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## Living with Stories

William Schneider

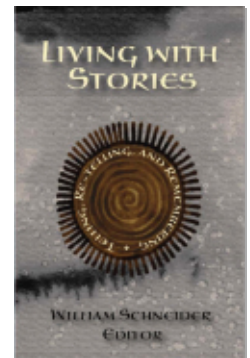
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# 1

## Introduction

William Schneider

William Schneider is curator of oral history at the Elmer Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. A long-time member of the Oral History Association, his interests are in the dynamics of storytelling, how people use and construct narrative to convey meaning. His most recent book is . . . *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*.

When we open our ears and our minds to oral tradition and personal narratives, we add layers of meaning to the oral history accounts we have stored on our shelves. We can ask, why was this story told at that time? Why was it told to this person? Why does the telling differ with audience and setting? When we are open to these questions, we become more sensitive to implied as well as explicit meanings, and we see how stories may indirectly convey attitudes and beliefs. These expanded areas of contextual analysis broaden the oral historian's work beyond the words on tape and transcript to an exploration of how the story is used in the home, on the street, told to a daughter, and retold over time in different ways for different reasons.

The title of this book, *Living with Stories*, emphasizes our common belief that to really understand a story, we need to listen to how it is used and recognize how each new narration bears the mark of the present and a particular reason for telling. This is not new information to scholars of oral narrative, but our focus on retellings

provides a new and appropriate frame for asking about individual stories and how they are used over time. By exploring examples of how and when people retell their stories, it is our hope that we can (1) expand appreciation for how people create and convey meaning through stories; (2) demonstrate how context and audience play out in a variety of different case studies of retellings in different cultural settings where different values, beliefs and practices influence the story and how it is told; and (3) use our focus on retellings to explore how stories are keys to how and what we remember.

As contributors to this volume, we come from the disciplines of history, anthropology, folklore, and literature. Our examples are international in scope and diverse in content and theme. Our common ground is an interest in how people use stories over time and what prompts them to remember and retell. We hope that the examples and the accompanying conversations with commentators will stimulate you to compare and contrast different kinds of storytelling and to reflect on the role of narrative in your own life.

When we live with stories and actually think about how we use narrative, we see how accounts are a resource to talk about what we think is important; they are our way of relating experience to the present, and we recognize that stories are as much about the present as the past. Telling our stories is how we construct meaning from memory, but the process is selective and many factors influence how we tell stories and why we choose to retell certain stories. In this work we demonstrate some of the ways that people use particular stories and narrative structures. The examples and reactions of the commentators lead us beyond knowing the skeletal principles of how stories work to a discussion of actual stories working in people's lives. We want you, our readers, to live with the stories that are retold here, to hear the struggle of narrators and authors to understand, to see the transformations of text over time, and to witness the efforts to remember and retell. The discussions between the authors and their discussants enriches appreciation for the most important part of being human, the ability to relate to each other through oral narrative across cultures, generations, and diverse experiences.

### The Emergence of Oral History

Oral historians who do this work come from many different disciplines, and their theoretical training is as diverse as the subfields within their disciplines. History, anthropology, and folklore are the primary, although not exclusive, training grounds for professionals

who use oral history methods. Oral history is nourished today by all three disciplines and by the librarians and archivists who manage the ever expanding collections of recordings. Each discipline has a stake in how oral sources are understood and used, but the academic roots of oral history rest in history, and in particular in the use of interviews as a way to elicit information about what happened in the past (Ritchie 1995:1). Therefore, we start our discussion with history but quickly see that the other disciplines have enriched a discussion within the Oral History Association that goes beyond any one formal discipline.

Paul Thompson makes the point that the term “oral history” is relatively new, but the idea of learning about the past directly from interviews and stories is quite old (Thompson 2000:26). For many years, the only way to pass on knowledge was through individual recollections of what happened (Henige 1982:7–22). So, why is the formal study of “oral history” relatively new? Two historical developments seem to have diverted attention from oral sources: the growth of written texts, particularly after the printing press made such volumes widely accessible (Henige 1982:13). Then, after 1825, the formal training of historians was strongly influenced by the German school and what became known as the “documentary method” (Thompson 2000:55). For many trained historians, the focus narrowed to what could be demonstrated through written sources. Testing for reliability and verifiability became hallmarks of the discipline. There was little room for oral sources, particularly if they couldn’t be proven by empirical evidence. The focus was clearly and particularly on what could be demonstrated to have occurred. It is not surprising, then, that the criteria of verifiability (can it be determined to be true?) and reliability (is the account correctly retold and reported?) emerged as central concerns when the oral history movement in the United States was formally recognized in 1948 with Alan Nevins’ Oral History Project at Columbia University (Dunaway and Baum 1996:29). The idea was to learn information from individuals who were in a place to know and thereby fill out the historical record. For instance, consider this definition offered by Willa Baum back in 1982 (emphasis is hers): “Oral History is the *tape recording* of a *knowledgeable* person, by *questions and answers*, about what he/she *did or observed* of an event or events or way of life of historical interest. The purpose is to *preserve* that account for users, both present but especially future users, and make it available for use” (Baum 1983:39).

At first, the effort in American oral history research was directed at those who were in positions of power and influence, “movers and shakers,” the famous. The term “elite oral history” became identified with this work. The most obvious example of this is the oral history projects associated with presidential libraries, beginning in 1961 and ongoing (Ritchie 1987:591), but see also the University of California Berkeley’s Regional Oral History Office roster of interviews starting in 1954 (<http://Bancroft.berkeley.edu>). While part of the thinking was that the rich and powerful, the educated and influential, were the people who knew and could actually contribute to the historical record, there may also have been the practical recognition that these were the people who were in the best financial position to support research. In England, there are examples of a greater interest at this time in recording the experiences of the ‘ordinary’ people (Thomson 2007:51).

Ironically, public funding opportunities in the United States turned in favor of ethnic and other underrepresented groups, Native Americans, Blacks, and immigrants. There was a revised interest in the interviews that had been done during the Works Progress Administration era, particularly with former slaves (Ritchie 1987:589 and <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>). Other works such as *Amoskeag*, the story of a factory town in New Hampshire (Hareven 1978), and *Akenfield*, the story of an English farming community (Blythe 1969), brought public recognition to the conditions of workers. More recently, Milton Rogovin and Michael Frisch’s *Portraits in Steel* (1993) depicts in oral narrative and photo images the conditions of steel workers in Buffalo, New York. Events such as World War II (Terkel 1984; Gluck 1987) and the Holocaust (Lewin 1990) and the issues faced by first generation Japanese Americans (Tamura 1993) became the subjects of interviews that helped bring public recognition in a first-person way to issues of genocide, racism, and prejudice.

When taken together, the two approaches to interviewing—top down with the movers and shakers and bottom up with the workers and common folk—represented a growing realization that a story could be told differently by people whose experiences differed or who perceived the events differently, and that by working with these different perspectives we could produce a more inclusive understanding: “a story no one person could have told” (Kline 1996:20; Thomson 2007:54).

Even before the “formal” re-recognition of the role of oral sources in historical research and before the explosion of oral history programs at universities, libraries, museums, and historical societies, anthropologists, folklorists, and some trained historians were coming face to face with people whose understanding of the past was distinctly different from their own. Genealogical accounts, myths, legends, cultural reconstructions of history, and life stories were windows into how people thought about and described their history. In Africa, the work of Jan Vansina (1965) and Ruth Finnegan (1992; 1998) brought to the attention of scholars the ways Africans expressed their understandings of the past, what they recognized as “verbal arts” (Finnegan 1992). Similarly, British colonial officers, some of whom were historians, found the study and understanding of oral sources useful as they attempted to resolve disputes and administer to the empire (Henige 1982:20).

Bridging the disciplines of anthropology and history, ethnohistorians pioneered research on the histories of nonliterate societies using all forms of documentation, including the oral record (Brown 1991; Krech 1991:349; Sturtevant 1966). Ethnohistorians fostered in-depth discussions of how cultural differences could be evaluated and appreciated in an historical perspective; hence the conclusion by Krech that the field could be called anthropological history or historical anthropology to emphasize the issues raised by research about the ways that cultural groups understood and described their history (Krech 1991:365; Brown and Vibert 2003). This research has taught us the importance of heightened sensitivity to how people conceptualize history and the ways they express these meanings. Reexamination, rehearing, and dialogue over time have become hallmarks of this research, particularly where we are working through translations (Mathews and Roulette in Brown and Vibert 2003:263–292).

Another form of historical reconstruction came from anthropologists who pioneered the life history method (Lewis 1965; Mintz 1960; Radin 1963; Rosengarten 1974; Lurie 1961; Langness and Frank 1981) as a way to document the rapid changes going on in the lives of community members. Alistair Thomson also traces the interest in life histories to a recognition of the therapeutic benefits that can come from talking about one’s life (Thomson 2007:59). Within the lifetimes of their subjects these authors could see the influences of acculturative forces but also the core cultural values that persisted. Many of the early life histories brought the value of

first person narrative to the attention of a scholarly audience: not just the content of what the narrators said but the ways they chose to construct and tell their life stories (Titon 1980). This in turn influenced the way authors rerepresented the accounts in writing. In fact, the term “author” came to be questioned. Terms such as “oral biography,” “life histories based on oral history,” “oral memoir,” and “oral autobiography” are reflections of this awareness and attempt to capture the roles that narrators and their collaborators assume when they tell and write their story (Schneider 2002:114–115; Dunaway 1991:257). Of course, this reflects a growing recognition of the importance of understanding and describing the relationship between the narrator and the recorder/writer (Thomson 2007:62). All of the developments just described expanded scholars’ appreciation for how the oral record could be used to understand history, both in terms of what people considered historical and the ways they construct and convey that understanding to others.

The American Oral History Association is young (forty years old in 2006), and while its roots are fully planted in how oral narrative can contribute to history (in the sense of supporting documents), the developments just described extended the discussion. The association welcomed a diverse and talented group of scholars from disciplines other than history, and their work has broadened appreciation for the ways stories are used by people to talk, not just about the past, but about their lives today. Key contributions to this discussion came from folklorists whose work has been specifically recognized by the Oral History Association. For instance, in *George Magoon and the Down East Game War*, Edward “Sandy” Ives, a folklorist by training and a pioneer in the oral history movement, demonstrates that stories about the fantastic feats of a backcountry Maine moose poacher reflect how tellers and their audiences now feel about the hunting laws that impact their lives. A stretch from the facts, George Magoon is a culture hero who represents and expresses their feelings about the game regulations that favor sport hunters over local subsistence users. Similarly, Jack Santino’s study of Black railcar porters, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle* (1989), introduces us to the ways that the porters use stories to describe how they overcame adversity on a daily basis and their respect for the honesty and integrity of their leader, A. Phillip Randolph. Other members of the oral history community, such as Barbara Allen (Bogart) in the stories she collected on the American West, *In Place*, lead us beyond narrative as description of events to stories

as also reflections of the attitudes and sentiments of the tellers and their audiences.<sup>1</sup>

With this background, it is not surprising that the Oral History Association welcomed Julie Cruikshank as its keynote speaker for the 1999 meeting. Cruikshank, a Canadian anthropologist with deep roots in the Yukon, used the opportunity to retell the story of Kaax'achgóok. In her work with this story, Cruikshank traces the different occasions and ways that Tlingit and Tagish elder Angela Sidney retold the story of Kaax'achgóok. Each telling carries the story of how he was lost at sea for a time but found his way home. That's the basic story but it doesn't end there. The story takes on additional meaning each time Angela Sidney tells it: to celebrate the return of her son from WWII (like Kaax'achgóok, who was lost at sea, her son returned safely), to commemorate the opening of Yukon College (built in the home region; so young adults will not have to leave for school and be lost to the community, like Kaax'achgóok who was lost for a time at sea). Cruikshank demonstrates that this story, like all stories, isn't just about the past. Angela Sidney, through Julie Cruikshank's work, teaches us what it means to appreciate the "social life of stories" and to recognize how people can "live life like a story" (Cruikshank 1990, 1998). Each telling adds new dimensions to our understanding and interpretation. Our debt to Cruikshank is evidenced in our choice of the title for this book.

### Living with Stories

In David William Cohen's *The Combing of History*, we see further evidence of how the present can expand the way we understand and retell our history. Cohen argues that in our understanding and reporting about the past, we continually add layers of meaning as new information is forthcoming and as our circumstances shed new light on old stories. In Cohen's terms, we are involved in a "production of history" based on an accumulation of influences such as audience, setting, recognition of need or interest, and the events that precede our decisions to recollect and retell. In this view, past tellings and present circumstances become part of our understanding of the story and influence how we use the story to convey meaning in the future. For Cohen and others like Trouillot (1995) and Hamilton et al. (2002), who might be loosely grouped as postmodernists, history is not just what can be shown to have occurred; it is also the record of how our understandings of the



past evolve and inform us in the present. For these scholars, stories aren't bound; they grow with each new telling and opportunity to find meaning and to relate the past to the present.

Folklorist John Miles Foley makes the point that stories contain "tagged potentials": that is, by examining the texts and the way the story is constructed and with close attention to the historic context, we can discern how the story was used and its meaning (Pathways Project, Oral Traditions and the Internet, posting for Friday, April 15, 2005: "Excavating an Epic"). On the surface, tagged potentials seem similar to the production of history, the chance to see how a story could be used in new and different contexts. Both Cohen and Foley are grappling with the multitude of ways we draw meaning from stories and the illusiveness of trying to confer meaning to a singular interpretation from one point in time. For Foley, the challenge is how to represent and preserve the fluidity of ancient texts, to determine the range of intended meaning and use. He sees clues in the way the texts are structured and the ways words were used in their historic context. For Foley, with adequate attention to the historic context and the performance today, we can discern the range and meaning of the stories.

However, the application of "tagged potentials" to the modern setting is problematic. It is clear that we interpret ancient texts and apply them to our lives (Schneider 2003), but in the process we also create new "tagged potentials." We may use terms or sayings from the past and apply them in new settings with expanded meaning. For instance, the Xhosa word *ubuntu* is roughly translated as "a person is a person through other persons," and the term has been used to describe the value of sharing and the dependency we have on each other. The term may be used in multiple settings, such as when people are gathered around a common plate of food—where we will all share the same food and be nourished equally—or in the modern political context where it may be used to encourage nation building (Schneider 2002:55–57).

For some oral historians, the emergence of potential interpretation outside the historic context of intended meaning is a distortion, a leap from original intent. This leads some to search for original intent, the "most accurate" rendering of the story. This reductionist approach can lead to considerable loss of meaning as the researcher searches for consistency and agreement. This is where Foley and Cohen's work becomes so important. They recognize that stories operate within an historic and cultural context that



*Photo by Jarrod Decker, courtesy of Denali Mountaineering Project Jukebox, [www.uaf.edu/library/jukebox](http://www.uaf.edu/library/jukebox)*

This photo is of dog musher Will Forsberg (on the right) telling Bill Schneider (on the left) about his experiences freighting supplies by dog team to mountain climbers on Denali.

must be fully described and appreciated, but they also recognize that stories are fluid; they can be used in more than one way and can convey a range of meanings depending on context. For Cohen the range is ever-expanding and most important for him is to discern how the story takes on meaning over time. He celebrates the way people give stories wings to take off and meet the needs of new occasions. But what about the tape-recorded interview?

The tape recording represents history-making at one point in time (Dunaway and Baum 1996:8), an account crafted for an occasion and recorded for posterity. Once created, the record is much like the ancient texts, and our focus turns to understanding the context of that telling in relation to previous tellings, Foley's "tagged potentials." When there are future tellings, then we must extend our analysis to the record of how the story has been used, what we can learn about its intended meaning through time. Recordings and texts are static entities, unlike the story that is recreated with and for each new telling (Finnegan 1998:2). The meaning can only be fully understood against other accounts, some recorded, some not. The tape can be replayed and we can recall a past telling, but without a storyteller, that is, someone who chooses to re-tell the story, our reference is limited to how it has been used as opposed to

its role in creating meaning in the present. Of course, our recall of the story in our minds is a form of personal storytelling, of re-creating meaning for the present. And, this is the first step in actually re-telling a story to others. People need to decide to retell the story, to make meaning in the present with the story. Oral performance is the way people choose to create and re-create meaning in the stories they tell and in the ways they interpret and retell them. The telling or performance becomes a critical part of not only the form, but the content, the substance of the story (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Toelken 1996, 117–33.); it is also the place where there is opportunity for innovation and change.

Swameji, a holy man who is the subject of Kirin Narayan's book *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, instructed his followers: "You should never assign a meaning to a myth because if you assign a meaning, the mind clamps onto just that one meaning. Then it's no longer active because when a story is active it allows for new beginnings all the time" (1989:106). Swameji's instructions through stories provided his followers an array of settings and contexts to understand how to live. Many of his stories are quite familiar to his followers, but they took on new meaning each time he used them. Narayan and other followers of his teachings learned to live with his stories.

Of course, for those of us who are also curators of collections, we must not only understand how stories are used over time (live with stories), we must also preserve and make accessible the record that is produced. We have a responsibility to understand what we are preserving, the way it has been created, and how it is interpreted within historic and cultural contexts. Therefore, our challenge goes beyond material preservation and access to documentation and preservation of the recording contexts. That's our responsibility. Our opportunity is to listen to the story as it is told today and to draw upon multiple recordings of the story made over time to understand how it has been used (Hatang 2000; Hamilton et al. 2002; Schneider 2002:161–167). This collection of essays is offered as a way to demonstrate how that scholarship can be done.

### Origins of This Collection

The main plenary session for the 2004 U.S. Oral History Association meetings featured a discussion of Alessandro Portelli's new book, *The Order has Been Carried Out*, a study of the oral accounts and written record of a Nazi massacre in Rome.<sup>2</sup> The massacre story, as

it has been told over the years, is a key to the political attitudes and modern history of Italy. In her remarks at the symposium on Portelli's book, Paula Hamilton captured this sentiment when she credited Portelli's work with exploring "ways of taking the past forward which emerge from the idea that the present is obliged to accommodate the past in order to move on from itself" (2005:14). In the tradition of Ives, Santora, Allen, Cruikshank, Cohen, and Foley, Portelli's work demonstrates not only that a population is living with a story that has an historic and cultural context that can be understood, but also how this story shapes their lives and attitudes towards each other today.

So, when the invitation came to organize a special session on storytelling at that same meeting, I jumped at the chance. The time was ripe to bring together a group of scholars who would explore how stories challenge us to understand their meaning in context and their evolution over time, the essence of issues raised by Cohen, Foley, and Portelli and the challenge faced by all who work with stories.

Now, two years after that conference, with most of our original contributors and some additions, we hope to continue to build on the theme that we truly do live with stories in our lives and to demonstrate through case studies and discussions some of the ways that stories are important. Each author in this volume traces a story and the circumstances of its retelling. The authors situate their discussion of variations in each retelling to indicate how we are influenced to remember and how we choose to retell. Each essay is followed by dialogue with a second scholar who extends the discussion to their work with narrative.

In Holly Cusack-McVeigh's piece, an important place, the Giant Footsteps, leads Yup'ik Eskimo villagers to recall a well-known narrative and the lessons they were taught about the importance of proper behavior. McVeigh traces when and how she was told about this place and the lessons she learned from each telling. Her discussant, Klara Kelley, works with Navajo and finds the Yup'ik way that current events can become part of a traditional story to be in contrast to what she has learned from the Navajo, where the old stories must maintain their integrity and where one's current experiences are referenced outside the formal story. For the Yup'ik residents of Hooper Bay, the Giant Footsteps are a close visual reminder of the moral order; for the Navajo, the ceremonial stories describe the ancient sites but the meaning of the sites is not as easily accessible,

particularly to children who have left the homeland for school or other reasons and aren't present at the ceremonies where they would learn about the sites. In both cases, the author and commentator note that it is an increasingly difficult challenge to instruct young people about places, stories, and their meaning.

Joanne Mulcahy's essay focuses on the use of metaphor in a Mexican American woman's oral narratives. Metaphors about trees, their bark, and leaves are a common theme in Eva Castellanoz' stories and are a familiar link back to her Mexican oral tradition where the Tree of Life is a central cultural symbol. Mulcahy traces Castellanoz' use of the tree metaphor to describe her mother's work as a healer and her own work with at-risk youth. The essay demonstrates how the constancy of the metaphor can be a familiar frame for the narrator to shape lessons about health and social well-being. For the Mexican American audience, the metaphor is a touchstone to their heritage, a visual and familiar link to the themes under consideration. Metaphors are a building block of narrative, and in this essay we see how important the blocks are in the construction of stories. Barbara Babcock, the discussant, extends the conversation through comparative perspectives on Pueblo storytelling as a "generative" force, passing on the culture while bringing the community together. Babcock and Mulcahy's conversation also turns to gender issues in fieldwork and in cultural representation. Both authors point out how intimate and personal their work is and how it calls for new ways of expressing and writing about their experiences.

Kirin Narayan's essay describes her reintroduction of an Indian song to a group of Indian women in a village in the Himalayan foothills. Years before, Narayan recorded a women's song about Krishna's encounter with a beautiful woman. The song was familiar to the women gathered for a wedding but there were verses to the song that they did not know. In Narayan's description of her reintroduction of the song, we see how this song is part of a traditional set of wedding songs that are sung when young girls go off to their future husband's village to marry. The women are expected to sing the song, but because they come from different villages they may not know all of the verses. The discussant for this piece is Barre Toelken, who points out how songs, with their melody, rhyme, and familiar verses, act as mechanisms to enhance the learning of new verses interspersed with the familiar. He relates the song tradition to his own experiences coming from an East Coast commercial whaling family, where certain songs are a common bond among family

members and evoke strong emotion. Narayan sees her example of the wedding songs and Toelken's description of the whaling songs as examples of storytelling that provides "a strong sense of continuity with our progenitors."

Aron Crowell and Estelle Oozevaseuk's essay was inspired by a visit of St. Lawrence Island Yupik<sup>3</sup> Eskimo elders to the Smithsonian Institution to work with heritage objects in the museum's collections. There, a gut skin parka was the inspiration for Estelle Oozevaseuk to retell the story of the St. Lawrence Island famine and epidemic of 1878–80. Her story, unlike written accounts by government officials, describes how hunters mistreated a walrus by skinning it alive and how because of this transgression the people of the community had to die. However, their deaths lead to a form of resurrection to a better life. The authors' description of the discrepancies in interpretation about what caused the famine leads us to reflect on the way some members of the community have made sense, in their own minds, of the disaster. Discussant James Clifford points out how stories are never limited to just facts but are also opportunities to point to deeper meanings that go beyond a strict rendering of what "actually" happened. In this case, the Western written sources claim the cause of the disaster to have been alcohol abuse and a poor walrus hunt, whereas the account given by Oozevaseuk emphasizes the breach of moral and spiritual relationship with the walrus and the consequences of this act. Christian and traditional beliefs are interwoven in her account, which emphasizes that people must live respectfully with the resources they have been given and there are severe consequences for neglecting these responsibilities, but in admitting transgression there is promise for salvation.

Sherna Gluck's essay takes us to Palestine, the development of the women's movement there, and how it both contributed to and was impacted by the first *intifada*. She points out that the emphasis in the way the story is told shifts over time according to the political climate. Context and audience are key factors that determine the emphasis placed on certain parts of the larger story. Gluck alerts us to the fact that the story may change its emphasis according to the political climate, but this does not necessarily mean the story has lost parts of its original meaning. Gluck's commentator, Ted Swedenburg, invites us to recognize the power of "official narrative" and how it functions in accounts such as the Palestinian women's story to overpower other renderings of the narrative. He poses

the example of Vietnam veterans and how a public story emerged about how they were treated on their return, a story that became the “official” interpretation, despite evidence to the contrary. Gluck adds additional perspective on the complexity of relating “official stories” to individual retellings in a description of her interviews with garment workers in the United States. In that case, she points out how growing trust with a narrator allowed the teller to feel comfortable diverting from the “official story.” The essay is a reminder that our growing relationship with our narrators provides perspective on how they use a story at any particular telling and how powerful political forces can shape and influence the record produced.

The last essay by Lorraine McConaghy describes how she reintroduces oral history accounts to museum visitors so that they can experience aspects of Seattle history that have not been told in the “official record.” Visitors are asked to read portions of transcripts and take on a character who describes his or her experiences. Visitors are forced to imagine what their character experienced and to relate it to their lives. Karen Utz is the discussant. She is the curator at Sloss Furnace National Historic Landmark, where she has also used oral history narratives in the schools to teach students about Birmingham industrial history. McConaghy and Utz’ discussion leads us to consider how reenactments are a way to extend the less well-known historical accounts to a public audience and how the act of voicing a character can create a personal connection with that character and their experiences.

In each of our explorations into retellings, we are reminded that the present is a key to how and what we remember. An ancient site is a reminder of how to behave. The needs of the present prompt the Mexican American healer to frame with familiar metaphor the story that heals. The parka at the Smithsonian is a prompt to retell the story of its origin and its significance in an historic tragedy. The Palestinian narrators feel the constraints of the present political environment as they shape their narratives of the women’s role in the *intifada*. The group of women gathered for the Indian wedding is the context where Narayan reintroduces the traditional song, and the group joins in the verses they know and collectively re-create the song that enriches their wedding event. McConaghy invites her visitors to participate in the narratives of the past, and the process forces them to confront their own experiences and lives today as they try to understand and portray the character they have been asked to present.

Each essay reminds us that if we are open to how retellings can be influenced by the present, if we are willing to live with stories, then memory becomes more than a vessel of information and detail that we accurately or inaccurately, completely or incompletely, draw upon. Memory is also a response to the moment: information that we need to recall because it relates to the present. The present, as Hamilton put it, is “obliged to accommodate the past in order to move on from itself.” And story making is the way we draw from the past to serve the present and future.

### Notes

1. It is interesting to note that Ives' video *An Oral Historian's Work* (2005) is still the flagship introduction to the field after nineteen years. His contributions were formally recognized in a special session at the 2005 Oral History Association meeting. For many years, Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell's book *From Memory to History* (1981) was a classic primer for oral history research.
2. Portelli, a professor of American literature in Rome, was recipient of the 2004 best book award by the Oral History Association.
3. The spellings *Yup'ik*, used by Cusack-McVeigh and *Yupik*, used by Crowell and Oozevaseuk, reflect linguistic differences among Eskimo groups.

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