

Oral History and Communities of Color

Edited by Teresa Barnett and Chon A. Noriega



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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction <i>Chon A. Noriega and Teresa Barnett</i>	1
Stories of the "Sugar Illness": Using Talking Circles to Reveal Beliefs about Illness among American Indians Living with Diabetes <i>Felicia Schanche Hodge</i>	19
"See What I'm Saying": Adding the Visual to Oral History <i>Karen L. Ishizuka and Robert A. Nakamura</i>	29
Not In Their Plans: Gentrification, Latinas/os, and the Practice of Community Oral History <i>Nancy Raquel Mitrabal</i>	50
"It Wasn't a Sweet Life": Engaging Students in Oral History Interviewing across Race, Class, and Generations <i>Susan D. Rose</i>	76
Doing Oral Histories in the Shadow of 9/11: Fear, Secrecy, and Intimidation as Factors in Research <i>Iram Sheikh</i>	98
Capturing the Reflective Voice: An Interview with <i>Karen Mary Davalos</i> <i>Conducted by Teresa Barnett and Chon A. Noriega</i>	117
Recording a Queer Community: An Interview with <i>Horacio N. Roque Ramirez</i> <i>Conducted by Teresa Barnett</i>	132
Contributors	153
Index	157

"It Wasn't a Sweet Life"

Engaging Students in Oral History Interviewing across Race, Class, and Generations

Susan D. Rose

I've studied here for almost four years and I had no idea what kind of community lay just two blocks from campus—and I never would have, had it not been for this course. I have met some wonderful, amazing people.

—Jesse Morrell, Dickinson College student

Dickinson College is a small, predominantly white liberal arts college located in Carlisle, a small town in south-central Pennsylvania. Like many historically white American colleges and universities, Dickinson faces the challenge of how to engage its primarily white students—and an increasing number of African, Latino, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) students—in meaningful dialogues about diversity.¹ The college is known for encouraging its students to study abroad, and it has worked actively over the past decade to diversity its faculty and student body. The percentage of students of color has risen from 5 percent to 16 percent. The college continues to search for effective ways to create an intellectual community that prepares all of its members to live creatively, productively, and harmoniously in a multicultural society and world. This cannot be done simply by making the campus demographically more diverse or by sending students to foreign countries. Rather, the institution must intentionally engage diversity in ways that create greater understanding and empathy and thereby enrich the entire campus and its surrounding community.

I am on the sociology faculty at the college, and for us a key strategy has been to look beyond the campus to the town. Dickinson is located in

the borough of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which is the county seat of Cumberland County. In 2000 the borough had 17,970 residents, 14 percent of whom live at or below poverty level. Among African American residents, one-third live below poverty level. By contrast, nearly 40 percent of Dickinson students come from private school backgrounds, and a majority grew up in households whose median income is easily quadruple that of Carlisle residents. While African Americans make up only 6.9 percent of the borough population, they have deep roots in Carlisle, dating back to the Revolutionary era. And the heart of the town's black community is located just two blocks from the Dickinson campus.²

We have found that collaborative fieldwork and oral history interviewing under the applied sociological framework of community studies has been an effective way of connecting students with the town, and particularly with the town's African American community. In 1989–90 we launched a two-stage oral history project called the "Smalltown" project. Students and faculty worked in research teams with community members to collect multigenerational oral histories that revealed the origins and continuing development of the local African American community. This interracial college-community collaboration helped our students get to know their neighbors and better understand town-gown relations. It also yielded an important study of change and continuity in race relations in twentieth-century small-town America.

For Carlisle's African Americans, the project provided a way to document and validate their history. For Dickinson students, the process of interviewing black town residents taught them much about race and class relations, family and gender, education, work, housing, leisure, and religion in an ostensibly "white" town. It also taught them about themselves. At first, thinking their task was to document the experiences of African Americans, students did not realize that they were also going to be exploring the experience of growing up white, both at the turn of the century and today. Perhaps most important, the students overcame their fear of entering into authentic conversations with other people whose lives seemed quite different from their own. They became active listeners. For their part, community members came to know students as diverse individuals rather than just as "the rich kids down the street." Challenging stereotypes on both sides, participants in the oral history project came to appreciate the multidimensionality of those once considered strangers.

Listening to African American Narratives in a Predominantly White Town

The team that came together for the first stage of the project in 1989–90 was composed of four African Americans (a minister, a sixth-grade teacher, and two high school students) and five whites (an eleventh-grade English teacher, two college professors including me, and two college students). Our various concerns included race relations in the town, discrimination in the local school system, the marginalization of the African American community, and the isolation of Dickinson College. In order to address these issues, we decided to engage young people in collecting oral histories. We wanted to empower the students and foster academic work that spoke to their concerns. We also wanted to gain greater understanding of Carlisle's African Americans and to record and make available the rich history of a community that had not been included in the town's official history.

There were legitimate worries about continuing racial tensions and lack of integration in the town of Carlisle and about the potential repercussions of speaking out and appearing to be, as several narrators put it, "uppity." Oral history methodology provided a relatively safe, nonpoliticized way to collect information in this politically sensitive situation. The KKK still made its presence felt in the area, periodically placing flies in rural mailboxes. In the initial study in 1989–90 we used pseudonyms for all narrators, since a number felt uncomfortable speaking out, knowing that they could be identified.

By 2001, when we began the second stage of the project, the climate in the town had shifted somewhat. An interracial Social Justice Committee was active. When the KKK threatened to march, many organizations and churches came together to organize a large unity rally, with support from the governor of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission, as a counter to what turned out to be a very small KKK gathering. By then, most narrators wanted to use their own names when we interviewed them.

During the fall of 2001, two groups of students at Dickinson came together for the second stage, a follow-up study of Carlisle's African American community and race relations in town and on campus. This time the team of Dickinson students was much larger and more diverse than had been the case a decade earlier. One set of students was enrolled in a qualitative research methods class in sociology. The other set came from the Crossing Borders program, a cross-cultural (inter- and

intracultural) program that brought together up to twenty students from Dickinson and two historically black universities in New Orleans, Xavier University of Louisiana and Dillard University. The students spent the summer in Cameroon, West Africa. They returned to Dickinson for the fall semester and then spent the spring semester at one of the historically black universities. During the fall all Crossing Borders participants took one course that focused on the African diaspora and on historical and contemporary race relations.

Wanting to discover more about the community of which Dickinson College is a part, and to enrich their study of race relations, these two groups of students were eager to engage in a study of Carlisle. Their focus was on the local African American community, which is rarely visited by students despite its nearness to the campus.

As they began their research at the local historical society in 2001, students became increasingly convinced of the project's importance. Compared to the documentation of Euro-Americans (mainly Scots-Irish and Germans) who had settled in the area, the information on African Americans in Carlisle was very limited. Most of the family genealogical records focused on prominent Euro-American families. The students, therefore, relied primarily on the oral history interviews done as part of the 1989–90 community-college collaboration, as well as on census data, city directories, and funeral directories. Using these various sources, they began to piece together the history of the African American community in Carlisle.

This history dates back to the 1700s. Some of the earliest African Americans were brought to the area as slaves to work on farms, in homes, and in the iron industry. Others came as free blacks to work in the iron mills—including the Pine Grove furnace—as unskilled laborers, and as domestic servants. Carlisle developed into a segregated black and white town, with few other racial or ethnic minorities. African Americans worked at unskilled or low-skilled jobs, and local businesses successfully kept out the unions. Throughout the twentieth century, only a few black professionals (doctors, dentists, ministers, and teachers) lived in the community. By the time we began our research in 1989, there were no black medical professionals and only two black teachers in the whole school district.

As the students listened to the previously recorded oral history interviews, they were captivated by the narrators' passion and humor in recounting their stories. They expressed both eagerness and fear as they imagined conducting their own interviews. Would they be able to

effectively cross racial and class lines? For many of the students, the first step was to get beyond the timidity they felt about interviewing people who appeared to be different from them. This was particularly true for many of the white students, but it also was the case with students of color. These shared misgivings helped the students realize that their fear was often as much about taking the initiative to start a personal conversation as it was about race. Would people be willing to talk with them? What did they, as interviewers, have to offer?

They eased their way into the black community by going to church services and meeting people afterwards. Then they branched out. Many of the students chose to do follow-up interviews with narrators from the first stage of the project and their families. Others sought out new connections.

The First Stage: 1989-90

It wasn't a sweet life. No, I wouldn't call it a sweet life because you had a lot to contend with, you know. What was it like growing up in Carlisle? Bad! Just like putting a chicken in a bear's cave.

—Rachael Hodge, age 94

In 1989, two black high school students, Shelli and Richelle, sat around a table at Shiloh Baptist Church as a group of older people brainstormed plans for the college-community collaboration. Present were a black minister, a white high school teacher, a black elementary school teacher (the only African American teacher in the school district at the time), two white college professors, and two white college students. The "Carlisle Community Project: An Interracial Collaboration" would involve oral histories, videotaped documentaries, professional conference presentations, History Day workshops, and community publication of stories told and written by members of the black community. Uncertain and certainly overwhelmed, the two eleventh-graders glanced furtively at each other with looks that clearly communicated: "What did we get ourselves into, and how fast can we get out of here?"

Finally, the scholarly talk was put on hold. All discussion of oral history methodology, family histories, and community research was pushed into the cracks, like mortar between the cement blocks of the church basement. The tape player was cued up and the voice of Rachael Hodge, a ninety-four-year-old widow and community matriarch who lived across the street from the church, rang out. The high school students listened

intently as Hodge told of growing up black in predominantly white Carlisle at the turn of the century.

I was born in Carlisle in 1895, delivered by my grandmother in a house right down the street from here. I never knew my mother since she died giving me birth but my grandmother took care of me.

What was it like growing up in Carlisle? Bad! . . .

I went to school at the black school until eighth grade, and then I went to the high school that technically was integrated. But we got a different diploma.

After high school, there wasn't anywhere for you to climb. There was nothing for you to do—what I mean no pick. You had to work, as they had used the expression, "in a white folks' kitchen." You had to be a cook or a waitress or a maid. Sometimes you could get a job nursing, you know, and that kept you out on the street pushing this baby up and down. You couldn't find much to do. No polished jobs. . . . I wouldn't call it a sweet life because you had a lot to contend with.

You know, you—the white people—I hate to say this, but the white people caused a lot of trouble because you could be sitting at your own door, standing at your own door, not even botherin' them and they'd go holler "NIGGER!" and when they said "NIGGER" that meant "FIGHT!" That was all there was to it, and then, of course, they were never bothering you; it was always you bothering them. But our boys and girls just didn't take it off them. I know one thing, the white people couldn't have stood it. You'd have took low, [pause] yes, [pause] yes.

In this first interview, Mrs. Hodge was ready to "tell it like it is," acknowledging that she was speaking to white listeners: Marianne Esolen, a white (actually Italian American) college student, and me, a white college professor. Enough rapport and respect had been established that she felt comfortable sharing her story with us, interjecting at times: "You, you whites would have took low." It helped that Mrs. Hodge was ninety-four, old enough to care little (not to be confused with not caring at all) about what others thought. I also had my three-month-old son with me, which helped open up a conversation about birthing and babies.

I know a woman that had a baby—a colored baby, and the white woman was admiring this baby and she said, "If you wasn't black, I'd kiss you!" Well, you never saw anything rub off us. We're this color and we can't help it.

Although Mrs. Hodge talked about times that stretched some eighty years into the past, she spoke with a vivid clarity and passion. As the tape played, the expressions on Shelli's and Richelle's faces changed from confusion

and boredom to excitement and interest. To paraphrase oral historian Paul Thompson, as those of us gathered in that church basement listened to Rachael Hodge, she gave history back in her own words. She recognized the heroism of ordinary people going about their daily lives and gave voice to their experience. In that moment, Rachael Hodge brought history out of and into the Carlisle community, affecting everyone around that table in different yet powerfully similar ways.

For the two black high school students, Shelli and Richelle, the project provided an opportunity to explore their own family and community history and in so doing to rediscover their past, make sense of the present, and plan for the future. For Andi, a white high school English teacher, the project offered a way to empower her high school students by legitimizing work that was relevant to their lives and to explore longstanding questions of race and racism as they pertained to the Carlisle school system. For Jill and me, both white college professors, and Marianne, a white college student, the project offered an opportunity to become better integrated into the Carlisle community and to integrate teaching and research around important local issues. For everyone, the project became a lesson in self-examination, community awareness, and the challenges and rewards of ethnographic research, focusing on the collection of oral histories.

While we were all captivated by the rich, tremulous voice on the tape, Shelli and Richelle were particularly enthralled. They did not know Mrs. Hodge personally, but they knew her by reputation as one of the black "community mothers," and they knew she lived in a certain house they walked past every day. They were enchanted by the voice of a woman describing real experiences that were both radically different from and strikingly similar to their own. Growing up and attending high school in Carlisle, Shelli and Richelle saw every day what Mrs. Hodge had seen in her lifetime: members of their community who graduated from high school, only to stand on the corner or sit in the park or push their own babies up and down the street. Shelli and Richelle knew about being called "niggers" and they knew about having to fight. They knew kids hanging out on the street corner, but they also knew there was more to the community than that.

Mrs. Hodge's narrative probed issues, experiences, and feelings that weren't always considered polite topics of conversation. Both Shelli and Richelle seemed surprised and impressed by her candor as she openly discussed racism in Carlisle at the turn of the century. They also wondered what we, the committee of "older people," more than half of us white, were thinking and feeling as we listened to those same words.

Shelli, in particular, was ready to get involved. She wanted to interview and tell the stories of various young people, both those who didn't hang out on the street corners and those who did. She wanted to give them a chance to speak and she wanted to speak herself. Rachael Hodge did not just tell Shelli a story that was memorable in its hearing; she encouraged Shelli to speak out herself and to engage in a dialogue that went beyond the stereotypes of age and race. She encouraged Shelli to become both a researcher and a historian for her own generation and her own community. Soon after that first church basement meeting, Shelli and Marianne began working together in a mutually beneficial partnership. Shelli had entrée and insight into the African American community. Marianne had training in oral history methodology, so she was able to help Shelli shape the questions she wanted to ask of her peers. Drawing on her own experience with discrimination in the local high school, Shelli chose as her first interview another black high school student named Pamela:

I would say most white kids are scared of the black kids, but I would not know why. I mean think about it, 700 and some white kids [laughs] and maybe forty blacks.

As Pamela continues, she makes clear that she found not only the students but also the teachers to be afraid and prejudiced:

They act like there's a lot of us. They watch us. I mean it's true, some of the black people do live up . . . to the stereotypes people give us, but most of us don't. We go to school and all of us like to socialize; you just don't want to go to class, walk . . . And it's just like you get tired of being called THOSE people . . . If it was like 700 blacks and maybe 150 whites then I would see there was maybe a reason for them [teachers] to act the way they do towards blacks . . . They act like blacks are a threat, and it's really sad because teachers are supposed to be there to help you, and they're supposed to want you to do more and they're there to encourage you to do more, but it doesn't seem that some of the teachers do that.

SHELLI: It's amazing to me when a group of blacks will be standing somewhere and four, five, six times as many whites will be standing and they'll be scared of the blacks. I mean what put that fear? I don't understand why that fear is there.

As we continued to conduct interviews, it became clear that other African American students in Carlisle shared Shelli's understanding of black students' position vis-à-vis white students and the high school faculty and administration. Realizing that others were afraid of them gave them

an inverted sense of power—the kind of power that does not empower but entraps. Pamela explained, “It’s scary, ‘cause when you’re there and being black and seeing things from a black point of view, it really looks hopeless. . . . I know I probably will do what I want to do and be what I want to be, but some kids just don’t have hope.”

In 1991, both Shelli and Pamela planned to leave Carlisle after graduation, Pamela to go to college and Shelli to go to college or into the armed services. “If you want to be somebody, you have to leave Carlisle,” Shelli explained. “You have to get out.” Shelli expressed aspirations for her future children and for Carlisle, too.

I never want my kids to have to go through being stereotyped . . . being judged before you’re known, being called something that you’re totally opposite from. I just want everybody to give my kids a chance. . . . Before you judge them, get to know them. Before you determine who they are and what they stand for, get to know them. . . . Don’t ever assume something . . . you can’t assume about people. . . . I mean, you can assume it’s gonna rain. You can’t assume people. . . . That isn’t possible because your assumptions when it comes to people are most all the time wrong. . . . I hope someday there is not a Carlisle black community, not a Carlisle white community, just the Carlisle community.

As we conducted interviews, listened to tapes, and read transcripts during the project’s first stage, we were working out our own understandings of what was going on in the community and also within ourselves. The project became a very personal one as we moved in and out of our roles as insider/outsider, historian/listener, participant/observer, minority/majority, student/teacher, apprentice/mentor.³ Shelli’s final journal entry reflects both the skepticism and the hope that characterized her involvement in the project and her relationship to Carlisle:

When I first approached about this project I was very reluctant. I couldn’t understand why—why these people? I felt like this was just going to be another thing to help the “Poor Black Community,” and like everything else nothing would be done to make a change. I feel we’ve made a change to some of the few people we’ve reached, including myself. Before I began, I never knew how deep and how long the problems have been here. Some of the problems Rachael Hodge faced eighty years ago, myself and Pamela still face today. For the people of my generation I think the biggest concern lies with the Carlisle School District. Before I started the project I had no idea how bad it was. . . . The most important thing I’ve realized as a result of the project is that I must make a change. Until someone speaks out, everything will stay the same forever.

Shelli’s sentiments reveal the ways in which oral history “brings history into, and out of, the community,” as Thompson says. “Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making.”⁴

For those of us who came to the project as observers looking to become participants, helping the community discover and document its stories allowed us to discover our own communities and stories as well. Marianne Esolen, a white sociology major, wrote about her awareness of her role as a researcher and her evolving self-consciousness in the conclusion to her honors thesis:

When I began my research on Carlisle’s black community it was not without some insecurity, apprehension, and confusion. I worried about my color, my age, my status as a [college] student, my religion, my gender . . . in short I wondered where I would fit into this community as a student researcher. I wondered who would respond to me and how they would respond. I wondered how I would approach my interviews and how my approach would be interpreted. I wondered if I would step on toes while addressing sensitive issues. Later I wondered if others worried about stepping on my toes while addressing sensitive issues. I wondered how any of this would get started and where any of it would go. I wondered if I would ever feel less the outsider and I wondered if I would gain the trust and rapport necessary to do justice to the research of Carlisle’s black community. Basically I wondered and worried and wondered. . . .

I was quite often embarrassed and sometimes even frightened by my race. I felt guilty, disgraced, and angry when hearing of various racial incidents. My skin color for the first time in my life was something I felt shame for, an interesting role-reversal given the focus of this research. I no longer so easily made the distinction between THEM—the racist whites who committed any number of crimes against humanity—and US, the liberal post-civil rights movement generation of whites who so quickly, so completely, and so assuredly made the declaration of our independence from the weight of their prejudice and the guilt of choices, attitudes, and excuses based on those prejudices.

For an olive-skinned Italian who grew up in an all-white community and only heard the racial slur “nigger” used in reference to myself as an Italian, this sudden confusion over my own racial “pride and prejudice” left me unprepared for my objective outsider role as researcher. I found myself walking on eggshells I already imagined to exist whether they were actually a reality or not. As a result of this super-self-consciousness, my confidence was at least in part left in my car as I walked up to the door of those first participants, nervously took too many notes, and stumbled through the technical difficulties of dead batteries, forgotten tapes, and inkless pens.

Ironically this period of introspection and self-doubt I believe was the most fruitful contributor to my development as a researcher. As I shed many of my own misconceptions about myself, issues of racism, and one's responsibility to address such issues, I became empowered by my research, its purpose, value, and absolute necessity. I knew I was still white, but I also knew I was committed, and I believe this commitment to the project and to the people within Carlisle's community surpassed many of the racial barriers initially present in my first set of interviews. I was no longer defensive because I no longer felt so self-conscious. I became the researcher and "listener" and members of the community became participants and "historians." The relationships that ensued were by and large based on trust, respect, and surprise—the subtle wonder that a white college student was collecting black family histories and that members of that community were allowing her to do so.

The Second Stage: 2001

A decade later, the diverse team of students from Dickinson, Dillard, and Xavier universities built upon and expanded the work we had done in the first stage of the project. For Aja, an African American student from Xavier participating in the Crossing Borders program, the work in Carlisle's black community was the highlight of her experience at Dickinson. Originally from St. Louis, Aja felt very comfortable going into the community and stopping to talk with people sitting on the sidewalks or on park benches. She soon found in Mr. Corn, an octogenarian and former housekeeper for a Dickinson fraternity for many decades, "the grandfather I never had." She was invited to birthday parties and Sunday dinners at his home. Val, an African American student from the Bronx, had a totally different experience. She felt quite uncomfortable going into the community and talking with people. She had as much anxiety as many of the white students did about how people would view her and about whether or not they would be willing to talk with her. This became an interesting part of the class conversation as it became clear that race was not the only, or perhaps even the most salient, issue for everyone. A host of other considerations came into play: personality, regional and urban/rural background, and socioeconomic class.

Many members of the African American community in Carlisle mentioned feeling more comfortable with students of color from the South. Used to the warmth of Southern hospitality, these students often could more easily approach people and start conversations in a friendly and respectful way. The majority of Carlisle's black families originally came from the

South, some of them generations ago. Some members of the community perceived the Northern-raised students of color, who were predominantly from urban areas, to be less friendly, less respectful, and more arrogant. "The ones from the North, from the city, they just walk by and don't say anything; they don't even see us." When Val heard this, she said, "Well, yeah, you are taught not to look people in the eye in the city. You've got to be crazy to do that, to trust people." At the end of the semester, Val commented, "Reflecting on how it's changed me . . . I'm thinking about who I was before. You know, I knew everything. 'If you're black, this is how you act, if you're white, this is how you act.' Of course there's a few exceptions to the rules, but you know, basically this is how we are. *How we are.*"

These insights and conversations—about what it meant to be black, to be raced as white, to be biracial and feel as though one had to choose or not—became more complex and nuanced as we moved through the semester. Having a diverse group of students and faculty involved definitely benefited our explorations of race and race relations, of our own and others' identities, and of other people's perceptions of us. As a group, we were able to consider more fully the ways in which race influences expectations and interactions and the ways in which other factors and experiences contribute as well. Such discussions proved to be both confusing and liberating. The oral history research drew on the resources of all of us, students and teachers alike. It challenged us to step out of our traditional roles as educators and students and explore social interactions that were both part of the history we were documenting and part of the present we were living. It forced us to think about ourselves in relation to others.

As we discover and tell other people's stories, we need to hear both what they are telling us and what we are telling ourselves. In "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter," Micaela di Leonardo concludes that the new work in ethnographic theory offers oral history two major contributions: "the self-conscious analysis of the intersubjectivity of the interview, and an admission of the innately theoretical nature of any interview project."⁹

In confronting issues of methodology and interpretation in a collaborative project like this one, we cannot escape the complex and difficult issues that surface as part of the research process. As Thompson reminds us, "All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose."¹⁰ We continually had to confront this fact as we went about our work, negotiating what questions we should ask, whom we should interview next, which materials and findings we should present and to whom. As we worked on our interpretations of the data that reflected who we were and what roles we

played, it became clear that important methodological questions posed sensitive personal and political questions.

The relationship between the project and the larger community was an interactive one, representing a "series of exchanges, a dialectic, between information and interpretation," between educators and students and their localities, and between races, classes, and generations.¹ When approached about their willingness to be interviewed, most of the adult narrators initially responded, "I haven't anything to say." We interpreted this as having at least two possible meanings: one, they didn't want to talk to us, and/or two, they didn't believe they had much to say that was worthy of being recorded. We assured each potential narrator that his or her story was important and noted that other community members had been willing to share their stories; everyone we approached ultimately agreed to an interview. Their positive responses were partly due to the fact that the high school students, who came from their own community, as well as the college students, seemed genuinely interested in listening to them. And for many of the narrators, the interviews provided an opportunity to instruct a younger generation, as though they were talking to their own grandchildren. As for the younger narrators, they were just waiting for a chance to speak and to be heard, and it was by and large their peers who were interviewing them.

Discovering and Recovering Relationality

As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover, and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge.
—Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*

Exploring difference is about relationship. It is about bringing ourselves, again and again, to the edge of our not knowing, to the edge of our silence, to the edge of subjects that feel, and sometimes are, dangerous. Each time, we play out the drama of difference: when we reach that edge, when we come up to a moment of pain or confusion or impasse, what do we do? Do we stay or do we leave, do we continue to speak in the presence of these feelings or do we close down around them and retreat to the world we know? To hold difference and sustain hope requires us, moment by moment, to hold steady, to stay with ourselves and each other, to continue to learn how to speak in the presence of profound silences.

—Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship*

As students conducted, transcribed, and shared their interviews, they were processing not only information but also their own and others' emotional responses to that information. At various times they were shocked, surprised, angered, relieved, or awed by what they heard and experienced as they interviewed people. The process of interviewing is one of mutual engagement, and the students were drawn into the lives of their narrators. As they came to know these neighbors whom they had never before visited, they were challenged to think not only about the past but also about the present and about what the future might hold. They soon realized that this study was not just about "the other" but also about themselves, their assumptions, and their relationships.

This became clear when Dickinson College students Jesse Morrell and Jesse Shellock interviewed Jack Hodge, a seventy-six-year-old man who worked as a cafeteria monitor at Carlisle High School. About two-thirds of the way through the interview, Mr. Hodge spoke about discrimination and racism and the ways in which some things were changing:

So we're on the move. Slow, we're not as far as should be . . . but we're coming. And look, prejudice is always gonna be around, let's face it. You know? You are going to have those who don't like you because the way you comb your hair or the way you look or something. . . . But I let it be their problem. What you see with me is what you get and I can't control this, you know? I am what I am, but I can be a good person, you know? And you got some white people too who, you know, are the same way. . . . I know who I am, what I am. . . . I would never do you any harm, that's not what life is all about. I always believe in sitting down, get to know me. Get to talk to me. Get to know me, and then you find out.

Mr. Hodge related a story from work:

I used to work in Camp Hill. . . . And there was a lady down there [named Buella], and she was a Meenonite and I noticed that when I walked down the aisle there in the store, she would sorta cringe and move away from me, you know? Wouldn't touch me, you know? I thought okay, so, I can be a devil at times. . . . Sometimes I would just rub her, hit her, with the elbow. Boy did she jump! So one day, I was working on my press, and I burnt my arm. Just took the top of the skin off. So I went over and I said, "Buella, where is that there cream at?" And she said, "What did you do?" And I said, "I burnt myself!" And she said, "Okay," and she got the cream and she said, "Let's see it," and I showed her. "Oh, you're white, you're white!" And I said, "What in the hell do you think I am?" She thought that I was black all through, I swear to God. To this day, we are good friends.

Jesse S.: Really?

Mr. HODGE: Yes, because she got to know me. She had never worked around black people before, you know. . . . But Carlisle is—it has changed, and it is changing. It's still a lot of prejudice here and always will be. It's not (so much) out in the open the way it used to be, it's sorta underneath, subdued now, yeah.

The reference point for this comparison was the more overt racism that Mr. Hodge had experienced as a little boy:

I remember when I was a little guy, and you're gonna love this. The freshmen at Dickinson College—

Jesse S.: Oh no!

Mr. HODGE: Yeah. . . .

This is as good an illustration of the dialogic nature of the interview as I can imagine. Here, Mr. Hodge recognizes that the students are listeners who are involved in the process of his storytelling. He emphasizes, "you're gonna love this." He seems to know intuitively, as oral historian Alessandro Portelli puts it, that the "inter-view" involves a "mutual sighting."¹⁰ It is about the engagement between the narrator and the listener, both of whom are seen, heard, and affected.

Mr. Hodge went on to recall what happened in 1936, when he was ten or eleven years old:

The Dickinson students—the freshman—wore white pants, white shirts, little red bow ties, and red blazers, and red caps, you know? That was the freshmen dress. . . . When they were pledging, they would have to come out and grab a little black boy and they had these big paddles, great big paddles. And they would grab and whip him, beat him.

Jesse S.: Are you serious?

Mr. HODGE: Yeah, I'm serious! Yeah.

Jesse S.: What were they pledging?

Mr. HODGE: I don't know, whatever fraternity it was up there. . . . So, there was a lady there, we were all sitting on the porch here because we weren't allowed to come uptown after dinner, we just didn't, because, um, you got into trouble and your parents worried about you, so you sit out and grab him and whip him, you know? So she said what you have to do is set on down on the curb and make some nice, wet mud balls. . . . don't make 'em tight or hard, you don't want to hurt anybody. But make 'em nice and wet and muddy, you know. And then when they come after the kid to paddle him, then throw these mud balls at them. So one time, we knew they were coming around—they would circle the block, you know—and one of the kids would sit there and we would be

hiding behind these bushes and everything you know. And about three or four of 'em would jump out of the car and come over and grab him. And we were waiting until they got close, and when they got close, we let them have these mud balls. Oh man, I'm telling you, you have never seen anything like that, I mean they ran. They had on the white pants, the white shirts, you know? And we just let them have these fat, juicy, wet mud balls. Boy, they dropped the paddles, some went running to get back into the car, some just ran up the street back towards the college. And that, that's how we broke that up, really.

Jesse S.: So they stopped doing that after that?

Mr. HODGE: Yeah, yeah.

Jesse S.: Good!

Mr. HODGE: Ah sure!

Jesse S.: Good job!

In reporting on the interview later to the class, Jesse and Jesse shared excerpts from the written transcripts and the videotape. They commented on the substance of the interview and their desire to get more information about the Dickinson freshmen of that time. The most poignant moment came, however, when they were asked how they felt during that part of the interview. Jesse Shellock responded, "Well, I was shocked. I couldn't believe it." She then went on quickly to play more of the tape in which she circled back to the mud ball story after about four minutes of conversation about other subjects, including a discussion of racism at the Army War College.

Jesse S.: Did any of your friends—it didn't happen to you—that fraternity paddle thing?

Mr. HODGE: No, they didn't get me.

Jesse S.: Okay. Did any of your really close friends, have it happen to?

Mr. HODGE: Oh yeah! My buddies, my buddies got paddled.

Jesse S.: Really?

Mr. HODGE: Heck yeah!

Jesse S.: Did their parents try to do anything?

Mr. HODGE: What are you gonna do?

Jesse S.: Did their parents try to notify the police?

Mr. HODGE: Oh, oh the police.

Jesse S.: [Laughs] No? Bad idea?

Mr. HODGE: Oh, come on! The police, the police, where were the police you know?

Jesse S.: So they didn't care, that little kids that were ten were getting the crap kicked out of them?

Mr. HODGE: That's right, right. They would just say, well just sit in front of your—don't go out of the neighborhood, just sit in front of your door. And back in them days it was really something, sure, no kidding.

Jesse S.: Wow.

Mr. Hodge: Sure, no kidding. We remember, I remember when we see the police coming, we'd run. We didn't do anything. But we ran. They don't run today, if you notice, they don't run today. But hey, God's been good to us and helped us to grow and learn and get to know people and talk to people. What else is there in life? You know. That you look back on it and say, hey man, you missed something, in not being able to talk to me, for not taking the time out to find out who I am; that I'm okay. Yeah, hey, that guy's not bad just because he's black, you know. What the heck!

In that class discussion we talked about the relationships between college students and members of the African American community, now as well as then. This brought up questions related to race relations on campus. What assumptions did students of color and white students hold, what experiences did they have on campus, what it was like being white or being black at Dickinson? It also brought up differences between individual students of color and their different relationships with members of the African American community. The discovery that some townspeople felt more comfortable with the African American students from the South opened up questions about regional differences and similarities, about class and gender, and about differences between urban, rural, and small-town cultures. Recognizing and analyzing these differences helped students both to see race and to see beyond it—to the complex interactions that race has with class, gender, sexual orientation, age, region, and religion.

Most important, students learned to ask and to listen—both to the people who were willing to share their stories and to themselves. They thought about how they were feeling as they heard stories of discrimination, and they came to understand that discrimination is intensely personal and can leave scars. The African American narrators, recalling their childhoods, emphasized that race affected everything: where you could go, where you could sit in a movie theater, where you could eat or swim. As Marcus Hodge, the son of Rachael Hodge, recounted:

Well, where the dam is . . . that was specifically reserved for the whites. And the blacks used to have to go down by the pump house and swim. . . . That's the truth. All the whites would go up to the dam, and all the blacks, the Afro-Americans, they would go by the pump house and swim. Now we'd fish all over the place. Allowed to fish anywhere we wanted to [and ice skate] anywhere we wanted to. But, as far as swimming goes, no, we couldn't go up there and contaminate that water up there.

Robert Owens, the first (and so far only) African American to be elected to the Carlisle Borough Council, recollected:

If you went to the movies you had to sit a certain place in the theater. You had to sit up in the balcony, way in the back. You could not sit on the main floor of the theaters. Tickets were the same price, but you weren't allowed to go anywhere else in the theater. We couldn't even belong to the YMCA. And that change was made less than thirty years ago [in the late 1960s]. . . . So it hasn't been long that we could belong to the YMCA, or the Lions, or the Kiwanis. . . . there was no thought of such things in the thirties, forties, or fifties. The other big thing was housing. . . . We built this house in 1967, and it almost took me an act of Congress to get the money for this house. Just to give you an example, at that time I was working and I had a good job, a very good job. My wife was working and had a good job. Our joint income was up in the upper-middle-class level at the time when I went to get a loan for this house. We had already owned two houses; we didn't owe anybody anything; I mean, our cars were paid for and everything was fine with my salary, but the bank would not give me the money to start. No reason at all, just because of who I was.

Although a number of narrators said they had put these experiences behind them, their words, voices, and faces suggested otherwise, that thirty, sixty, and even eighty years later they remembered these injustices. As one narrator in his seventies reflected,

Some of these things, I am not bitter about these, but some of these things still bother me. I think of how long it has gone on, and there's still an awful lot of it in Carlisle. It's more covert now, but there's still an awful lot [of prejudice and discrimination].

Reflexive Analysis and Authenticity

For some students, stories of racist discrimination brought up painful memories; for other students, they brought up feelings of guilt. We listened to expressions of both emotions, and in the process we came to know one another much more deeply. Knowing that guilt can paralyze rather than politicize, we talked about guilt, shame, anger, blame, and responsibility—and about how to move beyond guilt to action. We became increasingly aware of how much the history and institutionalization of slavery and racism affect all of us and sensitive to the particular forms that racism assumes in the United States (as contrasted to, for example, the Caribbean or Brazil). The writings of Michel-Rolph Trouillot and

Avery Gordon, and their images of the ghost, were particularly useful in deepening our analysis.

That U.S. slavery has officially ended, yet continues in many complex forms—most notably institutionalized racism and the cultural designation of blackness—makes its representation particularly burdensome in the United States. Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and a living presence.⁹

As we moved through the semester, it became increasingly clear that, as Trouillot argues, “what needs to be denounced here to restore authenticity is much less slavery than the racist present within which representations of slavery are produced. . . . Authenticity implies a relation with what is known that duplicates the two sides of historicity: it engages us both as actors and narrators”—and as students and teachers. “Whether it invokes, claims, or rejects The Past, authenticity obtains only in regard to current practices that engage us as witnesses, actors, and commentators. . . . Even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present.”¹⁰ Shelli certainly understood this. When Marianne first asked her how she would describe the general relationship between the white community and the black community in Carlisle, she immediately responded:

I think it's fake. Like there's this fake front that everything's perfect and everything's all nice, neat, tied up in a little bow, you know, the whites are trying to help the blacks, and the blacks are trying to help the whites and vice versa. And there's a great cultural exchange when actually there's not, because, just look. I mean, all's you got to do is observe things. I mean there's not many blacks in Carlisle, and the ones that are in Carlisle are isolated from a lot of whites, I mean, there's no blacks holding positions. . . . I don't think there's any blacks on the school board or anything like that. I know there's a black running for borough council . . . very few black teachers. There's no learning about black people, black history. There's no education about blacks to white students or blacks to black students for that matter. [voice raised] I mean, black students are just as ignorant about their culture as white students are ignorant about black culture. Because they were never taught.

As we discussed the ways in which historical memory is contested and becomes a site of cultural struggle, we examined how dominant and alternative historical narratives have affected our own lives and understandings as well as those of our narrators. We began to deal with contested truths, not only at the macro level, within the academic literature “out there,”

but also at the micro level, within the group and within ourselves. It was at this personal level, of course, that it became particularly difficult to explore the contested terrains that separated as well as united us.

The students came up against this as they discussed what they had learned and not learned about American history, about power, and about social constructions of race and ethnicity across time and place. They struggled with this as they explored the meaning of the accusation sometimes hurled by blacks against one another: “You’re acting white.” For most of the white students, whiteness was only just beginning to become visible. They were trying to figure out what it meant to be white, while most of the African American students were working at another level to deconstruct what it meant. We explored what blackness and whiteness meant both politically and personally and how students believed they could or should express themselves on a predominantly white campus.

For Serena, an African American student from Xavier University, the experiences she had while working on the project allowed her to interact more comfortably with both her black and white friends, without always having to code-switch and self-censor:

I no longer trip. . . . Some of my black friends were in my face, “Why are you talking to white people?” Now I’m not tripping—now I don’t care what anyone thinks about who I’m walking with. I used to have a certain lingo with my black friends, and one with my white friends, and now—it’s all the same now, more universal. I mean, we are applying what we’ve been learning to our lives right now.

As Trouillot argues, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”¹¹ So is it too with personal and group narratives. In fact, this particular group had a remarkable and respectful way of calling one another out, holding one another accountable in ways that enabled us to move beyond defensiveness.

Remembering, Discovering, Reconciling

Recorder: To remember, from the Latin *re-cordis*, to pass back through the heart.

—Eduardo Galeano

This account of collecting and analyzing oral histories in an African American community in small-town America tells us much about the

wider community and its subgroups, and about those who are interacting with and doing research in the community. Community studies is not just about examining demographic and economic data and specific historical events, though these are critical to understanding historical and social context. To understand community, we must also understand the dynamics of relationships, especially relationships between dominant and subordinate groups and between community members who have more power, influence, and resources (material, educational, occupational) and those who have less. We must investigate how power and influence are defined and negotiated, and we must look into the heart and soul of communities, as well as their social, political, and economic conditions.

Students came to appreciate and respect the people whom they interviewed, recognizing what the narrators had achieved and the obstacles they had overcome to do so. The students, in the words of oral historian Paul Thompson, came to value the extraordinary lives of seemingly ordinary people.¹² This is not something I taught my students; it is something they learned in relating to those with whom they talked and worked. Most students were initially fearful about asking sensitive questions of others and hearing their responses, but this fear soon gave way to excitement and ultimately to a sense of reward. Perhaps most surprising to the students was people's willingness to tell their stories—painful stories of discrimination and loss, as well as stories of accomplishment and perseverance—if they, the listeners, showed genuine interest. This authentic connection and generosity of spirit made the experience a rich and meaningful one.

Hearing the stories also helped students see more clearly the dynamics of campus relationships. They began to think concretely about how to do just that through their own actions and relationships. Oral history projects are not just a history of "the other"; they are an inquiry into our relationships with one another. They are an exploration of the past and present of all of us, revealing the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion, and other differences and similarities are negotiated. This then is the challenge: to understand the past in all its complexity, both what happened and what is said to have happened; to understand the present and how it is perceived; and to imagine and shape the future.

Notes

1. ALANA is increasingly being used within higher education, especially in admissions, to refer to African America, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American people, replacing the terms *minority* or *underrepresented*.
2. Median household income for African Americans in Carlisle was \$26,250, with a per capita income of \$12,748. In the black population twenty-five years of age and older, 74 percent have graduated from high school and 12 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. Three-quarters of African Americans in the borough rent their homes (all figures from the 2000 census).
3. The project adopted the terminology used by Audrey Olsen Faulkner in her collection of the life histories of elderly African Americans in Newark, New Jersey. Faulkner referred to herself and other researchers as "listeners," while those being interviewed, the informants, were "historians." This terminology recognizes the narrators as the experts in telling and interpreting their own life stories. Faulkner, *When I Was Coming Up: An Oral History of Aged Blacks* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1982).
4. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 23, 308.
5. Micaela di Leonardo, "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 20.
6. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 1.
7. *Ibid.*, 23.
8. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning of Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 31.
9. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 147; see also Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
10. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 147, 150–51.
11. *Ibid.*, 27.
12. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*.