



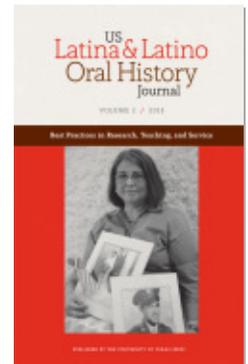
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Pathways in Oral History: Rina Benmayor

Editors

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Pathways in Oral History:

Rina Benmayor

EDITORS

Oral historian Rina Benmayor's journey through oral history began when she was a graduate student, recording ballads of Sephardic Jews. She has since used oral history to chronicle and examine the lives of Latinas and Latinos of other ethnicities. She discusses her approach to using oral history as a methodology in publishing and her deepening appreciation for the field.

How and why did you get started doing oral history?

I came to oral history through literature and folklore. My PhD was in Spanish literature. My doctoral dissertation was a field collection and critical study of Judeo-Spanish ballads, preserved in oral tradition for five hundred years by the Spanish Jews (my ethnic heritage), expelled from Spain in 1492, who resettled in the Ottoman Empire. In the early twentieth century, many immigrated to the United States, and significant communities were established in Seattle and Los Angeles. I went with my tape recorder in hand to the Sephardic elders in these cities and recorded them singing fifteenth-century Spanish *romances* they learned as children. I didn't know anything about oral history at that time but loved doing fieldwork. A decade or so later, I took a research position in New York at the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College, CUNY [City University of New York], where I was asked to design an oral history project of the Puerto Rican migration to New York. I figured that this would be asking people to tell stories instead of singing folklore. In some ways I was right, but there was much more to oral history than I had expected. In fact, through my training in literature, I found myself well grounded in the interpretation of oral history narratives.

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Did you get trained or read a lot to train yourself?

Shortly after beginning my job at the Centro, I was put in touch with Ron Grele, who had just arrived in New York to direct the Columbia Oral History Research Office. Ron gave our Centro oral history research team important methodological training and introduced us to the concept of the oral history interview as a coproduced conversational narrative rather than a traditional journalistic or sociological interview. He also emphasized the importance of understanding how narrators view themselves in the context of their times, their held ideologies, and the myths they tell about themselves. I was particularly interested in these issues as I was familiar with historical, feminist, Marxist, and poststructuralist approaches to the “reading” of texts. An important part of this training was the opportunities Ron opened to us to present at his seminars, at summer institutes, and at international conferences. I had the great fortune to attend the monthly seminars he organized that featured oral historians such as Sandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini, Daniel Bertaux, Al Thomson, Anna Davin, as well as local community historians like Jack Tchen. This was my introduction to oral history! And of course, reading and presenting at annual meetings of the Oral History Association and the International Oral History Association have been essential components of my ongoing professional development as an oral historian.

What books or journals have you published that required oral history?

I have become an oral historian, primarily, so most of my writing since the mid-1980s has been directly located within the field of oral history. In the 1980s, I began to publish individually and collectively authored articles in the *International Journal of Oral History*; *Oral History Review* (“Stories to Live By: Continuity and Change in Three Generations of Puerto Rican Women,” 16, no. 2 [Fall 1988]: 1–46; “Contested Memories of Place: Representations of Salinas Chinatown,” 37, no. 2 [July 2010]: 225–234); in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (Routledge, 1991); and in books that I coedited with William Flores: *Latino Cultural Citizenship* (Beacon, 1997). I coedited with Andor Skotnes a collection of oral history essays . . . *Migration and Identity* (International Yearbook of Oral History, 1994; Transition Press, 2005). Oral history was also intrinsic to our Latina project that culminated in *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Duke University Press, 2001). Although this is a collection of autobiographical writings, the first step in our *testimonio* process was to conduct oral history interviews with one another and use these as the foundation for these writings. My latest co-editing project was to bring innovative essays from Spanish and Portuguese into the purview of English-speaking oral historians: *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation: Approaches to Oral History in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain* (Palgrave, 2016).

What equipment did you start off with?

Up until the mid-1990s, I was using Sony professional cassette recorders and archiving the cassette tapes. Then came the MiniDisc recorders that recorded onto small floppy

disks but that required real time for conversion to digital. They were excellent recordings, but the technology advanced rapidly and the MiniDisc recorders soon became obsolete.

What equipment do you use now?

Now I use a Zoom H2, fully digital recorder, with Sony lavalier mics for audio interviews. I don't record video myself but have relied on amateur and professional teams for that. In the oral history projects that my undergraduate students at Cal State Monterey Bay have undertaken, I found that the quality of the product was better when we engaged professional or advanced student videographers. In my latest project, I am doing distance video interviews via Zoom, a videoconferencing platform that gives me access to interviewees from anywhere in the world. The quality of these recordings is adequate for research but [is] not broadcast quality. Although they can be archived, there is great variation in the quality of the recordings, depending on bandwidth, the stability of the Internet at the particular moment of the recording, lighting, and other technical aspects. The advantage is that one can interview people anywhere in the world, as long as they have a computer or smartphone; you can record directly from the screen—the recording is converted automatically into both MP3 (audio) and MP4 (video) files at the end of the interview (as opposed to Skype, which does not offer screen recording). I chose this approach because of the international nature of the project. It was the only way I would be able to interview people in a wide array of countries.

How has the change in technology affected you?

More than anything, the changes in technology have created challenges for archiving: digitizing old cassette collections or converting MiniDisc recordings requires time and money. On the other hand, a digital file can be transferred to different preservation formats with minimal effort. Digital platforms have also facilitated programming—the creation of documentary programs and the ability to bring the voices and images of narrators to diverse audiences. Changes have enhanced my technological literacy and encouraged me to engage in artistic production such as the creation of testimonial digital stories, although not oral histories, in my Latina Life Stories classes (for an example, visit “U Stories: Latina Life Stories,” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLbh2gw8EsA>) and designing oral history walking tours. The Salinas Chinatown Oral History Walking Tour (<http://salinasace.org/walkingtour>) was the result of an eight-year project with my students. The 140 interviews we amassed with Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Latino individuals who lived in or frequented Salinas Chinatown have enabled the creation of a neighborhood walking tour guided by the voices of its community members, pinned to the physical sites of memory.

Do you work by yourself, or do you have someone run the equipment for you?

Both if audio, although I much prefer to have someone else run the equipment! With video interviews, I rely on a videographer.

Are you working on oral history projects right now?

Yes. My most recent project involves interviewing people of Sephardic heritage who are applying for or have received Spanish or Portuguese citizenship under the 2015 laws of historical reparations in those countries. These laws are unique in their historical dimension, and also in that they offer citizenship without a residency requirement and allow for dual citizenship. With a colleague from the College of Staten Island, CUNY, I am conducting oral history interviews with people from Turkey, Israel, Latin America, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We have recorded forty-five interviews so far, on topics such as family historical origins and genealogy, perspectives and feelings on identity and belonging, motivations for applying for these citizenships, meanings of citizenship, and thoughts about historical reconciliation, reparation, and reclamation. Interestingly, these interviews have been conducted without the usual preinterviews. I am finding that the face-to-face dimension of computer interviewing contributes to a level of intimacy and focus between the interlocutors. We are face-to-face, without distractions. Also, being a cultural insider, an academic, and an applicant myself has helped create an unusual rapport with people of diverse ages, genders, and national backgrounds.

What challenges have you found doing oral history?

The biggest challenges have to do with the interview process: establishing rapport with narrators who may not understand the purpose of your inquiry, negotiating one's agenda with that of the narrator, thinking deeply on one's toes. I still make silly mistakes in interviewing! The other challenge has to do with making sense out of a massive amount of material. Some people create detailed databases, but I tend to follow my instincts and keep a journal of what I find as I go along. I don't create written transcripts so I'm forced to listen back to the interviews, which has advantages in that you are reminded not just of what someone says but also about the context and how they express themselves. The disadvantage of not having a transcript is that it takes a long time to relisten to a large interview collection. Another challenge has to do with how we use oral history material. It is all too easy to pluck out juicy clips of interviews and weave them into a preconceived argument; it is substantially more challenging to let a picture emerge from the raw material and structure the argument from that. I prefer to use large chunks of interview and examine them from various angles.

Any anecdotes about your interviewing?***Great moments?***

When you encounter a thoughtful narrator who loves to talk and elaborate! You can sit back and cruise! And, you can actually focus more on the progression of the conversation rather than on how to coax your narrator. My favorite narrator of all time was a ninety-year-old Puerto Rican woman, Mrs. Minerva Torres Ríos, who was a student

in a Spanish adult literacy class that the Centro sponsored for several years. She reached an eighth-grade education in Puerto Rico but was in the program because it took place at her senior center. I soon realized that Minerva saw herself as a historian, having been born in a place and time (1905) that most people had not experienced. She wanted me to do her oral history, and we recorded her life stories over many years. She wanted to tell her story, she would speak to schoolchildren, to adults, and in me she found a vehicle for leaving a recorded and written legacy. She was remarkably consistent in her tellings over the years, having constructed a narrative that was both nostalgic and didactic. My task was to record her, to publish her story, and to interpret her memory and the way in which her memory worked. Working with her was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had as a scholar and as a person.

Not-so-great moments?

Discovering that you aren't recording! Either because you aren't comfortable with the equipment and failed to press the record button twice, or because you paused the recording and didn't reengage it properly! It's happened to me more than once! Actually, just last month, when conducting a Zoom interview with a man in Panama. I had paused the recording and thought I had reengaged the recording but didn't realize that I had not. Very embarrassing! And you only discover it after the fact and then you have to explain your faux pas to the narrator and look like a fool. Also, it's really hard to get the narrator to agree to a replay!

Where do you archive your material?

I try to house the work in the most appropriate place, where the work will endure. The oral histories our team produced at the Centro live in the Centro Library and Archives. I archived my Judeo-Spanish ballads at the University of Washington Libraries, Sephardic Studies Digital Collection (<http://content.lib.washington.edu/sephardicweb/index.html>). The interviews conducted by my students, from 1995 to 2014, are archived at the California State University Monterey Bay Oral History and Community Memory Archive, a repository that I created in order to preserve this valuable student work (<tps://csumb.edu/hcom/oral-history-community-memory>); and yes, I still have some work in shoeboxes in the closet!

How did that come about?

The work we conducted at the Centro naturally remained there, as those oral histories were commissioned as part of Centro projects. Recently, I archived my Judeo-Spanish ballad collection at the University of Washington. It was the most appropriate place to preserve the material. I approached the director as to the feasibility of housing my collection within the Sephardic Studies Digital Collection. They were able to fund the digitization of the cassettes, recorded in the early 1970s. I sent my precious tapes to the best digitizer in the country, George Blood, and happily there were no disasters.

Then I began the laborious process of cataloging each song, fragment, and other bits of folklore that were on these tapes.

How has your approach and understanding about oral history changed over the years?

I wouldn't say that my approach or understanding has changed, but they have become deeper and more nuanced. The foundations of the conversational narrative, shared authority in the creation of the text, and the orality of the text remain the same. What has always intrigued me most is the construction of meaning, the workings of memory, and the possibilities of interpretation. Why do we remember something, how we remember it, and how we recount it. Oral history has become a field of study unto itself, not an appendage of history or any other traditional discipline. Sadly, the term "oral history" is used as a catchall phrase for interviewing of any kind or any autobiographical story. Alexander Freund has critiqued the current mania for stories and storytelling (*Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 [2015]: 96–132). Oral history is not simply recorded storytelling, but an exploration of memory, ideology, meaning, historical context, and performance. Another very interesting strand in oral history scholarship is the connection between memory, constructed narratives, and emotions. Spanish scholar Miren Llona writes about "enclaves of memory" formed by trauma and other deep experiences that find expression in the modalities of the telling. ("The Healing Effect of Discourses: Body, Emotions, and Gender Subjectivity in Basque Nationalism," *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation*, ed. Rina Benmayor, María Eugenia Cardenal, and Pilar Domínguez [New York: Palgrave, 2016], 77–92). This is a fine example of the sophistication of oral history inquiry that I find fascinating.

Advice for newcomers to oral history and advice to veteran oral historians

Newcomers should immerse themselves in the field, read its scholarly literature, attend the conferences, get professionally trained (attend workshops and institutes), dive in, and share your work with others. Approach oral history as you would any discipline or field of study—not just as a method but as a way to gain interpretive insight. Invest the time. Oral history is one of the friendliest fields to become a part of. Oral historians don't get tenure on the basis of oral history, not yet, at least. Oral historians love to engage people and listen to what they have to say. There is no competition for jobs as there is in traditional disciplines. Oral history is a people-friendly field.

The best advice I can offer to veterans is to engage younger scholars and support their work. Introduce oral history in high school and undergraduate curricula, create undergraduate and graduate oral history programs, and in these ways contribute to the building of young scholars in the field, to the intellectual advancement of the field, and to the presence of the field in the academy and the community.