
Oral History and Public Memories resulted from the suggestion by noted British historian Paul Thompson that two leading scholars from opposite ends of the globe collaborate to produce a volume that would attempt to bridge what he saw as a surprising disjunction between work being done in oral history and the growing interest in public or collective memories. In this collection Linda Shopes of the United States and Paula Hamilton of Australia present essays by authors in a variety of fields who are exploring the ways that individual memories expressed in oral interviews can, should, and do inform public memory. These essays provide a fascinating around-the-world tour of oral history projects that focus on a great variety of subjects, from the environmental vision of native peoples in northwest Canada to descriptions of loss and resilience in urban South Africa. They likewise display the theoretical and methodological range of oral history as a research tool, as these authors experiment with new ways of both eliciting and employing personal narratives. Finally, these essays can serve as a primer to public historians on the possibilities for connecting the personal, individual human perspective to broader community and national narratives and histories.

Shopes and Hamilton frame the collected essays with an introduction that lays out in accessible terms the problem, as they see it, of the disconnect between many oral history projects and the scholarship based on them and the developing field of memory studies. The volume is then divided into three sections, each with an extensive introduction by the editors detailing the contents and interlocking themes that join the essays therein. The first section, “Creating Heritage,” includes chapters that document the ways in which official heritage agencies around the world are attempting to incorporate oral history in order to document and present their nation’s story in new ways. Here, for example, Maria Nugent explains how employees of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales used personal narratives of Aboriginal people to change the way Australians view the shared use of space between white settlers and native peoples. In Turkey, oral histories with residents near two forts under development as potential national parks reveal how personal memory and ideas about history can challenge official historiography. The second section, “Recreating Identity and Community,” includes essays based on more informal, often community-based projects that document stories of struggle and survival. Gail Lee Dubrow, for example, discusses how oral history projects that were at least initially grassroots in nature have changed the popular understanding of the experience of Japanese Americans before and during World War II. In some instances, the authors of these essays make clear the felt urgency of these community members to have their stories heard and recognized as part of the broader culture’s history, as in Horacio N. Roque Ramirez’s piece on using oral history and multimedia presentations to preserve
and present the story of queer Latinos and Latinas in San Francisco. Finally, section three, “Making Change,” makes explicit a theme in much of the book: the social implications and activist agenda of oral history projects that seek to alter public memory. Daniel Kerr, for example, attempted to use the oral histories of homeless men and women in Cleveland to challenge publicly the official narrative of that city’s renaissance. In these final chapters the authors make clear that conducting oral history with marginalized groups has the potential to change the interviewer (the “shock” felt by Greek students interviewing Albanian immigrants), the interviewee (the sense of community and “critical social consciousness” felt by participants in memory workshops in Colombia), and ideally a broader national historical understanding.

This volume has many strengths to recommend it to public historians and scholars in related disciplines. The editors did a commendable job of organizing the material and demonstrating its thematic cohesion. Their section introductions provide food for thought about the essays and the shared project of linking oral history and public memory. The essays themselves showcase the diversity of oral history–based research and community work around the world. Some of the essays, and the collection as a whole, raise questions about the impact of oral history on public memory, and how we understand the latter. Throughout the book there are assertions that a particular oral history initiative might or could influence popular understandings of a nation or community’s past, and a few of the essays are relatively more successful in demonstrating how that happens. It would have been interesting, however, to hear more about how that potential impact might manifest and be measured. Put bluntly, how do we know that projects like those described here are making a difference in the collective memory of a culture? More broadly, how do we document or assess change in what can be sometimes ambiguously characterized as “public memory”? Can public historians, those entrusted with preserving and interpreting such collective memories, find in oral history not only a method for bringing individual perspectives into broader narratives, but a way to trace the extent to which that matters? This volume does a service to both oral and public historians by provoking us to rethink what exactly public memory is, how it is related to the individual life experience, and how it is shaped or reformed.

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In Solidarity Stories, historian Harvey Schwartz surveys the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), revealing the history of the organization through a diverse collection of oral history interviews with officers,