

*On Teaching:*

## **Women's Lives, 1945-1995: Personal Narratives and the Pedagogy of Intergenerational Interviewing<sup>1</sup>**

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### **TRUE CONFESSIONS**

Early in April of this year I had THAT DREAM again: I am rushing frantically down the corridor on the 5th floor of Rossi Hall (where my office is located) looking for a classroom that does not exist. My stomach is in knots. After what seems like a long absence from teaching, I am late and unprepared. Terrified, I dash into a familiar-looking room, but I do not recognize the students who are sitting there and they do not recognize me.

Suddenly, my alarm shrieks, interrupting this nightmare of professorial guilt, and I awake sweaty and shaken. Yes, I've been distant from my students, it's the truth. I've been preoccupied with lectures to be given abroad; also with my adult children's dilemmas, a faculty seminar on Global Feminism, and several essays I'm trying to revise for publication.

The dream is a wake-up call and I'm ready for it: this is the day that my students are scheduled to begin reading their narratives of women's lives from the 1945 intergenerational interviewing project. With these narratives, I will be drawn into their orbits and re-born as a teacher.

It's unfashionable to talk about teaching. Teaching is the work that we academics are paid to do, but it is NOT the work we are rewarded for doing. Nor is it what many of us consider our "real" work. When I am honest with myself about teaching, I admit to boredom and frustration. I know what my students need: skills, analytical frameworks, the capacity to satisfy their own curiosity about how the world works and how they locate themselves in relation to it. But I can't figure out what they want—beyond a degree, a decent job and "a personal life." My uncertainties in the classroom drive me to experiment and improvise: to find ways of teaching which will unsettle students and compel them to re-examine themselves and their environment. This project, "Women's Lives, 1945-1995: Personal Narratives through Intergenerational Interviewing," is grounded in these contradictions.

### **OBJECTIVES, PARTICIPANTS, RATIONALES**

In launching this project, my collaborator Delight Dodyk (Department of History, Drew University) and I began with two simple objectives. The first was to engage our students in the emotionally charged process of interviewing an older female relative, most commonly a grandmother. The interview would probe the subject's experience of womanhood in 1945, and it would also look at the changes in her outlook, roles and opportunities over the ensuing half century. The process, we believed, the act of interviewing, would teach students as much about history in the making as the data they culled from the interviews.

The second objective, building upon the individual interviews, was to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences and reflections of these "ordinary women," American born and foreign born, who are now between 65 and 80 years of age and living in the United States.

To these we soon added a third objective. We wanted to interrogate and assess the research process: to confront the subjectivities and mysteries of getting and telling a story, of composing and understanding a life.

Feminist teachers and scholars, since the early '70's, have been staunch advocates of personalizing the teaching of history and culture studies. As students have flooded into universities who do not share the dominant white, Anglo Saxon, middle class, Protestant, heterosexual, male professorial culture, we teachers (some of us from locations outside of that academic mainstream) have had to rethink our educational politics and our pedagogical strategies. In designing courses, we have paid attention to our students' stated interests in everything from popular culture and the media to identity politics and careers. We have invited them to be reflexive: to treat the self, their own selves, as the cultural artifacts they know best and can examine with an expert's authority. We have modeled for them a post-modern mode of approaching issues and organizing data in relation to our individual standpoints. In raising our own personal, first person voices in scholarship and teaching, we have liberated students to explore and develop theirs.

My students at Jersey City State College are not historians in the making or future teachers of history. Their fields of study range from business, human services and police work to painting, media, psychology and special education. Harried people with many responsibilities, they are generally more concerned about getting a degree than getting an education. In addition to heavy course loads, they all have full or part time jobs and many are parents. Of the fifty who took part in the project, most are the first generation in their families to attend a university. About a third are Black and over a third are immigrants, mostly from the Caribbean and Latin America; more than half of the white students are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Their average age is 27.

### INTERGENERATIONAL INTERVIEWING

At the first class meeting, students are given a packet of materials including the following: a detailed set of questions to be asked, a short guide to interviewing and an interview assessment sheet. They are instructed to allow from 60 to 90 minutes for the taped interview, to transcribe the most significant or revealing parts, and to edit the transcript into a well organized first person narrative (of at least 750 words). Students whose family members are not English speakers (about 30 percent) have the added responsibility of preparing the interview questions in the subject's language and later translating her narrative into English.

Interviewing is a difficult art. Students worry about their competence as interviewers and about the cooperation they will receive from their subjects. Since the interview is an academic assignment for a college course, students are predisposed to approach it "scientifically": they expect to adopt a dispassionate professional manner and move efficiently from one question to the next. They want to get the data.

But **I** want them to get the **story**: the emotional tone, the reflections and rationalizations, the fabric of relatedness within which events are lodged, decisions made and meanings derived. Getting the data is only the beginning. Everyone has a story, I tell my students, and eliciting the story requires craft and guile. For some subjects it takes early preparation and lengthy explanations; for others warmth, gentle probing and constant reassurances; for others doggedness or unabashed manipulation; and for still others, pleas for special assistance in the interests of a good grade.

Of course, these subjects are family members: grandmothers (about 60 percent) and mothers, aunts, great aunts and grandmothers-in law. In relation to age and status, they command respect or at least the forms of respect. Some, at the age of 70 or thereabouts, may seem quite powerful and unapproachable; others may appear vulnerable and in need of protection from probing. How are younger family members to ask women of a certain age about their sexuality, the quality of their marriages or their sense of self worth? Can such questions be asked without being construed as disrespectful?

Ellen Gellman tells her classmates:

my grandmother was willing to give me information but I wasn't really willing to take it. I was nervous and telling myself that I've got to get this done. I think I was afraid of her emotion, afraid that she might cry and I wouldn't know what to do.

Anita Simonetti adds:

In my interview I was trying very hard to be careful and polite; I kept trying to smooth things over, to keep my subject from becoming angry or feeling bad. So I missed my opportunity to be "real" with her and get deeply into her story.

Contemporary American culture, with its therapeutic norms and compulsive showcasing of the confessional (e.g., my dream at the beginning of this paper) provides encouragement for making the private public. What some consider to be invasiveness, prying or rudeness is simply cutting to the jugular of the story. Oprah and Geraldo do it daily on tv; so does Barbara Walters. And so do dozens of *New York Times* reporters and celebrated authors of *New Yorker* profiles. Many topics that were once unmentionable sources of shame—from poverty and domestic violence to illegitimacy, desertion, abortion and homosexuality—are now out of the closet and in our faces.

Americans believe in being open with one another—even about our pain and our differences—and we admire those who are. Openness is a frontier that won't close down, an arena for change that does not require economic restructuring or an end to sexism and racism.

I don't mean to suggest that American students and their American born subjects are uniquely positioned to produce an open or revealing interview. Van Phung, a 40 year old student from Vietnam, has not been in America long enough (two years) to absorb the ideology of openness. Yet her interview with her 75 year old mother pierces to the anguished core of the older woman's experience. For Van a "real" interview is a consequence of privileged knowledge and intimacy. Van knows her mother's hatred of her subordinate status in marriage and in Vietnamese society; and she understands her mother's need to give testimony before a sympathetic audience. Van writes, "listening patiently to stories I was familiar with, I knew that I helped her to relieve her discontentment. My mother wanted to inform her descendents of the inequalities that were imposed on women's lives" so that they would value their opportunities and live differently.

### PERSONAL NARRATIVES

For two weeks at the end of the semester students read their relatives' stories, the pieces they have edited from the taped interviews, aloud in class. As one first

person narrative follows the next, we note the distinctive qualities of each voice and lifepath; and we look for patterns among women whose cultures of origin include not only the industrial Northeast of the U.S. and the rural South but also Vietnam and the Philippines; Poland, Italy, Portugal and Ireland; Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic; Guyana, Ecuador, Uruguay and several islands of the West Indies.

In introducing his interview, twenty-six year old James Jenkins puts it perfectly when he says, "I got to take a walk through time with my grandmother as a guide." James interviewed 73 year old Lois Lattimore in the privacy of her bedroom in Newark, NJ. For this family matriarch, the War was a window of economic opportunity and the foundation of fifty years of hard earned independence.

"During the war," she tells her grandson:

my first job was working in a munitions plant in Newark, N.J. where I inspected handgrenades. After that, I was hired by General Electric to work as an inspector with the engineers. I enjoyed my work greatly and had the satisfaction of being the first Black woman to hold that position.

"VE day was the happiest time of our lives," she recalls:

We heard the news on the radio. I remember hearing bells ringing, and everybody stopped work. It was a great feeling: we were going to see friends and loved ones come back home. Later, when Hiroshima was bombed, veterans came to the plant and discussed how the bombing took place and what the bomb did. I was glad to know more about what was going on. In later years, I had the opportunity to see Hiroshima for myself.

When the war ended, James' grandmother was fortunate to be able to hold on to her job. As a single parent with two children, she needed the income. Over the years she became a leader in her (mostly white) union, earned enough to put her son and daughter through college, enjoyed middle class comforts—made possible in part by the paternalistic policies of General Electric—and travelled widely. In summing up a half century of experiences, she declares, "I always did what I wanted and now I'm retired and independent. I'm a happy old lady with no regrets. . . ."

Lois Lattimore's situation—as a Black single parent who makes a financially secure life for herself and her family in urban New Jersey—is not the statistical norm for women in the sample or for Black women as a group. Other African Americans, most of whom were living in the South in 1945, report inadequate

education and few job opportunities other than domestic or farm work. Among white subjects, Phyllis Boucher, now seventy years old, speaks enthusiastically about a similar job in a defense plant, but making hand grenades; she recalls loving the danger of it all and cherishing the scars from work-related burns. But she also remembers what a pleasure it was “to give up my job for the boys who were coming home.” However, most of the white women in this sample continued working after the War, generally at low paying clerical, service or factory jobs, to help provide for the family.

Speaking in Spanish to her granddaughter Monica Vega, 80 year old Rafaela Santiago describes her traditional upbringing in rural Puerto Rico:

My six brothers worked on the farm and my two sisters and I did the cleaning, cooking and sewing; we washed dirty clothes in the river with the help of two flat rocks and a broad piece of wood. I was raised in a strict, religious family with many rules directed to women. I wore a long dress that reached to my ankles. I could not show my legs or my neck. I was not allowed to cut my hair. I was permitted to date at the age of 18 as long as one of my brothers accompanied me; no kissing or hugging was allowed. I married in 1939, and we were terribly poor. When World War II began, my husband enlisted in the army for economic reasons. My baby daughter and I were sent to live with my father-in law. My husband visited us once a year, and by the war's end I had four more children.

“Today,” Rafaela concludes:

I see women taking jobs outside of the home, jobs that were considered to be men's jobs. When I see them, I feel very proud to be a woman. Still, I believe that children come first before any job opportunity; I believe in equal rights but not to the point where it affects the family.

Carolina Dungea was sixteen in 1945 and living in a town called Paniqui, Tarlac in the Philippines. Among the women interviewed, her first hand experience of the war is unusual, but the rest of the story is familiar enough. Speaking in a mixture of Tagalog and English, she recalls that:

American soldiers walked through our barrio on their way back to camp. We sold them fried chicken, and in exchange they gave us chocolate bars, pudding and other delicious foods. I actually saw burning airplanes crashing into the rice fields. People were sick with malaria and there was no medicine

available. My mother rationed our food. Each day she fed us just one hotcake, a little bit of rice and black coffee.

Carolina got through the war hungry but unharmed:

I heard horror stories about Japanese soldiers raping young women, and even pregnant women were not spared. But I was not too concerned because I was flat chested and thin at that time, and I knew that they would not have been interested in me.

Carolina continues:

My parents were poor farmers. My mother sold vegetables in the market, helping with the family's expenses. My sisters and I did most of the household chores, including caring for children. We were raised under the belief that sex is solely for procreation. If God meant for one to have seven children, then that is one's destiny.

It was Carolina's good fortune that an uncle sent her to high school, and from there she went on to two years of college. In later years, she and her husband worked hard to educate all of their children. "As I grow older," she concludes. "I have become more confident and fulfilled knowing that our children are leading rewarding lives."

The narratives come alive with the details of domestic life in 1945: obtaining and preparing food, dressing for special occasions and doing the laundry, cleaning and heating the house. They document the sexual division of labor, relations between parents and children, formal education, age of marriage, numbers of children produced and intervals between them. Of course, there are differences in the experiences of rural and urban women, American born and foreign born women, white women and women of color. But across the categories, a pattern of apparent contradictions emerges: severe hardship (financial, familial, political and social), on the one hand, and unsuppressible optimism, on the other.

So many women in our sample testify to dire poverty and backbreaking labor, to painful ignorance about sex, minimal literacy, marital strife, the loss of a homeland and the traumas of migration and adaptation. Cuban-born Hilda Lei remembers years of having only "a glass of water sweetened with brown sugar for breakfast and a piece of guava paste with some crackers for lunch." Rookmin Rambharose from Guyana speaks about having babies year after year regardless of the pain one endured or the inability of the family to provide for them. She had seven in a ten year period. Filipina Carolina Dungea recalls the shame she felt in school because of the primitive and tattered condition of her clothes. And Bessie

Thornton from rural Georgia, merging her family's history of slavery with the humiliations of Jim Crow culture, describes her life as "time on the cross."

While few subjects cry out as passionately as Vietnamese Nguyen Phung against the injustices of patriarchy and the suppression of women, many speak resentfully about their subordinate status as girls and women. Curiously, some of these same subjects also idealize the role of woman in the traditional family and are consumed with nostalgia for a more orderly past. But the majority are remarkably upbeat. They appear in the edited narratives (and in the assessments that the interviewers write) as strong, opinionated and confident—virtually exuding a sense of accomplishment.

In the repetition of stories and salient themes, students see clearly what they may only have tentatively concluded from their individual case studies: all of the women have experienced a dramatic improvement in the content and texture of their lives in the years since World War II. Technology—and here I mean everything from cars, phones, household appliances and the omnipresent tv to metropolitan workplaces, shopping malls and supermarkets—has transported them from locations of "underdevelopment" (even in the US) to late twentieth-century urban settings where their most bitter struggles for survival are behind them.

In a similar vein, our explorations in class of the generational dynamics of the interviews clarify the findings. Students understand that their subjects have been encouraged by the structure of the interview and the urgings of their interviewers to "compose" a life: to review a fifty year journey and have it inscribed into history. The subjects have been asked, most of them for the very first time, to perform on tape for a younger relative, an unknown audience at a local college and for posterity. The occasion is heady indeed.

Like Lois Lattimore and Nguyen Phung, many subjects are emboldened by the opportunity that the project provides: not simply to reminisce but to witness before children and grandchildren their commitments to work, family and personal development. Willing participants in a late life passage of self affirmation, they proudly recite their accomplishments: survival, a willingness to struggle against adversity, and a belief—born perhaps of motherhood—that the next generation's achievements are also their own. Several even mount the bully pulpit to instruct their student interviewers. "Never settle for less," Keisha Johnson's grandmother lectures her. "Strive for change and never let anyone tell you that because you're a woman you're not capable."

The older women's testimonials are homilies for a younger generation. The message is familiar and foreordained: it is the Great American Metanarrative—the Modern Universal Metanarrative—of moving from poverty, ignorance and provincialism, through grit and steady labor, towards a life of greater material comfort, worldliness and maturity.

### CODA

Two weeks after the semester is over, I meet Olive Samuel, a West Indian-born student in her forties, in the hall outside my office. (This is not a dream!) Olive tells me that her Jamaican subject, seventy-seven year old Ethel Cousins, has called her twice since the interview was completed. The first time, she left a message on Olive's answering machine that she had omitted some important events from her story. On the second call she asked Olive if they could continue the taping. "I have so much on my mind since we spoke," Ethel told Olive, "and I want you to get it all and have my story right."

Olive's days and nights are full: she takes courses all year long, works full time as a nurse and is rearing a teen age daughter and a year old granddaughter. Her interview assignment has been graded and the semester is over; but the story she has elicited from Ethel Cousins, like all "real" stories, goes on. With scarcely a hesitation, Olive promises to stop by at Ethel's place with her tape recorder and a few extra tapes. Olive is hooked.

Like Olive, I too am hooked on the mysteries of the process and the drama of each interview and lifetale. As a teacher, I am inspired by the power of these stories to bind interviewers and narrators, grandparents and grandchildren, even strangers in a classroom into collaborators and historical researchers.

### NOTES

1. A version of this essay was presented at the annual meeting of the Japanese Association for American Studies in Sendai, Japan in June 1995 and at the Faculty of Anglo-American Studies, Coimbra University, Portugal, in March 1997.