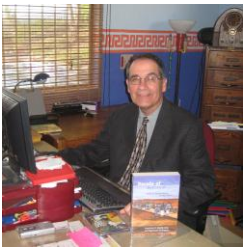
ORAL HISTORY: LEGACIES AND MINORITIES

Oral history as a field of study and a method for gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices as well as memories of people and communities, was established in the 1940s. Of course, the practice and recording of oral traditions is much older and predates the written word. However, audio recordings and digital technologies have catapulted the significance, sentiment, and legitimacy of the documentation and preservation of oral histories, making it an important part of the study of history.

Oral history, in recording the voices and memories of individuals, can provide eyewitness accounts of important events, and thus introduces a new and valuable source of information. Nevertheless, many questions and problems arise in the study, recording, and use of oral histories. Maintaining the integrity of the individual's voice, altering or editing interviews, and the challenges of memory are some of the realities oral historians must confront. For this article, the editors of *Perspectives* interviewed three scholars about their expertise in oral history; Dr. Francisco Balderrama, a Chicano Studies and History Professor at CSULA; Sylvia Lubow, a retired Women's Studies and History Professor as well as a volunteer at the KPFK (one of three public radio stations in Los Angeles) oral history archives; and Dr. Ping Yao, a Chinese History Professor at CSULA.[1] They addressed the challenges, importance, as well as

[1] Balderrama, Francisco. Interview by author. Video recording. Los Angeles, CA., January 30, 2012. Lubow, Sylvia. Interview by author. Video recording. Universal City, CA., January 27,

the uses of oral histories. *Perspectives* would like to thank Professors Balderrama, Lubow, and Yao for taking the time to meet with us and sharing their remarkable insights as important contributors to the field of oral history.





FRANCISCO BALDERRAMA

For both the interviewee and the interviewer an oral history, says Professor Balderrama, is "creating a window of the past." His latest work, *Mexican American Baseball in Los Angeles*, was published in 2011 and co-authored with Richard A. Santillan, an Ethnic Studies Professor at Cal Poly Pomona. The book began with a 2005 collaborative effort between the Baseball Reliquary, a nonprofit organization that explores culture through the context of baseball history, and CSULA called "Mexican-American Baseball in Los Angeles: From the Barrios to the Big Leagues." Balderrama designed an undergraduate class that included collecting oral histories from the Latino community on the topic of baseball. He fondly recalled the experience of that course and the importance of oral history in his career when discussing this project.

Balderrama noted that in recent years historians are paying much more attention to sports and recreation to uncover how a community forms identity and baseball is an avenue that can help in discovering that process for Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. Balderrama recalled "it became one of those things that just got a life of its own and got all sorts of connections with

2012. Yao, Ping. Email to John-Paul Fernandes, February 8, 2012.

the local community." This speaks to the effect that an oral history project can have on the lives of everyone involved. There were scholars and other members of the community who called, offering to teach the course with him or just to give a guest lecture.

It was not just the community that became enthusiastic about participating in the project of collecting oral histories. Students were so passionate about their role in collecting oral histories that they worked overtime. Balderrama remembered, "we had a timeslot of once a week, from 6:10 to 10 o'clock and I tell you we would take a short break but I wasn't getting out of here until 11 o'clock and the students didn't want to get out of there until 10:30." By the end of the course, Balderrama had collected an enormous amount of information about baseball in Los Angeles. There were students in other courses who showed interest in this topic and surprisingly, they too contributed stories that he included in the book. There were many interviewees that confided to Balderrama the sense of personal empowerment they felt as a result of participating in the project.

All of this hard work was turned into an exhibit. The day it opened at the CSULA library Balderrama was amazed at the turnout, "there were five hundred people." Not only did the students and the participants in the project attend, but also their families and an impressive array of television and radio representatives came. According to Balderrama, the book and the exhibit were really only "step one [to gaining] visibility for the project." Developing a research base and finding the space and commitment to store those materials were also part of this first step. The oral histories and other information collected so far are located at CSULA and CSU San Bernardino. What was "really momentous" for this project, are the regional and national connections between people from various places who contributed material to what is now called the Latino Baseball History Project. Inspired by this work, professors at other CSU campuses are teaching similar courses on baseball history.

Balderrama felt that this book represents a change for him because as a historian a book is an "opportunity to share text." This is unlike his earlier monographs because here his students were "really conducting the research." He saw his role

as "a coach…but it is still more their decision-making process." When he edited the oral histories, he explained, that keeping the cost of the book down was essential to assure his audience had access to it because "this is public history, community history here." A framed poster hangs in his office, signed by various baseball players in the Mexican-American community. It is a daily visual reminder of the stories Balderrama and his students helped to record and preserve.

Balderrama differentiates between historians and journalists working on oral history projects. While a journalist "goes for the story," he explained that over time things change, other facts surface, and a journalist has to move on to the next headline. In contrast, a historian is more invested in the issues and subject over a longer period. Balderrama emphasized, that "there are reporters that do great background work," but that historians are better situated for the long process of research, writing, reviewing, and editing. For example, there are families that Balderrama has interviewed over decades.

Balderrama made clear that what journalists produce is valuable but a historian's position allows for a unique commitment not available to a reporter. What is clear about this project is that oral history was the tool Balderrama used to help his students engage with the community that many of them are from. This collaborative venture was a very gratifying part of Balderrama's career.

SYLVIA LUBOW

Sylvia Lubow is a retired History Professor who spent over twenty years teaching her students about the "world in which they lived and how the past had helped shape their lives." Lubow began teaching at Los Angeles Valley College in 1969 after receiving her BA in History from CSULA and her MA in History from UCLA. Her teaching specialties included post-Civil War, women's history, and the Impact of Science and Technology on Society. Following an educational research trip to China in the late nineteen sixties, Lubow also began teaching classes in contemporary Chinese history. In all her classes, she wanted students to understand their political agency, explaining

that many of them "came out as political activists" as a result of her course.

Lubow initiated our conversation with a definition of history as "the past seen through the eyes of the present, with an eye on the future." For Lubow, the significance of oral history lies in its ability to uncover the memories of "ordinary and oppressed peoples" that are often absent from written sources. The oral historian serves to extract "remembrances, information, ways of living, attitudes, and values" from individuals, and has the formidable task of interpreting and narrating their words. Oral historians must be extremely vigilant during the editing process to avoid prescribing their "own approaches and values." Still, the process of oral history requires historians to construe meaning from spoken language in order to create a narrative that advances their scholarly purpose. Lubow highlighted the importance of understanding how history has been class-oriented and has mainly been produced by privileged members of society, forming the direction of how people think and what they know about the past. For Lubow, oral history reveals additional views that provide the perspectives of minorities and women, who have been historically neglected and powerless in society.

Lubow recalls implementing oral history in courses on women in the United States, noting that although "the area was still in its infancy at the time," it offered the potential to "expand women's place" in history. She instructed students to conduct interviews with older women, asking them how being a woman had affected their lives. The raw material, as a result, gave Lubow "insight into the limitations and the need for the education of students in terms of oral history, its functions, and its meaning." Lubow explains that if she were to use oral history again, she would be "very cautious" in framing the questions. She would also ask the students about their own perceptions on the subject and the person being interviewed to make sure that their own personal biases were not imposed.

More recently, Lubow has been volunteering at the Pacifica Foundation's audio archives, which also includes the KPFK public radio station in Studio City, California. She assists in the preservation of the station's audio materials. Lubow deems the archives an invaluable resource for historians. Reflecting on

her long career, Lubow says that she misses student interaction the most, always finding it "exciting to hear minds [at] work."

Lubow believes that oral history can be limiting if the interviewee is only asked about contemporary matters. For oral history to be history, the subjects need to explain how they have come to their conclusions; how their upbringing, education, and other experiences shaped their lives. This creates a perspective of time, because history "is never a static thing." She also stresses that when creating an oral history, the interviewer should examine multiple types of sources, taking into account class, race, sex, place, and time.

For Lubow, there is no clear-cut difference between oral histories created by journalists or historians. Both depend on the perspective and background of the interviewer. For Lubow, the emerging academic appreciation of oral history has made an important "contribution to the totality of history," allowing for greater diversity and richness in the topics, approaches, and sources used by historians and society.

PING YAO

Director of the Asian and Asian American Studies Program and Professor of Chinese Women's History at CSULA, Dr. Ping Yao's time is divided between teaching, researching, and writing. Typically her courses focus on the lives of East Asian women, as does her forthcoming book, *Good Karma Connections: Buddhist Women in Tang China, 618-907*. Yao was recently awarded the prestigious 2011-2012 Fulbright grant to travel to Shanghai, where she will conduct research on medieval Buddhist women and lecture at Eastern China Normal University. Despite her approaching departure, Yao graciously discussed the exciting opportunities and inherent limitations of using oral history research with *Perspectives*.

Yao's research focuses on accessing the intimate ways in which women of the Tang Dynasty "perceived their experience." Investigating thousands of ancient epitaphs allows Yao to learn about these women's lives and identities. While not conventional oral history, studying the immensely intimate statements written about those who have died parallels the ability of oral history to

access the personal. Additionally, Yao's own experiences in both China and in the classroom have increasingly drawn her toward oral history projects. She sees the way that history has traditionally portrayed the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution as painfully inadequate. Yao states frankly that the majority of research "does not reflect the perspective of ordinary Chinese people…and their gendered experience during this traumatic era." Oral history interviews can remedy this deficiency in addition to being uniquely interesting to students. These two attributes have led Yao to assign oral history projects in numerous courses, as a way of creating an archive that will preserve the past and establish personal connections between the students and those they are studying.

The appeal of oral history is its ability to enter new and under-represented communities of women and ethnic minorities that are typically absent from the historical record. Historiography of the late twentieth century tells us that these voices matter and oral history allows us to recover these hidden stories. The powerful possibilities of oral history, Yao also emphasized, must be tempered with an understanding of the field's limitations. Oral histories have the exciting potential of reaching the subaltern classes in a meaningful way, yet like any other historical methodology, it is also prone to error. The subjectivity of an individual's memory is one of oral history's potential pitfalls. However, Yao counters that memory in fact, "provides historians a great opportunity to analyze the interviewees in the historical context by examining the shifting and selectiveness of their memories." Despite its limitations, Yao has repeatedly witnessed the validity of the narratives her students create. Much like this special feature, Yao's students have compiled and preserved interviews in video format, thus allowing an unaltered glimpse into the stories they share. The strength of oral history lies in its authenticity and Yao reminds us that this can never be compromised.

The aim of this project was to record the insights and experiences of local practitioners of oral history and their pedagogic methodology. Professors Balderrama, Lubow, and Yao have used this tradition in their teaching and scholarship. They have all made significant strides in the study of oral

traditions and have used the information they discovered to educate students and others interested in the subjects they explore. Their thoughts on the impact this approach has had on themselves, their students, and on their profession is another valuable aspect of these interviews. The paramount feature of their work is preserving minority voices and bringing them to the forefront of education and knowledge. Francisco Balderrama's project on baseball memories in the Latin American community, Ping Yao's exploration of epitaphs by the unrepresented women of the Tang Dynasty, and Sylvia Lubow's use of oral history as a teaching method have helped bring the voices of neglected populations to light.

Videos of the interviews with Balderrama and Lubow are available on the *Perspectives* YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/PerspectivesJournal.

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