

Teaching to Listen: Listening Exercises and Self-Reflexive Journals

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Abstract: Listening is critical to the oral history process. How does one teach students to listen? This article describes a series of listening exercises the author designed for her students and the reflexive journals they kept to record their responses to the exercises. One of the motivations for the deepening of listening skills was to assist students in becoming more sensitive to issues involved in listening to someone who was different from them in significant ways. While many of the students' responses centered around increasing their perceptions of listening in general, some commented specifically on what it means to listen to someone who is racially different from the listener. Students wrote about listening as a very active process that deeply impacts the content, performance, and emotional tone of the narration. They acknowledged the significance of nonverbal affirmations, directed questions, unstructured environments, empathetic bonding with narrators, and the role of silence in listening. They also commented on the impact that power negotiations had on the interview, and how honesty, openness, and self-revelation eased discomfort in talking about racial issues. Many commented on the lack of intensive listening they engaged in during their ordinary lives, and sought to incorporate their new listening skills not only in oral history interviews, but in their personal interactions with family and friends.

Keywords: interviewing techniques, listening, oral history methodology, race, reflexivity

Introduction

The many stories I have listened to throughout my life, whether in the context of a formal oral history interview, a personal setting, or a public venue when the

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stories are unexpected but none-the-less riveting, have changed my understanding of how people create meaning in their lives. I have thought a lot about the experience of listening to another person describe key events in her or his life and their search for reasons for why things happened as they did. How profoundly can I listen to another person so that he/she can narrate his or her life story in a way that best reflects his or her sense of self, and the many layers of meaning embedded in the construction, performance, and content of that narrative? How can I teach my students about the nuances of listening so that they too can create a more empathetic, sensitive, and richer experience for themselves and their narrator?

When Michael Frisch coined his now famous phrase, “a shared authority,” he wrote of the shared responsibility of listener and narrator for creating the interview document, for interpreting it and for sharing the knowledge created. He encouraged the change from historian as collector to historian as actively co-creating social history through the listening and interpretive processes. He wrote of the historian’s great responsibility as a listener, as an editor, and as an interpreter.² While editing and interpreting are critical to the oral history process, the first moment of creation takes place in the interview, in the act of listening. Listening beyond words means, as Alessandro Portelli pointed out, that one must be aware of the cultural forms and processes by which “individuals express their sense of themselves in history.” Rather than occupying an objective position, a listener should expect to modify her or his self-awareness and identity as a result of engaging with the narrator and hearing the stories. When there are class and power differences between listener and narrator, a listener of conscience acknowledges them.³ Establishing an atmosphere of respect and equality of self in an interview means that neither the logic of the narrator nor that of the interviewer is privileged; instead the driving force of the interview lies in “the interaction and tension between the two and the ways that each is revised, reconstructed, and elaborated upon as the conversation flows back and forth.”⁴ How does one teach this?

Race, gender, and other differences of importance can be explicitly addressed as a way of establishing an honest and open listening environment. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai presented the work of feminist oral historians as they reflected on the importance of listening in particular ways to women narrators, so that they can construct their life stories in an atmosphere that more closely resembles gendered forms of speech.⁵ When interviewing someone from a different racial or ethnic background, the listener must be sensitive to issues of normative whiteness, racially charged language, and differences in experience. Students who engage in oral history interviews about “difficult dialogues,” particularly about race, need to learn to talk with someone who is racially different from them.⁶

In an effort to train my students to engage in sensitive relationships in the context of the interview, I altered the focus of my oral history projects from creating an archive (the recorded oral histories) to encouraging a more meaningful listening and narrating environment during the interviews. I also changed my implicit assumption that the narrators should be increasingly open and candid to asking my student listeners to engage in a deeper reflexive process that opens them up to a genuine experience of listening. Della Pollock wrote of the oral history interview as “a process of making history in dialogue.” The interview “involves its participants in a heightened encounter with each other and with the past . . . a future to be made in talk, in the mutual embedding of one’s vision of the work in the other’s.”⁷ I wanted to encourage this dialogic relationship as an end in itself, not as a means to a more fully articulated oral history document. While we still recorded the interviews, much of the class discussion revolved around the quality of listening the students engaged in and how it impacted the oral history interview. To teach my students to become better listeners, particularly when they were interviewing across difference, I designed a series of listening exercises for them and asked them to record their responses to those exercises (please see Appendix A for a list of the exercises).

Project background

The listening exercises I designed were conducted while my students co-created interviews for The African American Oral History Project. The project began in 2004 when a colleague asked if I might focus my graduate oral history seminar at The University of Texas at Austin on interviews with African Americans on the occasion of the anniversary of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act (fig. 1). For six years, I had been working with graduate students to improve the interpretation of women and people of color at historic sites throughout Texas, so I knew something about Texas African American history. I also knew that I had no experiential knowledge of racial discrimination and the day-to-day struggle to achieve racial equality in Texas and the U.S. Many of my students also lacked a direct experience with African American racial segregation in the U.S.

The students who worked on the project came from a variety of backgrounds: Vietnamese, Japanese, Malaysian, Nicaraguan, Chinese, South Asian, Mexican American, and Korean; they are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim; gay and straight; and from privileged backgrounds and from middle-class and working-class families. Several of my students identified as African American. One-half to two-thirds of my students would describe themselves as being of European

descent.⁸ If the majority of my students did not share in the collective memory of African Americans, how could they hear and understand stories about discrimination or trauma or triumph? They felt unsure how to ask about and listen to stories about race and class. For many listeners who were not African American, it was the first time they had an in-depth conversation with someone of African descent. They were afraid of appearing racist; they lacked a vocabulary to talk about race. What could they ask? Many students who described themselves as European American felt they should not raise certain topics with people of color; one African American student felt uncomfortable interviewing a white colleague. The students returned to the seminar room with important issues: “Am I asking someone to tell me what it means to be black?” “How would a person narrate what it means to be white or Asian American?”

Because I wanted the students to do life histories with narrators rather than concentrating on their civil rights activities, or their specific experiences with segregation, students were left with a large, open arena of possible topics.⁹ We developed a detailed topics list based on interviews conducted by students in prior years and from the readings we did on oral histories with African Americans.¹⁰ We talked about questions that would naturally raise issues of race, beginning with basic questions such as: “Was your school segregated?” and “Tell me about your neighborhood.” When narrators spoke about clubs or social functions they attended, students eventually felt more comfortable asking if the events were segregated.

While some students were naturally gifted listeners, others did not seem to understand what it meant to ask thoughtful follow-up questions, or were too uncomfortable to pursue a topic. I scrutinized each transcript, making detailed suggestions about how the student could ask additional focused questions, particularly in areas where the students seemed extremely uncomfortable. I began the semester with an intensive four-hour oral history workshop; we read Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* and Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History* to ground the students in qualitative interview methods.¹¹ We also read some online oral history guides.¹² Rather than engaging in interviews with multiple narrators over the course of the semester, I encouraged my students to re-interview their original narrator so they could see how the quality of the interviews improved as their relationship with the narrators deepened.¹³

Yet the experiential divide remained, and I searched for ways to address it. Robert O'Mealley and Genevieve Fabre wrote, “The legacy of slavery and the serried workings of racism and prejudice have meant that even the most optimistic black Americans, are, as the expression goes, ‘born knowing’ that

there is a wide gulf between America's promises and practices."¹⁴ 'Not knowing' became a central part of the project: to acknowledge the often tremendous difference in experience, and to try to create a genuine relationship in the interview. Oral history that is done in the context of an honest and sensitive listening environment has the power to communicate what experience feels like; through empathetic, nuanced listening two people who are different from each other can co-create a detailed, meaningful life history. In describing a philosophy of listening, Gemma Corradi Fiumara wrote of the need for authentic openness to sustain a revealing dialogue. Without this openness, there cannot be a genuine human relationship.¹⁵ It takes courage and risk to listen: such listening opens us up to the possibility of changing our ideas and our lives.¹⁶ I encouraged students to admit what they did not know, to be honest, respectful, and to slowly move closer to some understanding, even while acknowledging that such an understanding could at best be, in Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's words, a "fantastic failure . . . in the impossibilities it revealed. The impossibility of erasing the boundaries sedimented by slavery, segregation and the ordeal of integration . . . of doing justice to the story, with all its individual and local complexities . . . of representing . . . the full meaning of the stories we heard."¹⁷

The narrators were key to creating a sensitive listening environment. They lived with the issue of race every day of their lives, and they became our guides through the great gulf. They introduced topics students were afraid to broach, they facilitated discussions about race, they described experiences of racism, they spoke about their identity as black Americans, and they recounted the period when their awareness of the civil rights movement began.¹⁸

The first set of narrators in The African American Oral History Project, most of whom were people in the public sphere—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People leaders, newspaper editors, museum directors, well-known educators, people active in local politics, and leaders of Austin organizations, especially organizations involved in civil rights—spoke about their lives, the influences that shaped their ideas and their careers, and their assessment of the state of racial affairs in the U.S. I decided to continue the project, working with both graduate and honors undergraduate students at The University of Texas at Austin and, in 2009 when I joined the faculty at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), with graduate students in the Public History Program at MTSU. In the seven years, we have been co-creating life history interviews with people of African descent we have spoken with 125 narrators and have 600 hours of audio and video recordings. All of the interviews have been transcribed and audio audited, and all have been excerpted into meaningful sections and assigned subject headings. There are about 6000 pages of transcript.¹⁹

The listening exercises

The exercises I designed were neither explicitly about race nor did the students necessarily conduct the exercises with narrators who were different from them. They were meant to develop increasingly sensitive listening skills that could then be applied to interviews that demanded a heightened awareness of the differences between narrator and listener. The students engaged in the listening exercises each week, experimenting with the differences in listening to sad and joyous stories, to stories from young and elderly people, highly structured and unstructured interviews, body language, and the role of silence in listening. Each week they wrote in their reflexive listening journals, recording their responses to these experiences. Reflexive journals can be a mechanism for interviewees to explore their reactions to listening across difference, particularly racial difference, and to confront racial stereotypes and anxieties.²⁰ The testimony of the interviewer-listener can then become a part of the record of the interview.²¹ My students began their reflexive journals by evaluating themselves as listeners, noting their strengths and their challenges. At the end of the semester, they again evaluated their listening skills, noting how and why they had changed.²²

The students candidly assessed their listening skills, particularly as they listened across difference (whether the difference was race, gender, class, geography, age, sexuality, etc.). While many described themselves as thoughtful listeners, they experienced common challenges: they interrupted the narrator while she or he was talking, their minds wandered, they were busy thinking of the next question they could ask, and they often replied with a story about themselves rather than asking the narrator to expand on her life experience. Many felt their egos prevented them from fully involving themselves in the story of another person. While I had urged the students to be so deeply sensitive to their narrators that they could sense their breathing rhythms, their narrative style, the way they paused or spoke quickly, and to adopt those rhythms themselves, implementing that heightened level of perception was difficult.

Some students wrote of themselves as naturally empathic, and saw listening as a way to feel connected to people.²³ Identifying oneself and one's experiences with those of the narrator, and learning about one's own life through the narrator, was a common theme. They wrote of the listening activity as requiring focus and concentration. A good listener can assume the perception of the speaker, noting not only what is said but how the narrator feels about what she or he said. Trained in theater, Meg Brooker had engaged in a number of exercises about communication. She wrote of the many levels of interaction in an interview, both verbal and nonverbal. "Hearing others speak, we bear witness to

their lives By identifying with the stories of others, we deepen our understanding of our own lives.” She distinguished a quiet demeanor from listening: “Listening involves . . . the ability to prioritize someone else’s experience over your own. . . . Listening is an embodied, sensory experience.” She reflected on the demands of hearing not from a preconceived position, but from an open stance that can dramatically change the listener. “Listening can also require the listener to be open to the possibility that her ideas or opinions may change We must be able to disrupt our own identity location in order to not only hear but also see and experience what life is like from a radically different orientation.”²⁴ Katherine Andrews wrote about the emphasis placed on showcasing children’s expression rather than their listening skills. “Children and adolescents are taught to express themselves through their work, their clothing, and their words With the onset of premade worksheets and the educational disconnectedness of the Internet many children never learn to listen.”²⁵

I discussed the different listening environments in which we participate, referring to the oral history interview as an intensive listening environment. A person does not have to listen with intense focus to taped instructions in a subway or a telephone menu or to an overheard conversation on the street. Casual conversations require more attention but the listener does not have to hone in on each detail. Rapt attention is required to listen to a friend describe an important event in her or his life. Each day, a person experiences many different listening environments and makes judgments about the degree of attention required. Heightened sensitivity to every environment is impossible; fieldwork guides caution ethnographers to reverse the usual sensory blocking that occurs in daily life and begin to notice more and more about the fieldwork environment.²⁶

Some students used the initial reflective essay, and the concluding essay about the changes in their listening skills, to think broadly about the idea of listening. Roger Gatchet learned to listen to what was not said in the context of his job as a recruiter for a temporary employment agency. “I will never forget the time I interviewed an older Mexican woman who was illiterate and spoke no English. All of her previous work experience had been on family farms in her native Mexico, and she described in such lovely, passionate detail what it was like to work so close to the earth I could hear her silently acknowledging that in some way her future was in my hands With this woman . . . the most important information was signified in the gaps where nothing was said. That interview has always troubled me, because I knew at the time I could not hire her (my employer, for safety reasons, would not hire candidates who could not read or write).”²⁷

Searching for something when listening had a limiting effect for Angie Ahlgren. “I see myself . . . as an impatient interpersonal listener. I am usually searching for something when I’m listening to another person, and that limits my ability to

know and learn.” She was also aware of the subtle differences in listening to family versus friends. “On the other hand, I am a good (i.e., sympathetic) listener when friends have problems . . . I have learned in recent years to avoid giving advice, but just to listen and respond only when specifically asked for advice.”²⁸ Sarah Kim, who is from Korea, wrote of the cultural differences between Eastern and Western styles of listening, noting that in the East one learns to listen to the “hidden” messages. “I believe that there is a conceptual or cultural difference between Westerns and East Asians about listening and speaking practices . . . I was educated to think first and speak in a more [abstract] way . . . Listening practices often require [one] to focus on not only what was spoken, but also what was ‘behind’ or ‘hidden’ [in] the spoken words.”²⁹ Listening beyond what one is able to perceive was a challenge for Allison Devereux. “I would consider myself a good listener in that I am intuitive to needs, desires, and subtexts. However, like many people, I often only listen for the things I want to hear in the conversation and the subtexts I want to perceive . . . The ability to perceive beyond what is being said by someone in a conversation is a skill that often manifests itself in unexpected ways . . . People often tell me I am a great gift giver because I find gifts that are meaningful to them . . . I think that is a mark of a close listener.”³⁰

Interviews about sadness and joy

I asked students to listen to the differences between the ways joyous stories and tragic stories were constructed and narrated. What did each kind of story ask of the listener? Did the listener feel close to the narrator at particular moments? Did the sad stories raise issues for the listener? Did students understand the nature of the joy or the nature of the tragedy in the context of the narrator, or did they have to put it in the context of their own lives to “hear”? What questions did the listener ask and how did this impact the direction of the interview? What did the student and narrator talk about when an interview about sad memories was completed? How did narrating those stories impact the teller, and how did the listening impact the interviewer? We found that a number of our female narrators in The African American Oral History Project had experienced some level of violence in their lives. How could one listen to strong emotional states? Mary Marshall Clark wrote of the special skills involved in interviewing people traumatized by the September 11 attacks in New York City. While being clear that oral historians are not therapists, she noted that the listener must enter the space of trauma, and the life of the traumatized subject, suspending the time of ordinary life, and when the interview was drawing to a close, lead the narrator back into the space and time of daily life.³¹ How could I teach my students to go with their narrator into spaces of sadness and then lead them out?

When Roger Gatchet's narrator recounted a sad experience, she assumed a solemn demeanor, speaking more slowly and more deliberately. He sensed that her experience, while sad, was not entirely unpleasant to revisit, not something she had been trying to repress. He felt closest to her when her narrations, whether sad or happy, triggered similar memories of his own past.³² Sarah Kim felt a bond with her narrator as she spoke of sadness. Both Kim and her narrator were moved by the experience, for different reasons. "I felt that listening to personal sad stories somewhat mystically builds an emotional common ground in a short amount of time between a narrator and an interviewer. Not only the narrative itself, but their tone of voice and bodily expressions like [tearing up bring] . . . the interviewer into a similar mental [state even if] . . . the interviewer [had not] experienced [a] similar feeling before . . . I accepted it as a kind of gentle and graceful invitation. This emotional common ground lets the interviewer bring out more sophisticated or subjective questions. As an interviewer, I could see at that moment how the interview questions can make the narrator move from the surface of [her] . . . memory to the memory about how she felt, which is more vividly engraved in her current mental status At the end, I [thanked] her for sharing her story and mentioned how this interview was meaningful and had [a] great impact on me. And . . . she also kind of thanked me [for] listening to her story since she never had any chance to talk about her sad feelings about this event before. This struck me in lots of truly positive ways."³³

In listening to painful memories, Meg Brooker found that it was particularly important to let the speaker shape the narrative. "With this exercise . . . I am learning that there is an appropriate time for pretty much all of these interviewing techniques. Allowing someone to follow the contours of their memory is an important example. Encouraging someone to keep sharing by listening empathetically with an open heart is as well."³⁴

Surprisingly, when narrators were asked to speak about a joyous event in their lives, they struggled to identify a memory. However, once a narrator embarked on her story, one joyous memory sparked a series of related memories, and it was important to allow the narrative to form on its own without explicit direction from the listener. As with tragic narratives, those of joy sparked identifying stories from the listener's own past; the danger lay in going into one's own past and shutting out the narrator. "I'm not sure why," Gatchet wrote, "but I felt the closest to my narrator during those moments when she recounted very specific details about the event . . . I was identifying with my narrator and the common experiences we shared. This can be a powerful way to connect with a narrator when doing oral history interviews, but it can also be distracting if one's own memories interfere with the listening process."³⁵

Highly structured interviews and unstructured interviews

I ask my students to engage in semi-structured qualitative interviews, where they encourage the narrator to shape the story while leaving themselves intellectual and emotional room to ask questions, to respond, and to interact. They are a presence, but the interview is not a conversation: the emphasis is on the narrator fully inhabiting the speaking space. While students bring lists of topics to an interview, I ask them to instead follow the life history thread established by the narrator.

To highlight the difference in interview styles, I asked students to conduct one highly structured interview and one completely unstructured interview. In the highly structured exercise, students bring a list of questions to the interview and, regardless of what the narrator says, the interviewer moves to the next question. I expected student interviewers to be jarred by this experience, and many were. Students noted that narrators appeared uncomfortable when a new question continually changed the topic. However, some students found the rapid-fire questions led to unexpectedly fruitful stories.

Callie Holmes had composed a list of questions based on her prior knowledge of the narrator's past and was pleased that she could move through the list rather than following unexpected digressions. "The interview definitely had a more formal feel than the other interviews thus far . . . [It] was much more successful than I expected. I had anticipated *really* wanting to ask certain follow-up questions, but not being able to because of the restrictions. While this certainly happened . . . I didn't have to abandon areas in which I was interested in favor of new unexpected topics that arose naturally."³⁶ Having prepared questions made Sarah Kim feel more sure of herself: "Since the interview directed him to rely on the prepared questions, both of us lost the chance to open up the floor. However . . . having a certain direction for the interview in my head made me feel more confident."³⁷

The highly structured nature of the questions disallowed empathetic responses. "I found this interview to be quite uncomfortable because I could feel [her] wanting me to ask more questions," Angie Ahlgren wrote. "But without prompts, it was difficult for her to know what I was trying to get at . . . I had the feeling of being almost entirely in control of what she told me—not because she couldn't think of things to say, but because I knew she was depending on me to say more . . . To not respond to another person's need was very difficult."³⁸ For Katherine Andrews the clash of moods was an issue. "It is difficult to determine where a conversation will lead before you conduct a narrative. The questions that I asked . . . [did not] fit the mood of the conversation . . . I would be forced

to ask a positive question after a sad story had ended . . . It is important to continue the mood as well as the progression of a narrative rather than focusing on questions that you want to ask.”³⁹

Several students commented that their questions structured the narrator's response to such an extent that they changed the content of the interview. Allison Devereux wrote that she “felt totally restricted in the conversation. However . . . I at least got to ask a variety of questions which then yielded a variety of answers . . . The conversation started once the exercise was over . . . I realized how, by asking only a rigid set of questions, you can manipulate an interview to yield a specific set of answers . . . You will . . . receive answers of the desired *content*.”⁴⁰ This led Anne Frugé to question bias in journalistic interviews. “Reading news articles always seemed so straightforward to me; either the journalist left out a fact or they didn't. They were biased or they weren't. I didn't even consider how much could be left out simply due to the narrow focus of the interview style. Conducting a structured interview opened my eyes to everything a journalist is missing—potentially the entire story.”⁴¹

In the highly unstructured interview, students begin with an open-ended question such as, “Tell me about your childhood,” and then say nothing more apart from repeating the narrator's last phrase (“so you saw him in the road?”) or uttering sound affirmations (uh huh, mmmmm, etc.). They remain highly engaged, but pointedly nondirective. Not surprisingly, the unstructured interview format proved both fascinating and frustrating. Students wanted to share similar experiences from their own lives and they wanted to interject questions and comments. The lack of questions sometimes created a rupture between narrator and listener. One student interviewed a parent, but it was a disturbing experience. He'd heard his parent narrate the story many times before and while he tried to assume a professional stance, he felt attacked by his parent's narrative. He felt that he could not lead the conversation, and his lack of control over the interview, coupled with the nature of the narrative made him feel “small.”⁴²

Students noticed how verbal cues, or prompting, impacted the unstructured interview in positive ways. Holmes was surprised by how much she could direct the flow of the interview nonverbally, through smiles or laughing. “I was pleasantly surprised at how this simple prompting can spark continuation . . . I did notice that although I did not direct the interview verbally, I would definitely not say that I did not direct the interview at all. Whenever my friend could tell that I was particularly interested in a certain facet, she would elaborate further . . . Nonverbal cues can influence an interview, be it laughing, smiling, or just the history between the narrator and the interviewer.”⁴³

This exercise in particular gave students a sense of how much the listener shapes the conversation. While Rachel Meyerson said she, “felt constricted and limited

to my narrator and annoyed that in no way could I direct answers I wanted from the speaker," and that, "our conversation was [often] limited in energy and flow . . . I did enjoy . . . the topics that we discussed which I wouldn't have thought to bring up . . . Before this exercise, I didn't realize how much each person shapes conversations." Frugé more explicitly explored the "unshaped" interview: "I was surprised because she went in a direction that I would have never gone. She told me about the influential people in her life and the ways in which she wants to be like them. It was quite touching and I thought it was better that I hadn't said anything . . . I see how "structured" our interviews can be. My question would have moved the conversation down an entirely different path . . . From her perspective, it could have been artificial. If she were naturally inclined to talk about her family and I asked about her career, then I am shaping the interview so that it fits my understanding of what a person's dreams may be."⁴⁴

On occasion, students interviewed classmates and then switched roles to become narrators. This was particularly effective with undergraduate students, who conducted the exercises during class time. The students got to know each other much better than is typical in a classroom, and they valued that interaction. They also understood what it felt like to occupy each of these very different roles in an interview. When Frugé was the narrator in the unstructured interviews, she initially enjoyed the freedom but later felt lonely. "It was nice to be able to monologue and say whatever came to mind, to follow a train of thought uninterrupted as long as I wanted until I found a new branch to explore. It was nice for a while, but then it got lonely . . . I . . . felt that the monologue isolated me . . . I think conversations are best as dialogues . . . because they do more than just relate stories. They create a bond between speaker and interviewer that is unique and not replicable."⁴⁵

Short silences

Two of the most interesting exercises involved silence. The emphasis was on differentiating silences, and foregrounding silence as a form of communication. The attention to silence highlighted nonverbal expressions, intimacy and distance, and framed the space of thought and speech.

The first exercise involved short silences. The listener was to ask the narrator to talk about his or her best friend. After the narrator completed a story or an idea block and seemed to be finished speaking, the interviewer paused for six or eight seconds before asking a question. The interviewer created, or invited, regular small silences or pauses. With the admonition against asking immediate questions, the listener was unable to interrupt the narrator's speech, thus redefining the parameters of speech to include the silence that follows.

In many cases, both the narrator and the interviewer initially found the pauses awkward, and in some cases it remained awkward throughout the interview. For many interview pairs, the pattern emerged as not only productive but also essential. As the pair came to see the pauses as the pattern of the interview, they used the pauses in creative ways. Both parties were surprised by the direction the narration took as a result. Many narrators felt freer to speak, pause, and resume speaking. The pauses eliminated the danger of rapid-fire questions or having to change direction in response to a question. Listeners found the pauses helpful: they did not feel rushed to produce a new question, they felt they could listen more attentively to the narrator's complete thought, and they felt better able to focus. Allison Devereux wrote that the pauses caused her to redefine what interrupting meant: she considered the silences after speech to be a part of the speaker's narrative space; to disrupt the small silences was to interrupt. "This listening exercise did, in fact, help me to realize that interrupting is not only cutting in and talking when someone else is speaking; interrupting can be far less blatant. Someone who is speaking could be done with a sentence and even be amid a short pause but still not be finished with his/her thought and what it is he/she wants to express . . . Sometimes the person is searching for the right words, or has more to say but doesn't immediately know where to begin expressing it. Even more than that, the speaker him/herself may even think the thought is done, but then something new comes to mind that is important and significant to the conversation." In her final analysis of herself as a listener she wrote: "Another essential aspect of listening that I learned this year was of the more subtle forms of interruptions that we commit everyday . . . I have learned over the past few months that interrupting someone can go so far as to not let someone fully explore and express the depths of their thoughts, even when it seems they have finished speaking . . . These days, people do not have the time for close, deliberate conversation. It is simply not part of the conversation structure to wait around for someone to complete their thought."⁴⁶

The narrator revealed deeper information, Meg Brooker wrote, when the listener "allowed the silence." "Even though [my narrator] had a lot to say, I discovered that by allowing the silence and not just accepting that the interview was over, he actually revealed some deeper information about the nature of his relationship."⁴⁷ When Rachel Meyerson played the role of narrator, she initially felt awkward but after a while she found the seconds of silence became a time to reflect. Both as a narrator and as a listener, she used the silence to visualize the stories. "The eight seconds of silence felt awkward for the first few minutes. However, as . . . my story . . . progressed, I found the few seconds to be a nice time to reflect on what I had said and to gather my thoughts for my next point . . . I realized that the short time could be used for recalling the memories to my

mind and visualizing the experiences. As the listener . . . it gave me time to reflect on what she said and try to visualize her experiences . . . I often realized that I had gone over the eight-second count, and about fifteen [seconds] had passed before I raised a new question.”⁴⁸

Once the interview partners settled into the routine of the pauses, they were better able to communicate. Elizabeth Runner noted that, “After about ten minutes of talking to my partner I felt like I got into the rhythm of this exercise . . . Eye contact became more natural between the two of us, and I felt less pressure about carrying the conversation. It was then that I could appreciate the benefits of the eight-second pauses to the person who is speaking. I found that I was more inclined to pause for a second and pick up on another related thought without the anticipation of being interrupted.”⁴⁹ For Devereux, maintaining eye contact in the small silences when she was the narrator was difficult. This led her to conclude that she was not used to someone listening to her so intently and she wondered if her discomfort was a commentary on the infrequency of close listening in our society. When she was the interviewer, she found she too listened more deeply as a result of the small silences, searching for questions that would lead to a better interview experience for both she and her partner. “This exercise also showed me that eye contact is a very difficult thing to maintain . . . I was completely unable to refrain from diverting my eyes . . . while my partner waited to ask me the next question, or while I waited to ask my partner the next question . . . I’m not at all used to people listening so closely, intently, and thoughtfully to what I have to say. I am so accustomed to interruptions that I think I actually find comfort in them—other people’s interruptions are a way out of having to finish the serious thing I have to say . . . I am almost made *uncomfortable* by such close attention and care given to me . . . Does this say something about our communication standards today? Do we really have such little experience and familiarity with close listening that we are made uncomfortable when listened to by others? . . . I also found my focus on the other person’s words deeper than normal . . . I was more thoughtful of the questions I wanted to ask.”⁵⁰

The small silences raised issues of power in the narrator-listener relationship. Keeley Steenson felt it evened the playing field because the interviewer did not determine when a new question would be asked; instead, the narrator decided when to begin and when to stop speaking. As with other students, she commented on the rarity of having so much time to think and speak; she found it therapeutic. “When allowed more time to answer a question, [my narrator] quite often did not continue to speak. What we both did instead was quietly reflect on her answer together. I could see her becoming more aware of herself, just as I was able to become more in touch with what she was telling me . . . The

pattern encouraged an increasingly insightful and personal conversation By allowing the interviewee more time to speak the role of the interviewer becomes less aggressive. The interviewer relinquishes the power of deciding when a new question will be posed by allowing the interviewee more time to decide when to start and stop speaking People are rarely allowed so much time to speak in normal conversation and it is initially odd to them That being said, what a treat to be allowed so much time to think and speak, unlike in normal conversation! In fact, the exercise challenges the interviewee and interviewer to take on a new speech pattern completely personal and unique to their relationship. In many ways this makes the relationship much more special and increases the therapeutic qualities inherent in oral histories."⁵¹

Some students never found the exercise helpful in promoting a fluid narrative. There was too much silence, and it felt disruptive and unnerving to the narrator. Roger Gatchet suggested that if the narrator were informed about the pauses both parties could use the silences to better advantage. "I noticed that as the interview progressed, [my narrator] seemed to become more comfortable with the silences. She continued to display nervous smiles when I paused and looked at her, but she stopped squirming and turning away from me However, I had expected her to fill those pauses with more narration, which she never did Silence is very important in an interview, but . . . too much silence can cross the line and actually disrupt the narrator's flow." Callie Holmes thought the pauses disturbed her narrator: "I think this strategy, combined with the narrator . . . and the topic . . . actually produced unexpected results When I used the pause-after-talking strategy in the past . . . the narrator would . . . elaborate further In this interview . . . the pausing really unnerved my narrator. When he finished a sentence, he would look at me for further prompting, but by the time the eight seconds were up, he would have already started second-guessing whatever he had previously told me Lesson: sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't." The ten-second silences made Katherine Andrews and her narrator both uncomfortable. She interviewed a friend who was a fast-paced speaker and felt the exercise would have been more productive if they were explicitly aware that this was to be the pattern of the interview. "We both eventually got nervous at about the five-second mark in the silences and he looked at me as though I was crazy for not following up very quickly. He's just very fast-paced, and . . . rarely has pauses in his conversation at all . . . I need to work on my eye contact in these situations. I have a feeling that I come across as domineering when the eye contact and nodding come in a pair . . . Mr. L seemed to figure out what is going on partially and waited for a while After that the interview went quite well. He seemed to get used to silence elapse . . . I think a short silence elapse can be useful as long as an interviewee is informed about it before the interview."⁵²

Long silences

The second silence exercise involved interacting through a longer period without speech. The student was to sit with someone for five minutes without talking and without engaging in any other activity (no cell phone, no electronics). Apart from the requirement of sitting together and being silent, there were no other instructions. Students were to note what they were feeling during this time, if they communicated with their partner, and to describe the nature of that communication. Three female students conducted the exercise with their partners. They described the initial moments as awkward. The couples did not know if they should maintain eye contact, they were unsure what to look at, and they laughed nervously. Then they settled into an intense nonspeech form of communication. The women were very moved by the sense of intimacy they experienced with their partners. They experienced the silence not as an individuating experience, but as something they shared together. Meg Brooker wrote, “So I sat with [my narrator] for five minutes—very profound experience for both of us. I have done a lot of exercises like this in the years that I studied acting . . . I am used to the self-conscious performativity in the first moments, followed by breathing together, awareness of how much tension I hold in my face, the rhythm of being lost in another’s gaze and directing myself to release tension and allow myself to be seen by the other person . . . It is very profound to do this with someone you love. After about two minutes, [my narrator’s] eyes began to well up with tears. I reached for his hand to hold and he wiped his cheeks. My experience of these moments was an overflow of loving energy . . . I asked him at the end if he felt like there was any communication between us, and his response was that more communication happened in those moments than in any of our other listening activities. I agree.”

For Rachel Meyerson the experience was equally profound. “I was already stressed, and the fact that I couldn’t find five minutes to be with the person I cared about most only added to the stress and tension that I was feeling due to school and work. Finally, in the middle of a paper I was doing on a Sunday night, I stopped myself, called my boyfriend, and asked him to come over . . . We sat on the couch together, at first facing forward. There was no clock near us, so I do not even know how long we sat there. I’m guessing it was between eight and ten minutes. As the seconds passed, my boyfriend reached over and took my hand. We faced each other from that moment on, focusing on intense eye contact and smiling—what seemed like the first time in days—at each other. It almost made me cry, even as I was sitting there, realizing that this silence was the nicest communication we had had between each other for so long. The quiet transcended any tension we had felt towards each other the past few weeks. It was a feeling of complete intimacy—more than any romantic moment we had

shared together . . . Before this exercise, I did not know the power of silence. I only knew the power of the words.”

Allison Devereux felt a similar intense closeness to her partner, facilitated by the silence. “For this exercise, I was a bit nervous because I am very bad about needing to fill silences in conversation. I was not sure how it would feel to sit for five minutes with a person without being able to communicate. Little did I know, in a span of five minutes, which in this exercise felt like an eternity, a totally different form of communication took place. In my exercise, an experience of intense closeness inevitably resulted from simply sitting with my partner silently . . . After what I guess was a minute into the exercise, I began to feel relaxed and comfortable with my friend. At first I diverted eye contact and glanced around the room. My body language subconsciously tried to tell my partner ‘don’t worry, don’t take this too seriously, five minutes and it’s over’. Luckily, my partner didn’t let me off so easy. Slowly our breathing became synchronized. I became aware of the physical closeness between us . . . I realized that I had been maintaining eye contact for a lengthy stretch of time. I suddenly felt extremely close to my friend and became aware of all the feelings of sadness and even loneliness I’d tried to suppress with him gone for the past month. I was completely relaxed, yet strangely emotional. At some point . . . I realized we had shifted a bit and were making the slightest physical contact. I had so much flowing through my head, but in a meditative, not frantic, way. When I finally looked at my watch to check the time, I realized nine minutes had passed. Even though we both knew the exercise was over, we continued to not speak but just stayed close and quiet for a few minutes more. This is *not* what I expected from this exercise. I wasn’t prepared for a short period of silence to stir up such an emotional response . . . It showed me just how isolated and cut off we can be from day to day. It’s almost paradoxical that talking, talking, talking all the time with our friends and family can almost be distancing.”⁵³

Students who conducted the long silence exercise with a friend had a very different experience from those who were silent with a romantic partner. Callie Holmes felt it was a very intimate experience that was not successful even with a good friend. “I chose to conduct this interview with a friend from college who was in town over spring break. I got her to sit down with me one afternoon for the exercise. Interestingly, I think that even if you have a relationship with someone in which you are comfortable with silences and pauses that arise in conversation, to sit down with a friend and enforce a silence is a completely different ball game. . . Being purposefully silent with another person is a very intimate experience, and one which was not entirely comfortable, even with a dear friend. It seems like there is an expectation that to be purposefully silent must be an intense bonding experience, where at the end both parties hug each

other, or something like that.”⁵⁴ Katherine Andrews also noted that the quality of the experience depended upon the intimacy of the friendship. “There are few people in this world that can sit in silence and be content Were I to do this exercise with [my partner], it would be different in that we are used to being quiet around one another The silence was quite uncomfortable if only for the reason that [my narrator and I] aren’t at the level of friendship that would be okay just ‘being’ with someone else.” Sarah Kim reiterated the idea that one must be very close to another person to share silence: “I thought how I usually experience being silent. I think it is somewhat related to the level of friendship or even trustworthiness with a given conversation partner. I do not mind or sometimes enjoy being silent if I am with someone whom I know well, feel close, or completely trust.”⁵⁵

Being aware of her body was Anne Frugé’s response to the exercise. “I was really shocked by how different the world seemed to me when I sat next to someone in total silence for five minutes. I tried as best I could to be a blank slate and see what I felt. I wanted to see if my experience of existing changed at all. And it did! I had a new grasp on where my body was in time and space and how things around me related to my physical space Usually I see the world in its relation to me, in the context of being my environment. This time, I sat and let myself become a part of the world, a part of the environment It was incredible to feel my body in an entirely new way.”⁵⁶

Un sighted interviews

As a further exploration of nonverbal cues, I asked students to blindfold themselves for one of the exercises, while the narrator recounted stories of a holiday she or he celebrated.

Not being able to read his narrator through visual cues made it difficult for Roger Gatchet to ask follow-up questions and he found himself interrupting her. He did, however, pay more attention to the sounds of his narrator’s voice and found this meaningful. “The lack of visual cues made it difficult to ‘read’ my narrator. I could not easily discern when she had finished a thought . . . [Yet] I saw it as a challenge to see if I could conduct it smoothly and with minimal interruptions while blindfolded . . . I paid closer attention to sounds as I searched for cues to give me direction. Without being able to see, it is somewhat easier to focus on aural qualities of the voice, such as volume, timber, pace, inflections, and so forth. These nonverbal qualities speak volumes.”⁵⁷ But Callie Holmes felt hampered by her inability to send verbal cues to her narrator, calling herself “nonverbally gagged.” “Before I did this interview, I expected to miss the nonverbal cues from my narrator Instead, I found the most awkward aspect

of this interview to be . . . my inability to accurately send my own [nonverbal] cues. By blindfolding myself, I felt nonverbally gagged . . . I felt so lost when it came to positioning my head, what hand motions to make, my posture—all things that are adjusted subconsciously (for the most part) during a sighted interview . . . Overall: Very interesting disruptions in the communication flow.”⁵⁸ It took a tremendous amount of concentration for Katherine Andrews to listen to her narrator when blindfolded. “I found it incredibly difficult to listen to [my narrator] blindfolded. I could not pick up on cues that I normally would find easily . . . I was distracted by all the noises around me (animals, traffic) . . . I will rely on eye contact in the future more heavily than ever so that I can pay better attention. I was a lot quieter in this interview than I was in previous listening exercises.” Sarah Kim lost the joy of interaction when she lost eye contact. “I felt [like I was] losing the joy of a face-to-face interaction. However . . . it made me pay more attention to sound, what she talks . . . Interestingly I found out that I asked follow-up questions more rapidly than usual, right after she finished her talk . . . After the interview, when my eyes were free, she and I exchanged a big smile and eye contact.”⁵⁹

Several students, when playing the role of narrator, found the exercise freed them to speak more openly about themselves. It lifted their self-consciousness, making them feel as though no one was judging them. Keeley Steenson wrote, “Allison and I interviewed each other about any recent realizations we have had. We sat beside one another without facing each other. We could not see each other. This was very freeing! I felt so much less like an actor, both in speaking and listening . . . I was much more able to say things that made me feel embarrassed. It was so comforting not to have to look . . . for any confirmation . . . I felt like I was talking to myself, maybe no one was listening and thus I could speak more freely as if no one was judging.” Her self-consciousness as a listener was also lessened when she could not see her narrator: “But by not looking at [my narrator’s] face I think I was able to concentrate on what [she] was saying even better. Sometimes as the listener I get distracted by acting. I try to be very cognizant of acting interested for the speaker . . . I find myself thinking, ‘Keeley reassure your speaker. Look interested. All eyes on the speaker!’ . . . When I was listening to [my narrator] and she couldn’t see me all of my self-consciousness washed away.” Elizabeth Runner also found the blindfold exercise surprisingly releasing for her as a narrator. “Knowing that the listener’s eyes were closed made me feel very comfortable with looking off into the distance or at whatever object I pleased, and thus allowed me to focus on what I wanted to say to my partner. Not having to look at my partner while I spoke had an interesting impact on the content of my speech, in that I allowed myself to go deeper into personal matters than I believe I would have if my partner’s eyes were open . . . It was actually quite therapeutic. It was almost as if I was writing in a journal, but that

“journal” could talk back and give me valuable insight into what I was going through.”⁶⁰

The experience triggered Anne Frugé’s imagination, enhancing her experience. Yet when she played the role of narrator, she felt the conversation was less interactive, and she missed the facial expressions that typically served as responses. “I covered my eyes and listened to her speak and I felt conflicted . . . The visual images that came into my mind as she spoke were much more vivid and continuous than in previous listening exercises . . . Blocking out my other senses forced me to use my imagination, which enhanced the experience . . . Thinking of follow-up questions was harder. I thought I missed a whole side of the story without being able to see her expressions . . . As the narrator, it was a little strange to talk to someone who wasn’t responding to me in time with my expressions . . . However, I feel like I adapted to the situation by not expecting cues from my listener and so my body language changed in response to my lowered expectations . . . I stopped looking at [my narrator] . . . I know our time together would have been significantly richer had we been able to look at each other because after the exercise we talked for an hour.”⁶¹ Allison Devereux initially felt hampered by the lack of sighted interaction and interrupted often; once she eased into the new situation and resumed her “good listening” skills, even deepening them to compensate, she felt more connected to her narrator than had she been able to see her face. “The first few minutes of my turn as the blindfolded listener were strange because I found myself frequently interrupting. Maybe this happened because I was so thrown off by not being able to see the speaker’s face, but it felt more like I was trying to take control of the conversation precisely because I couldn’t see anything . . . My sense of participation in the conversation felt diminished . . . Once I realized that I was constantly interrupting, however, I made myself stop and mentally start over. From then on, surprisingly, I found it very easy to return to normal “good listening” techniques . . . I felt I became more connected to the speaker than I normally would have could I see her face.”⁶²

Interviews with the young and the old

I ask students to think about the impact of age on the nature of the interview. They interviewed a young person and an older person and asked them what they did in their free time. Several students felt the narrators, at both edges of the age spectrum, gave short, sometimes stilted, responses.

Neither the students’ young narrators nor their older narrators understood the concept of “free time.” This led them to reflect on the importance of language as an indicator of experience, appropriate to a person’s age and gender. Callie

Holmes thought that, “Interviewing a young person and an older person about their free time was quite different . . . The person I interviewed, a child of about eight, seemed a bit confused about the concept of free time. His life apparently is not yet divided into work and play . . . Good lesson in using the terminology of the narrator. For the older person, a retired woman, in a sense, all that she has is free time, so her life was also not too delineated between work and free time . . . Both seemed very suspicious of my query.” Sarah Kim’s older narrator was also confused by the idea of “free time.” Her narrator eventually described her daily life, rather than separating work from leisure time. “Ms. L is in her 60’s. She did not work as a professional career woman. But she is a mother and a wife who dedicates her life to support her family. She was a little confused by my question about what she does in her free time. Her first reaction was ‘Free time?’ And I said, ‘Yes, when you have your own time for yourself’ . . . Even I was not sure what free time possibly means to her. After a while she said, ‘Well I do’ — and just started describing what she usually does on these days.”⁶³

Two-hour in-depth interview

In order to encourage my students to pursue the many narrative threads they would encounter in an interview and ask detailed follow-up questions, I instructed them to interview a friend about her or his life before the age of twelve. The interview had to be a minimum of two hours long. While we developed, as a class, a list of possible topics to pursue, I asked them to probe, in detail, each topic the narrator raised. This seemed to be an important exercise for the students. They began to understand the nature of detailed listening: following the narrator’s life story while asking for details and clarification. They felt they could open up new windows of reflection on past experiences and that they could be more of a presence in the interview. Roger Gatchet “anticipated having to work harder to stick to the first ten years and to get my narrator to fully explore her childhood, but I found that she required only a few initial prompts and very little probing throughout the interview. She seemed to really enjoy the opportunity to revisit these memories . . . I feel better able to explore life events at a greater depth.” Callie Holmes “loved this exercise . . . I felt that it gave me more confidence in what an interview could be . . . I realized that the longer you interview someone, particularly if you are sticking with a relatively short time period, the less intrusive the questions become . . . The questions are proportionately less of the interview . . . I felt much more free to be a presence. I don’t mean that I talked a lot, but I felt that my own personality was a much bigger presence than in my previous oral history interview.”⁶⁴

This is what I heard you say

Borrowing from psychology, students were to ask each other about “something that matters.” They were to repeat the narrator’s words back to her, asking if they had understood her correctly. While acting as the narrator, Allison Devereux described the therapeutic qualities of feeling so well understood by another person because the listener could accurately explain back to her what she had said. “My partner and I were surprised . . . at how well we understood what each other had said and that sometimes we could even describe the situation and the feelings back to one another even better than the person experiencing the struggle . . . Also, having to put into words the issues that I am struggling with . . . I unexpectedly got deeper to the roots of my struggles . . . Even though my partner and I had seemingly totally different struggles, after talking and questioning and listening, we realized that they were actually in many ways similar.”⁶⁵

Racial awareness

I designed exercises to ease students into discussions about race and class. In one exercise, they were to ask narrators to describe their racial or ethnic identity and how it had impacted their lives. They were to move past monolithic representations of race and ethnicity and explore the complexities of multiple and mixed backgrounds and to ask the narrator if race or ethnicity was one of the most important components of their identity. Students were to note how they felt asking these questions, what questions they were hesitant to ask, how conscious they were of the differences between themselves and their narrators, and how the narrators responded. In one of these exercises, I asked students to pay particular attention to the communicative aspects of body language. In the role of listener, a student of African descent wrote that she felt no discomfort with her narrator; however, the student of European descent was keenly aware of race and noticed her body language reflected this unease. “QS is a truly attentive listener and an intriguing narrator. She and I both chose to share stories about our high school friends who were different from us racially. As I watched her body language while she told me of her high school friend Joe, who is black, I noticed how some sentiments that she may not have portrayed strongly in speech displayed themselves in her bodily movements . . . QS’s connecting body language throughout our dialogue made me feel as if she were a friend, not just a recent acquaintance.” QS, on the other hand, was keenly aware of racial differences when she summarized the interview experience. “When JK spoke she spoke looking out into the distance and did not make much eye contact with me, the listener. I think that this is a distancing tactic . . . Distancing

may be something that happens when we are trying to have inward thoughts . . . I could tell she was trying to work out her own thoughts in her speech and also recall non-recent memories. But I think distancing was also important because JK and I were treading new and personal water in trying to talk to each other about race and our peers because we were of different races. She was telling me about white people she had known . . . I felt uncomfortable telling her about a black friend who was floundering in life even though this person's friendship was important to me . . . One of the biggest things I noticed in myself was how I was leaning back from JK while speaking . . . I noticed in particular, though, that I leaned backward away from her when I asked an awkward question about race. I think this was important because it showed my inward nervousness about the question even though I was trying to be brave and nonchalant while asking it."⁶⁶

Udelle Robinson reflected on the differences between listening to white and black acquaintances. When she spoke with someone who was black, there was an assumption of familiarity and closeness; when she spoke with someone racially different from her, she was careful not to speak too confidentially on certain topics. "Because I was raised in a predominantly white community, I have learned to listen with few racial prejudices and stereotypes. This allows me to listen to people from a multitude of racial backgrounds with little interference from my previously mentioned catalog of preconceived responses. As most of my close friends and relatives are African American, I subconsciously give myself license to interrupt them not only because we are close, but also because we are both black and supposedly know where one another is 'coming from' (a knowledge exists among both parties and fosters mutual understanding). This assumption of familiarity is discarded when I speak to someone of a different race than myself. When speaking to someone racially different from me, I am highly guarded against speaking too confidently on cultural topics that are obscure to me. Proceeding with caution in this fashion allows for fewer chances to offend the other party . . . [I hope] to view the people I speak to as individuals with unique stories and experiences rather than part of a class, gender, or ethnic group. I also need to remember that when speaking to close friends and family that I do not always know what their experiences are like just because we are of the same ethnicity."⁶⁷

Self-assessment as listeners after the listening exercises

In their final self-assessment as listeners, students commented on a range of new insights they developed as a result of the exercises and the interviews. Meg

Brooker thought, “My ability to simultaneously hear text, observe behavior, and listen for what is not being said has greatly improved . . . I have loved investing in other people's stories and reflecting on my reception of them, and hope to continue this practice.” Roger Gatchet shifted his emphasis from asking good questions to the multiple skills involved in listening. He also reflected on the trust that must exist between the narrator and the listener in order to engage in a meaningful interview. “As an ex-recruiter and radio DJ who does a lot of phone interviewing, I have always been cognizant of how listening can make or break an interview, but despite that I have spent much more time working on improving my ability to ask good questions rather than listening to the responses to those questions If there is anything I have taken away from these exercises, it is the realization that even the most brilliantly worded questions contribute only a small percentage to the overall success of an interview. The rest is all in the listening—to the nonverbal cues, subtle shifts in posture or tone, or a lingering pause—that offer signposts that guide an interview for both participants. Throughout this journal I have tended to think of listening as something I was doing with my narrator, but it was also the case that the narrator was listening to me. It seems that oral history narratives are much more about cooperation between the interviewer and the narrator . . . that sense of mutual trust and cooperation that the oral historian builds with a narrator over time. That can really only be accomplished if the oral historian makes an extraordinary effort to listen to everything about the narrator when they are together, especially for what is not being said. How else can we gain an in-depth understanding of the important events in someone's life?”⁶⁸

Adopting a persona was a skill Angie Ahlgren found helpful in drawing out her narrator. As she came to know her narrator over the course of four interviews, she remembered the importance of being herself and not worrying about appearing “too white.” “It was not until I interviewed my dad about a joyous and a sad event that I recognized how important my questions and my relationship to the narrator were I realized during these two exercises that I could use a “persona” in interviewing, at least at certain moments, to draw out a particular story. In other words, even while talking to my dad, I tried to remember not to ask leading questions and sometimes played innocent, even though I thought I might know the answer to certain questions. This skill eventually helped me in my subsequent interviews with Mr. Bradshaw In my second interview with him, and especially in our third and fourth, I became much more comfortable with him. And with that comfort also came curiosity The interviews with Mr. Bradshaw and our in-class discussions also helped me to remember to be myself in this process and not worry too much about being ‘too white’ or too anything else. Often during our interviews, Mr. Bradshaw noted the differences between our skin color, gender, or life experience, and he always did that respectfully. I

think this not only led to our having a good rapport, but also probably enriched our interviews. Although he obviously knows I am educated, he also was able to point to my Midwestern upbringing as a sign that I wouldn't fully understand segregation or the South . . . He usually explained any racial aspect of his stories in detail for my benefit . . . After this experience, I can almost not imagine interviewing someone only once . . . This course has definitely changed me as a listener in all the ways listed above: as an interviewer, I have become more adept at asking questions and allowing my curiosity to guide those questions; I have made progress in knowing that I can interview a person who does not share all of my cultural markers—white, female, middle class, etc.—and not need to pretend to be more knowledgeable than I am.”⁶⁹

The students were surprised at how much effort, even striving, was involved in listening. Karl Jun was humbled by his experience. “The best feeling I received from the listening exercises is whenever I am ‘shocked’ at how close-minded or wrong I had been just prior to that specific moment in time. I think we all have an innate sense of ‘arrogance’ when it comes to listening . . . My ‘arrogance’ was often upended by listening exercises . . . The listening exercises have shown me that learning is a continual process that has no objective end. We strive every day to be a better version of ourselves. This same philosophy should be applied to our listening abilities as well . . . I will be honest in saying that I was skeptical in the beginning of the course about the interviewing process. Uncertain about how a ‘connection’ would be made between the interviewer and the interviewee, I was a bit nervous about the prospect of my narrator not having much to say. I had already believed that there were things I could learn from *anyone*, but whether this would be drawn out into the openness of an interview was still questionable. However, after actually undergoing an interview, my whole perspective on the matter changed. A bond does form and you often feel closer to each other after the experience, even if you've only known the other person for an hour. We can always pretend to imagine what it feels like to be another person and see things through her vantage point, but the interviews have taught me that there are an astounding amount of emotions and ideas that we could not possibly have ever conceived of by ourselves . . . The course has brought to light another fundamental truth as well: listening is difficult. Because there is a constant need/freedom to improve, you may continuously try to become a better listener. The rewards for undergoing such a feat are immense. It is something I would never want to give up, and at the same time is an unbelievable gift that you can offer someone else. To truly be listened to is an unbelievable feeling.”⁷⁰

In an essay for a university scholarship, Jess Tillis wrote that she had incorporated the listening exercises into her life. “Dr. Norkunas told us in the beginning of

the semester that our listening skills would improve throughout the class, but I was skeptical because I've always considered myself a good listener. Eight classes later, I discovered I was wrong. While I might have been above par in comparison to my peers, my ability to listen to narrators in interviews or my family and friends in everyday life has improved more than I thought possible. We do these listening exercises in class and analyze what it means to be a good listener. I have even taken those exercises outside of class and shared them with friends, so that they can benefit too. I am now a much more open and nonjudgmental listener, and I am learning so much more about those sharing their stories with me. As an aspiring inner city high school teacher, listening will be crucial for making personal connections with my students."⁷¹ Allison Devereux thought about the conscious effort involved in listening. "Being a good listener requires an intuitive ability to read your narrator, a skill that can only improve through the practice of interviewing, listening exercises, and daily conscious effort One major aspect of listening that I have learned from this class is that the job of the interviewer is not just to record the speaker's words and ask the questions to get the responses that we ourselves want to hear. It is the job of the interviewer to help his/her narrators understand their experiences, their relationships, and their sense of themselves through the process of asking sensitive questions and responding in ways that show we understand, or are at least trying to understand Another incredible thing I learned about listening this semester is how much people don't actually do it. The listening exercises we practiced this semester took time to perform. They were deliberate and required focus. They were not activities we could speed through and get real results. When I did the exercises with my classmates, I realized how rare it is for me to put so much care and thought into conversation in my own life. I doubt I am much different than most other people, if at least in my own age group. It seems that people simply do not have the time for thoughtful, focused conversation With all that I have learned this semester, I have made an effort to slow the pace of my life."⁷²

They came to see that listening involved trust and empathy. Rachel Meyerson learned to "live as a listener." "I had always thought that I was a good listener. I heard my friends and family when they would speak to me about mindless gossip or happenings in their everyday life. As expected, I would listen more intently to serious issues or problems—ones of relationships, stress, and even death. But, it was not until I committed myself to this class and all that it entailed in the listening exercises, the intense interviews, and the class discussions, that I realized that I had never been a good listener at all I have realized that every time someone speaks to me, they are bearing a bit of their soul, a bit of what it is like to be in their shoes, and a bit of their thought processing to me. It is almost a game of trust The specific exercises have taught me more about

listening that I could have learned in any other class. But, more than just the tangible results of the class—in terms of interviews and work—I have learned to live as a listener.”⁷³

Seth Owens initially thought that listening was a passive soaking up of information, but he changed to see it as a constant, creative activity that can be life changing. “Perhaps the most important thing I've learned this semester . . . is that listening is by no means a passive activity. At the beginning of the semester, I thought that listening mainly involved sitting quietly while someone discussed a certain topic . . . All that was necessary, I thought, was a quiet attentiveness that would show respect to the narrator while allowing you to soak up information like a sponge in an entirely passive action on the part of the listener. In reality, I've found that listening is a constantly active activity. Not only do you impact the narrator through your questions, but your body language, facial expressions, and other voiceless methods of communication can really impact how comfortable the narrator feels and how much information they are willing to share with you . . . [I also learned that] active listeners and narrators can together shape and form a conversation into something that neither of them could ever envision at the outset . . . This concept of joint discovery among the narrator and the listener was no more apparent than in the various oral histories that we conducted. Udelle's questions about how I see myself and define myself really forced me to examine what I believe and how I feel about a whole host of difficult issues. I definitely found it to be very rewarding and illuminating to talk about how I felt about affirmative action, my grandparents' feelings towards the civil rights movement, and other complex topics. Although I wasn't always able to articulate what I felt in a cohesive manner, I think I learned a lot about myself from the process. These revelations were completely due to Udelle's great questions and attentive listening style. This showed me that proper listening can create a wonderful work of oral history where the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts. By working closely together, the narrator and listener can use the unique perspectives that each brings to the table to shape and mold an interview into a beautiful, wonderful, and sometimes painful expedition into the inner reaches of one's heart and mind.”⁷⁴

Reflections

My students thoughtfully engaged with the listening exercises and applied them to their professional interviews. In the absence of shared experience, a relational bridge can be enacted between narrator and listener. A genuine listening encounter between two people where stories are told in an atmosphere of trust creates a body of transmitted memory for the listener. These stories become a

part of the listener's consciousness and can be drawn upon in subsequent interviews as a basis for understanding and empathy.

The exercises sensitized the students to the intensive nature of nuanced listening. They redefined listening from a passive activity to one that was active, ongoing, and required daily, conscious effort, a process that could transform them into interviewers of conscience. They came to see the deep meaning of a shared authority, an effort to create an atmosphere of equality not in the absence of difference, but in its acknowledgment and acceptance. With each exercise, they opened themselves up more to the possibility of changing their ideas and their sense of themselves. This, perhaps was the most important goal of the exercises and of the projects themselves: to come to see the narrator, who is at first so different in so many ways, as a friend and partner in creating testimonies drawn from one person's life but only fully articulated in the presence of an active, trusting, and insightful listener.

Martha Norkunas holds a Ph.D. in Folklore from Indiana University's Folklore Institute. From 1999 to 2009, Norkunas directed the Project in Interpreting the Texas Past (ITP) at the University of Texas at Austin where she taught interdisciplinary teams of graduate students to think critically about memory, history, and culture and to apply their knowledge to social and cultural issues, including creating more diverse and inclusive interpretations at Texas historic sites. ITP produced award-winning films, Web sites, exhibits, educational material, posters, brochures, oral history booklets, an in-depth oral history project with African Americans in Texas, and an oral history project exploring race and identity among college students. In August 2009, Norkunas became Professor of Oral and Public History at Middle Tennessee State University in Mufreesboro, TN, where she directs the African American Oral History Project. Her current research involves listening, racial memory, and the relationship between familial memory and history.

Appendix A: Listening exercises created by Martha Norkunas, Ph.D.

Interview a good friend about his or her childhood before the age of twelve. You may also ask them about their parents and grandparents. Do not talk about the narrator's life after the age of twelve. Record the interview (you do not have to transcribe it). The interview must last a full two hours. Whatever the narrator tells you about, ask a series of follow-up questions. Probe each topic in detail. Help the narrator to create a richly detailed portrait of his or her childhood. Topics may include, but are not limited to: stories about grandparents, parents; childhood house, inside rooms, special places inside the house; meaningful outside places; play, games; friends;

daily life; prayer, religion; births, deaths, celebrations; school; reading, music, sports; dinnertime at home; holidays; manners; hopes for the future; summer; trips; discipline; work, household chores; farming or city life; and happiest moments. Most importantly, listen to what the narrator tells you and ask him or her about the topic he or she raises, rather than trying to ask about the topics listed above.

Small silences

Ask your narrator to tell you about his or her best friend. At the end of each narration phase, let six to eight seconds of silence elapse before you ask a question. What role does silence play in the interview? How did your narrator respond? How did you feel? Remember to keep eye contact and smile during the silent periods.

Large silences

Sit with a friend for five full minutes and do not talk. Tell your friend that you will be sitting together in silence for five minutes. Do not do anything else (no cell phones or other electronic devices). At the end of the time, note what you are feeling and what you were thinking about during the five minutes. Was there any communication between you and your friend during the silence? What was it? How did the silence effect the way the two of you related to each other?

Joyous stories

Ask your narrator to tell you about a joyous event in his/her life. Note how the narrator tells the story, and how you listen to the story. What did you feel while she/he was narrating? Were there moments when you felt particularly close or distant from your narrator? Did you impact the direction of the interview or the content of the story? How? What questions did you ask? Had the narrator told the story before? How could you tell?

Sorrowful stories

Ask your narrator to tell you about a sad event in his/her life. Note how the narrator tells the story, and how you listen to the story. What did you feel while

he/she was narrating? Were there moments when you felt particularly close or distant from your narrator? Did listening to a sad story take special skills? Did it raise particular issues for you? Did you impact the direction of the interview or the content of the story? How? What questions did you ask? What impact did this narration have on your narrator?

The story behind the story

Sometimes the most important part of listening is hearing what the person did not say. Ask a friend to tell you about his or her relationship with one of his/her parents. Do you sense that some parts of the story are being edited out? How do you know this? What significant elements in a parent-child relationship do not appear in this story? Would you have to have prior knowledge of the person's life to understand the story?

Older and younger

Do a short interview with someone who is much younger than you. Then do a short interview with someone who is much older than you. Ask each of them what they like to do in their free time. What difference does age make in the interview process? Did you respond to each narrator differently? How? Were your questions different? Did you feel social differences?

Structured interview

Ask your narrator a series of questions about his/her jobs. Bring a detailed list of questions to the interview and do not ask any question that is not on your prepared list. Do not ask follow-up questions. Describe the nature of the interview, your role, and the response of the narrator.

Unstructured interview

Ask the person one open-ended question and then listen without asking any other questions as the person speaks. If necessary, repeat the last thing they said, but do not direct the interview in any way. Compare the kinds of listening you engaged in during the highly structured and highly unstructured interviews. How did your narrator respond to the two styles? How did you respond as an interviewer? Which style was more effective for you?

Social class

Find out what your narrator's social class was as a child. Note the questions you ask, the responses, the follow-up questions, and the flow of the interview. Were there any surprises? Did you come to understand something about the narrator's social and economic standing? Did they understand what you were asking about? Did you or the narrator have any difficulty situating the narrator in a larger social context of class?

Racial and ethnic identity

Ask the narrator how his or her ethnic or racial identity impacted his or her life. How do they describe their identity? What is their race or ethnicity? Is it complex? Is race or ethnicity the most important factor in the narrator's identity? (If listener does not know narrator well) How did you feel asking someone you did not know well about their identity? Did you shy away from any questions you might have asked if you'd known them better? Were you conscious of the differences between you? How did that impact your interviewing style?

Sites of meaning

In this exercise, ask your narrator to write down three sites that have meaning in the life of his/her family. Interview her about each of the sites, asking what they are, where they are located, physical description, what events took place there, why the site is important to him/her, and what would change if the site disappeared. How do place and memory intersect? What special kind of listening skills does it take to listen to narratives about place?

Body language

In this exercise, listener asks the narrator questions about an important experience in his or her childhood. As the narrator describes the experience, carefully noting his or her body language: eye movement, overall body position, hand movement, tense parts of the body, how emotion is expressed by the person's body. Also note your own body language as you listen. What body language feels connecting? Is there body language that feels distancing?

Listening without seeing

Put a scarf or towel around your eyes and do a short interview. Ask the narrator to tell you about a holiday they celebrate. Conduct the interview as usual, but note what impact the lack of visual cues has on you and the nature of the interview.

This is what I think you said to me

Do an interview about an emotional experience that was important to the narrator. After they've completed a thought and paused, you say, "This is what I think you said to me. Is this right?" Let the narrator correct what you thought they said. Do this until you both agree that you heard what s/he meant. Do this for each thought unit. How did your impression of what the person said change when you repeated it back to them? How did it change when they corrected what you heard? What were the nuanced differences in what you originally heard and what the final version was? Is there a difference between listening and being understood? What is it?

Additional listening exercise topics

Tell me about your grandmother.

Have you ever felt invisible?

Do you believe in God?

What does heaven look like?

Do you believe there is an afterlife?

Did a national or international event ever really impact you?

What do you like to do most in your free time?

Is politics important to you?

What's the most important thing in your life right now?

What matters to you and why (for open-ended question)?

What are the most important things you've learned about life so far?

Can you describe your mother to me?

What is your mother doing now, in your thoughts? How do you picture her now? Tell me how you are like your mother? Your father?

Has there ever been anyone in your life that you would consider to be your kindred spirit or soul mate?

Do you ever know things before they happen?

Has your life gone the way you expected it would? What would you change?

Is there someone you wish you could forgive? Who do you need to forgive? Who haven't you forgiven?

Tell me how your ethnic or racial identity has impacted your life.

Tell me about your friends (who is most important to you, what he she is like, do

you have a group of friends, what do you do together, what do you like about each one).

What is the most amazing thing that ever happened to you?

Tell me about your relationship with music.

Appendix B: Course syllabus

The memory of the past: oral history theory and methodology

Dr. Martha Norkunas, norkunas@mtsu.edu.

Description

This course focuses on the collection of oral narratives as evidence of the past, situated somewhere on the continuum between memory and history. Students are trained in oral history interviewing techniques, transcription, and the representation of oral evidence. The class reads theoretical material about collective memory, the relationship between memory and history, the ethnographer's role in the creation of the past, transgenerational memory, trauma and memory, and the challenges and possibilities of representing oral narrative as history. Students read transcriptions, listen to audio interviews, view films, and examine web-based oral histories as they evaluate how presentation impacts the creation of meaning. Each student will conduct a series of interviews with selected people associated with a case study, and edit the texts for web publication. Students will also edit audio or digital video interviews for web publication.

Students' responsibilities

Class responsibilities

Each student will summarize and evaluate some of the assigned readings. The summary should address the main points in the book, or the collection of articles, and give an assessment of how the material contributes to our understanding of oral history, memory, and history. Students should prepare written summaries and distribute them to class members via E-mail by 8:00 p.m. the evening before class. Please also bring several paper copies to class (5%). Each student will present a film or Web site based on oral history. Please type your notes on the Web site/film

and distribute them to class members via E-mail. Please also bring several paper copies to class. The notes should include correct film, web and print citations, a summary of the web site/film, and your thoughts on the Web site's/film's relationship to oral history, that is, most dynamic uses of oral material, innovations, insights, etc. (5%). Each student will audio audit a two- to three-hour oral history interview, correcting transcription errors and spelling, and adding punctuation and paragraphs as necessary. Students should submit the corrected text on CD—both a copy with comments and a clean copy (7.5%). Each student will audio audit a colleague's transcripts, correcting transcription errors, and discussing changes with the colleague to produce highly accurate transcripts (7.5%).

Listening exercises and performance

Students will begin the oral history process by conducting in-depth life history interviews with a classmate (minimum of two hours per interview). While the interviews do not have to be transcribed, they must be recorded with the expectation that they will become public documents. This enables students to occupy the role of narrator before they assume the role of interviewer. Students must also keep a reflexive listening journal noting their responses to the listening exercises. The first entry in the listening journal is a five-page essay evaluating yourself as a listener. Throughout the semester, each student will submit the listening journal to Dr. Norkunas and should be prepared to discuss insights into listening during class. The final overview essay summarizes how you have changed as a listener as a result of the exercises and the professional oral history interviews (15%). Students will do readings of excerpts of the interviews on the final day of class (7.5%).

Major project

Each student will identify several people associated with the case study, conduct intensive interviews with two of the identified narrators or multiple interviews with one narrator, transcribe the recordings, audio audit the recordings, and produce an unedited transcript and a lightly edited transcript. Each student must take color or black and white digital images of narrators, and fill out a contact and biographical information sheet. It is critical for each student to obtain release forms for the oral history interviews, photographs, and any other materials donated by the narrator and to scan release forms. Each student will write a one paragraph abstract of each of their interviews, a one paragraph biographical sketch of the narrator, and context notes for each interview. Students will fully excerpt each of their interviews, creating text and audio excerpts. They will create teacher questions for each excerpt and assign it

primary and secondary subject headings (60%). Students “must” send copies of the final transcripts and audio CDs to narrators, along with thank you notes. Students should plan on submitting two copies of all audio and text material on CDs and one paper copy of all materials.

Note: Students will be trained on audio and video recording techniques and must attend two 1.5-hour audio recording and audio editing training sessions and review, as needed, online digital audio editing workshops.

Students should subscribe to H-Oralhist for the duration of the semester: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/H-Oralhist> is a network for scholars and professionals active in studies related to oral history. It is affiliated with the Oral History Association.

Students are asked “not” to bring laptops to class, unless they have a disability that requires a laptop.

Class schedule

Class One

Introduction to Oral History

Introduction: The organization of the class, issues in identifying narrators and in interpreting oral evidence, discussion of the case study.

Assignment: Write a three- to five-page introspective paper on listening, evaluating yourself as a listener (see detailed explanation on attachment: listening exercises). Assignment: Audio audit an interview from the collection African American Oral History Project. Correct any errors, include punctuation, and create sentences and paragraphs when necessary. See Oral History Transcription Style Sheet (available electronically). Be prepared to talk about the interview generally (style of interviewer, questions that could have been asked) and issues in audio auditing. Create CD with four documents: (1) a clean, corrected unedited transcript; (2) an unedited transcript with markers indicating corrections made; (3) a corrected lightly edited transcript; and (4) a new copy of teacher questions and excerpts, with the corrected, unedited, and audited text.

Optional assignment: Review audio recording tutorials at: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/dms/audio/tutorial.php>.

Class Two Note: Class meets from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. (please feel free to bring snacks to share with the class)

The art of the interview

Oral History Workshop: training in interviewing. Students must bring to class an object that has meaning in the life of their family.

Readings (due this class): Thompson, Paul Richard. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), skim generally and read chapter on interviewing; Skim, *Fundamentals of Oral History: Texas Preservation Guidelines* (Austin, TX: Texas Historical Commission, 1999). Available at: <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/oralhistory/ohdefault.html>; Regional Oral History Office Tips for Interviewers: <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/resources/rohotips.html>.

Due: Listening paper

Assignment: Listening exercise #1 (and journal entry): co-creating a life history.

Assignment: Make appointment to conduct first formal interview; conduct first interview; begin transcribing interview. For transcription assistance, see style sheet on D2L.

Class Three

Excerpting the life history interview/The African American experience

Discuss interviews; develop preliminary interview question list for case study.

Readings: Chafe, William H., Gavins, Raymond, Korstad, Robert, Ortiz, Paul et al. (eds.). 2001. *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press), in association with Lyndhurst Books of the Center for Documentary Studies of Duke University: Distributed W. W. Norton & Co, xv–xxxv, 1–37, 56–74, 89–114, 141–9, 152–71, 205–19, 268–93. Listen to some audio excerpts at: <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/remembering/resistance.html>.

For additional narratives, see: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/>, particularly Jim Crow stories. For an excellent summary of the history of Jim Crow, see <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org> especially the Texas Jim Crow laws: <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/geography/geography.htm>.

Due: Audio audit of interview (two identical CDs)

Assignment: Listening exercise #2 (and journal entry)

Assignment: Continue transcribing interview. For transcription assistance see style sheet on D2L.

Class Four

Analyzing oral material/The African American experience

Readings: Makagon, Daniel, Neumann, Mark. *Recording Culture: Audio Documentary and the Ethnographic Experience* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009). <http://www.recordingculture.org/>.

Assignment: Complete transcription of interview; audio audit your own interview; create abstract of interview, biographical notes, and context notes.

Assignment: Review audio editing tutorials on the University of Texas DIIA site as necessary: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/dms/audio/tutorial.php>.

Assignment: Listening exercise #3 (and journal entry)

Class Five

The life history/The African American experience

Readings: Rosengarten, Theodore, Shaw, Nate. *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw (Chapter 2)* (New York: Knopf, 1974). Be prepared to discuss issues in transcription, abstracting, etc. Listen to all or parts of speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream," and "A Time to Break the Silence," at: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesbydecade.html>.

In class: Listen to tapes of Nate Shaw during his interview with Rosengarten.

Due: CD with audio and text of first interview to exchange with a colleague. Submit to professor unedited transcript of first interview, identify most meaningful sections of unedited transcript, and indicate suggested excerpts with marks in the transcript, abstract of interview, biographical notes, and context notes. Bring audio on CD and one paper copy of text materials (abstract of interview, biographical notes, context notes, and unedited transcript) for professor.

Assignment: Audio audit a colleague's interview. Please share the audio audit with your colleague and discuss any changes made. Both parties should agree that the transcript is an accurate and precise transcription of the recorded interview.

Assignment: Listening exercise #4 (and journal entry)

Class Six

The Art of the interview/The African American experience

Readings: Gluck, Sherna Berger, Patai, Daphne (eds.). *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), read introduction, chapter 2, skim ch. 3, read ch. 4, 6. Listen to Fresh Air program: Zadie Smith: "On Beauty and Difference," October 17, 2005 at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/>

story/story.php?storyId=4961669 and “Dear Senator,” from Strom Thurmond's Daughter, February 1, 2005.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4473680>. Note: Terry Gross's interview style in each interview and compare the kinds of questions she asks and the “feel” of each interview. Discussion of Thompson, Gluck and Fresh Air interviews, discussion of audited oral history interview.

Due: Audio audit of colleague's first interview, on CD.

Due: Listening journal with exercises #1–4 completed.

Assignment: Incorporate professor's corrections into unedited transcript; create text excerpts (the ones you identified and the ones suggested by professor), questions for teachers based on those excerpts, assign each excerpt primary subject headings (from list) and secondary headings (use list or create your own secondary headings); and lightly edit transcription of corrected first interview. Schedule second interview.

Assignment: Listening exercise #5 (and journal entry)

Class Seven

Analyzing oral material/collective memory

Readings: Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), vii–137. Zerubavel, Yael, “The Historic, the Legendary, and the Incredible: Invented Tradition and Collective Memory in Israel,” in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations, The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 105–23.

Due: Unedited, corrected transcript, lightly edited transcript of first interview, transcript excerpts, questions for teachers, and primary and secondary subject headings for each excerpt. (You should have in your own files the interview release form and a photograph of the narrator.)

Assignment: Prepare audio (or video) edits of recording based on identified excerpts.

Assignment: Listening exercise #6 (and journal entry)

All students are required to schedule a one-hour meeting with Dr Norkunas to review and submit all materials associated with the first interview. The audio excerpts must be completed by your appointment date.

Class Eight

The life history/civil rights

Readings: Arsenault, Raymond. *Freedom Riders, 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 93–176; Listen to Fresh Air for January 12, 2006, Freedom Rides: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5149667> or <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5151487> Film: In class view segment from Eyes on the Prize.

Due: Audio (or video) edits of first interview (on CD or DVD) (by appointment date)

Assignment: Set up second interview, conduct interview, and begin transcribing interview

Assignment: Listening exercise #7 (and journal entry)

Class Nine

Memory, history, and performance

Readings: Pollock, Della. *Remembering, Oral History as Performance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), ch. 1, 4, 6, 9, Afterward (skim: ch. 3); Listen to: America: 'Forever Free,' but Not Yet Whole, January 9, 2006.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5133942> and Remembering Ray Charles, June 11, 2004 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1954799>.

Assignment: Continue transcribing second interview, audio audit your second interview, create abstract of second interview, biographical notes, and context notes.

Assignment: Listening exercise #8 (and journal entry)

Due: Listening journal with exercises #5–7 completed.

Class Ten

Memory and history

Readings: Hamilton, Paula, Shopes, Linda, *Oral History and Public Memories* (Temple University Press, 2008) (selected chapters); Clark, Mary Marshall, "Resisting Attrition in Stories of Trauma." *Narrative* 13 (2005): 294–8 (available on Project Muse).

Due: Bibliography of listening articles.

Assignment: Audio audit a colleague's interview. Please share the audio audit with your colleague and discuss any changes made. Both parties should agree that the transcript is an accurate and precise transcription of the recorded interview.

Assignment: Listening exercise #9 (and journal entry)

Class Eleven

Memory, history, and loss

In-class discussion of themes emerging from the interviews

Readings: Spiegelman, Art. 1986. *Maus I, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon Books). ISBN 0394747232; Spiegelman, Art. 1992. *Maus II, A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon Books). ISBN 0679729771.

Due: Audio audit of colleague's second interview, on CD; the unedited transcript of second interview, identify most meaningful sections of unedited transcript and indicate suggested excerpts with marks in the transcript, abstract of interview, biographical notes, and context notes. Bring audio on CD and one paper copy of text materials (abstract of interview, biographical notes, context notes, and unedited transcript).

Assignment: Incorporate colleague's corrections into unedited transcript.

Assignment: Listening exercise #10 (and journal entry)

Class Twelve

Analyzing oral material

Readings: Perks, Robert, Thompson, Alistair (eds.). 2006. *The Oral History Reader* (Oxford: Routledge), chapters 12, 17, 22, 25, "Making Histories: Introduction," 29, 30, 33, 39, 40.

Assignment: Incorporate professor's corrections into unedited transcript; create text excerpts (the ones you identified and the ones suggested by professor), questions for teachers based on those excerpts, assign each excerpt primary subject headings (from list) and secondary headings (use list or create your own secondary headings); and lightly edit transcription of corrected second interview. When creating text excerpts, please make one document with all excerpts, teacher questions, and subject headings; please also make each question and each excerpt a separate document.

Assignment: Begin written analysis of how you have changed as a listener.

Class Thirteen

Memory, history and loss/analyzing oral material

Readings: Norkunas, Martha. *Monuments and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press/Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), Intro, ch. 1, 2, 4.

Due: Unedited, corrected transcript, lightly edited transcript of second interview, transcript excerpts, questions for teachers, biographical notes, abstract, subject index terms, and context notes. (You should have in your own files the interview release form and a photograph of the narrator.)

Assignment: Prepare audio (or video) edits of recording based on identified excerpts.

Assignment: Work on written analysis of how you have changed as a listener.

Assignment: Send professor two excerpts from each interview that you would like to read on final day of class.

Class Fourteen

Memory, history and performance/films and Web sites

Oral history and the web/oral history and film

Each student prepares a detailed review of an oral history Web site or a film that is heavily based on oral history and presents it to the class. Please type up notes on the Web site or film and submit to professor. Note the effectiveness of oral history in communicating ideas about memory, history, loss, cultural identity, and/or other ideas. Bring cued up film to class.

Due: Audio (or video) edits of first interview (on CD or DVD)

Assignment: Work on written analysis of how you have changed as a listener; write short analysis of what themes emerged from the major oral history interviews; complete all work on oral history interviews.

Assignment: Rehearse reading of two excerpts from the oral history interviews.

Class Fifteen

Readings from the oral histories: each student reads excerpts from the oral histories

Due: Written statements of how you have changed as a listener; and short analysis of what themes emerged from the major oral history interviews and listening journal.

Due: Final copies of all materials

All students are required to schedule a one-hour meeting with Dr Norkunas to review all submitted materials.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank a number of my colleagues for sharing their ideas with me on the topic of nuanced listening and for their comments on various drafts of this paper. They include Yildiray Erdener, Jasmine Erdener, Dana Everts-Boehm, Alan Boehm, Martha Harroun Foster, Yuan-ling Chao, Chris McCusker, and Mary Hoffschwelle. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Thanks to my graduate and undergraduate students for allowing me to quote from their listening journals. Versions of this paper were presented at The University of Texas at Austin and at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum.

- 2 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xx, 71.
- 3 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), ix, xi. While chapter two, “Research as an Experiment in Equality,” treats the relational aspect of the interview explicitly, throughout the book Portelli reflects on the interviewer-narrator relationship.
- 4 Ronald J. Grele, “Values and Methods in the Classroom, Transformation of Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 25, nos 1–2 (Summer to Fall 1998): 57–69. See also Grele’s article, “Oral History as Evidence,” in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006), 43–101.
- 5 Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, for example, encouraged listeners to ask women to reflect upon the meaning of their experience, to listen to the women’s moral language, their meta-statements, and to the logic of their narratives. They note that a woman’s discussion of her life may combine two conflicting paradigms: one framed by men’s dominant position in the culture, and one informed by more immediate realities of her personal experience. See Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis,” in *Women’s Words, the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991). Kristina Minister wrote that men’s forms of communication are assumed to be the norm for oral history interviewing and that deviating from that model is subnormal. Some of the differences she noted were that men talk about what they do but women talk about who they are; men are willing to “take the floor” and engage in monologic, well-polished narratives, while women tend to a more dialogic, slower paced approach, and that women respond well to reinforcements in the narrative that men may perceive as interruptions. See Kristina Minister, “A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview,” in *Women’s Words, the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 6 The Difficult Dialogues project was launched by the Ford Foundation to, among other goals, “prepare students to constructively engage with difficult and sensitive topics.” For more information see: <http://www.difficultdialogues.org/about/> (accessed September 4, 2010).
- 7 Della Pollock, “Introduction: Remembering,” in *Remembering, Oral History as Performance*, ed. Della Pollock (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 2–3.
- 8 The students also came from a wide range of disciplines on campus: Performance as Public Practice, History, American Studies, English, Communications, Library and Information Sciences, Anthropology, the Michener Center for Writers, the Historic Preservation Program, the Design Program, the Theater Department, and even the School of Nursing.
- 9 This approach proved very fruitful, and avoided some of the challenges noted by Catherine Fosl and Tracy E. K’Meyer in *Freedom on the Border, An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009) when The Kentucky Civil Rights Oral History Project engaged in interviews with African Americans in Kentucky. Interviewers were to focus on a specific date range—1954–1968—and people who were clearly identified with the civil rights movement. By opening up the interview to the narrator’s life experiences, we found that many people who said they were not active in the civil rights movement because they did

- not attend demonstrations or sit-ins, were intellectually very engaged, and participated in the movement “emotionally” or in other small but significant ways.
- 10 Among the other oral history texts in the seminar, the class read a number of oral histories about African-American life including Bernadette Anand et al., *Keeping the Struggle Alive: Studying Desegregation in Our Town, A Guide to Doing Oral History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders, 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South*, ed. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad (New York: New Press, 2001); *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner, Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Fosl and K’Meyer, *Freedom on the Border*; Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom, An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested, Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977); Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Theodore Rosengarten and Nate Shaw, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Thad Sitton and Dan Utley, *From Can See to Can’t: Texas Cotton Farmers on the Southern Prairies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, *Freedom Colonies, Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
 - 11 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History, A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005).
 - 12 Marjorie Hunt, “The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide, Smithsonian Institution,” *Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage*, 2003, http://www.folklife.si.edu/explore/Resources/InterviewGuide/InterviewGuide_home.html (accessed January 6, 2011); “Fundamentals of Oral History: Texas Preservation Guidelines” (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1999), <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/oralhistory/ohdefault.shtml> (accessed January 6, 2011); “Regional Oral History Office Tips for Interviewers” from Willa K. Baum’s *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, 3rd ed., 1987, <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/resources/rohotips.html> (accessed January 6, 2011); “Oral History Workshop on the Web,” *Baylor University Institute for Oral History*, <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=23560> (accessed January 6, 2011); “A Guide to Recording Oral History,” *New Zealand History Online*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/handsonhistory/oral-history> (accessed January 6, 2011); “Voices from the Past: Oral History,” *The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, <http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=517> (accessed January 6, 2011).
 - 13 Jennifer Asenas interviewed Nelson Linder, the head of the Austin National Association for the Advancement of Colored People four times during the semester (Spring 2004). At the conclusion of the semester, they decided to continue the

- interviews and conducted two more sessions. She felt nervous during the first interview and at the end asked if she could return for a second session. By the end of the second interview, Linder asked if she wanted to return at the same time in two weeks. They continued this pattern from March through June.
- 14 For a fascinating look at African-Americans and collective memory, see *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), quotation from page 3.
 - 15 Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language, A Philosophy of Listening*, trans. Charles Lambert (London: Routledge, 1990), 28, 33.
 - 16 Ken Metzler, *Creative Interviewing, the Writer's Guide to Gathering Information by Asking Questions* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 87; and Metzler's reference: Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens, *Are You Listening?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957).
 - 17 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Afterward: Reverberations," in *Remembering, Oral History as Performance*, ed. Della Pollock (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 96.
 - 18 In their analysis of the use of personal narratives in the social sciences and history, Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer Pierce, and Barbara Laslett comment on sociologist Marjorie De Vault's experiences of interviewing across racial differences. DeVault listened carefully to everyday talk, with its oblique and indirect references to race, sensitive to her narrator's pauses, qualifiers, hesitations, and "talk that circles around race." "For DeVault, who is a white woman, 'hearing' race and ethnicity in the stories she was being told required active attention and analysis rather than passive listening." Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories, The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 121; from Marjorie DeVault, "Ethnicity and Expertise: Racial-Ethnic Knowledge in Sociological Research," in *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 85.
 - 19 For additional information about the project, please see: "Introduction, African American Texans Oral History Project," Online Took Kit for Teaching African American History, University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.utexas.edu/world/lifteveryvoice/histories/index.html>; Patrick Beach, "Black Austinites Share Stories for UT Oral History Project," *Austin American Statesman*, August 15, 2010, http://www.statesman.com/life/black-austinites-share-stories-for-ut-oral-history-859968.html?cxtype=rss_ece_frontpage; Interactive video and audio: <http://www.statesman.com/news/interactive-oral-histories-of-african-americans-in-austin-858560.html>; and "Listening Across Difference," Smithsonian Education, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKbTMta6Ku8>.
 - 20 See Marjorie L. McLellan, "Case Studies in Oral History and Community Learning," *Oral History Review* 25, nos 1–2 (Summer/Fall 1998): 81–112 where she gives an overview of a number of interactive oral history projects about race; Hall, "Afterward: Reverberations," 187–98 where she discusses an oral history and performance project with students about the "ordeal of desegregation" in Chapel Hill, NC; and *Keeping the Struggle Alive, Studying Desegregation in Our Town*, ed. Michelle Fine et al. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
 - 21 See Valerie Yow, "Do I Like Them Too Much?": Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice Versa," *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (Summer, 1997):

- 55–79; and the special issue of *The Oral History Review*, “Theme Articles: Practice and Pedagogy,” 25, nos 1–2 (Summer/Fall 1998), especially the article by Vicki L. Ruiz, “Situating Stories: The Surprising Consequences of Oral History,” pp. 71–80 in which she discusses the self-ethnographies of three of her students.
- 22 All of the listening exercises were conducted in 2008 and 2009, although the quotations for this essay are derived from both the graduate and undergraduate 2008 listening journals. Individual attributions are associated with each quotation. All quotations are from unpublished papers from the class and are used with permission from the students. On several occasions, names were withheld to protect the privacy of the student and his or her narrator.
 - 23 Josie Smith noted the intentionality of listening and wrote that her sense of empathy made her a good listener, even across differences. “I love feeling connected to people and listening to someone is a great way to feel connected to them.” Josie Smith, “Listening Journal,” unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 24 Meg Brooker, Listening Journal, unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 25 Katherine Andrews, Listening Journal, unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 26 James Spradley’s guides to ethnographic fieldwork stand as classics. See James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, *The Cultural Experience, Ethnography in Complex Society* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1972) and James P. Spradley *Participant Observation* (Belmont: Wadsworth, Thomas Learning, 1980).
 - 27 Roger Gatchet, Listening Journal, unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 28 Angie Ahlgren, Listening Journal, unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 29 Sarah Kim, Listening Journal, unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 30 Allison Devereux, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 31 Mary Marshall Clark, “Resisting Attrition in Stories of Trauma,” *Narrative* 13, no. 3 (October 2005): 294–8.
 - 32 Gatchet, Listening Journal.
 - 33 Kim, Listening Journal.
 - 34 Brooker, Listening Journal.
 - 35 Gatchet, Listening Journal.
 - 36 Callie Holmes, Listening Journal, unpublished graduate student paper, Oral Narrative as History graduate seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
 - 37 Kim, Listening Journal.
 - 38 Ahlgren, Listening Journal.
 - 39 Andrews, Listening Journal.
 - 40 Devereux, Listening Journal.

- 41 Anne Frugé, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
- 42 Name withheld to protect privacy.
- 43 Holmes, Listening Journal.
- 44 Rachel Meyerson, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008; Frugé, Listening Journal.
- 45 Frugé, Listening Journal.
- 46 Devereux, Listening Journal.
- 47 Brooker, Listening Journal.
- 48 Meyerson, Listening Journal.
- 49 Elizabeth Runner, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
- 50 Devereux, Listening Journal.
- 51 Keeley Steenson, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
- 52 Gatchet, Listening Journal; Holmes, Listening Journal; Andrews, Listening Journal.
- 53 Brooker, Listening Journal; Brooker, E-mail message to the author, January 8, 2011; Meyerson, Listening Journal; Devereux, Listening Journal.
- 54 Holmes, Listening Journal.
- 55 Andrews, Listening Journal; Kim, Listening Journal.
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- 57 Gatchet, Listening Journal.
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- 61 Frugé, Listening Journal.
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- 63 Holmes, Listening Journal; Kim, Listening Journal.
- 64 Gatchet, Listening Journal; Holmes, Listening Journal.
- 65 Devereux, Listening Journal.
- 66 Names withheld to protect privacy.
- 67 Udelle Robinson, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
- 68 Brooker, Listening Journal; Gatchet, Listening Journal.
- 69 Ahlgren, Listening Journal; Angie Ahlgren, E-mail message to the author, January 6, 2011.
- 70 Karl Jun, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.
- 71 Jess Tillis, E-mail message to the author, University of Texas Scholarship Essay, March 31, 2008.
- 72 Devereux, Listening Journal.
- 73 Meyerson, Listening Journal.
- 74 Seth Owens, Listening Journal, unpublished undergraduate student paper, Oral History, Identity, and Diversity Plan II seminar, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.