' This is my most favorite words."<sup>23</sup> The Afghan Women's Network in Peshawar, Pakistan, wrote, "We grieve with you for the loss of love, the loss of such shining potential, and the loss to this, our global community."

As university archivist of Virginia Tech, I was charged with developing the libraries' permanent collection of condolence artifacts.<sup>24</sup> As I read the messages offering thoughts and prayers, sympathy and solidarity, it struck me that we also needed to hear the voices of those closer to home who had experienced the tragedy firsthand. After the shootings, the media inundated Blacksburg, but the sound bites they gathered did not tell the whole story. No voice could speak for all, but through diverse voices the many facets of the story could be told. The April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project collected narratives of more than seventy individuals from Virginia Tech and the larger community to learn their perspectives on the incident and the aftermath of this violent massacre. These trauma oral histories help make meaning of what happened on that day and afterward.

Those individuals who elected to tell their narratives of trauma and healing gave a great gift. Contributing their interviews to the collective memory improved our understanding of the many dimensions of the event. Some people agreed to participate because they wanted to speak of those who died. By telling their stories, the interviewees shifted the axis of power. Instead of

being victims defined by catastrophe, they became, as Mary Marshall Clark suggested in the context of her work with September 11, “history’s agents who define for the rest of us the multiple ways in which history is experienced and read.”<sup>25</sup>

Listening to the horrors of trauma can horrify the listener. Susan Fleming-Cook, reflected on being the main interviewer for the project.

Undeniably, all three students suffered intense emotional trauma. I can say only that the interviewees are moving forward, as I do not know if they are healing or have been healed. Each of them symbolized to me the bridge between survival and recovery. As a bridge provides passage over an obstacle, the students are in a transitory stage and have not completed their journeys.

Interviewing a survivor of violent trauma is stressful. It is a challenge not to appear stressed or posture a sense of rigidity. The first words of the initial exchange are powerful, and often humor, though seemingly out-of-place, relaxes not only the interviewee but also the interviewer.

The students’ deeply personal accounts often left me exhausted and shaken. A sense of guilt comes with this, a guilt not of a survivor, but of the collective. I am part of the Virginia Tech community. I can imagine myself, my family, and my friends experiencing the violence, surviving, or most horribly dying. As a Virginia Tech employee, mother, and wife, shared community enabled me to identify with the survivor to a certain extent, but there was a wall—a thick and high wall that I could never climb. But my understanding of the survivors’ accounts and my response to them stopped at being able to identify with their experiences. I was not there, and I could not know the fear, sadness, and pain.

Sadness after interviews became the norm. A one-time counseling session alleviated my stress and guilt. Rituals seemed to help. I did not want to be alone. One ritual, in particular, helped. I met my husband in a popular local restaurant for a glass of wine and a meal. In a public place, I could privately disclose my feelings to someone I trusted. I could not flee or ignore the trauma of how what interviewees revealed to me settled in my heart and mind. By sharing my sadness, acknowledging and verbalizing the suffering of the interviewee so soon after the interview, I was able to understand that recording survivor stories provided not a personal loss but a calling to the power of listening with compassion.

### **Let Your Response Define You**

School should be a safe place, but unfortunately it is not. We are all at the mercy of random violence. If we live in fear, the killer has won. It is easier to climb through a window or stand around or go about our business than to seek help or question why. Even in the room with tragedy, it is difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to act.

Yang Kim, Derek O'Dell, and Kristina Heeger-Anderson showed great resilience after the attack. They returned to school and earned their degrees. Derek and Yang were back in school just one week later. It took courage to tell their stories. By sharing their vulnerability, they demonstrated their strength. They bear witness for those who cannot speak for themselves. Every individual contributed another facet to the collective memory and deepened our understanding. By reaching out to others who have faced the violation of trauma, they empowered themselves. They insisted on being defined not by the traumatic event but by their response. Is giving an oral history interview a step in a healing journey? Perhaps through the telling, they become the healers for the collective as well as agents of history. By telling their stories to a supportive listener and by listening in turn to other survivors, they may find a way of knowing that breaks the cycle of entrapment.

**We remember:**

Ross A. Alameddine  
 Christopher James Bishop  
 Brian R. Bluhm  
 Ryan Christopher Clark  
 Austin Michelle Cloyd  
 Jocelyne Couture-Nowak  
 Kevin P. Granata  
 Matthew Gregory Gwaltney  
 Caitlin Millar Hammaren  
 Jeremy Michael Herbstritt  
 Rachael Elizabeth Hill  
 Emily Jane Hilscher  
 Jarrett Lee Lane  
 Matthew Joseph La Porte  
 Henry J. Lee  
 Liviu Librescu  
 G. V. Loganathan  
 Partahi Mamoral Halomoan Lumbantoruan  
 Lauren Ashley McCain  
 Daniel Patrick O'Neil  
 Juan Ramon Ortiz-Ortiz  
 Minal Hiralal Panchal  
 Daniel Alejandro Perez Cueva  
 Erin Nicole Peterson  
 Michael Steven Pohle Jr.  
 Julia Kathleen Pryde  
 Mary Karen Read

Reema Joseph Samaha  
 Waleed Mohamed Shaalan  
 Leslie Geraldine Sherman  
 Maxine Shelly Turner  
 Nicole Regina White

## Notes

1. Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why: True Stories of Miraculous Endurance and Sudden Death* (New York: Norton, 2003), 183.
2. This and other quotes are from Yang Kim, interview by Susan Fleming-Cook, Blacksburg, VA, July 28, 2010.
3. Derek O'Dell, interview by Susan-Fleming Cook, Blacksburg, VA, March 13, 2009.
4. On February 14, 2008, Steven Kazmierczak shot multiple people on the campus of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, killing five and injuring twenty-one, before committing suicide.
5. This and other quotes are from Kristina Heeger-Anderson, interview by Susan Fleming-Cook, Blacksburg, VA, February 16, 2009.
6. Timothy W. Luke, "April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech—To: Multiple Recipients: 'A Gunman Is Loose on Campus...'" in *Tragedy and Terror at Virginia Tech: There Is a Gunman on Campus*, ed. Ben Agger and Timothy W. Luke (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 6.
7. Virginia Tech Review Panel, *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech April 16, 2007: Report of the Review Panel Presented to Governor Kaine, Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, August 2007), 90.
8. *Ibid.*, 27, 91, 93.
9. Roland Lazenby, ed., *April 16th: Virginia Tech Remembers* (New York: Plume, 2007), 34.
10. Virginia Tech Review Panel, *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech*, 27, 90–91.
11. <http://koshkafoundation.org/about-us/>.
12. On September 23, 2008, Matti Juhani Saari, a twenty-two-year-old hospitality management student, shot and killed ten people at the Kauhajoki School of Hospitality before committing suicide.
13. Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–58, 69. Laub and Geoffrey Hartman cofounded the Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.
14. Glenn Roberts and Jeremy Holmes, *Healing Stories: Narratives in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.
15. Lazenby, *April 16th: Virginia Tech Remembers*, 163–67.
16. *Ibid.*, 173–74.
17. O'Dell interview by Fleming-Cook.
18. In a similar program, Teach for Madame, volunteers honored the legacy of Madame Couture-Nowak by teaching French to elementary school students.
19. Tamara Jones, "Deceptively Strong," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/14/AR2008041403101.html>.
20. O'Dell interview by Fleming-Cook.
21. Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York: Norton, 1994), 228.
22. The April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City killed 168 people and injured many more. Two senior students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed twelve students and a teacher and then themselves in the Columbine High School massacre in Columbine, Colorado on April 20, 1999. On November 18, 1999, the forty-foot-high stack of logs for the Aggie Bonfire, an annual tradition at Texas A&M University, collapsed during construction, and thirteen people were killed. A gunman took hostages in West Nickel Mines School, an Amish one-room schoolhouse in the Old Order Amish community of Nickel Mines in Lancaster County,

Pennsylvania. He shot ten girls, killing five, before he committed suicide in the school-house. On August 1, 1966, Charles Joseph Whitman, an engineering student and former Marine, shot and killed fourteen people and wounded thirty-two others around the Tower of the University of Texas at Austin. More than five hundred thousand people were killed in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 in which the Hutu-led government forces targeted the Tutsi population.

23. The SMIC Shanghai School is a company-run K–12 school for the children of employees of the Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC) in the Zhangjiang Hi-Tech Park of Pudong, Shanghai, China.
24. Tamara Kennelly has served as university archivist at Virginia Tech since 1993.
25. Mary Marshall Clark, "Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe: Reflections on the September 11, 2001 Oral History Memory and Narrative Project," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 257–58.

# 4

## TALKING CURE

### Trauma, Narrative, and the Cuban Rafter Crisis

Elizabeth Campisi

**Oral histories by Elizabeth Campisi with Cuban rafter crisis survivors conducted in Miami, Florida; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Rochester, New York, 1998–2001**

*Cuba was one of the countries that experienced severe aftershocks from the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991. By the summer of 1994, the severe economic austerity program that the Cuban government had implemented in response combined with increased repression to bring social tensions on the island to a boiling point. Since the 1960s, the Cuban Revolution had had at its disposal mass exodus to the United States during periods in which social tensions threatened the existence of the government. Thus, in the wake of rioting in downtown Havana in early August 1994, after Fidel Castro announced that he would allow anyone who so desired to leave the country, thirty-four thousand launched themselves into the Florida Straits on rickety rafts and small boats, knowing that the United States had traditionally welcomed Cubans fleeing the island as heroic refugees from Communism.<sup>1</sup> With the Cold War over, however, political calculations had changed. In a press conference on August 19, President Clinton labeled the rafters “illegal refugees” and sent them to join the approximately fourteen thousand Haitians already being held at the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, while American leaders explored other so-called safe haven options in the region.<sup>2</sup> Eight and a half months later, the Clinton administration decided to admit most of the Cubans (and only a few of the Haitians), but the last one did not leave the base for more than eight months after that. This meant that thousands of people spent up to sixteen months in a hot, dusty military detention center on the remote base.*

*From January 1995 to January 1996, I worked at “Gitmo” as a temporary employee of the Justice Department’s Community Relations Service. For the first four months, I worked as a resettlement interviewer, and then served out the rest of the year as a mediator in the Cuban camps. My fascination with the Cubans’ idealism, the creative expression that was a major feature of the camp culture, and the fact that I was troubled*

*by some of the things I witnessed in the operation inspired me to do an oral history of the rafter crisis, for which I interviewed twelve Cubans who had been detained from four to sixteen months on the base. The interviews covered the events leading up to the rafter crisis and life in the camps, as well as their upbringing in Cuba, what led them to flee, and their initial experiences of life in the United States.*

*Augustín Hernandez, a computer programmer in his forties who spent fifteen months in the camps, describes the rioting in downtown Havana on August 5, 1994, and Fidel Castro's arrival to survey the scene.<sup>3</sup>*

AUGUSTÍN: Fidel arrived fast. Fidel comes surrounded by a group of people. I saw a mess of them come. When they got there, I get up on one of the lions on the Prado, and I see a bottle that they threw at Fidel from the building, and it broke about a meter and a half... at Fidel! Incredible. They almost hit Fidel with a bottle. So, the bodyguards go up to those buildings, and at best they made a lot of problems for the [people in the] buildings [laughs]... But, yes somebody threw a bottle at Fidel from that building. Many people don't believe that they threw a bottle at Fidel like that. They threw various bottles, and one landed half a meter from Fidel.

That happened the fifth of August of 1994. From then on, the government understands that the pressure cooker is about to explode. So it uses a very old tactic, that it had used in '73, that it had used in '80, and that they decided to use in that moment, because if not it was going to get out of hand. Fidel then says that those who want to leave can go by their own means, they can go.

Yes, I was there. That same night, the fifth of August, when I get to my house at about ten o'clock, I had to walk from almost the tunnel [of Havana harbor] to my house [in Havana del Este]. Fidel is speaking. He says that he is not going to hold back the borders, that they [the crowds] had killed a policeman, that he isn't going to protect those who want to leave, and that whoever wants to leave should go. That had been coming since the day before, with the people on the rafts. We already had some rafts prepared. We had begun them days before, a week before. When they said that, we took them out to the roof fast and I say to them [the workers] well, "what I want today is that you finish all of this."

The situation was very bad... the pressure cooker was about to burst. We had already told ourselves, "they have to free this up, because this is bad." They had already killed, they had stolen two ferries from Regla, the people were out on the street, grabbing whatever they felt like, and the government was not going to permit things to get out of hand. I said that the same thing had to happen as happened in '80.

*Sylvia Gonzalez, a psychologist in her forties who spent fourteen months with her daughter in camps in both Panama and Guantánamo, further comments on the situation.*



SYLVIA: Well, you know, the government wanted it to happen. It was provoked by the government, the people didn't provoke it, so they could come out clean, so that all the counterrevolutionaries would leave, and they would clean house, because things were bad in Cuba then. Writing was appearing on walls, appearing on the streets, "down with Fidel," and things like that. It was a charged atmosphere. And Fidel said, "Let me get these people out of here." He knew there were a lot of intellectuals; they weren't falling for the usual tall tale. And he became afraid of that. And that's how things were.

*It was one thing to dream of escaping all the problems on the island; leaving everything behind to confront death on a raft in the middle of the shark-infested Florida Straits was another. Augustín's journey, below, was emblematic.*

AUGUSTÍN: The morning of the 19th of August was a mix of happiness and sadness. Happiness because I was leaving Cuba, I wanted to leave Cuba. But, well, sadness because I left a lot of people behind, a woman, children, parents. My father said goodbye to us there [at the beach].

He was there until we left. After that I never saw him again. I said to Papi, "Take care, take care of mom." My father died last year [from cancer] as you know. I never saw him again. My papa helped me make the raft, and he wanted his children to leave. If he couldn't go himself, he wanted his children to go. So, he said goodbye to us. I remember that I was in the water, all the way in the water. I took off a watch that I had, and I gave it to him. I say, "Papi, here, I have a watch." From there, I turn around, I launch myself into the water, I get into the raft. That was the last memory of my papá [asks to stop the tape and goes into the bathroom to compose himself].

So, we were in the water for only three days. We would have been about some twenty, twenty-five, thirty miles... the hills of Havana were still in sight, the tower of the Santa Cruz rum factory was still in sight. So, there are some who want to go back, they were afraid, they got scared, the first night.

First of all, nights on the sea are terrible. It's terrible because you can't see anything. Everything is dark. The sea gets as dark as chocolate. Like chocolate espresso. All that you see are those little fish; they reflect the light of the moon. They are shiny, but the sea is dark. That part of the Florida Straits is very deep, the water is very dark.

We were myself, the two brothers, and the other people, we were all adults. Two friends, one older, the other like us, my oldest brother, two children, one younger girl. The oldest one was about thirteen, and the little one about eight or nine. There were ten of us altogether. The children, I saw them when they got on the raft. One hit herself in the face; she would have killed herself if the Coast Guard didn't rescue us, because they got under some cloths. I thought that they were going to die, because they began vomiting... vomiting... vomiting... vomiting... vomiting. I thought that they were going to die.

They didn't eat for the whole trip, they were vomiting, vomiting, vomiting. And I didn't see them again until the Coast Guard rescued us.

I was afraid, of what everyone is afraid of [death], and I drummed on the inner tubes, on the deck, I drummed... to make sure they hadn't gotten lost over there. They had planned what they were going to do... if the raft turned over or if the inner tube burst or lost air. There is sure death, without escape. They told each other, "Well, we have to die here as fast as possible to suffer less," that was what they thought.

So, the next day, having to row, the rowing, and only that, the burning, and rowing, rowing, rowing, rowing. I saw a huge shark, huge, black and white. We saw a lot of movement in the water, it seems that there were sardines, and many seagulls, and in that the hump of a shark like this [gestures], at about ten meters. Then it was as if they had put a motor on the boat, on the raft. We left rowing... fast.

Outside of that area there were no more sharks. We saw a flying fish jumping over the water. The second night we saw a lot of rafts that were calling us, so that we would get close to each other, and pass the night with them. Because on the high sea all of the rafts that met tied themselves together. But we couldn't get there, the current didn't let us. The ocean got very rough and there were waves of one or two meters. And that boat, up and down, up and down, up and down, up. The waves were about two meters and we couldn't get over to where they were. And that night passed, we didn't see more rafts.

The third night arrived, and that was the worst of all. Because we were exhausted and sleepy. We finished the food; we didn't have any more food. Almost everyone was the most exhausted physically. I began to feel bothered... on the buttocks, because they were raw flesh already, because of the little stick I was sitting on for the trip. So, my body began to peel, because I urinated on myself in the same seat. And the water came in, the salt, and the urine, and my legs began to peel, and that dampness, *ahh*.

Ah, that night we saw... so there had been many small planes from Brothers to the Rescue, but none passed over us. We made signs, but they were already busy with other people. Night arrived... and that was that last night... because it seems that we arrived at a traffic point in the Straits of Florida. We came to a night where there were many boats, but many boats. I remember that there was a whirlpool, and we began to turn around. We couldn't get out of that whirlpool, and we would have died in that place.

I took off the t-shirt I was wearing... we poured alcohol on it and we lit it, and we signaled the ships... and the ships shot red lights at us, *ch, ch, ch*. We saw red lights as if we were in a danger zone. An Italian ship, I'll never forget it, the *Giuseppe* almost flipped us. Because it got on top of us, and we said "it's coming to rescue us," but rescue us nothing, because we began to row over to them, out of ignorance, and we continued rowing and we almost [hitting fist into hand] crashed into the boat. We almost flipped over there, because the

boat had turned off all of its lights. The boat when it passed by us was totally dark, like a deserted ship...ghost. An Italian ship. It almost flipped us. So, well, we found out that it was the United States that had put out the order not to rescue anybody.

Afterwards in Guantánamo, the Marines themselves told us that, yes, the United States had given the order to the world, you know the United States does that in the world, you know that [laughing], that no ship take in any rafter in the Straits of Florida, that that was their problem, and they had named the operation "Sea Signal." So, none of them were going to take in any...that that was the United States' problem, and everybody, all the countries said, well, that's your problem, take them in...and no Italian ship could take us in.

So, we said, "Well, gentlemen, what we need to do here is stop rowing, pull in the oars...." The children began to cry, the woman began to cry...and the man who was afraid started to say that the north wasn't in the north, that the north was in the south, and that he knew, that he had to send us over there, and there almost was a fight, because his, his nerves were so bad. And I had to throw him three or four "*pingas*" so that he would calm down. Yes, because if not, we would have fallen overboard. Three or four of us came together, and he arrived as another one, and the other two together, who I met on the raft. I say that if he didn't calm down we would have thrown him overboard, because, apart from all of our problems, if we would have had people in a panic, panicked because they couldn't stand it, that would have been...the women crying. Well, I shut down the situation there, which was the most difficult. I thought we were going to die. I thought that our own people were going to sink us.

When I woke up, without eating, we now had no food, water yes, but food no. I woke up there, everybody now exhausted. That sun, three days. It rose. We didn't even have a watch, just an old compass. I woke up. It was seven or eight in the morning, we see a white point coming toward us...fast. It's a ship that's coming, from the north, a white point. When, well, we continued rowing, the point gets bigger and bigger, until we see that it was a ship. When the ship, it had seen us supposedly...we see the ship, which pulls up next to us, is an American Coast Guard cutter. I say, "Wow, an American Coast Guard ship." Nothing less than a movie. I say "wow," it was imposing, that Coast Guard ship. The red stripes, and the big letters from one side to the other say "Coast Guard," and the American flag...in an official American thing, nothing more than....So, I say, "That is the American Coast Guard." The Coast Guard sees us, and pulls up next to us...and it speeds up its motor and leaves. The women began crying again, the men screaming [laughs]. Everybody upset, and that they weren't going to rescue us, the women say [high voice], "They aren't going to rescue us," now crying. I say, "Shit." For me, for me inside I say "Shit, to hell, we're going to die like this" [laughs]. So, after it runs about two or three hundred meters, it turns around *shweeu*. It seems that it was looking for a way to get us on board.

*Augustín had left in time to find out that he was going to be sent to Guantánamo. Others were surprised to find out where the Coast Guard ships were taking them. Pancho Fernandez, a barber in his thirties, spent fifteen months in camps in both Guantánamo and Panama with his brother, who had been jailed for twenty years as a political prisoner. He was one of the people who had been unaware that he was not going to be admitted to the United States when he embarked on his journey.*

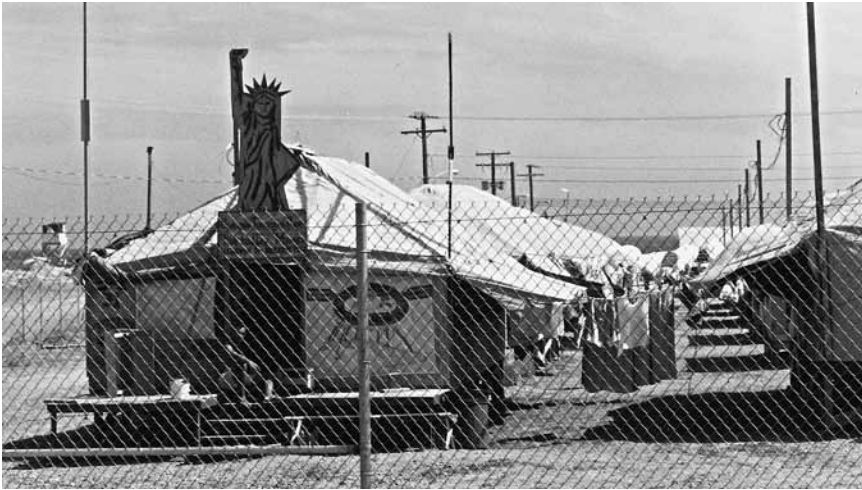
AUGUSTÍN: A military woman stood there in front of everybody on the boat and then she read us a piece of paper . . . they gave us a paper by the leaders of the United States, and the things that the President said to us, that by order of the President, we wouldn't travel to the United States and we are going to a secure place, which was the naval base at Guantánamo. So, imagine, when I saw that, I thought that I was going to die there. I said "Ay, mi madre, please, back to Cuba again, it's not easy." Everybody began to feel bad, because the people didn't want to go back to Cuba again. You know about Cuba, that they would send you back isn't easy. Of course, everybody began to get desperate and worried because of that. Because they were afraid that they would send us back, understand?

*Some people felt desperate, while others were just indignant, as Raul Ruiz, a former nightclub sound engineer from Havana in his thirties who spent a year in Guantánamo, describes:*

RAUL: Telling us by microphone that we had to go back to Havana, that we would never enter the United States, that we were economic emigrants. So, that political pressure [hitting fist in hand] over months was a disaster because it discourages you, it disenchants you, because supposedly one left Cuba for all that injustice that you know was there . . . so one left to get to this country, the country of liberty, the country of democracy. So, the government of this country grabs us, and puts in Guantánamo, and begins that psychological treatment on us . . . not wanting to give us attention, not wanting to give us clothes, but only food, not giving us any type of information. We spent months where we didn't know what was happening in the world.

*President Clinton made the decision to send the Cuban rafters to Guantánamo so fast that the military struggled to handle the influx, and living conditions were accordingly terrible during the first few months of the operation. Often, there were not enough supplies of clothing and medicine, and although there was enough food, it was poorly distributed. The military commander initially in charge of the base, Brigadier General Michael Williams, acknowledged the problems, saying, "It's a mess. . . . You can't help feeling sorry for these people."<sup>4</sup>*

*Guillermo Moreno's description of the first few nights on the base reveals how disorienting the situation was. A young man in his twenties, he had been a design student in Havana before spending fifteen months in Guantánamo.*



Public art at Camp Delta, 1995, displays the symbols associated with the rafter identity: the Statue of Liberty, painted on a piece of plywood, is attached to the doorway to the tent. A picture of a raft with oars is painted on a sheet that covers up a window opening. Photograph by Elizabeth Campisi.

GUILLERMO: For the first nights, when you got up, you got dizzy, like this, and you went back down dizzy, like this, *zziiii*. Because you get off the boat and everything makes you dizzy, it seems like you're still in the water, *chhhh*, walking. And that first night that we slept there, *pseu*, man, everyone had a nightmare, everyone, everyone, everyone. I remember that I was sleeping, and the same nightmare came to me, because I heard people screaming, people right there next to me were really screaming. And it even made me scared because I hear noise, noise, noise, noise, noise, noise, and when I turn around like this, I wake up and turn back around, some lights came in, and it was the tractors that were making a camp right there next to us at night. They worked by night more than by day, because the sun is very strong during the day. And so they put those tractors in there at night, clearing that. *Oyyy*, that gave me a scare, that right here they're going to run us over with the tractors and they're going to bury us here. *Hmhum*. And besides that, well, it did that to everyone, so everyone was screaming, and they had their other things, the traumas from the trip and all of that, right. But that was the most dogged night. And when we arrived and they put us there, sitting on the ground, and the guards with machine guns like this, I was, *eeeeee*, and everyone was super scared. The people said "*ay Dios*."

*Sylvia's description illustrates what the initial conditions were like for women.*

SYLVIA: When we arrived, it was tremendously disorganized. We hadn't bathed or brushed our teeth in exactly eleven days. Nothing, nothing. Eleven days

without having any water to wash out our mouths, without clothing either, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. After eleven days they gave us a little pail of water for the first time, white like this [gesturing]. A little pail like this size. For everything. That little pail of water for all day, with some small tanks that they brought in there. And the food was little boxes, those little brown military boxes. They were the worst brown ones of all. Nobody could eat them. Everything was hard; everything was raw, and spicy, spicy, spicy. If you ate it one day, you got hemorrhoids the next. People started to get hemorrhoids because it was so spicy. There wasn't anybody who could eat it. And my daughter was, well, what can I say? Imagine, when my daughter left Cuba she was menstruating. My daughter smelled like, what do you call it? A dead mouse, a dead mouse, a dead mouse. I don't know how she didn't get an infection. The amount of shame she experienced, because in those conditions in front of thousands and thousands of men....

*The behavior of some of the military guards was often a problem with which people had to contend as well. Since they had no training in dealing with civilians, most of the members of the military just followed their own personal proclivities. Some would do passive-aggressive things while others showed a great deal of kindness and camaraderie toward the Cubans. However, others were cruel and abused their authority. Sylvia describes a traumatic experience she and her daughter had at the hands of a few soldiers.*

SYLVIA: One time my daughter and I were sitting outside the tent. And since it was like 6:00 or 6:30 at night, because we were waiting for the long line to end, to go get food. You had two options, you went to get the food, you ate, you ate in the dining room, or you went to get the food and brought it back to the tent. We always went to get the food and we took it back to the tent and ate in the tent. So, that day we had gone to look for food and we were sitting there like that, in the front of the tent... eating. And suddenly they were all over us like this, like this, a deployment of soldiers surrounded us, *dududududud*, they came in like this, *rurururu*, fast like that. We were with our plates of food in our hands, "what's happening, what's happening?" And what was happening was in our own tent. They caught us off guard [hitting hand in open palm]. Look, *muchacha*, they came into the tent and finished us off. They finished us off. And since we were sitting outside in front of the tent, the last thing they did was jump on top of us like this, and when they jumped on top of us, the plates of food went flying and... I have the handcuffs here; I brought them with me [from the base].

They handcuffed the two of us, and they put us in a truck, and they took us to the command post. So, nothing, because, they say that somebody was drinking, that he had gone into our tent. So, they took us there, and when I arrived at the command post, you figure, I was about to lose it, my daughter was white as a piece of paper. She had just finished eating, and my daughter began to

vomit, eh, and in a little while I began to vomit too. The food paralyzed us. Yes, so well, I asked him, how is this possible? The soldiers saw us outside eating, how can you treat us like this, how can you do this to us? So they let us go, the handcuffs, they gave us a glass of water to drink and they took us to the hospital to take our blood pressure, and, and they gave us some recognition. And afterwards they took us back to the camp. "Oh, sorry, very sorry, very sorry," but, already, I was like three days with diarrhea and my daughter was the same, and all of that because... the damage was already done.

Like that, like that, like that, like that, those things, *mi hija*. How can I tell you all the things we went through there? It was constantly, constantly, constantly, constantly... The more you were careful, the more you... and we were decent people, people who supported each other, people who didn't stick out. And we were always staying away from crowds. Look, we took our food back to the tent. We never ate in the dining room. So you know. It was like that, constantly like that. And when it wasn't with you, it was with the person next to you, and if not, with the person in front of you. In other words, you were constantly living with unpleasant things.

Humiliating things, you know. A hard, hard, hard situation. Really hard, really hard, really hard.

Yes, and there were beatings there, there were beatings, just so you know. There were beatings. And abuse, you know, people tied hand and foot, they were handcuffed hand and foot, and they were beaten. You know, that's an abuse of power, an abuse of power.

I saw a soldier open up a wound in a man's foot with his boot that took five stitches [to close]. He stood on top of his foot... and he grinded his boot like this [makes motion with foot] on, on, on, there, there, until... until he created a wound like this, standing on top of his foot like that, like an orange peel. I saw that right in front of me, just so you know. They filled the wound with dirt, and everything. Imagine, that man, he had to go [to the clinic] two times a day to heal that. I saw them do that right in front of me. He was handcuffed and thrown on the ground... they did that to him. They handcuffed him and they threw him on the ground, and they did that to him.

And the man hadn't done anything; he didn't do anything, or anything. The man was right next to me; he even had a sack of clothes, plus a sack of clothes from other people. He was carrying a sack of clothes from some women. They let him have it from above, they took away the sacks of clothing, they threw him face down on the ground, they put handcuffs on him, on his feet and hands, and the soldier told him, "Ah, here you have a wound, here in your..." and he asked how it had happened, and the man said he got it playing on the football field in the camp. And he [the soldier] put his boot on it [making a grinding motion with her foot] and *tracaracaracaracar, ssssst*, until he opened it up and the blood flowed like this. That man, seized with such terrible pain like that. I'll never forget that, never.

No, *hija*, what can I tell you *vieja*. What can I tell you, *hija*, what do I have to say? The things that I saw. A deployment of, an abuse of power is what was there. A psychological war, you know.

*In December 1994, after rioting broke out in the camps in Panama, where eighty-six hundred people had been moved at the beginning of the operation to alleviate some of the stress on the Guantánamo base's resources, the military retaliated against many of the residents of the camps. Sylvia describes one situation in which soldiers singled out a group of women for reprisal.*

SYLVIA: In camp number two, there hadn't been a revolt. The revolt was in Camp One. But the military, as a product of what happened in Camp One, charged against the people in Camp Two. And by the dawn of the day after the riots, all of the soldiers mobilized, they disguised themselves, they painted themselves...they were painted in a green paint; they painted all of their faces so we Cubans wouldn't recognize them. And they came into the tents at dawn when the people were sleeping, and they cleanly beat women, men, and everyone.

Afterwards, the next day, in the morning, they grabbed the women from the tents. They only did that in part of the camp, the back part of the camp. And they put them through everything, they took off their clothes, they stripped them, and they made them walk around the whole camp, in the middle of the whole camp, in the front part, like that, two by two, in a line on one side and a line on the other side. And they marched those stark naked women down the middle.

We Cubans threw them; some people took off their shirts and threw them. Others threw a towel so they could cover up their bodies. Afterwards they took them naked to the dining room, and they sat them down at the dining room tables, and they put a breakfast tray [rapping on table] in front of them.

That's what it was [like a rape, in response to interviewer's question]. I wasn't from Camp Two, I was from Camp One. But when Camp One was destroyed, they got us and they went...they grabbed the people and they distributed them among Camps Two, Three, and Four. In Panamá there were four camps. So, they redistributed the people from One. Camp Two was a family camp, where there were more families. They took everyone who was part of a family to Camp Two. Since I was with my daughter they sent me to Camp Two. When I got to Camp Two, I found myself in that phenomenon.

That was like three or four in the morning. And over there, they broke legs, feet, bones, and everything, they did away with everyone. There were people who, people who had all their teeth knocked out. They destroyed...

They jumped in there at dawn, when everyone was sleeping [knocks on table]. They grabbed various tents. They say that was...to make an example [of them]. Like an exemplary action. And at dawn, they came in, eh, painted, you know and they came in [hits hand in palm] so much, but they wrecked the tents, they wrecked the tents, with sticks and everything. And they broke



bones, heads, and everything. Clean beatings at night, beating, beating, beating, beating. They grabbed people like this [makes grabbing motion with fists], like sacks of potatoes. They grabbed people like this, like sacks of potatoes, and they threw them around. And they went around throwing everyone... over to a hole, a little depression in the ground. And they kept them there until the next morning.

All those people beaten there like that, without medical assistance or anything. They kept them there until the next day. So, the next day, they grab those women, they strip them and they parade them around... the camp naked. Afterward they take them to the dining room, and they sit them down to eat, to eat breakfast.

It was a repression. Those last months that we spent there after the riots, until they took us back to Guantánamo again, I can't even talk about it. It was a horrible repression... horrible, horrible.

And that was when the people began to fall into depressions again. A lot of military force, you know, they deployed a lot of military force, a lot of military force.

*The military never investigated any of this as the clear abuse that it was.<sup>5</sup> On May 2, 1995, the Clinton Administration announced that it would let the Cubans into the United States on a case-by-case basis. Although this announcement alleviated the collective angst caused by indefinite detention, many people had already undergone sufficient trauma either in the camps or at sea to be permanently marked by it.*

*Predictably, some people would suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after their arrival in the United States. Sylvia describes her own symptoms.*

SYLVIA: The first month, my first month in the United States, I lost thirty pounds.

I lost a pound a day. I lost a *pound* a day. After I was here for a month [rapping on table] I was thirty pounds lighter. The diarrhea wouldn't stop. I don't know how long, I can tell you it was diarrhea, diarrhea, diarrhea. I had to live on Pepto-Bismol. If I finished a bottle, I bought another one, *prsst*, the diarrhea came. No, no, no, no, no, what can I tell you, what can I tell you.

After six months, one day I sat down and analyzed myself, I was already here in this country for six months, and I horrified myself, I horrified myself. Because after six months, I was still having nightmares. I couldn't sleep well. I didn't sleep. I woke up. I would sleep for a while and wake up suddenly. I heard those knocks, and all those noises, all those sounds I heard there, I heard them as if I were, eh, I woke up like that. After six months I did a self-analysis. I said, "My God, I'm never going to get out of this, this is going to stay with me tremendously for my whole life." Yes...

I got destroyed a lot physically in Guantánamo. A lot. You have no idea. Look, when I arrived at Guantánamo I didn't use glasses. I had twenty-twenty vision. And when I got here they did a medical check, mmm... a visual check,

and I was 275. I was completely blind. Blind. In a year and a half. I became conscious of the blindness after I got here. I couldn't see anything. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. However, in Guantánamo, one day I began to try on glasses that came in the donations, because I felt certain level of discomfort, no? I found a pair of glasses so I saw better. And I got by with them until I got here. But I thought it was not so, so, so [bad]. Now I'm better, I use contact lenses. And it was like that, you know, a lot of time went by, for example, visual, auditory stimulus, olfactory stimulus, and taste also, yes, yes. How could it not be?

### Commentary

Oral historians are becoming increasingly sensitive to the fact that, like the Cuban rafters, many interviewees post crisis are in a potentially fragile emotional state. This presents a number of questions. What exactly may be going on inside of the people we interview while they are telling their stories? Could the act of telling trauma stories be harmful to survivors, or is it helpful? Can a non-therapist truly help a victim of trauma? What in fact do we owe our interviewees anyway, aside from protecting copyright or closing a transcript for a period of time? This leads to the larger question of what the public and private purposes oral history may have in addition to the documentation of an event or a life.

My first attempts to arrange oral history interviews with some of the Cuban rafters made me wonder if I might be doing harm in interviewing them. Most of the problems with the interviews had to do with people avoiding reminders of the camps or being unwilling to talk about certain experiences. For example, while I was in Miami looking for interviewees, I found some of the people whom I had known in the camps. One was a man in his mid-twenties who had been a friend. The other was a woman of about the same age who was more of an acquaintance. I had gotten to know her only a week or so before her departure when she asked me to help her get a new set of clothing to wear to Miami because she had gained weight from eating the military pouched meals. I visited both of them at their homes to see if they would consent to being interviewed.

Initially both of them consented, but in the end I could not interview either one. Whenever I went to the man's house to interview him, he suddenly became very busy with his stepchildren. When I went to the woman's house, she would talk only generally about our mutual experiences. After my second visit, while walking me to my car, she told me that she had had to pay to get onto a raft, that horrible things had happened to her in the camps, and that she did not want her mother or her Nicaraguan boyfriend to know about any of those things. A few days later, when I called to ask her if she felt ready to talk about the camps, perhaps somewhere where her family could not overhear, she told me that the things that happened were too terrible for her to think about again. I seemed to be only a reminder of those experiences.

In another instance, I went to Jacksonville twice to interview a couple who had been leaders in the camps. I had worked with them every day for about two months while I was a mediator, but I had been introduced to them while I was doing resettlement interviewing since she had been given medical parole. On both of my visits they took me on extensive tours of the city and made me elaborate meals prior to their scheduled interviews, ensuring that there would be insufficient time for them. This couple was doing so well economically that they had purchased a house. Both of them seemed very happy and well adjusted to life in the United States, but neither one wanted to think about Guantánamo. I came to a general conclusion that many people were still feeling the effects of being detained five years after their arrival in the United States and that the people who did complete interviews with me had either been less traumatized or come to terms with their experiences more fully than the people whom I could not interview.

Both Sylvia and another of the interviewees, Roberto Eduardin, a young man in his mid-twenties at the time, had been in the camps in Panama for six months. They were therefore present when riots broke out there in December 1994. Sylvia volunteered information about the riots; Roberto did not, even though he had endured the injustice of being forced to sit flexi-cuffed in his underwear on a pile of rocks for two weeks in the punishment camp, X-Ray,<sup>6</sup> despite the fact that he had not participated in the rioting. After Sylvia told me about the incident in the Panama camps, I went back and reinterviewed Roberto about it. I had spent enough time with him in common social situations to feel comfortable asking him why he did not share the story. He told me he had not wanted to say anything against the government, even though he knew I would be using pseudonyms in the transcripts. I found this ironic considering how often he had told me during the first interview that he was probably the only one being totally honest about his experiences.

These experiences were instructive in a number of ways. First, interviewing trauma victims certainly raises ethical questions around how hard to push a person for an interview, and, once in the interview situation, how hard to push for details of particular experiences. My experience suggests that one should not press people when they start avoiding interview situations. There will be plenty of others who are ready to talk and who will derive healing from the storytelling experience. Once in an interview situation, it is likely that some will leave out details that are too painful for them to revisit at the moment. The researcher might want those details, but has no inherent right to them. Again, a large enough pool of interviewees will compensate for such omissions.

It is also important to remember the power differential between academic researchers and some of the people we interview. In those cases, they may initially agree to be interviewed even though they are not really ready to share their experiences. This will also become apparent during the interview, if the researcher can get one in the first place. Prioritizing an empathic listening style

over a rigid research agenda and being in the moment with interviewees can result in them sharing more information anyway, but only if they are at the point where they can bear to think about it.

Although it is important to be careful about pressing traumatized people who are exhibiting avoidance behaviors, looking at oral history interviewing through a trauma studies lens shows that, if we respect the potential for emotional fragility present in trauma victims, telling stories during the interview can be healing. One thing trauma does to an individual is interrupt cognitive processes, disorganizing the templates that people use to interpret reality and make probability statements to themselves. This subjects the trauma victim to the distressing thought that the world is no longer comprehensible.<sup>7</sup> Trauma also renders the normal processes of imposing structure on inchoate experiences chaotic or conflicted, and causes one's preexisting life story to become incapable of providing a coherent context in which to integrate past experiences, enact a meaningful social role in the present, and predict future outcomes. In order to reestablish lost or chaotic meaning systems, individuals must integrate the traumatic experience into their model of the self and the world by answering questions related to "why" and "what for."<sup>8</sup> Since oral history interviewing involves the creation of narratives that allow individuals to re-create meaning systems, impose structure on inchoate experiences, and work out new identities for themselves, the interview process can contribute to emotional and cognitive healing.

In fact, this process can begin to occur before the interview process. For example, while I was on the base, I noticed that the Cubans were constantly answering "why" questions by theorizing about the reasons they were put into detention. After they knew they were going to be let into the United States, some then talked about how the detention had served them as individuals. For example, when I first arrived, many people speculated that they were part of a geopolitical chess game between Fidel Castro and Bill Clinton. Others felt that the United States was testing them to see what they would endure to live in a democracy. By contrast, at the end of the operation, one man told me that the camps had been a decompression chamber, and that if they had not experienced detention, the people would have arrived in the United States too agitated to adjust to their new lives properly. Since he shared that observation with me while still on the base, I could not determine whether he reconsidered that idea after encountering a different set of shocks involved with adjusting to life in a new country.

The issue of the "why" continued to be relevant after resettlement in the United States. While I was in Miami, both inside and outside of interview situations, people discussed the importance of knowing why one left Cuba. Some even blamed maladjustment problems among some of their compatriots on forgetting why they had left Cuba.

"What for" questions were also on people's minds. At the end of a segment of an interview I did with two men who told how they got rid of a thief in their

camp, one of them interjected an interpretation of the value of their camp experiences, thus revealing an answer to the “what for” question:

RAUL: In Guantánamo, after a week, or a month, I’m not sure, when they began to give us the first assistance... we began to be able to get clothes and shoes... the people... that is... I know what I saw... the people hung up their clothes, and put their sneakers in the door of their tents, and nobody lost anything. You know, or if somebody got up a little late, at nine in the morning, yes there was silence in the tent. So, we learned to respect each other, one another. We learned to respect your space; we learned to respect values, things, property, that was only, I believe, what we achieved there.

A person who would leave maybe from Havana on a plane, and they put him here in Miami... this society suffers when people arrive without any kind of preparation, no type of discipline. Not in so much as, so as I was saying at the beginning, I believe that in relation to people, I believe it was an achievement because after a year... in Guantánamo, everything that took place, one knew why he came, why he came to this country, what he wanted, one learned to respect his fellow humans, respect what is around them, and isn’t achieved in a week, that isn’t achieved in a month...

...the people didn’t justify thefts; they didn’t understand them, *comadre*. They repudiated them... So, when we arrived at Guantánamo we were full of vices, full of things. After spending many months we began to purify ourselves, we began to see, you know, we began...

The closing thought of this passage is interesting because of the social context in which the interviews occurred. There is a theme in the Miami Cuban community’s narrative that people have somehow been contaminated by the revolution, and by coming to the United States they purify themselves. Therefore, the assertion that “we began to purify ourselves” is probably an interpretation of the situation that they developed in response to the preexisting community narrative in Miami, not during their experiences in the camps.

This issue illustrates why the social context in which an interview takes place is important: narratives at work in communities may cause individuals to assist newcomers by providing empathy and social support, or they may discourage healing by forcing newcomers to suppress elements of their personal histories or express them inauthentically. Cuban Miami’s community narrative, and the aggressive fashion in which the older generations of exiles deploy it, creates social pressure on individuals to suppress the elements of their life stories that may imply something positive about the Cuban Revolution.<sup>9</sup> This can be problematic for people who have undergone traumatic experience since, as psychologist Robert Neimeyer notes, the narratives can “at times overshadow or obscure the unique experiences of individuals within the system which otherwise might have developed more idiosyncratic stories to describe the significance of their experience of loss.”<sup>10</sup> This factor is quite obvious for anyone who

interviews Cubans in Miami. In fact, the pressure to conform to a narrative that basically says any story associated with life in Cuba has to end with how the Cuban Revolution is invalid, unpleasant, or, at best, offset by negatives is so overwhelming that experienced interviewers warned me “you have to get them before they learn what to say.”

Many of the older exiles in Miami considered the rafters to have been contaminated by growing up under the Revolution. Thus, instead of validating their stories of trauma and loss, and then learning from how they overcome those things, the exiles labeled the rafters’ motives as impure (in contrast to their own supposed piety) and questioned their stories instead. This type of attitude, in addition to being a hindrance to people trying to come to terms with their experiences, has meant that the older generations of exiles in Miami have squandered opportunities for healing themselves. As a result, old wounds have continued to fester for much longer than necessary.

The kind of cool reception that many of the Cuban rafters initially received on arrival from Guantánamo is an extreme example of the larger society’s insensitivity to the plight of trauma victims. Richard Mollica, a psychiatrist who directs the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma (HPRT) of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, notes the reasons this is a missed opportunity: “The trauma sufferers need society’s assistance in the self-healing process, and in turn they help society heal by sharing their stories, experiences, and wisdom. Personal and social healing are united in a reciprocal and mutually advantageous process. Society gains from what people who have experienced trauma can teach us about survival and resilience. Through the journey of self-healing that each one takes, survivors can teach the rest of us how to recover from injury in a violent world.”<sup>11</sup>

Seen in this context, oral history serves as a social activity that can sensitize the collective to the need to provide healing opportunities for trauma survivors, whose stories benefit the larger society because they offer wisdom for overcoming terrible life events. Oral history as a methodology is well suited to assist in individual and social healing because the storytelling process is a natural vehicle for the creation of new meanings and identities, which can only enhance each project’s contribution to the historical record.

## Notes

1. Norman L. Zucker and Naomi Flink Zucker, *Desperate Crossings: Seeking Refuge in America* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1996).
2. Carroll J. Doherty, “Presidential News Conference: Clinton Changes Policy on Cuba, Describes View of Crime Bill,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 52, no. 2 (1994): 2472–73.
3. To protect their families in Cuba, and the interviewees’ ability to travel back and forth to Cuba, I have given them all pseudonyms.
4. Joseph B. Treaster, “Guantánamo Refugee Camps Fill with Fury,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1994.

5. In fact, military history touts the success of the Marines in “subduing” residents of Camp Two, where these incidents occurred. For a complete description from the military’s point of view, see Colonel Nicholas Reynolds, *A Skillful Show of Strength: U.S. Marines in the Caribbean 1991–1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003).
6. The Cubans held in Panama rioted in December 1994 out of frustration with the indefinite nature of their detention. As a result, the government of Panama requested that the camps be closed, and the population was reincorporated into the one on the base in Guantánamo in February 1995.
7. Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 40–43, 78; Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Andrea R. Berger, “The Other Side of Trauma: Towards a Psychology of Appreciation,” in *Loss and Trauma: General and Close Relationship Perspectives*, ed. J. H. Harvey and E. D. Miller (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2000).
8. Noel Walsh, “Life in Death,” in *Trauma and Self*, ed. C. B. Strozier and M. Flynn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 402–403.
9. Cf. Robert A. Neimeyer and Heidi M. Levitt, “What’s Narrative Got to Do with It? Construction and Coherence in Accounts of Loss,” in Harvey and Miller, eds., *Loss and Trauma*, 408.
10. *Ibid.*, 410.
11. Richard Mollica, *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 234–35.

# 5

## IN THE GHOST FOREST

### Listening to Tutsi Rescapés

Taylor Krauss

**Oral histories by Taylor Krauss with Rwandan rescapés, Kigali, Rwanda, 2007–08**

*The Voices of Rwanda (VOR) archive was founded in 2006 to film and preserve video testimonies of rescapés<sup>1</sup> (a French variant of “survivors”) and other primary witnesses of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.<sup>2</sup> Twelve years after the genocide, communal forms of memory such as memorial sites, commemoration events, and legal tribunals existed in Rwanda; however, there were very few spaces in which individuals could share and record their own personal memories and history. Within the first few years of operations, VOR filmed, transcribed, and translated approximately five hundred hours of video testimony for use in research, memorialization, and education. It is from this body of testimonies that the excerpts in this chapter originate.*

#### ANTOINETTE M. STANDING LIKE A TREE

*Antoinette M. volunteered to record her testimony with VOR in April 2007, after thirteen years of silence; until this time she had never shared her testimony, except in writing in her diary after the genocide.<sup>3</sup> All of Antoinette’s family, including her parents, two brothers, and twin sister, were killed during the genocide. At the beginning of Antoinette’s testimony she offers her motivations for speaking.*

ANTOINETTE: It is important not to withhold anything from what I will say because this is what happened. Because, if I say that it should be hidden, it would be like denying the genocide. And right now what I’m looking for . . . and I think the reason that I have strength to talk is . . . if I die without telling my story here, my lineage will be snuffed out. Do you understand? I’m the sole survivor. So if I die, at least the history of the surviving member of the family will be preserved. That’s what I hope for. That’s also why it’s going to be difficult for me. But I will do it. My wish is . . . like now I’m the only one left in my



"...if I die without telling my story here, my lineage will be snuffed out. Do you understand? I'm the sole survivor. So if I die, at least the history of the surviving member of the family will be preserved." Antoinette stands like a tree in a Kigali courtyard at dusk. Photograph by Alexander Gibbons, July 2007, © Voices of Rwanda.



family. And my legacy is a rich one if you let me go back in time and start from my grandfather's history up to now. Because no one else can talk about that. The one who was telling stories was my dad. But they killed him and my siblings. That means if I keep it to myself, it will disappear forever. And the name of our family will disappear. I'd like to ask you a favor, for me. This video you're making of my testimony. If you can please do me this favor. This is the first thing I can do to help my future child, if my child will be able to watch this, and learn about our history. I do not want it to be hidden. I want it to be seen. Because if I die, my family's name will disappear from the root.

*In Antoinette's universe, sadness is timeless, from a provenance before her birth and ever-present throughout her life, without beginning or end. Just as it came into her life, so too will it for her child. The sad narrative embalms her family legacy. And the survival of the latter is contingent on the transmission of the former. Here Antoinette's recollections of childhood begin to frame this phenomenon.*

ANTOINETTE: My father loved me, and I liked asking him [questions]. Even though he loved us, sometimes he was unhappy. When it was time to visit family, he

[Dad] would take us to Mom's family, instead of his. Because there was no one in his family. I had to ask him about it one day. I said: "Are you my mother's brother? Because I've never seen your father. I've never seen your mother in our house. When Mom gives birth, her relatives come over. . . . Other children visit their father's relatives. How come you don't take us there? What happened? Are they outside of Rwanda?" I asked him that question at five years old when I was a little child. Daddy got very sad. He ran away from me. . . . Now I've started to realize why he didn't want to tell me. It's like me, if my future child will ask me the same question today, I'd be very sad. The same way I asked my father is the same way my child will ask me. It makes me sad a lot because I was hurting him, the same way that my future child may do to me today.

*Even though her father did not recount to her the sad narrative, she observed that he "got very sad. He ran away. . . ." Although he avoided the narrative she observed the sadness. Herein lies the paradox for the rescapés that blights their agency: to speak leads to sadness, and not to speak leads to sadness. Antoinette then assigns responsibility to herself for burdening her father with her innocent question. She rationally knows she wasn't the cause of his sadness, but even today she cannot separate that fact from the pain that resulted—both his and her own. She concludes by sentencing her future child to the same guiltless action of simply asking about the past, which will cause both her and her child's future sadness. Five years later in 1987, Antoinette's father begins to answer her question:*

ANTOINETTE: One day, he called me over and told me this . . . "You see that you stand up as a Tutsi [in school].<sup>4</sup> It's time to explain, now that you are no longer a child. People died in our family because they were Tutsis. They [Hutus] killed them."<sup>5</sup> I couldn't raise you in a destroyed house.<sup>6</sup> That's why I married your mother. It helps me because my family doesn't have a house anymore. Now you can go to hers, to visit your grandfather on your mother's side. Because it's the only place you have left." I was sad and told him: "Even if they are dead . . . please take me one day to the place you were born." I asked him: "Show me where grandpa lived. And where he is buried." Because he didn't have anywhere to show me. . . . He didn't reply, so we went there and found his father's relatives. We went there for a visit. They were happy. Things were. . . . They accompanied us down the hill and told us . . . "There is no tomb. That's where they went." He pointed to the river. I said to him: "Since I brought flowers, would you let me put them there?" Because I was seeing other people doing this. I said [to myself]: "Me, I'm not going to bury people again." Because in my mind, I was thinking that no one else was going to die. "So let's put flowers there." We did that. I hadn't seen my daddy cry like that my whole life. But at that moment, he cried because of what I did.

*Happy memories too can be sullied by the overshadowing power of genocidal trauma:*

ANTOINETTE: Now let me talk about my twin. We were sisters. In reality... what I am saying about her... I feel... even if she is not alive anymore, the last time I saw her, there was no difference between us. She liked what I liked. She didn't like what I didn't like. Because we were thinking the same. Let me just talk about what she used to like. Which is also what I liked, because I can't separate myself from her. All the time... I still feel like we're together. Wherever I'm sitting, whenever I'm talking, I feel like we are together. Sometimes, I feel like she is helping me. There was a song she would ask me to sing with her, because she liked it. She was singing... "If I had wings like angels, I'd fly there..."—I'm going to stop here, because it's too painful for me to sing the song. She really liked that song. There was another Catholic song she would ask me to sing with her. What makes me sad is that I hear that song at cemeteries. It goes: "Lord, I'm coming to you. Receive me." She used to ask me to sing with her. I remember she began to like that song in 1991. But after her death... I started to wonder why wherever we went, she asked me to sing that song. Everywhere we sat, she would ask me to sing that song. I remember that she even wrote it down. She asked Daddy to write it on a typewriter because she liked it. But I don't doubt God was talking to my sister. That song, wherever she was... From what I heard, she was singing that song when she died. "Let's sing that song. The Catholic one." "There is a present and future time when there will be trouble and hunger... but nothing will separate me from Him." I'd ask her: "To separate you from who?" She'd reply: "From you." It makes me sad.

*The purity of a once-beautiful childhood memory of singing together with her sister and her father typing the words is marred by the loss of her sister and the circumstances in which she was killed.*

ANTOINETTE: I heard later about my sister's death—Muhongerwa... She died in Runyina. A lady denounced her when she asked for some water to drink. They cut her in three parts. She was singing those songs I told you about earlier. She was praying... asking God, that wherever I was, I'd be singing and praying while dying. But I didn't die. I'm still alive. I'm talking about her.

*In the testimony of Claudine U. we are similarly introduced to a childhood idyll, but her laughter and smiles disappear as the memory of the genocide surfaces.<sup>7</sup>*

CLAUDINE: When we came back [from school], we would agree to meet at 3 o'clock. You know at 3 o'clock, the sun is very strong. So, we'd say, "Let's go for a swim." We would schedule to meet up with the neighbor's kids. Sometimes we would lie to our parents, telling them that we were going to fetch water. [laughter] But in reality, [more laughter] we weren't really going to fetch water. We were just going for a swim.

We would take a quick dip, and you know, after swimming your body gets pale and wrinkled. So everyone knew to bring body lotion to conceal it,

so the parents wouldn't find out. [laughter] But because we were just kids, we didn't do such a good job, so they'd figure it out anyway. They would find out, but you wouldn't get in trouble. You know, those friends are still there. At least some of them are still living there. When you think about it, the only kids who managed to survive were the ones my age. They could run fast and could adapt almost anywhere. There is even one girl who survived... She survived because maybe... maybe it was God. Even though, you could say she was a good swimmer, I think it was God. She couldn't have swum across, to another village... swimming from where we were all the way across to another village in a different county. You know, that child was cut with a machete after they killed her mother. They threw her in the water and said, "Go back home." They had taken her across to another county, Mugesera, which bordered our county. Some of the killers... after killing her mother, and throwing her body into the water... they also cut her and told her: "Go... If you don't die like her, swim back home." With God's help, she really swam across the lake. She just swam normally, and since they'd already cut her, she must have been saved by God. She struggled and struggled, but she was lucky enough to make it. As you can imagine, of all the children my age... most of them were taken into the same water. It was almost like a [swim] test they were giving them. Beforehand, they would tell them... "The tallest among you, go first." They told them to keep walking into the water until it covered them completely... to go and be killed by the water. But, because some of them could swim, they swam on and survived. They kept swimming, so they couldn't have drowned. They knew how to swim very well.

Many people died in that lake. That lake took so many lives. Sometimes you'd conclude it's over for you, that there's nothing more you could do... and just walk into the lake by yourself. However, sometimes you realize that God didn't want you to do it. But many committed suicide and others were thrown into the water alive. That's how it was. Now, when I see that lake, I don't cherish it like I did before. The only good this water did for us—it swallowed our people. I don't feel that I love it anymore. [silence]

*Even the testimony process itself, through the recounting of familiar details of an ordeal, can churn up memories that seemingly shock the witness as they come to mind; as if some memories are embedded within memories and are only encountered through the process of telling. This is demonstrated here in Antoinette's testimony.*

ANTOINETTE: Now I reach a difficult part. I got inside the church. They were starting fires and were cutting people. They even cut me, and I was injured. It's a miracle to get out of a church alive when fuel has been poured on it. I got out of the church through the window and fell behind the church. But let me go back. I was with my big brother. He was killed there. They killed him three times. I went down the hill. I ran into a group of killers. They brought me back. They hit Uwamwezi with a machete here. They turned me upside down

and put her on top of me. All her blood was in my stomach. I couldn't remove her. I was full of her blood. God. I drank her blood...until the last minute when someone came and took me from that place. It wasn't easy to remove her from me, because she was a tall and heavy girl. I got out of there. As soon as I got out, they started hitting me on the head with clubs. I fell in another hole over there, with people inside. People in that hole were burned. I left that hole as well. After a while, a Caterpillar arrived. They were picking people up with the forks of the Caterpillar and putting them in the hole. Those who were still alive were screaming. I was hoping to see Uwamwezi screaming, but it didn't happen. She was already dead when I left her. I saw it. I saw her.

*As Antoinette narrates this story, she steps back and forth between her present self and the self of a past present. At times she makes eye contact with the interpreter, anchoring herself in the now, but then averts her gaze into an empty stare, which is fixed in the then of her mind's eye. As she narrates being turned upside down, her hand gestures and she leans her torso over as if actually being upended—less a reenactment for an audience and more a reliving of it. Her hand continues fluidly motioning as if the blood was flowing into her as she says, "All of her blood was in my stomach," almost as if this memory takes over her body and she finds herself there in the past.*

## Commentary

INTERVIEWER: You said that you did not survive. Can you explain more about what you mean?

KAROLI: What I mean is that I lost my family, and I don't seem to have life, so can I say that I survived? It is by the grace of God that I'm still breathing, how can I say that I survived? I would have survived if one of my children survived, but all of them were killed. I would say I survived if I had something to sustain me.<sup>8</sup>

Although Karoli is not numbered among the eight hundred thousand Tutsi killed during the 1994 genocide, he is a walking fatality. He attempts to explain what he feels is self-evident: that although he is "still breathing" today, he ceased surviving when his offspring were killed by Hutu perpetrators, and his lineage eliminated.

Karoli's words convey a notion of survival rooted in family legacy and emotion. They communicate an expansive meaning, one that pushes on our own perceptions of survival, yet because they have been excerpted from their own narrative context, translated from a foreign culture and language, and printed above as an entity discreet from their own speaker's vocal intonations and body language as they are on video, their emotional carriage is lessened. When one witnesses eighty-five-year-old Karoli hunch over his cane, gaunt frame swallowed in his olive-green suit; blink from behind thickened glasses,

straining to see through eyes punctured by perpetrators' knives; and drop his own gaze to the floor as he pronounces his sentences, the grave hopelessness of his words is not just implied, it is delivered. Herein it becomes evident that his physical presence is a vestige and a contradiction, one that time will soon resolve.

VOR's testimonies make use of an open-ended interview process that allows witnesses to navigate their thoughts, memories, and feelings in whatever manner they choose. Typically one non-Rwandan interviewer asks questions while one Rwandan interpreter approximates translation only after the speaker has finished.<sup>9</sup> An exact transcript is made from the recording, followed by a word-for-word translation where possible; however, cultural concepts embedded within Rwandan proverbs, ancient vernacular, and idiomatic language often make direct translation impossible. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic nature of Kinyarwanda can sometimes even leave the most seasoned translators puzzled over a speaker's intent.

In these testimonies, ideas are communicated through vocal quality, gestures, cadence, expressions, and other nonverbal communication in addition to the words themselves. A brief pause, a prolonged silence, a broken phrase, a tear, or a tremble may complete an idea or even capture on screen an internal experience of a witness who momentarily crosses over the borders of time along the scattered planes of discontinuous memory. Although meaning is lost and sometimes even obscured by translating the images and sounds of testimony into the printed word, much can still be learned through a deep reading of each witness's words.

Lawrence Langer's ideas about forms of memory, as he has observed through witnessing and facilitating Holocaust testimonies, and his critical interpretations of what is being communicated in these testimonies, have influenced my own attempts to "move beyond listening towards the disagreeable task of interpretive hearing."<sup>10</sup> As I have drawn closer to the words and body language of the rescapés from Rwanda, I have observed a repetition of some of the same forms of memory and modes of communication about which Langer has written. I am not suggesting that surviving victims of the Holocaust and rescapés from the 1994 genocide had parallel experiences. There are vast differences between the realities of the Holocaust experience and those of the 1994 genocide. Nevertheless they share modalities of memory that bridge their differences in history and culture.

For this discussion, I draw interpretation mostly from one particular interview with Antoinette, but I supplement this with words and anecdotes from numerous other interviewees as well as from my own conversations with rescapés. It is through observing the narrative framework she uses to recount the past; bearing witness to the particularities of Antoinette's experience of the genocide; and noting the modes in which she expresses her associated memories, both voluntary and involuntary, that we gain insight into the imposing experience of

memory itself, one that is likely shared by the few hundred thousand rescapés left in Rwanda today.

When we meet Antoinette at the beginning of what is to be her seven-hour testimony, she suggests that she will bare everything: "...to withhold anything...would be like denying the genocide." In other words, silence equals denial, a denial that would effectively negate the previous existence of her family, not just the narrative of their murder. To avoid, or rather deny, *that* denial, she is compelled to speak. It is the negation of a negation that drives her to give birth to words. These words seem to be her only assurance that her family name will continue to exist. Even bringing a child into the world would not fulfill this primary need, for her "future child" must hear this testimony too. This is the same imperative I have heard again and again from rescapés: that they not only must build new families in order to sustain their family lineage, but also must speak of their histories to them.

This is a crisis of survival. Though not a physical survival, it is an existential one in which the witnesses endlessly strive through telling to reverse the disappearance of their already disappeared family. Telling, however, is not a solitary endeavor; it requires an audience. And if we, as secondary witnesses, choose not to hear and see these tellings, we too become guilty of a kind of denial by default, or worse, as we are warned in Elie Wiesel's words, "to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."<sup>11</sup>

Sadly, the burden of sharing her family history as motivating force to give testimony takes the form as a narrative of elimination, as opposed to one of restoration. In this narrative she focuses on their deaths as opposed to their defining characteristics of their lives. As such, the attempt to reassert her ancestral legacy is eclipsed by the shadow of its very destruction. It is not self-defined as she wishes, but rather defined by others—what *they* have inflicted on the family. Furthermore, the prevailing and most lingering image of her family is the sadness of her father—a sadness that she later refers to as her inheritance.

ANTOINETTE: So now I'm the one left with that sadness, but mine is deeper [than my father's]. Because for him, at least he still had his brother's children, but me, I've got nobody left on my grandfather's side. I'm telling you the truth. On my grandfather's side I'm the only one left. I'm here standing like a tree, it is very sad.

Antoinette's simile of the lone tree conjures the ghost forest in which it used to stand. Her family trees have all been hewn, save her own, and we are reminded of the gruesome nature of the Rwandan genocide where *chopping* and *cutting* became the signature terms for killing by machete.<sup>12</sup> Antoinette extends this idea deeper when she concludes, "Because if I die, my family's name will disappear from the root," for a tree without roots doesn't exist at all.

In this context "standing like a tree" means to be without relatives; however, in other contexts the Kinyarwanda phrase *nk'igiti* "like a tree" can also connote

"to be stoic." As quickly as Antoinette introduces these words, she also adds "it is very sad," to ensure we are aware of the sadness she feels. Her words alone, however, cannot convey what watching her testimony provides: her long pauses, sighs, and vacant stares emote an inescapable and overwhelming sadness.

When at the age of ten Antoinette requests to be taken to the burial site of her grandparents, who were killed in the anti-Tutsi attacks of 1959, she learns then that their bodies were never buried but instead washed away by the very waters that drowned them. One hopes that in recounting this story Antoinette finally is able to inter the dead in the memorial plot of her testimony. In this vein, the testimony, like memorial sites and commemoration days, facilitates both remembering *and* forgetting; by providing a context and time in which these narratives are delivered, perhaps the overwhelming burden of remembrance is lightened. For the rescapés however, it seems they must endure life without closure in spite of reburials, memorial sites, and *Icyunamo*, the annual period of mourning in which the genocide is commemorated. Bernhard Schlink writes, "That the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, i.e., mastering the past, is used and recognized in German but has no corresponding word in English and French. It connotes a longing for the impossible: to bring the past into such a state of order that its remembrance no longer burdens the present."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless in both Germany and Rwanda there are those who choose to forget and those who have no choice but to remember. For the rescapés, there is no mastering of the past, particularly when the memories of their loved ones assert themselves and their priorities in the present. Antoinette describes one of such moments hearing and seeing her dead twin sister, Muhongerwa.

ANTOINETTE: I'm sitting here for Muhongerwa, I have the responsibility to do so.

There was a time when I was sleeping and I heard a voice telling me . . . I'm not sure, maybe it was just my imagination, but I saw her in front of me, dressed up telling me: "Why aren't you mentioning me? Why aren't you telling people about how we used to like God?" So I said to myself that I have to stop being unfair to her and start talking about her. It is going to be hard, but I will speak it [her story].

Once more Antoinette wrestles with guilt. She was "being unfair" by not talking about her sister or not "telling people about how we used to like God." One wonders if Antoinette sees Muhongerwa's ghostly visit more as an admonition of silence or permission to speak. And if the former, what then do we make of her seemingly contradictory needs to remain silent *and* to speak? Does being "fair" to Muhongerwa require that Antoinette speak about her because Muhongerwa cannot?

This recollection seems to fit a form of memory that Langer calls "anguished memory," which "is inseparably identified with victims who did not survive, dividing the self between conflicting claims—the need and inability to recover from the loss. Most other disasters seem eventually to encourage conciliatory



gestures, balm for the memory, abated pain. This one, if we are to believe the voices in these testimonies, does not."<sup>14</sup>

Antoinette is not alone in her anguished memory. The *rescapés* who are living *at present* in Rwanda are challenged to live *in* the present because many still reside in the same towns in which their ordeals took place. Schools, churches, hotels, and stadiums, all of which were sites of killing, often become painful detours into the past, in addition to the hundreds of *inzibutso* across the countryside that already stake claim to memory.<sup>15</sup> And even the landscape itself with its banana groves and marshes and valleys and rivers can entreat reflection into the past, particularly during the rainy season. In April 2004, while I was eating lunch with one friend in Kigali it began to rain. At that moment he turned to me and said, "I remember the water washing the blood down this dirt road." When Antoinette articulates in her testimony, "What hurts me more is the fact that I'm still called by her [my sister's] name, many people don't know who is the one who died," she reveals that even her own physical presence can be the catalyst that jars her out of the present.

Claudine's mind grants her a brief reprieve before the innocence of her childhood is drowned by explicit visions of the genocide. As she laughs about childhood trickery in carrying body lotion to conceal the fact that their skin would "get pale and wrinkled," one can sense her narrative already shifting. This description and the accompanying mental image is what triggered the associative jump to the cadavers swallowed by the lake. Presumably those associations are impossible to sever in her mind, and the memory of the lake itself will always be contaminated.

The machete too, though used as an everyday tool, becomes a point of departure into the past because of the horrifying mental images associated with it. It has been said that the same machetes used to *cut* the Tutsi might be among those today used to *slaughter* cows for meat.<sup>16</sup> Many *rescapés* choose not to eat meat during *Icyunamo*. The flesh of the meat itself reminds the *rescapés* of the flesh of their loved ones during the memorial months.

Traumatic memories like these puncture the surface of the present even when *rescapés* no longer live in Rwanda. In Canada, one *rescapé* recounted to me the anxiety she has every time she gets off the bus and fears someone might be following her. There is a plausible correlation between this fear and her experience during the genocide. Hutu killers drove her on a bus to an area where she was to be killed. Even if memories of the genocide do not come to mind when she gets off the city bus, momentary fear, likely the result of those memories, intervenes in her daily life.

Langer writes about these shifting states of consciousness and expounds on the phrases "deep memory" and "common memory" from Charlotte Delbo's accounts of her Holocaust experiences. He observes how witness accounts "unfold before our eyes and ears, veer from one to the other, often unaware of the discrepancies introduced by their alternating vision. Deep

memory tries to recall the Auschwitz self as it was then; common memory has a dual function: it restores the self to its normal pre- and postcamp routines but also offers detached portraits, from the vantage point of today, of what it must have been like then. Deep memory thus suspects *and* depends on common memory, knowing what common memory cannot know but tries nonetheless to express."<sup>17</sup>

As Antoinette says "I was full of her blood," she closes her eyes and covers her face, reminded once again about that moment, as if the memory had been hidden from her before she began its telling. Almost immediately as if hearing the memory with a self other than the one telling, she utters "God," acknowledging the grave nature of that moment and the ends to which she was driven.

Her language shifts from the passive voice, "I was full of her blood," to the active, "I drank her blood," in what Langer calls "tainted memory... a form of self-justification, a painful validation of necessary if not always admirable conduct."<sup>18</sup> Langer writes, "The impromptu self is immune from such judgment, because once the impulse to stay alive begins to operate, the luxury of moral constraint temporarily disappears. Tainted memory then replaces judgment, as it deposes guilt. Retrospectively we may not approve of this situation (any more than surviving victims do)—the internal motives ruling such conduct seem so alien to our own."<sup>19</sup> Antoinette's "impromptu self" drank blood to stay alive, and her now "tainted memory" replaces judgment of that self. These similar patterns of act, future self-judgment, and then release from that judgment can be observed throughout many of the *rescapé* testimonies. Antoinette later mentions she was drinking other people's blood in the context of the smell on her breath, and less in the context of judgment.<sup>20</sup>

ANTOINETTE: Ndekezi did me wrong, I thought he was a friend. I was starting to have bad breath because of people's blood. I said to him: "But maybe it's that tea I drank." ...I started puking things that looked like that bag. [she points to a dark bag in the room]

Langer makes clear throughout his work with Holocaust testimonies that the witnesses did not *choose* to be in these situations, but rather were *forced* into them. The same paradigm, though with vast circumstantial differences, holds true for the *rescapés* during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, particularly as they were in hiding across the Rwandan countryside for weeks and months on end and driven by extreme hunger.

In spite of the mechanisms of tainted memory and self-justification, during other moments of Antoinette's testimony it seems she is unable to escape feelings of guilt. Her choice of the word "stealing" of the water from gutters, an otherwise innocent act, suggests this:

ANTOINETTE: I managed to sleep. I said, "God, what is happening?" "I'm the only one left. I'm useless." "I'm asking you to let me die so I can disappear." The

next morning I was still alive. I went up the hill. I went to Mutaganira's place where they used to leave water at night. I stole some water and drank it. I started to vomit, because of the water I was stealing from the gutters and other places. Their dog... it's really sad to see dogs with more empathy than people. I was sleeping and the dog would come and lick my wounds. He never ate me. My aunt used to give food to the dog, so the dog knew us. At night, he was coming to sleep alongside me. He licked my wounds. The maggots came out of my wounds and I started healing. The dog stayed with me. Whenever he heard noises, he would leave and return later in the afternoon and sleep next to me. One time as I fell asleep, I prayed: "God, instead of sending a dog to protect me..." "I beg you to let me die." "... Or help me go and die at home, where my dad died, even though I haven't seen him."

The nights alone with the dog become the most dispiriting moments of Antoinette's testimony as she recalls how she no longer sustains a will to live. She says, "I'm the only one left. I'm useless," and pleads to God to let her "disappear." Despite giving up, she awakens the next morning "still alive." She then entreats God to let her die instead of sending a dog to protect her. Even as she acknowledges that God did not answer this plea, in her assumption that God sent the dog one might observe she had not lost faith.

Whether Antoinette thinks she is the "only" remaining Tutsi left, or "only one" living member of her family is not clear; however, her sense of complete isolation is. But is it the sense of aloneness that pushes her to want to disappear? Or perhaps is it the realization that she exists in a world in which dogs have more empathy than people? Were the dog's actions somehow restorative? Did seeing a dog as "empathetic" help her regain a sense that she was not alone? Did she give herself the choice to see this dog as anything but "empathetic," for she was also aware it could have killed her for food? Her words give rise to more questions than answers.

Antoinette seems certain today, however, that the dog had "more empathy than people." She speaks about her nights with the dog with a particular intimacy in describing how he slept alongside of her, and licked her wounds, and "knew us" because her aunt had fed the dog in the past. She suggests, "He never ate me," almost to answer a question that was never asked of her. Antoinette seems to be aware, just as other rescapés have described, that during the genocide dogs were eating bodies. Is it Antoinette's need to find goodness in the world that lets her find it in this animal?

But it is also her own background that informed the way she viewed that situation. Without knowing that Antoinette's father was a veterinarian by profession and that she too had been studying to be a veterinarian, we might draw conclusions about an experience we have little insight into, save a few words.

Perhaps ultimately this is why Antoinette felt safe and healed by the dog, while other rescapés would have been terrified.<sup>21</sup>

Hyacinthe U.'s memory of the dogs eating corpses robs her of an appetite during the genocide.<sup>22</sup>

HYACINTHE: I was not hungry, she could put food on the plate for me, and I would pick it up unable to eat, thinking, "How dogs are eating my husband on the street?"

Beathe I. also witnessed dogs eating bodies as she lay near dead on the floor having just been stabbed by a machete that pierced through her baby, who had been swaddled on her back.<sup>23</sup>

BEATHE: The dogs came to eat the bodies of the dead. They kept coming to eat them, and when they got to me they would sniff the breath from my nose, and wouldn't eat me. When they realized I was breathing they left. It was like a movie. I remember it very well. I could see it all under the very bright moonlight. I watched as the dogs ate my family.

Beathe's mind's eye recalls a scene so distinct it is impossible for her to forget. "It was like a movie" describes less what she witnessed than how she witnessed. The how here seems to point toward her own sense of unsuspended disbelief as well as the very fact that she was a passive viewer, utterly helpless and dying on the floor.

BEATHE: Then the thirst I had led me to drink the blood that was flowing. . . . I was so full of blood. Then I was trying to drag myself from where I was, and in two hours I moved only some centimeters. I drank the blood until the morning and my thirst lessened. I finished every puddle of blood in the house. I never had thirst like that in my life. This is also a big problem in my life because I feel I have bodies of my children and my husband in me.

We witnessed Antoinette absolve her own distress over the memory of drinking human blood through "tainted memory"; however, Beathe's attempts at justification through describing the intensity do not seem to succeed. Beathe's recounting seems to fit the form of memory that Langer calls "humiliated memory," which "recalls an utter distress that shatters all molds designed to contain a unified and irreproachable image of the self. Its voice represents pure misery, even decades after the events that it narrates. Neither time nor amnesia soothes its gnawing. After hearing its testimony, we are less prone to dismiss as exaggeration the insistence by many surviving victims that the humiliations they endured in the camps were often worse than death."<sup>24</sup>

Beathe's "problem" is "big," but this language fails to convey what we later learn off-camera, that she harbors a persistent desire to kill herself.<sup>25</sup> The Kinyarwanda word "problem" is the same word for "question." In Kinyarwanda the conveyance is precise: her "problem" prompts her to "question" life itself.



"I drank the blood until the morning and my thirst lessened. I finished every puddle of blood in the house. . . . This is also a big problem in my life because I feel I have bodies of my children and my husband in me." Beathe, a *rescapé*, sits at her dinner table looking at photographs of her children. Photograph by Alexander Gibbons, July 2007, *Voices of Rwanda*.<sup>©</sup>

Humiliated memory reminds us not to view testimony as therapy, for it is only in retelling this testimony that Beathe reignites her own burning helplessness, which she alone feels.<sup>26</sup> Her inability to communicate this in the testimony compounds the problem. Langer writes, "Humiliated memory is driven by the need to share its contents and its conviction of the impossibility of doing so."<sup>27</sup> And as Beathe recounts these stories again, she is unable to dissociate the Beathe of the past who drank the blood of her family from the Beathe of today who impossibly still carries that blood in her stomach. Her past has literally become her present. It does not pass out of her system; it becomes her presence.

Another example of "humiliated memory" can be observed in the testimony of Michel U., who was orphaned by the genocide.<sup>28</sup>

MICHEL: We went, and reached Gitarama—close to Gitarama. We found a road-block there. They [the Interahamwe boys] had just killed another person who lied like that. Because they found someone there who knew him. They said: "Those children are lying. They are Tutsi." They took us to a forest nearby. They took us to the forest, so they could kill us there. They beat us seriously with a club. They did everything to us except kill us. They took off our clothes

and so on. They did terrible things to us—even worse, worse, worse. They took my penis and they did this to it. [begins rubbing his hands together] They rubbed it until I felt it burning like hot pepper. [accelerates his hands] Can you imagine? [rubs his hands even faster] They did this to my penis! [stops rubbing his hands] I felt it burning like hot pepper. Also I felt like I was going to die. I said to myself: “Instead of doing this to me...” The nerves of my penis were going to break, so I would rather they kill me. They continued, but they didn’t kill us. They tortured us, until one of them had an idea.

It was less the burning pain and more his fear that the “nerves of [his] penis were going to break” that brought on his wish to be killed rather than tortured. Permanent damage to his penis, and what that might mean in his future, seemed at the time to be worse than death. At the end of Michel’s testimony, he requested that this portion not be available to view in Rwanda; he expressed concern that others might judge him if they knew about his experience.

While both Beathe and Michel seem to exhibit similar forms of memory in their testimony associated with their traumas, the legacy of their traumas manifests itself very differently in their daily lives. Physically, Beathe is unable to wash her own body on account of her incapacitating scars, ongoing infections and abscesses, and obesity. Michel, however, said that he fully recovered from his torture and cholera, and he is now physically active and strong. From an emotional standpoint, Beathe also struggles with suicidal ideation, while Michel is driven by a strong desire to succeed financially and interpersonally. Michel completed university and is pursuing graduate work along with multiple jobs. He is an active member of an association of rescapés (AERG) in which he built a second “family,” which is of particular note given his experience with his grandfather:

MICHEL: The last time I saw my grandfather was that time. Since I came back from Congo, I won’t go there, because...if they did such a thing...what good can they do for me? I cannot imagine. I signed [swore] that I cannot go there. Never, never. I’ve never gone there, and I will never go there. They were accomplices of the people who wanted to kill me, and they were my relatives. I am done with that. If other people, not family members, were willing to help me...If they can see my difficulties...but people like my grandfather and other relatives conspired against me? When I am their grandson. Imagine. It is a big problem there. So I signed [swore] that I cannot be there. I cannot, and I have never been there, since that time I escaped death there.

Somehow, Michel was able to reestablish trust in his ideal of family in order to build a new family. His new family members are his peers, all of whom are rescapés, who support each other just as biological families typically do. Family members sit bedside during bouts of malaria and accompany each other to the hospital in times of sickness, help pay for expenses, and are present at celebrations and other life milestones like birthdays, graduations, and marriages. They

also give immense emotional support to each other during *Icyunamo*, a time when the rescapés experience the collision of public and private, communal and individual memories. Michel's AERG family is a vital force in his life; however, he is aware it can never replace the family that was killed, the absence of which remains a source of tremendous pain. This pain from losing his first family has only been compounded by losing his grandfather through betrayal, and as Michel swears never to visit him again, the conflicting impulses laying claims to his actions are clear. But he fervently shakes his head, "I cannot be there. I cannot..." assuring all who are listening of the complete dissociation his mind demands. Sadly, his ongoing dissociation, which is likely necessary to maintain trust in his ideal of family, is a reminder of the destruction of that very ideal, which even in reconstituting anew he can never fully recover. This coda to Michel's testimony, one of a restoration of family, is still obsessed with the elimination of family, a fixation in almost every witness testimony.

Geoffrey Hartman, one of the doyens of Holocaust testimony, wrote that "[t]he term 'oral history'... suggests that although what is brought into view are individual testimonies, their purpose remains the documentation of a collective fate, the depiction through converging witness-accounts of a single event" and that although each testimony "may differ in point of view and resonant detail... the stories are disastrously alike."<sup>29</sup> So too are the individual stories of Karoli, Antoinette, Claudine, Hyacinthe, Beathe, and Michel the evidence of the collective fate of those who were killed, as well as of the rescapés who managed to live. Their testimonies are another reminder not to miss the forest for the trees, even a forest that is no longer.

### Postscript: Planting a Tree

On the evening of April 8, 2011, one day after *Icyunamo* began, in a candle-lit church basement in Ottawa, Canada, more than 150 Rwandans, mostly rescapés, gathered for an all-night vigil. I had been invited to screen testimonies that evening and so I quickly greeted the group in broken Kinyarwanda and then played excerpts from several testimonies.

When the screening ended one hour later, Richard N. walked to the front of the silenced room: "Although we have lived in the same community for many years," he noted, "few of us have even given testimonies as I have heard tonight." A friend of mine whispered an approximate translation in my ear as Richard continued in Kinyarwanda. He urged everyone to speak to each other and to volunteer to record a testimony.

What he said next stunned me: "I grew up with Antoinette. I was the best man in her brother's wedding. We were like brother and sister. Both of us lost our families, and tonight was the first time I found out that she is still alive. When I saw her on the screen I couldn't believe my eyes. I wondered, 'How am I seeing her now in Canada?' It didn't make sense to me."

Later, Richard approached me and asked me if I would deliver to Antoinette “a little something to help,” and he pulled a fresh \$100 bill from his wallet. I folded it for safekeeping and gave him my commitment to deliver it along with an accompanying letter from him.

Four months later, in Kigali, I tried to contact Antoinette by phone without success. Given that informal communication networks in Rwanda are often more reliable than cell phone networks, I mentioned to mutual friends I was hoping to speak with her.

On my last morning in Kigali, Antoinette arrived at my office. Our greeting was amiable but without many words, as has been customary over the years we have known each other. I offered Antoinette a chair, and we sat together. I handed her a sealed envelope with the bill and Richard’s letter and she began to open it. When she saw his name she gasped. I assumed that she too was not aware he was alive. She began to read the letter and to weep. I began to weep as well. And there we sat, unable to stop crying.

Though I cannot know her thoughts, I imagined the letter had triggered memories of a childhood once lived while simultaneously reminding her of the horrors that brought it to an end. I also imagined her happiness in knowing Richard was alive. I was overwhelmed.

I suggested that I could help send an email to Richard if Antoinette wanted to let him know she had received the letter. She, unfamiliar with computers, asked that I type the letter as she dictated to me in Kinyarwanda. It was a comedy of typing errors, and yet thirty minutes later we sent off her first glorious email.

Never did I imagine that two individuals, who both lost their families yet consider each other family, could be reunited in part thanks to the filming and subsequent screening of a testimony. It does not validate past or future motivations for filming, and yet it does demonstrate one of the infinite outcomes of filming testimonies in Rwanda today. Just as Antoinette’s testimony catalyzed her own reunion with an individual across space and time, so too does it have the capacity to draw together individuals who exist in different intellectual, emotional, and psychological planes, building a bridge toward deeper understanding of the hearts and minds of those dehumanized by genocide. This is my principal motivation for filming oral testimonies in Rwanda.

Later, we mounted a minibus into town to exchange the money Richard had sent into local currency. As we drove past 1930, the prison in downtown Kigali that houses perpetrators of the genocide, I glanced over at Antoinette, who was eyeing it from her window. We got off the bus and walked to the city center, evidence of construction all around us. I again glanced over at Antoinette, who was eyeing the tall buildings downtown.

One can see Rwanda with two eyes, either the miracle of reconstruction or the tragedy of the elimination. It is clear with which eyes the *rescapés* of Rwanda see it.

A tree has been planted in Antoinette’s name in memory of those she lost.



## Notes

1. The French word *rescapé* is often used in Rwanda today as a translation of the Kinyarwanda word *uwarokotse*, "one who escapes catastrophe." Although *uwarokotse* was used in other contexts before the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, it is now commonly used to connote those who escaped the genocide. The English word *survivor* is a common translation used by anglophones in Rwanda; however, its associated ideas of empowerment and triumph seem discordant with what we learn from many of the witnesses in the VOR archive. For this reason I have chosen to use the French term *rescapé* to underscore the fact that although these individuals "escaped" catastrophe, they may not have "survived." Alternatively, it might also be said that many of these individuals "survived" but some have not "escaped." I hope introducing a foreign word gives readers pause, if only briefly, to consider the particularities of each *rescapé* experience.
2. Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 265, estimates that 800,000 Tutsi were killed in the three months of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Prunier also estimates that between 10,000 to 30,000 Hutu who opposed the genocidal plans of the Hutu government were killed during that time. While there may have been cases of mistaken identity, the Hutu who were killed during that time were mainly targeted for their ideology and not their identity.
3. I recorded Antoinette M.'s testimony on April 24, 2007, with Kamanzi Willy interpreting from Kinyarwanda to English. It was later transcribed by Ntizimira Evode and translated by Kamanzi Willy, along with support from Impanoyimana Solange, Nkurunziza Jean Felix, and Uwimana Mariya. At the time of her interview, Antoinette was twenty-nine.
4. The story of the teachers instructing Tutsi students to stand up in class to publicly acknowledge their ethnicity is related in nearly every testimony.
5. In other parts of Antoinette's testimony we learn this occurred during the anti-Tutsi attacks in 1959.
6. In Kinyarwanda it is common to use the word *house* in place of *family*.
7. I filmed Claudine U.'s testimony on October 6, 2008, with Kamanzi Willy interpreting from Kinyarwanda to English. It was later transcribed by Impanoyimana Solange and translated into English by Ntizimira Evode. At the time of her interview, Claudine was twenty-seven.
8. I filmed Karoli K.'s testimony on October 27, 2008, with Kamanzi Willy interpreting from Kinyarwanda to English. It was later transcribed by Nkurunziza Jean Felix and translated into English by Ntizimira Evode. At the time of his interview, Karoli was eighty-five.
9. Although the word *testimony* is often associated with legal proceedings, the use of the word in this chapter is not. *Testimony* here specifically refers to the video documents housed in the VOR archive. This term is used here to underscore that these documents follow a unique form (as opposed to content) unto themselves, instead of using terms like *life stories*, *interviews*, *survivor accounts*, and *witness accounts*, which are among the many other commonly used terms in the field of oral history. Using the noun *testimony* is not without consideration of the valid concerns of Henry Greenspan, who in his essays has sought to untangle the term from what he believes to be its misuse in the field of oral history, by suggesting that it be reserved for "trials or narrowly focused documentary studies." Greenspan also prefers to use gerunds like "retelling" and "recounting" "to emphasize process, context, and construction" of the act of "'making a story'" and its interpretations. See Henry Greenspan, "Collaborative Interpretation of Survivors' Accounts: A Radical Challenge to Conventional Practice," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 85–100. *Open-ended* refers both to the use of nonleading questions and to the absence of a time limit; most testimonies last between two and ten hours in one sitting; however, at times they have taken place over the course of a few days. A second part of the testimony process includes a post-testimony questionnaire to solicit demographic information. Given the challenging social dynamics among Rwandans, VOR chose to use non-Rwandans as interviewers, which we believe encourages what Geoffrey Hartman calls a "will to bear witness," in his presentation *Holocaust Testimony in a Genocidal Age*, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, on April 19, 2004. Additionally these interviewers serve as representatives of the global audience that will be receiving these testimonies. Most witnesses speak Kinyarwanda, although they often use Swahili, French, and English words as well.

10. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 133. This book, which explores the forms of memory that Langer has observed through the Holocaust testimonies housed at the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, has greatly influenced my own understanding of what is being communicated in the testimonies in the VOR archive and has enriched the way I watch, rewatch, and interpret testimonies.
11. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. xv.
12. The Kinyarwanda word *gutema*, which means "to cut" as in "to cut down a tree," was used to signify killing by cutting the body, or cutting the body into two pieces. The word *gutemagura* is translated into "to chop." In the context of the genocide this word is used to describe how killers chopped bodies into many pieces in the process of killing or after killing. Through the language used to describe the killing it is possible to note how killing became such a generalized act that even words like *gukora*, which means "to work," took on the meaning "to kill" as the *genocidaires* went about their daily "work" of killing.
13. Bernhard Schlink, *Guilt about the Past* (Toronto: Anansi, 2010), 43.
14. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 75.
15. According to a 2007 report by the Association des Etudiants et Elèves Rescapés au Genocide (AERG) and the Ministry of Youth Culture and Sport, 390 *inzibutso* (memorial sites) have been established to house mass graves and to memorialize sites of killing, which include schools, churches, and stadiums. The word *inzibutso* is not only used for genocide memorial sites, but also for positive memories. It is derived from the word *kwibuka*, which means "to remember."
16. It is a chilling thought that the same weapons of death, which were used by the Hutu killers, were likely used in the kitchens by night to cut the meat of the cows stolen from the Tutsi. Troubling still is that in Rwanda meat is the food eaten for celebration.
17. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 5–6.
18. *Ibid.*, 122.
19. *Ibid.*, 150.
20. It should be noted that it was common in the countryside long before and after the genocide for villagers to cook with cow, goat, or sheep blood, as in many Western cultures. The sustaining effects of drinking blood were thus commonly known.
21. When *rescapés* in Rwanda today hear barking dogs, it reminds many of them of the terror they felt when the dogs were running after them in the bushes and barking. This is yet another example of events in the present triggering past fears. Similarly, the sound of whistles, crowds of people yelling, honking of car horns, and even fireworks can remind *rescapés* of the past.
22. I filmed Hyacinthe U's testimony on April 27, 2007, with Kamanzi Willy interpreting from Kinyarwanda to English. It was later transcribed and translated into English by Uwimana Mariya. At the time of her interview, Hyacinthe was thirty-nine.
23. I filmed Beathe I's testimony on April 1, 2006, with Rubayiza Fidèle interpreting from Kinyarwanda to English. It was later transcribed by Uwimana Mariya and translated to English by Ntuzimira Evode. Beathe was thirty-nine.
24. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 77.
25. On one visit to Beathe I's home years after filming her testimony, she told me that giving testimony brought her some sense of purpose, which even today helps her fight her own suicidal feelings.
26. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 83–84.
27. *Ibid.*, 85.
28. I filmed Michel U's testimony on June 25, 2007, with Kamanzi Willy interpreting from Kinyarwanda to English. It was later transcribed by Uwimana Mariya and translated to English by Uwimana Mariya. Michel was twenty-four.
29. Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 134.

# 6

## THE CONTINUING AND UNFINISHED PRESENT

### Oral History and Psychoanalysis in the Aftermath of Terror

Ghislaine Boulanger

I once saw a sculpture outside the town hall in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that I often call to mind when I want to summon a visual image of the difference between focusing on social trends and being immersed in individual lives. It is a memorial commemorating the massacre of a local Native American tribe. A roughly fashioned adobe monolith stands some ten feet tall. Around the monument's base, words cut into the stone record the history of the event it commemorates—the date of the massacre, the place, the number killed. These are the usual dry facts you would read in any history text. But this implacable monolith rests on a four-foot-square adobe plinth that offers mute testimony to everything traditional memorials and official texts leave unsaid. Stuck into that plinth are fragments of everyday life, children's plastic toys, a sock, a toothbrush, a tattered teddy bear, chipped plates and cracked cups, a family photograph behind broken glass with the frame partly obscured by sandstone, artifacts of lives disrupted by the massacre.

Combining as it does the shocking poignancy of familiar personal objects with the impersonal monument towering above them, that sculpture in Santa Fe conveyed at a glance a meaning that words must struggle to contain. Traditional history is represented by the monument, oral history by the cups and plates, mirrors and teddy bears; a gradual accretion of little artifacts, of personal narratives that become a montage of lives lived during a particular era. Perhaps in the context of the first five chapters in this volume, it might be more accurate to say “lives endured” in the aftermath of a particular crisis. As a psychoanalyst, I take these artifacts one at a time, hopefully not overlooking the larger context.<sup>1</sup> The entire monument symbolizes the tension between individual narratives

and history, and asks: How do we take account of the collateral damage that large-scale violence leaves in its wake? How do we fit our understanding of the individual survivor into the larger picture of a catastrophe without losing sight of individual struggles? How do we grasp the entirety of a particular event without, in some way, objectifying the survivors? Sometimes this task falls to mental health professionals and crisis workers, but often these resources are not available. And even when psychotherapists or counselors are available, in the United States, at least, insurance companies and government-funded disaster programs regulate not only to whom but also how and for how long post-disaster treatment may be dispensed; they throw their official weight behind post-trauma therapy protocols that emphasize behavioral exercises to combat the effects of surviving a catastrophe. Counselors hand out checklists of symptoms, normalizing what is troubling to the survivor and discouraging further discussion. At times like these, oral historians can provide the only opportunity for survivors to give an account of their individual experiences.

The five preceding chapters evoke powerful and disorienting reactions. In their compelling and often horrifying detail, they prompt me to think through the process of giving and listening to narratives that have been collected in the aftermath of terror, to address some of the questions raised by the authors, and to consider ways in which the disciplines of oral history and psychoanalysis may overlap when the topic is crisis.

## INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE BENEFITS

Oral historians do not set out to be therapeutic. The task they set themselves is to counter impersonal social science with personal narratives. Whether giving these narratives proves beneficial to the individual narrators is a question that they ask themselves and one of the issues that I shall address. Tamara Kennelly says in her chapter “contributing a narrative to the collective memory improved our understanding of the many dimensions” of the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007. For Taylor Krauss, the motivation to document the rescapés from Rwanda was to “build a bridge toward deeper understanding of the hearts and minds of those dehumanized by genocide.” Selma Leydesdorff describes her intent “to produce a historical account that would include the voices of the victims and survivors of the genocide” in Bosnia. With the UN inquiry into the massacre, she continues, “Surprisingly no one thought of including the voices of the survivors in their histories, even though historians agree that they simply cannot be left out of any historical account of genocide.” This oversight highlights the importance of “uncovering diverse and uncensored voices that may already be silenced or will be excluded from collective memories over time,” as Denise Phillips puts it in her account of Hazara refugees. Without the narratives collected by oral historians, especially in times of crisis when memories prove unstable and narrators fear that telling often leads to reliving the crisis,

the social construction of historical memory can amount to the social repression of individual memory. Indeed, in her attempts to collect firsthand accounts of previously unspoken and unexplored episodes in the Cuban boat people's flight to Miami, Betsy Campisi is aware of struggling against the "accepted cultural explanation about a particular crisis that demands conformity, leading individual survivors to suppress their own life stories in order to maintain an alliance with the other members of the group."

In their efforts to record the personal damage that historical movements leave in their wake, many oral historians work under time pressure, feeling the need to record personal narratives before the media's inevitable bowdlerization and oversimplification have shaped public memory and before it has been used for political leverage by elected officials.<sup>2</sup> However, several of the narratives in these chapters were collected over a period of years; the survivors' enduring and horrifying impressions of what they went through in order to survive remain seared into their minds. The emphasis on the time-sensitive nature of these memories is one of the ways in which psychodynamic clinicians and oral historians differ. Clinicians are less concerned with knowing the truth about what actually happened during a crisis than with understanding how the memories continue to plague the individual survivor. Moreover, many survivors enter psychodynamic treatment years after a traumatic event, often without the express intention of addressing their survival.

Mary Marshall Clark says of oral historians, "Our quest is always teleological in nature, our goal is a product with serious social implications."<sup>3</sup> As a psychoanalyst, I focus on the process, not the product; my emphasis is on the narrator, whereas the oral historian's is on the narrative. But when oral history is documenting a time of crisis, and the narrator is describing events that range from callous indifference to human life to unspeakable brutality and violations of human rights that, as each of the authors mention, are painful to listen to, let alone to recount, the oral historian finds that the line between a valuable historical document and the individual narrator's needs is inevitably blurred.

Oral historians raise questions about the nature of their relationship with their narrators; they ask themselves where their responsibility to their respondents lies. What motivates their respondents to tell their horrifying stories? They remind themselves that they are not therapists but wonder if there is anything therapeutic for their informants about the process of narrating. As Kennelly puts it, "Is giving an oral history interview a step in a healing journey?" Campisi in particular raises the question of the oral historian's ethical responsibilities: "What do we owe our interviewees besides protecting copyright? What do we owe history?" How do oral historians understand their own role? How do they account for and counter the profound and sometimes shattering impact these encounters have on the listeners, on the oral historians themselves? And finally, the oral historians ask themselves what meaning their narrators make

of the experience of being interviewed; what meaning do the events they have described hold for them?

In each of these essays we hear the tension between the responsibility to the individual narrator—often someone whose voice would not otherwise be heard—and the responsibility to the larger project of recording events that add a more nuanced view of history. With an eye to that larger picture, Kennelly asks: “Through the telling, do these narrators become the healers for the collective as well as agents of history...agents of change who encourage the rest of us to remember and change ourselves?” In giving voice to displaced Hazara refugees seeking asylum in Australia, Denise Phillips points out that this is not just an Australian story but one that could lead governments to reconsider the resettlement process in general. In recording these individual stories, she is, in fact, bringing a human rights crisis into the open; “beneath the public hysteria, the real—and often prolonged—crisis belongs to the refugees themselves.” And she speculates that understanding more about this resettlement process through the oral histories could lead to a change in policy.

## CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO DEATHS

The stories of survival our patients or narrators tell us about being overwhelmed by violence that has upended their lives and their communities often concern events that may be recorded by history but where the individually disrupted lives are obscured by the enormity of the facts and figures. For example, during the Rwandan genocide it is estimated eight hundred thousand were killed; in Bosnia the most widely accepted official data record eight thousand to nine thousand dead during the massacre in Srebrenica in July 1995. Krauss and Leydesdorff animate these impersonal statistics with individual narratives from Antoinette, Charles K., and Hanifa.

In other instances, the violence may have been contained, the events well documented by the media, and community resources rapidly made available to the individual survivors, as was the case at Virginia Tech. Or, again, the particular survivors may have trodden a painful, hazardous, and lonely path of which the press and the rest of the world remain largely unaware, as with the Hazara refugees who finally made their way to Australia. All these survivors tell stories filled with terror and uncertainty, with scenes of incalculable brutality and humiliation, and the irreversible loss of families, homes, and homelands.

The majority of the stories include moments when the narrator was in terror of annihilation, not of death per se but of sudden and total extinction. Furthermore, many endured the horror of seeing others killed or horribly injured or heard about the sudden and violent death or disappearance of a loved one. For many survivors these traumatic moments—whether they were brief moments, or whether the terror continued for months or even years—lead to the collapse of the self as it was experienced before the crisis.

This is what I call catastrophic dissociation.<sup>4</sup> Survivors are often left with the impression, sometimes spoken aloud, sometimes a closely guarded shameful secret, that they have not, in fact, survived, or that even if they survived physically, they have not survived psychologically. Charles K. admits this openly to Taylor Krauss: "What I mean is that I lost my family and don't seem to have life, so can I say that I survived? If I had survived I could get one of my children to survive, but all of them were killed."

Krauss and Leydesdorff voice concern about their respondents' psychic survival. Antoinette agreed to tell her story to Krauss as a way to ensure that her family would be remembered by future generations; yet Krauss finds to his dismay that Antoinette, who watched and by awful means survived the destruction of her entire family in Rwanda, paradoxically and tragically is focused on death and her family's manner of dying rather than on their ways of being alive. Similarly, Leydesdorff is troubled that Hanifa, a survivor of the Bosnian genocide in which her husband and one of her sons disappeared, cannot imagine a future for herself. Leydesdorff writes, "Envisioning the future might have helped her order her memories, since the present combined with what is coming shapes memory and sorts out the many impressions." In fact, Hanifa cannot move forward in time; catastrophic dissociation has trapped her in the everlasting present of the genocide. To sort out the many impressions of what she went through and possibly free her to envision a future for herself would take years of painstaking psychodynamic work, and even then it is not clear that Hanifa would choose to rejoin the living.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has an expression that fits the psychic reality of survivors like Antoinette, Hanifa, and Charles; he locates them in a space *entre deux morts*, between two deaths. There is natural or biological death on the one hand, which is part of the "cycle of generation and corruption, of nature's continual transformation," and on the other hand "absolute death,"<sup>5</sup> which is in itself a symbol for death. The gap between natural and absolute death is an emptiness that cannot be contained or defined or reasoned away. When Antigone was banished from Thebes for defying her uncle's edict and burying her brother, Lacan argues, her banishment represented absolute death, her exclusion from the symbolic community, from a world of common meaning. She awaited her biological death in isolation.

Survivors of massive trauma who have faced annihilation and experienced catastrophic dissociation and its devastating consequences inhabit this place of exile. Their biological death has not happened, but they are outsiders; intimate knowledge of mortality has robbed them of their citizenship within the ranks of the living. As the philosopher and Lacanian interpreter Slavoj Žižek puts it, "absolute death is always the destruction of the symbolic universe."<sup>6</sup> Although Antoinette has words to describe for the first and possibly only time what she physically survived, Krauss is concerned that she remains immersed in death. As Krauss puts it, for this rescapé "there is no mastering the past, particularly

when the memories of their loved ones assert themselves and their priorities in the present."

## DANGERS INHERENT IN CONSTRUCTING TRAUMA NARRATIVES

When the external world becomes a direct reflection of our most terrifying thoughts, fantasies, and nightmares, fear collapses the distinction between the outside world and internal experience, between fantasy and reality, and the survivor finds himself in a state of psychic equivalence.<sup>7</sup> The psyche has been overwhelmed by external horrors that find their equivalents in the unconscious. There are many consequences for those held hostage in the state of psychic equivalence. If the distinction between the interior world and the external world is lost, thoughts cannot cohere in a mind that is exposed to the outside, there is no longer the internal space for reflection, the distinction between signifier and signified has collapsed, and consequently meaning has been leached out of experience; words and what they stand for are one and the same. Words, the symbols that once protected one from and made sense of raw experience, no longer serve their purpose as signifiers; they *are* the experience. The word has, in effect, become flesh.

In such a state, a narrator is not describing what happened; she is living it. Some survivors find that when the moment arrives, the prospect of telling their story to an oral historian is simply too daunting. With great understanding and a little humor, Campisi summarizes a number of creative ways in which survivors, who had originally appeared to be promising oral history subjects, manage to run out the clock and avoid telling their stories. Campisi speculates that survivors who are prepared to give oral histories are less severely affected: "I came to the general conclusion that many people were still feeling the effects of being detained five years after their arrival in the United States and that people who did complete interviews with me had either been less traumatized or had come to terms with their experiences more fully."

Some survivors may choose the difficult task of becoming narrators even when they are catastrophically traumatized, but by and large those survivors who were more traumatized or had more difficulty coming to terms with their experiences may find a way to construct a narrative in psychodynamic treatment. Psychodynamically trained therapists are experienced in working with reluctant narrators. Our discipline teaches us how to imply that we can contain and withstand the patient's confusion; we offer confidentiality (although I shall speculate about the limits of confidentiality below), and we hold out the possibility of a long engagement. Unfortunately, when a psychodynamic approach may be more appropriate than oral history, in many cases the resources are simply not available or a therapeutic engagement is not practical.



There is much evidence of how trauma disorganizes memory, making it difficult to give—and to follow—a narrative of events. In faithfully transcribing Hanifa's confused account, Leydesdorff provides a stark example of Hanifa being unable to tell a coherent story about the chaos, panic, and violence that lay at the core of her experience. As Leydesdorff says, "Severe traumatization affected reminiscing, hindering her memory performance." Hanifa's transcripts are hard to follow, with gaps reflecting memory's reluctance to reenter territory that may have caused the self to collapse. Perhaps the most striking example for the reader comes as Hanifa attempts to ward off knowledge that is too painful to admit into consciousness at that moment. To the question, "When did you realize your husband and son had disappeared?" she responds, "Well, I still don't know anything, they are missing but I don't know anything." Facing a reality that is literally unbearable, unable to admit to it yet knowing it to be true is common in massive psychic trauma, contributing in part to the confusion that both listeners and narrators experience as a narrative unfolds.

Some survivors recite their tales of terror and loss as if they happened to other people; the narrator switches from the first to the second or third person. Augustín, one of the Cubans Campisi interviewed, who decided to leave Cuba to confront death on a raft in the middle of the shark-infested Florida Straits, recounted, "*You* get off the boat and everything makes *you* dizzy, it seems like *you're* still in the water, *everyone* had nightmares." It is safer to project one's experiences into another or to speak impersonally than to remember and relive in the first person.

The narrative's chronology is frequently confused, for the ability to produce a meaningful sequence is compromised when time has lost its meaning to survivors who remain paralyzed in the past of the event. Hanifa, in particular, cannot tell a story that follows a timeline: she does not mention the order to leave her home until she is describing the fact that she and her family left; she does not mention her sister-in-law's pregnancy until the baby is born; a son enters the narrative out of the blue. The story vividly conveys the cognitive confusion Hanifa experienced during the days that led up to the genocide and the months and years that followed. Ten years later, we learn from the continuing confusion in her narrative that she is still living in a state of catastrophic dissociation.

Many survivors believe that events like these, which are frequently too awful to remember, let alone describe to another person, are best not spoken about. They fear that if they do speak about them, they will be forced to relive them. Yet these events have left an indelible mark in memory. The reminders may be dissociated, pushed aside for periods of time, but they always return to haunt the survivor, often not in the form of explicit memory but in fragmented thoughts, images and feelings, paralyzing fear, sudden disgust, triggered by a sound or smell or the way a certain person looks or moves. The events that gave rise to these catastrophically dissociated memories fall into what Jacques Lacan refers to as the register of the Real. Lacan argues that this psychic territory represents

a gap in experience that cannot be organized into memory and cannot be filled by the Symbolic. Words cannot be used to make the experience meaningful; they are powerless against the disorganizing void of trauma. Lacan is not alone in insisting that trauma defies representation.<sup>8</sup>

There is an exciting consilience between the difficulties that survivors experience in living with and in giving accounts of their traumatic histories and the neurobiological correlates of trauma. The flood of norepinephrine released during a stressful event damages the hippocampus, where, under normal conditions, long-term memories are consolidated. Traumatic memories are quite literally short-circuited and stored as somatic sensations, visual images, and auditory traces in the amygdala, leading to the fragmented impressions that are easily aroused by environmental stimuli.

The situation is further complicated by the paradoxical nature of the neurochemical process. At the first sign of danger, an increase in adrenaline can strengthen explicit memory, leading to flashbulb memories, the clear and explicit memories of parts of the traumatic event that many survivors keep seeing in their mind's eye. Kennelly's Derek O'Dell describes one such memory during the shooting at Virginia Tech: "Each trigger pull and each gunshot that was fired it just seemed like—I remember looking when he first fired at our professor, I remember seeing the casing pop out of the gun and just watching it twirl up in the air. It is something that is just burned in my mind." But as the stress continues, the adrenaline ultimately devastates the explicit memory.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the survivor's memory consists of moments of terrifying clarity and equally terrifying impressions of events that, on reflection, do not appear to hold together. Terror leaves a lasting biological impression with profound psychological reverberations.

## ADVANTAGES OF CONSTRUCTING TRAUMA NARRATIVES

It would appear, then, to be an act of insubordination against the Real and a challenge to neurological realities for oral historians and psychoanalysts to expect narrators or patients to provide coherent accounts of their traumatic experiences. When the psychic self has collapsed in the aftermath of terror, there is no subject to speak the narrative and so metabolize an event that has left a tear in the fabric of experience. In an extraordinarily vivid description of her struggle to regain her psychic footing after a brutal rape in the south of France, philosophy professor Susan Brison wrote, "I lost my voice literally when I lost my ability to continue my life's narrative."<sup>10</sup> Dori Laub, one of the founders of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, insists that narrative is a way of repossessing one's life story, which in itself is a form of action.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, under the right circumstances narrative can reestablish shattered subjectivity, supporting a growing sense of agency. Telling a story in

sequence allows a subject to recover the sense of time. Constructing a narrative encourages the exploration of disordered physical cohesiveness and the expression of previously intolerable affect. Over time, words take back their symbolic meaning; they are no longer stealth missiles destroying the survivor's fragile equilibrium. They are no longer the experience itself but representative of that experience. This is not to say that narratives will make explicit all the impressions and meanings of previously unformulated traumatic experiences. Narratives are transfigured memories that, in their turn, further transfigure memory; this is a continuous process. Narratives are open texts inevitably incomplete, always inviting further elaboration.

From the oral historian point of view, obtaining individual narratives is crucial to providing a more nuanced understanding of history. From a therapeutic point of view, being able to build a narrative is crucial to resuming a life that is no longer dominated by horror. Kristina Heeger-Anderson, one of the students from Virginia Tech, understands this implicitly. "I feel like it is something that will help me move past it if I can talk about it the way I want to," she said. Kennelly has a more modest goal: "the aim of oral history may not be healing, but through the telling of the story, the survivor and supportive listener may find an exit—even a chink of light—that helps break the cycle of silence." Kennelly is echoing a point that Laub made in a ground-breaking volume written with the literary scholar Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*: "Silence is defeat."<sup>12</sup>

The remarkable clarity of the three narratives from the Virginia Tech students is a notable exception to the halting and confused narratives described by Leydesdorff and Campisi. The students vividly recall their terror and in some cases their guilt over actions not taken to protect others. In all probability, the fact that the community mobilized so rapidly to support and debrief these survivors enables them to speak fluently in testifying about their experiences, and each of them is intent on reaching out and educating the public about what happened at Virginia Tech. Derek O'Dell says that it is his "mission to tell everyone who will listen about what happened to him on April 16."

## THE MOTIVE TO TELL

Survivors who seek psychoanalytic treatment after a traumatic event often fear that their stories cannot be told. They are filled with shame about their reactions, reluctant to admit to their symptoms, wondering why they have not been able to put the event behind them. As they begin their halting narratives, frequently they can tolerate only a few moments' telling at a time. I have often wondered how it is that oral history narrators agree to reenter this difficult territory for a few hours with a virtual stranger who is not trained in psychological theories of trauma. It appears that the particular demand characteristics of oral history interviews facilitate rather than work against the motive to tell. Many of those

who volunteer to give oral testimony, such as the three Virginia Tech students, do so with the intention to make their stories public. Knowing that their narrative will be preserved holds great personal meaning for them. For some, knowing that their interlocutor is not, in fact, a mental health professional but someone who will value and disseminate their experience just as it has been recorded so that others will benefit from this knowledge is an incentive.

How oral historians introduce their project can create a set of expectations that help respondents override their fears of reviving memories that will not stay dead. When they were recruited to give their oral histories, the subjects in the Columbia University 9/11 Oral History Project were told they were performing a highly creative and ethical act, that future historians would rely on their testimony to understand the true nature of catastrophe: "We are going to be using this interview forty, fifty, a hundred years from now, and so, in order to better understand your story, we'd like to know how you got where you are today."<sup>13</sup> In the introduction to *Fascism in Popular Memory*, the Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini<sup>14</sup> notes that she encouraged her subjects to present themselves as unique and irreplaceable. This is an important message to potential respondents who feel they have been cast aside by history and for whom there has been no public acknowledgment.

For Antoinette, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, the motivation to tell her story grew out of the tragedy that had befallen her, keeping her psychically exiled in Lacan's space between two deaths: "If I die without telling my story here, my lineage will be snuffed out...and the name of our family will disappear." Lacan<sup>15</sup> argues that if biological death occurs without symbolic closure for the dead, without the proper settling of accounts, as he puts it, then the dead will haunt the living. The multigenerational transmission of trauma, how traumatic deaths that have not been properly mourned spiral across generations, always enacted but never spoken, can be an important incentive for survivors to publicly remember their dead.

## BEARING WITNESS

In her narrative, Antoinette is both offering herself as a witness to the personal impact of the Rwandan genocide and seeking witnesses to share the loss with her, witnesses who will carry the names of the dead and the manner of their dying to future generations so that they can finally be laid to rest. Thus we have two orders of witnessing, eyewitnesses to the atrocities that have occurred, the immediate survivors, and the oral historians, and by extension, I would argue, psychoanalytic clinicians, who witness their narratives.

None of the narrators discussed here have been offered an opportunity to formally testify in a court of law about the events that they have survived. Testifying in public frequently distorts survivors' subjective experiences, leaving them feeling exposed rather than comforted. Like psychotherapists working

with survivors of massive psychic trauma, the five oral historians whose work I am discussing have gone out of their way to make the setting safe for their respondents. Furthermore, in a court of law, witnesses have no control over their words once they have been uttered; their testimony belongs to the official court record. Oral historians offer assurances that if the narrator decides at any time to keep her narrative private, it will not be made public. However, it is generally understood that the respondents will be identified and that their testimony, their narratives, will be archived and made available to the public through books and scholarly articles. This is perhaps the most obvious distinction between an oral history and words spoken in psychotherapy sessions.

The understanding between a psychoanalyst and her patient is above all that the patient's material is confidential. Psychoanalysts believe that confidentiality is a necessary, perhaps the most necessary, condition of our work with patients. Ethically we are bound not to reveal patients' names, to keep records under lock and key, and never to share them without the patients' written permission. If the clinician wants to use material for a spoken or written presentation, a patient must give permission, and it is understood that the details will be carefully disguised so that patients are unrecognizable. In numerous ways, patients are assured that what happens in the consultation room remains between us; it stays in the room.<sup>16</sup>

However, on a number of occasions recently I have found that patients of mine, particularly those who have been through an adult onset trauma, are less concerned with confidentiality than they are with bearing witness to a larger public so that others would understand what they and those who had been through a similar experience suffered. One woman I worked with several years after September 11 found it impossible to give me details about her experience escaping from Ground Zero. It was so difficult for her to say the words out loud into the space between us that I suggested I would write down what she said verbatim. Then I proposed to type up what she had said, so that we could review it and build on it together in the next session. Suddenly, the thought that what she had gone through and was still going through might be read by other people and might be experienced as encouragement to them was enough to motivate her to work with me over many, many weeks to produce a powerful narrative of her experience, very different from the lifeless narrative we had started with. As I wrote out her testimony, she understood that her experience was worthy of others' attention, of being recorded and read. She was no longer an abject survivor living in exile, but someone who had been invited to reach beyond her exile to find kindred spirits and give them a helping hand.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the assurance of confidentiality, which unequivocally distinguishes between psychoanalysis and the intentions of oral historians, the relationship between oral historians and their narrators, at least those whose work I am

discussing here, and the psychodynamic clinician and her patient is based on similar principles. The single most significant variable that has set contemporary models of psychoanalysis apart from more traditional and classical techniques is the emphasis not on the patient alone but on the therapeutic relationship. Contemporary psychoanalysts argue that the process requires a two-person engagement in which the clinician is not a blank screen but knowable to her patient, acknowledging her own subjectivity as she acknowledges her patient's; patient and therapist are viewed as co-participants in the therapeutic endeavor. It is a mutual relationship even while it remains asymmetrical because the therapist's role confers a different set of expectations on her.<sup>18</sup>

We are provided details about how oral historians sought to develop relationships with their informants before taking their oral histories. Phillips spent days getting to know her subject before the formal interviews began, and some of those interviews were recorded at the subject's home to give him a greater sense of security. Leydesdorff came to know Hanifa over several years as she made a longitudinal study of several women who were left behind by the massacre in Srebrenica. She notes that when she started to recognize a few words in Croatian, "This was when I began to build positive affective connections to some of the women." Campisi advocates "prioritizing an empathic listening style over a rigid research agenda and being in the moment with interviewees," which can result in them sharing more information, but, she points out correctly, it is important to be respectful when respondents indicate that they have said as much as they can bear.

The attunement to their respondents and understanding that their respondents are also attuned to them make the oral historians whose work I am discussing here very much part of a two-person process. Contemporary psychoanalysts have several ways of describing the intersubjective dynamics that contribute to the capacity to be reflective, to listen intently to a narrative while another is speaking, in effect turning a monologue into a silent dialogue. To take a few examples of the way this crucial relationship is understood: the therapist's gaze, or in this case I would say the oral historian's gaze, is crucial. Experimentally it has been established that facial communication operates at the subsymbolic, implicit, or procedural level largely out of awareness. Yet neural activity surges twice as much when adults watch faces rather than objects.<sup>19</sup> Mentalization, the narrator's capacity to identify with the therapist's (or again, oral historian's) mind as he or she focuses intently on the narrator's words, teaches the capacity to be reflective.<sup>20</sup> The cognitive psychologist Wilma Bucci has measured these interpersonal processes as they occur through the exchange of myriad symbolic and subsymbolic behaviors, many of which are undetected and unintended but, when things are going well, reassure the speaker that someone is with them, listening to their every word, picking up on nonverbal signals, making every word count.<sup>21</sup>

## MORAL WITNESSING

The discussion of the interpersonal dynamics of the interview leads me to consider the role of second-order witnesses, oral historians or psychodynamic clinicians working with survivors of massive psychic trauma. These social scientists and mental health professionals feel obligated to bear witness when an external event that has been caused by evil has led to such a profound disruption in the other's sense of self (and frequently self in relation to other) that a witness is necessary to validate the extent of the damage that has been done. Active witnessing is a two-person process; the witness is "another that stands beside the event and the self and who cares to listen; another who is able to contain that which is heard and is capable of imagining the unbearable."<sup>22</sup>

In general, the word *witness* and the expression *bearing witness* have been stretched so thin that they are in danger of becoming empty clichés in contemporary discourse. In psychoanalysis, for example, the words are used increasingly to describe those clinicians who, in the course of their everyday work, encourage their patients to co-create narratives that give a fuller expression to the patients' past and present experiences, paying attention to the conscious and unconscious meanings that emerge. The work is not always easy; it takes great skill, it often takes a toll, sometimes the details are painful, and the process is difficult to negotiate, but it is a professional obligation. These are the ethics of the profession for those who practice psychodynamically. I prefer a narrower definition of the term *witness*, one that describes the oral historians and psychotherapists who acknowledge the moral imperative to work with those who have survived events of horrifying depravity, whose psyches have been mortally wounded.<sup>23</sup> In this I am influenced by the work of the Israeli moral philosopher Avishai Margalit<sup>24</sup> and his description of the moral witness as an eyewitness to human suffering that has been caused by evil.

A moral witness, even a silent witness, provides validation and in so doing counters a fear, frequently an unconscious fear, that is common to survivors: without this necessary validation the survivor doubts the significance of her experience. In addition to validation, moral witnesses who are prepared to listen to a narrative that the survivor fears is too awful to tell counters the survivor's sense of isolation, of having been exiled from the human race. Survivors feel that their intimate knowledge of death robs them of their humanity, setting them apart from others who cannot imagine and do not want to share their survivor/victim status. When the exiling truths of trauma are acknowledged by a witness, a community of understanding can begin to grow.<sup>25</sup> This is a valuable function that oral historians provide as they record their respondents' narratives.

Active listening is crucial to the witnessing function; the promise of bringing more witnesses into the community of understanding offers hope to survivors. Thus my analytic patient responded positively when she understood that

our work together would reach beyond the walls of my private office and that through my written words I would provide her with another circle of concerned witnesses.

## VICARIOUS TRAUMATIZATION

Margalit adds a second condition to his statement that the moral witness is an eyewitness to human suffering that has been caused by evil; he maintains that a moral witness must be exposed to risk in the act of witnessing. I have come to believe that the risk incurred by moral witnesses, whether psychologists or oral historians, lies in how they are affected by the testimony they hear. Danger lies in the inevitable exposure to a painful and intimate knowledge of horror that cannot be borne in mind. In brief, trauma is contagious.

Phillips describes feeling overwhelmed by “universal fears of loss, aloneness and death, and the vulnerability of the human condition . . . afterwards I was emotionally exhausted, distressed, and could not sleep.” Kennelly says that she will never fathom what happened to the three surviving students from Virginia Tech whose oral histories she presents: “I could not flee or ignore the trauma of how what interviewees revealed to me settled in my heart and mind.”

In the state of psychic equivalence, when the boundary between self and other is under threat, there is a danger that the listener’s mind will be invaded by the speaker’s unbearable experience. The listener struggles to hold onto the distinction between her own internal experience and the narrator’s, but there is an inevitable price to pay. Even as I was reading Hanifa’s narrative, I felt the tension mounting in myself. What will happen next? Will I be able to understand it? Will I be able to stand it? Will I ever sort out what happened here? Leydesdorff teaches us to listen with compassion, to listen intensely, to imagine when recognition is not enough, because the story requires active engagement and the survivor seeks someone who is prepared to struggle against her own dissociation and disorientation in order to consider with her in frightening detail the multiple consequences of those mortal psychic wounds.

Oral historians and clinicians working with patients who have survived massive psychic trauma learn firsthand how permeable boundaries between self and other become. Chaim Shatan describes having nightmares, “being unable to sleep, unable to talk normally to other people for days or weeks” after treating a number of combat veterans who had recently returned from Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> Commenting on this apparent psychological contagion, he notes, “We are changed in fundamental ways” when we are expected to listen to patients who have been exposed to the worst extremes of human experience. Some twenty years later, by then using the term *vicarious traumatization*, psychodynamic clinicians working with



survivors of trauma began to deconstruct in considerable detail the toll that working with survivors of massive psychic trauma takes on their therapists.<sup>27</sup>

## THE CONTINUING AND UNFINISHED PRESENT

Like the narratives recorded in the previous chapters, epics grow out of an oral tradition; they describe periods of social unrest, with battles between good and evil, right and wrong. The Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>28</sup> argues that epics concern a past that is inaccessible to personal experience; they lead to an inevitable and unvarying conclusion. In effect, epics are static. They are like that impersonal ten-foot monument in Santa Fe; they record history but not individual experience. "The story is 'sacred,'" writes Bakhtin. "The audience listens 'reverently' but cannot enter the narrative." However, the cups and plates, teddy bears and personal items fixed in that adobe plinth that I have suggested represent oral history and that offer invaluable insights into individual and familiar lives that were changed forever at the moment of crisis are also frozen in time, quite literally set in stone. Epics become narratives when a sense of past, present, and future is introduced—when outcomes are left in doubt and when personal meanings begin to emerge.

Meanings are discovered in an active engagement between two people. The role of the listener is crucial at the best of times, but much more so after a traumatic experience. A witness who can help contain feelings that are sometimes threatening to overwhelm, and help shape the experience, even if it is only by his or her presence, enables personal meaning to emerge. Time and again, completed oral history transcripts reveal comments such as "I've never thought about things this way before but now that I am talking about it. . . ." The meaning may have been on the tip of the narrator's mind, but it required an active and involved (but often silent) listener to clarify, to reflect, and to facilitate its expression.

Sometimes attempts to create meaning are premature, bids to avoid the inexplicable. These hurried explanations foreclose the possibility of further exploring the personal meaning of an event because accepting the knowledge that violence can strike at random is too frightening to consider. In contrast, Kennelly comments that by constructing her story in her own way, Heeger-Anderson created a new way of knowing the event and moved from being a victim of trauma to becoming an agent of history who defines her own reality.

Phillips's interview with Reza gave him an opportunity to reflect on how haunted he was by what he had lost and to imagine a future in which his losses might be reversed in some small part: "...the life is very changed, you know. . . . I born there and I lived in my country, in my own place about seventeen years. . . . always I remember, you know, I can't forget. And now I, I come here and I live here. It's very hard, and I lost all the family and relatives there and

I remember where, where we had there a, a little farm, a land, I go there when maybe this time to have a look.—Yeah, if I couldn't have any problem, try to be safe and do it quick and—take some memory from there.”

Leidesdorff describes the tragic conclusion that emerges from Hanifa's narrative: “Love is gone and life is gone. She has lived a life of continual loss, and with the genocide loss has taken on a new meaning. It has become a deeper and more painful feeling. Remembering loss is possible, but remembering mass murder and the inability to defend those she loved...blocked memories that simply cannot be told.”

If meanings are to remain viable, however, they must be subject to subtle shifts as circumstances change and time passes; they must take into account “the continuing and unfinished present” referenced in the title to this chapter.<sup>29</sup> In his description of oral histories given by Holocaust survivors, Lawrence Langer<sup>30</sup> strikes a somber note: “Oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives not only by the vicissitudes of technology but by the essence of the experience they record. Instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witnesses, they exhaust themselves in the telling.” The narratives shared are disrupted. This is the difference between the *process* of an ongoing psychodynamic treatment, which is continually reviewing the unfinished present and whose intent is to provide an individual therapeutic benefit, and the oral historian's *product*, which at a certain point is fixed in time but nonetheless provides distinct social and historical value. In exploring their respondents' individual memories as opposed to merely cataloguing historical events, these oral historians demonstrate their personal commitment, their sense of urgency, and their implicit hope that the individual narratives they have collected might alter the ways in which nations and individuals intervene to mitigate, if not to prevent, similar crises.

## Notes

1. For too long psychoanalysis unlinked the psyche from its social context, but with the relational turn, in the last twenty-five years psychoanalysts have been encouraged to take a more comprehensive view of our patients, to understand that they are embedded within a culture and acted on by history. See Ghislaine Boulanger, *Wounded by Reality: Understanding and Treating Adult Onset Trauma* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2007), 173, for further discussion of and references to this trend.
2. Mary Marshall Clark, “Echoes in the Search for Meaning in Stories of Catastrophe: The Struggle between Conscious and Unconscious Mourning in Oral History Accounts of September 11, 2001” (presentation given at American Psychological Association Annual Division 39 conference, New York, April 2005; cited with permission).
3. Ibid.
4. I am referring particularly to how subsymbolic, unarticulated sources of the self become dysregulated during terror and beyond. The sense of agency can be overtaken by a feeling of paralysis, of having no control over one's destiny, resulting at best in disabling anxiety and at worst in continual fear of further violence. The fact that most of us take for granted a sense of physical cohesion, that we inhabit an intact body, which clearly delineates inside from outside, is challenged in multiple ways, not only physically but also psychically. Familiar feelings that provide continuity from one experience to the next, one day to the next, are lost; a

- protective numbness has taken their place. Time is catastrophically disrupted, and survivors are frequently indifferent to past, present, and future; psychologically they remain transfixed in the everlasting and recursive present of the trauma. (See Boulanger, *Wounded by Reality*, 77–94, for a more detailed breakdown of the phenomenology of catastrophic dissociation.)
5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 134.
  6. *Ibid.*, 135.
  7. Peter Fonagy, Georgy Gergely, Elliot Jurist, and Mary Target, eds., *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self* (New York: Other Press, 2002), 255–61 and 306–16.
  8. See also Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Sue Grand, “Sexual Betrayal and the Persistence of Nonlinguistic Testimony,” in *Memories of Sexual Betrayal*, ed. R. Gartner (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1997), 209–19.
  9. Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 206–208.
  10. Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 114.
  11. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 82.
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. Personal communication, Mary Marshall Clark, June 2011.
  14. Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10–16.
  15. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1992), 248.
  16. As insurance companies increasingly insinuate their way into our private practices, some patients choose to pay out of pocket for their treatment rather than give up their confidentiality.
  17. Boulanger, *Wounded by Reality*, 131–50.
  18. This is not the place to review the technical and theoretical implications of this departure from the traditional practice of psychoanalysis. Further details may be found in Lewis Aron, *A Meeting of Minds: Mutuality in Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1996).
  19. Beatrice Beebe and Frank Lachmann, “Organizing Principles of Interaction from Infant Research and the Lifespan Prediction on Attachment,” *Journal of Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychotherapy* 2 (2002): 61–89.
  20. Fonagy et al., *Affect Regulation*.
  21. Wilma Bucci, “Pathways of Emotional Communication,” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 21 (2001): 40–70.
  22. Sam Gerson, “When the Third Is Dead: Memory, Mourning, and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 90 (2009): 1342.
  23. Ghislaine Boulanger, “Psychoanalytic Witnessing: Professional Obligation or Moral Imperative,” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 29 (2012): 318–24.
  24. Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
  25. William Thornton, John Cain, and Marc Litle, “Trauma, Certainty, and Exile,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 46 (2010): 355–79.
  26. Chaim Shatan, “The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans’ Self-Help Movement,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 43 (1973): 640–53.
  27. I. Lisa McCann and Laurie Anne Pearlman, “Vicarious Traumatization: A Framework for Understanding the Psychological Effects of Working with Victims,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 3 (1990): 131–49; and Laurie Anne Pearlman and Karen Saakvitne, *Trauma and the Therapist: Countertransference and Vicarious Traumatization in Working with Incest Survivors* (New York: Norton, 1995).
  28. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 16.
  29. *Ibid.*, 30.
  30. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), xi.

PART II

RESONANCE



# 7

## UNLOCKED

### Perspective and the New Orleans Prison Evacuation Crisis

Mark Cave

**Oral histories by Mark Cave with members of the Louisiana  
Department of Corrections, Angola, Pineville, and Keithville,  
Louisiana, March 23 and 24, June 17 and 18, 2009**

*The media found many explanations for what went wrong in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Those explanations that critiqued local, state, and federal first responders for their actions or inactions following the storm generated the most traction with the public. Some of these stories included police officers who shot unarmed civilians or abandoned the city; doctors who euthanized or abandoned their patients; national guardsmen who arrested citizens without cause; and correctional workers who abused prisoners or held them without trial. The public condemnation and legal action in the years following the storm were important parts of the process of the communities' recovery. First-responder misconduct was, of course, an appropriate avenue for journalistic inquiry, but the intensity of the investigation alienated many of the most important witnesses to the events in the hurricane's aftermath. I started an oral history project that partnered with first-responding agencies to record the experience of their personnel. In some instances, the agencies tied the interview process into their own after-action studies of their hurricane response. The last agency that I worked with was the Louisiana Department of Corrections. It was responsible for the evacuation and subsequent housing of more than six thousand inmates stranded in the Orleans Parish Prison by the storm. The evacuation and the treatment of prisoners following Hurricane Katrina were topics of harsh criticism by human rights groups and investigative journalists.*

*The Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) is made up of a cluster of buildings located near the city center of New Orleans. The prison, operated by the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office (OPCSO), has historically held a notorious reputation for overcrowding and abuse. The OPP buildings weathered Hurricane Katrina relatively well, but when the levees broke and floodwaters filled the city, the environment quickly devolved. The*

*prison buildings flooded and the generators that were on the first floor failed, leaving the inmates in sweltering heat and almost complete darkness. OPCSO made a desperate call for assistance to state officials, and the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections (DOC) responded. Correctional workers from state facilities across Louisiana descended on New Orleans to help with what would become one of the largest and most complex prison evacuations in American history.*

*Among the first to arrive on scene in New Orleans were members of the tactical team from Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. The Angola tactical team was trained to put down inmate disturbances at the state's high-security prison. On arrival, OPCSO asked the team members to deal with a situation in one of the prison buildings that was rapidly filling with water. Here, team leader Orville Lamartiniere recalls entering the building.*

LAMARTINIERE: And they called us over to the Templeman Building, which is behind CCC. That's what they [OPCSO] call Central Lockup, if I'm not mistaken, and they said they were having trouble there. That was a sight to behold. We pulled up in the lobby, or sally port, there, and I jumped out of the boat and I'm in about ten [feet] deep of water. I didn't realize how deep it was. And climbed back up onto the steps. And the team follows me and we go into the building. They said they were having trouble in the building. And we go into this huge dining hall, or processing area. It was a big area, probably as big as this academy, and it was full of inmates in about breast-deep water, just there waiting to get out, and the water's steady rising. I mean, you could—you could almost feel it coming up. You know, it was still on the rise. And so they were panicking and they were trying to get out. So we tried to concentrate our efforts there first because they were in the most danger and try to start getting them out.

But I remember going in. We had our guns out and went in about fifteen feet into the building and Colonel Slater grabbed me on the shoulder, because I was in the front of the team, and said, "This is not good. You know, we're going into a bad situation."

So we backed out, regrouped, kind of talked to them. Again, communication was the key. Once you talked to them and explained to them what was going on, they didn't—I think they thought that they were just abandoned, you know, that all the authorities had just left them... once they realized that we were there and we were there to try to help them and get them out, then I think they realized that everything was going to be OK and we started trying to get them out.

And we put like four or five on a boat and escorted them to the bridge. From there, they would just sit until we would be able to get them out, or bus them out. At that point, I didn't have any bus transportation. I didn't have any communication. You couldn't reach anybody by radio, cell phone, or anything. We were just—we were in the dark for about eight hours.

*Lamartiniere and other members of the team noted that the water soon rose by several more feet and had they not arrived when they did, inmate fatalities would have likely occurred.*

*In another building, OPCSO had totally abandoned control. Prisoners had freed themselves from their cells. At the time there were reports of violence between inmates, concerns that they were setting fires within the building, and rumors that they had breached the armory on the fifth floor of the building and were armed. The OPCSO deputies had retreated to a balcony area on the first floor. When the Angola tactical team arrived to help, the prisoners were pounding on the door that opens onto the balcony and demanding to be released. Angola Warden Burl Cain describes the situation.*

CAIN: [T]he walls were cinder block...they didn't put concrete in them when they built it and [the prisoners] would knock through the blocks with a fire extinguisher, using them as battering rams, and get into the next cell. So they all got together and I'm sure a lot of really bad things happened in there with the predators and the prey...and we heard those stories. But they had gotten all the way down to the door [on] the bottom floor, and there was one door separating them from all the deputies. Now, they [the deputies] had the guns down there. It would have been a really bad scene.

So, with the TAC team, when we opened that door, we were there with the beanbags, and shot the first two or three that tried to get out with the beanbags. It'd knock you down, so the rest of them thought they were shooting real live bullets, so they all turned around and scrambled back up the stairs and ran back up to where the jail was...that was a scary thing in there. Now, consequently, the armory hadn't been breached and they weren't armed, but we had the information they were. And they would burn fires and then you'd see smoke coming out the window and they'd hang out flags and banners, "Help me! Save me!"

*The TAC team forced the prisoners up the stairs floor by floor of the ten-story building, which was by that time oppressively hot and almost completely dark. Once the tactical team members pushed all the prisoners to the roof, they bound their hands and led them down and out of the building. Officials then loaded inmates onto boats and brought them to a staging area on the Broad Street highway overpass. The number of prisoners relocated to the overpass to wait for buses quickly grew, and the number of DOC personnel available to control the area was limited. One of the guards on the bridge was James Paul.*

PAUL: Me and my guys went to the Broad overpass, and there was approximately ten deputies there. When I first walked up on the bridge, I thought to myself, "Oh, my lord. We don't have enough buses in the state to move these people." It was approximately two thousand inmates on top of the bridge, and they was telling us they had five thousand more to move up there. So I asked the captain that was on top of the bridge, "Do you have any idea who these



people [the prisoners] are?" And he kind of grinned. I can never forget that he had one gold tooth. He kind of grinned, showing his gold tooth, and pointed with a thirty-eight-inch riot baton toward the bottom story of the courthouse. It was underwater. He said, "Chief, all their records is in that room that's underwater. We have no idea who these people are."

Me and my people stayed the next two days on top of the Broad overpass. . . . The inmates that was on top of it, they was getting restless, hot. The sun was beaming down on them. We didn't have any water, didn't have any food to give them. The first day went good. Everybody was ready to get out of there. They was loading on buses and nobody was giving us any trouble. But as it got around noon the second day, there was more DOC officers, Probation and Parole started showing up to help us out, and offenders, like I say, they was getting restless, which you can't really blame them. They was getting thirsty, hungry. They started getting up and trying to walk us into the water around noon, and we was forced to use chemical agents on them a few times, and we'd spray them and they'd sit back down. They'd last thirty minutes to an hour and they'd try it again. That day was long.

*Some of the most potent memories of DOC personnel from the staging area were of interactions with civilians who had sought the high ground of the overpass in hope of rescue. Here, Paul recalls encounters with civilians.*

PAUL: The first interactions we had was before we launched the boats the first day. Civilians was coming up to us. They thought we was coming in to rescue them. They thought the buses was for them, and I don't know, I had problems with it later on, thinking back. You know, we had women and children that was—children was crying and they was needing food and water, and we were sent in to get inmates, you know. A lot of times a lot of people think the inmates should have come out last, and to a certain point I'll agree with them. But the fact of it was, I'd hated to know what those two, three thousand inmates would have done if they'd got loose. So I looked at it thataway and went on about what we was doing, and the only thing I could tell them, tell my team to tell them, you know, "We can't move anybody right now. We're just getting here." And we had women throwing shoes at us and cursing us and everything else. But we had a job to do and we had to do it. We had to get the inmates out to make sure that nobody escaped.

But the main civilian encounter I remember was probably that third day, or the second day; I can't recall at the time. We was on top of the bridge there waiting for the next boat to come in, and one of my officers said, "Look, there's a lady coming through the water," coming to that bridge where we was at. This young lady, she could have been eighteen years old, she had a small child, probably a month old, and she had a child in her arms like this, and the child's arms was draped back over its head, and its head was dangling, its

feet was dangling. When she got there we checked the child, and it was unresponsive, barely had a pulse.

So I got on the radio and called back to one of our guys that was at the staging area and asked Warden Vannoy again what we had that we could get her out of there. Well, the young lady refused to leave, and her reasons was she had a four-year-old that was in the apartment complex about a block away and her niece was there, and all she wanted was water to bring back to them. I tried to explain to her, "Your child needs help. There's a good chance—the child's unresponsive, is dehydrated, and you're risking that child's life. I could get it out right now if you can just go on out. We've got an ambulance at the staging area. We could get it to help." And she refused to go. We gave her four or five bottles of water, and she went back across the water. We never seen her again, so I often wonder if the child made it or not. But it was always civilian encounters on top of the bridge that whole time we was there.

*Near the area of the overpass and parish prison, DOC personnel discovered a number of bodies of people who had clearly been murdered. Several had been shot in the head, and another had been thrown from the overpass. Warden Burl Cain describes the discovery of one of the bodies.*

CAIN: [W]hen we went under the overpass, there was a guy laying on the ground and the people up on top were screaming, "They just threw him off! They killed him! They threw him off!" And he was laying there. He looked dead. And so we went over there and laid something over him, one of the people with us did, and we kept going. There wasn't anything we could do, you know. We didn't have any way of chasing who did it. We needed to get the inmates out from the jail. And we went on down and parked.... Those people were—you know, they were just screaming and hollering stuff at us and carrying on. And we didn't think a lot about it, but we just—you know, we just kept our eyes on them.

*Probation and Parole officer Melissa Murray, a guard on the overpass, details the frightening scene.*

MURRAY: [P]eople are wandering aimlessly around by the hundreds, by the thousands, and so you're standing there and you could hear people walking up, but you can't see them coming. And as law enforcement, that makes you nervous. You want to see people coming to you.

And during the day, you're hearing gunfire everywhere, all around you, and you're assuming it's just citizens, it's not law enforcement, and, of course, you don't know where it's coming from. You don't know who they're really aiming at. There were several times when we were down there at the base of the ramp where we could actually see the fire coming out of the muzzle. So they say, "Did you shoot back?" Well, no, you can't just point your gun in the

general direction that you heard the sound and start shooting, you know. You can't do that.

We heard fire. We heard fire that was close. We actually saw some gunfire in the night. I couldn't tell you how close it was, but obviously it was close enough that we could see the flash. You know, people would come running up to us while we were down there, you know, saying, "A man just got shot. A man just got shot down here, and we need a cop. We need a cop."

Well, we were not allowed to leave, period. We were there. We were told to stay there. And you don't know if it was a trick. You don't know if it was them wanting to get you alone, you know, into a remote area where there was nobody else. And you had to think about these things, and that's not something I would typically think about. But let me tell you, it didn't take me long to get into that mentality when you're thrown into that kind of situation.

*Many guards expressed frustration and a sense of helplessness at not being able to do more for desperate civilians.*

MURRAY: You can sit at home and pick apart what somebody's not doing there, but when you're actually sitting in the middle of it and the noise and the chaos and the people, you're lost, you know. You just kind of stand there. I just felt like this teeny tiny little helpless nobody, you know, standing in the middle of all these people and all this chaos.

[W]e were told we couldn't give anybody [civilians on the overpass] anything, because if we gave one person something out of your car, everybody would see you giving it to them. You didn't have enough for everybody. But this mom and this child, I mean, we couldn't stand it. We couldn't stand it. Tanya gave her water, gave the little kid some peanut butter crackers... and I remember the woman just breaking down, wanting us to take her. She said, "Put us in your trunk. Put us in your trunk. We'll be able to breathe enough. Just put us in your trunk and take us with you."

"We can't. We can't do that."

She said, "Well, fine. Just take—," I don't remember if it was a boy or a girl. "Just take my son. Just take my son. Just leave me here. I'll figure something out. Just take him with you."

"We can't. We can't."

"Just put him in the trunk. Just put him in the trunk. It'll be OK. It'll be OK. You can breathe long enough in the trunk. It will be OK." And just begged us and begged us and begged us.

"We can't. We can't do that, ma'am. We can't take him."

*Once the crisis with evacuating inmates was over, many DOC personnel loaded their vehicles with some of the most vulnerable civilians and brought them to Baton Rouge. Mark Fradella remembers:*

FRADELLA: [I]t was a black male that was rolled up to us in a mop bucket. He was a double amputee, and a female who didn't even know the guy, rolled him up and said, "This guy needs help." And he was in this bucket, in his own waste. . . . So, we loaded him up in the back of the car and we took him to the Pete Maravich Assembly Center [on the campus of LSU]. I don't know what happened to him after that, but they took him in as soon as he got there.

Most of the inmates were brought first to the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel, Louisiana, the closest state facility to New Orleans. Here, officials staged inmates in the prison yard while creating space at correctional facilities throughout the state to accommodate the New Orleans prisoners. Some DOC personnel remained in New Orleans and converted the city's Greyhound bus station into a temporary jail.

### Commentary

Hurricanes are provocative media events. The menacing pinwheel moves closer and closer. Intrepid television reporters stumble in the wind and rain and comment on the impending calamity. There are anxious hours as the storm makes landfall followed by inevitable heartbreak as we listen to survivor interviews reporting what was lost. The coverage of Hurricane Katrina, however, particularly on the aftermath in New Orleans, went far beyond this script. The troubling images that bombarded television viewers for months after the storm called out for explanation. Journalists and activists from all over the world descended on New Orleans to weave narratives of the Katrina saga. Among the more popular storylines pursued in this inquiry were those critiquing the actions, or inactions, of first responders.

Scenes of bedraggled inmates pulled from flooded prisons and lined up on a highway overpass were some of the most compelling images to come out of New Orleans during the days that followed the storm. Why were they left behind when the city was under a mandatory evacuation order? The journalistic inquiry into the treatment of Orleans Parish prisoners began with this question. In September 2005, Human Rights Watch investigated and issued sharp criticism of Orleans Parish Sheriff Marlin Gusman, who decided not to evacuate as Hurricane Katrina approached.<sup>1</sup> In January 2006, the *Nation* published an article that expanded the scope of the inquiry, noting the alleged abuse of inmates while in DOC custody, as well as harshly criticizing the criminal justice system in New Orleans.

The *Nation* article brought national attention to the issue of pretrial offenders, that is, people held in OPP custody at the time of the storm and who, in the aftermath, were stuck in the state prison system for several months because of the reconstruction of the New Orleans judicial system.<sup>2</sup> These individuals had been arrested in the days and weeks before the storm and were incarcerated while they awaited trial. Many were arrested for minor



Orleans Parish prisoners assembled on the Broad Street highway overpass for buses to evacuate them from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Images such as this were disseminated in national media outlets during the week that followed the storm, provoking great interest in the prison evacuation. *Photograph courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection 2009.0213.*

offenses such as public drunkenness or unpaid traffic tickets. The plight of these pretrial offenders was the topic of numerous treatments by the local media in New Orleans.<sup>3</sup> Some of the offenders took legal action, which kept the issue of the treatment of prisoners in the aftermath of Katrina in the news for years.

The Orleans Parish sheriff's election in the spring of 2006 sparked additional interest in the prison evacuation. Challenger Gerald DeSalvo attacked incumbent Marlin Gusman with television ads showing images of ransacked prison buildings. He criticized Gusman not for his failure to evacuate but rather for his department's lack of control over inmates. Gusman responded by touting OPCSO's performance during the crisis, claiming that despite everything no one was killed and not one prisoner escaped.<sup>4</sup> Voters reelected Gusman, but the statement that no prisoners escaped was false. In truth, at least a dozen prisoners took flight in the chaos prior to the evacuation. DOC officials chased and eventually captured them. The attack ads during the campaign and the inconsistencies in Gusman's statements helped give the storyline even more traction in the media.

A BBC documentary that aired in August 2006 noted inconsistencies in the sheriff's statements as well. The documentary also reported on some provocative statements made by OPCSO staff regarding the alleged death of two female sheriff's deputies who had purportedly inhaled smoke from mattresses that had been set on fire by inmates during the crisis.<sup>5</sup> Also in August 2006, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released a 141-page report titled *Abandoned and Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina*. The report was an ambitious undertaking involving the work of numerous organizations, among them the National Prison Project, the ACLU of Louisiana, and Human Rights Watch.<sup>6</sup> Central to the research for the report were thirteen hundred questionnaires completed by OPP inmates who had been evacuated to DOC facilities. The report, as its title suggests, was a scathing critique of the actions of the OPCSO and the DOC.

The charges made in the ACLU report included allegations of the abuse of inmates on the Broad Street overpass by DOC personnel. The report accused officials of subjecting inmates to physical abuse, chemical agents, Tasers, and attack dogs while waiting for transport buses for prolonged periods of time. The report also charges that prisoners were maltreated after relocation to DOC facilities, and it includes excerpts of testimonials of inmates describing the abuse.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the report contends that OPP inmates at the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center were housed in an outdoor compound (often for days) awaiting movement to correctional facilities throughout the state. The prisoners questioned by the ACLU described violence between inmates while held in the detainment compound and characterized the hostility as unchecked by DOC personnel.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the prisoners questioned by the ACLU reported seeing dead bodies in OPP buildings.<sup>9</sup> This was not corroborated in my interviews with DOC tactical team members, and no fatalities within the prison buildings have ever been confirmed, but the suggestion of inmate deaths has been persistent in the years following Katrina. One factor contributing to this belief is the ambiguity caused by the loss of records after the flooding and the confusion during the aftermath. In 2008, former member of the U.S. House of Representatives Cynthia McKinney made statements at a Critical Resistance conference in Oakland, California, that suggested inmates were murdered by the U.S. government in the aftermath of Katrina.<sup>10</sup> According to her sources, approximately five thousand bodies with gunshot wounds to the head were dumped in the swamps outside of New Orleans. Her statements, largely ignored or ridiculed by the major news outlets, created a flurry of Internet chatter.<sup>11</sup>

The story of the prison evacuation also made its way into American popular culture. The HBO series *Treme*, a fictional portrait of post-Katrina New Orleans, featured a storyline related to the New Orleans prison evacuation. The narrative, likely inspired by the ACLU report and those people who worked on it,<sup>12</sup> followed the struggle of civil rights lawyer Toni Bernette to find the brother of her friend LaDonna. The brother, Daymo, had been arrested

just before Katrina. Toni identifies him in photographs of prisoners on the Broad Street overpass, only to find that his identity had been assumed by a convicted murderer while he was at the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center. Eventually, after a great deal of frustration dealing with the New Orleans court system, she finds out that Daymo died under suspicious circumstances while in DOC custody.

The *Treme* storyline not only highlights the dysfunction of the post-Katrina legal system in New Orleans but makes provocative statements about the prison evacuation as well. To identify the body, Toni and LaDonna travel to a temporary Katrina morgue established in Carville, Louisiana. Once there, they are led by a uniformed Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT)<sup>13</sup> official into a large freezer truck where body bags are stored. The DMORT official unzips one of the body bags. LaDonna looks at the frozen remains of her brother and then runs out of the truck into the parking lot. The camera zooms in on her horror-struck expression and then slowly pans the parking lot, full of freezer truck after freezer truck. The scene is powerful and portrays a painful moment that many New Orleanians had to endure, but it also leaves the viewer with the impression that a large-scale atrocity occurred, echoing claims of the mass murder of prisoners.<sup>14</sup>

Another important treatment related to the prison crisis can be found in *Zeitoun*, a beautifully constructed work of narrative nonfiction by Dave Eggers. The story is drawn from the Katrina narrative of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian-American resident of New Orleans who stayed in the city during and after the storm. Police arrested Zeitoun and two of his friends outside a rental property that he owned, accusing them of looting. Like most of those arrested in the weeks after Katrina, he was brought to the temporary jail established by the DOC at the Greyhound bus station in downtown New Orleans. The narrative suggests that when officials confined Zeitoun at "Camp Greyhound," as it was dubbed, they suspected him of being a terrorist. According to his narrative, DOC personnel escorted him to a private room at the temporary jail and forced him to disrobe and endure the humiliation of an anal cavity search at gunpoint. He also mentions that Homeland Security agents interrogated him and that DOC officials subjected him and other prisoners to verbal and physical abuse, as well as chemical agents.<sup>15</sup> The narrative offers the perspective of a post-September 11 Muslim American caught in the chaos of Katrina's aftermath. In his descriptions of "Camp Greyhound," Zeitoun makes comparisons to such infamous landmarks of the war on terror as Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.<sup>16</sup>

After reading or seeing many media treatments of the prisoner evacuation crisis, I was a bit apprehensive about conducting oral histories with DOC personnel. I braced for rather awkward conversations with hardened prison guards intent on evading questions or manipulating the interviews for their own ends. What I encountered was much different. On the whole, the correctional workers I interviewed were proud of the DOC's response to Katrina; at the same time,

and to my surprise, they corroborated a significant portion of the allegations made in the media accounts of the event as well as in the ACLU report.

I conducted the oral history fieldwork at state correctional facilities throughout Louisiana. Most of these facilities were located in remote parts of the state, in towns such as Kinder, Cottonport, Jackson, Angola, Dequincy, Pineville, Keithville, and Angie. For these towns, the prison was often the only major employer. Many of the workers grew up in the community. In some cases, the workers' families had been employed by DOC for generations, and it was not uncommon for members of the same family to serve at the same facility. These generational and familial connections create a unique perspective not easily influenced by outside attitudes. As a result, narrators spoke of treatment of prisoners, which to an outsider seems harsh, in an unapologetic and straightforward way. This led to more open and more candid interviews than I thought were possible given the intense media scrutiny of the prison evacuation.

When asked about the treatment of prisoners staged on the Broad Street overpass, interviewees in a very matter-of-fact way admitted to the use of beanbag guns, chemical agents, and attack dogs to maintain control of the inmates. One interviewee even brought his trained guard dog, which had been with him on the overpass, to the interview so that I could see him. Although most interviewees expressed sympathy for the prisoners, they emphasized how fragile their control of the situation was on the overpass and noted the necessity of increased force to maintain order.

Central to the guard narratives were encounters with the hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians who sought refuge on the overpass. Interviewees such as James Paul and Melissa Murray experienced frustration in not being able to do more to aid others until after the prisoner evacuation had taken place, when DOC loaded available vehicles with the most fragile civilians and brought them out of the city. Many of the interviewees recalled the civilian vitriol they faced on the overpass. They noted verbal harassment and some recalled that objects such as shoes were thrown at them. One guard reported being charged by a man wielding a hatchet. The guards felt much of the civilian resentment stemmed from the fact that inmates were being evacuated while nothing was being done for the general public. The presence of angry civilians in need of assistance elevated tensions in an already highly charged environment. This element likely led to increased hostility toward the inmates.

Some of the most potent images described by DOC personnel on the overpass were the sight of bodies near the evacuation area. Two of the bodies had been shot in the head, and the other, according to civilian witnesses, had been thrown off the overpass. Talking about these bodies triggered an emotional response in many interviewees. Seeing the bodies lying there over the course of several days contributed to the horrific nature of the environment. The sight alone was disturbing, but the fact that proper respect could not be shown to the bodies and that justice could not be sought on behalf of the victims seemed



to haunt DOC personnel. Bodies of individuals who died violently following Katrina were found throughout New Orleans, and interviews with first responders from other agencies tend to reflect the same emotional responses as my interviews with DOC personnel.

At each correctional facility, I worked to record the experience of relevant personnel, from their medical staff and classification personnel to their guards, tactical team members, bus drivers, and administrators. At most facilities, people responded to the oral history project with enthusiasm, but at the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center I encountered some resistance and found it difficult to get the interviewees I needed for a well-rounded account of what had happened. I got the sense that many at the facility resented the situation that their institution was placed in during the crisis. Staff members seemed suspicious of the project. Those who participated in interviews were people who had been away from the institution during the crisis or those who could not speak directly to the allegations made by the media and the ACLU.

The DOC used Hunt, being the closest state correctional facility to the city, as a staging area to hold New Orleans inmates until space could be created for the evacuees in correctional facilities elsewhere in the state. During the crisis, buses came into Hunt to drop off inmates at a far faster rate than bed space could be created at other facilities, so eventually thousands of inmates were in custody in an outdoor compound at the Hunt complex. For some inmates, their time in these fields at Hunt was brief (a matter of hours), but for others it lasted for days. Although I did not get the level of cooperation that I had hoped for at Hunt, interviews with bus drivers and medical personnel from other facilities tended to support the accusations made by the media. The bus drivers who dropped off and picked up inmates at Hunt commented on the chaotic post-Katrina situation there and mentioned seeing a large number of inmates in the prison yard. Interviews with medical staff at DOC facilities that received inmates who passed through the staging area at Hunt indicated that a large number of prisoners had cuts and abrasions suggestive of being in fights, two had broken jaws, and one inmate had suffered a minor gunshot wound. Oral history interviews suggested that the number of inmates staged at their facility overwhelmed Hunt staff and that some violence between inmates went unchecked.

Many of the administrators I interviewed acknowledged that pretrial offenders spent months at their facilities and that some were housed with violent offenders. Administrators explained that New Orleans inmates arrived without paperwork and that they had trouble determining who was who. On arriving at a state facility, the prisoners went through an intake process that included undergoing a medical inspection as well as being photographed, fingerprinted, and questioned about their identity. Interviewees remarked that some inmates pleaded with them, claiming they did not belong there and had just been arrested on a minor offense the day before the storm. During the intake process, however, administrators ran fingerprints through IAFIS (Integrated Automated

Fingerprint Identification System)<sup>17</sup> and discovered that a number of these people were lying. DOC personnel claimed they could not legally release anyone without a confirmation of identity, and even then only through order of an Orleans Parish judge.

The establishment of “Camp Greyhound” was a source of pride for most narrators. They saw the jail as a first step in reestablishing order in the city and were proud of the ingenuity used to create it. When the idea to create a temporary jail was conceived, an initial thought was to convert an abandoned riverboat casino docked on the Mississippi. En route to evaluate the site, DOC administrators found themselves caught in a gun battle between New Orleans police and armed civilians. They retreated and settled on the Greyhound/Amtrak station. The site worked perfectly for their purpose. They wrapped fencing around the individual bus stalls to create makeshift cells and used the locomotives as sources of power until better generators could be acquired. The temporary jail was in a central location and in their words “defensible.” The site was converted into a detention center within forty-eight hours thanks to the large influx of DOC maintenance staff, plus inmate labor primarily from the Angola penitentiary.

Once the jail was up and running, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies established a presence at “Camp Greyhound.” When I asked interviewees what crimes arrestees were brought in for, they noted looting, curfew violations, and public intoxication, but DOC personnel stressed that they took in whomever the law enforcement agencies brought to them. Interviewees did not corroborate allegations of abuse detailed in Zeitoun’s narrative or in earlier legal actions initiated by the ACLU.<sup>18</sup> Many Americans saw the creation of the jail as a positive step in the recovery of the city and applauded reestablishment of law and order. The media initially echoed this sentiment.<sup>19</sup> It was only years later, when accusations of abuse came to light, that this view changed.

The establishment of “Camp Greyhound” in the midst of the crisis reflects an inclination in American society to address social problems through incarceration. The United States has by far the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world.<sup>20</sup> According to a Pew Center on the States study, Louisiana has the highest rate of any state, with one out of every fifty-five adults imprisoned.<sup>21</sup> The majority of these inmates are from New Orleans, leading many to conclude that New Orleans has a higher percentage of its citizens living behind bars than any other city in the world.<sup>22</sup> The growth of the prison population has been a fairly recent phenomenon. In 1975, the Orleans Parish Prison could hold approximately eight hundred inmates. By 2005, its capacity increased to more than ten times that number despite the total population of New Orleans significantly declining during the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> The inmate population in the state prison system has risen as well. Quickly incorporating the six thousand-plus OPP inmates into an already overextended state prison system would have been problematic even under ideal circumstances. Situations such as the bottleneck of inmates at the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center would likely

have occurred even if the evacuation had happened prior to the storm's landfall. This probability may have influenced the sheriff's decision not to evacuate.

This extreme level of incarceration is perhaps the most obvious evidence of deep social problems that existed, and still remain, in New Orleans. Nearly 90 percent of the prisoners held at the Orleans Parish Prison at the time of Katrina were black, reflecting the city's entrenched class divide based largely along racial lines. Prior to the storm, New Orleans had been in economic decline for decades and was increasingly reliant on a tourist industry easily made unstable by a perception that the city was a dangerous place to visit. Incarceration served to hide some of these social problems and was seen by many as a vehicle to protect the city's economic interests.

At the center of the city's descent into chaos following the storm were anger and resentment not simply from the disaster but from decades of unaddressed social issues. The stress of the storm and flooding triggered a pent-up frustration in many stranded New Orleanians, and uniformed first responders became targets, representatives of a community that had failed them. The antagonism demonstrated by civilians surprised most first responders. In the case of the DOC, many narrators rationalized the anger of civilians as a resentment that prisoners were being evacuated and they were not. Conflicts with civilians, however, were major themes in my interviews with first responders from other agencies working in other parts of the city.

Members of the New Orleans Fire Department, for instance, were shot at as they tried to respond to fires breaking out all over the city, many the result of arson. They resorted to asking DOC to provide them with armed escorts to provide security when responding to calls. Early on in the crisis, a group of civilians stopped a convoy of members of DMAT CA-6, a disaster medical assistance team from California, asking for help as the convoy approached the Superdome. When the responders stopped, some of the team members indicated they were fired on, which led them to get back in their trucks and keep moving. They also mentioned that along the way people screamed at them and threw things at the convoy. After arriving at the Superdome area, DMAT CA-6 began to air-lift patients in serious condition out of the area, but this operation stopped, according to team members, when civilians shot at the helicopters. Eventually the DMAT team abandoned their mission and pulled out in the midst of the crisis; the environment became so chaotic and tense that their commander felt he could no longer protect his own people.

In a separate incident involving agents of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, a riot broke out near a bridge in the Ninth Ward where agents staged boat rescue operations. Interviewees noted that fights broke out and fires were set. When the agents tried to pull away from the area, civilians surrounded their vehicles and started pounding on the sides and screaming at them. Some of the LDWF agents indicated that they held tight to their firearms until other wildlife agents could come to their rescue.

Perhaps the most serious conflicts with civilians involved the New Orleans Police Department connected to violent incidents throughout the city. Some of these events have been investigated by a group of journalists lead by A. C. Thompson of ProPublica.<sup>24</sup> These investigations helped led to the criminal prosecution of New Orleans police officers for the murder of Henry Glover and the subsequent cover-up, and for the killing of civilians on the Danziger Bridge.

These clashes with first responders became central to the Katrina narratives of civilians evacuated to other parts of the country. These individual narratives undoubtedly influenced the media's overarching Katrina narrative suggesting what happened in New Orleans was the result of bad action or inaction by first responders. New Orleans embraced this depiction of the city's descent into chaos following the hurricane because it freed the community from a collective responsibility for what happened and focused blame on tangible targets. The pandemonium in Katrina's aftermath was thus perceived as the fault of FEMA, the New Orleans Police Department, the sheriff, or the DOC. During the years of recovery, every trial of a police officer for bad conduct following the storm and every piece of investigative journalism unearthing another act of misconduct by first responders gave people a sense of correcting what went wrong after Katrina, or a feeling that the city was moving beyond the crisis. Although in most of these cases legitimate wrongs were being acknowledged, framing its collective Katrina narrative in this way enabled the community to avoid looking honestly at the systemic social problems that were responsible for the city's post-Katrina meltdown. Such evasive explanations of crises are likely common in communities recovering from disaster, since the energy and optimism to rebuild are so often dependent on a love of place.

In the case of the prison evacuation crisis, the community found it easier to focus on allegations of prisoner neglect and abuse (which should not be trivialized) rather than confront the ugly truth that the evacuation crisis was ultimately the result of such a large percentage of the city's black population living behind bars. Nor did the community address what that fact said about the city's social order and its viability. During recovery, the community demanded, through what communications scholar John Tisdale calls "a dialogue of expectation," that the media provide it with tangible targets, such as the DOC, on which to pin blame. This was done through the simple functioning of the free market. The public consumed stories about prison neglect and abuse but did not show as much interest in stories related to the city's entrenched class divisions and the mass incarceration of its black citizens. This motivated the for-profit media into presenting a narrative that the community was more comfortable with.<sup>25</sup> In this case, it was a narrative more amenable to accounts blaming prison guard and administrator conduct than to those challenging the city's social order.

In the process of providing the community's preferred Katrina narrative, journalists frequently vilified and, as a result, alienated themselves from first responders. Many of the responders I interviewed noted they were afraid to talk

to journalists, fearing how their stories might be spun. As an oral historian, my work was not seen to be as opportunistic or as judgmental as that of a journalist, which made it easier for me to get access. The responders I interviewed had a keen sense that they had been a part of a critical event in our region's history, and they understood the value of learning from their response. Most of them wanted their experience and perspective to be part of the historical record. Oral history provided them this opportunity, and they embraced it.

First responders, whether they are soldiers, police officers, peacekeepers, or, in the case of this essay, correctional workers, are often at the center of crisis. They are important witnesses, but they are also frequently vilified in the media explanations of such events, sometimes rightfully so. But at other times they are forced to bear the responsibility for events when people avoid looking honestly at the systemic problems in their community that brought about crisis. Using oral history to unlock the perspective of first responders, particularly when they are blamed in the community's explanation of events, humanizes them in a way that makes superficial explanations more difficult to accept. The variant perspectives offered to the community by the work of oral historians can lead to the development of explanations that acknowledge longstanding social problems, and help communities move beyond crisis in ways that make them stronger and more resilient.

## Notes

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7. National Prison Project, *Abandoned and Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina* (New York: ACLU, 2006), 38, 69–70.
8. *Ibid.*, 73–77.
9. *Ibid.*, 62.
10. "Cynthia McKinney Reveals 5,000 Executed Post Katrina," from Cynthia McKinney's address to the Critical Resistance 10 Conference in Oakland, California, September 28, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vVlhyWsa10>.
11. For instance, OpEdNews featured a headline "Explosive: Cynthia McKinney Told 5,000 Executed during Katrina," <http://www.opednews.com>, and offered the banner "Cynthia McKinney: Government Murdered 5,000 People during Katrina and Dumped Them in Swamp," <http://www.rightwingnews.com>.

12. Civil rights lawyer Mary Howell, who worked on the ACLU report, also was a consultant on the *Treme* series.
13. The teams report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and respond to mass fatality incidents.
14. David Simon and Eric Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, HBO, premiered April 11, 2010.
15. Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2009).
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# 8

## LIVING TOO IN MURDER CITY

### Oral History as Alternative Perspective to the Drug War in Ciudad Juárez

Eric Rodrigo Meringer

**Oral histories by Eric Rodrigo Meringer with Juárez residents  
Jonathan, Rosa, and Raul, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, 2009–10**

*In 2009 and 2010, I collected a series of interviews in which ordinary residents of Ciudad Juárez shared everyday experiences of life amidst a raging drug war. Interview subjects included school teachers, lawyers, maquila workers, business owners, pastors, and family relatives. As was generally true in the more than two dozen interviews collected for the project, the three interview excerpts presented here focused on perceived crimes of opportunity and encounters with militarized security forces. Conspicuously absent are firsthand accounts of drug lords or an emphasis on the sort of violent crime presented as pervasive in the popular media.*

#### **JULY 2010**

*Jonathan Palmas, a lawyer and entrepreneur in his late thirties, talks from his home office about the challenges of conducting business in Juárez given the proliferation of extortion rackets taking hold throughout the city.*

JONATHAN: Juárez was more economically developed when my family arrived here. Since then the economy has been in decline. Same as in the United States, that crisis was reflected here too. But the worse part has come more recently with this enormous crime wave.

I had made a life plan. The plan was that I'd have all my businesses up and running by the time I was thirty-five. I invested a lot of work and earnings into this restaurant, what you see here next door. When it was finally ready for business, though, well, I wasn't able to open because there started this problem in Juárez with the extortion rackets (*cobro de cuotas*). Just like they

had there in the United States in the era of Al Capone with all that organized crime, well, here too you have to pay...not just protection, but the right to conduct any sort of economic activity at all. They call it a floor charge (*derecho de piso*).

At the moment, thank God, I am not paying any extortion money. But still, for me the price [of not paying] is high just the same. For me the cost of not paying extortion money is that I cannot develop my businesses as I had planned. I've been working on this business here [restaurant] for about five years. I've invested some \$50,000 in it over the course of that time and from before too. With my law practice as well as my car sales—I've always been a person who knows how to diversify. They say that you shouldn't put all your eggs in one basket. But my primary business, my principal investment has been the restaurant, and I can't do anything with it. Nobody's holding me back. Nobody's told me that if I open for business I'm going to have to pay. Just the same though, this is a very good location for a business here where we are. It is very visible. It gets a lot of traffic. And that tells me that if I were to open, well, it wouldn't take them very long to fall upon me [extort me].

MERINGER: What about your law office?

JONATHAN: In my office here I only open when I've got a scheduled appointment. The rest of the day we're closed. We're here shuttered in, behind closed doors. It's a way to keep my activities hidden. We do it like this so it looks as though this place were abandoned. And really, if you were to come by any hour of the day and if you didn't have an appointment, you'd find the grates closed, the sidewalk empty without any cars...you're not going to find me dressed like I am now. You are going to find me in a t-shirt and shorts dressed like my worker, like I'm just another worker.

MERINGER: How do you attract clients?

JONATHAN: I go out and find them. In this business I've learned that in practicing law first and foremost you've got to develop relations. You have to have contacts if you want to maintain a good client list. They say if a lawyer has poor clients he's going to be a poor lawyer. I've been practicing for ten years and that's helped me to maintain a list of clients that allow me to go off and attend to their needs without having to have my place here open twenty-four hours in order to attract new customers...that would help me a lot, it would be very helpful to be able to maintain my office here open twenty-four hours. I could freely advertise outside...and take more advantage of this good location. But that would put me in risk of attracting the extortionists.

MERINGER: Has your practice changed in the type of cases you handle?

JONATHAN: Yes, it's changed a lot. It's changed in that at the moment I dedicate my practice to personal law, family law, commercial law, in some cases labor, but now I avoid criminal law at all costs. That's because in criminal law I'd be in the greatest danger of...of having to deal with criminals. Nowadays, human life here doesn't have any value. Before I took more risks maybe to



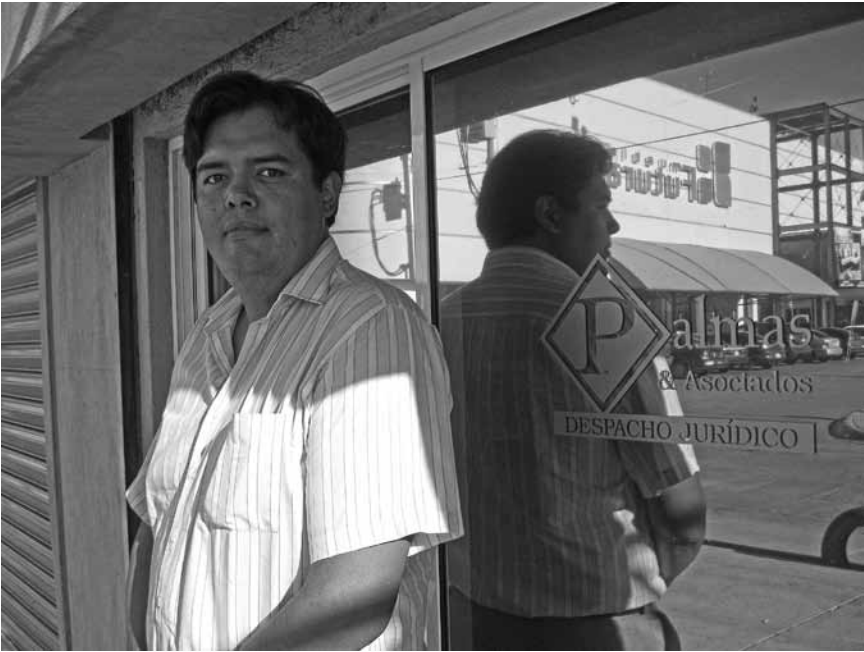
get a judgment against someone who was a criminal. Now I have to be more prudent because... the value of life has greatly diminished in this town. Now it's easy to have somebody killed. And so what is it worth getting a judgment or winning some money at the cost of risking your life? This is why I have opted for other activities in business, like selling used cars, having a body shop, doing service work for the maquila. To have other income that allows me to be more selective with my clients and the cases that I take, and not put myself in risk. There are some lawyers that for ethical reasons say that you've got to go after them [criminals]. I applaud those lawyers but don't share their position. Now I have a family. I have a wife. I have two kids. I have to take care of myself.

And so, if I open my business, the restaurant, that what's been my primary project, and if I put my cars out to show, I would be able to sell more. I could bring in more money. But I would also attract those that are doing the extorting. And the problem is that once they show up, they'll never leave. They'll be charging you an extortion rate that they determine. You can negotiate a little but they are going to have the final say. And to them, it doesn't matter if you are selling or not selling. You have to pay month by month as if you were paying rent. And I know because I have friends who are paying now and that's how they work it. If my business, the restaurant, were not to go as well as I would hope, and if I couldn't pay the rate they charge me... not only would I have to close down the restaurant again and bring in the cars, I would have to leave this place. Because once they set a price, you have to pay week by week or month by month or however they arrange it. But you don't stop paying. If you don't pay, they kill you. So you see, for that reason, I'd rather just not take the risk.<sup>1</sup>

## JANUARY 2010

*Rosa is the manager of a retail pharmacy chain store. She recently relocated to Juárez from southern Chihuahua. From a gated community where she shares a home with her daughter and newborn granddaughter, she offers her experiences of being held up at gunpoint on five occasions during her first four months at her new job. She expresses frustration over the seeming indifference of the local police and their inability to offer assistance even as she and her coworkers become familiar with their assailants.*

ROSA: We have these buttons that they call panic buttons. They're supposedly connected to the police. I say supposedly because I had my finger pressed on the button trying to get the police over as quickly as possible and they never came. The police never came, never. We have other alarms connecting all the way to Monterrey [Nuevo León, Mexico] where the pharmacy has its headquarters. I had that button pushed too. I called 060 emergency and they



"For me the cost of not paying extortion money is that I cannot develop my businesses as I had planned." Jonathan, a young lawyer and entrepreneur, reflects on the opportunity costs of staying in Juárez. *Photograph by Eric Meringer.*

never answered. The police never answered. I called again and this time someone answered. I asked that they send a unit over. They said they would send one out immediately but it never arrived. Never, never did the police arrive. I called the regional managers to let them know we had been robbed. They ask are you all right, yes we are all right—but then you have to take an inventory of what they took, inventory of the merchandise. After suffering through an assault you have to immediately report what was stolen, how much they took, all that. . . . Well anyway, that was the first time I was held up and the police never arrived.

The second assault was very traumatic for me. The first one not so much although I still see it all in slow motion. The second assault was more traumatic. I arrived here at home crying. My daughter prepared me a tea to calm me. It was more traumatic because I could feel the pistol against me. Here again we called the police and the police never came. I talked to the municipality the next day about the panic button and why it didn't work. They said call later in the afternoon so they could investigate. But I told our regional manager that I didn't want to investigate anything. If you guys want to see why the button isn't working that's fine but it's going to be the same. The same thing is going to happen. You've already had three or four robberies and

it doesn't solve anything. So I'm not interested in a panic button. I'm interested in solutions, real solutions that work because this is going to continue and continue. Well, that was the second assault. The 23rd of December was the latest one. That day there were three guys that came in. With a gun they asked that I open the cabinet with the medications that have drugs. They asked for the controlled drugs—Rivotril specifically—or else they'd shoot me. I opened the cabinet for them and they took just that medication, the Rivotril. They took it and—they even mock you because one of the *rateros* told me, "Do you remember me, señora?" Usually they tell me not to look at their faces. That day he says, "Do you remember, señora?" I told him no, I don't remember you. "I was the one that robbed you the other day." No, I don't remember.—And I don't remember, the truth is I didn't remember because in that moment you remember some things but the face no. You could ask me to describe him and I'd say no until he arrived again and then I'd say OK it's the same guy.

And it's always the same guys robbing us so we know who they are. The boys already know what cars they drive, what they look like. One time when we were robbed there was a street vendor outside selling breads. They robbed him too and took his money. When the *rateros* left he followed them in his car. He took down their license number. We got the plate number and the car they were driving. He gave the police the plate number, the description of the car, and all that. And they still didn't do anything because those guys robbed us a couple of times after that.

It's total impunity I tell you. Maybe it's better if I just get used to being assaulted and don't fight it... but you feel a lot of stress after being robbed. We keep the door locked now and open it only for respectable-looking people. Maybe a family with a child or people who are well dressed—although even well-dressed people are criminals. Still, it's a way of protecting ourselves. We already know who the robbers are so if they come to the door—and they've come to the door—we just don't let them in. That's all we can do to protect ourselves from the scare we get every time we're assaulted. Who knows when this is going to end?

MERINGER: Do you feel more secure with the increased military and police presence?

ROSA: No, I don't feel secure. On the contrary with police executions at gas stations and at different places... If I'm driving in my car and I come up to a police car, I accelerate so that I don't have to drive alongside him... My experiences with the police have not been good. The times that we've been robbed... I wish they could understand how it feels. I wish I could describe the sensation of being assaulted at gunpoint so that they might come and help us... So that they might know how desperate you feel when you are being assaulted and there's no one to help you. Even with all the police and the soldiers there is no one to help you. So that's why I say what's wrong? Are the police connected to the *rateros*? What's wrong here? To me that doesn't

represent security because no one has ever come to our assistance when we were being assaulted.<sup>2</sup>

## AUGUST 2009

*Raul, who moved to Juárez from Mexico City during the maquiladora boom of the mid-1990s, relates an encounter in which a military patrol entered his home to search for contraband. Once supportive of the military presence in Juárez, his recent experience has changed his mind.*

RAUL: How do I feel about the army? Well, you always have hope...if you're a peaceful person, well, you feel that if you have nothing to hide then you have nothing to fear. If you're not looking...well, even this level of trust is being lost. A lot of times even if you're minding your business, you stop for a traffic light...You're peaceful but they don't know that...and then it's your turn [to get pulled over]. So you look on the bright side and say now the army is coming, they're patrolling the streets. But unfortunately with so much of the news out there, people look upon them negatively. Not to generalize, but with all that's going on you want to say, the army is like this or like that...but no, not all of them. Yea, but then this happened and that happened to me.

MERINGER: You had an experience with the army?

RAUL: Yea, a little bit. Just like we are here, talking...it was in the afternoon, an army patrol was passing by. They came over here to my door, since it was open like it is now—they had said on the news that they [the army] had the right to enter your house...to search your house, to see if you had any guns, drugs—that doesn't seem so unreasonable, right? But as it happened in my case, when I opened the door for them immediately they barge in, four or five of them...and you see how small this house is....And I also had heard that sometimes they come in not just to search but sometimes they take things that don't belong to them. And that's what happened to me.

Four or five came in, the exact number I don't remember. They started moving dressers....Meanwhile I'm trying to keep an eye on my stuff, right? They go into the bedroom. They look through my things. They opened the refrigerator. I was trying to watch what they were doing but you really can't keep an eye on things when there are four or five of them. They spread out. They intimidate you too. They say "Give me your wallet!" And they took 350 pesos from me. They took my cell phone—it's the intrusion that bothers you. Why do they have to take things from the refrigerator?

MERINGER: Like what?

RAUL: Like a beer. Like a big soda. It's insignificant but it's the act....Why not just ask?—"Sure take it!" I'd give it with pleasure, right? But why do they just take it like that? And this is the army?

MERINGER: What did they say when they came in?

RAUL: "We have come to inspect things." Sure, no problem. But I thought maybe one or two of them were going to come in.... And then they barge in with no manners. "You have any guns?" No, no. "Drugs?" No, I don't have any; go ahead and look. So they start moving things around, searching for things—you know, you feel threatened. You can't move a finger. You are in your house but you can't even talk in a certain tone because they will come down on you. It shouldn't be like that. I think you ought to be able to look at a soldier... you ought to be able to feel safe. They are the ones that are supposed to be protecting us, right? Unfortunately, with the way they act we feel the opposite. You see soldiers passing by over there... you feel the opposite. Instead of saying "oh good, nobody would dare to rob me now" you feel the opposite. There go the soldiers, "híjole!" It's as if they were the thieves, and in uniform on top of that. In this respect, I think it would be better if they weren't here.

One ought not be spiteful but they disgust me. Instead of feeling safer with them, the truth is that they disgust me. And maybe you shouldn't generalize but they say that the proof is in the pudding. And for me, after that



"Who are you going to complain to? The same army? You wouldn't have a case... and what's worse, there would be reprisals." Raul once supported the surge in security forces patrolling the streets of Juárez, but after one such patrol entered his home and robbed him of various personal items, that support turned to fear. *Photograph by Eric Meringer.*

experience, well, that's the impression of them I'm left with. Maybe it's not all of them, but that is what sticks. And that was just on that day. The next day, I go out and there they are on the corner. Watch out.

Maybe they don't have anything on you but they make you nervous just the same. They make you nervous when five fuckers barge in with their guns like this [holds his hand apart to signify the approximate size of a military assault rifle]. What's this all about? And then these houses are so small. Why do so many have to come in at once?

They've got their purpose but still they make you nervous. Without having done anything. With what they've done, it leaves a bad impression, a bad impression of the army [pounds hand on table]. And without a doubt, with this behavior, you would rather they weren't here. With thieves or other crooks (*rateros*) at least maybe your blood gets to boiling and you can defend yourself, against them. But with the soldiers, no. So if it were one or the other... from that perspective I would rather that they weren't here. Because they make you nervous.<sup>3</sup>

### Commentary

Sensationalized media coverage of Ciudad Juárez as “murder city”<sup>4</sup> distorts the reality of life in the epicenter of Mexico's drug war. The news media's singular focus on violence precludes perspectives from ordinary Juárez residents who, despite the ongoing crisis enveloping them, still work, go to school, and raise families. Ignoring perspectives of everyday life creates false assumptions regarding the nature of victimization in Juárez and the impact of the drug war on the majority population. Oral history research reveals a dissonance between the standard sensationalist fare of drug lords and *sicarios* (hit men) and the dangers confronting Juárez residents daily. In the interviews conducted for this project, the notorious Juárez cartels are downgraded to a distant and avoidable peril while other residual consequences of the drug war—crimes of opportunity including robbery, assault, and extortion, but also abuse at the hands of the ubiquitous police and military patrols—emerge as more menacing threats. These perspectives differ from those generally found in popular media coverage of the drug war. By drawing distinctions between the manner in which oral history and journalism report violence, research presented here promotes oral history as an alternative approach to investigations of ongoing, emerging crisis situations.

Writing in the *Oral History Review*, the journalist Mark Feldstein described the relationship between oral history and journalism as one between kissing cousins.<sup>5</sup> The basis for this intimacy, he suggested, lay in the devotion that each discipline held for the oral interview as its primary methodology and chief source of information and credibility. Although Feldstein united the two disciplines through this shared and neutral methodology, he also drew

distinctions between oral history and journalism in their separate ends. As he put it, oral history's primary objective was to "recapture the past," while journalism, by contrast, served "ultimately [as] a commercial vehicle for selling advertisements."<sup>6</sup> In recent years, as information technology continues to transform the business end of journalistic investigation, this distinction has become increasingly relevant. As revenues from television, radio, and print journalism continue their slow and steady decline,<sup>7</sup> and as media ownership is concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, conglomerate business interests in a period of uncertain transition challenge journalistic integrity and further estrange traditional investigative journalism from its not-so-distant, but more autonomous, cousin, oral history.

Since Alan Barth first made his now-famous characterization of journalism as the "first rough draft of history,"<sup>8</sup> the amount of history in journalism has greatly diminished. In-depth feature stories, once prominent, have been set aside in recent years by a corporate business model that prefers to serve up the news in smaller, more easily digestible portions. As a result of what has been called the "USA Today-ification" or "tabloidification" of news media, investigative journalism has taken a backseat to stories that are short, flashy, and superficial in nature.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically too, while journalistic investigation has become more parochial in scope, the old aphorism of "man bites dog" as a local determinant of newsworthiness has also been downgraded. Nowadays, as a consequence of the concentration of media ownership, standards for sensationalism are set not locally but at a national level.<sup>10</sup> Journalists still ask the appropriate questions—who, what, where, when, why, and how—but increasingly the purpose of such investigation is to verify that preconceptualized stories conform to the editorial expectations and business dictates of corporate journalism. Mexico's continuing drug war is a case in point.

As a news story, Mexico's drug war satisfies the nationally defined, sensationalist appetite of today's corporate journalism in two respects. First of all, it provides shock value through episodes of drug-related violence that are not only abundant but easily accessible and particularly grisly in nature. Second, the proximity of the Mexican drug war to the United States adds an additional sensationalist component by extending the threat of drug-related violence beyond Mexico's border and into the United States. Ciudad Juárez, with its disproportionately high rate of homicide and its location just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas, has become the media focal point for U.S. coverage of Mexico's drug war. Journalistic coverage of the crisis unfolding in Juárez exploits the most sensational aspects of the drug war in order to appeal to a lowest common denominator among the national media's target reader and viewership. Rather than fostering understanding of the current situation, however, the popular media's sensationalist approach creates consternation in American audiences at best and all too frequently promotes blanket condemnations of Ciudad Juárez and the city's inhabitants in general.

The current crisis in Mexico began shortly after Mexican president Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006 and declared a national war against the country's powerful drug cartels. At the time, his pronouncement was internationally lauded and garnered immediate support from the United States under the administration of George W. Bush through the so-called Mérida Initiative, which pledged some \$1.6 billion in antinarcotics training, surveillance equipment, and helicopters over three years.<sup>11</sup> The war on drugs in Mexico was initially concentrated in the central Mexican state of Michoacán. But soon the drug-related violence spread throughout the country and particularly along the border, where Ciudad Juárez earned deadly distinction as the murder capital of the world.<sup>12</sup>

In Juárez, yearly incidents of murder that numbered around one hundred before 2007 were now being counted in the thousands, with more than three thousand killings in 2010 alone.<sup>13</sup> By 2008, this precipitous spike in the death toll brought an international media spotlight to bear on Ciudad Juárez and the drug war throughout Mexico. It was the gruesome and highly visible incidents of gangland executions, however, that maintained the story in the headlines and recast the larger story of the drug war within the narrower framework of drug-related violence.

In Mexico, drug cartels serve up shock value in an overflowing trough. Gruesome accounts of murder are punctuated by ghoulish characters like El Pozolero—who admitted to dissolving the remains of some three hundred persons in acid while under contract with one Mexican cartel<sup>14</sup>—or by grotesque episodes like the cartel assassination in which the victim's face was flayed and stitched onto a soccer ball.<sup>15</sup> In Ciudad Juárez, people are killed in broad daylight while bodies and body parts are dumped unceremoniously in streets and plazas. In Juárez, brazen drug lords have operated with impunity, posting assassination hit lists in town plazas.<sup>16</sup> In other incidents they have sent severed heads, neatly packed in ice chests, to local police stations.<sup>17</sup> Such grisly acts are sufficiently outrageous to meet media expectations of the sensationalism in the United States, but as they take place in such proximity to the U.S. border their shock value is all the greater.

One popular derivative theme of Mexico's drug-related carnage is the threat of a "spillover" of violence across the Mexican border and into the United States. The threat of a spillover has received significant coverage in popular American media for both its sensationalism and its political appeal. In the United States, policy makers have cultivated violence in Mexico to promote anti-immigration agendas at home.<sup>18</sup> This tactic has yielded numerous apocryphal claims, including representations of Phoenix, Arizona, as the number two kidnapping capital of the world.<sup>19</sup> Other more general claims have presented U.S. citizens along the border as being "overrun by [Mexican] drug cartels, gangs and human trafficking."<sup>20</sup> Spurious charges such as Arizona governor Jan Brewer's 2010 statements that extortion rackets and even "beheadings" had spilled across the border into



her state were condemned by critics as unsubstantiated but only had the effect of fueling further speculation within news media.<sup>21</sup> In El Paso too, local news reports continue to play up the urgency of the spillover threat there,<sup>22</sup> even while the Texas town retains one of the lowest crime rates in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Corporate media's exclusive focus on cartel violence does little to address the complexity of the ongoing crisis in Juárez. Instead, it mischaracterizes the nature of the drug war and its impact on the people residing there. Sensational accounts of violence in Juárez present the drug war in binary terms with drug cartels on one side and the antinarcotics forces charged with their eradication on the other. This simplistic depiction ignores the long and failed history of U.S.-led drug interdiction policies throughout Latin America<sup>24</sup> as well as structural problems within Mexico that include corruption and continued human rights violations on the part of the Mexican security forces charged with eliminating the threat of drug-related violence and protecting the city's residents.<sup>25</sup>

Media emphasis on drug cartels and cartel violence further distorts the nature of drug-related crime in Juárez by presenting the current crime wave in monolithic terms. Popular media coverage of crime in Juárez, for example, subsumes all criminal activity into the larger, single narrative of the drug war. Consequently, antinarcotics efforts have become a panacea for a host of social ills and nondrug-related criminal activities from petty theft to carjackings and extortion rackets. And as the security presence in the streets increases, many question whether the proposed cure is worse than the disease.<sup>26</sup>

Not only does the primacy of violence in media coverage of the drug war in Juárez subsume other nondrug-related criminal activities, it also produces sweeping generalizations and blanket condemnations of the city's general populace. In media accounts that emphasize violence and present murder in Juárez as the normal state of affairs, the people of Juárez are victimized twice as they are seen to be complicit in the violence that surrounds them. Charles Bowden is an investigative journalist who is intimately familiar with the border region and has written extensively on Juárez. His accounts of ruthless *sicarios* are gripping, but in his singular focus on drug-related violence he implicates the entire population of Juárez as being at least tangentially involved in the drug trade. As Bowden puts it, "There is not a family in the city that does not have a family member in the drug industry."<sup>27</sup> Taking it further, those not directly involved in the drug trade participate passively as drug consumers. Regarding drug use in Juárez, which Bowden sees as rampant, he offers this bit of empathy: "Who in their right mind would turn down a chance to consume drugs in a city of poverty, filth, violence and despair?"<sup>28</sup> Such portrayals of Ciudad Juárez as a bleak and desperate border town are not new.<sup>29</sup> Ascribing the same characteristics to ordinary Juarenses, however, only cultivates gross stereotypes while eliciting very little compassion and even less empathy for people residing in Juárez today.

In sensational media accounts of the Juárez drug war, ordinary Juarenses play a supporting role in the larger narrative of drug-related violence. Their

perspectives are valued only in the degree to which they conform to the existing story line. Silencing contrary viewpoints occurs subtly, but the cumulative consequence is nonetheless a blanket condemnation of ordinary Juarenses. In the television documentary *Narco War Next Door*, producer Laura Ling follows Bowden's lead in implicating the residents of Juárez in the drug war when, after showing up at the scene of a murder, she turns to the bystanders to verify the mundaneness of murder in Juárez.

LING: Are scenes like this, people getting killed, something that you see often?

BYSTANDER: No, it's not common.

LING: [turning away dissatisfied] Thank you, gracias.

Back in the car on the way to the next crime scene Ling's co-producer and cameraman looks to confirm his suspicions with their Mexican guide.

CAMERAMAN: So those kids don't talk 'cause they're thugs, right?

MEXICAN GUIDE: Yes, they are part of the gangs so they just lie.

LING: [agreeing] Right. They won't talk.<sup>30</sup>

In this brief interlude the young Mexican bystander challenges the premise that murder in Juárez is the normal state of affairs. His response is rejected and he is immediately recast as conspirator. The preconceived narrative is confirmed and the expectation of sensationalism met.

By reporting only the most sensational aspects of the drug war in Juárez, journalists are engaging their readers in what John Tisdale referred to as a "dialogue of expectations."<sup>31</sup> Journalists know what their readers want and either immediately retrieve and present certain aspects of a news story or lose the readers to the competition. Though Tisdale uses the term to connect oral history and journalism in the context of Michael Frisch's idea of shared authority, the differences in audience expectations further distinguish oral history from journalistic investigation.

In Ciudad Juárez, the allure of violence reduces journalistic investigation to gathering objective facts selectively in order to confirm the sensational character of a predetermined narrative. With oral history, editorial bias plays a lesser role, as oral history is not bound by the same sensationalist expectations imposed on corporate journalism today. Generally more open-ended to begin with, oral history is not meant to provide narrow facts pertaining to singular, even sensational events but to record subjective analyses of events. These analyses then themselves become the story. Alessandro Portelli reminds us of this in his assertion that oral history tells us less about the event (the story) than it tells us about the meaning of the event.<sup>32</sup> Through this approach, Juarenses interviewed for this project revealed the meaning of the drug war in Ciudad Juárez not through sensational accounts of death, but through their perspectives of everyday struggles to maintain some sense of normalcy in life.

Despite the primacy of murder in journalistic coverage of the drug war in Mexico, life in Juárez abounds nonetheless. Children still go to school amid the violence while men and women still go to work and parents do their best to raise their children and keep them safe. Although there has been some emigration out of Juárez among the wealthier classes, most of the city's more than one million inhabitants lack the means or desire to leave town and continue to call Juárez home.<sup>33</sup> Interview subjects informing this essay were of this group—the majority population—people residing in Juárez whose lives and livelihoods remain wrapped up in the familial and social networks that define their urban existence. Their accounts provided an array of commentaries regarding the nature of life in Juárez amid the ongoing crisis but also reveal a number of common perspectives. These shared assessments of everyday life are presented here as alternative themes to the more familiar representations of Ciudad Juárez as murder city.

The first such theme challenges the primacy of cartel violence as reported in the daily news by presenting drug-related violence in Juárez as an avoidable and external threat. This perspective clearly belies statistical body counts and directly contradicts Bowden's assertions regarding the average Juarenses's familiarity with the drug trade. It was, nonetheless, one of the more common points of view shared by Juarenses interviewed for this project.

The second theme is related and regards the threats to personal safety and livelihood that Juárez residents confront daily. Here too, the emphasis is not on the cartels but on other dangers: threats deriving from fellow Juarenses or from those charged with keeping Juárez safe. This perspective further rebuffs the popular characterization of the drug war as monolithic and all-subsuming.

Further dissonance between lived experience and journalistic constructions of life in Juárez also emerged in the final theme, the frequently voiced concern that Juárez has been treated unfairly in the media and that stories of violence have been greatly exaggerated. This last shared perspective rejects the presumed pervasiveness of cartel violence in Juárez while at the same time offering insight into the deeper impact of the drug war on average Juárez residents. In this final theme, Juarenses defend their city's current reputation by harkening back to its not-so-distant past. In so doing, they reveal what they believe to be truly at stake in Juárez, not personal safety per se but aspirations for the future enmeshed in a city that has lured them with hopes of promise and opportunity.

Each of these shared perspectives suggests that the threat of cartel violence is less significant than generally presumed in American media accounts originating north of the Mexican border. Deemphasizing cartel violence, however, by no means denies the existence of violence in Juárez; nor does it downplay the severity of the current crisis. On the contrary, accounts of daily life presented here by ordinary Juarenses paint a far more insidious picture of the drug war than the fantastical tabloid depictions because the threats are more truly pervasive,

genuinely familiar, and representative of a larger and potentially enduring breakdown in civil society.

Despite reports of daily executions in the local papers and graphic imagery of the grotesque in the weekly tabloid “El Alarma!” Juárez residents continue to project the drug-related violence that surrounds them as foreign and external. A popular refrain is that the violence “is between the *narcotraficantes*” or that “accidents happen but the violence is between them.”<sup>34</sup> Incidents occur to challenge this assertion,<sup>35</sup> but generally what the sensational accounts of drug violence overlook is the statistical reality that, for the vast majority of Juarenses, the act of murder exists outside the realm of personal experience.<sup>36</sup> Juárez residents do view their city as a battleground and will readily acknowledge the very real threat of getting caught in a crossfire and becoming collateral damage in some drug-related shoot-out. But for most Juarenses, the impact of the drug war derives from its residual effects—threats that are generally outside the scope of popular journalistic coverage from the U.S. side of the border.

To compartmentalize violence in Juárez is to prioritize risk. It is significant, then, that while drug-related executions receive primacy in sensationalized media accounts, they receive a lower priority among average Juarenses. For ordinary Juárez residents daily dangers take the form of increased incidents of assault, robbery, armed carjackings, extortion, and abuse at the hands of security forces. These crimes have risen in tandem with the cartel-related murders over the last few years but are nonetheless considered separately. Unlike the cartel violence—which is seen as avoidable and external—residents view these acts as pervasive and homegrown in origin.

Most of the Juárez residents informing this article presented the rising wave of criminal activity that is not specifically drug-related as crimes of opportunity. More often than not, then, the culprits were not *narcotraficantes* but fellow Juarenses taking advantage of the current situation to rob and extort their neighbors. As one small businessman—Carlos, the owner of a tire repair shop—explained it to me, in these hard times “[extortion] has become a profession for many. The criminals are exploiting people’s fear.”<sup>37</sup> Silvia, a mother and housekeeper at a local hotel, echoed a similar sentiment: “Neighborhood gangs are taking advantage of people’s fear. Before people didn’t let themselves be assaulted. They fought back. Now you don’t know if they are narcos or not.”<sup>38</sup>

“But hasn’t there always been crime in Juárez?” I asked Carlos, himself the victim of an armed robbery earlier that year. “It’s different,” he corrected. “Before, that sort of thing only happened at night, in darkness, on isolated streets. The incident that happened to me, that happened at 10:30 in the morning. I was second in line at a stop sign. There was [an active] construction site right on the corner.”<sup>39</sup>

Since the drug war began in 2007, incidents of nondrug-related crime in Juárez have greatly increased.<sup>40</sup> And at the same time, there has been a proportional increase in the number of security forces patrolling the streets. Despite

the introduction of ubiquitous security patrols, however, their numbers have had no measurable impact on the level of nondrug-related criminal activity. Even at the height of the 2008–9 surge, when Juárez was under de facto martial law,<sup>41</sup> incidents of street crime continued undeterred. Indeed, criminal activity actually went up. This situation has led many Juarenses to speculate aloud that outside security forces are collaborating with local criminal elements or creating crime syndicates of their own. Consequently, rather than promoting a sense of security in Juárez, this increased police presence has created only greater anxiety among the general populace by introducing an additional and more intrusive threat. This position is supported by numerous and egregious charges of human rights violations Juarenses have leveled against the military and police forces since the drug war began.<sup>42</sup> People interviewed for this project have likewise corroborated the failure of the security forces in Juárez as well as the general sense of anxiety brought by their presence. Their perspectives presented security patrols as overbearing and operating outside the usual boundaries of an acceptable level of police corruption. The young lawyer Jonathan Palmas, for example, drew these distinctions between local transit authorities and the more recently arrived federal police:

JONATHAN: You'd pay bribes before to the traffic cops but it wasn't much. And if you didn't want to pay, you had the option of going down to the impound with your paperwork and getting your car out. They [the transit police] would ask for 100, 200 pesos [as a bribe], not much. But I think that the bribes, the corruption on the part of the federal police, are not on par. . . . It's not comparable. It's worse because they . . . they don't give you any options. They take the money from you. They don't ask for money. They take it. They threaten you for it. They beat you. The normal bribe, or the normal corruption, didn't take it that far. But the federal cops, they've taken it to another level. It's no longer corruption anymore. It's criminal.<sup>43</sup>

This sort of candid observation regarding the worsening level of crime and corruption in Juárez was standard among those interviewed for this chapter and indeed the sort of commentary one would expect from Juárez residents given the current state of affairs. Less anticipated but just as frequently offered, however, were statements made in defense of Juárez. Through either explicit commentary or inference, interview subjects all communicated a general sentiment that "Juárez is not like they're making it out to be."<sup>44</sup> This observation became the final theme to emerge from this study, the commonly held position that Juárez has been popularly misrepresented in the news media. This position is noteworthy given the spiking murder rate in Juárez and the evidence of violence in the streets. It is also, however, an indicator of what Juárez residents perceive as the deeper meaning of the current crisis unfolding in their city.

In his book *Ciudad Juárez La Fea* (Ugly Ciudad Juárez), University of Ciudad Juárez professor Rutilio García Pereyra examines U.S. media portrayals of Ciudad

Juárez over the past century. He finds that depictions of Juárez in the U.S. papers as dangerous and degenerate have predominated since at least the Prohibition era.<sup>45</sup> Juárez residents are acutely aware of their city's reputation in the United States, and for them blanket condemnations of their city or presumptions of their culpability in the drug war are not surprising. As a consequence, however, they couch their defense of the city in terms of acceptable and unacceptable levels of crime and corruption while insisting, as if it is an unfathomable proposal, that Juárez once offered much opportunity and was actually a good place to live. As one anonymous interviewee nostalgically and somewhat ironically put it—ironically, considering he had recently lost his business after paying a hefty ransom to save the life of his wife—Juárez used to be a place of “mucho desmadre” (much chaos, in a positive way).

Borderland stereotypes of Ciudad Juárez as dangerous and degenerate even before the beginning of the drug war underlie the sensational accounts of drug violence in Juárez today. They also, however, ignore the counternarrative of Ciudad Juárez as a center of industry and opportunity. In the late 1960s, Mexico underwent a national transformation that shifted the geographic center of manufacturing out of Mexico City and Guadalajara and dispersed it north along Mexico's border with the United States. The maquila system that emerged allowed foreign investors greater access to Mexico's relative labor flexibility and created an economic boom for Juárez as workers from central Mexico relocated to the border region. Mexico's economic restructuring brought opportunities in Juárez in the form of low-paying maquiladora jobs, but in other areas including construction and professional services as well. Interview subjects confirmed this aspect of Ciudad Juárez's recent history in relating their stories of migrating to Juárez for opportunity and finding it too. Through their nostalgia, they revealed an aspect of the current crisis generally overlooked in the popular media coverage of the drug war: the cumulative human cost of lost aspirations culminating with the Juárez drug war, though deriving not from the foreseeable consequences of living in murder city but from the erosion of lifelong plans in a town they once saw as a utopia of promise and opportunity.

Jonathan, the young lawyer-entrepreneur, was well aware of the associated costs of practicing law or trying to run a business in a city where local estimates report 98 percent of businesses to be paying extortion fees.<sup>46</sup> He nevertheless downplayed the threat of violence: “I personally don't feel afraid of any drug traffickers or any extortionist or kidnappers.”<sup>47</sup> For him, the danger was avoidable. The cost of safety, however, was immense and meant putting his life plans and livelihood on hold. For him, the drug war has stymied economic earning potential once synonymous with Juárez and robbed him of the means to provide adequately for his family and achieve his dreams for the future.

Rosa, the retail pharmacy manager, has similarly had her expectations of a peaceful family life dashed as a consequence of her loss of confidence in civil society in Juárez. For Rosa, who came to Juárez to be with her only daughter and

to share the responsibilities of raising her daughter's newborn girl, the city initially offered sufficient opportunity for both mother and daughter. Both gained professional employment, and they still share a comfortable home in a gated community. For Rosa, however, the trappings of comfortable domesticity now serve only as an anchor to a city where criminals operate with impunity and the police have abandoned all pretensions of protecting citizens or prosecuting criminal activity. For Rosa, an apathetic employer, an indifferent and ineffective local police force, and repeated assaults from identifiable assailants have all combined to erode her trust in society and her aspirations for providing a nurturing environment to raise her family's next generation.

Raul, the recently laid-off maquila worker, similarly has had to reconsider past expectations of normalcy in light of structural forces transforming his adoptive home. Since coming to Juárez from Mexico City, Raul worked thirteen years manufacturing seatbelt harnesses and other automobile components for a number of American maquilas (General Motors, Chrysler, Ford). In that time, Raul maintained a simple but satisfied existence and acquired a small but comfortable home. The military's intrusion on his private sanctuary disrupted this comfortable existence, and now the mere sight of military patrols in the streets grips him with anxiety. Those he once viewed as protectors he now views as tormentors.

For Raul and the others, the primary concern over the drug war in Juárez lay not in the immediate threat of personal violence as represented by the drug cartels but in a more far-reaching and enduring breakdown of civil society. It is not through sensationalized reports of Ciudad Juárez as murder city, therefore, but through these accounts of everyday life and reminiscences of Ciudad Juárez as a one-time utopia of promise and opportunity that the truly dystopian quality of the current crisis unfolding in Juárez today is revealed.

With its reputation as "the first rough draft of history,"<sup>48</sup> journalism has long maintained investigatory rights to incidents within the realm of current events. Oral history, by contrast, has been traditionally relegated to covering occurrences taking place in the more distant past. This temporal distinction makes the idea of conducting oral histories of ongoing events unfamiliar to many and unnecessary to others who see it as investigative journalism done by nonjournalists. Charges of redundancy, however, are unwarranted and, moreover, belie fundamental differences between oral history and today's journalism that shape not only how each discipline approaches the shared methodology of the oral interview but the sort of information that each approach uncovers. Nowhere are these distinctions more pronounced than in emerging crisis situations where violence is at the center of the calamity.

In violent crisis situations, oral history investigation allows for broader understanding of circumstances through the incorporation of multiple perspectives. Multiple perspectives refers here not to what Paul Thompson touted as oral history's "social purpose."<sup>49</sup> Feldstein has pointed out journalists too in

recent decades have reduced "coverage of government hearings and official press conferences while increasing attention on average people and their concerns."<sup>50</sup> It refers instead to oral history's greater freedom to pursue alternative avenues of inquiry presumed too mundane and therefore unexplored by journalistic investigations driven by expectations of sensationalism.

Everyday experiences provide insight that is far more relatable to general readers than purely fantastical stories of aberrant behavior. In Ciudad Juárez, furthermore, oral histories of everyday struggles restore a level of humanity to the residents of Juárez that is lost in journalistic accounts focusing only on the inhumanity of the cartel violence. As a separate approach, oral history uncovers information different from what is revealed through journalistic investigation. Consequently, oral history also elicits very different responses from audiences. Through its incorporation of ordinary perspectives into studies of extraordinary situations, oral history accounts foster a greater sense of empathy among readers. Journalistic accounts of sensational violence, on the other hand, produce indignation at best. In emerging crisis situations where events are ongoing, the distinctions between the two approaches can have very important policy-making implications.

In Ciudad Juárez, sensational accounts of murder and mayhem incite moral and reasonable people to demand direct action and violent retribution without sufficient regard for the consequences of such actions.<sup>51</sup> Oral history investigation, with its broader focus on the impact of the larger story and not just events, emphasizes a human aspect of the story not always present in sensationalized accounts. In this way, oral history elicits more measured responses. In emerging crisis situations where audiences include policy makers or others whose influence might change the outcome of a still-developing calamity, oral history as an alternative to sensationalist media coverage is therefore invaluable.

## Notes

1. Jonathan Palmas, interview with author, July 14, 2010.
2. Rosa (last name withheld), interview with author, January 2, 2010.
3. Raul (last name withheld), interview with author, August 1, 2009.
4. This is a general reference to sensationalist treatment of the drug war in Mexico but also specifically to Charles Bowden's *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).
5. Mark Feldstein, "Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History," *Oral History Review* 31, no. 1 (September 2004), <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohr/31.1/feldstein.html>.
6. *Ibid.*, 12.
7. "The Matter of New Revenue," n.d., [http://www.journalism.org/analysis\\_report/matter\\_new\\_revenue](http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/matter_new_revenue).
8. Alan Barth, "Review of The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon by Harold L. Ickes," *New Republic* 108 (1943): 677.
9. Candy Cooper, "The Death of Slow Journalism," *American Journalism Review* (July 2009), <http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4789>.
10. For an illustrative discussion of what serves as newsworthy on the Mexican-American border, see Steve Rendall, "Worthy and Unworthy Border Murders," *FAIR: Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, April 2011, <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4306>.



11. As of March 2011, surveillance equipment provided to the Mexican antinarcotics effort included eight Bell 412 and three UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters. Bureau of Public Affairs Department of State, Office of Electronic Information, "The Merida Initiative: Expanding the US/Mexico Partnership," March 3, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/pl/157797.htm>.
12. Barry Peterson, "Juárez, Mexico—Murder Capital of the World," August 12, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/08/12/eveningnews/main6767879.shtml>.
13. Howard Campbell, "No End in Sight: Violence in Ciudad Juárez," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, June 2011; at the close of 2011 the Juárez daily *El Diario* had tallied a total of 1,974 murders for 2011. "Cierra 2011 con la Menor Cifra de Asesinatos en 3 años," *Diario.com.mx*, December 31, 2011, [https://nacla.org/sites/default/files/A04403021\\_7.pdf](https://nacla.org/sites/default/files/A04403021_7.pdf).
14. Marc Lacey, "Mexican Man Admits Using Acid on Bodies, Army Says," *New York Times*, January 25, 2009, sec. International/Americas, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/world/americas/25mexico.html>. Pozolero, or one who makes pozole, is a reference to a particular Mexico stew.
15. "Mexican Cartel Skins Rival's Face, Stitches It on Soccer Ball," *FoxNews.com*, n.d., <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/01/08/mexican-cartel-skins-rivals-face-stitches-soccer-ball/>.
16. "Drug Lords Go after Mexican Police Officers," n.d., [http://www.nydailynews.com/latino/2008/05/20/2008-05-20\\_drug\\_lords\\_go\\_after\\_mexican\\_police\\_offic.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/latino/2008/05/20/2008-05-20_drug_lords_go_after_mexican_police_offic.html).
17. Daniel Borunda, "Three Severed Heads Found in Ice Chest outside Juárez," *El Paso Times* (El Paso, TX), January 21, 2009, [http://www.elpasotimes.com/ci\\_11512551?source=most\\_viewed](http://www.elpasotimes.com/ci_11512551?source=most_viewed). See also "Mexico: Human Heads Sent to Police in Ice Chest," *USA Today*, October 21, 2008, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2008-10-21-2437915021\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2008-10-21-2437915021_x.htm).
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# 9

## UNTIL OUR LAST BREATH

### Voices of Poisoned Workers in China

Karin Mak

**Oral histories by Karin Mak with “Ren,” “Min,” “Fu,” and “Wu,”  
Huizhou, Guangdong, and rural Sichuan, China, August and  
September 2007**

*Exposés on deplorable working conditions in China appear in the American media when a particularly egregious incident takes place. One example is the slew of news articles about the May 2011 explosion that killed four workers who were polishing Apple iPads. Americans were astonished to hear about the long working hours and workers' routine exposure to dangerous and toxic chemicals. The long-term impact of poor working conditions does not, however, receive the same attention from the media. Many Chinese factory workers have been poisoned by cadmium, a heavy metal with properties similar to those of lead. Cadmium can stay in the body for many years, wreaking havoc on the kidneys, lungs, liver, and bones. I conducted an oral history project aimed at capturing the rising critical consciousness of workers in China responding to the health, economic, and environmental crisis. In-depth interviews took place with women workers, family members of the women, and advocates who were involved in a campaign seeking medical compensation from the multinational battery manufacturer of nickel-cadmium batteries GP Batteries (GP). This chapter features interviews from four of the women workers, who led a group of more than four hundred women poisoned by cadmium. One component of the oral history project was a short documentary film, Red Dust, which I produced and edited. In this chapter, I provide short descriptions of where the interviews took place similar to how in a film B-roll shots would be used to establish the setting.*

*Labor rights are a very sensitive issue in the country. I filmed the interviews one year before the Beijing Olympics, where China planned to blossom on the world stage. At the time, the government was especially watchful about reports that might damage its reputation. Freedom of expression and freedom of association are limited, so I was particularly careful about recording the stories of the women I call “Ren,” “Min,” “Fu,” and*

*"Wu." I was deeply touched and amazed by the workers' tenacity, courage, and sense of humor. Despite the deterioration of their health and family lives, their strong passion for justice is summarized by Fu's words, "We will not give up, until our last breath."*

*For my interview with Ren, I decided to journey with her to her hometown in rural Sichuan. We met in the city of Huizhou in Guangdong Province, where Ren resides close to the GP factory she used to work in. From the Huizhou station, we boarded a train so crowded that we were lucky to have had seats the entire way. After the twenty-six-hour train ride, we took a short cab ride over bumpy dirt roads. In the dark of the night, we finished the final leg of the journey by walking on a narrow dirt path lined by tall grass to reach the house where Ren grew up. Sichuan is one of China's poorest provinces and is home to many of China's migrant factory workers.*

*The next morning, we awakened to cool and crisp air. Crickets hummed lightly in the background as we brushed our teeth, squatting on the earthen step outside the front door of the home. It was starting to warm up, but the grass, mud, and wood beams of the house kept it cool. Bright pieces of clothing hung from the bamboo poles in front of the house. I began to interview Ren as she swept the dirt floor. It had been three years since she was home. The house had largely been empty for at least a year, as her mother, originally a farmer, had also become a factory worker and only recently returned from working in the city. As Ren sweeps the dirt in her home, she is reminded of the dust in the factory. The connection between city and countryside all came together in this interview.*

KARIN: Do you feel tired doing this work?

REN: I didn't use to feel so tired before doing this [house] work at home. After cadmium poisoning, this work has become very hard, very tiring. It's hard to breathe, like my chest is tight. . . . We need some water here [splashes water on dirt floor]; otherwise the dirt floats. . . . When we did cleaning on our factory there was this much dust.

At the factory, if the air conditioning wasn't on, we'd turn on the fans. The fans would blow the dust around—there was almost as much dust as I am sweeping right now. If the factory wasn't cleaned in a week, then there would be even more the dust. The dust was everywhere and our lips became red. Usually there was this much dust, a red dust, very dirty. The environment was very bad. It was just as much as I am sweeping here in the countryside. It was cadmium dust, a red dust.

KARIN: Did the factory train you on how to deal with cadmium?

REN: You mean about cadmium's dangers? No. They just trained us how to do our work. . . . They didn't explain the harms of toxic chemicals. If there was training, sometimes we didn't know what it was about. We just signed our name on a piece of paper, not reading what it said sometimes, and then it was taken away by the line supervisor. They only trained us how to do our work.

There was as much dust as I am cleaning here. The house is dirty because we haven't lived here in a year. If we were home everyday it wouldn't be this

dirty. We would have to eat in the same work area. . . . During the day shift, there was a cafeteria. During the night shift, it would be like this. Eating amongst so much dust. We would wash our hands and then eat. After eating, we had one hour to rest, but there was no place to rest. . . .

Every day after work we would return home with our pants like this—dusty. If we were wearing white work shoes, the shoes would be red. We would also bring the dust home and cook. They didn't tell us that cadmium was harmful to our bodies. Because we are from the countryside we don't have that much schooling. We didn't know it was so harmful to us. The factory never told us.

There's a lot of dust here. There was even more at the factory. Think about it in a place with three hundred to four hundred people, it definitely was more serious than this.

*Min was Ren's supervisor and friend from the battery factory. She started working in the factory when she was eighteen years old. She too has a rural background, as her parents were farmers, but they lived near the city of Huizhou and watched the factory grow. More than once, Min came late to an interview because she had spent the morning cleaning the home where she lived with her son, husband, and his side of the family. Min's diligence and earnestness were attractive to others. She described herself as someone who held to traditional gender roles and did not believe in speaking up. After her involvement with the GP campaign, however, she felt a change in her personality. She was more willing to demand equality and better treatment. She felt that she had worked so hard for the factory, but after cadmium poisoning the factory "kicked her out." Before this interview, I asked Min to bring some of her medicine as a tool to prompt her interview and also to illustrate the impact cadmium poisoning had on her.*

*On the way to her interview, we meandered through narrow pedestrian streets accompanied by Huizhou's soundscape of car horns, loud conversations, and the click-clack, click-clack of mahjong tiles on our way to Ren's home, near the factory where the women had worked. Min and Fu stuck close to each other, a few steps ahead of Pui Pui, my videographer, and me. We walked as a loose group, barely acknowledging each other in case others became aware of our foreign presence. The evening air was warm and humid. Black and red telephone numbers were spray-painted all over the brick and concrete buildings, advertising work or services.*

*We entered a three-story concrete house through a doorway decorated with red papers printed with Chinese characters along the top and sides of the doors, signaling good fortune and health. The sun began to set, and we entered safely under the cover of evening. Ren's home consisted of a single room, with access to a communal bathroom and kitchen. I sought refuge on the grass-woven mat on the bed, a bunk bed where the bottom was for a full-sized mattress for Ren and her husband and the top a twin bed for their son. Against the wall, like a poster, was a huge advertisement of a light-skinned*

*European model clad in a black bra. A fan near the window blew directly onto us. After some light conversation over slices of watermelon, I began my interview with Min. She took out of her bag an assortment of medicine bottles.*

MIN: I had worked there [factory owned by GP Batteries] for fifteen years. The factory hired me in 1990 when I was eighteen. My family was very poor, so when I started working, I sent my wages back to my family. After sending money back, I hardly had any left for my living expenses. I lived on the highest floor of the building and even on very hot days when the temperature was as high as 36 or 37 degrees Celsius [96 to 99 degrees Fahrenheit], I couldn't afford a fan. I just lived like this and sent all the money I earned each month home. Because I have many sisters, my parents, who live in the countryside, rely on us. Had I known I would be exposed to toxic chemicals, no matter how poor I was, I would not have come to work in this factory. . . .

We always have to take medicine. I've thrown away so many receipts. Every day I take painkillers for my stomach . . . seven to eight different types of painkillers. When I walk, I feel pain in my bones. For the bone pain I use an ointment. In one year I have used so many bottles. . . . It's not easy. Sometimes I feel very tired. I think about giving up, but our factory has not taken responsibility; when our illness acts up, what will we do? We have no choice but to go on. We hope the factory can act responsibly. If they don't, we definitely won't give up. Why? Because more and more of us workers are experiencing the symptoms [of cadmium poisoning]. . . .

Because of this situation, many workers' husbands have divorced them . . . or their boyfriends break up with them. The men are scared away by our future medical expenses. There is no way to calculate how much it would cost. . . . For now, even if you get hospitalized for some a not very serious disease, more than ten thousand yuan will be expended. . . . If we borrow money from others, they are afraid you won't have money to return it, right?

That's why our hearts are tired. We think about all kinds of things, mainly the hardship on our families. People my age come out to work and make money to raise a family. Like Jin [pseudonym, another worker], her husband can take care of her now, and next year, and the year after, but it doesn't mean that he can take care of her later. Why? She depends solely on him. He can be tired, he is human, right? We can't blame other people for this. We can only blame the factory's owner who led us to this disease. . . .

If the factory hadn't been cutting costs, we might not have been poisoned this seriously—had they provided good labor protections. Yes, there are still people who would have been poisoned, but maybe at a lower rate. . . . Before the poisoning became public, we demanded that the factory provide safety equipment, but the factory kept ignoring our demand. In 2001, a very serious situation arose where the skin on workers' fingers began eroding. The erosion

happened before but workers would see a doctor. This time they couldn't get it cured. Later, the management reported this to the higher level. So the workers were taken to the dermatology department to have an examination. The doctor at the dermatology department said it was definitely caused by cadmium powder exposure. Since then, they started giving workers gloves. That was a little better. But the factory's boss came up with a new policy in order to save cost: that the pair of gloves would be rewashed: use them today and wash them tomorrow and reuse them after washing. During the process of washing, the gloves were not disinfected. The bacteria infected the other fingers, which led to more serious skin erosion. So many people were affected. It was not caused by workers. It was the factory's fault.

Girls like us came out to work at the young age of eighteen with a lot of hope. We were very healthy, right? As a person coming from the countryside like me, although I didn't have much education, I always worked very hard, very diligently and obediently. I would do anything my superior asked me to do. If I didn't finish it, I would take the work home to finish. Why did I do this? Because I didn't have much education, but at least I could work very hard. If I could do a good job, others could trust my work. . . . I always tried to do the best at each working procedure, to raise the quality and increase the quantity and efficiency. . . . I worked so hard for more than ten years. When I got sick, they just kicked me out. . . .

Also the worst is the boss [referring to the CEO of GP Batteries] knew that we would get sick. He knew. He is the one who runs the battery factory. He surely knows about the poison, but how come didn't he tell us? . . . He should be very aware that he caused our disease and how seriously we are poisoned. It's impossible that he's not aware of that. Now we can say that he is just escaping from the responsibility. There were more than one thousand workers in our factory. Several hundred of them were poisoned such that their cadmium level exceeded the standard. Then he moved right away, sold all the machines, closed the factory, and left.

*Although some interviews took place in Ren's home, most of them were conducted at a three-star hotel near one of the GP factories in Huizhou. The hotel had shiny tile floors and gold-flowered wallpaper. It was comfortable, air conditioned, and most importantly, a neutral and seemingly safe place to talk. Sometimes interviews went so long that the workers would crawl into the soft linens of the bed and nap with the hum of the air conditioning lulling them softly to sleep. The hotel room became a retreat from their chaotic world. I had learned earlier that the GP women's phones were tapped.*

*Fu is originally from Hunan and is in her thirties. She started working in the factory after high school, which was unusual at the time for a woman from a poor rural background to be so well educated. At the GP Batteries factory, she worked hard to*

*move up the ranks from an ordinary worker to a line supervisor. Promotions were competitive, and those who rose up showed dedication to the factory. Fu comes across as strong-willed and very astute. She talks here about the influence her open-minded mother had on her political education. Her conversation is punctuated by a clicking sound, her way of clearing her throat of phlegm, which had built up as a result of the cadmium exposure.*

FU: In the eighties, being a worker was great... who knew it would end in the nineties because the country's strategy changed to reform and opening? We used to have the iron rice bowl.<sup>1</sup> My dad was a worker; therefore I was able to attend school until high school. My home village was so poor. When I think about it, at that time, being able to go to junior high wasn't bad. I was able to go to high school, but mostly because my mom let me.

To tell you the truth, many people from my village didn't have much schooling. For people my age, I am the only high school graduate. My mom was very open-minded. My brother and my sister went to high school, but we didn't go to university. My father was laid off in 1993.... After that, we weren't able to afford school anymore.

When we came down to the cities to work our wages were very low. To tell you the truth, only about 200 to 300 yuan.<sup>2</sup> It was enough only for me to live on. I couldn't send money back home.... The cost of living here is higher than in the countryside. My brother didn't have money to continue his education.

My mom was considered very open-minded. My mom was chair of the Women's Association in our village. She frequently did women's work. At that time, each village government had its own Women's Association chair. She never would favor boys over girls.... Of course my brother was also very precious to her. She would tell me not to hit him because you only have one brother. But in terms of education, we had equal treatment....

I am the only high school graduate from my village amongst my peers. In my younger brothers' and sisters' age group, there may only be two to three [high school graduates]. When someone is around fifteen to sixteen years old, about the age of coming out to work, they run out of money for school. They feel going to school is like working. But my mom didn't think like this. She thought if one is more educated, then she or he can become a supervisor. For my youngest sister, my family borrowed 30,000 yuan, but my mom thought it was worth it. She thought if we were better educated, than we can earn more money later. She was very open-minded. Very few people are like that....

*While I was interviewing Fu in the hotel room, Min was taking a catnap. She wakes up to mutter how tired she was from doing housework all morning. Here Fu responds to Min's sense of responsibility in completing housework.*



FU: In our society now, men and women are equal. Why shouldn't men do housework? Why should women do everything? That's never been my attitude. Plus, my personality has always been like this [strong]. When I was in school, the teacher gave us receipts [for expenses]. We paid 50 yuan, but the receipt noted 30. He couldn't explain what happened to the other 20 yuan. So we organized a walkout because we thought it was unfair. From then on, my thinking changed a lot. . . .

We were so devoted to the [GP Batteries] factory, and now we're sick. Now we're sick and they don't care about us. It was too horrible of them. I worked there for seven to eight years, I was a line supervisor, and contributed so much. They asked us to conduct some changes and we received a lot of pressure on those. Now we're sick, they don't care. I was a supervisor but was demoted to a worker after I started asking questions about the poison [cadmium], but still I worked so hard. They asked me not to tell others about the poisonings. They said I would be fired if I talked about occupational illness.

If this person or that person won't stand up, who will? That's why, I have to stand up. Can one person do it and win? The factory was too unfair to us. Other workers ended up like me—they were always working extra hours, always working hard. It didn't matter that we were sick, it was still difficult to get days off. Others said this couldn't continue, and I thought about it too. At the time, I was the first supervisor who spoke out. . . . I was always sick and no medicine was helping. I had symptoms similar to others, and I decided to get tested. My levels turned out to be particularly high. I thought about how devoted I was to the company, and now they treated me like this. Since I was demoted to a regular worker, I had a lot of opportunity to talk to other workers. We talked and decided we had to stand up. We couldn't continue like this. The company didn't care about us. We just punched out of our time clocks, and left. . . .

*The workers introduced me to Wu, who came to the hotel with a thick stack of papers, which she later explained to me were copies of her medical tests, medical bills, and work contracts. She spread the evidence over the entire full-size hotel bed. We increased the temperature of the air conditioning for Wu, so that her sweat would not chill her. Wu was visibly weak, with a tired voice, a downtrodden face with a downward-shaped mouth, and eyes that wistfully looked off into the distance. Her face seemed to have been worn down by salty tears that dried on the skin. Wu no longer worked for the Huizhou Power Pack factory, owned by GP Batteries, but she was suing for reinstatement.*

WU: I went for an examination because my cadmium levels exceeded the standard. See how high it is [points to document]. It is very rare. Every time the doctor advises to continue treatment. The doctor said, it is possible that I need to be hospitalized for three to five years. But I can't afford to be hospitalized.

The factory arranges yearly follow-up examinations. Those people whose cadmium exceeded the standard were told they had recovered in their follow-up examination. But when these people went to a different occupational diseases hospital, they were told their cadmium still exceeded the standard. How do you explain about this? Who should we believe? How do you explain it?... Look, so fake, right? This is fabricated. This is the result of the examination the factory arranged for me. This here is the examination I did somewhere else. The results are totally different... I did this last month.

KARIN: Do the tests arranged by the factory show you recovered?

WU: Yes, it says I've recovered.... This [pointing to factory-arranged test] is in Huizhou, this is a Guangdong provincial hospital [a preventative hospital of occupational diseases].... Cadmium in urine was mainly tested in the examination arranged by the factory. They fabricated the result and made it normal.

KARIN: What is normal?

WU: Below 5 is normal. Here it exceeds the standard [indicates 8]....

KARIN: Wow.

WU: This is fabricated. The factory fabricated it intentionally.

KARIN: So is there a relationship between the factory and hospital?

WU: I am not sure. But from these results, I can tell this result is fabricated, but I can't say they fabricated it.... The hospitals provided care for occupational diseases, but their results are so different.... Just because I am suing the factory. They did this to me intentionally, to make the figures look normal. Anyway I can't tell any other reason, except that I am suing them. This is the most obvious reason. I have no other choice but to sue them. Maybe because of this lawsuit, they intentionally make the figures look normal.... You tell me, which one result should I trust? Can I trust this one from Huizhou?

*During our conversation, Min and Fu were also in the hotel room. At one point, they heard voices from the hallway and looked nervously through the door's peephole. They whispered urgently and gestured for us to quiet down. I responded by turning on the TV to drown out any noise. They continued to peer out, and then announced it was all right. We continued our conversation.*

KARIN: You paid this examination on your own?

WU: Yes, what else can I do? Totally, how much money did you pay? Transportation, lodging and boarding expense, together with the examination fee, totally added up to more than 300 yuan.... Lodging, I had to stay there at night. I can't go in the early morning because my body is too weak to do that. So this one was done in July. This one organized by the factory was done in April. What resentful feeling does the factory have towards me? Just because I am suing them, they intentionally did this to me. There are no other reasons....

KARIN: What kind of work did you do at the factory? Why are your cadmium levels so high?

WU: I worked on the assembly line doing film inspection. I inspected and packaged the film and happened to be near the chemicals, which is why my cadmium poisoning is so severe. Look at my legs. They are all scratched up and the skin is peeling. I don't have it anywhere else, just here. It doesn't even look like I have skin on my legs because all of it is peeled off. I've scratched so much that it's bloody. My entire leg is like this. . . . Once I left the factory, it has been like this. I can't stand the itching. I'm constantly itching. It's not like this anywhere else, just on my legs. I really can't take it. When I take the medicine, I can't even walk and my stomach hurts so much. The doctor told me I have a lot of acid in my kidneys. He said I should not stop taking my medicine. He also told me to schedule regular doctor's appointments. I asked him how I'm supposed to deal with this. . . . He told me that if I don't seek medical treatment, I would need dialysis in two to three years. . . .

In 2003, I felt that my body didn't have strength, that I was always tired. So I went for a medical examination to determine what was wrong. I was constantly getting sick and each time I got sick, I needed to get an IV drip. Over the past two years, I frequently went to the clinic for emergency care. My body was in terrible shape and my immune system was very weak. I was sweating so much I had to cut my hair even though I hadn't cut it in over thirty years. . . . I am constantly sweating. . . . I don't like to go out. I don't like seeing other people. . . . This [illness] is very inconvenient, especially because of the toll it takes on our bodies.

Who can cure the poison? How can I get a kidney transplant? I still have a child at home. My sister has been caring for my daughter for many years. What kind of parent am I? Everyone is poisoned. How are we supposed to survive? There are a lot of us. . . .

KARIN: What about the current workers?

WU: All of the current factory workers are newly hired. There are not any old workers. Some people came from other towns and don't know what's going on at the factory. . . . As someone from the village, how was I supposed to know? I really don't know what to do now. So all I can do is live day by day. I only think of today. I never think about tomorrow.

## Commentary

The experience of Ren, Min, Fu, and Wu's poisoning is part of a larger story of China's rapid economic development. China has the world's second-largest economy after the United States.<sup>3</sup> Since 1978, China has adopted market-oriented economic development, disinvesting in state-owned enterprises and encouraging foreign investment. In 1992, while touring the southern province of Guangdong to promote the opening of China's Special Economic Zones, China's leader Deng Xiaoping declared, "To get rich is glorious." The trip signaled China's path



Min, Fu, and Ren hold up documents from their cadmium poisoning case in August 2007. Workers kept their own records of correspondence with the GP Batteries factory in addition to medical records. *Photograph by Karin T. Mak.*

toward international trade and capitalist development. China has spent many years positioning itself to be the world's factory, manufacturing everything from shoes to batteries. A generation of peasants who migrated to the cities have fueled the country's economic growth, but at great costs to their health and livelihood.

Since the 1990s, an estimated 150 to 200 million people have moved from the countryside to the cities in search of work. Many migrants find jobs in the booming factories that have arisen out of direct foreign investment and international demand for low labor costs offered in China. Many flock to southern China's Pearl River delta in the Guangdong province, where the country's foreign investment is concentrated. The workers have a perpetual status as migrants. The rural-to-urban migrants have been referred to as blind drifters (*mangliu*), outside workers (*wailaigong*), a tide of rural workers (*mingong chao*), working girls/sisters (*dagongmei*), working sons (*dagongzai*), and a floating population (*liudong ren kou*). The shift from a state-run socialist economy to an increasingly capitalist one has produced more wealth, but also dire social costs. Greater inequities between rich and poor, a widening gap between urban and rural, rising rates of occupational injuries, and increasing environmental devastation are some of the main consequences of China's economic growth.

In the factories, conditions generally are harsh. Twelve-hour days are the norm, with few breaks, low pay, no overtime pay, and cramped and dirty dormitory living conditions. In order to cut costs and remain competitive in the international market, factories usually cut corners on health and safety requirements. The women's employer, GP Batteries, violated Chinese labor laws by not providing workers with the proper safety equipment to handle the cadmium. For instance, the factories lacked local exhaust ventilation (LEV) systems that would have removed much of the cadmium dust from the workplace environment.

One of the challenges the women faced was that it was difficult to fully measure the impact of cadmium poisoning. Workers labored at numerous stations, resulting in varying levels of exposure, and each person's body reacts to cadmium differently. It can take the body between seven and thirty years to flush cadmium out. Exposure to cadmium can lead to memory loss, dizziness, lack of strength, and pain in the back and limbs. In a December 2007 interview with Dr. Peter Orris, an expert on occupational safety and health, he explained how cadmium could affect workers' bodies:

When workers breathe in the cadmium dust, it irritates their airways and can cause bronchitis. If it gets into the lower airways, it will cause pneumonitis and in fact, chronic scarring of the lungs. When it is incorporated into the body through lungs into the blood stream, it will deposit in bones, liver, and a variety of other organ systems. Eventually it is excreted through urine and causes damage to kidneys. Chronically, over a long period of time, cadmium is a known carcinogen. The general public understands a good deal about lead, but on top of lead toxicity, cadmium is extraordinarily irritating, so it is more toxic than lead.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to affecting workers' health, a 2004 report by Greenpeace found high levels of cadmium in the local environment.<sup>5</sup> A 2011 study found that 10 percent of the rice sold in China is likely to contain cadmium.<sup>6</sup> Heavy-metal contamination is an increasingly pressing issue in China; the recent outcries over lead-tainted products reaching the United States are only the tip of the iceberg.

When I began this project, China's economic rise dominated the news, stirring fears about the United States' economic position. News centered on cheap Chinese imports and how American manufacturing could not compete. At the same time, American popular media largely ignored stories from the Chinese workers' perspective, which was somewhat ironic given that China's growth was spurred by the labor of Chinese workers. Instead, a one-dimensional image of a submissive Chinese sweatshop worker was pervasive. In reality, however, there was a rising tide of worker resistance. In 2005 alone, there were eighty-seven thousand incidents of protest recorded by the government.<sup>7</sup> I embarked on this project to look deeper for stories of worker resistance.

These types of stories were particularly meaningful to me as a Chinese American woman. Having grown up in the Midwest, I was one of a handful of Asian students in school. Early on, I was marked as the quiet, dutiful Asian girl,

a stereotype that advanced my grade point average but limited how others saw me and how I saw myself. The powerful stereotype of the Asian woman as quiet and submissive went beyond my Midwestern town and was seemingly global. Ethnographies of Chinese migrant workers, such as Pun Ngai's seminal *Made in China*, found that factories tend to hire women because managers believe women are easier to discipline and cause less trouble. Currently, the majority of the world's factory workers are women.

Stereotypes also affected U.S.-China relations. As manufacturing declined in the United States and moved to China, many Americans seemed to develop a bitterness that reinvigorated the stereotype of Chinese as untrustworthy, evil, manipulative Fu Manchus. I had worked at an anti-sweatshop organization where we knew that regardless of nationality, globally organized transnational corporations exploited workers around the world. It was particularly disheartening to sense that the only conception American workers had of Chinese workers was of a stereotype: submissive or manipulative. Therefore I sought stories featuring the strength and courage of Asian women. Their stories existed, but the power of stereotypes combined with the sensitivity of labor issues in China kept them obscure. In the end, I captured one of the few cases of women-led campaigns in China.

The authoritarian state and state-run media make talking about labor issues extremely sensitive and dangerous for workers. Simply meeting and talking to workers was potentially dangerous, but I wanted to film them. For this reason, I had done extensive, even obsessive, research on the status of workers' rights in the country before conducting the oral histories. Independent labor organizing is illegal in China, and workers can be jailed for actions perceived to be organizing. I spoke with workers' rights advocates, explored histories of worker struggle, read oral histories of Chinese citizens, studied news articles on Chinese economic development, and consulted filmmakers who had filmed there. I hoped not to make the mistake of entering China with a Western gaze. Although I am of Chinese descent, my education and outlook are American. I hoped to capture the Chinese workers' voices authentically, and I was very sensitive to my status as an outsider in creating the narrative. I tried my best to blend in and brought along only a small camera and minimal equipment.

At my first meeting with the workers, I invited a videographer, Pui Pui Leung, a student from Hong Kong, to shoot so that I could focus on interviewing. We had been sitting on the hard blue-wired chairs in the designated waiting area of the train station for almost three hours. A constant flux of people passed by us, some carrying their belongings in oversized bags made of woven plastic while others transported their goods on a collapsible dolly. Finally I received a call from May Wong of the nongovernmental organization Globalization Monitor to meet at a nearby café. May and the women she would introduce me to, Min and Fu, were waiting inside. As we made our way through the crowded restaurant, I accidentally knocked my overloaded backpack into someone trying to

pass behind me. We shared the table with a group of women on the other end. Although we were surrounded by a loud hum of talking voices, I wondered if our conversation would be overheard, but the others did not seem alarmed. We were making plans to stay at Fu's that night. Fu had agreed, but she seemed nervous. At once, she insisted it was all right for us to stay with her, but also spoke of how we should walk separately into her apartment building and not take the camera out at all. I listened as Fu said we were to pose as migrants from the same village as her, in the city looking for work. I reasoned that strangers are strangers and her neighbors might not recognize an American of Chinese descent and a student from the former British colony of Hong Kong. Then Min and Fu noticed both Pui Pui and I were wearing glasses. I did not pack my contacts, wanting to save space in my bulging backpack. Glasses are a mark of a student: educated, and I inferred, elite. Throughout my years in the United States it was a joke that so many Chinese are severely nearsighted, but not in industrial areas of China.

At the time of the interview, Ren was in her thirties and had worked at the GP Batteries-owned Huizhou Advance Battery Technology factory for more than eight years. Her friend and supervisor at the factory was Min, who worked there for more than fifteen years. GP closed the factory in January 2005. The workers suspected that it closed because it was located in a neighborhood where dumping of cadmium in the water system posed a potential danger to residents. Fu worked in another factory in the outskirts of Huizhou, where the impact of poisoning could more easily be contained. Wu was Fu's colleague, and she had injured her arm on the job in addition to suffering from cadmium exposure.

To serve the visual purposes of a documentary, I had to consider the setting of the interviews so that they would communicate to audiences more of the women's experiences. Audiences would be easily distracted or bored if the visual setting was not compelling or interesting. The contrasting settings also evoked memories that provided an emotional and visceral response to interviewee questions.

I conducted the interviews in Mandarin, a language I have spoken since I was four, but it is not my native language. The women whom I interviewed were gracious and incredibly patient as we navigated the language barrier.<sup>8</sup>

When I met the workers, they were using as many avenues as possible to seek justice. Fu and other workers initiated work stoppages, production slowdowns, and petitions to pressure GP Batteries to resolve the cadmium poisoning. As a result, they were able to win small victories, such as having the factory provide yearly blood testing of cadmium, with the company paying the costs of workers' travel expenses to and from the tests; some of them returned to the city of Huizhou from their rural villages. In Wu's interview, she referred to the medical tests she paid for, which posed considerable financial burden. Although GP's concession to provide for yearly blood testing was a win, every step forward seemed to coincide with a step back. The workers grew to distrust the tests they had fought so hard for. Lawsuits were also slowly making their

way through the Chinese court system. The central Chinese media had covered the women's plight, but I had also heard of intimidation against the journalist who initially covered the story. Several protests had taken place on the steps of city hall, and workers had also occupied government buildings. Still, their cases seemed to drag.

I met the workers several times in the hotel. Sometimes the ring of one of the workers' cellphones interrupted our interviews. I grew accustomed to this as the women I interviewed commonly fielded questions from other workers or had to tend to family duties. I was lucky to not be discovered while there. During a lunch break at the hotel, Fu received a phone call from a worker who had been detained by the police. The worker was supposed to meet an American journalist in Guangzhou, which is an hour-and-a-half bus ride from Huizhou. When the worker arrived at the hotel, she was immediately detained by the police. After they heard the news, Min and Fu whispered in fast Chinese to each other. "An American journalist...could they mean you?" Fu asks, pointing to me. Then answering her own question she quickly replies, "No, but she said *American* journalist. You look Chinese." I left Huizhou later that night as an extra precaution.

Min and Fu would tell me they had nightmares of being assassinated, sometimes at gunpoint, sometimes by being hit by a car. The danger level was hard to assess when I was filming there. I felt pressure to act carefully in order not to expose the workers. Dealing with the sensitivity of labor issues in China was like living in a modern police state. The collusion between the local government and the hospital, tapped phones, and a jailed worker were the everyday realities experienced by the GP women struggling to have their voices heard. Even in Fu's interview, her nonchalant description of walking out of the factory did not reflect the depth of the courageous and defiant act this was. In another interview, Min said, "Sometimes I'm very scared, but sometimes I'm not. It's strange. But you can't act afraid."

"Our symptoms are too serious, and we'll continue on," says Fu, and their multiyear campaign has shown their indomitable spirit. I felt privileged to have captured a portion of their experience. Their personal health crisis, as well as the general social, political, and environmental health crisis generated as part of rapid changes in China's economic development, was a difficult story to capture given the sensitivity of labor issues in China. However, I felt that several factors eased the process.

First, I received an introduction from a trusted source. Workers were open to sharing their story with me because I was introduced by someone they trusted. May Wong from Globalization Monitor has been supporting the GP workers' campaign by raising awareness in Hong Kong, where GP is headquartered. The workers had known May for several years. She also helped me by providing background information about the campaign such as the timeline of events and information about cadmium poisoning so that I could be better prepared before the interviews with workers.



Working with an NGO was also helpful. Through her work with Globalization Monitor, May's in-depth knowledge of the landscape of labor issues in China also helped me prepare for shooting and interviewing. She also connected me with other contacts such as Peter Orris, who is the director of its Occupational Health Service Institute and the Global Toxics Policy Program at University of Illinois School of Public Health. I would also call to check in with May about the progress of the interviews or ask clarifying questions. Generally, it was helpful to have her and the NGO's support not only for background information and references but for the emotional support of being close to a crisis situation. The scrutiny the workers experienced was stressful, and it was helpful to talk to someone who was familiar with handling it.

Being truthful about the power dynamics of an outsider's going to China to collect and shape their stories was also very important to me. I believe grappling with the uncomfortable power dynamics and being transparent with the workers about this helped me gain their trust. I wrestled with an unpleasant truth in that doing this oral history project, especially the documentary film component, put them at more risk than it did me. The consequences of participating in this project were high for the workers, and I aimed to ensure their safety. The trust we developed shows in the range and content of the deeply personal experiences they shared.

Conducting appropriate research and preparation ahead of time were crucial. The background research helped me think about backup plans if a worst-case scenario took place. I interviewed other filmmakers who had shot in China. From their advice, I decided to take a small camera with a separate input for the microphone so that I could still get clean audio, even though the small camera compromised the video quality. I also took classes on Chinese history, and read the daily news about happenings in China in order to familiarize myself with cultural and social references. This helped me get a fuller story and also be able to connect people's daily lives with larger social and economic trends as the interviews took place.

Interviewing in several locations allowed varying stories to surface. Especially in the rural areas, away from the stress and pressures of the city and local city government, the interviews that took place felt freer. The hotel was not an ideal location (I asked to shoot all the workers in their homes, but they did not feel comfortable doing so), but it was the only place where the interviews could have been done.

Thanks to the women's agitation, GP Batteries stopped producing nickel-cadmium batteries. However, in one of the my last interviews with Min and Fu in the hotel room, they showed me documents indicating that cadmium battery production had been subcontracted to other factories, meaning production continued but not in factories owned directly by GP Batteries. This meant nickel-cadmium batteries were still in production, and I wondered about their

working conditions and whether the new workers, like the GP workers, were ever told about cadmium's toxicity.

Given the restrictions in China in relation to political expression and the sensitivity of labor issues, the GP women's stories of resistance, courage, and consciousness building could easily have been suppressed. Conducting oral history and filmmaking during their crisis allowed their incredible tenacity to be captured and shared. Their stories are not lost, erased, or censored but can be used to combat stereotypes and bring forth the profound notion that women workers in China are human and whole.

The worker who was detained by police had met with Jane Spencer, a reporter with the *Wall Street Journal*. Her article "Toxic Factories Take Toll on China's Labor Force" landed on the front page.<sup>9</sup> The article pointed out that, "workers making goods for American consumers have long borne the brunt of a global manufacturing system that puts cost cutting ahead of safety. The search for cheaper production means dirty industries are migrating to countries with few worker protections and lenient regulatory environments." The exposé led major toy retailers Toys "R" Us and Mattel to drop the use of nickel-cadmium batteries from their products. Globalization Monitor, the NGO in Hong Kong, continued to support the workers' campaign by organizing protests at the GP Batteries headquarters in Hong Kong.

In May 2010, I completed the documentary *Red Dust*, which screened at some fifteen film festivals around the world and continues to be used in classrooms in colleges and universities around the United States. The workers continued with their struggle for justice. Finally in September 2010, six years after the women learned of cadmium poisoning, 262 workers with excessive cadmium levels received more than 6 million yuan in total compensation, a testament to their courage and persistence. Through this oral history project, the voices of Chinese factory workers poisoned by cadmium would not face the silencing they may experience in China or American mainstream media but may continue to be heard.

More information about the GP workers' campaign can be found at Globalization Monitor's website, [www.globalmon.org.hk](http://www.globalmon.org.hk). Information about the documentary film *Red Dust* can be found at [www.reddustdocumentary.org](http://www.reddustdocumentary.org).

## Notes

1. The "iron rice bowl" refers to the government's socialist policy of providing workers guaranteed employment with regular wages and benefits.
2. Approximately US\$31 to \$47.
3. BBC News, China profile, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country\\_profiles/1287798.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1287798.stm).
4. Interview with author, December 20, 2007, Chicago.
5. Kevin Brigden and David Santillo, "Environmental Heavy Metal Contamination Arising from the Xianjin and GP NiCd Battery Manufacturing Facilities, Huizhou, Guangdong,

- China, 2004," Greenpeace Research Laboratories, October 2004, [http://www.greenpeace.to/publications/NiCd\\_China\\_2004.pdf](http://www.greenpeace.to/publications/NiCd_China_2004.pdf).
6. China Real Time Report, blog of the *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/02/16/new-food-scare-some-cadmium-with-your-rice/>.
  7. Jerry Harris, Robin Munro, and Michael Zhang, "Defending Workers' Rights in China: An Interview with China Labour Bulletin," *Race & Class* 48, no. 3 (2007): 83–93.
  8. The excerpts were transcribed and translated by Steph Lee, Jessie Wang, and myself.
  9. Jane Spencer and Juliet Ye, "Toxic Factories Take Toll on China's Labor Force," *Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, January 15, 2008, A1.

# 10

## WOVEN TOGETHER

### Attachment to Place in the Aftermath of Disaster, Perspectives from Four Continents

Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullmann,  
Ingo Haltermann, and Franz Mauelshagen

**Oral histories by Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullmann, and Ingo Haltermann with residents of communities affected by natural disasters, New Orleans, Louisiana; Accra, Ghana; eastern Brandenburg, Germany; and Chaitén, Chile, 2009–10**

*Why do people return to live in communities that have been devastated by and remain vulnerable to disaster? The Memories of Disasters research group, which is part of the Climate and Culture program at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen, Germany, sought to understand this question. In our work with this group we explored how natural disasters are remembered in different cultures and whether the experience and memory of natural disasters inform future action. For this work we designed what we call the enviro-biographical interview, a qualitative interviewing strategy designed to generate a life story. Coming from the fields of history, geography, ethnology, and sociology, we each conducted from sixty to eighty interviews in the aftermath of natural disasters on four continents.<sup>1</sup>*

#### NEW ORLEANS, UNITED STATES

*Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Louisiana, on August 29, 2005. Breaches in the inadequately maintained levee system surrounding the city led to the flooding of almost 80 percent of the city.<sup>2</sup> New Orleans residents needed to make a decision regarding whether to return home or not. In December 2009 and January 2010, Eleonora Rohland conducted several interviews with New Orleans residents. Here, David Leblanc discusses coming back to his city after Hurricane Katrina.*

ROHLAND: Talk about your decision to return home.

LEBLANC: I've always loved New Orleans, it's my home, it's where I grew up; though I have friends who grew up here and had no problems moving away

to better economies in other cities. But I truly love New Orleans; I think it's like no other place, no other city around here, for sure.

*For Rob Goodwin, the pull back to the Crescent City was strong.*

GOODWIN: It's home. I mean, we don't know what the future's gonna bring for us, but I prefer being here as opposed to Indianapolis.

I had job offers after Katrina to go to other places. But whatever that nebulous thing that home is, this is it to me. And I'm willing to take a pay cut to stay here, I'm willing to live in a place where I have to watch where I drive my car because of killer potholes, I'm willing to live in a place where crime is a real issue. . . .

ROHLAND: So the crime issue and the fact that a natural disaster is likely to strike again do not prevent you from living here?

GOODWIN: Correct. I can't give you a good reason. It's this ephemeral thing whatever home is . . . this is my home. It is far from perfect. And yet, given similar opportunities, I would stay here rather than go someplace else. My professional colleagues think I am out of my mind. I made associate professor just before the storm. It'll be impossible, or next to impossible, for me to make full professor here. . . . So here it's a choice of home versus career. Surely the career choice would have me at UCLA or UC San Diego or back at Michigan. But they're not home.

*Eric Jameson experienced the struggle to stay attached to place after disaster.*

ROHLAND: Talk about living in New Orleans.

JAMESON: I just wish there were more job opportunities. That was affected, too, the job market and everything, you know. But we're slowly coming back, you know. But missing a hospital and things like that is pretty big. Yeah, I do, but sometimes you think about going to other places to find better jobs.

ROHLAND: Why do you stay?

JAMESON: Well, the overall economy, I mean you look on TV, everyone's having a hard time to find a job, so, might as well stay here. And, you know, there are just things that happen here, the Mardi Gras and things like that, so, I wouldn't want to have to come all the way from California to see that.

*For Lorna Breaux, the storm and aftermath strengthened her roots in the city.*

BREAUX: Before Katrina, I felt like a fish out of water in New Orleans. I was very uncomfortable here, always kind of complaining and "why can't we leave," and amazingly enough, after Katrina, I felt like there was nowhere else in the world that I really would fit in or belong. . . . Now that's starting to wear off a little bit and I'm starting to feel the desire to move away again, because, I don't know. . . . It's hard for me. I can't say that I like living in New Orleans. But I will just go back to what I said, because it's been one of the most profound

identity processes of my life in that Hurricane Katrina made me a part of the fabric of this city that I never was before, you know. We're all woven together now. I am New Orleans, New Orleans is me. I never had that before. Whether I like that or not [it] is a different story. It's been a very profound change in my life.

## ACCRA, GHANA

*Floods strike Ghana's capital city of Accra regularly. Most often the flooding is manageable, but in the recent past the city has experienced catastrophic flooding. In July 1991, for example, floodwaters affected two million people inhabiting the greater area of Accra. Four years later, floods had an impact on 700,000 people and killed 145 in a flash flood. Significant flood events also occurred in 2001, 2002, 2009, 2010, and 2011.<sup>3</sup> In October 2009 and February and March 2010, Ingo Haltermann interviewed Accra-area residents to explore the experience and memory of these disasters. Here, Anthony Koffour talks about the recurrence and effects of the floods.*

HALTERMANN: Did you often talk about this flooding in Alajo, when you were still there? Was it discussed amongst the people of Alajo?<sup>4</sup>

KOFFOUR: When it's close to the [rainy] season, people discuss it. I should put it that way. It comes to their minds and then... Ey! It's getting to the rainy season again. This kind of flood is likely. Last year or two years ago, or three, or the disaster that took place some years back might happen again. But that is when it's very close to the rainy season. Some people will discuss about it. But when it isn't close to, everybody is about doing his normal thing.

...Some people would like to leave where they are, but they can't because the money isn't there to move to another place. ... If it costs maybe 300 or 400 Ghana Cedis<sup>5</sup> to get a chamber, in Ghana here you should have it three years in advance payment. ... So even when you find these people haven't financial problems, it will be difficult. ... So, it's impossible for the person to move from this place. So, those who have money can seek better places.

... Even where I am, I have to move. But I am working things out to get money, buy a plot of land, then I move. Earlier on I told you I am using my present place as some kind of stepping stone. I work things out and then I move out finally from that place.

*John Miller reflected on the widespread displacement the floods cause.*

HALTERMANN: And do new people move into here?

MILLER: Those who come in are people from outside who have nowhere to stay. ... From the rural areas. So they are forced to stay there until they find a better place. So normally, people who stay over here, stay for a short time.

When they get a better place, they leave. But those who you can see staying here for a long time are people who—

CO-INTERPRETER: Who have not made it yet in life.

MILLER: Yes.<sup>6</sup>

*Al Hadji Gyan speaks here of why his region is so devastated by the destruction from floods.*

HALTERMANN: Do you think that Accra is more affected by disasters than other regions in Ghana?

AL HADJI GYAN: It is more affected, because of the many people in this region. This is the region, where you are supposed to put your money. . . . I don't have [another] place, unless far away. But where I have to [go], is [where] the big money is. That is why I just manage here.

*Matthew Goldwing sees the tyranny of unmet daily necessities as a primary focus of people.*

GOLDWING: There are other things that are bothering them. Because at the end of the day it's the all-day needs. How to take care of their children, you know, school fees. These are the number-one problems they are thinking about. So they don't pay much attention to this, because it comes once, maybe twice a year. But these are daily problems they are confronted [with].

*For Umar Graham Mensah, the ownership of property keeps individuals coming back.*

MENSAH: So it's attachment to property. . . . some go. Some have the money to go and rent a room somewhere else. They can make enough money to raise the rent in advance. Some can't make it so they continue to be here. But some, they have the money, but they won't go, because they don't want to lose the property here. He is claiming it for his children and their children and their children. As a legacy. He doesn't want to leave.

## BRANDENBURG, GERMANY

*Originating in the Czech Republic, the Odra flows through Poland and forms the eastern border of Germany over a length of 161.7 kilometers (about 100 miles).<sup>7</sup> The Odra River flood in the summer of 1997 was massive in both scale and duration.<sup>8</sup> Within Germany, the flooding affected primarily the Brandenburg region in eastern Germany. Maike Böcker interviewed residents of the Brandenburg region in October and November 2009. Below, interviewee M. Hüber speaks of his relationship to the landscape.*

BÖCKER: Do you like living here?

M. HÜBNER: Yes. Well, I have learned to love and esteem the Oderbruch. And '97 really helped that. Before, I wouldn't have seen it that way at all. Well, yeah,

I was like “if I live here or somewhere else? Here everything’s flat and mountains are much nicer.” But now I like it much more here.

BÖCKER: You do?

HÜBNER: Yes, that’s right, I don’t know why, one day it was just there.

*For M. Carl, the attachment to place evolves.*

BÖCKER: And do you like living in this place?

M. CARL: We somehow also cling to certain things, not just life but things, right?

I mean, if I’d been given a house, or if my parents had given me 200,000 Marks, back then, I wouldn’t have clung to it that much. Had I not built up everything by myself, had we not rebuilt this old barn so meticulously and with such care for detail, I wouldn’t have clung to it that much, for sure. It really always depends on the relationship one has to things. And since then, it has become even worse, even more intense, this connectedness. I remember exactly, the first time that we, that was after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that was in ’89 already, when we had our suitcases packed and we wanted to leave. We’d actually had the same thoughts as in ’97: “Oh my God, you’ve built up so much here, you’ve made such an effort, and your kids have a nice home and we like it here, do you really want to leave all of this behind?”

*O. Rausch recalls the many factors that inform the decision to return or leave.*

BÖCKER: Did you want to rebuild here?

O. RAUSCH: Nah, we actually didn’t want to rebuild here. . . . They said, that is, my husband said, “Look, we’re going to look for a nice, cozy corner to rebuild” and then we heard that we’d only get the money if we rebuild here.

. . . Or we could stay in the parish, keep the property and buy the other one too. That is, you’d still have the property now, nobody’d have bought it, even less after the flood and the other one you’d have had to buy as well. It wouldn’t have worked.

BÖCKER: Hmmm. But would you have wanted that or did you want to stay here, in your old place?

O. RAUSCH: Well, after the flood we wanted to leave because we were afraid. We wanted to get away at first. We drove around and looked at other properties. But, as I said earlier, it was also a financial question for us. We were still paying off our old house; I mean, it’s not like we’d bought the house and renovated it, so we had to continue paying it off.

*Here, O. Nauke remembers the fear that marked the period after and how it faded to a renewed enthusiasm to rebuild.*

BÖCKER: How did people react to state plans for resettlement?

O. NAUKE: In the beginning everybody was just afraid. . . . There was this fear which surfaced occasionally: Maybe it’s not going to be rebuilt. That was in the discussion, to make this a large plain, a floodplain. That was discussed



for maybe four or six weeks. . . . But when the money was there and the possibility was there to rebuild everything in a reasonable manner, nobody talked about the floodplain anymore. All that was said was “we’re gonna rebuild everything.”

## CHAITÉN, CHILE

*Chile is frequently struck by geological disaster.<sup>9</sup> The country is home to about two thousand volcanoes, of which five hundred are active.<sup>10</sup> In 2008, a volcanic eruption and a flood triggered by the eruption virtually destroyed Chaitén, a village located in North Patagonia.<sup>11</sup> The village is so remote that it can be reached only by sea through the Gulf of Corcovado or by the Gulf of Ancud. Gite Cullmann interviewed residents of Chaitén about their experience and memory of the disaster in November 2009.*

*Rosa Rodonda speaks of the dramatic impact of the catastrophe.*

CULLMANN: Before [the disaster], what was it like in Chaitén? . . . How did the town change?

RODONDA: Oh, I would say 90 to 95 percent of the village has changed. It was a very beautiful place. It was very touristy, very attractive with its natural beauty.

CULLMANN: With the sea.

RODONDA: Yes with the sea. All those squares, the parks, all the street vendors with their trays in those broad streets. For the cars. We didn’t have traffic lights or anything, but we didn’t need them either because there was so much space. . . . everybody knew each other, we all knew each other. We all respected and esteemed each other. Here [in Chaitén] burglary was nonexistent. We used to be able to just leave our things lying around and they were never stolen. The foreigner, the tourist or the visitor from outside was always astonished. They mostly came from Puerto Montt and there you cannot leave your things unattended. That’s the same elsewhere in Chile, you have to mind your things constantly. Because they just come and rob you. You have to be vigilant at all times. Here [in Chaitén] you don’t.

*After evacuation, Maria Silvina Ivarro struggled with life in her new home.*

CULLMANN: And life here [place of evacuation]? What is it like? Is it similar or totally different?

IVARRO: I find it totally different. If you have no money here [in the city], you don’t live. And in Chaitén, somehow you always managed; because here [in the city] you have to pay for everything. The wood, the gas and everything. In Chaitén we only bought the gas. And the wood we collected outside, on my dad’s property. It’s totally different. Here you just have to spend so much money. But there, it wasn’t like that, it was much better.

It was a totally different lifestyle. You could get by perfectly on 100 Luca per month. You could buy your stuff. And if you were lacking anything and your

money had run out in the middle of the month you went to a friend's supermarket and said, "Here, friend, I need this and that, could you give it to me?" "Sure, no problem." And you just gave them the money later, and that was it.

*Jorge Ricardo remarked on the alterations to the physical landscape as well.*

CULLMANN: Did the river have a different course?

RICARDO: Yes, it had a different course. A different course. As you can see, it now runs straight through the middle of the town. It separates the town into two parts. And where the river runs now, you can see the bridge there, but where it runs now is where my house used to be. The river runs right where my house used to be. Afterwards, after three months we returned. The government let us come back; they brought us here with navy ships and we came here and could find nothing at all. But in all this muck we found some things that belonged to my son. An instrument. Yes, one instrument and a toy. That was all we could find, nothing more. And with this we returned to Puerto Montt [place of evacuation]. Only with this. But here, we are back here [in Chaitén] again. My family will return, too, at the end of the month, at the end of the year. That's when school ends for several of my children and then they will come here so we can have some healing.

### Commentary

Historically, natural disasters have had the power to threaten the existence of local societies through the sometimes back-to-back destruction of staple crops.<sup>12</sup> Industrialized societies, however, are usually considered more resilient and better prepared for natural hazards and disasters. Vulnerability in regard to such extreme events has until recently been perceived primarily as a problem of less industrially developed countries.<sup>13</sup> In recent memory, global incidents of catastrophe such as the earthquake, tsunami, and consequent nuclear disaster of Fukushima in Japan on March 11, 2011, and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in August 2005 made it clear that Western-style industrialized societies are not exempt from extreme impacts through natural disasters *qua* their advanced technologies.

An increasing world population often concentrated in environmentally vulnerable urban areas as well as recent projections by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of increasing frequency and severity of natural extreme events caused by current and future global warming add urgency to questions about the impact of such disruptive events on societies across the globe.<sup>14</sup> In the context of interdisciplinary disaster studies in general, and in the context of crisis, disasters, and trauma in particular, the question of why people feel the urge to return to or stay in the place of disaster—potentially holding traumatizing memories for them and at risk of recurrence—is surprising and requires explanation.

In order to explore this question subsumed under the concept of attachment to place, the excerpts from fieldwork above match interview material from the four case studies conducted by the Memories of Disasters project group. For our transdisciplinary and cross-cultural undertaking we designed the enviro-biographical interview (EBI), which can be described as a specific type of biographical interview used by social scientists and historians as a method to generate life stories.<sup>15</sup> The basic idea behind biographical interviews is simply to let the interviewee tell her or his life story, either in its entirety or focused on a stage or event relevant to the subject of inquiry, for example, the experience of unemployment, war, or a disaster. The interviewer should interfere as little as possible with the interviewee's own narration and thus reduce the danger of projecting theoretical or methodological assumptions. Only after the narrative part of the interview is over may the interviewer ask further questions. From this interview technique, collections of narrative texts emerge that reflect social processes of developing and changing biographical identities. Of course, narrative interviews are anything but authentic recollections of historical events or individual experiences. Rather, they are highly contextual, with the interviewee and the interviewer interacting in a specific setting. Analyses of the interview material generated in this interaction must reflect this situation and the fact that the interviewee is likely to accommodate his or her story to what they perceive is expected of him or her.<sup>16</sup>

The linguistic diversity of our interview material and the consequent necessity to translate it into a common language for comparison forced us to neglect dialects or paralinguistic features, such as tone of voice or affect. Documentation of such features would have been important had we chosen deep hermeneutics as our method of evaluation. After transcribing and translating the interview material, the research group developed a common coding system for the comparison of data processed with the interview software MAXqda. Individual coding categories emerged from a comparative reading of the interviews and from the definition of rules that would guarantee homogeneous codes. Thus our coding "tree" was strongly informed by the interview material. This bottom-up process helped in avoiding presuppositions about the narratives' inherent structure or a theoretical overlay that would ultimately have no connection to the actual interview material.<sup>17</sup>

So far, the focus of biographical research in sociology and history has not been on people's experiences with the natural environment and their memories of these experiences. In social theory, the environment or "nature" is apparently perceived as beyond society, which is defined as the totality of relations between individuals or the realm of human self-organization. Most theories of society are still more or less of the Durkheimian type in that they favor explaining or interpreting social facts alone over considering forces other than, or external to, society. Countering these theories, we argue that people's social

relationships are directly or indirectly framed by their relationship with the natural environment, for example, through the use of natural resources or humans' emotional relationship with landscapes. Sociocultural relations, on the other hand, also frame people's relationship with the environment. Rather than being static, this relationship is of a highly dynamic nature. For an understanding of these dynamics, disasters are a particularly relevant field of study that has involved sociologists, anthropologists, and, more recently, historians. Occurring "at the intersection of nature and culture," disasters illustrate "the mutuality of each in the constitution of the other."<sup>18</sup> They are, as anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith has aptly put it, "totalizing events. As they unfold, all dimensions of a social structural formation and the totality of its relations with the environment may become involved, affected and focused, expressing consistency and inconsistency, coherence and contradiction, cooperation and conflict, hegemony and resistance, expressed through the operation of physical, biological and social systems and their interaction among populations, groups, institutions and practices."<sup>19</sup> This totality is also reflected in biographical narratives of disasters. Our interviews have shown how, in multiple forms, environmental factors are included and socialized in the life story narratives. To emphasize the new dimension of this research, we coined the term *enviro-biographical interview*.

Although our research project was not specifically designed to research attachment to place alone, we did ask our interviewees to tell us their (life) story in their respective place of residence (at the time of disaster), thus initiating the narrative part of the interview. Our interview material reveals how much place is constructed as a combination of both social and environmental relations meaningful to an individual or a group. Disasters are serious disturbances of these constructions, thus directly affecting autobiographical identities connected to place. Through disasters, people became the subjects of evacuation (either on their own initiative or by civil authorities), displacement, and internal (emotional) or external (economic) pressure to return. Hence these aspects also emerged as significant experiences in the interviews. Apart from their significance for oral history, trauma, and memory studies, the results of our research are also meaningful in the context of climate change impact research as well as migration studies concerned with migration triggered by disaster.

The general concept of attachment to place began to be formed and studied in the late 1950s and early 1960s by phenomenologists such as Gaston Bachelard and Mircea Eliade.<sup>20</sup> Research developed primarily in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology with a strong focus on the individual, ultimately extending to include family as well as group use of space.<sup>21</sup> Research in a variety of disciplines into attachment to place in the aftermath of natural disasters is of a more recent nature, however, and seems to have experienced a take-off after the "record year of disasters" in 2005.<sup>22</sup>

The interdisciplinary literature on attachment to place often uses not only “place” but a variety of sometimes vaguely defined terms for the actual entity under scrutiny, namely, the geographical space humans (or groups of humans) inhabit in particular periods of time. Thus “landscape,” “space,” “region,” and “place” are all in use and overlap in some respects, with each describing, at their core, a different facet of the human-environment interaction they mean to capture.<sup>23</sup> For the purposes of the research presented here, we follow geographer Edward Relph’s definition of *place*, which holds that it is “constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations. Place experiences are necessarily time-deepened and memory-qualified.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, the important components we would like to filter from and underline in this definition of place are not just its “real world” but also its imagined shape, the interaction of humans with their place, the memories that arise from such interactions and therefore also the temporal aspect of the duration of those interactions.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, conflict ensued over the rebuilding of the city of New Orleans. The Republican speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, publicly stated as early as September 1, 2005, that “it [made] no sense to spend billions of dollars to rebuild a city that’s seven feet under sea level.”<sup>25</sup> Obviously, such a comment did not sit well with New Orleans’s evacuees who were dispersed all over the country and anxiously watching the news coverage of the still-unfolding flood disaster in their city. Mayor Ray Nagin’s Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which promoted a plan worked out by the Urban Land Institute, did not improve the general atmosphere of the debate. The plan became known as the “green dot plan” and suggested shrinking New Orleans’s footprint by converting the lowest-lying and most vulnerable areas of the city into green space. This suggestion caused further outcry among the citizens and in particular among the affected property owners.<sup>26</sup> It fueled an unprecedented process of civic engagement in the rebuilding of the city, ultimately opening out into the Unified New Orleans Plan and the Master Plan for the rebuilding of the city.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the sustainable rebuilding of a city has to take into account planning and finances after a large-scale disaster. However, “sustainability” should also involve social and cultural considerations. It is therefore crucial for disaster research, relevant political institutions, and possibly the insurance industry to discover why individuals live in or return to a place threatened by recurring natural hazards. Why do people put up with a remarkably reduced quality of life, a faltering local economy, and possibly the loss of their businesses or workplaces, after a disaster? Which are the motivating factors for this attachment to place?

In winter 2010, researcher Eleonora Rohland asked interviewees whether they liked living in New Orleans and whether the experience of Katrina had changed their mind about returning. The response was overwhelmingly positive and emotional, regardless of whether interviewees had stayed in the city during

the storm or evacuated; whether they were born in the city or had just recently moved there. The motivation most often mentioned by interviewees was their view of New Orleans as a culturally unique city with a diverse population. They held the city as a place that always had something to celebrate, and interviewees could not imagine “living anywhere else in the world.”

The interview excerpt with David Leblanc, a twenty-nine-year-old New Orleans metro native and resident of the Lakeview neighborhood, shows that, even in the face of reduced economic opportunity, people are prepared to stay in an environmentally vulnerable place, putting emotional values first.<sup>28</sup> Rob Goodwin, a physician at Tulane hospital and a New Orleanian by choice, argued along a similar line when asked whether he liked living in New Orleans.

However, several interviewees who were in their twenties also mentioned the disruption of New Orleans’s economy (concomitant with the ongoing effects of the economic crisis of 2008) as a problem that made them think of alternatives. The interview excerpt of Eric Jameson, a New Orleans native in his mid-twenties, working as an attorney at New Orleans City Hall at the time of our interview, stands as an example for this group.

For another group of New Orleans citizens, the experience of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath had the paradoxical effect of making them feel more connected with the city, rather than discouraging them or scaring them off, as in the exemplary case of thirty-seven-year-old Lorna Breaux, who was born in New Orleans but raised in California. Lorna’s story is particularly interesting, since she stated that she did not really like living in New Orleans but still felt deeply connected to the city through her personal disaster experience.

This sense of strengthened attachment to the city is collectively expressed by an unprecedented memory culture that has evolved since Hurricane Katrina. It has taken shape in the form of monuments, such as Memorial Park at the top of Canal Street; art, such as the traveling exhibition *Art in Public Places*; or *lieux de mémoire*,<sup>29</sup> such as the “Katrina Crosses,”<sup>30</sup> which some residents made permanent on their house walls with fresh paint or iron, and even in the form of Katrina tattoos as a way of showing that the disaster had literally gone under their skin.<sup>31</sup>

The city of Accra, Ghana, is wedged between the Akwapim Mountains and the Gulf of Guinea and—not unlike New Orleans—partly lies only a few meters above and in some areas even below sea level. The core of Accra’s drainage infrastructure largely dates back to early colonial times or to the era of the first independent republic, 1957 to 1966, when the city was inhabited by a tenth of its present population of three to four million. Every year, Accra receives 120,000 migrants, causing competition of ever more people for dwindling space.<sup>32</sup> Hence, even land that is hardly suitable for settlement, such as floodplains, garbage dumps, or traffic space, acquires market value. It becomes a dead end for those who cannot afford to move to a place with organized traffic, supply, and waste disposal systems. To the present, the most

vulnerable segment of the population forced to live under such precarious conditions has risen to 60 percent.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the three other case studies presented in this chapter, Accra was not affected by a single disaster but was, and is, confronted with a multitude of floods of a varying scale. The question as to which of them was the most disastrous, or whether they can actually be reasonably called “disasters,” is difficult to answer conclusively, since floods—regardless of their magnitude—form part of Accra’s everyday life and are hardly perceived as singular, catastrophic events. In contrast to Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans, those recurring floods are rarely the cause for ruptured individual biographies, let alone caesurae in the collective consciousness of Accra’s inhabitants. Therefore, when prompted to speak about the worst disaster they had ever experienced, people invariably stated there was not merely one but a whole chain of events. Of forty interviewees, only one person explicitly mentioned having become the victim of one *single* flood disaster, and only three people could remember a time before there were floods. Clearly, the city’s inhabitants became accustomed to the constant threat of inundation, thus lowering the readiness to prepare for those extreme events—including considering a change of location.<sup>34</sup> On a collective level, this habituation prevented the development of a risk discourse. This problem is illustrated by the reply Anthony Koffour, a fifty-five-year-old librarian and pastor from Kotobabi Down,<sup>35</sup> made to the question of whether the last experienced disaster was still the subject of talk.

The often-described function of disasters as catalytic events, or as the beginning of a new era, is largely absent in Accra. For the particular case of Ghana’s capital, this observation raises the question as to whether Accra’s inhabitants are—despite large-scale loss in the wake of those annual inundations—actually dealing with disasters in the sense of singular, rapid-onset events.

Thus the constant search for a better place characterizes the relationship of Accra’s citizens to their hometown. People often perceive their present accommodation merely as transitory, knowing—at least in part—about its hazardousness. Inhabitants often have no alternative to living in such areas of the city despite the inherent risk. This situation is mirrored in the answer from John Miller, a real estate manager and former inhabitant of Accra’s New Town neighborhood, to the question of which people moved to such dangerous places.

However, individual, familial, and societal contexts influence the perceptions of what is deemed a viable alternative place for settlement, which risks seem acceptable, or at which point in time moving to another place becomes feasible. Al Hadji Gyan, a teacher in his midforties and a homeowner in Alajo, explained this by saying that Accra was where one had to be in order to earn a decent living. Alternatives could only be found far away and thus were not considered an option.

Often, the competing risks of everyday life blank out specific environmental risks from people’s awareness so that they are just accepted as a fact, as

Matthew Goldwing, a thirty-four-year-old pastor from the Kotobabi neighborhood, explained. The problems of daily life, raising children, paying for their education, etc., by far outweighed considerations of flood risk in people's consciousness.

An additional reason mentioned by interviewees for settling in high-risk areas is the want for property, which is still one of the most promising avenues to social and material ascent. Not only does ownership save the often horrendous rents but also property can be bequeathed to children and possibly secure a better future for them. Thirty-nine-year-old journalist Umar Graham Mensah, from Kasoa, describes this nexus by literally stating that this reason for staying in flood-prone areas was "attachment to property." Those of Accra's citizens who had the means clung to their piece of land in order to pass it on to the following generations.

The pattern described by Umar Graham Mensah is a common one, and for the citizens it is another factor that makes settling in hazardous areas seem inevitable. Furthermore, the special practice of Accra's landlords demanding several months' (sometimes even several years') rent in advance makes moving from one place to another virtually impossible for many flood-affected residents, as Koffour explained. Because of the impossibility of affording rental payments up to four years in advance, people were often forced to stay in one place. Concerning his own situation, Koffour said he was considering it a temporary arrangement, a "stepping stone" to a better place.

It is important to remark preliminarily, that, although researchers carried out the New Orleans and Accra case studies within a single city and a metropolitan area respectively, Maike Böcker, the interviewer for the German case study, did fieldwork in several towns across the flood-affected region. Levees<sup>36</sup> surround the area of study. The district lies largely below sea level and stretches from the Ziltendorfer lowlands across Frankfurt/Odra to the Oderbruch.<sup>37</sup> Annual winter as well as summer floods are characteristic of the region and hence catastrophic flooding is not uncommon.<sup>38</sup> The last inundation before the centennial flood of 1997 occurred in 1947, when a severe winter flood strongly affected the residents of the area. The extreme effects and scale of the 1997 flood were due to changes in the settlement structure throughout the region. Similar to many regions in the United States and elsewhere in the world, levee-building activities throughout the last century drastically reduced natural floodplains along the Odra and encouraged the settlement of the latter. Hence these areas are highly flood-prone, and the approximately thirty-four thousand inhabitants are very vulnerable indeed.<sup>39</sup>

In early July 1997, extreme and long-lasting rainfall occurred in the Polish and Czech mountain regions leading to widespread flooding in the Czech Republic and Poland. A further spell of strong precipitation in the upper catchment basin of the Odra caused another wave of floodwaters. In addition, rain soaked and thus weakened the levees, causing hundreds of small-scale leaks and two large



levee breaks south of Frankfurt/Odra. The Ziltendorfer lowlands, comprising about 29 km<sup>2</sup> (about 18 square miles), were thus completely flooded, with the water level reaching 3 meters (9.8 feet). Although large parts of the area had to be evacuated by force, the spread of floodwaters into additional areas was prevented by the around-the-clock assignment of the army (Bundeswehr), the German Red Cross, several fire brigades, the Technisches Hilfswerk, and other local and national emergency services. Ironically, on the German side of the Odra River, the pressure on the levees was reduced by the large-scale flooding of Poland. In contrast to Poland and the Czech Republic, with fifty-six and forty-nine casualties respectively, Germany had no deaths to report.<sup>40</sup> At the beginning of August, people were allowed back into their homes insofar as those were still habitable. The total financial loss caused by the flood reached 648 million German Marks (equivalent to about US\$457 million).

At the time of the fall 2009 research interviews, the signs of the inundation, twelve years past, had largely vanished. Residents of the region related that very few people had left after the flood and that, on the contrary, new neighbors had moved in. Initially, this may seem surprising, yet it raises the question of what moved people to return to such a flood-prone place after an extreme event like the 1997 Odra flood. Which factors had weighed most in the decision-making process?

Looking at the German interview sample, we found people expressing a strong and emotional attachment to place. They told their family history, which had unfolded in the region over generations, and stated they felt it was their home, or *heimat*, and it therefore gave them a feeling of security and belonging. Their *heimat* was intertwined with their personal history so much that they did not feel able to leave. However, not only long-established residents but also newcomers felt a strong emotional bond that made them stay in the area. Interestingly, and similar to New Orleans, the interview material shows that the experience of the flood even strengthened people's emotional ties to their dwelling place. One example is fifty-seven-year-old Mr. Hübner, an automobile mechanic from the Oderbruch who described how the flood changed his relative indifference toward his surroundings to a new level of high esteem for the region.

Interviewees frequently praised the beauty of the landscape, which was highlighted as a strong motivating factor for their choice of residence. Apart from the feeling of belonging and affection for a place, memories of building up one's own existence emerged as an important factor for remaining in or returning to that particular place. This biographical aspect emerges clearly from the statement from Ms. Carl, an Oderbruchian teacher in her late forties, about lovingly rebuilding and renovating the family's old farmhouse. The strong connection she voiced included not only the geographical situation as such but also her work, life, and memories crystallized in her property or place of residence. In addition, the local social fabric kept people in the Odra area. Relatives and

friends as well as the places where people meet and interact formed frameworks of familiarity that flood-affected residents wanted to regain and preserve.

Apart from emotional, social, and spatial factors that motivate flood victims to return to their towns and villages and to rebuild their homes, interviewees often mentioned economic aspects. Those who wanted to leave the region after the flood for fear of repetition of the disaster saw themselves bound by their economic situation, such as forty-six-year-old commercial employee Ms. Rausch from the Ziltendorfer Lowlands. In the interview she explained the difficulty of selling property in the flood zone and how the need to pay off the mortgage on their old house kept them in the risk area.

Other interviewees who wanted to leave the area explained that they either could not afford an equivalent, alternative property or that the substitute offered by city authorities did not meet their standards. In addition, they voiced the concern that, because of the increased flood risk, their former property could be sold only beneath its actual value. Hence, for the prevention of future disasters, the availability of financial resources that would allow the residents of the hazardous area to seek alternative locations could play a crucial role.

Furthermore, the decision to remain in the region was to no small amount influenced by the political handling of the emergency situation and the general mood among the inhabitants of the area. Popular sentiment in the immediate aftermath of the flood was strongly in favor of rebuilding and quickly pushed aside considerations of resettling as an effective way of flood protection. Mr. Nauke, a retired engineer from the Ziltendorfer Lowlands, described this change in the public debate about resettlement, which occurred in a similar way in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

The political decision against the creation of a floodplain to replace human settlements favored flood victims' remaining and returning to this inherently flood-prone area. The minister for the environment, Matthias Platzeck, and the premier of the State of Brandenburg, Manfred Stolpe, both objected to the re-naturation of the flooded area, arguing that the residents' efforts had been too great to abandon the land now.<sup>41</sup> Thus the restoration and rebuilding of the flooded areas became a political issue.

Public sentiment and the political discourse about the legitimacy of rebuilding one's destroyed home, as well as generous donations and insurance money, pushed the rebuilding process forward. With regard to the future risk of the area, many affected residents seemed to presume that such an extreme event would not be repeated in the near future. Others saw themselves protected by a variety of engineering measures such as raising their houses or the improvement of the local levee system.

For flood-affected residents, emotional, social, spatial, and economic factors were crucial in their decisions to remain in or return to the hazardous area. Interestingly, the flood event, often described in terms of a disaster, did not lead to skepticism but rather to a stronger bonding to place. Apart from

this, it becomes apparent that the overall societal setting as well as the political agenda contributed to the rebuilding of the destroyed homes in the same area. Ultimately, flood victims also rebuilt their homes in the same area simply because it was possible or because it was *made* possible.

In general, Chile is a disaster-experienced country often hit by marine quakes and earthquakes owing to its geographical location in a seismically active area.<sup>42</sup>

On May 2, 2008, a volcanic eruption and resulting flood devastated the remote village of Chaitén, Chile. Before the volcanic eruption, the village in North Patagonia was the provincial capital of the region of Palena and counted about forty-five hundred inhabitants. The explosive eruption caused an ash cloud and pyroclastic flow that reached the village during the night of May 2–3. Chaitén was evacuated by force, and the residents were put on ships, which brought them across the surrounding gulfs to a number of villages and the city of Puerto Montt.

The volcanic fallout accumulated in the bed of Río Blanco, a river whose natural flow had been diverted long ago, and caused a flood that, according to the experts, destroyed more than 60 percent of the village.<sup>43</sup> The flood swallowed whole houses and streets as a mixture of water and volcanic ash submerged the village. The Río Blanco regained its original river bed and thus divided Chaitén in two parts. In many places the ground rose about 2 meters (6.5 feet) and, in an almost Pompeian manner, buried the existing structures. The flooding of the village occurred after a mandatory evacuation. Only a few soldiers and policemen along with some other members of the state's emergency services remained in Chaitén at the time of the inundation. Researcher Gitte Cullmann conducted interviews with the disaster victims eighteen months after the volcanic eruption and flood, at a time when the village had not yet been officially reopened for the inhabitants. Despite this, about a hundred residents had returned to live in Chaitén. The rest of the residents remained dispersed over the surrounding villages and Puerto Montt, a city with about 180,000 inhabitants that had recently experienced an increase in the poverty rates because of the decline of its fishing industry.

As in the previous case studies, the return, or desire to return, to the heavily damaged and hazardous area on the part of disaster victims requires explanation. Particularly, considering that large components of the village's infrastructure were totally destroyed, services such as water and electricity had not been restored even eighteen months after the disaster, the food supply was very limited, and agriculture was prevented by the volcanic ash. In addition, schools, kindergartens, and jobs were almost nonexistent. What were the residents' reasons to return to such a dysfunctional place? Several patterns of evidence emerged from the interview material.

One recurring aspect in the interviews was that a subjective sense of safety held high importance. Interviewees expressed this feeling by juxtaposing "safe" Chaitén with the city of Puerto Montt, the—often involuntary—refuge for many

after the eruption and flood. The statement by Rosa Rodonda, a cafeteria owner in her early fifties and a native of Chaitén, is exemplary for this pattern. This kind of statement mirrors the assessment of competing risks by the interviewees. Crime, lack of freedom, and concern about the safety of their children in the city were strong enough factors to decide in favor of returning to or remaining in Chaitén. The volcano and the experienced disaster were therefore only one aspect among many they perceived as a threat in their everyday lives, and they often weighed less than the dangers interviewees connected with the city.

Apart from personal risk assessments, emotional ties were an important factor in people's attachment to the village. Many interviewees spoke about Chaitén as the ideal place of residence with a high quality of living. The latter was enhanced by economic aspects that were, again, contrasted with the city: whereas in Puerto Montt, or other evacuation sites, money was the basis for citizens' livelihoods, Chaitén had offered the possibility of an autarkic life. Maria Silvina Ivarro, a forty-six-year-old housewife who had been displaced to Dalcahue and had not returned to Chaitén yet for lack of a school for her children, said in relation to this aspect that the city was a difficult place to live in for the high cost of everything. In her perception, her lifestyle in Chaitén was easier, even with little money, and the place was "just beautiful."

Ivarro's answer is representative of many of the interviewee responses and forms a further pattern of reasoning in favor of a return to the hazardous area. The role of money was apparently less pronounced in Chaitén than in the urban areas of Chile. The confrontation with a different value system occasioned by the displacement of Chaitén's inhabitants in the wake of the disaster presented a personal challenge. The urban value system was criticized ardently by a large number of the interviewees and became an important reason for returning to the village.

In contrast to the Odra case study, in the Chilean case participants had not returned to their everyday lives yet at the time of their interviews in fall 2009.<sup>44</sup> Residents perceived returning to the place of disaster as a step in the recovery of normality and a part of the process of coming to terms with the disaster experience and its aftermath. Returning to the area was thus seen as a form of healing, as expressed by forty-six-year-old Chaitén native Jorge Ricardo, a priest who became a logistics employee in the aftermath of the disaster.

To summarize, three important argumentation patterns in favor of returning to a hazardous area emerged from the interview material, namely, a subjective sense of safety, the rejection of expensive city life and the connected central role of money, and the healing potential of the residents' original location. All three factors neglect the threat presented by the proximity to the volcano and clearly show that the return to their former place of residence was paralleled in the interviewees' perception with restoring normality.

The most basic and important factors that emerge from our journeys into disaster-affected areas on four continents are time and, in connection with the

issue of attachment to place, not surprisingly, space. Those two concepts also underlie Relp's definition of *place* presented above. The temporal aspect in relation to our case studies is twofold and straightforward. It concerns the return frequency of disasters on the one hand, and the time lag between the extreme event(s) and the interviews on the other hand.

The case study of Accra, Ghana, touched on the fact that the citizens perceived the annually recurring floods differently than did the residents in the other three case studies with longer return periods between events. In the Accra case, the floods were, for most of the year, kept at the margin of people's consciousness, while everyday concerns were of a much higher importance. Flood risk in Accra is so ubiquitous as to come to be seen as an environmental fact, to such an extent that the application of the term *disaster* to the Accra case had to be questioned. The nexus between the return frequency of extreme events and people's consequent risk perception is crucial for the resilience or vulnerability of a society and may also affect people's attachment to place.<sup>45</sup>

The importance of the second temporal aspect, the lapse of time between the disastrous event and the interviews, may not have been highlighted enough throughout the case studies. It provides important information, however, about the depth or persistence of the emotional imprint a disaster experience leaves with the affected individuals. In other words, our interviewees were, at the time of conducting the interviews, at different stages of emotionally processing their respective disaster experiences. This aspect should be borne in mind, as it may provide additional insight.

The spatial aspect mentioned above is more complex, however, since it concerns the multidimensional human interaction with the environment and therefore with place. As we have seen from the disaster experiences from four continents, humans relate to their places of residence in a variety of ways



Newly built houses in a nonflood situation at the Sakumo Lagoon in Accra, Ghana, illustrate how far people's acceptance of environmental risks goes when the opportunity for property ownership arises. *Photograph by Ingo Haltermann.*

connected to various spheres of human life, including, but not limited to, the economy, politics, culture, and social relations.

Thus, in all four case studies interviewees mentioned economic considerations as “push” factors for returning to or remaining in a place. Looking more closely, we can discern the shapes those considerations acquire on the local level. In Chaitén, Chile, for example, residents strongly felt the difference between their former low-cost, autarkic, communal life in the village, where money was not so important, and Puerto Montt, where they had been evacuated to and where the opposite was the case. The urge to return to their former way or place of living was clearly connected to material pressure, but also to the emotional value the inhabitants of Chaitén ascribed to this aspect of their lives.

In Accra, Ghana, on the other hand, economic considerations caused people to move into hazardous areas of the city in the first place. This is well exemplified in Al Hadji Gyan’s statement, “But where I have to [go], is [where] the big money is.” However, once arrived in the place of hope, the majority of the often financially weak newcomers were forced to live in environmentally risky, but affordable, areas. What is more, thanks to local rental practices, residents were bound to those precarious places for several years. Those who owned property in hazardous areas even saw themselves tied for life because of dynastic considerations. The economic aspect of the Accra research is distinctive from the Chaitén case study in that it sheds light on the vulnerability arising for a significant segment of the population from the nexus between financial weakness, the consequent inability to afford environmentally safe rental space or property, local rental and inheritance practices, and the social prestige connected to property owning.

Accrans had to stay in hazardous areas because they could not afford to move elsewhere; New Orleanians chose to stay or return to the city, in the face of adverse economic circumstances, because they *could*. The same may be said about the Odra region in Germany. Obviously, this has not least to do with those Western countries’ private and state-run insurance and emergency programs. Some further parallel postdisaster experiences emerge from the juxtaposition of New Orleans and the Odra region. In both cases, politicians discussed the option of land recultivation instead of rebuilding the destroyed places, causing an emotional stir and defiance among residents, ultimately strengthening people’s will to return to their cities. Interestingly, in both the German as well as the U.S. case, interviewees felt that the disaster experience had not raised doubts about the viability of their place of residence but had, on the contrary, strengthened their ties to it, making them feel ever more intertwined with it.

Chaitén’s citizens, viewing their return to the practically nonfunctioning remains of their village as part of their emotional healing process, emerge as a particularly telling case of attachment to place. This perception highlights what for outsiders may look like irrational behavior, while the residents’ own value systems overruled supposedly objective risk assessments. Emotional values such



One of many lost homes in the village of Chaitén, Chile, smothered by debris from the flood. After the eruption of the Chaitén volcano and the flood of the Río Blanco, destruction was everywhere and the village was disfigured. A majority of the houses were buried under volcanic fallout and the water of the river. People lost their village together with their houses. *Photograph by Gitte Cullmann.*

as “home” emerged as strong motivating factors for returning or staying in a place, in particular for the Odra region and New Orleans. In contrast, in the Accra case study, interviewees referred to their present places of residence as a stepping stone, revealing a rather more temporary connection to place. This is interesting in view of the different temporality of flood events as well as the dissimilar motivations for people to make Accra their home in the first place.

The residents of Chaitén, New Orleans, and the Odra region mentioned the beauty of their surrounding landscapes and the culture and social fabric of their respective places as strong motivating factors to stay there after disaster. New Orleanians, in particular, mentioned the culture and the great atmosphere of their city, created by the peculiar mix of people, as *the* factor that made them accept all kinds of hardship in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

It must be noted that the aspects described separately above are almost all entangled and permeate each other in all four cases. This pertains in particular to emotional values, since humans assign them to everything, material or immaterial. But how they are combined and weighed against environmental risk factors is specific to culture and its particular way of interacting with place, as we hope to have shown with these short glances into several postdisaster situations. Conclusively, it can be said that in all four cases, those emotionally

loaded “values-connected-to-place-clusters” overruled supposedly “rational” assessments of environmental risk. In light of the culturally and temporally specific aspects that influence attachment to place and which we described in our study, such risk assessments were and are apparently often made without consideration of the humans inhabiting those environments.

## Notes

1. Interviews were conducted in German (Odra case study, Germany, Maike Böcker), Spanish (Chaitén case study, Chile, Gitte Cullmann), and English (Accra case study, Ghana, Ingo Haltermann and New Orleans case study, United States, Eleonora Rohland). For methodological reasons, the entire interview material was originally translated into German. For the present chapter, interview excerpts for the German and Chilean case studies were then translated into English from German transcripts. For the United States and Ghana case studies, the excerpts were transcribed from the original English interviews. Interviewees' names in all four case studies are pseudonyms.
2. Barry D. Keim and Robert A. Muller, *Hurricanes of the Gulf of Mexico* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 31. Risk Management Solutions, *Flood Risk in New Orleans: Implications for Future Management and Insurability* (Newark, CA: Risk Management Solutions, 2006), 7. For a history of the New Orleans levee system, see Craig E. Colten, *Perilous Place, Powerful Storms: Hurricane Protection in Coastal Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).
3. Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), “EM-DAT. Emergency Database,” <http://www.emdat.be>.
4. Alajo is a suburb of Accra.
5. About \$250.
6. The interview was conducted in New Town; however, the interviewee at the time had moved to Kasoa, 30 kilometers outside Accra.
7. Landesumweltamt Brandenburg (LUA), *Hochwasserschutz in Brandenburg: Handbuch für die Hochwasserabwehr an Gewässern und Deichen im Land Brandenburg*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Landesumweltamt Brandenburg, 2003), 8.
8. Internationale Kommission zum Schutz der Oder gegen Verunreinigung (IKSO), *Odereinzugsgebiet: Das Hochwasser 1997* (Wrocław: KORAB, 1999), 15–16.
9. See Universität der Vereinten Nationen Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, Institut für Umwelt und menschliche Sicherheit, “WeltRisikoBericht 2011” (Berlin: Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, 2011). For a recent article on the challenge of climate change in Chile, see Gitte Cullmann, “Neue Wege für Chile: Modernisierung in Zeiten des Klimawandels,” *Berliner Debatte Initial* 21, no. 1 (2010): 47–51.
10. Servicio Nacional de Geología y Minería (SERNAGEOMIN), *Volcanes de Chile*, Santiago de Chile, [http://www.sernageomin.cl/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=176](http://www.sernageomin.cl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=176).
11. The village, as well as the volcano, are called Chaitén. The use of the name throughout this commentary refers to the village.
12. We use the term *natural disaster* (i.e., nature-induced extreme events) to differentiate the situations under scrutiny from technological (i.e., predominantly human-induced) disasters and violent conflicts or wars. We are aware however, and follow Oliver-Smith in his definition, that natural disasters are a complex entanglement of “processes and events, social, environmental, cultural, political, economic, physical, technological, transpiring over varying lengths of time.” See Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Global Changes and the Definition of Disaster,” in *What Is a Disaster? A Dozen Perspectives on the Question*, ed. Enrico L. Quarantelli (London: Routledge, 1998), 178.
13. Greg Bankoff, “Rendering the World Unsafe: ‘Vulnerability’ as a Western Discourse,” *Disasters* 25, no. 1 (2001), 24–27.



14. Stephen H. Schneider et al., "Assessing Key Vulnerabilities and the Risk from Climate Change," in *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. Martin Parry et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 796.
15. Fritz Schütze, "Biographieforschung und narratives Interview," *Neue Praxis* 13, no. 3 (1983): 283–93. Social psychologist Harald Welzer, who is the primary investigator of the Climate and Culture cluster of research at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, coined the term *enviro-biographical interview* (EBI) (*Umweltbiographisches Interview, UBI*).
16. Harald Welzer, "Das Interview als Artefakt: Zur Kritik der Zeitzeugenforschung," *BIOS* 13 (2000): 52.
17. Although there are several methods to analyze interviews, all of them are qualitative and interpretive—which our approach shares with established procedures of interview analysis applied in oral history. In fact, narrative autobiographical interviews have been the methodological starting point for several research projects integrating historical and sociological perspectives, two of which are Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, "*Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*," 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002); and Harald Welzer and Natalija Basic, *Der Krieg der Erinnerung: Holocaust, Kollaboration und Widerstand im europäischen Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007).
18. Anthony Oliver-Smith, "Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture," in *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, ed. Susanna Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2002), 24.
19. Oliver-Smith, "Global Changes," 180.
20. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1959).
21. For a comprehensive overview over the state of the art, see Setha M. Low and Irwin Altman, "Place Attachment: A Conceptual Inquiry," in *Human Behavior and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 2–3.
22. Munich Re, *Jahresrückblick Naturkatastrophen 2005*, Topics Geo. Knowledge Series (Munich: Munich Re Group, 2005), 2. For example, Aaron M. McCright and Terry Nichols Clark, eds., *Community and Ecology: Dynamics of Place, Sustainability and Politics* (Amsterdam: Elsevier JAI, 2006), present such a post-2005 endeavor from the field of sociology to unite research on this aspect. An early study on disaster and attachment to place is Helen M. Cox and Colin A. Holmes, "Loss, Healing, and the Power of Place," *Human Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 63–78; see also David Burley et al., "Place Attachment and Environmental Change in Coastal Louisiana," *Organization & Environment* 20, no. 3 (2007): 347–66; Joan M. Brehm, "Community Attachment: The Complexity and Consequence of the Natural Environment Facet," *Human Ecology* 35, no. 4 (2007): 477–88; and Bob Carroll et al., "Flooded Homes, Broken Bonds: The Meaning of Home, Psychological Processes and Their Impact on Psychological Health in a Disaster," *Health & Place* 15, no. 2 (2009): 540–47.
23. For studies on landscape, see Barbara Bender, ed., *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives, Explorations in Anthropology* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993). For definitions of region, space, landscape, and place from a (phenomenologist) geographer's point of view, see Edward Relph, "Geographical Experiences and Being-in-the-World: The Phenomenological Origins of Geography," in *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, ed. David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), 15–31.
24. Relph, "Geographical Experiences," 26.
25. Associated Press, "Hastert: Rebuilding New Orleans under Sea Level Makes No Sense," Fox News.com, September 1, 2005.
26. Anne M. Lovell, Samuel Bordreuil, and Vincanne Adams, "Public Policy and Publics in Post-Katrina New Orleans: How Critical Topics Circulate and Shape Recovery Policy,"

- Kroeber *Anthropological Society Papers* 100, no. 1 (2010): 106; and Billy Fields, "From Green Dots to Greenways: Planning in the Age of Climate Change in Post-Katrina New Orleans," *Journal of Urban Design* 14, no. 3 (2009): 334.
27. Expert interviews with Bobbie Hill, co-director of the planning and architecture firm Concordia; Professor Jim Amdal, director of the Merrit C. Becker Maritime and Intermodal Transportation Center (MITC) at the University of New Orleans; and Keith Twitchell, president of the Committee for a Better New Orleans (December 2009 and January 2010).
  28. It is important to note that the New Orleans sample of interviews included only people who had already returned to the city, and no displaced inhabitants located in other places in the United States. That is, it is biased in the sense that it does not include perceptions of citizens who would have liked to return but for economic reasons could not; nor does it include the views of those who intentionally chose not to move back to New Orleans.
  29. The term *place of memory* was coined by the French historian Pierre Nora. In his conception, a place of memory can be geographical, but also a mythical figure, an event, an institution, a monument, or a piece of art. Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1990), 26–33. English Edition: Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), 7.
  30. Marks the National Guard spray-painted on house walls in their search and rescue operations, stating the date of the house search and the number of casualties found therein.
  31. For a collection of Katrina tattoos, see "[Hurricane Katrina Tattoos]," nola.com, [http://photos.nola.com/photogallery/2010/08/tattoo\\_1.html](http://photos.nola.com/photogallery/2010/08/tattoo_1.html).
  32. UN Habitat, "Ghana: Accra Urban Profile" (Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2009). The figures refer to the Accra metropolitan region, including the districts of Ga East, Ga West, and Tema Municipal. The city proper had a population of approximately 1.7 million at the last census in 2000, with an annual growth rate of 4.3 percent.
  33. See Gordon McGranahan, *The Citizens at Risk: From Urban Sanitation to Sustainable Cities* (London: Earthscan, 2001), 6; and UN Habitat, "Accra."
  34. See Mark Pelling, *The Vulnerability of Cities: Natural Disasters and Social Resilience* (London: Earthscan, 2003), 15–16. The question of risk perception in Accra is pursued in more detail in Ingo Haltermann, "Vom Alltagsrisiko zur Katastrophe: Die Veränderung von Naturrisiken und deren Wahrnehmung am Beispiel Accra, Ghana," *SWS Rundschau* 53, no. 3 (2011): 349–66.
  35. Kotobabi Down (as well as the other place names mentioned in this case study) is a neighborhood of the city of Accra (except for Kasoa, which lies 30 kilometers outside of Accra).
  36. Or dykes, *deiche*, in German.
  37. The Oderbruch is a marshy inland delta formed by the Odra.
  38. The last inundation before the centennial flood of 1997 occurred in 1947 when a severe winter flood strongly affected the residents of the area. For an overview over the floods that occurred in the region, see Internationale Kommission zum Schutz der Oder gegen Verunreinigung (IKSO), *Odereinzugsgebiet*.
  39. See Gesundheit und Verbraucherschutz (LUGV) Landesamt für Umwelt, *Hochwasserschutz: Jahrhundertflut an der Oder 1997* (2011), <http://www.mugv.brandenburg.de/cms/detail.php/172491#bilanz>; and Gesundheit und Verbraucherschutz Ministerium für Umwelt, *Hochwasserschutz* (2011), <http://www.mugv.brandenburg.de/cms/detail.php/51bm1.c.172770.de>.
  40. Christine Bismuth et al., *Ursachen der Hochwasserentstehung und ihre anthropogene Beeinflussung—Maßnahmenvorschläge* (Berlin: Umweltbundesamt, 1998), 82.
  41. René John, *Die Modernität der Gemeinschaft: Soziologische Beobachtungen zur Oderflut 1997*, Sozialtheorie (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 113.
  42. See Universität der Vereinten Nationen, "WeltRisikoBericht 2011." For a recent article on the challenge of climate change in Chile, see Cullmann, "Neue Wege für Chile," 47–51.
  43. Expert interview with Fernando Gil Cruz of SERNAGEOMIN.
  44. On the subject of the reformation of everyday life after a disaster, see Lars Clausen, Elke M. Geenen, and Elisio Macamo, eds., *Entsetzliche soziale Prozesse: Theorie und Empirie der Katastrophen* (Münster: Lit, 2003), 8.

45. Another society living with a high return period of several natural extreme events is studied in Greg Bankoff's *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003). On the nexus between the frequency of extreme events, memory, and vulnerability, see Franz Mauelshagen, "Disaster and Political Culture in Germany since 1500," in *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies Toward a Global Environmental History*, ed. Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 44–45; and Christian Pfister, "Die Katastrophenlücke des 20. Jahrhunderts und der Verlust traditionellen Risikobewusstseins," *Gaia* 18, no. 3 (2009), 239–46.

# 11

## SMILE THROUGH THE TEARS

Life, Art, and the Rwandan Genocide

Steven High

**Oral history by Jessica Silva with Rupert Bazambanza, Montreal,  
Canada, June 3 and 12 and July 6, 2008**

*The life story and artistic practice of the Rwandan-Montreal graphic novelist and genocide survivor Rupert Bazambanza, author of "Sourire malgré tout," or "Smile through the Tears," which tells the story of his friend and neighbor Rose Rwanga, provide us with a rare opportunity to reflect on public and private remembering in the aftermath of mass violence. Bazambanza and Rwanga were both interviewed (in French and Kinyarwanda respectively) by the Montreal Life Stories project, a community-university research alliance exploring the life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations. The following transcript is part of a multisession interview conducted by Jessica Silva, a student affiliated with the project. As a community-university partnership, Montreal Life Stories is founded on the idea that communities can and should be partners in research and not simply objects of study.<sup>1</sup>*

SILVA: Could you tell us a little about yourself?

BAZAMBANZA: My name is Rupert Bazambanza; I come from Rwanda. I'm an illustrator and a graphic artist. Also a public speaker. So, I give artistic conferences, because I make drawings on the spot. I am the author of a graphic novel about the Rwanda genocide.

SILVA: When did you make that book?

BAZAMBANZA: I made the book in 2002, but it was completed in 2004. It tells the true story of the genocide that we suffered in Rwanda. So all of the accounts that you will find in the book are true stories. That's why there are also photos of the Rwanda genocide victims. This book talks about a family of friends, a family whose disappearance I witnessed during the genocide in Rwanda, and that I want to pay tribute to, to immortalize, so that the world never forgets what we went through, and so that it never happens again.

SILVA: Did any of the members of the family survive?

BAZAMBANZA: The only person from this family to survive is the mother, Rose Rwanga, who I have tried to draw here. She is in Montreal now... she is a woman who has lived through horrible things... The difference between her and me is that I can still have a family, while for her, everything is in the past. So her life is behind her. That's the problem. When I chose the title of my graphic novel, which is called, even in French, "Smile through the Tears," it is precisely this smile that represents the life that she lived with her family. Because before the genocide took her family, they didn't only share bad things. I tried to be a bit optimistic, to give some hope. Because this woman will always remember the beautiful life that she had with her family, which will give her that glimmer of a smile. This isn't a well-defined smile, but it is a glimmer. And it is this same smile that we survivors [rescapés] try to show, because we tell ourselves that life has spared us, and we must live it. Even if there are things that block our fulfillment, still we must have something to give us hope. That's what we can share with our loved ones, who are gone, because everything wasn't negative before they left for... That's the smile that we try to show, so that life can go on...

SILVA: When she is with your family, do you talk about your memories or your shared experiences?

BAZAMBANZA: When we are together, we talk, as I said, about what happened before the genocide. I remember once, when the site where her daughter was buried was found. Well, it was easy to locate compared to her husband and two sons, who died before her daughter, as I explain in the book... And then the body had to be dug up to be buried in consecrated ground. We begged her not to come while they were digging her up. Because the unearthing would be a horror scene for her. We didn't want her to be there. She asked us to film the ceremony. And we asked ourselves how we could show her that. So we did it, we filmed, so... Afterwards [her daughter] was placed in a coffin, and a Mass was celebrated, and then the burial. A few days later [Rose] asked to view the film! We felt really uncomfortable to look at that film with her. But she really wanted to see it. So... we tried to see if she was really strong enough for that. We put in the cassette. She became very still and all, but she watched the whole thing. It's... it's better sometimes to get things over with once and for all. Because several months later she went through the same experience with her son, her husband, and all that. Because a common grave was discovered, where they were buried. This was even more traumatizing than... the experience with her daughter, since there were several bodies in the common grave; this time they had to be identified. She had to be there. Because, you see, when the bodies are disfigured, only the mother can know if this is her son or her husband. Things like that. This was one of the major and most difficult experiences that she went through after the genocide. Except that it gave her a bit of comfort. It comforted her to say, "Now I can grieve, because now,

this time, I know that they are dead." Before, it was unknown where they had been buried, there was perhaps some hope that someone had gotten away, had escaped. But after seeing the bodies, she had to give up on that. She said, "They are gone, I am alone." That's what happens. Yes.

SILVA: How long has your family known Rose? Is it since you were a child?

BAZAMBANZA: Even before I was born, they were my parents' friends. The Rwanga family. Yes, they were all friends. Until the genocide. This was a real friendship that had lasted for a long time, and that we must continue to hold onto as long as she lives. And I think that it is in situations like these that friendship is really worthwhile. Yes. Because we know that some day we will be alone, without any family, and that's when we need to have friends, if not, who can you count on? Do you understand? There it is.

SILVA: So, you were their friend. Friendly with her sons, her. . . .

BAZAMBANZA: The whole family were our friends, the parents were our friends, the children were our friends, so. . . . When we have gone through all the horrors together, it's as if we have shared almost everything, almost. We shared New Years, we shared the joys, we shared the hard moments, but we never lived through any moments as tough as the genocide. Unfortunately, we didn't all suffer the same fate, because they're all gone. . . . That's why for me, doing this work, the book, is a responsibility, a personal duty. How can one sit back with folded arms after something like that? Maybe if they were still here, maybe they would have done the same thing. That's why it was also a way of finding peace. Otherwise, we would feel like cowards. Because, when they started taking people, people didn't do much, people didn't do anything. Even so, as a survivor (rescapé), if I didn't do anything. . . it depends on the others as well. Because genocide can happen anywhere. It can happen anywhere. If the Holocaust survivors hadn't done anything to speak out, perhaps the world would never have said "never again." Even if this wasn't abided by. But I tell myself that it's thanks to the testimony of all those survivors that. . . those who did things, that people at least tried to do something. But it wasn't enough. Now we need to continue, we need to continue. Because it is happening again. It's happening again in Darfur, it almost happened again in Kenya, just recently. There is no place that can say that. . . it is completely safe. As long as human beings exist, there are good things, but also bad things. We don't know how it can happen, because it comes with the small everyday things, that we let go by. Because there isn't a country in the world without racism. Racism is everywhere. Racism can develop everywhere. So you see. . . we need to speak out about it.

SILVA: Do you have memories of your childhood with Rose's son, and the family, that you could relate?

BAZAMBANZA: I remember one time, we were celebrating the New Year, but tension had begun in the country. And this was after the multiparty system existed in Africa, so the one-party system was finished, you understand. This bothered

the former dictator a lot, along with the war which had broken out in the country, former Rwandan refugees wanted to come back, but the president in office didn't want them to come back. After thirty years, they forced their way back. Thirty years of exile. So...all of this led to things happening in our country [...] I was about seventeen. We had had a New Year's party, but there was racism in the air. We had to celebrate without those around us knowing, without attracting attention. Even so, we wanted to put the music up loud like everyone else, but we had to be a bit quiet, and... We weren't comfortable, because we had to keep looking out the windows, to see if there weren't any militia who...were coming to throw grenades through the glass. This was happening very frequently everywhere. There were militia everywhere who worked for the racist regime, and hated everything Tutsi or Hutu. Every time that they saw that there was a party going on, they would throw grenades at us through the glass. Imagine trying to celebrate in such a climate. You want to have a party but you also think that they are going to throw grenades at you. But it's New Year's Eve, we needed to celebrate. So that's one of my memories... with that family.

SILVA: Can you tell me a bit about your childhood? Things that you liked to do when you were small, sports...

BAZAMBANZA: When I was small, what I liked to do was draw.

SILVA: Draw? OK...of course.

BAZAMBANZA: Yes. I loved to draw, to leaf through comic strips...I didn't read the texts, but I loved it. It was as if I understood without reading. And I also loved to draw. But the problem was that in my country, drawing was not encouraged.

SILVA: Why not?

BAZAMBANZA: Because in Rwanda it wasn't a profession with a future. Rwanda was a country that needed to satisfy its primary needs. So things like art, music, and all that, came well behind...But I had a talent that I didn't want to bury, that I didn't want to waste. I developed it like that...and fortunately my father...didn't discourage me. But all his friends told him, "Ah, you need to point your son in another direction."

That's why in the end there aren't many survivors (*rescapés*) who ended up drawing. Even now, I can say that I'm the only survivor (*rescapé*) to have made a graphic novel about the genocide.

Not only were there few artists in Rwanda, but many, many people died in Rwanda. So that reduces the chances of there being illustrators to do things like I did. In that sense.

SILVA: How does your mother feel now about your book?

BAZAMBANZA: My mother was impressed, because I didn't consult anybody before doing it. It happened, I had that ambition. After leaving Rwanda, I wanted to let it all out. Even so, I didn't know that it was a graphic novel that I wanted to produce; I hadn't ever made a graphic novel before. I knew that I could draw; I lacked some training here and there. Well, I took a course in graphic

design, and afterwards I put it all down on paper. When it started to come together, I began to like it, even if the concept phase was difficult. It was difficult, because while wanting to express myself, I discovered a form of therapy. While really wanting to present a testimony, I discovered a form of therapy. At each scene, I would stop and say to myself, "Did I really live through all this?" It was as if I had just found the time to realize all that we had just gone through. I had never had that time. Because in Rwanda, what we did after the genocide, was to bury our dead, dig them up and bury them in consecrated ground. It was constant funerals and things like that. We were beginning to relearn... how to live. Yes, because life went on during the war. The dead constantly surround you. It's as if you're dead too, somehow. You see that life has spared you, but you don't know what to do, you just don't know what to do.... When they leave the country, you know, you feel that after all there is such a weight that has been... relieved a bit, and then you can realize what you've been through. It was while I was producing my graphic novel that I realized all of that. I would draw things, take a look: "But is this fiction, or is it truly reality? More and more I would see the scenes, linger over the drawings, there were some things that I didn't want to draw.... I would say to myself, "Why don't I want to draw them?" That's therapy.

[...]

SILVA: OK, thinking about what you experienced with your family during the genocide, can you explain to me how the days prior to... the genocide were for your family?

BAZAMBANZA: How were things in my family before the genocide began? We were living under pressure. A pressure, a tension, caused, as I said, by the war that was started in 1990, by the rebels of the FPR, the Front Patriotique Rwandais. And, as said, the Tutsi refugees that had been chased out in '59, that decided to force their way back, because the government in office, and I repeat myself, didn't want them to come back. The war created great tension because the regime said, ah, this is a war of the Tutsis against the Hutu.... Each Hutu has to keep watch on the Tutsi, and anyone who looks like a Tutsi, or any Tutsi who is taken for a Hutu, things like that. So all this created tension within the country, within the family, among my friends, like that. Because the government really set us against each other, against our neighbors, against everybody. So it was as if we were foreigners in our own country. Foreigners, like, you know, when anyone did something for you, you had to thank them as if you had received a favor, while in fact everyone had the same rights. It was as if you had to let people go ahead of you, even in the buses, had to let them sit before you did.... We didn't want to provoke anybody at the time. Some felt sick... you had to be careful as if we were foreigners, not human anymore. Also there were expressions, names, we weren't called human anymore, we were cockroaches, snakes, things like that. You might bump into someone by accident and apologize, and he would spit out "it's a snake, it's a cockroach."



Still, we remained optimistic. We thought all that would go away, since there were negotiations going on between the government and the rebels, and since the United Nations were beginning to have a presence in Rwanda. We thought we were going through the end, but we also thought that the end would be just as bad. That's it. So it was... a greater tragedy than we imagined. So that was the climate that we were living in, before the genocide....

SILVA: What was your first thought on arrival in Canada?

BAZAMBANZA: Well, first of all I wanted to come to the West. To the West, because... not that I accuse the West, but the West had more means, so, we had been in contact with the West during the genocide. Belgian soldiers went to Rwanda, and French soldiers, even the blue berets led by a Canadian general, Dallaire. All of this represented the West. They had all the equipment possible. They landed. We were in contact with them because they came to the center where I was located, but they only evacuated the Westerners. At that time we asked ourselves, "But where is the world?" This is what these soldiers were doing, we wondered if those that came after them think as they do. Because they only came to evacuate the Westerners. We thought that the world didn't give a damn.

I arrive in Montreal, it was the same in New York, but I'm a francophone, I couldn't ask any questions in New York, an ambulance goes by, the firefighters, everyone clears the way. It scared me; I thought there was a war. For me, all that sort of thing meant war. I get to Montreal, and I see the same thing. Sirens in the streets, police cars, tatata tatatatata, everybody clears the way, afterwards comes an ambulance. I asked the taxi driver, "What's going on, is there a war coming?" because in Rwanda I had never seen anything like it. He told me, "It's an emergency! What are you asking me?" The taxi driver didn't understand why I was asking him that question. Somewhere, a life is in danger. That surprised me. A life is in danger and that's the way everyone reacts? Well, yes. I thought I hadn't heard right, because he said "a" life was in danger. Maybe one life or several. So I understood that the West knew what an emergency is. You see, it paralyzes the city. I didn't think that they were that aware of this. I didn't think that they hurried when there were problems.

I think of the fact that in Rwanda we waited for three months. Well, it was an emergency, really, it was an emergency. That was one of the things that I found deeply disappointing. The importance of the emergency was shown, but that's not how they reacted. Imagine the fact that in Darfur, the genocide has been going on for, what, soon to be three years [he sighs].... Things like that. That's why I want people to talk about Darfur too. I do cartoons, that's the kind of thing I do.

SILVA: Maybe you can tell me about your memories and the feelings that you had.

BAZAMBANZA: Well, there are plenty of memories. There are lots, but unfortunately, some memories aren't right, because before the genocide, there were always things that announced that something was going to happen, even if we

didn't know it would be genocide. Because I didn't know the word *genocide*. Above all, I didn't expect a genocide because I didn't know what that was. I thought that they would kill a few people here and there, like in 1959, in our parents' time.

Next, if you ask me about my memories, memories that I had, from before the genocide, they're mostly about the relationships between my friends who are gone. You know, secrets and projects that your friends confide in you about. I remember in particular, the day before the genocide—because the genocide began with the Habyarimana plane that was shot down—we had spent a wonderful day that day—in the afternoon there was a party for the students and everything, it was good, everyone was there and we had fun. It was as if we were saying good-bye without knowing it. There was a party, really all of the people who are gone were there, at least most of the young people, at least those of my circle, my childhood friends. We all had a crazy good time. Well, there were limits, when I say a crazy good time.

Dating that started at the age of twelve, thirteen, fourteen, or around there, was frowned upon. So the atmosphere of that day was for friendships that were somewhat hidden, that parents weren't altogether aware of. You could see boys telling girls "I love you." There were some projects or other, or tomorrow we were going to do this or that. We left each other on that note, with good promises, things like that.

Well. That evening, the Habyarimana plane was shot down. And the next day, the great majority of those who had been with us were all dead, because the genocide had begun. They didn't die the next day, but they died over the one hundred days.

So in the end you see a few survivors (*rescapés*) like yourself who were at that party. You see the girls, you know that her boyfriend is gone; you know what her boyfriend told you about that girl. So the genocide didn't just, didn't just weaken the family and all. There is, how can I say this, the pain that we feel inside because maybe you lost someone that you loved, and you think that would have been the right person in your life. Today, when you have a disappointment in your life, you say to yourself, "Ha, maybe the person who died during the war was the right one for me." Do you understand? That's the person who might have helped me to do well in life; he or she was sincere, things like that. It happens often that we, the survivors (*rescapés*) think of things like that.

That's why there is never any end to genocide. We have memories like those. Your father said to you, "I would like to see your child," "I would like to meet your wife someday," "I want to be a grandfather." So when you remember that he's gone, it hurts too.

SILVA: Could you tell me something about that night, when the plane was shot down? Where were you? With your family...?

BAZAMBANZA: In fact I was halfway home. We had just left the party, as I told you, that ended at 7:00 P.M. The plane was shot down at 8:00 P.M., we hadn't gotten home yet, because we were walking; the weather was always good there.

So, it was evening, because in Rwanda after 6:30 P.M. it's always evening, it's nighttime. Just like the sun comes up at the same time every morning, it sets at the same time: 6:00 P.M., after 6:30 P.M. it's evening. We were walking along, and we heard a noise, something that went boom. Since the country was already at war, we didn't think that it was the plane that had been shot down. It went BOOM! BOOM! What followed didn't come right away. Everybody was asking, "Did you hear that? Did you hear that?" Maybe it was a shell, or grenades, because they were throwing grenades into Tutsi homes. It was war, somewhere there were shells flying.

SILVA: Were you with your family at that moment?

BAZAMBANZA: That evening I was with my friends. But they went home. I got home without realizing anything. I even said to my friends while we were still together "We'll see each other tomorrow," whatever. But we didn't see each other again, they died. You see. We didn't have any more real walks like are usual in life, the opportunity never presented itself because the next day was totally different.

### Commentary

"Hell exists. It's here on earth. It's called hatred and racial discrimination, and I saw it with my own eyes during the Tutsi genocide that took place in Rwanda between April and July of 1994. I am one of the few to have escaped such a fate, and the events I am about to relate have been seared into my soul." So wrote Rupert Bazambanza in *Smile through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan Genocide*.<sup>2</sup> His 2005 graphic novel bears witness to the atrocities committed against Rwanda's Tutsi minority in 1994. Unlike most survivor testimony, the story being told is not strictly his own. Instead, Bazambanza tells us his story "from the point of view of a family very dear to me whose near-total annihilation I witnessed: The Rwangas."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say that the Rwanga children "were more than just friends" and their parents were "like my parents." Born in 1975, Rupert Bazambanza was just nineteen years old when his world went up in flames. He survived the genocide, as did his mother and two sisters. In contrast, their neighbor Rose Rwanga was the sole survivor from her family. Her husband and two sons were taken away and killed; her daughter was then murdered in front of her. She pleaded with the Hutu militiaman to kill her instead, but he cynically replied, "Urwo upfuye, si ruto" or "The death that you will now endure is worse."<sup>4</sup> After the genocide, the remnants of the Bazambanza and Rwanga families relocated to Montreal, Québec, where they joined a close-knit community of Rwandan exiles and rescapés.<sup>5</sup>

When the Montreal Life Stories Project began to interview area residents displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations, it was only natural that Bazambanza and Rwanga were among the first people to be interviewed. As narrators have the option of being interviewed in their home language, Rose chose to be interviewed in Kinyarwanda. According to her interviewers, this decision “favored the expression of emotion and that which is difficult to express in a language other than your own.”

Through the evidence of individual witness and community testimony, our project addresses three sets of questions. First, we ask how large-scale violence is experienced and remembered by its victims. What does it mean to be a survivor of genocide? Second, we ask how displaced persons (re)compose and narrate their stories within their host societies. How do individuals and communities who have sought refuge in new lands construct and transmit their stories? Third, we ask how narratives of violence and displacement can most effectively be represented and communicated to wider publics in the context of ongoing educational efforts. After the interview, the project incorporated these life stories into a range of public outcomes, including theatrical performances, audio walks, art installations, digital stories, radio programming, museum exhibitions, scholarly publications, and pedagogical resources. Four hundred of the city’s subway cars were also equipped with QR-coded audio portraits for several weeks.<sup>6</sup> Two new community-based documentation centers are yet another legacy of the project.

Interviewing survivors of war, genocide, and atrocity crime is emotionally exhausting for both the interviewer and for the narrator. These stories are difficult to tell and hard to hear. What I find most challenging, as an interviewer, is the transition back into everyday life after a particularly intense interview. As our project is based in Montreal, my every day is far removed from the places and times being remembered: Rwanda, 1994; Cambodia, 1977; Poland, 1942. One moment I find myself immersed in the horrific memories of another person only to find myself doing routine office work or family play time the next. I suspect that this is true for many survivor-interviewers too, and perhaps the interviewees as well. No doubt this transition would be experienced differently in postconflict societies. Although Montreal may not be a “crisis environment” in the usual sense, it remains a highly charged political environment for the Rwandan diaspora. Some “génocidaires,” as the killers of 1994 are known, also started anew in Montreal, and there have been confrontations and judicial trials. Genocide deniers have likewise enjoyed a large public profile in the city, thanks to a handful of Québec-based writers and researchers. In consequence, there has been considerable fear and anxiety within Montreal’s Rwandan Tutsi community. Rwanda, 1994, is not a distant time or place, but here and now.

The oral narrative of Rupert Bazambanza provides an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of mass violence in the context of a life lived and remembered. Interviewed by Jessica Silva, a graduate student affiliated with the Montreal Life Stories Project, Bazambanza shifts our attention from what happened during

those one hundred terrible days to its ongoing significance for those who survived. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Bazambanza chose to call his 2005 graphic novel *Sourire malgré tout/Smile through the Tears*. To remember life before the genocide is to recall all that was lost: friends, family, young love, innocence. Once-joyful memories are now inextricably tied to the horror and sadness that followed. Love, memories and despair thus “co-exist” inside of him, Bazambanza explains. The genocide is a constant presence, coloring his memories of life before, during, and after the violence: “It is for this reason that the genocide never ended.”

The edited transcript reproduced here has undergone several stages of revision. First, Bazambanza’s interview was transcribed as verbatim text on the basis of the Montreal Life Stories Project guidelines (which are available at [www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca](http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca)). Generally, these transcriptions record exactly what is said, including grammatical errors and false starts. We direct our transcribers as follows: “Do not correct interviewees’ words or grammar; do not change speech patterns. Do not change content, intent or put words in the interviewee’s mouth, when you are not sure what you are hearing.”<sup>7</sup> Second, it was lightly edited for publication. The critique of verbatim transcription is that spoken language is not written language: what is often eloquent when said aloud becomes ponderous or even unintelligible when transcribed. Too often, those false starts and grammatical mistakes become barriers to effective communication once in print. A strictly verbatim text also has the potential to exaggerate class and racial hierarchies when put alongside other sources. I therefore elected to streamline the text somewhat without changing its sequence or adding anything new. Finally, the edited transcript was professionally translated from French into English. Strictly speaking, these are no longer Rupert Bazambanza’s words, but the stories are his.

Listening to the interview recording, and reading the transcription, it becomes clear that the genocide eclipses Bazambanza’s memories of life before the slaughter. In recalling “la veille,” or the day before, he tells of how he and his friends simply had no idea what was about to befall them. He parted company with his young companions that evening with the usual “see you tomorrow”—only there would be no tomorrow for many of them. To recall that moment now is to marvel at the sweet innocence of it all. As he remembers it: they never even knew what “genocide” meant, so foreign was the word. Much has changed. Today, Rwanda is synonymous with genocide. It has joined the Holocaust as one of the darkest chapters in the history of the twentieth century. To be asked in everyday conversation “where are you from” is now to risk an uncomfortable silence or further questions like “Are you Tutsi or Hutu?” It is inescapable for Rwandan-Montrealers.

The story reproduced here ends on the eve of the violence. In the full interview, Bazambanza goes on to tell us about his own family’s struggle to survive the slaughter. They awoke early that April morning to the sound of gunfire.

At first it seemed far away, but it soon came closer. He recalls: "Well, we said 'What's going on?'" A Hutu neighbor came to warn his family to escape before it was too late. His mother led them to the nearby Centre d'Etude des Langues Africaines (CELA), run by a group known as the White Fathers of Africa. At that moment, he did not know what to bring—it was the first time he had to flee his home. His parents understood better, as they fled back in 1959 when the Tutsi monarchy was overthrown by the Hutu revolution.

Bazambanza recalls what happened next as if it was a dream. His father was killed as the family left the house: "We had fled, my father was dead. He was in good health only a few hours earlier. What happened? What happened?" One can hear the incomprehension of that moment in Bazambanza's voice, as he recalls his father's death. When the rest of the family arrived at CELA, others expressed their condolence about the death of his father. Looking back, he found this strange: "Because in the beginning, everybody was not yet dead. You know that all those who told us their 'condolences' died later." In the days and months to come, these lingering signs of normalcy would seem anachronistic:

BAZAMBANZA: We were sitting there. We said, but "are we going to bury him?" We said, "Of course, he must be buried." But how? Because we could not go get his body at our house, it was too dangerous to leave the Centre. We could not just leave him there neither. It was at this moment that the same Mister Albert, who told us to flee, said, "Me, I will take five boys among you, five men. We went there and stole the body, bringing it here to the Centre, and burying him here." If the priest accepts. We cannot bury him outside, we could not expose ourselves. Thankfully, the priests said, "OK, you can bring him here." My father was lucky in this sense.

Bazambanza went on to tell us about the hell that followed. Death was "always next to you." At one point, Belgian troops arrived to rescue the White Fathers. Henceforth, they were on their own.

His story of death and survival runs parallel to that of Rose Rwanga, who is the subject of the graphic novel. Bazambanza was a childhood friend of Rwanga's two sons and her daughter. As a result, they experienced the horrors together: "It was as if we shared everything. We shared the year's end, we shared the joys, we shared the difficult moments, but we never knew moments as difficult as the genocide." He wanted to immortalize the Rwanga family and to condemn the injustice of what happened to them.

Because our interview with Rose Rwanga in Kinyarwanda has yet to be translated, I must rely on the reflections of the interviewers, Callixte Kabayiza and Monique Mukabalisa. The Rwanga family had sought refuge at Sainte Famille Church, located near CELA. Very few people who went there survived. The two interviewers, both rescapés themselves, wrote that Rose Rwanga "incarnated the tormented history of Rwanda." At age fourteen, she was in secondary school preparing to become a teacher when the 1959 revolution separated her from her

family, who sought refuge in Uganda. Rose Rwanga would not see her parents again. They died in exile. She subsequently had four children, three of whom were still alive at the time of the genocide. Her husband and two sons were also taken away and killed. The murder of her daughter outside Sainte Famille Church in Kigali may have been the most tragic of all. Interviewer Callixte Kabayiza related what happened: The part where she spoke of the death of her only daughter who was with her in Ste. Famille Church in Kigali is the most tragic of all. She spoke of how she asked the killer who came to kill her daughter to kill her instead, but he cynically responded: “Urwo upfuye, si ruto” (the death that you will now endure is worse). She felt guilty for not being able to grant the wish of her daughter, who before she died, pleaded that she work with orphans should she survive. Survival had “not been easy for her.”<sup>8</sup> She lost everything.

To help me further connect with Rose Rwanga and her story, I watched the full interview even though I do not speak the language. She looked frail, and the interview was punctuated with the occasional cough. It is easy to read these as signs of ill health, as she died later that year. Her death was deeply felt in the community. On several occasions I heard her described as the community’s matriarch. As I watched the interview, I searched for meaning in Rose Rwanga’s body language and in her voice. Her speech was slow, as were her gestures. She seemed weighed down by history. The interviewer’s voice was soothing, accompanying her as she recalled all that was lost. One word surfaced repeatedly in the interview: genocide. Perhaps Rupert Bazambanza was right: the word *genocide* was quite literally foreign to Kinyarwanda-speaking Rwandans. What she thought of *Smile through the Tears*, I could not say. When Bazambanza was asked this very question, he replied that she could not read the book in its entirety—it was too painful.

In his interview, Bazambanza spoke of Rwanga often. The difference between them, he said, was that “I could always start a new family, whereas everything was behind her. Therefore her life stood behind her. That was the problem.” Asked about the memories they shared during the genocide, Bazambanza recalls with horror the disinterment of Rwanga’s daughter and her reburial in consecrated ground. They pleaded with her not to attend the disinterment, as for her it would be a scene of horror. Bazambanza and the others did not want her to be there in person. She agreed, but on the condition that they film the Mass and the disinterment ceremony: A few days later she asked to view the film. “We felt really uncomfortable to look at that film with her. But she really wanted to see it. So . . . we tried to see if she was really strong enough for that. We put in the cassette. She became very still and all, but she watched the whole thing. It’s . . . it’s better sometimes to get things over with once and for all.” In the months that followed, many Rwandans reburied their dead. Later, Rwanga had to identify the bodies of her husband and two sons found in a mass grave. For Bazambanza, this was perhaps even more traumatic as she had to be there in person. At one point, he remembers her making the sign of the cross and saying, “They are gone, I am now alone.”

If the loss of family was at the heart of Rwanga's survivor narrative, at least as it is represented in *Smile through the Tears*, Bazambanza reveals other sources of loss in his own life story. For him, the sense of loss extended to his many friends. As a young man, he is haunted by "what ifs":

BAZAMBANZA: There is, how can I say this, the pain that we feel inside because maybe you lost someone that you loved, and you think that would have been the right person in your life. Today, when you have a disappointment in your life, you say to yourself, "Ha, maybe the person who died during the war was the right one for me." Do you understand? That's the person who might have helped me to do well in life, he or she was sincere, things like that. It happens often that we, the survivors (rescapés) think of things like that. That's why there is never any end to genocide. We have memories like those. Your father said to you "I would like to see your child," "I would like to meet your wife someday," "I want to be a grandfather." So when you remember that he's gone, it hurts too.

Friends and community therefore loom large in his oral narrative.<sup>9</sup> Authoring the graphic novel was akin to therapy. As Bazambanza tells it, "It was difficult, because while wanting to express myself, I discovered a form of therapy. While really wanting to present a testimony, I discovered a form of therapy. At each scene, I would stop and say to myself, 'Did I really live through all this?' It was as if I had just found the time to realize all that we had just gone through."

The production of the graphic novel was "a personal necessity" for Bazambanza. He understood it to be a political act, undertaken in the hope that this story might contribute to a culture of "never again." No society is immune to the possibility of genocide; it has returned in Darfur and elsewhere. "You see... we must speak," he insisted. Bazambanza's graphic novel situates individual tragedy in political context. We hear about the escalating conflict in Rwanda as an army of Tutsi exiles crossed the border from Uganda in 1990. Tutsi civilians in Rwanda lived in fear of reprisals. He recalls grenades being tossed through windows and the regular crack of gunfire or the thud of distant cannon. It was a country at war. Despite the "racism in the air," there was still room for optimism. The return to multiparty politics and the signing of a new peace accord promised a new beginning.

In his testimony, Rupert Bazambanza holds the international community to account for its inaction in the days and months that followed. He saw this inaction with his own eyes, as Belgian and French troops were in Rwanda during the genocide, as were United Nations peacekeepers. At one point, he mentions Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, the head of the UN Mission. Bazambanza's ambivalent feelings toward the West are evident in a story he tells about his first impression of North America. In New York City and again in Montreal, he recalls hearing emergency sirens and asking a taxi driver their meaning:

BAZAMBANZA: I arrived in Montreal, after experiencing the same thing in New York City—but I am a Francophone, I couldn't ask any questions in New York, an



ambulance goes by, the firefighters, everyone clears the way. It scared me; I thought there was a war. For me, all that sort of thing meant war. I get to Montreal, and I see the same thing. Sirens in the streets, police cars, tatata, tatatatata, everybody clears the way. . . . I asked the taxi driver, "What's going on, is there a war coming?" because in Rwanda I had never seen anything like it. He told me, "It's an emergency! What are you asking me?" The taxi driver didn't understand why I was asking him that question. Somewhere a life is in danger. That surprised me. A life is in danger and that's the way everyone reacts? Well, yes. I thought I hadn't heard right, because he said "a" life was in danger. Maybe one life or several. So I understood that the West knew what an emergency is. You see, it paralyzes the city. I didn't think that they were aware of this. I didn't think that they hurried when there were problems.

The story is an important one. Many of the themes that emerge in the life history interview are also evident in Bazambanza's media interviews. In 2006, for example, he told the student newspaper of George Washington University that he did not choose to tell his own story in the graphic novel because "compared to her, I still had life."<sup>10</sup> His act is thus understood as a memorial gesture. Likewise, he frequently spoke of the therapeutic power of illustrating *Smile through the Tears* and the political importance of his artistic practice: "'Every time I have the chance to talk to people, I realize why I survived.'"<sup>11</sup> Of course this same language has been used by Holocaust survivors for many years. In that time, survivor testimony has developed its own conventions. For example, we expect survivor testimony to be based on firsthand experience. It is an eyewitness account. Bazambanza's decision to tell another person's story, not his own, and his decision to incorporate larger historical events and public figures into the story, makes *Smile through the Tears* unusual in relation to other forms of public testimony. It is part personal testimony and part history lesson. As Jessica Silva notes, illustrators can play with perspective: "positioning the reader" as witness.<sup>12</sup>

There are a growing number of graphic novelists who explore the history and meaning of war, genocide, and other human rights violations. However, only a handful of these illustrators are themselves survivors.<sup>13</sup> Bazambanza's graphic novel is therefore unique. As he explained to Silva, words are sometimes inadequate to the task: "What we witnessed in Rwanda surpasses words. There must be images to accompany the words."<sup>14</sup> *Smile through the Tears* follows the Rwanda family as they are annihilated by hate and violence. Bazambanza's use of a large number of panels per page seems to suggest a relentless progression and sense of inevitability that some associate with traumatic memory. At the very least, one gets the sense of an accelerated time and loss of control. It ends with Rose Rwanda collecting the remains of her daughter. The last page shows the real-life photographs of the Rwanda family. This is no cartoon world; the semiotics and process of graphic novel illustration tell us a great deal.

One of the greatest challenges facing illustrators who represent mass violence is determining how to represent victims and perpetrators. In Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, he portrayed the Jews, Nazis, and Poles as different kinds of animals, mice, cats, and pigs respectively.<sup>15</sup> These animal choices were controversial, particularly in Poland. In *Smile through the Tears*, Rupert Bazambanza opted for a more realistic depiction of Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis. However, these two groups are clearly distinguished by body shape, skin color, nose size, and attitude. Throughout the graphic novel, Tutsis are represented as thinner and lighter skinned than Hutus, who are portrayed as stocky villains with stubby noses. The racialization of these two groups is hardly subtle, even grotesque. Almost without exception, Hutus are presented as stupid, even animalistic—creating a dichotomy between civilized Tutsis and uncivilized Hutus. Although there are “good” Hutus, such as Canisius, who warned the Rwanga family to flee their homes, good versus evil is clearly drawn along ethnic lines.

Scholarly reaction to the graphic novel has sometimes been sharply critical of this, calling it a “comic-strip-type story of good and evil.”<sup>16</sup> Others suggest that the politics of the graphic novel crosses into the realm of propaganda.<sup>17</sup> None of these authors, in my opinion, sufficiently consider the context: that Bazambanza is himself a survivor of the Rwandan genocide and that this is his personalized response to the tragedy. In fairness, *Smile through the Tears* should be read as a subjective first-person account, rather than a comprehensive history.<sup>18</sup> It reveals the truth as he sees it. It also hints at some of the political tensions and contradictions of the current historical moment. But, as one of my colleagues asked, “Why not just represent them by what they say and do, showing how they ‘become’ or are ‘made into’ Hutus and Tutsis by each other?” Racial stereotypes could have been challenged rather than reinforced.

In the aftermath of genocide, the Rwandan government has sought to suppress Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities in favor of an official discourse of a unitary Rwandan people. This impulse is evidenced in *Smile through the Tears* when Bazambanza suggests that these ethnic categories were an invention of the Belgian colonizers. We are told by Bazambanza that “the colonizers looked for something to divide the Rwandan people, who had lived together peacefully for over a thousand years. The Belgians split the Twas, Hutus, and Tutsis into different ethnic groups.” They were categorized by their physical characteristics and by the number of cattle they owned: those owning more were classified as Tutsis. We are shown a white Belgian measuring nose sizes, confidently asserting that “this is a Tutsi nose” in one case and “yours is Hutu” in another. Identity cards are then distributed. This critique of colonialism is blunted, however, by Bazambanza's own reliance on these same physical markers of ethnic difference in his graphic novel. One can understand the conundrum: How to visually represent the two groups effectively without

recourse to racial stereotype? Moreover, how can the violence be understood without recourse to these same ethnic categories? This question is a difficult one as state policy and the need to remember are not easily reconcilable. The tensions and contradictions in *Smile through the Tears* are thus indicative of wider politics in Rwanda and the diaspora.

In her research on the graphic content of *Smile through the Tears*, Jessica Silva poses some tough questions about the depiction of sexual violence. One frame in particular struck her as “slightly pornographic in nature.”<sup>19</sup> It revealed a Hutu militiaman raping a partially nude woman who is fiercely resisting. The historical record shows that Rwandan women were raped, gang raped, mutilated, and forced into sexual slavery in massive numbers. Many were then killed. In a forthcoming book chapter, project researchers argue that Tutsi women were targeted because they had become a powerful symbol of privilege and physical beauty in Rwanda.<sup>20</sup> Mass rape was therefore a weapon of extermination. Those that survived faced public hostility and serious health issues. Bazambanza thus breaks a taboo that prevents Rwandans from speaking openly about the sexual violence that was an integral part of the genocide. At the same time, his emphasis on the sexual purity of Rose Rwanga’s daughter acts to reinforce this taboo. Her father’s parting words to her were: “My daughter Hyacinthe! Never compromise yourself. Better to die.” Later, when she was asked for sex by Father Munyeshyaka at Sainte Famille Church in exchange for his protection, she refused, saying, “I’m not a whore. May God forgive you.”

Silva’s concerns mirror similar debates about the representation of graphic violence in Holocaust studies where the showing of the dead has sometimes been likened to “Holocaust pornography.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the level of violence directly represented in graphic novels varies considerably. For example, the authors of *The Search*, a graphic novel that tells the story of Anne Frank, allude to the violence rather than show it directly.<sup>22</sup> For his part, Bazambanza takes us into the bloody events—bullets and machetes mutilate and kill. His decision to show the rape of a young woman is disturbing, but it is consistent with his treatment of other forms of violence.

Another theme that runs through the graphic novel is that of resistance. At key moments, Bazambanza highlights examples of Tutsi defiance. He does this in two principal ways. First, the Rwandan Patriotic Front is extolled. Early on, Rose Rwanga defends the RPF’s invasion of Rwanda in 1990: “If not, they would have stayed refugees forever.” Thereafter, the RPF army is presented as orderly and always respectful of human rights. The second strategy adopted by Bazambanza is to extol the individual heroism of Albert, who organized the resistance at CELA: “All you young men and able-bodied adult males, get ready! We’re going to form resistance groups and fight the Interahamwe [the Hutu extremist militia]!” He later died, but not without a fight. Another example is when Bazambanza makes reference to the heroic resistance in Bisesero,

“an event evoking the famous resistance of the Warsaw ghetto Jews during the Holocaust.”

The link to the Warsaw ghetto uprising is an important one. Bazambanza’s frequent linkage of the Rwandan genocide with the Holocaust is a politically effective way to explain the genocide to North American audiences. With the RPF taking Kigali, “the Tutsi genocide, the last large-scale massacre of the 20th century (after the Armenians and the Jews) was over.” *Smile through the Tears* has resonated with Montreal’s Jewish community. In 2006, the Canadian Jewish Congress helped finance his book tour across Québec as well as a return visit to Rwanda. Quoted in the *Canadian Jewish News*, Bazambanza said: “The Jewish community has been a community that has understood me. They understood what it is like to be victims.” How Montreal’s Jewish community has framed Bazambanza’s graphic novel, in light of the Holocaust, is a question well worth exploring further.

At its best, an interview transcript is a partial record of what was said during the interview. However, a great deal is lost in transcription: the sound of a person’s voice, the emotional resonance of the words spoken, body language, and so on. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have argued that survivor interviews have served to foreground embodiment, affect, and silence. Indeed, “the location of the essence of Holocaust experience in the bodily wound, and thus in the deep embodied memory of the survivor,” shaped the field and contributed to the shift to video in interviewing.<sup>23</sup> Here, Bazambanza’s illustrated testimony serves much the same function. In this case, the “bodily wound” is represented on the front cover of the graphic novel by a machete slicing into a tree. The tree is bleeding and there are tears in Rose Rwanga’s eyes. Oral history has a role to play in helping communities respond to crisis. In some instances, this may mean the contextualization of the violence in order for people to move beyond it. But healing is not always the goal. Sometimes it is justice or countering denial. Other times it is about reconciliation and the transmission of memory to young people. It is always political. All of these factors can be seen and heard in the work of the project’s Rwandan Working Group.

## Notes

1. I received substantial feedback on this chapter from several members of the project’s Rwandan Working Group, including Callixte Kabayiza and Monique Mukabalisa of Page-Rwanda, which represents Montreal-based survivors of mass violence, as well as Lisa Ndejuru, and Emmanuel Habimana, also from the community. Others have provided feedback as well, including Stacey Zembrzycki, Erica Lehrer, Matthew Penney, and the editors of this volume. I want to thank Magaly Sala for the English translation. Jessica Silva, a former MA student who wrote her thesis on the artistic vision of Rupert Bazambanza and several other graphic novelists, was particularly influential. The chapter begins with an excerpt from Silva’s interview with Bazambanza, June 3 and 12, 2008, and July 6, 2008, Transcriptions and Chronologies Folder, Montreal Life Stories Archives (MLSA), Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS).

2. Rupert Bazambanza, *Smile through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan Genocide* (Montreal: Images Les Editions, 2005).
3. Ibid.
4. Rose Rwanga, interviewed by Callixte Kabayiza and Monique Mukabalisa, January 31, 2009; interview reflection, Interviewer Reports/Blogs Folder, MLSA, COHDS.
5. Emmanuel Habimana, a team member of Rwandan origin, reminded me that “rescapé” is not synonymous to *survivant* (survivor): “In Kinyarwanda, rescapé translates better to what we call ‘Uwacitse kw’icumu’, which is to say ‘the one who escaped the spear,’ or in other words, the one who during the slaughter of the spear was able to slip away and hide or escape the executioner. Sometimes, in the Rwandan tradition, the aggressor can save one person, often a child, not because of their good heart, generosity, guilt or other sentiment, but more to demonstrate their force, the power over this rescapé with the goal of permitting the rescapé to tell of the horror! In effect, the horror must be known for it to instil fear and respect.”
6. For more on the project, see Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Authority in Community-University Research* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming); and Steven High, Edward Little, and Thi Ry Duong, eds., *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). I examine the oral narratives of Rwandan Montrealers and their collective efforts to remember in Steven High, “‘Une fleur dans le fleuve’: Remembering the Rwandan Genocide in Montréal, Québec,” in *Remembering Africa and Its Diasporas: Memory, Public History and Representations of the Past*, ed. Audra A. Diptee and David V. Trotman (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2012), 251–90.
7. The project’s transcription guidelines can be found in the training manual available at <http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca> (under Training).
8. Kabayiza, Callixte, and Monique Mukabalisa, interview reflection, MLSA, COHDS.
9. We must also consider how the interviewer—a young woman—shaped the interview. Did it contribute to the resulting emphasis on his memories as a young adult: young love, innocence? Would he have shared the same stories with me? Would other ones have surfaced?
10. Megan Marinos, “Rwandan Genocide Survivor Illustrates Tragedy,” *GW Hatchet*, October 16, 2006, <http://www.gwhatchet.com/2006/10/16/rwandan-genocide-survivor-illustrates-tragedy/>.
11. Ibid.
12. Jessica Silva, “‘Graphic Content’: Interpretations of the Rwandan Genocide through the Graphic Novel” (unpublished paper, 2009), 9.
13. For example, the Rwandan genocide has inspired the work of several non-Rwandan illustrators, such as Cecile Grenier, author of *Rwanda, 1994: Descent en l’enfer*, and Jean-Philippe Stassen, who produced *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*. Jessica Silva analyzes both of these graphic novels, as well, in her master’s research paper.
14. Quoted in Silva, “Graphic Content.”
15. For a discussion of other graphic novels about the Holocaust, see Henry Gonshak and Montana Tech, “Beyond Maus: Other Holocaust Graphic Novels,” *Shofar* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 55–79.
16. René Lemarchand, “Review Essay: Controversy within the Cataclysm,” *African Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (April 2007): 143.
17. Michael A. Chaney, “The Animal Witness of the Rwandan Genocide,” in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. Michael A. Chaney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 93.
18. Rupert Bazambanza has gone on to complete a second graphic novel, *Tugire Ubumwe—Let’s Unite!* for the Rwandan Genocide for the Outreach Programme of the Rwandan Genocide and the United Nations. <http://www.un.org/preventgenocide/rwanda/education/shtml>.
19. Silva, “Graphic Content,” 19.

20. See Emmanuel Habimana, Carole Vacher, Berthe Kayitesi, and Callixte Kabayiza, "*Les Viols pendant le génocide des Tutsi: Un crime d'envie*," in *Remembering Mass Violence*.
21. Ibid.
22. Eric Heuvel, Ruud van der Rol, and Lies Schipper, *The Search* (Amsterdam: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009).
23. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies," *Memory Studies* 2 (2009): 158.

# 12

## A SPIRITUAL WAR

### Crises of Faith in Combat Chaplains from Iraq and Afghanistan

David W. Peters

**Interviews by David W. Peters with “Christina,” “Michael,” “Timothy,”  
Craig,” and “George,” Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington,  
DC, 2011**

*War changes every person who participates in it, including those who care for the soldiers' souls. The chaplains who accompany the men and women of the U.S. armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer many of the same symptoms as their warrior congregations. During my service as a chaplain at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, my interviews with chaplains who experienced combat revealed how combat trauma can cause spiritual and theological changes in the lives of these unique warrior clergy. The following excerpts reveal the crises of faith and profound spiritual changes that can take place in combat chaplains after the trauma of combat.*

*Christina is an army chaplain captain who deployed to Iraq. At the time of her interview, she had been home from Iraq for a little over a year. When deployed, she left two daughters in the care of her husband, and this was very difficult for her.*

CHRISTINA: I spoke to my family when I came back and I can't say things to my family. They just don't understand why I don't talk to them. Being a chaplain I've moved—I haven't had time to process. Because of the confidentiality of my work I carry lots of things in my psyche. Some things I just can't share, very private things. We are all uncomfortable and disconnected to family. I used to be self-righteous—lots of church in me. Swearing used to offend me, now soldiers don't offend me. They protected me. They carried my bags. We were bonding, then they were gone.

*Michael is an army chaplain and a skilled guitarist who has been married for more than ten years. I interviewed him in a group of four male chaplains and a female civilian secretary after a presentation I gave on the life and thought of Paul Tillich, a theologian who served as a German army chaplain in World War I. I asked the group*

*if there was anything in my presentation that resonated with their own experience. Immediately, Michael began to talk about Tillich's open marriage to Hannah and his pornography collection, which I had mentioned in the presentation. As soon as this subject came up, Michael insisted that the female civilian leave the room. This caused some controversy but eventually the group pressured her to leave. After she left, Michael began to speak openly.*

MICHAEL: The scale of the devastation was different. There were no small wounds in Iraq. I had a real problem. I saw the bodies of people charred. We had to wash the floor—it was very gory, gruesome, concentrated. It was like we had to wade through the gore just to treat the remains. But after that, after dealing with all that I just wanted to have sex, I mean, I wanted to just procreate. We are born to procreate and I guess that when I was around all that death I wanted to feel alive. I didn't expect this.

*Timothy, a Baptist army chaplain, was deployed with a combat engineer battalion to Iraq in 2006. His battalion did route clearance; they drove up and down the roads of Iraq looking for improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Many of these IEDs detonated before they were seen. After thirteen months in theater, he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and medically evacuated to Landstuhl, Germany, and eventually to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I interviewed Timothy the week that he replaced me as the Medical Center Brigade Chaplain at Walter Reed. We sat in my office and I remember feeling thankful that I was being replaced by such a competent and compassionate soldier who had the experience of being a patient at the hospital he now served.*

DAVID: Did you experience any spiritual changes after your experience with combat?

TIMOTHY: No, I found myself drawing closer and seeking after him [God]. And that was while I was there.

DAVID: And what did that look like?

TIMOTHY: I would say for me, in my life even as a pastor, I had always strived to read the Bible daily, to be in prayer regularly, to maybe get in touch with seeking out an understanding of a deep passage like Romans 9:11, or Ezekiel. I would work through Hebrew, work through Greek, I would always say I would like to do that, even as a pastor. This was something I got into a lot more. I'm glad I did. If nothing else I've seen one individual really inspired to go on. He's in Bible College now.

DAVID: These disciplines, while you were there, did they sustain itself when you came back?

TIMOTHY: No, I really lost that. Um. And that had to do more with the cancer.

DAVID: And you were medevac'd [medically evacuated] from Iraq?

TIMOTHY: In September of 2007 I had been there roughly thirteen months. I was starting to see our replacements come in. I was medevac'd to Germany where they told me I had less than a year to live after that surgery. I had always



thought that I would be that guy in crisis who was rock solid. I wouldn't show weakness or doubting God. And I was more like that in Iraq than I was with my own personal crisis. I think that probably that was a good lesson. It came down to being life or death, I guess. In a hospital it's really, really real. I don't think I maintained a really good testimony when I was there in Germany. Two soldiers in particular. . . .

DAVID: What happened there?

TIMOTHY: Oh well, I had one that, I was told that when I moved into the barracks there I would have a room to myself. I was an officer, you know. And I did the surgery and they let me out that day. It was outpatient kind of surgery to relieve pressure and get a biopsy. When I came back what I was just told, they had moved this young enlisted individual into my room and my stuff was still there. Everything else had already upset me and I really lost it on that kid. And I kicked him out of my room and he didn't deserve the way I treated him. But that was indicative of how I treated him as well. I think the bottom line is that I was just not really portraying myself as a chaplain very well, I suppose. But I was genuine, I was real, I was me, and I was upset. I just wasn't kind.

DAVID: Were there any spiritual changes in your life after your deployment to Iraq?

TIMOTHY: I can't think of such a specific example. I'm usually pretty easy mannered, easy going. But there was one time. Where we were sitting out there and we had just had an IED go off beside the vehicle. It shook the vehicle and filled it with dust. Everybody's checking themselves, you know. And we're sitting there for a little bit and then—it was route clearance engineers and they were always out there with the bombs. I rode with them like every seven days. And we backed off of it and whenever they are nervous, you're supposed to be nervous. So we backed off it and we were sitting still. And all of the sudden there was a loud "bang!" on the side of the vehicle. And I was sitting there kind of looking out the window, looking around and one of them said, "Get down, Chaplain!" I turned and looked and there was a bullet stuck in the window. It was stuck right next to my head. So I got down and they said, "Man, Chaplain, you've got a sniper and he's got you right in his crosshairs, you better stay down." I remember right in that moment that I had a kind of weird anger about it that I hadn't had before. I remember it really well. I wrote it in my journal. Shortly down the road they said, "I'm surprised you didn't flip him off." I said, "Well, I hadn't thought about that. I'm definitely not going to moon him in case he sends a second round and it makes it through. I don't want to have to describe how I got that wound." But I told all of them how pissed off I was at the sniper and they would go ahead and somebody would just kill the guy. And I've never said that before about the enemy. I've never spoke about, "Somebody needs to kill that guy." I never realized how impacting that can be onto our soldiers when the chaplain is saying, "We need to kill that guy." I did let anger out once, that's what I'm saying. That I can recall.

DAVID: It just came out.

TIMOTHY: Oh man, it just came out. But I was pissed off. That dude had me in his crosshairs and it made me mad. Like I can't believe that you felt comfortable pulling that trigger with my head in your crosshairs. But he was the enemy and he did what he was supposed to do. I guess I did what I was supposed to do. The bottom line was, that at the end of the day, I told everybody that I wished one of them would kill him. I'd be OK with that. It sure shocked a bunch of them. They never thought that would come from me. I didn't come across that way.

DAVID: Those are two examples of moments when it got real personal and your real, true feelings just kind of came out. And you expressed them. It wasn't abstract, other people's pain. It was *your* pain.

TIMOTHY: I hadn't thought about it that way. I always recognized the fact that the difference with the cancer was that it was personal. I never connected that. You know they gave me the glass. When I was medevac'd back. Somebody kept it. When I got back to my station, like six months after being here at Walter Reed, they said, "Hey, we brought your window back for you." And you know it, like, takes a general's approval to take anything like that out of theater. But they said, "We've been told that you weren't going to make it so the general approved it." It's a Buffalo window, you remember those?

DAVID: Yeah, they're huge.

TIMOTHY: Like six or seven feet long. So, what am I going to do with that? I don't need that window. They said, "Oh, you'll make a coffee table!" They had a bunch of fun with it. And I still have it.

DAVID: To me, your relationship with yourself changed. In those two experiences you were a different person from who you normally are. It sounds like it changed you. Normally you're a cool, calm, collected pastor, then all of the sudden you're a living breathing human being whose getting shot at by a bullet or being told, "You're not going to live." Then you go back to the one little area you're supposed to live in.

TIMOTHY: One thing I did learn was that being myself was OK. There's people that don't like me because of that. There's a very strong anger problem in my family and I think I saw that in me, that day with that soldier, and it somewhat scared me. And that day I was shot at too, I let out some anger. You know, that stuff I didn't think I inherited. Everyone can look at my father and mother and say I don't look a thing like them. I didn't grow up in the church. I don't act a thing like them. None of them were interested in the church. Just drugs and alcohol. It was a shocker that it was passed down to me.

*Later on in the interview, Timothy reflected on the other changes experienced through his service overseas.*

TIMOTHY: Wow, my wife, she dealt with a lot. My time in Iraq was far easier than my cancer. And looking back on it I can say that. Yet at the time I would say, "We'll get through this."

DAVID: Spiritual crisis is whatever gets your spirit and cancer gets your spirit more than even trauma on the battlefield. It might be sexual assault, that's trauma.

TIMOTHY: Perhaps what could be said for that was that, uh, you know every day in Iraq it wasn't. . . . Some days were just like bearing the heat and living on the FOB [Forward Operating Base]. Or traveling, which wasn't always dangerous, especially by helicopter. But cancer never gives you a day off so that's probably why it was hard on my spiritual life.

DAVID: The most you could ever do for God and your country—you did it. And look what happens.

TIMOTHY: You know you hear stories like that where you're angry at God, but not like that. I've heard stories like that, cancer, then it happened to me and I began to question.

DAVID: Is your relationship with God different now after cancer?

TIMOTHY: Yeah, I'll tell you why I think that's a hard question to answer. In Iraq I had a better spiritual level than I've ever had. So, for me, I came from such a high to such a low. But I would say my desire was greater for study then, but now my desire more is to live a life devoted to Christ, and that is an application of that. Especially to my family. So yes, the relationship is different in certain aspects. I'm not where I was. I would also say, I feel so ashamed for how I acted when I dealt with it that some days I'll be talking with someone I'll see a lot more of my failures than before. I realized how I thought I was invincible when I was in Iraq.

DAVID: Like the bullet in the window?

TIMOTHY: In the back of my mind I just say things now.

DAVID: But that makes you a real person.

TIMOTHY: Here's an interesting statement. My wife said I'm a better preacher now. She said that's because I'm more genuine now. I looked to God when I was struggling with cancer and I threw out this phrase, "How can I trust you now?" The first thing I was concerned with was my family and my kids. I said to God that he was screwing this up because there's three people in my life who depend on me financially. So you, God, are not trustworthy. I had to come to an understanding, which I still think I'm working through. I really don't think I've mastered this but I need to learn how to trust God again. It's a simple concept. Cancer can come back so I feel every day that my time is limited. I'm trying to get to the point where I can say to God that you're apparently in control and I guess I can trust you. I need to trust him. I couldn't say that before Iraq. I remember that now and think, What kind of Christian would say they didn't trust God and they were in the pulpit?

DAVID: Your honesty makes you more real to people. There were lots of people in the Bible who doubted: Jeremiah, Elijah, Abraham.

TIMOTHY: I remember thinking during the time with cancer about Abraham, when he goes to sacrifice Isaac. Why didn't he stress out like I did? He had to come to some level of understanding so that he could trust God. I know that was

what I was thinking about I don't read where Abraham doubts God. I don't find it. Maybe I missed it. I still think for us to reveal the real Abraham there had to be some doubt. And God's got to be OK with that too.

*Craig is a Roman Catholic priest and army chaplain who served with me in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2006. He emigrated from Africa to the United States after his ordination and has served as an army chaplain for seven years.*

CRAIG: I think my spiritual life is the same for me but my parents changed. I discovered I was more reflective, more approachable, talked about love more. I talked about living in the moment more, washing my plate when I eat. Because culturally, for the first son, I don't have to wash my plate when I eat. The first son is more independent. When I get up to wash my plate, my father said, "You have changed." I'm calmer now, more reflective. My parents were the ones that changed. I think they are all right.

DAVID: Why do you think that changed?

CRAIG: Because of my experience over there. The first death I witnessed was horrible. Myself and my commander had to go to the front to bless the body and put him in the body bag. It was the end of life. It was my first day in Iraq. So, why do we hurt people? Violence is a violation of love. I was always aware of the violence that was about to happen. I prayed a lot, I did a lot of adoration. Because I didn't know what could happen. If I prepared myself for danger around me—like the Bible says, "Be watchful, be vigilant."

DAVID: You were watching for your own death?

CRAIG: No, if a Catholic dies he goes to heaven. I was ready for that. Prayer works. My commander was worried before we left and I told him I would pray and no one died.

DAVID: What about God now, when you think about how some people lived, and some people died? Has that changed how you think about God and of how people live and die?

CRAIG: One thing my seminary preparation taught me was, "You do not know much about God."

*George is an army chaplain who deployed to Iraq in 2006 and was exposed to many IED blasts and to one mortar attack on the dining facility that resulted in many American casualties. George recently finished his doctoral dissertation on how narrative therapy can help combat veterans heal from the wounds of war.*

GEORGE: When you mentioned Nietzsche's quote, "When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back into you," I resonated with that. I sucked in darkness. Maybe I should have referred more of my soldiers to others for counseling. I would get to a place where I couldn't counsel any more soldiers. It was like I reached a limit. Maybe I should have said I didn't know more. I liked my Clinical Pastoral Care group because I could share my war stories.

DAVID: How do you see yourself as different from civilian clergy?

GEORGE: They don't know what I went through. They have their own world. I really prayed over there in Iraq. When I first got back, I associated church with the memorial services that I would do for my soldiers who died. I would get anxious and leave. It bothered me for years. I needed connection but I couldn't get it at church. I had to walk out of church when they prayed for the troops. I wanted to think about something else.

### Commentary

On September 11, 2001, terrorists piloted passenger jets into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Ten days later, President George W. Bush told the nation that America was now engaged in a "War on Terror." This was to be a new kind of war that would be fought on many fronts. The president vowed that those who would seek to do America and Americans harm would be found and killed. The scope would be global and the weapons would be both conventional and unconventional. The speech ended with these sentences: "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them." The War on Terror, from its inception, was bathed in a spiritual light, so it is little wonder that this war would produce spiritual wounds from a spiritual war in which Americans were assured that God was on their side.<sup>1</sup>

Within a few days, U.S. Special Forces were on the ground in Afghanistan on a mission to topple the Taliban, who were providing shelter to Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaida terror network. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in weeks. By 2010, 1.9 million American men and women had deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, fighting these wars at a cost that measures in the hundreds of billions of dollars.<sup>2</sup> But the costs of these wars cannot be measured in dollars alone. By 2011, 4,457 Americans had died in uniform and the number of Iraqi and Afghani civilian deaths are estimated to be over 100,000.<sup>3</sup> Advances in trauma care on the battlefield led to a higher survival rate for severely wounded combatants, a phenomenon that has produced battalions of double, triple, and quadruple amputees from the conflict. And then there are the invisible wounds of war. The exposure to and participation in the toxic, traumatic, and deeply disturbing events of war produces psychological wounds, the most common being post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is on the rise among veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. The Veterans Administration (VA) estimates that more than 21 percent of combat veterans suffer from PTSD, and veterans with PTSD consume almost twice as much general healthcare as those without a clinical mental health diagnosis.<sup>4</sup> The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR), lists the standard symptoms of PTSD as including numbing,

detachment, absence of emotional responsiveness, a reduction in awareness of surroundings, depersonalization, and dissociative amnesia.<sup>5</sup> PTSD affects interpersonal relationships as combat veterans detach and numb themselves to their feelings. For example, a young soldier with a loving girlfriend wants to leave her. The returning soldier tells me that she loves her boyfriend, but she does not want to talk to him or be with him. Self-medication and substance abuse enable this numbing and sabotage recovery. Recent studies provide evidence that PTSD also affects the spiritual and religious life of combat veterans.<sup>6</sup> Ed Tick, a psychiatrist working with PTSD patients, describes PTSD as an identity wound of the soul that affects the personality at the deepest level.<sup>7</sup> Participation in wars that are fought in the mythic realm of good versus evil can leave combatants with complex spiritual wounds that manifest in broken relationships with others, themselves, and even God.

From the first days of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, military chaplains from a wide variety of faith groups and denominations were with their soldiers offering pastoral care and religious support in the midst of combat. These men and women followed their threefold mission to nurture the living, care for the wounded, and honor the dead. Chaplains often participated in the same traumatic events that their warrior congregations experienced; hence they are often traumatized at a similar level of intensity as their soldiers. Even if they were not active participants in the traumatic events, all chaplains spent countless hours listening to the survivors relate their stories of combat trauma. Since they carry these stories of combat trauma in the strictest confidentiality that the military offers, they rarely find a safe place to tell of their own experiences.

Traumatic events often produce crises of faith in religious people. As a chaplain, I am interested in how my fellow chaplains experience these crises and how they resolve them. In many ways, the crises produced by trauma are theologically fertile places. The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth coined the term "crisis theology," because, he argued, the finite human situation, full of death, pain, and longing, creates such a crisis that can only be resolved by a God who is "wholly other" and outside the finite world of our existence.<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich said that Barth's theological work "saved European Protestantism" after it was torn apart in World War II.<sup>9</sup> As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan conclude, we need theological reflection to assist in the healing process.

I write this chapter as a combat chaplain who carries the stories of my own combat trauma and the stories of my warrior congregation. As such, I am both a participant in the trauma experience and a caregiver for those who endured it. I began this work during my quest to understand my own crises of faith after my combat experience. During this quest, I encountered other chaplains who had similar crises of faith, in this war and in past wars. My doctor of ministry dissertation, *"Shattered: An Analysis of Paul Tillich's Experience in World War I and His Search for Healing,"* was an attempt to understand my own experience theologically.

In their work, chaplains occupy a middle ground, a liminal space, between the military hierarchy and medical community, and are therefore open to creative, nonmedical ways of helping soldiers return from war. Chaplains have always been content to allow the medical community to treat the *D* in PTSD, and the medical community is doing this with determination, compassion, and success. Chaplains, however, focus on the theological and spiritual changes that occur when the whole person is forever changed by war.

As a chaplain who listens to stories, my work is akin to oral history in many ways. Primarily, both chaplains and oral historians acknowledge the importance of the interviewer in the interview. Though there are similarities, there are also four important distinctions between the work of the chaplain and the oral historian.

A principal difference lies in desired outcome. When a chaplain meets with an individual, he is much more interested in the healing of the storyteller than in the detailed accuracy of the story. I am not trying to reconstruct the timeline of a traumatic event; I am trying to be present with the soldier while she reenters the experience of loss and trauma. I want them to know they are not alone in their pain.

A second distinction is that my primary task is to equip the storyteller so they can make meaning out of their story. Trauma produces a confusion of meaning. Clichés like “everything happens for a reason” have been repeated to me many times. My first response to this statement is, “So what does this amputation, wound, or death mean to you?” I never impose my meaning on another person; I help them make their own meaning from *their* experience and *their* theology. Meaning making, for me, is a theological task. “Where was God when my buddy died?” and a host of other questions are the hallmarks of the crises of faith that people experience in combat. As a chaplain, I use theology to help people integrate their traumatic experiences into their spiritual lives.

A third distinction is the reality that a chaplain is both an insider and an outsider in the military community. Chaplains are assigned to the commander’s staff. As staff officers they advise the commanders in matters of ethics, morale, and religion. Everyone in the army knows I am a chaplain. I wear the symbols of my calling on my uniform. Sewn onto the center of my jacket is my rank insignia. This indicates I am a captain in the army, but the soldiers know I am not like the other captains. Above my embroidered name tag on my jacket is a two-inch-square cloth patch with a small black cross embroidered on it. This cross tells my soldiers that I am different, that I am an outsider. The main symbol of my outsider status is that I am always unarmed in combat. Although chaplains are allowed to carry weapons by the Geneva Convention, the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps has chosen to go into combat unarmed. My fellow soldiers know I will never have to kill in combat, even though I may be right next to them in the heat of battle.

On the right sleeve of the jacket is my combat patch. This is the patch I earned by deploying to Baghdad, Iraq, for twelve months in 2006. They know that I deployed and participated in war. This builds trust and creates a strong insider identity.

As clergy outsiders in a warrior culture, many chaplains draw on techniques that are more commonly used in the academic discipline of anthropology. I made this connection while reading several of Jared Diamond's works, most notably, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies*.<sup>10</sup> When an anthropologist enters a tribal society in New Guinea, she is clearly an outsider. In order to do thorough research, the anthropologist must participate in the life of the society. This participation in the life of the society can give him or her access to the inner psychological, sociological, and spiritual dynamics of the society. Many of these same techniques are used by missionaries who are trying to convert people to their own religion. In contrast to the missionary, military chaplains follow a code of ethics that forbids them from seeking out converts for their particular faith group. Military chaplains are free to lead worship in their particular tradition but are charged with the responsibility to ensure the freedom of religion for every soldier. Therefore, the chaplain is somewhere between an anthropologist who is trying to fit in to the culture and a missionary who is trying to change the culture.

A fourth, and principal, distinction lies in the fact that chaplains are the only military personnel who have complete and total confidentiality. Everything that is told to the chaplain is told in the seal of the confessional, and soldiers and chaplains are very conscious of this. So many memories of combat involve shame. The military can be, for many, a "zero defect" organization. In spite of constant training and preparedness, there will always be casualties in war. Leaders often feel shame for "not doing more." Many soldiers also feel shame for the unnecessary cruelties they commit in war. My experience with this high level of confidentiality happened the first time I felt the death grip that sealed a warrior's confession. When I experienced this, I knew that being an army chaplain was my true calling. I had been back from Iraq for a few months and was assigned to Madigan Army Medical Center in Fort Lewis, Washington, where I visited patients in their rooms. At Madigan, most of the patients were retired soldiers who had spent more than twenty years on active duty. These veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam went to war with chaplains when they were young men, and now that they were old men, they needed us more than ever.

I was standing by the bed of a Korean War veteran when he grabbed my forearm with a strength that seems out of place in the intensive care unit. He held tightly onto my arm and looked straight into my eyes. He uttered, "Chaplain, I've never told anyone this but I don't have much time." I paused, then responded, "What is it you want to tell me?" Then he related his story. It was a story of what he did in the war when he was in charge of enemy prisoners of war, twenty-five, to be exact. He feared they would escape, so he made the biggest one kneel



down in the dirt in front of the rest. He lit a cigarette and sucked in the smoke until the cherry glowed red. Then he stuck the burning end into the prisoner's nostril. His voice was monotone and his face betrayed no emotion. The only feeling he expressed was in his grip, his death grip. He carried the story all these years until this moment. Now his chaplain bore it with him and he was not alone. He relaxed his grip and laid his head back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. He exhaled. I was on one knee by his bed so that my head was level with his. When he released me, I stood up and thanked him for sharing his story. I began to tell him of God's forgiveness but he was already asleep. I quietly left the room and walked down the hallway of the hospital.

I came back the next day to see him and he was sitting up in his bed. He was doing better, he told me, and we never revisited what he shared the day before. The window of confession opened for a brief moment, and then it shut.

In her interview, Christina's reflections show how chaplains experience changes in their relationships after combat. For Christina and most clergy, one's family is fully integrated into one's success as a clergyperson. Christian Scripture and most ordination vows include admonitions to maintain an orderly and respectable family. A crisis at home can ruin a chaplain's career.

Christina offended her family by pulling away from them at the precise moment they expected her to be most present. After all, from their perspective, she is finally home. For Christina, her "home" is with these brave young men and women in Iraq. In the hardship of war they formed a strong bond that seems more solid than even family connections back home. She accepted them as they were, even with their crudities. Soldiers in combat are intensely relational with the others who endured the same experience. Truly, love forged in war is as strong as death.

When a soldier deploys to Iraq or Afghanistan for a tour of twelve to fifteen months, changes take place both in the soldier and in those who are left behind. Before redeploying away from the war zone, soldiers receive dozens of briefings and view short videos telling them to expect changes in their wives, girlfriends, husbands, children, parents, and friends. In spite of the education, few are ready to embrace these shifts. Romantic relationships often experience a "honeymoon" phase of heightened but confusing sexual activity that masks tension for a short time. Parents ask questions that soldiers have difficulty answering, and there is always someone asking the returning soldier if he killed anyone. The combat veteran shuts down around civilians and outsiders, and often communicates comfortably only with others who have experienced the same trauma of war.

In the trauma of helping recover the mutilated body parts of dead soldiers, Michael was surprised by the intense sexual urges that followed the experience. Trauma upsets preconceived and parochial ideas of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, and much of this is lived out in the sexual arena. Ed Tick uses mythic language to describe this phenomenon: "When Ares, the god of war

is invoked, Eros, the goddess of lust shows up."<sup>11</sup> When the soldier comes home, she must find a new healthy way to be sexual in relationship to others. Because of the confidentiality I offer, several homosexual soldiers during the Don't Ask, Don't Tell era felt safe enough to tell me how, after returning from war, they were more emboldened to risk their careers by having sex. Stories of affairs, infidelity, adultery, and secret use of pornography after coming home are all narrated manifestations of the spiritual changes that happen after combat trauma.

In spite of our attachments to others, we are, in our essence, individuals. We are born alone and we die alone. When I first arrived in Iraq, I noticed that after a week of running combat missions "outside the wire" I was no longer afraid of death. In fact, I have never had a soldier tell me he was afraid to die. What soldiers have told me, through their actions, statements, and stories, is that they are afraid of being alone. When a soldier is alone he must face memories. Grief and regret often leave him anxious and in a spiritual crisis that may lead to seeking sexual connection with another person. Sexual morality in Christianity is strictly defined by most churches, and this often is in conflict with the impulses that follow the trauma of combat.

One of the staff officers I deployed with told me that there were two kinds of mad: mad, and there was Iraq mad! The transformed emotional landscape of the post-traumatic self can be seen in Timothy's burst of anger when he found an enlisted man in his room after he was told he had terminal cancer. This burst of anger surprised Timothy and disturbed him. It was a signal that he was somehow different. The outburst of anger even suggested the dreaded possibility that he had inherited the anger of his parents. The personality and identity changes in combat veterans are often surprising at first. Many people expect clergy to be nice and polite. After combat, the anger that chaplains feel can be a spiritual crisis. There have been many days after my combat experience in which I stared in the mirror and asked, "Who am I?"

Every soldier wears an ID tag, or "dog tag." In addition to her name, blood type, and gas mask size, the ID tag records the soldier's religious preference. The purpose of this is to enable chaplains and caregivers to offer appropriate religious support in the event the soldier is wounded or killed. One of my roles as a chaplain is to ensure that soldiers are free to practice their religion within the parameters set by the military mission. At Walter Reed I advocated on behalf of Muslim soldiers for permission to grow beards and wear the *hijab* (a black headscarf worn by Muslim women) while in uniform. For another soldier, I advocated that he be allowed to leave the room when the chaplain prayed at meetings because he was an atheist and felt as if religion was being pushed on him. Many soldiers come from traditional religious backgrounds, and others discover new religious practices while in the army. Still others abandon religion altogether, list themselves as "no religious preference," and may describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious. Chaplains have the duty to care for everyone who wears the uniform.

Combat veterans often experience a renewed energy to practice the disciplines of its faith. Craig became more devoted to his religious disciplines while in Iraq because he now understood how traumatic the experience of a deployment could be. He was exposed to the reality of death in war but still made promises to his commander to maintain his relationship with God so that he could preserve the lives of the soldiers in his unit. From this we can see that Craig places a great deal of trust in his religious practices—they can even prevent death in war. And yet, in spite of that trust, he willingly acknowledges that he does not have all the answers about God. He often finds it difficult to draw hard lines about right and wrong, as Christine narrated earlier. War is uncertain and mysterious and therefore defies easy answers. Warriors learn early to suspend their judgments and complete the mission. When they return home, they find that all of life defies easy answers. Craig's last statement that "You do not know much about God" demonstrates that his experience with the trauma of war has brought about a sense of faithful doubt about his own knowledge of God.

In my experience, I have found that combat veterans often admit that doubt and faith can coexist. I have observed this in countless interviews with soldiers and chaplains like Timothy. When Timothy told me that he did not trust God, his face grew pale and he glanced nervously around the office. The heavy door had been shut, and he continued to speak about this. At first, he said that his lack of trust in God might prevent him from preaching in a congregation. However, his wife also observes that he is a better preacher after his experience with war and cancer. Combat chaplains can often speak to God from a new place with honest, vulnerable, and sometimes irreverent voices.

Soldiers know they can die at any moment. They look into the abyss and often experience an existential awakening. George references this in his first sentence. He realized the limits to his pastoral endurance and the need he had to share his own stories. Combat chaplains often feel overwhelmed and anxious. For George, this anxiety led to him to walk out of church on a Sunday. He told me that when the pastor prayed for the troops, George was reminded of the many memorial services he conducted for the fallen soldiers in his unit. Even though these memorial services were meaningful events, they taxed George's emotional endurance and subsequently traumatized him. This became obvious to him when he reflected on his own, out-of-character reaction.

Combat chaplains are often anxious and uncomfortable even in the presence of God. When a human relationship experiences discord, the symbols of the relationship become symbols of discord. Rings are taken off and flowers are thrown away. The same is true for humans who are experiencing disharmony with God. Symbols of God, such as church, become reminders of the strained relationship and therefore avoided. When I hear that a soldier is experiencing pain in his or her relationship with God I try to explore the nature and characteristics of the pre-traumatic God, and the nature of the soldier's relationship with that God. I encourage the soldier to explore different theological and philosophical understandings of God that may better resonate with his or her new identity.

Personally, I have found the theology of Tillich to be helpful in this endeavor. He served as a German army chaplain in World War I and later came to the United States after being exiled by Hitler. Tillich said, "God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore to argue that God exists is to deny him."<sup>12</sup> He posited that God is not a being among many, but the ground of being itself. I believe that this shift from God as a being among many to God as the ground of being can help combat veterans understand why God was silent and inactive when traumatic events occurred in combat. There are many other approaches to this theological problem, but this is one that I found helpful in my own journey home from war.

The sacrifices of war are often thought of as the loss of life and limb to enemy weapons. An often-overlooked sacrifice of war is found in the trauma associated with the act of killing. Those who kill in war often feel that their relationship with God is changed by their actions and reactions. Few events in war are more traumatic than the act of killing. Killing in combat is often an act of instinct that surprises the killer with feelings of guilt that follow the act of killing. In many of my interviews with combat veterans, I heard them express their feelings of guilt. While deployed to Iraq, I offered pastoral counseling to a soldier who killed an enemy combatant just an hour before our meeting. The insurgent was shooting at his guard tower and he fired back, hitting the shooter, who died instantly. This young soldier was surprised by how horrible he felt when all his teammates were celebrating and patting him on the back for his excellent shot. He told me that he had "crossed a line," and then he cried. History records who won or lost battles, and where the new boundary lines were drawn after the treaty was signed. Combat veterans know they have crossed the boundary lines of the soul, and they will fight to redraw the lines of good and evil, right and wrong, true and untrue for years to come.

The main point of overlap for my work as a chaplain and the work of the oral historian is in the way chaplains and oral historians collect and curate stories to help the culture at large understand the wars that shape our national life. As chaplains and clergy preach sermons and write books, they are attempting to help our nation make choices that reflect the golden rule, a rule that exists in most religious traditions ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"). The stories of trauma and pain that we carry compel us to be passionate about this message because we know what is at stake. Oral historians also teach the culture how to make wise decisions by presenting an accurate picture of past failures and triumphs. Oral historians remind society how big decisions, made by powerful leaders, affect the lives of ordinary people.

During my last year at Walter Reed, I taught the suicide prevention course required for all the hospital staff. Every time I present the material I remember the soldiers I have served with who took their own lives. The suicide rate in the army has gone up every year since 2006. In 2009–10 the army lost more soldiers to suicide than it did in Iraq or Afghanistan. A 2010 Department of Defense study found that between 2005 and 2009 a member of the U.S. military died

from suicide every thirty-six hours.<sup>13</sup> The DOD study does not count the men and women who take their own life after they are discharged from the military.

In Sophocles' play *Ajax*, the great warrior Ajax invokes the goddess Athena in his fight against his enemies. "Stand by me, Athena, stand by me always, help me with my fight," he shouts as he rushes into battle.<sup>14</sup> But Athena betrays him in the battle and Ajax is disgraced. He cannot recover his dignity, and the play ends tragically with his suicide. Combat chaplains often feel betrayed by others and by God, and the ensuing existential crisis can be fatal. These deaths affect the entire military community, and these now-silent soldiers serve as enduring reminders of the work that must continue in our offices, our communities, and our national dialogue to prove to our soldiers that their stories are heard and that we are trying to understand their difficult work.

## Notes

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# 13

## A LONG SONG

Oral History in the Time of Emergency  
and After

Mary Marshall Clark

**Oral histories by Gerry Albarelli and Temma Kaplan with  
Mohammad Bilal-Mizra, Talat Hamdani, Zaheer Jaffery, Salmaan  
Jaffery, and Zohra Saed, New York City, October 2001 to June 2005**

*The Columbia Center for Oral History has, to date, gathered and transcribed more than nine hundred hours of testimony on the events of September 11, 2001. This large-scale effort includes five projects and programs focusing on a number of areas of inquiry related to the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center. The voices collected during this project are representative of the wide range of experiences of the catastrophe. Included here are excerpts of oral histories with Mohammad Bilal-Mizra, a taxi and limousine driver in New York City; Talat Hamdani, a public school teacher in Flushing, Queens; Zaheer Jaffery, a Port Authority executive who worked in the North Tower; Salmaan Jaffery, Zaheer's son, a banker with an appointment in the South Tower the morning of September 11; and New York poet and academic Zohra Saed. These interviews were conducted by teacher and writer Gerry Albarelli and historian Temma Kaplan between October 2001 and June 2005.*

**INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMMAD BILAL-MIZRA BY  
GERRY ALBARELLI, NOVEMBER 23, 2001, AND  
DECEMBER 30, 2002**

**[New York City]**

*Mohammad Bilal-Mizra was born in Pakistan and came to the United States in 1984. His uncle, Mohammed Rafik Butt, died in detention at age fifty-five in the Hudson County Correctional Center on October 23, 2001.*

ALBARELLI: What made you come here?

BILAL-MIZRA: I just look for a better future. I had a dream to come to America and work in this country. I have heard so many times in Pakistan, my colleagues

talking about America. My brother came over here for an education and he told me. I see pictures of the World Trade Center, Statue of Liberty, these places. I have a dream to go to this place and look at that. . . . I decided to stay over here and work very hard in this country. I [am] a limo operator. The limo is my own, and I work there. I am very happy. Sometimes I work a little bit hard for my parents, also.

ALBARELLI: What do you mean you work hard for your parents?

BILAL-MIZRA: I send them money over there, you know. My father ran a bar, and about forty years my father has retired, he's not working. Right now, my father is 101 years old and he's in wonderful health.

ALBARELLI: Your religious upbringing, what was that like?

BILAL-MIZRA: Sunni Muslim. But I believe in all kinds of religion. All kinds of religion are respectable. In every single religion, people believe in God. There is only a little bit of difference [about] Prophet Muhammad. Muslim people believe in Jesus too, and Catholic people believe in Muhammad prophet too. There are not big differences, you know. They respect all religions. Muslims respect every single religion. The four books, holy books: Koran, Injil, Bible, Tevat, the four books are holy and we believe in all books.

ALBARELLI: Well, tell me where you were on September 11.

BILAL-MIZRA: I sleeping, actually. I was working at night—driving three days a cab and part-time. My mother is here and I came home late in the morning, and I am sleeping. My wife wake up about 10:00 and hears they have big news about the World Trade Center. I woke up right away. All the time I see the World Trade Center. I am living on sixth floor. I just open the window and there is kind of a white dust in the sky. After an hour, I take my car and go to the downtown area, near Smith Street. I go near by Battery Tunnel, and I can't stay over there even two minutes. There is a smell of burning and I can't breathe, and I close the window. I make a turn to come back home.

ALBARELLI: Tell me then what happened to your relative.

BILAL-MIZRA: September 13, my other relative tell us—two of my uncles have been living in Queens with their roommates—and they ask me to go over there. They have neighbors who called [the authorities] and say that they are four people, Pakistani, live in the area. And FBI searching the people and looking for a connection with those who were involved in this incident. FBI took them and I don't know where he is.

ALBARELLI: All four of them?

BILAL-MIZRA: Right. Third day, his roommate call us. He is released, he had a green card, he call us. "Your uncle could be in Jersey City and he is in jail." He says. [My uncle] had a heart attack in the jail and he died over there.

ALBARELLI: How old was he?

BILAL-MIZRA: About fifty-five. He never said he had a heart problem. September 23, 2000, he came [to the United States]. He had a visa for five years and

he overstayed about four or five months. My idea is eight or nine million peoples in this country are illegals. But September 11, the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] changed their policies for having illegals here, and they try to send them back to their country. Especially the people who are involved with Saudi Arabia and other countries. But I don't understand why the INS took lot of Pakistani people. The Pakistan government helped the United States government [fight] terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

## INTERVIEW WITH TALAT HAMDANI BY GERRY ALBARELLI, APRIL 29 AND JUNE 29, 2005

[New York City]

*Talat Hamdani was born in 1954 in Karachi, Pakistan. She and her husband brought her infant son, Mohammed Salmaan Hamdani, with them to New York City some decades later. Talat was teaching in an early morning program on September 11. Salmaan, who had completed his education as a police cadet, was doing research in a chemistry lab at Rockefeller University to enhance his chances of admission to medical school the following year. He was trained as a paramedic and his dream was to become a doctor. When Salmaan did not come home on September 11, Talat could not believe that he had died. Her mind was fixed that he was at Rockefeller University. Maybe something else happened to him, she thought. So before she traveled to Mecca in October 2001, she wrote a letter on his behalf addressed to George Bush, and other officials.*

HAMDANI: We showed the flyer to firemen and everyone. No one saw him at all. We just prayed and prayed and prayed. Then I wrote a letter to [George W.] Bush on October 2 because someone told me that people had been detained. "So maybe your son was picked up," someone said.

I said, "Hopefully." So I wrote a letter to President Bush, registered and certified, return receipt, and I mailed copies of it to ex-president [William J.] Clinton and [Senator Charles] Schumer, I think. I don't know who else. Mayor [Rudolph W.] Giuliani, Governor [George E.] Pataki, and Hillary [R.] Clinton. Nobody responded. Then in October I said, "Let's go to Mecca. Maybe we'll get an answer from there, whether he's alive or dead."

*Talat made several calls to the mortuary before she left.*

HAMDANI: The day we are leaving a police officer called. He said, "I want his computer. I want to check his computer." I said, "Why would I give you my computer? You want to check on me? You come here and check." "No, we want to check it at..." I said, "No. It's my only computer." "Why won't you give it to us?" I said, "I use it, my boys use it." "What was his password?" he asked. I said, "You're American. You think he would give me his password?" I just



lost my temper that day. I said, "I'm not going to talk to you until and unless you tell me where my son is. If you're holding him, give me my son back."

Then they didn't call back after that.

*Later, Talat learned that the police department had circulated a flyer with Salmaan's picture, asking anyone who knew him to step forward. The New York Post, which published a story about Salmaan under the headline "Missing or Hiding," went so far as to insinuate that Salmaan was seen near Manhattan's Midtown tunnel at 11:00 A.M. on September 11.*

HAMDANI: But we were in Mecca at that time, so we couldn't defend ourselves.

My sister told me that [Gary L.] Ackerman's office called and she said, "They have some news about your son." I said, "When I get back, I'll call you." We came back after, I think, twelve days or something. I called their office and Congressman Ackerman spoke with me. He investigated, "How did he look? What did he do?" So many things were against him, poor kid. He was a Muslim, number one. He had a light beard. Because he was lazy in shaving, you know. He had kinky hair, and they were growing, because he thought he was chemistry major, he was an Einstein, so he took pride in that. He had a Koran on him. We all read the Koran in English; had a Koran in English. He had a NYPD ID, what do you call it? EMT [emergency medical technician]. He was a certified EMT. So everything went against him, you know. And anthrax came out that time of the year. Remember, anthrax? If you had asked him what anthrax is, he would tell you. He was an excellent student. Because Dr. Harsh said, "I haven't seen a student with his potential, in the Chemistry Department. I want to establish a scholarship in his name." His papers came out, two papers came out, this spring, last spring or this spring, somehow. He wrote two papers in chemistry.

So he investigated everything, Ackerman, and he said, "He could be with the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service]." I said, "Well, he's a citizen." He said, "Well, the dividing line is whether you're born here, on U.S. soil or not," and that's what this idea's all about. The dividing line still is whether you're a born citizen or not.

So one thing that happened was I got to know Mr. Ackerman very well, through that experience. He's a nice person. Then, in January, President Bush's secretary replied, "Thank you for your letter. We're forwarding it to the FBI." Five days later, the FBI replied that, "We only investigate criminals," so that's not a denial! So the hope was still there that he was alive and detained. Then [John D.] Ashcroft came on; he was called by the Senate. Are you aware of that? Do you remember how many people he said the federals had detained?

ALBARELLI: I don't remember the exact figure.

HAMDANI: He said 148,000, 148,000 had been detained. They asked him, "Where are you holding them?" and he said, "In federal prisons."

ALBARELLI: "On what charges?"

HAMDANI: "Material witnesses. That's all." And he's mentioned in the [USA] PATRIOT [Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism] Act, my son, for his heroism, but he's mentioned as missing, not dead. And in the PATRIOT Act, you know, it's actually very highly discriminatory, to immigrants and to Muslims. At that time, I didn't know it. At least it cleared his name. It gave him his dignity back, and his honor back, that he wasn't a suspect. He was acknowledged for his heroism.

It's up for renewal now, this year. Some of the clauses are very bad clauses, because they were issued only for three years, or four years, you know, and that's what the Republicans are—I don't know what to call those people—evil? Evil. They want to continue, because they want to take away the fundamental rights of due process. Just by guilt by association, so much is going on, and the people are not aware. Let's get back to where we were.

So I talked to Congressman Ackerman. Then the Voice of America called me. Our hope, always, was that he was alive, that he was alive. The *New York Times* had every day a printing of the names of the dead people. All the papers did, most probably, and the *Times* called you for the "Portraits of Grief," and I said, "No, he's not dead." They said, "Oh, he's not dead? Did you speak to him?" "Yes, I speak to him every day." They must be thinking, what a crazy woman, you know?

So they didn't write a portrait. So the first issue of "Portrait of Grief"—Salmaan is not in it. Then, on March 14th or something like that, the Voice of America called me. They interviewed me, and I said, "They have people detained. If you want to do anything, if you want me to work for it, if you want to get involved, I want to get involved in getting those people liberated." Then I asked him, "When will you air this?" He said, "It will be aired March 21st, starting from midnight, and we go for twenty-four hours, every hour to be aired." Whatever the station was.

So March 21st, from midnight, it was about to start airing, my interview, revealing the detention of all those people. The two police officers came to my home at 11:30 P.M. After this tragedy happened, my husband didn't sleep in the bed. He was sleeping in the living room—that the door was going to open, and Salmaan was going to walk in soon. So on March 20, 2002, at 11:30 P.M., they came in, we were standing, and he said, "This is the number of the medical examiner's office. Call them. Your son has been found dead." And my husband, heartbroken, he just sat down on the floor and started to cry. And he says, "Call now, call now." I said, "Do me a favor. Just leave us, please."

So they left, and I said, "You know, I don't really want to do anything. Let's go to sleep. Nothing is going to change, except more aggravation and hassle for the whole family, also. Let's go to sleep." So we went to sleep. The next day I called my family, and we all went down to the medical examiner's office.

He had a big file, and he was trying to convince us that this was where he was found, by, I think, grid number seven, by the Custom House—the tower that collapsed second but was hit first. I said, “Prove it to me, that he’s my son.” So this is his file, and he drew it towards him, and he said, “Okay, Mrs. Hamdani, go get yourself a lawyer.”

I don’t know why he became so defensive. I said, “Just prove it to me, that he’s my son; that he’s who you’re saying he is.” He said, “Through DNA, we have identified.” I said, “What did you find?” I said, “What if I want to have my own test conducted? To verify that, indeed, these are his remains?” And before that, I said, “Why did it take you so long to confirm them? When did you find his remains?” He said, “They found his remains in the third week of October. The 23rd of October or the 26th of October.”

We came back from Umrah, Mecca, on October 26th. I remember now. Those dates so much coincide.

So I said, “Well, November, December, January, February. It took you five months for DNA? To verify somebody?” “Oh, no. There were like thirty-four pieces. We had to verify all these pieces with your DNA, then with your husband’s DNA and with all the thirty-four parts found.” Bull crap. I’m not stupid. He said, “The only way you could have it tested would be in our presence, and over here.” Remember, the remains are at this hospital, by NYU hospital?

So he says, “Well, we have your records. You have two options. If you want to have someone conduct a test, to verify that these are the remains of your son, they will have to come here and do the test in our presence.” Now who is going to defy the federal government? Nobody. “Or, you take the death certificate and his remains, and do whatever you want to do.” Same thing. They wanted him declared dead, and they did.

So we had no option. I said, “OK.” We decided to pick him up. We had a funeral for him April 5th, because my family had to come from Pakistan and Dubai and England. We had it in the mosque where he used to go to pray for his Friday prayers, the 96th Street mosque, on Second or Third Avenue. And the NYPD gave him a very good, honorable send-off, with the bagpipes and the American flag, and all the NYPD cadets came. Commissioner [Raymond W.] Kelly came, [Michael R.] Bloomberg came, and Congressman [Gary] Ackerman came. So he got his dignity, and his respect.

Two years ago one of my nephews had died, who was also with the NYPD. Salmaan was a very humble person. I don’t remember celebrating anything for him in America except his first birthday in Pakistan. Even when he did his bachelor’s [degree]—No party. No party. “I’ll tell you when to celebrate.” So two years ago, one of my nephews had died of cancer. He was thirty-four years old, he was a sergeant and a veteran, and he saw the funeral that he had gotten from the NYPD, and he said, “Mama, this is honor. This is how I want to go.” And that’s how he went.<sup>2</sup>

*In January 2012, I went online to read the New York Times and saw a lovely young's man's face with the headline "Obscuring a Muslim Name, and an American's Sacrifice." Upon clicking on the article, written by Sharon Otterman, Talat's hopeful face appeared. The story was about the National September 11 Memorial and Museum's refusal to assign Salmaan an official plaque at the museum, because of the museum's family association, which largely decided on who would be represented there, refused to memorialize his sacrifice. The article reads in part:*

Despite this history, Mohammad Salmaan Hamdani is nowhere to be found in the long list of fallen first responders at the National September 11 Memorial in Lower Manhattan. Nor can his name be found among those of victims whose bodies were found in the wreckage of the north tower, where his body was finally discovered in 34 parts.

Instead, his name appears on the memorial's last panel for World Trade Center victims, next to a blank space along the south tower perimeter, with the names of others who did not fit into the rubrics the memorial created to give placements meaning. That section is for those who had only a loose connection, or none, to the World Trade Center.<sup>3</sup>

*Although the museum cannot yet allow Salmaan to be fully represented at the site of his destruction, the New York Times has recorded a fault line in the official memory's mammoth structure, stamping the time of the public recognition of Salmaan's humanity some ten years later.*

*As time passes and I consider all that it took to encourage those we interviewed to trust us with their narratives, I realize with new appreciation why life stories sometimes take generations, even centuries, to explain. After all, both identity and the confusion about identity are located in time, in the historic contexts we inherit and are born into. It is no surprise that before Gerry Albarelli began his interview with Zaheer Jaffery, the father of Salmaan, Zaheer told Gerry he would have to begin several hundred years before his birth to give the historical context, six hundred in fact. Fortunately, Gerry told him he had all day.*

**INTERVIEWS WITH ZAHEER JAFFERY BY  
GERRY ALBARELLI, NOVEMBER 16, 2001, AND  
WITH SALMAAN JEFFERY, DECEMBER 3, 2001,  
DECEMBER 4, 2002, AND JUNE 21, 2005**

**[New York City]**

*Zaheer Jaffery's story is deeply connected to that of his son, Salmaan. The striking thing about their stories is that Zaheer, who is a survivor of polio and walks with a cane, did not describe his descent as traumatic. He was far more concerned for Salmaan, who for nine hours believed his father was dead, and also lived through the*

*terror of the backlash against Muslims and other immigrants in the days and weeks afterward.*

### **Zaheer Jaffery**

ALBARELLI: Would you start by telling me a little bit about your early life: where you're from, where you were born, something about your family.

ZAHEER JAFFERY: I was born in India, migrated to Pakistan when I was about four years old; that is 1949. In 1968, I came to the USA for the first time. I would say that as far as my ethnicity is concerned, I'm not truly either a Pakistani or an Indian as such. My family spent about six hundred years in Iran before coming to India. In India we spent, maybe, a hundred fifty, hundred sixty years—we came in the reign of [Emperor] Jahangir. So that's not that long [ago]; it's about two hundred years. But we were five, six hundred years in Iran and before that in Syria. In any case, that is my background. I became a U.S. citizen about twenty-five years ago.<sup>4</sup> I grew up as a fairly moderate Muslim. I would fast, I would pray but not five times a day. But we were all relatively extremely well read. In other words, I knew more about religion than many, many people who prayed five times a day and fasted all thirty days of the month and year after year. We came from a book-loving family, and therefore we think we had a slightly different take on religion than the man in the streets.<sup>5</sup>

I was so focused on “escaping,” that as people ask me: Did I have nightmares? Did I have sleepless nights? No. Because I think I totally exhausted my adrenaline in trying to just get away. There was no conflict between flight or flee kind of thing. It was just flee! On the other hand, my son, my eldest son, he had a very rough time. He had an appointment in World Trade Center One [North Tower]. He was working out of World Financial Center, which is just across the street. His train stopped there around, what, 8:40, 8:45. He had a 9:00 appointment. He heard outside some kind of muffled roar or bang and people started running. Somebody said, “There’s been a shooting.” He goes up to the lobby and he senses there’s something drastically wrong, and he sees debris falling. So he comes out and then waits for me. We often have lunch together or used to have lunch together, my son and I. You know, once a week or so we would just get together and have lunch in that courtyard. So he stands there and he says he saw thousands of people leave until he was asked to leave by officials. He stood there for like a couple of hours—the people would make him move and he would move and then he would stand somewhere else. He could not believe I would have survived, that I made it.

So he called my other son, who was working in New Jersey, upstate New Jersey, I mean, north New Jersey, and he said, “Mustafa, you’d better go home and take charge and be the man of the house because I cannot get out, all the bridges and tunnels are closed and Baba is dead. There is no way he

could have made it out. I stood there until everyone had left and the building was going down.” He saw the second building hit by the plane. He saw the bodies fall out. He saw one body fall and hit within forty feet of him. And so he went home to a cousin’s apartment. They offered prayers of the dead for me. So he had actually given me up for good. And he had a very rough time later.<sup>6</sup>

## Salmaan Jaffery

ALBARELLI: How has your life changed, if it has changed, since September 11?

SALMAAN JAFFERY: It’s changed significantly. First and foremost, I lost my job. I mean, my job went away because the Winter Garden and the annex building were damaged. My job moved to New Jersey and then they don’t have the budget [to keep me].

Emotionally, I think everyone around us, we were all affected, and we all talked about it for a good two months afterward. The first five, six days was literally CNN watching, around the clock, this obsession with why, what, where information. Not much reflection, not much digestion of the information, but just information. The Sunday following [9/11] was the first time it really hit me, and a sense of despair just came over me.

But then something else happened afterward which was even more disturbing. Because even beyond the day-to-day sorrow and the death and the trauma, things that affect who you are as a person [become] very powerful. So this whole question about who is responsible [had a big impact]. What does it mean to be a Muslim? What does it mean to be a Pakistani-Muslim? What does it mean to be an American Muslim? Why are Muslims doing this? Are Muslims doing this? The terrorists were Muslim. I happen to be someone who was very soul-searching to begin with. I also know a lot about our history and I am a keen, keen follower of foreign policy in the Middle East. I’ve been active, I’ve written, I’ve read. So this was a very, very big question for me, and it’s continued from that day until today.

The first couple of weeks I did not leave my neighborhood. I was afraid. I wasn’t afraid I’d be attacked. I was afraid I’d face someone who was belligerent, who I could not counter because it was such a moment of national grief. When people are upset you can’t say a thing to un-upset them. So I kept a very low profile. Plus, there were killings in Texas and Phoenix. A Sikh guy got killed in Phoenix. A Pakistani was killed in Houston. A couple of friends got harassed. For the month and a half afterward, I shaved every day. I hate shaving and I do have a pretty thick beard, [but] I took no chances. I’m even ashamed to admit this—no, actually, I’m not ashamed. I dressed as “Yankee” as I could. I didn’t wear [my] black leather jacket or black jeans or black shoes. I wore shorts, my vest, my baseball cap, because I just didn’t want to stand out. I had been reading very vigorously before 9/11, by the way. It’s so weird

because I had been reading books about Islam. I was pissed off at us. Muslims have lost a PR battle. We have given in to fundamentalism. We don't look at all the great sort of nonpracticing things in our religion. Unfortunately, we have become a religion that people associate with violence, and it's not.<sup>7</sup>

### Zaheer Jaffery

ALBARELLI: What are your feelings now, four years after this event? What are your personal feelings about the aftermath of 9/11 and the changes, if any, that you have seen in this country?

ZAHEER JAFFERY: I would say there are two aspects to it. One is the effect it would have had on me as an individual, and that would not matter whether I was of any particular faith or ethnic origin. But the other thing is the impact that it had on the Islamic *umma*, the Islamic brethren of the community, as such. On a personal level, it did wake me up—as if I needed to be awakened—that life can be snubbed out in a second. I had made a resolution—and again, the funny thing is, you still lose track of it; that life is so precious, that you should enjoy each day of it. I did a couple of things that I probably would not have done, except for 9/11. I made a deliberate choice that I'm going to limit my social interaction. Gerry, you may have some idea, having spoken to me, my son, having visited my house a little bit, and maybe other people from India and Pakistan—the subcontinent—that we are an extremely social people. We may not go out to the beach that often, or do picnics or skiing—but every chance we get we love to get together. Sometimes it becomes almost a social obligation, because so much of sand grains of your life that are falling are spent in inane things, like countless weddings, and this and that, celebrations, and I cut down on that. I said to my wife, "Tell them I've got a second chance in life, and if I feel like staying home and reading a book, I'm not going there." Gradually, people have come to terms with it. So I have become less social.<sup>8</sup>

### INTERVIEWS WITH ZOHRA SAED BY TEMMA KAPLAN, JANUARY 15, 2002, AND MAY 1, 2003; AND BY GERRY ALBARELLI ON JUNE 24, 2005

[New York City]

*Zohra Saed was born in Afghanistan, and her interview begins like that of a poet, describing her origins in the broadest historical and literary terms as so many people from the Middle East and South Asia did—revealing the power of language to begin a new dialogue.*

KAPLAN: Would you just introduce yourself, and say who you are and what you do?

SAED: My name is Zohra Saed. I am a first-generation Afghan American immigrant. I'm a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, where I'm in

the English literature program, and I'm focusing on literature on Afghanistan during the "Great Game" and the Cold War eras.

I'm also a poet. I'm co-editing an anthology of Afghan writings from 1978, during the communist revolution there, until the present war and situation here. So, I don't know what else to say.

*Zohra is not as interested in continuing her own life story as she is in telling the stories of her ancestors, whom she invokes in order to be able to make meaning of her own experiences of September 11 and also to provide a historic context through which she wants Americans to hear the history of the Taliban.*

KAPLAN: Would you talk about what you remember from your early life, and a little bit about your family, and the background, and where you were born, and your cousins and relatives, and the first poem you remember?

SAED: I was born in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, on the rooftop. I was premature, I think by a month, so I was eight months. They were so surprised that my father ended up delivering me, on the roof. He was a med school dropout, ended going up into dental school, so he had some idea of what was happening. He actually knew more than the midwife who was there, who apparently panicked more than my father.

So I was born on the rooftop, in Jalalabad, of our house, of our family house. It was just my mother and my father. The rest of the family had gone over to Kabul. So that's my entrance into the world.

We left Afghanistan in 1976, when I was a year old. My grandmother actually was living in Saudi Arabia, in Mecca. My grandfather was half-paralyzed, and because his wife was so young, she was able to get a divorce. He actually granted her a divorce, and she ran off to live with her father in Mecca. Her father had chosen to live there because he had become very pious and wanted to be in the city of God.<sup>9</sup>

KAPLAN: When you went back to Brooklyn, after a few weeks, what was the response of the Afghani community, and your friends in the larger community, to all of the events that succeeded the attack?

SAED: For the first, that week, I stayed home. On the weekend, we ended up going out, and we went to Queens. I think my family was afraid to go to New Jersey, because there were all these checkpoints. My father was nervous, and he was just like, "What if they think, because of our name, I don't want them to sort of blame us for something. So let's just stay in New York, and not have to deal with it."

We were all afraid to really come out. We were all afraid to do anything, really, just for being Muslims. And I think also a sense of guilt that we shared anything with the people who did this. There's a lot of guilt too. Like—we're sorry. The executive director of my English program, Joan Richardson, called me in when I came back, to talk to me and tell me that she was there for me, and it was very warm and very sweet, and she had lost someone in the World



Trade Center. It was very emotional. I told my father, and he was just like, "Oh, my God. I can't believe they would talk to us." I mean, that's his thing, because so many other parts of the world, you would be persecuted immediately. Like, no one would reach out to you, for sharing this culture or religion or anything with these people, and he was just like, "This is great that she would be able to do that."

So the first weekend, we went to Queens, the Afghan community. And we were just sort of shopping, just to see—I don't know if we needed anything, but I think we just wanted to see what was going on, and we wanted to go out together. So we went to the Afghan shops. Everything seemed fine. There were a lot of flags. There were a lot of flags around. There were not a lot of veiled women. And in Flushing, Queens, that's something to notice.

There were three veiled women, and they were all surrounded by people. You had this little, veiled, old woman, and you had like three huge men around her. So it was definitely noticeable that people were hiding and not coming out. We were at the Queens Botanical Gardens, and, again, if you were out, you had to have flags all over, if you looked Middle Eastern or South Asian. No veiled women were there.

Of course, we had our flags too on it. Of course; I mean, you couldn't go out without it. I mean, it's not that we were less American or anything, for not wanting to put on the flag because of the war, for being patriotic, but we were scared Americans, because we were being so easily targeted. We had to change our phone number two times, because people got it and were prank-calling our house, and cursing us out.

KAPLAN: They were cursing you out?

SAED: Yes, and whoever was there. There were flyers of [Osama] bin Laden on our door, and my father's like, "You know, I'd be the first one to get this guy. I mean, he's in our country. He's been destroying Afghanistan for so long. Don't you think the Afghan people would hate him as much?" But there wasn't any distinction between Afghans, the realities they had to face in Afghanistan, and these terrorists, who, none of them were Afghan and had, I guess, taken over this—I don't know what kind of stress I'm going through right now.

So that was the first week. Everyone was just hiding. I got a lot of emails, telling me to be careful, because I'm always very vocal. I've been writing about Afghanistan and talking about Afghanistan for so long, just talking about the women's issue, talking about just everything. From '97, we started the Afghan magazine, the *Afghan Communicator* magazine, which was like the first youth magazine for Afghan Americans. It was for everyone, but it was in English, mostly.

So I've been active in the community since '97, so everyone was really concerned about me—my friends, my activist friends—about what I was doing, about being careful, about just sort of watching what I did and what I said. I didn't really think what I said was anything against what was—I mean, what

I was doing was basically bringing to attention that Afghans were terrorized in Afghanistan, you know, basically, that there were all these foreigners that no one wanted to see before.

And that's something the Afghan activists were trying to do for years, when the Taliban came in. I mean, it was just I think from '97, when people woke up and realized the Taliban weren't who they said they were, and there were all these foreign radicals there. Everyone was trying to get this information out to the world and get world assistance for this problem. I know, [Ahmad Shah] Massoud, Commander Massoud, the head of the opposition group who fought the Taliban for years, who was, of course, killed. Before all this, he had sent, I think, I don't know how many; it was a couple thousand IDs that indicated that most of these Taliban people were from Pakistan.

So this was something that we were trying to do for a while, but the world wasn't seeing this, wasn't noticing this. So, let's see, the only thing I did do, as far as—either the [Afghan] community was hiding or they were coming out. They did a lot of great things. They did a lot of interfaith things and were reaching out with other ethnic communities.

It was surprising how many Afghan activists there were, that I didn't know about, that sort of came out and starting writing and speaking. So it was very productive. I think moments of crisis really do change an ethnic community. Every ethnic community in America has had that crisis moment, where they gelled and came together and really started entering the mainstream consciousness, at least.

So I think this is what did it for Afghans. And for the first time, journalists were interested in going into the Afghan American community. People didn't even know what Afghan American was. During the Soviet-Afghan war, of course, there was some interest, but not as much as now, of course, because it was so far and it wasn't their war, so a lot of people didn't know about it.

But it was still very hurtful, early on, when people were saying, "Kill all Afghans." I got on a bus once, and there was this picture of the Twin Towers burning. A little child had drawn it. And then at the bottom, it said, "Death to Afghans." So it made me sad, seeing this Twin Towers on fire, and then at the bottom, it says, "Death to Afghans." It was early morning, and I just couldn't believe it. I knew the bus driver had it on. I mean—should I go up to the bus driver and bring this to his attention? Is it worth it at 8:00 A.M.? Is it really going to make a difference? Would he stop for me the next time I saw him? I'm like, I don't know. So there were all these things that, you know, you have to try to figure out when you want to address this issue. I was in Union Square. I didn't go to the candlelight vigils. I was actually a little afraid, to be honest. I sort of stayed home. I stayed home through a lot of it. I just wasn't ready. Like, my skin felt really raw, and my family was already being threatened at home. I just wanted to stay home.<sup>10</sup>

*But Zohra, like many of the immigrants, Muslims, Arab Americans who became cultural workers in the aftermath of September 11, did not stay home. They drew on their cultural heritage to become ambassadors of the countries they had come from much earlier.*

*Zohra Saed has lived through the raw skin of the time of emergency, and recovered her ability to write poetry, live the life of an activist, and fulfill her scholarly ambition to teach the West about the cultural memory of Afghanistan and transmit that memory to a generation of others who will be born after her. In 2010, she published *One Story: Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Afghan American Literature*. A working note she posted on her website in early 2012 reminds us that memory transcends the boundaries of time—allowing us to draw from the past even as we grasp for a new future.*

As a poet, I value memories and believe in the healing nature of sharing particularly traumatic memories. The airing out of old wounds is what will help us move ahead to a healthy future as a people from a country that has experienced war continuously for the past two decades. On a personal level, by giving voice to my families' and my own memories, I am trying to fit us all under the one skin of writing. It is perhaps the only way I've been able to reconnect my extended family, which have been scattered across the globe and suffered tremendous losses since the Soviet-Afghan war.

### Commentary

At the time of this writing, the more than nine hundred hours of testimony collected and transcribed by the Columbia Center for Oral History have only recently been opened in full; and the readers push open the ancient gates of the archive slowly and with some trepidation. Many more flock to the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, which I was told in August 2010 held no interviews with Muslims. On September 12, 2011, the CCOH received in the mail a beautifully designed certificate thanking the center for its work, signed by the mayor of New York City and the president of the museum, an institution erected on the haunted space of what has come to be known as Ground Zero. There is a paver named for us at the site, recognizing our "foresight" in documenting the events of September 11, 2001. The word *surreal*, the term most frequently used by our narrators to describe the time of emergency and of distorted experiences in New York City in the weeks after September 11, comes to me as I label the folder I use to file the letter. I am overwhelmed with sadness as well as a feeling of helplessness in this moment: remembering the fear and confusion that so many Muslims, Arab Americans, Sikhs, and others felt over the last ten years of our nation's history when one rule of law shifted to another.

The experience of documenting the catastrophe and the crises that followed has deepened us in ways that might have taken decades to do had we

not undertaken the project. Every Friday morning for a year, my Columbia University colleague Peter Bearman, a sociologist, and I had the great honor of listening to our extraordinary interviewers talk about their fieldwork, solve problems together, and discuss what needed to happen next. Hearing individual life stories and September 11 stories in the gentle and direct way our interviewers told them to us, as intimate accounts told to us directly, one to one, is what we hope for in creating archives (and writing articles and poems).

I was inspired by an experience I had talking to one of our narrators near the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001. I had never spoken to her before this summer. She witnessed from Battery Park City the terrible sight, at close hand, of people who jumped from the towers. She was able to describe, in detail, what one man wore. More importantly, she had the courage to interpret his act as one of agency, to "take back his life" from another kind of certain death. Intuitively, from reading her narrative, over and over again, I felt that she was speaking about her own experience of transforming terror into narrative. When we spoke I asked her if she was glad she had told her story or if the act of telling was a hardship. She took a deep breath, exhaled, and said, "Telling my interviewer the story of what I saw kept the image of it from burning into my brain and destroying my mind. It saved my life." "Would you repeat that?" I asked, afraid she was only saying it for my benefit. "No, I mean it," she said. "You have to believe me; it's true!" I hope it is true, for it is why we do this work, in addition to preparing the archive.

Stories, and by that I mean poems, sonatas, plays, soliloquies, as well as interviews, have circulated through history since the beginning of time as a way of capturing that which was lost, and then recreated from the dust and muck of history. And yet in recent years, as the mass media have accelerated the circulation of narrative and global crises are more and more painfully transparent, oral historians have increasingly asked ourselves, What role do we play in documenting and interpreting catastrophe? At Columbia University, shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, Peter Bearman and I found we were asking that very question. Though we stopped short of thinking that oral history could play a significant role in recovery from a complicated catastrophic event, we staked a claim to history by creating a project that began days later. During the first year of our work, we interviewed close to 450 people in a diverse range of communities. We returned to 215 narrators during 2003 to conduct follow-up interviews. The interviews were all life history accounts, and cultural histories, and we encouraged those we interviewed to go back in time to talk about their identities. By the end of our interviewing in 2005 we had conducted 665 sessions with people in our longitudinal project, the September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, and completed three related projects resulting in more than six hundred interviews in total, amounting to nearly one thousand hours. We interviewed more than fifty Muslims who immigrated from the Middle East, a large number of Arab Americans, and a smaller number

of Sikhs whose identities were often confused with those of Muslims. We also interviewed some sixty Latinos. Approximately six hundred hours of interview are now open to the public.

The purpose of our project was to assess the nature and scope of urban injury on the ground where the events happened, without adopting the nationalistic framing of the events within the larger collective sphere. Although we were interested in whether and how the September 11 attacks would constitute a turning point historically, we wanted to find that out by exploring the personal and community stories of those we interviewed. Our interest lay in having those we interviewed frame the events, and their aftermaths, for themselves. Concretely, we were interested in a number of themes: family and loss of family, friendship networks and loss of friendship networks, community engagement and estrangement, sense of security and vulnerability, religious affiliation and estrangement, political affiliation and estrangement, and civic participation and withdrawal.

Because we began with no particular prompts except to ask a series of open-ended questions, we had the advantage of not bringing preconceived notions into the interviews. As a result, we and our interviewers and those we interviewed were connected by a radical openness to the future of what meaning the stories we took might accrue over time. It was a position that encouraged meaning making without the benefit of historical reflection and not the standpoint that we use now, more than a decade later, to read the archives backward through time to analyze the moment of catastrophe. The evidence of our standpoint in which the future would inform the past can be found in the qualifying statement that many of our interviewers made before the first questions were asked: "Imagine that these interviews will be heard fifty, a hundred years from now." From this perspective, and also from the content of many of the narratives, the interviews might well be read as prophecies.

Asking about how the days, weeks, and months following September 11, 2001, would be read in the future also allowed us to time-travel with the narrators and imagine that the archive stood apart from the meaning created by the government and mass media in which injury and revenge were two bookends to one story. We stepped out of the heavily constructed time of the catastrophe to tell and hear life stories and cultural memories. We invited those we interviewed to speak freely, and for as long as they wanted to talk, and they readily agreed.

One productive result of slowing down the pace of telling and building memory in this way was that people felt free to explore the meaning of trauma, loss, and injury through their own personal and cultural memory. Encouraging those we interviewed to think of how they wanted to be remembered, and following the most conservative procedures of oral history in allowing those we interviewed to read their transcripts months or years later before they signed releases, reduced pressure on them to conform to the official and present-focused response, and gave them the sense of safety they needed to talk freely. At the time we began our project, we had no idea how precious this guarantee of freedom

to speak without censure would become in the days, weeks, months, and years that followed, particularly to Muslims, Arab Americans, and other citizens and refugees who were or appeared to be from the Middle East.

The fact that we mounted a longitudinal project, in which our idea was to return to the narrators at different points in time, was another important temporal anchor for the project. Even though for administrative reasons we really returned only once, in late 2002 and early 2003, to approximately one-third of the narrators, those we interviewed commented on how important this gap in time was for them in providing them the freedom to think and make meaning over time within the specific frameworks of their own life stories and urban histories. Importantly, this meant they could leave the time of catastrophe in order to reenter it at a later point, just as they could imagine life after the catastrophe by speaking for an audience in another century. We returned to a smaller number of narrators in 2005, in order to conduct video interviews. This longer gap in time was particularly significant, as those we interviewed could now speak retrospectively about their experiences as well as their memories. Catastrophe creates the effect that time has stopped and actions and reactions are fixed. The longitudinal orientation of our project, and the choice to conduct life histories beginning long before the catastrophe interrupted time, offered an alternative mode of living through and beyond the time of crisis. The history we took from nearly six hundred people over three years was temporally enriched both by our project's orientation toward the future and its investment in the deep pasts embedded in the life and cultural stories of those we interviewed. Defining our work as a cultural memory project as well as the history of an event allowed people to talk about the possibility of transformation, creativity, and active response to injury, discrimination, and material loss. As we found across our work in many communities, these values informed responses to the events throughout the boroughs of New York City as well as through social networks New Yorkers are connected to around the world.

The creative, diverse, life-affirming modes of addressing injury we found in the individual narratives stood in stark contrast to the state's commitment to a single story and a harsh rollout to war in Afghanistan less than a month after the attacks happened and then again in Iraq in 2003. The tensions between urban and national memory, personal and collective meaning making were palpable in the interviews taken immediately after the events as well as months and years later. For example, the majority of those we interviewed in the winter of 2001 and the early months of 2003 were ambivalent about or opposed to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In this sense, there was not a "common memory" that could be described as shared or as the foundation of a collective accounting that cohered across lines of difference or any one temporal standpoint. In fact, we found that the living memory of September 11 was, and to a large degree still is, qualified by fragmentation, controversy, and temporal perspective that require careful examination of the concrete historical backgrounds of our narrators as

well as the specific ways that the reactions to the September 11 events shaped public and private discourse over time.

The “time of emergency,” which I think of as the immediate aftermath of crisis, is characterized by a very special subjectivity that all oral historians who work in rapid response to crisis know well. This time is qualified by a sense of urgency that can fuel an amazing level of activity and build a sense of community among interviewers, transcribers, narrators, and funders. The heightened and communal energy that was bound to the time of emergency was productive as it developed our capacity to convey genuine emotional presence to our narrators, which they needed. This energy is temporary and can deflect from the long-term and arduous work that is required to bring a project to fruition. The longer and often harder oral history work includes listening, relistening, indexing, procuring legal releases, writing reports to institutional funders, and most importantly maintaining relationships with those who have been interviewed. Ideally, the work of oral history in and after crisis should include interviewing people over time so that the memory of the emergency does not overshadow the memory of that which comes after—which is the only time in which the impact of critical events can be measured. The memory of emergency is, after all, a partial memory, shared and fractured, time-bound and often overshadowed by the definitions of catastrophe that are created in the mass media, and by the state and public policy makers to gain its fullest effect.

More importantly to the real documentary record of historical crises, it is only in the afterlife of emergency that the multiple impacts of the catastrophe can fully emerge. Documenting crisis, then, has at least two primary goals. The first is to capture the subjectivity of the catastrophe itself through interviewing those that experience it from as many perspectives as possible in order to adequately understand and represent the historical memory of crisis as it unfolds. The second purpose is to document the afterlife of crisis at various stages in the future, without the presumption that the story of the first wave of crisis is the one that will define the story of the catastrophe, and the story of all the life stories contained within its temporal envelope. Profound cultural, social, political, and economic change usually follows a substantial crisis, and can rarely be predicted in precise terms.

Perhaps the most important point is that the process of making meaning of difficult events is time-sensitive and unpredictable. It requires, for one thing, an audience that is open to wading through the sea of partial and contradictory frames of memory that develop only gradually. In fact, as our interviewers suggested by asking their narrators to imagine an audience in the distant future, the process of making and transmitting meaning often crosses generations before it is solidified in memory. Watching meaning develop through time, until story fragments rearrange into a mosaic that is whole, is one of the most important dimensions of our work.

One question, then, haunts us: When is the narrative of catastrophe complete? In order to answer this question thoughtfully (and because so many of the stories we heard in 2001–2 read like great novels), I turn to a work of historical fiction, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*, set in the time of Jamaican slavery in the 1830s, to explore the multigenerational nature of testimony. The narrator, July, says, "But for me, reader, my story is finally at an end. This long song has come full up to date. It is at last complete. So let me now place that final end dot. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

Levy's writing is literature of the imagination in which the time it takes to finish a story says something about the history being told. July chronicles the story of her mother's rape and her own experiences as the secret lover of a British colonizer and then as the mother of his child, Thomas. Thomas, who came of age after slavery was officially ended, rose through the ranks of Jamaican society to become a publisher. He wants to publish his mother's narrative (partially written, partially told) but asks her to add to it by telling how she had to return to working in the fields after her affair with her colonizer. July refuses, saying her narrative is as complete as it can be given the historical context in which she tells it. The implication is that the society, even when Thomas publishes her narrative in 1898, is not capable of hearing the story in its true historical context. There is a limit, an end, to the possibility of telling in the here and now, but this does not mean that the story cannot be told again: "Perhaps, I told my son, upon some other day there may come a person who would wish to tell the chronicle of these times, anew. But I am an old-old woman. And, reader, I have not the ink." <sup>12</sup>

Without the distance of time, memory, and a great deal of historical scholarship, Andrea Levy's historical novel (based on a fictitious? oral source) could not have been received as a "true" story of one individual that reveals the whole context of slavery. The point of this historical reconstruction is the lapse in time between the first telling and the second one. Imagining the life of a young slave girl during one of the most brutal regimes in history was not possible at the time the story happened.

The optimistic framing of the story's irregular but successful travel through time is that it is also a tale that cannot ultimately be suppressed. It is a parable that often fits for those doing oral history in the time of emergency and after, particularly in deeply politicized moments where state actors define the meaning of events unilaterally, and collective memory is constructed to eclipse narratives that challenge historic norms of suffering and valor.

Like Levy's novel, oral history is also a *long song*, particularly when the narratives of crisis that do not fit with the ideological frames of the present are misinterpreted as irrelevant, and yet the present is the fulcrum in which meaning is made or broken. But the effort it takes to break through the circumference of catastrophe by standing outside the time of emergency, drawing from the past, and betting on a different future in the accumulation of personal, cultural, and historical narratives, is a momentous one.



I think now of the ten years following September 11, 2001, as a “lost decade” in terms of our country’s decision to privilege national security over civil liberties and human rights. This sadness, to me, is as great as the sadness we all felt in the time of emergency. It is no accident that one story led to another and now our center is working on the history of the assault on the constitution, on the Geneva conventions, and on humanity through recording the impact of detention and rendition policies formed in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. And yet we work with the optimism shared by so many incredibly brave attorneys, advocates, human rights activists, and others that someday, perhaps even sooner than we imagine, we will forge a different future: one in which this kind of work will no longer be necessary. Until then, we will keep adding the narratives that cannot so easily be heard in the here and now, to the living archive. The sun still rises on the Hudson in the beautiful crystalline light at day’s beginning, and it burns with a ferocious orange rage at day’s end—giving us the strength to continue. The collective I refer to is the group of interviewers, principal investigators, transcribers, and student workers who began this project and never faltered in their loyalty—as well as those we interviewed—who chronicled their lives for a future in which their stories could be heard in their full complexity.

For now, at least, after many months of picking it up and putting it down, my pen has run dry. But I will leave you with a parable for the future that has haunted and motivated me from the start of our work. It was a conversation that Gerry Albarelli had on camera with a group of young Muslim kids he was teaching in the fall of 2001. Remembering the beautiful young faces crowded into the camera now, it is a conversation that reads more like a poem of our times.

“What is your name?” Gerry asked of one.

“My name is Osama,” he answered.

“What do they say to you in school?” Gerry asked.

“They yell at me and make me feel bad,” Osama said.

“What do you tell them?” Gerry asked.

“I tell them I love them anyway,” the boy answered.<sup>13</sup>

As this young prophet looked intensely up at Gerry, his face split into a smile that temporarily demolished the gap between the past and the future. Something began again.

## Notes

1. This series of excerpts was selected from the Columbia Center for Oral History (CCOH) transcriptions that were edited by Mary Marshall Clark, Peter Shawn Bearman, Catherine Ellis, and Stephen Drury Smith for *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001 and the Years That Followed* (New York: New Press, 2011), 120–23. The original version of the oral history, part of the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Oral History Project, is held in CCOH, part of the Columbia University Libraries.
2. *Ibid.*, 211–15.

3. Sharon Otterman, "Obscuring a Muslim Name, and an American's Sacrifice," *New York Times*, January 1, 2012.
4. Reminiscences of Zaheer Jaffery, the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Oral History Project, Session 1, p. 1, conducted on November 16, 2001, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries (hereinafter CCOH, CUL).
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
7. See note 1.
8. Reminiscences of Zaheer Jaffery, the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Oral History Project, Session 3, p. 94, conducted on June 24, 2005, CCOH, CUL.
9. Reminiscences of Zohra Saed, the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Oral History Project, Session 1, pp. 1–2; conducted by Temma Kaplan on January 15, 2002, CCOH, CUL.
10. *Ibid.*, 15–19.
11. Andrea Levy, *The Long Song* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 335.
12. *Ibid.*, 336.
13. Oral memory.

# CONCLUSION: THE FABRIC OF CRISIS

## Approaching the Heart of Oral History

Stephen M. Sloan

In 2009, I received a phone call from an established colleague at Baylor University who was setting out on a new and challenging project. Jerold Waltman, a full professor of political science with a long record of significant scholarship dealing with tax policy, minimum wage policy, and American and comparative constitutional law, planned to use oral history to delve into his next topic. His latest research focus was an important legal action from the 1990s dealing with the separation of church and state, *City of Boerne v. Flores*.<sup>1</sup> This landmark case, which made its way from south Texas to the U.S. Supreme Court, concerned the conflict over a proposed church expansion and historic district zoning regulations in Boerne, a small community just northwest of San Antonio. Waltman planned to interview several of the key players involved in the heated case, including community members and the legal teams for the defense and prosecution.<sup>2</sup>

Waltman's first experience with oral history was the baptism by fire that new oral historians often experience: equipment malfunctions, negotiations between factions, reluctant narrators, no-show appointments, and conflicting stories. His extensive research into the case failed to prepare him for the competing views and perspectives the oral history interviews offered. When asked in the fall of 2010 to reflect on his first experience with oral history fieldwork, he admitted, "I realize that up to now I have been conducting antiseptic research."<sup>3</sup> It was a telling statement. Characterizing the research approaches he had employed in the past as antiseptic says less about the nature of that work than about the character of oral history fieldwork. At the heart of Waltman's comment was the relationship between the oral historian and the subject studied. The notion of antiseptic research brings to mind the image of a surgeon, scrubbed and sterile, approaching an operation with steady hand and impartial expertise. It is necessarily cold and impersonal. There is a detachment between professional and subject, a representation starkly different from the interviewer-narrator relationship of oral history.

If oral history fails the antiseptic test, then, as the authors of the preceding chapters have demonstrated, it is at its least antiseptic when employed in crisis or disaster fieldwork. In the midst of physical and often emotional chaos, oral historians work to record the experience of events by collaborating with narrators who are often still processing the meaning of events, enduring the aftermath of crisis or disaster. It can be an environment marked by great disorder and turmoil. Oral history at this point is an attempt to understand in a setting far removed from anything neat and clean.

## EMERGING CRISES ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH AWARD

Since the tragedy of September 11, oral history work in the United States has witnessed a dramatic expansion in the number of projects dealing with crisis or disaster settings. The history of the U.S. Oral History Association's Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award offers a glimpse into the larger scope and character of this growth. In 2005, the OHA, acknowledging the increasing desire for new projects, recognized the need for quick funding for researchers working in a disaster or crisis context. The OHA council noted that the rise in oral historians' interest in crises projects had been met by an attendant and stifling challenge of lag time in grant funding. For crisis fieldwork, the interval between award decision and financing could make a valuable oral history project unfeasible. In her statement to the OHA executive council, president Kim Rogers proposed the Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award as an "action scholarship fund that would support oral historians doing research in currently developing crisis areas." After a discussion of criteria, expectations, and feasibility, the association established the initiative for up to three years, finances permitting.<sup>4</sup>

The timing of the award's creation proved providential. The landfall and associated devastation of Hurricane Katrina just six months later sparked widespread interest in using oral history to document the human experience of the disaster. Out of a pool of eight proposals for the inaugural award in 2006, the top three projects identified by the selection committee dealt with some aspect of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. Folklorist Teresa Parker received the funds for her project, Floodwall, which incorporated oral histories into an ongoing art installation of objects found in the wake of the storm in New Orleans. Since 2006, subsequent awards have made oral history projects possible on crisis topics in China, Colombia, Nicaragua, Mexico, Egypt, and Cameroon.<sup>5</sup>

A study of the overall character of the proposals for the initiative is instructive.<sup>6</sup> Examining the applicant pool over time shows an increasing number of proposed projects, to be sure, but also an expanding diversity in both the environments studied and the backgrounds and disciplines of the primary investigators submitting proposals. From 2009 through 2012, although more than 90 percent of the researchers who applied for the Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award

were based in the United States, only 32 percent of the projects proposed dealt with crisis situations in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Projects were proposed in thirty-nine countries encompassing every continent except Antarctica. The range of disciplines seeking to use oral history to conduct crisis or disaster studies is equally diverse. In the early years of the award initiative, oral historians rooted in the discipline of history dominated the applicant pool. Recent trends, however, reveal a much more interdisciplinary set of proposals. For example, in 2012, applicants from the fine arts, including performance art, painting, photography, and film, submitted seven proposed projects, while six were offered by historians.

Likewise, the evolving applicant pool reveals the creativity and innovation with which researchers have framed their projects, contributing their own definitions to the challenging question, What are crises? In designing the initiative, the selection committee defined *crises* as situations that “include but are not limited to wars, natural disasters, political and/or economic/ethnic repression, or other currently emerging events of crisis proportions.”<sup>8</sup> One would expect proposals to cluster around events that garnered wide international attention over the past few years. Although proposals dealing with high-profile topics are certainly represented in the applications, what is most prominent is the zeal of scholars to better understand the less generally known catastrophes or emergencies around the globe.

## LISTENING AMID CHAOS

Oral historians have popularly embraced crisis oral history projects for many reasons. Although the motivations for doing such work are broad, most blend the scholar’s desire to inquire and understand with a humanitarian impulse to respond to need. Theirs is work informed, as Mark Cave describes, by “compassion, or a sense of moral responsibility.” When fueled by elements of empathy, oral historians create an atmosphere of advocacy for the narrators with whom they collaborate.

Linked to this impulse to assist, crisis oral history is also a response to the silences inherent in rescue, recovery, and rebuilding. It provides a means for the people most affected by crisis or disaster to be recorded, archived, and shared, to put them, not the devastation, at the center of the story. It is an effort that has not traditionally been a priority. In her work on the Srebrenica massacre during the Bosnian war, Selma Leydesdorff notes that even after historians acknowledged that the voices of survivors were important, they were left out of historical accounts. She surmises, “Was it fear, the inability to reach out, or perhaps the nature of the official reports, which made it possible to ignore paying attention to the suffering of the survivors?” Oral history offers a tool to reach out, expand conventional coverage, and bring attention to survivors.

The desire of oral historians to work in close proximity to crisis stems also from an aspiration to capture the emotion and atmosphere in the immediate

aftermath. As Mark Cave points out, "Through capturing accounts while the feelings associated with events have not faded, we are able to record memories before they are influenced by changing circumstances or shifting collective interpretations." Mary Marshall Clark, who cofounded the September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, argues that the first primary goal of documenting crisis is to "capture the subjectivity of the catastrophe itself through interviewing those that experience it from as many different perspectives as possible in order to adequately understand and represent the historical memory of crisis as it unfolds." Clark maintains that the second purpose should build on the first through continued interviews, documenting the "afterlife of crisis at different stages in the future." When accomplished, such a longitudinal approach can offer deep insight into the important aspects of how the experience of catastrophe evolves.

The oral historian's motivation to document the human experience of crisis and disaster immediately after events also derives from how insightful a period it is for conducting research. For the oral historian, moments of crises or disaster can offer an environment when the larger weaknesses or strengths of a society are quite visible. The stress of these circumstances can, for example, reveal often-observed facets of relationships between race, class, and gender. They are also occasions that disclose the rapport between a state and its people, rendering quite clearly societal, political, cultural, and economic realities that may not be as obvious during periods of comparative tranquility. Crisis also offers an opportunity to explore broader issues of faith and views of God. The aftermath of disaster or crisis frequently includes a sudden revival in religious devotion or a sense of betrayal by the higher power that chaplain David Peters discovered in some of his interview work with chaplains deployed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For all of these reasons and more, oral historians have entered into the rewarding challenges of crisis or disaster fieldwork. It is the impressive growth in the scope and quality of such projects that made this volume necessary. What became clear was the need for a discussion of not just the content captured through crisis oral history, which by all measures is impressive, but also the process of conducting research in these environments. All of the authors included have contributed to that analysis of process in their own way through discussing their provocative research. Amid the scores of issues raised, a few key and common questions emerge that seem to be of predominant concern to oral historians working within a crisis or disaster context: Does it help the narrator? How does it affect the interviewer? How is it different from journalism? How is it done well?

## DOES IT HELP THE NARRATOR?

For narrators, incidents of injury or loss are what usually attend crisis or disaster. A primary theme that emerges from the descriptions of crisis fieldwork here is the question of whether oral history is therapeutic, or healing, for the narrators

who participate. As Ritchie notes, the desire to “provide a cathartic release for the victims” has been a motivating factor in the recent growth in crisis and disaster oral history.<sup>9</sup> For, as Clark argues, stories, including those shared through interviews, “have circulated through history since the beginning of time as a way of capturing that which was lost, and then recreated from the dust and muck of history.” Betsy Campisi, who worked with participants in the Cuban Rafter Crisis, found that for her interviewees oral history was “particularly well suited to assist in individual and social healing because the story-telling process is a natural vehicle for the creation of new meanings and identities associated with healing from trauma.” For her, the approach proved useful to individuals engaged in the needed process of recovery.

In his extensive interview work on the Rwandan genocide, Taylor Krauss prioritized an especially long-form design for oral history, spending up to ten hours in one sitting. From this process, Krauss noted the critical importance of relating the narrator’s experience: “This is a crisis of survival. Though not a physical survival, it is an existential one in which the witnesses endlessly strive through telling to reverse the disappearance of their already disappeared family.” For his narrators, telling was the way to recover the unrecoverable.

With regard to the question of healing in postcrisis interviewing fieldwork, it has been helpful here to compare and contrast the listening of the oral historian to the listening of the psychologist. Like the psychologist, the oral historian takes the position of other, a listener standing beside those in times of crisis. For chaplain David Peters, seeking to help those whose stories he hears, standing beside is of great worth, as “when a soldier is alone he must face memories, grief, and regret that infiltrate the distractions of the post-traumatic self.”

Psychologist Ghislaine Boulanger’s analysis assists greatly in clarifying the differing objectives in the work of the therapist and the oral historian—a line that she says admittedly can become quite blurred in postcrisis environments. She states, “As a psychoanalyst my attention is on the process not the product; my emphasis is on the narrator, the oral historian’s is on the narrative.” The oral historian’s task, while keeping the narrator’s needs in mind, is to focus on the product of the interview. Ultimately, how do we work to make that outcome as valuable and representative of the narrator’s experience as it can be? For psychologists, according to Boulanger, the undertaking is “continually reviewing the unfinished present . . . to provide an individual therapeutic benefit.”

Although we conduct our work through a meeting of the individual, the task of the oral historian is to record the experience at a moment in time in a way that is usable for others. By definition, the enduring value of the oral history should extend to an audience beyond the interviewee. It is a goal that does not preclude what our narrators may realize about their experience, or themselves, through the process, but the broader purpose of joint creation

and documentation offers us the primary objective in which we can meet our interviewees.

## HOW DOES IT AFFECT THE INTERVIEWER?

From the preceding chapters, it becomes clear that oral history work in these environments places significant demands on the interviewers who choose such topics. Oral historians researching crisis or disaster are rarely detached observers; they pursue their interests with a sense of passion and they often form personal relationships with their narrators. Hearing stories of loss, devastation, and sadness can take its toll on the oral historian. Deeply listening and working to understand a narrator's experience can cause a thinning of the boundaries between the self and the studied. Getting lost in another's story is what often happens in an interview. In crisis and disaster settings, because of the raw and highly emotional nature of the experiences recorded, there is considerable danger of getting lost in the stories.

For Denise Phillips, who did oral history with Hazara refugees in Australia, distress and sleeplessness followed her sessions with Juma, who was still coping with his experience of torture and grieving for his wife and children left behind in Afghanistan. The challenge Phillips faced was multiplied through her research design, which included serial interviews with her narrators. Consequently, she mentioned that by her third interview with another refugee, Reza, she "subconsciously tried to shield him and possibly myself from the dangers he and his family faced during their return journey to Afghanistan. Instead, I moved toward Reza's hopes of seeing his extended family, saying, 'It's going to be a big family reunion.'" Phillips' desire to protect the interviewee and herself exemplifies the intimate connection that can be forged with a narrator through a series of interviews.

The vulnerability of researchers can be compounded as well by their standing as insiders with close association to the subject explored. For Susan Fleming-Cook, who interviewed Virginia Tech students caught in the violence of the 2007 school shootings, it was a project that hit very close to home. As she stated, "I am part of the Virginia Tech community. I can imagine myself, my family, and my friends experiencing the violence, surviving, or most horribly dying....Sadness after interviews became the norm." It was easy for Fleming-Cook to see herself in the position of the narrator, and that capacity accentuated the vicarious distress.

Even when far removed from the circumstances of the trauma or pain, it can be difficult to make the transition back to ordinary life after being subsumed in the narrative of the interviewee. Steven High, who conducted oral histories with Rwandan genocide survivors in Montreal, described this as the most challenging aspect of such interviewing work: "One moment I find myself



immersed in the horrific memories of another person only to find myself doing routine office work or family play time the next." Interviewers bear the difficult aspects of the narrator's experience even long after the recorder has stopped.

For Taylor Krauss, emotional investment in his work on the Rwandan genocide not only led him to explore the topic; he argued that it made him a better scholar. His intimate attachment is what gives his work added meaning as "the testimonies have made a profound impact on every facet of my life from the very personal to the communal and professional, which in turn has deepened my own understanding of the experiences of the surviving witnesses in today's post-genocide Rwanda." In the end, he sees the emotion and affiliation with those he interviews not as distraction, but rather as an influence that deeply informs the quality and insight of his work.

What becomes clear is that interviewers need additional support when conducting crisis or disaster oral history projects. This should be an element addressed prior to fieldwork in research design and made a priority throughout the operation of the project. That support can bring added benefit to the investigator by offering more objective feedback on whether the relational boundaries between interviewer and interviewee are advancing or betraying research aims.

## HOW IS ORAL HISTORY DIFFERENT FROM JOURNALISM?

One approach to understanding the work of the oral historians in crisis environments has been to compare and contrast their efforts with that of the other primary group making inquiry at the "intersection of grief and history," the journalists.<sup>10</sup> Late-breaking chaos or disaster has long been seen as the domain of the reporter on location. The public has increasingly looked to the media to provide clear and accurate information on the latest developments in emerging crises. For some, it is the growth of our awareness of crises or disasters through the information revolution that has helped spur the oral historian to action. Clark notes, "As the mass media has accelerated the circulation of narrative and global crises are more and more painfully transparent, oral historians have increasingly asked ourselves, What role do we play in documenting and interpreting catastrophe?" The oral historians in this volume who have documented crises or disasters with a high level of media coverage have thought deeply about the distinct value oral history fieldwork brings to these environments when compared to journalism.

Eric Meringer maintains that his research into views of the residents of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, on the recent violence in their city offers a fundamentally different view of incidents that have made sensational content for news outlets across the border. In places like Juárez, Meringer argues, "where violence provides shock value and marketability, the divide between journalism and oral history is at its greatest." The complexity and reality of life for ordinary Juarenses are

overshadowed by the frightening brutality that makes for an attention-grabbing news lead. According to Meringer, oral history, not journalism, possesses the flexibility to “pursue alternative avenues of inquiry presumed too mundane and therefore unexplored by journalistic investigations driven by expectations of sensationalism.”

In Mark Cave’s experience, it was the prevalence of media attention that made oral history more appealing to the first responders he interviewed. His desire to ask was met often by desire to speak as his work “was not seen to be as opportunistic or as judgmental as that of a journalist.” Oral history holds the facility to examine texture, listening more thoroughly to the stories behind the story.

When considering the objectivity of media reporting, it is important to be aware of recent trends in media coverage. In their analysis of reporting post-Hurricane Katrina, Jay Perkins and Ralph Izard described the event as a watershed for the objective man on the scene: “The difference in coverage of the Gulf Coast hurricanes occurred because journalists abandoned their traditional impassive approach to the news and allowed their feelings to show in their reporting.”<sup>11</sup> For oral historians, it is also important to consider how little in-depth broadcast news coverage can be provided even for a high-profile event such as Hurricane Katrina. On CNN, which by far had more coverage than any other network, the average story in the aftermath of the storm was 3.5 minutes long, almost twice the length of the average segment on one of the other four major networks.<sup>12</sup> Such pressure to inform in quick order frames the task of the journalist quite differently from that of the oral historian.

Unlike most media coverage, the projects an oral historian pursues are primarily defined by the researcher alone. The journalist is much more bounded by what aspect or event is currently in the public’s gaze or interest. One of the factors driving Karin Mak’s investigation into the miserable working conditions among factory women working in China was the dearth of media attention paid to long-term impacts. The story she revealed was one without a single sensational event, but a pattern of abuse and disregard driven by complex global economic and political factors. Her desire to build relationships and work to record their narratives provided the space and immersion necessary to discover the root human experience.

As oral historians continue to work post-catastrophe, such work will be compared and contrasted with the work of journalists in such environments. Although oral historians and journalists both ask questions to inform others, each approach has fundamentally different motivations, aims, and audiences.

## HOW IS IT DONE WELL?

Even in ideal conditions, oral history can be done poorly. At its worst, oral history in the hands of a careless researcher can be exploitive, voyeuristic, or opportunistic. Compounded by the vulnerability of narrators in such settings, crisis

or disaster oral history projects have the potential to do greater harm if badly conducted. The challenge of doing crisis fieldwork well puts forth several new considerations for recommended best practices for oral history. Contributors here mentioned several qualities of their work that are informative. A few items held in high regard for the best approaches for crisis oral history include staying flexible, pursuing life history, and having a public purpose.

For an oral historian to work with success in a crisis context requires great flexibility on the part of the interviewer. The chaotic physical and emotional environment in the wake of crisis necessitates many considerations. One aspect of this flexibility is the setting in which the interviews are conducted. For Denise Phillips, her concession was moving into the midst of the family environment, full of noisy comings and goings, to record oral histories with Reza. It was a less-than-ideal environment to capture an undistracted and clear recording. Phillips notes that had she “insisted on a controlled environment, this significant symbol of intergenerational love and hope would have been missed, while also possibly making Reza ill at ease.” It was an allowance that yielded valuable rewards. For Karin Mak, interviewing Chinese factory women who put themselves in jeopardy by participating in her project, the issue of setting also involved the safety of her interviewees. Her interviewees’ phones had been tapped and their movements were followed. Mak interviewed in a hotel near the GP factories and described the space as “comfortable, air conditioned, and most importantly, a neutral and seemingly safe place to talk...the hotel room became a retreat from their chaotic world.”

The charge to be flexible in crisis and disaster research extends from setting to the way oral historians structure their inquiry. Strict research plans that may prove valuable in quieter times may fail post-crisis. Betsy Campisi, who interviewed individuals from the Cuban Rafter Crisis, related this lesson from her work: “Prioritizing an empathetic listening style over a rigid research agenda and being in the moment with interviewees can result in them sharing more information.” She conceded that this is true only if they were willing to engage in the process to begin with. Campisi argues that flexibility should extend to “including questions about meaning, and not just the stark details of traumatic events, in their interviews.” It was a strategy that eased into, but explored well, many difficult subjects.

Holding unyielding assumptions can prove detrimental for any oral history project, and this is especially true for crisis or disaster fieldwork. The perspective of those that experience events, of course, can be radically different from popular theory or an outsider point of view. In some cases, this may even call into question how an event has been extrinsically defined as a turning point. The research of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities into flooding in Ghana represents a good example of this. For residents of Accra, “the floods were, for the most part of the year, kept at the margin of people’s consciousness, while everyday concerns were of a much higher importance. Flood risk in Accra

is so ubiquitous as to come to be seen as an environmental fact, to such an extent that the application of the term *disaster* to the Accra case had to be questioned." The research group discovered some similar findings in Chile. Though researchers came to the country to record the impact of a volcanic eruption and subsequent flood, they found that it was much less of a concern to interviewees than the "crime, lack of freedom, and concern about the safety of their children in the city" in Puerto Montt, where residents were evacuated. Other factors were much more influential in how locals made decisions about relocation and residence than what outsiders deemed as a landmark disaster.

Oral history shines when used to gather a deep understanding of the narrator's experience. That mission is met by framing an inquiry much more broadly than a single and discrete occurrence. Events are not experienced in isolation; they are connected to a life lived before and after. Oral history done well stays cognizant of this truth. Framing interviews as a life history offers a fruitful approach in crisis or disaster oral history for several reasons. Framing an interview as a life history provides a richer understanding of the temperament, personality, and background of the narrator. Taking the time to gather a broader narrative exploring life before crisis or disaster can also help compose a more complete picture of what the individual feels was lost in crisis or disaster, a familiar theme expressed in oral history post-catastrophe.

Selma Leydesdorff used life history in her oral history interviews with Hanifa, a survivor of the Srebrenica genocide. The focus in Hanifa's first interview sessions was her early life. Leydesdorff argues that "starting with the story of their childhood and focusing on the good times before did, however, reveal an image of life and survival under extreme conditions, in spite of fragmented trauma memories." Leydesdorff found that asking Hanifa directed questions about distressing features of the genocide proved difficult. Asking Hanifa about her life, instead of just probing areas of trauma, paved a way for Hanifa to eventually relate even the painful parts of her story. For Hanifa, the experience of the genocide was incorporated into the central theme of her story: "The relationship between parent and child... it is the metanarrative of her life and of the genocide she survived." The telling of her life story offered Hanifa a way to impart a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Srebrenica genocide. Life history requires interviewers to approach their topics through a broader lens, but it is a method more likely to capture the full meaning of crisis or disaster.

Though there may be many motivations for an interviewer or narrator to use oral history, ultimately it is the public purpose of oral history that gives the interview its enduring meaning and worth. For crisis and disaster oral history, sharing what is gathered is of the utmost importance. At the very least this includes ensuring that material is archived and preserved appropriately. Crisis environments also offer the oral historian a wide range of opportunities to disseminate to others seeking to understand in the wake of catastrophe, from local institutions, to NGOs, to the global community.

Sharing postcrisis interviews also allows the full effect of the benefits of oral history to be realized. As Boulanger points out, “Active listening is crucial to the witnessing function, but it appears that the promise of bringing more witnesses into the community of understanding also offers hope to survivors.” Oral history provides a method to bring others into aspects of the narrator’s experience, an ability that makes oral history so worthwhile. For Krauss it was his principal motivation: “Just as Antoinette’s testimony catalyzed her own reunion with an individual across space and time, so too does it have the capacity to draw together individuals who exist in different intellectual, emotional, and psychological planes, building a bridge toward deeper understanding of the hearts and minds of those dehumanized by genocide.” Narrators collaborate with interviewers to mutually record their experience, but researchers usually have complete control over how the material they created gets distributed—who else gets to listen in.

Doing crisis oral history well is a moving target, as every environment offers new challenges and opportunities. There are, however, methods and procedures that remain immutable. It is crucial that oral historians continue to raise the standard of their work for their research objectives, for their narrators, and for the impact of crisis oral history fieldwork in general.

## WHY CRISIS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history fieldwork post-catastrophe is not for everyone. Despite the accessibility of the method, the challenges for interviewers working in the wake of crisis or disaster are significant. For those with a desire to help, improvement can often seem elusive or painfully slow. Interviewers with an ambition to understand the meaning of events frequently find chaotic narratives, substantial trauma, and adverse conditions. It is a precarious moment at which to work.

Although the task can be daunting, the rewards are great for the oral historian who chooses to step into the fray and document crisis or disaster. Oral history helps us understand. Even in an event like Hurricane Katrina, when it is tempting to believe the information revolution and the twenty-four, seven news cycle have led us closer to a more complete picture, there is an increased need for understanding. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, with an avalanche of opinions and information in the aftermath, one may ask, What is the place for oral history? It is in listening to understand the personal accounts of catastrophe—not listening to editorialize or excerpt, but working with narrators to record their experience on their own terms, in the manner and form they want it said. In oral history fieldwork I conducted after Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi, it was the spate of media coverage of New Orleans in the storm’s aftermath that made many want to speak, to share what the disaster meant for them, not just what occurred on August 29, 2005, but the place of that catastrophe in their

broader story. They wanted me, and the others who listened, to not just hear, but understand.

Oral history privileges individuals who encountered crisis or disaster firsthand, letting those feeling the impact speak on the meaning of the catastrophe. Participating in an oral history can empower interviewees to take back the narrative—making their experience *the* experience once again. In that respect, telling or recounting is a subversive act, especially in light of powerful external and internal forces working against it.

Oral history fieldwork in the aftermath of emergency offers the opportunity for the methodology to be used by new practitioners working in original settings. It also offers oral history a more central role in drafting the initial perceptions of catastrophe that then inform the broader collective memory of crisis or disaster.

Ultimately, the heart of dynamic oral history has always been the exploration of crisis. Crisis, in the full meaning of the word, is a turning point or decisive moment, marked by atypical instability threatening danger to a person or group.<sup>13</sup> Whether at the level of the individual or the greater community, groundbreaking oral history fieldwork has always explored well social, economic, political, cultural, and religious turning points. A list of the significant movements, issues, and events of the past half-century reads like an inventory of important studies that have been conducted using oral history. Oral historians have worked in all of these settings to capture how narrators have experienced far-reaching societal and community crises and the manner in which those events or forces influenced or touched the living of their lives. From this respect the rise in the number of crisis and disaster oral history projects is less a new development and more of an important and profound affirmation of the attributes that made oral history distinct, valuable, and compelling.

## Notes

1. *Boerne v. Flores* was a case that began when St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church in Boerne, Texas, drew up plans for an enlargement of its sanctuary. Soon after, however, the church discovered that the city's Historic Landmark Commission, which had previously designated the church as a landmark, refused the building permit. The church took the city to court under the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Acts of 1993 (RFRA), which mandated "strict scrutiny" for any judicial proceedings involving free exercise of religion.
2. After considerable research into the case, Jerold Waltman initiated his oral history fieldwork in spring 2010. His plan was to interview four sets of people: those in the local church and archdiocese who were connected to the case, people involved with the decisions taken at the city, the legal teams on each side, and key leaders of the religious interest groups.
3. Jerold Waltman, *presentation at the Institute for Oral History Faculty Fellow Roundtable*, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, October 5, 2010.
4. Executive secretary Madelyn Campbell, *midwinter meeting minutes*, Oral History Association, February 26, 2005. The proposal was put forward by President Kim Rogers. A motion to accept was made by Mary Larson and seconded by Kathryn Nasstrom. Allocations were approved for up to \$3,000 per year in funding for the next three years, finances permitting.
5. Past recipients of the OHA Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award include, in 2007, Karin Mak, "Migrant Women Workers in China"; 2008, Ann Farnsworth-Alvear,

- "'Twice Refugees': Afro-Colombians and Political Action During the Explosion of Violence Along Colombia's Pacific Coast"; 2009, Christopher D. Hartmann, "How Are Waste Site Workers and Inhabitants' Livelihoods Affected by 'Green' Development? A Case Study of the Managua, Nicaragua, Municipal Waste Site"; 2010, Eric Rodrigo Meringer, "Ciudad Juárez: Lives Interrupted"; 2011, Rhana Natour and Tamara Shogaolu, "Sawt: Voices from the Arab Spring"; 2012, Selly Thiam, "None on Record: Stories of Queer Africa."
6. The full proposals for the years 2006, 2007, and 2008 were unavailable for analysis.
  7. The Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award constitutes a significant new role for the Oral History Association. Since the organization's founding in 1966, the OHA had always advocated and recognized outstanding oral history projects but never previously directly funded fieldwork. The award has also expanded the international presence of the OHA, as a significant majority of the proposed projects are conducted abroad.
  8. "Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award," Oral History Association, <http://www.oralhistory.org>.
  9. Donald A. Ritchie, "Introduction: The Evolution of Oral History," *Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Jay Perkins and Ralph Izard, "In the Wake of Disaster: Lessons Learned," in *Covering Disaster: Lessons from Media Coverage of Katrina and Rita*, ed. Ralph Izard and Jay Perkins (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2010), 3.
  12. Guido H. Stempel III, "Hurricane Katrina: Flooding, Muck, and Human Misery," in *ibid.*, 21.
  13. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged*, s.v. "crisis."

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# Index

---

- Abandoned and Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina* (ACLU), 137
- absolute death, 114
- Accra, Ghana floods, 185–186, 193–195, 200, 201, 202
- Ackerman, Gary I., 244, 245, 246
- ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), 137
- active listening, 122–123
- AERG (association of *rescapés*), 105
- Afghan Communicator* magazine, 252
- Afghanistan, 232, 251–253, 257. *See also* combat chaplains; Hazara refugees
- Afghan Women's Network, 69
- Aftermath, Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Brisson), 30
- "Aftershock: Journalists and Trauma" (Johnson), 12n3
- Aggie Bonfire collapse, 72n22
- Ajax (Sophocles), 240
- Alajo, Ghana, 185
- Albarelli, Gerry, 241, 247, 260
- Albert, Canisius, 217, 221, 222
- Alive in Truth: The New Orleans Disaster and Memory Project, 13n25
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 137
- American jazz musicians, 13n22
- American survival rituals, 55
- amputees, 232
- anger, 228–229, 237
- Angola tactical team. *See* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis
- anguished memory, 99–100
- anthrax, 244
- antiseptic research, oral history and, 262–263
- Antoinette M. (Tutsi *rescapé*)  
commentary on interview with, 97–100, 101–102, 106–107  
interview with, 91–94, 95–96  
Krauss on, 114–115  
motivation for, 119
- April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, 69–70
- April 16th: Virginia Tech Remembers* (Lazenby), 66
- archival memory, 5–6
- art, as therapy, 211, 219
- Art in Public Places* (traveling exhibition), 193
- Ashcroft, John D., 244
- Asian women, stereotypes of, 176–177
- association of *rescapés* (AERG), 105
- athleticism, as survival mechanism, 55
- attachment to place, natural disasters and, 183–203
- Accra, Ghana floods, 185–186, 193–195, 200, 201, 202
- Brandenburg, Germany floods, 186–188, 195–198, 201, 202
- Chaitén, Chile volcano, 188–189, 198–199, 201
- commentary, 189–203
- construction of place and, 191
- economic ties to place, 197, 201
- emotional ties to place, 193, 196, 199, 201–203
- general concept of attachment to place, 191
- New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina, 183–185, 192–193, 201, 202
- place, definition of, 192, 200
- property ties to place, 195, 200
- resettlement after disasters, 197–198
- safety ties to place, 194, 198–199
- spatial dimension of, 200–201
- temporal dimension of, 199–200
- terms used for, 192
- Augustín Hernández interview and commentary, 75, 76–79, 116
- Australia, 41–42, 43–44, 44–45. *See also* Hazara refugees
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, 124
- Balkans, family patterns in, 25



- Barth, Alan, 154  
 Barth, Karl, 233  
 Bauer, Yehuda, 29  
 Bazambanza, Rupert, 207–223  
   Canada, arrival in, 212  
   childhood, 210  
   commentary on, 214–223  
   family life before genocide, 211–212  
   family's experience during genocide, 216–217  
   father, death of, 217  
   friends, loss of, 213, 219  
   on hell, 214  
   as illustrator, 210–211  
   interview with, 207–214  
   on Montreal, 219–220  
   pre-genocide memories, 212–213  
   on Rose Rwanga, 218  
   on Rwandan genocide, beginning of, 213–214  
   Rwandan genocide and Holocaust, linking of, 223  
   Rwanga family, friendship with, 209–210, 217  
   *Smile Through the Tears*, 219–223  
 BBC, 137  
 bearing witness, 119–121, 122  
 Bearman, Peter, 9, 255  
 Beathe I. (Tutsi *rescapés*), 103–104, 105  
 best practices for oral history, 269–272  
 between two deaths, 113–115  
*Beyond the Trauma Vortex* (Ross), 12n3  
 Bilal-Mizra, Mohammed, 241–243  
 bin Laden, Osama, 252  
 biographical interviews, 190  
 Bisesero, Rwanda, 222–223  
 Bishop, Christopher James, 58, 63, 66, 67  
 blacks, incarceration of, 142, 143  
 blame, 4  
 blood, drinking of, 96, 103  
 Bloomberg, Michael R., 246  
 Böcker, Maike, 186, 195  
 Bosnia, 23. *See also* Hanifa (pseud., Srebrenica survivor)  
 Boulanger, Ghislaine, 1–2, 266, 272  
 Bowden, Charles, 156, 157, 158  
 Brandenburg, Germany floods, 186–188, 195–198, 201, 202  
 Breaux, Lorna, 184–185, 193  
 Brewer, Jan, 155–156  
 Bring New Orleans Back Commission, 192  
 Brison, Susan J., 30, 117  
 Broad Street highway overpass, New Orleans, 131–132, 136, 137, 139  
 Bucci, Wilma, 121  
 Bush, George W., 232, 243  
 Bush, George W., administration, 155  
 Butt, Mohammed Rafik, 241, 242–243  
 cadmium dust, 167–168  
 cadmium poisoning, 166, 167, 176. *See also* China, poisoned workers in  
 Cain, Burl, 131, 133  
 Calderón, Felipe, 155  
 Camp Delta, Guantánamo, 80  
 Camp Greyhound, New Orleans, 138, 141  
 Campisi, Elizabeth  
   Guantánamo, work at, 74–75  
   on individual memories, 112  
   informants, relationship with, 121  
   interviews, attempts at conducting, 85–86  
   on oral historian's ethical responsibilities, 112  
   on oral history as healing, 266  
   oral history best practices, 270  
   on survivors giving oral history interviews, 115  
 Canada. *See* Montreal Life Stories project  
 Canadian Jewish Congress, 223  
*Canadian Jewish News* (newspaper), 223  
 cancer, 229–230  
 Canfield, Robert, 51  
 Carl, M. (Brandenburg flood survivor), 187, 196  
 Carlos (Juárez resident), 159  
 Carney, Katelyn, 58, 59, 63  
 Carter, Kevin, 12n3  
 Carver, Jamal, 56–57, 64  
 Castro, Fidel, 75  
 catastrophes. *See* crises  
 catastrophic dissociation, 113–115  
 Cave, Mark, 264, 265, 269  
 CELA (Centre d'Etude des Langues Africaines), 217  
 Center for History and New Media (George Mason University), 13n25  
 Centre d'Etude des Langues Africaines (CELA), 217  
 Chaitén, Chile volcano, 188–189, 198–199, 201–202  
 chaplains. *See also* combat chaplains  
   oral historians, comparison with, 234–236, 239  
 Charles K. (Tutsi *rescapé*), 113  
 chemicals. *See* China, poisoned workers in  
 Chile. *See* Chaitén, Chile volcano  
 China  
   American exposés of working conditions in, 166

- economic development, 174–175
- factory work in, 175, 176
- house work in, 172
- labor rights issues, sensitivity of, 166–167, 180
- rural-to-urban migrants, 175
- worker protest incidents, 176
- China, poisoned workers in, 166–181
  - commentary, 174–181
  - Fu, 170–172, 175, 179
  - funding for oral history of, 11
  - Min, 168–170, 179
  - Ren, 167–168, 175
  - Wu, 172–174, 175
- Cho, Seung-Hui, 55, 58, 59–64, 69
- Christina (pseud., combat chaplain), 226, 236
- chronic grief, 45
- City of Boerne v. Flores*, 262
- Ciudad Juárez: Lives Interrupted project, 11
- Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. *See* Juárez, Mexico, drug war in
- Ciudad Juárez La Fea* (Ugly Ciudad Juárez, Pereyra), 160–161
- civilians
  - in Iraq and Afghanistan, deaths of, 232
  - during New Orleans prison evacuation crisis, 133–135, 139, 142–143
- civil rights movement, 13n22
- Clark, Mary Marshall
  - on agents of history, 70
  - Boulanger and, 2
  - on documenting crises, 265
  - on listening to stories of tragedy, 48
  - on mass media and oral history, 268
  - on oral historians, 112
  - on September 11 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, 9
  - on stories, 266
- classrooms, safety of, 58
- Claudine U. (Tutsi *rescapé*), 94–95, 100
- Clinton, Bill, 74, 79, 243
- Clinton, Hillary R., 243
- Clinton Administration, 84
- CNN, 269
- Coast Guard, 78
- cobro de cuotas* (extortion rackets), 146–148, 161
- cognitive processes, 87. *See also* memory
- colonialism, in Rwanda, 221
- Columbia Center for Oral History, 254–257, 260. *See also* September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks
- Columbia University, Oral History Research Office, 13n23
- Columbia University 9/11 Oral History Project. *See* September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project
- Columbine Everywhere* (movie), 66–67
- Columbine High School shootings, 2–3, 72n22
- combat, killing in, 239
- combat chaplains, 226–240
  - anger during combat, 228–229
  - Christina, interview and commentary, 226, 236
  - commentary on, 232–240
  - Craig, interview and commentary, 231, 238
  - crises of faith in, 233
  - George, interview and commentary, 231–232, 238
  - Michael, interview and commentary, 226–227, 236
  - mission of, 233
  - as outsiders, 234–235
  - Timothy, interview and commentary, 227–231, 238
- combat historians, 6–7
- combat veterans, 238. *See also* combat chaplains
- common memory, 101
- communism, collapse of, 8
- completeness of crisis oral history, 259
- confidentiality, 120, 235
- continuing and unfinished present, 124–125. *See also* oral history and psychoanalysis in aftermath of terror
- courts, testifying in, 119–120
- Couture-Nowak, Jocelyne, 60, 63, 72n18
- Craig (pseud., combat chaplain), 231, 238
- crises
  - blame for, 4
  - constancy of, 1
  - definition of, 264
  - explanations for, 3–4
  - impacts on ethnic communities, 253
  - as opportunities, 265
  - prolongation of, 51
  - time and, 257
  - time of emergency of, 258
  - truth vs. collective understanding of, 4
- crises of faith. *See* combat chaplains
- crisis oral history. *See also* interviewing; interviews; memory
  - benefits of, 43–44
  - completeness, 259
  - crisis oral history projects, 264–265
  - expansion of, 11, 263
  - goals of, 258

- crisis oral history (*Cont.*)
  - introduction to, 1–11
  - methodologies for, 47–48
  - reasons for, 264, 272–273
- crisis survivors, 1–2
- crisis theology, 233
- Cuba, 74, 75, 76
- Cuban rafter crisis, 74–89
  - commentary, 85–89
  - Gonzalez, interview with, 75–76, 80–85
  - Hernandez, interview with, 75, 76–79
  - Moreno, interview with, 79–80
  - Ruiz, interview with, 79, 88
  - U.S. entry refused, 79
- Cuban revolution, 88–89
- Cullmann, Gitte, 188, 198
- Czech Republic, flooding in, 195, 196
  
- Dallaire, Romeo, 219
- Danziger Bridge, New Orleans, 143
- Darfour, genocide in, 212
- darkness of the sea, 76
- death, 113, 114, 227, 236–237
- deep memory, 100–101
- Delbo, Charlotte, 100
- Deng Xiaoping, 174
- denial, silence as, 98
- Department of Defense, study on suicides, 239–240
- Derek. *See* O'Dell, Derek
- DeSalvo, Gerald, 136
- destruction, responses to, 28
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR), 232–233
- dialogue of expectation, 143, 157
- Diamond, Jared, 235
- digital archives, 13n25
- disasters, natural. *See* attachment to place, natural disasters and
- DMAT CA-6 (disaster medical assistance team), 142
- DOC (Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections). *See* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis
- dogs, 101–103
- dog tags (military ID tags), 237
- drug cartels, 155, 156, 158–159
- drug wars. *See* Juárez, Mexico, drug war in
- DSM-IV-TR (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition, Text Revision), 232–233
- dust, cadmium, 167–168
- Dutchbat, 28–29
  
- EBIs (enviro-biographical interviews), 183, 190, 191
- economic ties to place, 197, 201
- Eduardin, Roberto, 86
- Eggers, Dave, 10–11, 138
- Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, 135, 137, 140
- El Paso, Texas, 156
- emergencies, oral history in times of. *See* Columbia Center for Oral History
- Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award, 263–264
- Emerging Crises Oral History Research Fund, 11
- emotion, as component of truth, 5
- enviro-biographical interviews (EBIs), 183, 190, 191
- environment, nature of people's relationship with, 191
- epics, 124
- Erikson, Kai, 68
- Erin (Virginia Tech Student), 59
- ethnic communities, 253
- existing, surviving vs., 96–97
- extortion rackets (*cobro de cuotas*), 146–148, 161
  
- facial communication, 121
- faith, crises of. *See* combat chaplains
- Fascism in Popular Memory* (Passerini), 119
- FBI, 244
- fear, 51, 237
- "Fearful Symmetry: Shared Trauma in New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina" (Boulanger), 12n3
- Federal Writers' Project, 13n22
- Feldstein, Mark, 4, 153–154, 162–163
- Felman, Shoshana, 118
- Fernandez, Pancho, 79
- fiction, in recall memory, 28
- Field, Sean, 3
- first responders, 143
- flashbulb memories, 117
- Fleming-Cook, Susan E., 70, 267
- floods. *See* Accra, Ghana; Brandenburg, Germany; New Orleans
- Floodwall project, 263
- floor charge (*derecho de piso*), 147
- FPR (Front Patriotique Rwandais), 211
- Fradella, Mark, 134–135
- Frank, Anne, 222
- friendships, 209
- Front Patriotique Rwandais (FPR), 211
- Fu (pseud., Chinese worker), 168, 170–172, 173, 175, 178, 179

- gateway approach to oral history, 2–3  
 gaze, 121  
*génocidaires* (killers of 1994 Rwanda), 215  
 genocide, 209, 213, 216, 266. *See also*  
     Rwandan genocide; Tutsi *rescapés*  
 George Mason University, Center for History  
     and New Media, 13n25  
 George (pseud., combat chaplain),  
     231–232, 238  
 Germany. *See* Brandenburg, Germany  
 Ghana, Accra floods, 185–186, 193–195, 201  
 Giuliani, Rudolph W., 243  
*Giuseppe* (Italian ship), 77–78  
 glasses (eyeglasses), 178  
 Globalization Monitor, 179–180, 181  
 Glover, Henry, 143  
 God, 230–231, 239  
 Goddard, Colin, 62, 63  
 Goldwing, Matthew, 186, 195  
 Gonzalez, Sylvia, 75–76, 80–85, 86  
 Goodwin, Rob, 184, 193  
 GP Batteries (GP). *See also* China, poisoned  
     workers in  
     CEO of, 170  
     factory workers, 171, 172, 178  
     headquarters, protests at, 181  
     labor law violations, 176  
     medical compensation campaign against,  
         166, 178–179  
     Min at, 169  
     nickel-cadmium batteries, production  
         of, 180  
 graphic novels, 222. *See also* *Smile Through  
     the Tears*  
 Greenpeace, cadmium studies, 176  
 Greenspan, Henry, 108n9  
 Greenwood, Mississippi, 13n22  
 grief, 42, 45  
 Guantánamo naval base, 79, 80–85  
 Guatemalan war widows, 29  
 Guillermo Moreno's comments, 79–80  
 guilt, over killings in combat, 239  
*gukora* (to work, to kill), 109n12  
 Gusman, Marlin, 135, 136  
*gutemagura* (to chop), 109n12  
*gutema* (to cut), 109n12  
 Gyan, Al Hadji, 186, 194, 201  
  
 Haas, Emily, 63–64  
 Habimana, Emmanuel, 224n5  
 Halterman, Ingo, 185  
 Hamdani, Mohammed Salmaan, 243–247  
 Hamdani, Talat, 241, 243–247  
 Hanifa (pseud., Srebrenica survivor)  
     bus journey to Tišća and Kladanj, 22–23  
     commentary on, 23–31  
     early life, 17  
     husband, loss of, 22, 26–27  
     interview techniques for, 271  
     interview with, 17–23  
     Leydesdorff, relationship to, 24, 28, 30  
     Leydesdorff on, 25, 125  
     narrative disorder of interview with,  
         26, 116  
     parent-child relationships in story of,  
         25, 26, 28  
     photograph of, 18  
     Potočari, move to, 21–22  
     pregnancy and childbirth, 19–20  
     rejection, experiences of, 30–31  
     sons, 19–20  
     Srebrenica, journey to and arrival  
         in, 18–19  
     trust, sense of, 28  
 Harris, Eric, 72n22  
 Hartman, Geoffrey, 106, 108n9  
 Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma  
     (HPRP), 89  
 Hastert, Dennis, 192  
 Hatzfeld, Jean, 2, 8–9  
 Hazara refugees, 33–52  
     commentary on, 41–52  
     families, separation from, 44–45  
     Juma, interview with, 38–41  
     persecution of, 40  
     Reza, interview with, 33–38, 40–41  
 Hazaras  
     families, importance of, 44–45  
     life in Afghanistan, 42  
     Taliban persecution of, 33, 34, 40, 46  
 healing, 66, 87, 89, 113  
 heavy-metal contamination, 176. *See also*  
     cadmium poisoning; China, poisoned  
     workers in  
 Heeger-Anderson, Kristina  
     commentary on, 64–65, 67, 71  
     interview with, 59–62  
     Kennelly on, 124  
     on narratives, 118  
*heimat* (home), 196  
 hell, 214  
 Herman, Judith, 12n11  
 Hernandez, Augustín, 75, 76–79, 116  
 High, Stephen, 215, 267–268  
 Hirsch, Marianne, 223  
 historical memory, 112  
 historical reconstructions, 259  
 Historic New Orleans Collection, 10  
 history, in journalism, 154  
 Hoffman, Alice, 5–6

- Hoffman, Howard, 5–6  
 Hokies United, 68  
 Holocaust, 100–101, 223  
 Holocaust studies, 222  
 house work, in China, 172  
 Howell, Mary, 145n12  
 HPRT (Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma), 89  
 Hübner, M. (Brandenburg flood survivor), 186–187, 196  
 Huizhou Advance Battery Technology factory, 178  
 Huizhou Power Pack factory, 172  
 Human Rights Watch, 135  
 humiliated memory, 103–104  
 Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, 13n25  
 Hurricane Katrina. *See also* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis  
   aftermath of, 129  
   Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, 13n25  
   New Orleans residents' attachment to place, impact on, 183–185, 192–193, 201  
   oral history work on, 10, 272–273  
 hurricanes, as media events, 135  
 Hutus, 9, 108n2, 221–222  
 Hyacinthe U. (Tutsi *rescapé*), 103
- I-10 Witness Project, 13n25  
*Icyunamo* (annual mourning period), 99, 100, 105, 106  
 identity, time and, 247  
 ID tags (dog tags), 237  
 IEDs (improvised explosive devices), 227, 228  
 Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), 243, 244  
 improvised explosive devices (IEDs), 227, 228  
 incarceration, 141–142  
 individual and collective benefits of oral history, 111–113  
 individual stories, community narratives vs., 88–89  
 INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service), 243, 244  
 Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, 270–271  
 Interahamwe (Hutu extremist militia), 222  
 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 189  
 interpreters, 24  
 interviewees, 85, 121. *See also* names of specific interviewees  
 interviewers. *See* oral historians  
 interviewing  
   contexts for, 49–50  
   as healing, 87  
   stress of, 70, 215  
   techniques for, 49–50, 183, 190, 191  
   of trauma victims, 86–87  
 interviews  
   social context for, 88–89  
   textual treatment of, 216  
   transcripts, limitations of, 223  
 investigative journalism, 154  
*inzibutso* (memorial sites), 100  
 IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), 189  
 Iraq, 232, 257. *See also* combat chaplains  
 iron rice bowl, 171  
 Islamic *umma*, 250  
 Ivarro, Maria Silvina, 188–189, 199  
 Iversen, Eve, 8  
 Izard, Ralph, 269
- Jaffery, Mustafa, 248–249  
 Jaffery, Salmaan, 241, 248–250  
 Jaffery, Zaheer, 241, 247–249, 250  
 Jamaica, 259  
 Jameson, Eric, 184, 193  
 jazz musicians, 13n22  
 Jin (Chinese worker), 169  
 Johnson, Michelle, 12n3  
 Jonathan Palmas's interview and commentary, 146–148, 149, 160, 161  
 journalism  
   history in, 154  
   oral history, comparison with, 4–5, 153–154, 157, 162–163, 268–269  
   sensationalism in, 153–154, 156–157  
 journalists, 4, 6, 12n3  
 Juárez, Mexico  
   depictions of, in U.S. papers, 161  
   emigration from, 158, 165n33  
   federal police, actions of, 159–160  
   lived experience vs. journalistic constructions of life in, 158–159  
   nondrug-related crime in, 159–160  
   security forces in, failure of, 159–160  
 Juárez, Mexico, drug war in, 146–163  
   army, actions of, 151–153  
   cartel violence, residents' responses to, 158–159  
   civil society, effects on, 162  
   commentary, 153–163  
   crimes, police response to, 148–149  
   extortion rackets, 146–148, 161  
   general populace, portrayals of, 156–157

- Palmas, interview with, 146–148, 149, 160, 161  
 Raul, interview with, 151–153, 162  
 robberies, 148–150  
 Rosa, interview with, 148–151, 161–162  
 sensationalistic coverage of, 154, 156–157  
 Juma (Hazara refugee)  
   Australia, resettlement in, 43  
   commentary on, 41–43, 45–48, 50, 52  
   family, fears about, 45, 46–47  
   family, separation from, 39–40  
   greatest crisis of, 42  
   imprisonment, 43  
   injuries, 38–39, 41  
   interview with, 38–41  
   interview with, context of, 47–48  
   mother's death, 52  
   refugee status, 36  
   torture of, 48  
  
 Kabayiza, Callixte, 217, 218  
 Kaplan, Temma, 241  
 Karoli (Tutsi *rescapé*), 96–97  
 Katrina. *See* Hurricane Katrina  
 Katrina Crosses, 193  
 Kauhajoki School of Hospitality, 72n12  
 Kazmierczak, Steven, 72n4  
 Kelly, Raymond W., 246  
 Kennelly, Tamara  
   on healing through oral history, 113  
   on Heeger-Anderson, 124  
   on oral history, 118  
   on oral history interviews, 112  
   oral history work, motivation for, 111  
   vicarious traumatization of, 123  
 killing in combat, 239  
 Kim, Yang, 55–57, 63, 64, 67–68, 71  
 Klebold, Dylan, 72n22  
 Koffour, Anthony, 185, 194, 195  
 Koshka Foundation, 60, 62, 65  
 Krauss, Taylor  
   on Antoinette M., 113–114  
   long-form design for oral history, 266  
   oral history work, motivation for, 107, 111, 268, 272  
*kuchi* (Pashtun nomads), 46  
  
 labor organizing, in China, 177  
 Lacan, Jacques, 113, 116–117, 119  
 Lamartiniere, Orville, 130–131  
 Langer, Lawrence, 97, 100–101, 103, 104, 125  
 La Porte, Matthew Joseph, 60  
 Laub, Dori, 65, 66, 117, 118  
 law, practicing, in Juárez, 147–148  
 Lazenby, Roland, 66  
  
 Leblanc, David, 183–184, 193  
 Lee, Henry, 60  
 Leung, Pui Pui, 168, 177  
 levees, 195–196  
 Leviatín, David, 8  
 Levy, Andrea, 259  
 Lewes, England floods, 13n28  
 Leydesdorff, Selma  
   about, 2  
   Hanifa, meeting with, 24  
   Hanifa, relationship with, 28–29, 30  
   on Hanifa, 25, 113  
   on Hanifa's narrative, 125  
   informants, relationship with, 121  
   on listening, 123  
   methodology, 29  
   oral history best practices, 271  
   oral history work, motivation for, 111  
   on traumatization, effects of, 116  
   on voices of survivors, 264  
 Librescu, Liviu, 55, 57, 67  
*lieux de mémoire*, 193  
 Ling, Laura, 157  
 Lithuanian refugees, in U.S., 45  
 Loganathan, G. V., 63  
 Loma Prieta, California, earthquake, 8  
 longitudinal studies, 9–10, 257, 265  
 long song, oral history as, 259  
*Long Song, The* (Levy), 259  
 long-term memory, 5–6  
 Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections (DOC). *See* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis  
 Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, 142  
  
 machetes, 98, 100  
*Made in China* (Pun), 177  
 Madigan Army Medical Center, 235–236  
 Mak, Karin  
   documentary, making of, 11, 176–177, 178–180  
   factors driving, 269  
   oral history best practices, 270  
   *Red Dust*, 166, 181  
 Mandela, Nelson, 12n7  
 maquila system, 161  
 Margalit, Avishai, 122, 123  
 Marshall, Samuel I. A., 6  
 Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, 89  
 mass exoduses from Cuba, 74, 75, 76  
 Massoud, Ahmad Shah, 253  
 mass violence, 221

- Mattel, 181  
*Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Spiegelman), 221  
 McKinney, Cynthia, 137  
 meaning, 124–125, 234, 256, 258–259, 266  
 meaningful remembrance, 3, 10  
 Mears, Carolyn, 2–3  
 media, 6, 268. *See also* journalism  
 Memorial Park, New Orleans, 193  
 memorials, 100, 110–111  
 Memories of Disasters research group, 183, 190  
 memory and memories  
   anguished memory, 99–100  
   archival memory, 5–6  
   common memory, 101  
   deep memory, 100–101  
   of emergency, 258  
   fiction in, 28  
   flashbulb memories, 117  
   forms of, 97  
   historical, construction of, 112  
   humiliated memory, 103–104  
   individual memories, social repression of, 112  
   influences on, 2, 25, 47, 116, 117–118  
   tainted memory, 101  
   value of sharing, 254  
 Mensah, Umar Graham, 186, 195  
 mental health field, vicarious traumatization, issue of, 12n3  
 mentalization, 121  
 Mérida Initiative, 155  
 Meringer, Eric, 11, 268–269  
 Mexican drug war. *See* Juárez, Mexico, drug war in  
 Mexico, 161, 165n51  
 Mexico City, Mexico, 7–8  
 Miami Cuban community, 88–89  
 Michael (pseud., combat chaplain), 226–227, 236  
 Michel U. (Tutsi *rescapé*), 104–106  
 migrants, rural-to-urban, in China, 175  
 military. *See also* combat chaplains  
   treatment of Cuban rafters, 82–84  
 military chaplains. *See* chaplains; combat chaplains  
 Miller, Crystal, 66–67  
 Miller, John, 185–186, 194  
 Min (pseud., Chinese worker), 168–170, 171, 173, 178, 179  
 Mollica, Richard, 89  
 Montreal Jewish community, 223  
 Montreal Life Stories Project, 207, 215, 216  
 monuments, 110–111, 193  
 moral witnessing, 122–123  
 Moreno, Guillermo, 79–80  
 Muhongerwa (Tutsi genocide victim), 94, 99  
 Mukabalisa, Monique, 217  
 Munyeshyaka, Fr., 222  
 murder city. *See* Juárez, Mexico, drug war in  
 murders, in Juárez, 155  
 Murray, Melissa, 133–134  
 Muslims  
   beliefs of, 242  
   fear, after September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, 251–252  
   PR battle, loss of, 250  
   questions about, after September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, 249  
 Nagin, Ray, 192  
*Narco War Next Door* (Ling), 157  
 narratives, 88–89, 117–118, 124  
 narrators of oral history, 265–267  
 National September 11 Memorial and Museum, 247, 254  
*Nation* (magazine), 135  
 Native Americans, 110–111  
 natural death, absolute death vs., 114  
 natural disasters. *See* attachment to place, natural disasters and  
 nature, in social theory, 190–191  
 Nauke, O. (Brandenburg flood survivor), 187–188, 197  
 Nazari, Mohammadi Mussa, 49  
 Neimeyer, Robert, 88  
 Newcastle, Australia, 8  
 New Orleans. *See also* New Orleans prison  
   evacuation crisis  
     conflict over rebuilding of, post-Katrina, 192  
     Hurricane Katrina and attachment to place in, 183–185, 192–193, 201, 202  
     social problems in, 141–142, 143  
 New Orleans Fire Department, 142  
 New Orleans Police Department, 143  
 New Orleans prison evacuation crisis, 129–144  
   Broad Street highway overpass, prisoners on, 131–132, 136, 137  
   Cain, interview with, 131, 133  
   civilians, encounters with civilians, 133–135, 139, 142–143  
   commentary, 135–144  
   correctional workers, interviews with, 138–139  
   first responders, clashes with, 142–143, 143–144  
   Fradella, interview with, 135  
   Lamartiniere, interview with, 130–131

- Murray, interview with, 133–134  
 Paul, interview with, 131–133  
 New York Police Department (NYPD), 246  
*New York Times*, 245, 247  
 nickel-cadmium batteries, production of, 180–181. *See also* China, poisoned workers in  
 Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, 72–73n22  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 231  
 night letters, 45  
 Night of the Tlatelolco, 7  
*noche de Tlatelolco, La: testimonios de historia oral* (Poniatowska), 7  
 nonverbal communication, 97  
 Northern Illinois University shootings, 62, 65, 72n4  
 NYPD (New York Police Department), 246  
 “Obscuring a Muslim Name, and an American’s Sacrifice” (Otterman), 247  
 observational reporting, 4  
 occupational health and safety. *See* China, poisoned workers in  
 O’Dell, Derek  
   commentary on, 63, 64, 65–67, 71  
   flashbulb memory, 117  
   interview with, 57–59  
   mission of, 118  
 Odra River flood (Germany), 186–188, 195–198, 201, 202  
 OHA (Oral History Association), 11, 14n36, 263–264  
 Oklahoma City bombing, 72n22  
 Oliver-Smith, Anthony, 191  
*One Story: Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Afghan American Literature* (Saed), 254  
 OPCSO (Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff’s Office), 129, 130, 131  
 open-ended, as term, 108n9  
 OPP (Orleans Parish Prison), 129–130.  
   *See also* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis  
 oral historians  
   chaplains, comparison with, 234–236, 239  
   crisis oral history, embrace of, 264–265  
   description of, 125  
   difficulties faced by, 262  
   effects of oral history on, 267–268  
   influence on interviews, 224n9  
   interviewees, relationship with, 121  
   journalists, comparison with, 6  
   psychoanalysts, comparison with, 3, 112, 121, 266  
   task of, 266  
 oral history. *See also* crisis oral history; oral history and psychoanalysis in aftermath of terror  
   antiseptic research and, 262–263  
   benefits of, 89, 111–113, 266–267  
   best practices, 269–272  
   Emerging Crises Oral History Research Award, 263–264  
   gateway approach, 2–3  
   influence of, 113  
   interviewers, effects on, 267–268  
   journalism, comparison with, 4–5, 153–154, 157, 162–163, 268–269  
   Leviatin on, 8  
   as long song, 259  
   methodologies for, 6–8  
   as methodology, 1  
   narrators of, 265–267  
   Poniatowska on, 8  
   purpose of, 223, 271–272  
   terms used in, 108n9  
   in times of emergencies (*See* Columbia Center for Oral History)  
   work of, 258  
 oral history and psychoanalysis in aftermath of terror, 110–125  
   bearing witness, 119–121  
   benefits, individual and collective, 111–113  
   catastrophic dissociation, 113–115  
   moral witnessing, 122–123  
   present, continuing and unfinished, 124–125  
   survivors, motives for telling, 118–119  
   trauma narratives, advantages and dangers of constructing, 115–118  
   vicarious traumatization, 123–124  
 Oral History Association (OHA), 11, 14n36, 263–264  
 Oral History Research Office (Columbia University), 13n23  
*Oral History Review* (journal), 153–154  
 Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff’s Office (OPCSO), 129, 130, 131  
 Orleans Parish Prison (OPP), 129–130.  
   *See also* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis  
 Orris, Peter, 176, 180  
 Otterman, Sharon, 247  
 outsiders, chaplains as, 234–235  
 Palmas, Jonathan, 146–148, 149, 160, 161  
 Panama, rafter camps in, 79, 83–84, 86  
 parent-child relationships, in Hanifa’s story, 25, 26, 28  
 Parker, Teresa, 263



- Parkhill, Peter, 8  
 Passerini, Luisa, 119  
 past, mastering of, 99  
 Pataki, George E., 243  
 PATRIOT Act, 245  
 Paul, James, 131–133  
 Penner, D'Ann, 10  
 Pereyra, Rutilio García, 160–161  
 Perkins, Jay, 269  
 Peters, David W., 233–234, 265, 266  
 Pew Center on the States study, 141  
 Phillips, Denise  
   challenges faced by, 267  
   on influence of oral history, 113  
   informants, relationship with, 121  
   methodological techniques, 47–51  
   oral history best practices, 270  
   oral history work, motivation for, 111  
   vicarious traumatization of, 123  
 Phoenix, Arizona, 155  
 place. *See* attachment to place, natural disasters and  
 Platzeck, Matthias, 197  
 Pogue, Forrest, 6–7  
 Poland, flooding in, 195–196  
 Poniatowska, Elena, 7–8  
 Portelli, Alessandro, 30, 157  
 Portraits of Grief, *New York Times*, 245  
 post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 84–85, 232–233, 234  
 Potočari, Bosnia, 21–22, 29  
 power differentials, between interviewers and interviewees, 86–87  
 Pozolero, El (drug cartel assassin), 155  
 Prague, Czechoslovakia, 8  
 present, continuing and unfinished, 124–125. *See also* oral history and psychoanalysis in aftermath of terror  
 Preston, Joy, 14n28  
 pretrial offenders, 135–136, 140  
 prisons. *See* New Orleans prison evacuation crisis  
 procreation, death and, 227  
 property ties to place, 195, 200  
 prophesies, interviews as, 256  
 psychic equivalence, 115  
 psychoanalysis, confidentiality of, 120. *See also* oral history and psychoanalysis in aftermath of terror  
 psychoanalysts, oral historians, comparison with, 3, 112, 121, 266  
 PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), 84–85, 232–233, 234  
 Pun Ngai, 177  
 racism, 209, 210  
 rafter crisis. *See* Cuban rafter crisis  
 Ramsey, Frederic, Jr., 13n22  
 rapes, 222  
 Raul (Cuban rafter crisis survivor), 88  
 Raul (Juárez resident), 151–153, 162  
 Raul Ruiz (Cuban rafter crisis survivor), 79  
 Rausch, O. (Brandenburg flood survivor), 187, 197  
 Raxworthy, Richard, 8  
 recall memory, fiction in, 28  
*Red Dust* (Mak), 166, 181  
 reexternalization of traumatic events, 65, 66  
 refugees, 31, 41–42  
 register of the Real, 116–117  
 Relay for Life, 66  
 Relph, Edward, 192, 200  
 Ren (pseud., Chinese worker), 167–168, 175, 178  
 Republicans, Hamdani on, 245  
*rescapés*. *See* Tutsi *rescapés*  
 resettlement after disasters, 197–198  
 resistance, 222–223  
 Reza (Hazara refugee)  
   Australia, emigration to, 43  
   brother, relationship with, 36, 37, 45  
   commentary on, 42–50, 52  
   family, knowledge of, 34, 35  
   father, remembrances of, 37  
   as father, 37–38, 50  
   interview with, 33–38, 40–41  
   life in Afghanistan, 33–34  
   marriage and children, 35  
   meaning, discovery of, 124–125  
   mother, plan to revisit, 40–41, 45, 46, 49  
   mother's death, 52  
   Phillips's relationship with, 267  
   photograph of, 46  
   residence status in Australia, 35–36  
 Ricardo, Jorge, 189, 199  
 Richard N. (Tutsi *rescapé*), 106–107  
 Richardson, Joan, 251–252  
 Ritchie, Donald A., 266  
 robberies, in Juárez, 148–150  
 Roberts, Glenn, 66  
 Rodonda, Rosa, 188, 199  
 Rogers, Kim, 263  
 Rohland, Eleonora, 183, 192–193  
 Rosa (Juárez resident), 148–151, 161–162  
 Ross, Gina, 12n3  
 RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front), 222, 223  
 Ruiz, Raul, 79  
 Rule of Law Oral History Project, 9–10  
 Ruttig, Thomas, 45  
 Rwanda, 210, 211, 221–222

- Rwandan genocide, 8–9, 73n22, 213, 219, 222. *See also* Bazambanza, Rupert; Rwanda, Rose; Tutsi *rescapés*
- Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), 222, 223
- Rwanga, Hyacinthe, 222
- Rwanga, Rose, 217–219  
about, 207, 214  
Bazambanza's friendship with, 209–210, 217–218  
death, 218  
early life, 217–218  
family members' reburials, 208–209, 218  
language of interview with, 215  
on Rwandan Patriotic Front, 222  
smile of, 208
- Rwanga family, 214. *See also* *Smile Through the Tears*
- Saari, Matti Juhani, 72n12
- Saddest Days Oral History Project, 10
- sadness of *rescapés*, 92–93, 98, 99
- Saed, Zohra, 241, 250–254
- safety ties to place, 194, 198–199
- sampling techniques, 9
- Santa Fe, New Mexico, 110–1111
- Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), 68
- SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design), 68
- Schlink, Bernhard, 99
- schools, feelings of safety in, 58, 64
- Schumer, Charles, 243
- Schurig, Gerhardt, 65–66
- sea, darkness of, 76
- Sean (Virginia Tech student), 58, 59
- The Search* (graphic novel), 222
- Sea Signal (rafter operation), 78
- second-order witnesses, 122
- sensationalism in journalism, 154, 156–157
- September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, 9, 119, 255–257
- September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, 241–260  
Bilal-Mizra, interview with, 241–243  
commentary on, 254–260  
detainees from, numbers of, 244  
Hamdani, interview with, 243–247  
Jaffery, Salmaan, interview with, 249–250  
Jaffery, Zaheer, interview with, 247–249, 250  
killings after, 249  
official story of, 257  
Saed, interview with, 250–254
- September 11 Digital Archive, 13n25
- severe loss, 26
- sexuality, death and, 227, 236–237
- Shatan, Chaim, 123
- "Shattered: An Analysis of Paul Tillich's Experience in World War I and His Search for Healing" (Peters), 233
- Sichuan, China, 167
- silence, 66, 98
- Silva, Jessica, 207, 215, 220, 222
- Silvia (Juárez resident), 159
- Slater, Colonel (at Orleans Parish Prison), 130
- SMIC Shanghai School, 73n23
- Smile Through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan Genocide (Sourire malgré tout, Bazambanza)*, 207, 208, 214, 216, 219–223
- social drama, 27–28
- social problems, incarceration as cure for, 141–142
- social theory, nature in, 190–191
- societies, 89, 189–190
- soldiers, 236
- Sophocles, 240
- South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 3
- Spencer, Jane, 181
- Spiegelman, Art, 221
- spillover violence, 155–156
- spiritual war. *See* combat chaplains
- Spitzer, Leo, 223
- Srebrenica, Bosnia, 17, 23–24, 24–25, 29–30. *See also* Hanifa (pseud., Srebrenica survivor)
- standing like a tree, 98–99
- stereotypes, 176–177
- Stolpe, Manfred, 197
- stories, 255, 256, 259, 266
- storytelling, 89
- student protests, 13n23
- Suada (interpreter), 27
- suffering, 51, 66
- suicides, 49, 239–240
- survival rituals, American, 55
- surviving, existing vs., 96–97
- survivors, 118–119, 220, 264. *See also* Tutsi *rescapés*
- Sylvia Gonzalez interview and commentary, 75–76, 80–85, 86
- tainted memory, 101
- Taliban, 33, 34, 40, 45, 46, 253
- tattoos, 193
- Teach for Jamie, 67
- Teach for Madame, 72n18
- television, live crisis coverage, 8

telling, 118–119, 255  
 temporary protection visas (TPVs), 44  
 terror. *See* oral history and psychoanalysis in  
 aftermath of terror  
 testimony, 103–104, 108n9  
*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature,  
 Psychoanalysis, and History* (Laub and  
 Felman), 118  
 Thompson, A. C., 143  
 Thompson, Paul, 162  
 Tick, Ed, 233, 236–237  
 Tillich, Paul, 226–227, 233, 239  
 time, 247, 257, 258–259  
 timelines, in trauma oral histories, 116  
 time of emergency, 258  
 Timothy (pseud., combat chaplain),  
 227–231, 238  
 Tisdale, John, 4, 143, 157  
 “Toxic Factories Take Toll on China’s Labor  
 Force” (Spencer), 181  
 Toys“R”Us, 181  
 TPVs (temporary protection visas), 44  
 trauma  
   as contagious, 123  
   effects of, 26, 48, 68, 87, 116  
   meaning, effects on, 234  
   memory, effects on, 2, 47  
   multigenerational transmission of, 119  
   neurobiological correlates of, 117  
   response to, 70–71  
   severe loss, differences from, 26  
   as social issue, 2–3  
   traumatizing events, 29, 87–88  
   vicarious traumatization, 2, 12n3,  
   123–124  
 trauma narratives, 115–117, 117–118  
 trauma oral history. *See* crisis oral history  
 trauma victims, 86–87, 89  
 TRC (Truth and Reconciliation  
 Commission), 3  
*Treme* (HBO series), 137–138  
 Trey (Virginia Tech student), 59  
 trust, 28  
 truth, 4, 5  
 Truth and Reconciliation Commission  
 (TRC), 3  
 Turner, Victor, 27–28  
 Tutsi genocide, 8–9, 108n2  
 Tutsi *rescapés*, 91–107  
   Antoinette M., interview and commentary,  
   91–94, 95–96, 97–100, 101–102  
   Bethe I., commentary on, 103–104  
   Claudine U., interview and commentary,  
   94–95, 100  
   commentary on, 96–107

Hyacinthe U., commentary on, 103  
 Karoli, commentary on, 96–97  
 Michel U., commentary on, 104–106  
 Tutsis, representations of, in *Smile Through  
 the Tears*, 221–222  
 Ugly Ciudad Juárez (*Ciudad Juárez La Fea,  
 Pereyra*), 160–161  
 United States  
   drug interdiction policies, failure of, 156  
   incarceration rate, 141  
   jazz musicians, 13n22  
   survival rituals, 55  
 University of British Columbia, 68  
 University of Texas at Austin  
   shootings, 73n22  
 Urban Land Institute, 192  
 U.S. Army Chaplain Corps, 234  
 U.S. Army, suicide rates, 239–240  
 USA PATRIOT Act, 245  
 Uwamwezi (Tutsi genocide victim), 95–96  
*uwarokotse* (one who escapes catastrophe),  
 107–108n1  
 Vannoy, Darrell, 133  
 VA (Veterans Administration), on PTSD, 232  
 Velvet Revolution, 8  
*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering the  
 past), 99  
 Veterans Administration (VA), on  
   PTSD, 232  
 vicarious traumatization, 2, 12n3, 123–124  
 violence, unreality of, 64  
 Virginia Tech (Virginia Polytechnic Institute  
 and State University) shootings, 55–72  
   April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Oral History  
   Narrative and Memory Project, 69–70  
   coherence of narratives of, 118  
   commentary on, 62–71  
   Drillfield shrine, 69  
   external responses to, 68–69  
   Heeger-Anderson, interview with, 59–62  
   Kim, interview with, 55–57  
   memorial list, 71–72  
   O’Dell, interview with, 57–59  
 Voice of America, 245  
 Voice of Witness (book series), 10–11  
 Voices of Rwanda (VOR) archive, 91, 97  
 volcanoes. *See* Chaitén, Chile volcano  
 Vollen, Lola, 10–11  
 VOR (Voices of Rwanda) archive, 91, 97  
 Wahedy, Habibullah, 49  
*Wall Street Journal* (newspaper), 181  
 Waltman, Jerold, 262

- war, 239. *See also* combat chaplains
- War on Terror, 232–233
- Warsaw ghetto uprising, 223
- web-based documentation, 13n25
- websites
  - for Globalization Monitor, 181
  - for Montreal Life Stories Project guidelines, 216
  - for *Red Dust* documentary, 181
- Western forces in Rwanda, 212
- West Nickel Mines School, 72–73n22
- Whitman, Charles Joseph, 73n22
- widows, 29–30
- Wiesel, Elie, 98
- Williams, Michael, 79
- witnessing, moral, 122–123
- women, conditions for, at
  - Guantánamo, 80–85
- Wong, May, 177, 179–180
- World Until Yesterday, The: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies* (Diamond), 235
- World War II, 6–7
- Wu (pseud., Chinese worker), 172–174, 175, 178
- X-Ray punishment camp, 86
- Yang Kim interview and commentary, 55–57, 63, 64, 67–68, 71
- Zeitoun, Abdulrahman, 138
- Zeitoun* (Eggers), 138
- Ziltendorfer lowlands, 196
- Zizek, Slavoj, 114
- Zur, Judith, 29





























