

Susie Lan Cassel

## *A Hunger for Memory: Oral History Recovery in Community Service-Learning<sup>1</sup>*

*At a moment when multiculturalism is inspiring new directions for studying non-fiction, new literary genres are emerging, including the oral history narrative. This essay explores the value of the oral history narrative through its recovery in a service-learning course. Interrogating questions of genre, subjectivity, ethics, and composition, this paper affirms the place of oral history recovery in the composition classroom and proposes innovative strategies to remake a basic assignment into an interdisciplinary event.*

### **From Research to Curriculum**

Two years ago, serendipity brought to my desk a ten-volume, nineteenth century diary written mostly in English by a Chinese immigrant. I knew immediately that it promised to predate the entire genre of Asian American literature, assuming, of course, that a diary could be considered “literature.” In this post-modern, post-structuralist age, it seemed axiomatic to me that personal writing merits critical rhetorical study that yields unique insights into the human condition; my colleagues in history felt otherwise. For them a diary was an historical document that has the potential to confirm in personal voice incidents and events recorded in public, but nothing more. Provoked by the spirit of collegial inquiry, I set out to interrogate my own assumptions about the value of personal writing, especially as it pertains to ethnic and racial groups. In keeping with my university’s mission to incorporate into the classroom the lessons of ongoing research, I proposed a new course that would explicitly explore these questions of subjectivity, genre, verity, and literary merit to see what we could learn as an academic community from personal writing.

As I developed this course, entitled “American Immigrant Testimonials,” a second serendipitous event occurred: The local Community Service Learning (CSL) office announced a course development grant. As I thought about the final project for this new course, I sensed that something could be done to more closely link the students to members of a very multicultural community (San Diego), and that

the linkage could both serve the community and further an understanding of the subject matter. Perhaps students could understand more viscerally the struggles that accompany leaving one’s country and the complex literacy issues involved in writing the experience if they could speak at length to first-generation immigrants. If the students themselves were from immigrant families, perhaps speaking to someone outside the immediate family about their journey would give new insight to the themes and struggles that they might experience at home and that we would read about in class. I wondered if there were willing and appropriate residents of retirement homes or clients of social service agencies who would want to talk to students about the immigration experience. The CSL office assured me that their staff could locate appropriate subjects for my students to interview, so I applied and was happy to receive the grant. The project that resulted was an excellent pedagogical experiment that brought with it pleasure and surprise.

### **The Course: American Immigrant Testimonials**

I envisioned this new upper division class primarily as a survey of American ethnography, a genre defined in terms of content rather than form. Cutting across all classifications of personal narrative (e.g. auto/biography, diary, epistle, testimonial), ethnographic texts take as their major themes issues of culture, race, and ethnicity from a personal vantage point. When they are clustered together, as with Japanese American internment diaries, we can use these

texts to draw some conclusions about the world view of a group of people at a certain moment in time. We would, however, begin the course more traditionally by exploring a theoretical framework concerning the different manifestations of non-fiction (e.g. epistle, testimonial, diary, auto/biography). This theory would then be applied to classic American texts, like *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Once we laid the groundwork, we could survey American ethnographic writing, culminating in a class or two during which I could introduce the ten-volume diary I was working on to show students the real-life process of scholarly editing. Among my goals were to:

- Interrogate the genre of the personal narrative by examining its many manifestations, including testimonial, memoir, diary, auto/biography, and epistle. How does each form invite specific rhetorical devices and constructions of self? How have these forms been used strategically in historical times and places to convey certain political agendas? In what ways have these strategies of narrative been effective and limited?
- Survey cross-cultural testimonials from a number of different periods in American history in order to examine the processes of “Americanization.” What themes and issues persist from Puritan immigrants of the seventeenth century to Mexican immigrants of the twentieth century? What are the myths, realities, and stakes of immigration? If America is defined as “the” land of immigrants, then what does the study of immigrant writing tell us about “America”?
- Examine critically the construction of self and identity put forward in each narrative, including analysis of issues such as race, culture, ethnicity, nation, family, religion, language, and discrimination
- Expose students to scholarly editing and the recovery of a primary text
- Hone important basic skills, such as textual analysis, critical thinking, and writing competency

Our reading list began with the discovery texts of Christopher Columbus and Cabeza de Vaca. We examined several slave narratives (admittedly problematic given the “immigrant” focus of the course) to investigate the construction of the “I” from a voice assumed by many to be illit-

erate. We worked our way to the twentieth century from which the majority of the readings were taken, including turn-of-the-century pieces by Jewish Polish immigrants (Anzia Yezierska), mid-century writings by Chinese Americans (Jade Snow Wong), and contemporary work by Mexican Americans (Richard Rodriguez). Through fifteen weeks of study, we paid particular attention to three things: the form used, the self constructed, and the American-ness displayed (where American-ness referred more to the shared themes and textures of these texts than to the notion of assimilation).

### The Project: Oral History Recovery

For the final assignment, I imagined that the students might write an immigrant testimonial or an oral history. Borrowing from history and anthropology, by “oral history” in this context I mean a life narrative that has been written down or “recovered” by an interviewer. Typically, in this genre, the person whose oral history is being recovered will give verbal testimony about his or her life in response to questions or prompts. Although a video or tape recording may itself be considered an “oral history,” I use this term explicitly to refer to a unified, coherent text that documents significant moments in the life of the subject and that is based on the information reported in the interviews. In many ways akin to a biography, an oral history often takes the first-rather than the third-person voice and is typically selective rather than inclusive.

What better way to make real the lessons of hardship, transition and adaptation than to have students cross discourse communities to become writers rather than just readers, re-coverers rather than consumers of the text? An assignment like this would foster writing competence through critical reflection, make use of active rather than passive learning, and facilitate three-dimensional understanding of themes explored in the course. To share with the community the richness of our experiences, we could host a public reception at the end of the semester to share the stories and/or the process of recovering them. The CSL office made this assignment possible. They contacted familiar community partners, such as the local Chinese

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Historical Society, and sought new members, like Jewish community organizations and international “houses” located within our city. By the time school began, I had in hand a short list of agencies eager to participate.

From the first class, students seemed excited (if a little anxious) about the project. The students (rightly) wondered what it meant to be an “immigrant.” As this was an experimental assignment and my first exposure to CSL, I tried to give students as much leeway as possible. For the purposes of the assignment, “immigrant” was defined in the broadest possible terms to include anyone who was significantly affected by a move from one cultural or regional sphere to another.

During the second half of the semester, students conducted a two-hour interview every two weeks (for a total of four interviews or about eight hours) and turned in a journal with notes from each interview session. In preparation for the first interviews, we devoted a class to developing questions and discussing various approaches to oral history recovery, including a “scripted approach” in which interviewers use a standard set of questions from which straying is not allowed; a “prompt approach” in which questions are introduced to encourage the interviewees to speak freely about their interests; and a “directed approach” in which interviewers probe certain issues that the interviewees have raised. Due to time constraints, we implemented the latter.

Generally speaking, students learned basic information about their subjects during the first interview—the who, what, when, why, and how of immigrating. The second and third interviews were used to discuss in depth more specific themes or issues around which the narrative could be organized. By the fourth interview, students shared with their subjects a draft of the essay. This served as an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, fill in gaps, and gain tacit approval. Some students required additional interview sessions, but eight hours was adequate for most. The subjects signed a release form prior to the interview cycle which served, in part, as assurance that the students had paired themselves with appropriate subjects early in the semester.<sup>2</sup>

The course required two very different types of writing. This was an important point to make

clear. In the first part of the course, students wrote two short thesis-bound papers analyzing specific readings. For the final project, the oral history narrative, students were told that a simple recounting of the facts of the interviews, however accurate and interesting, would not satisfy the requirements of the assignment. The best papers would have as their focus a specific theme or issue which would serve as the organizing motif for the paper. Several class readings were recommended as good models.

### Narrative Choice in Oral History Recovery

One of the biggest challenges students faced was deciding how to focus and organize the information gathered from hours of discussions into a compelling and unified twenty-page text. Students deliberated over what form or genre their prose would take—which style of presentation would best capture the intimacies of thought, the thrill of adventure, the profound insight of experience? Would they use the most intimate and reflective of forms, the diary, or the more deliberate and audience-focused epistle? Would they record the stories from the third person voice as a biography or attempt to speak in the first person voice of an autobiography or memoir? Given the information they had acquired, what would they gain and lose from each form, from each decision? What criteria could they use to decide?

The issue of voice was perhaps the most difficult, and eventually the most rewarding, choice they had to make. Students were so respectful of their subjects that most hesitated to write in the first person “I” for fear that they could not adequately capture the voice that they had now been listening to for several weeks. Toward the end of the semester, as we shared more about the projects and the experience of oral history recovery, it was clear that almost every student wrote the first version of his or her paper from the third person perspective. As outsiders they had listened to these life stories, so it made sense that they captured the voices as they had heard them. But in nearly every case, the students found the results unsatisfying. They felt that their pieces were missing something visceral and that they somehow failed to represent a reality that they could perceive but not secure. With trepidation they each turned to a first-person model, most often as an experiment. They struggled to reproduce on the page the sound and texture and tone of the

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voice that they had been hearing, and they feared, perhaps more than the final grade itself, that the voice would be unfaithful to the original.

To their surprise, when it was time to share the ethnographies with their subjects, students found that the subjects were overwhelmingly delighted—even impressed—with the work. In many cases, subjects were grateful for the students' care and skillful rendition. In some cases, the subjects were sure that the students had captured the life story better than they themselves could have done. Subjects asked for copies of the narratives to give to their children, siblings, friends, and to save for themselves.

There were many tears of satisfaction shared in our final class discussions, but there was one noticeable exception. One student was working on the story of a very interesting friend whose immigration from Europe had taken him through a number of other countries and life paths. This subject insisted on a heroic depiction of himself as a self-made man, as one who had overcome obstacle after obstacle to reach his current successful position. The student was uneasy writing a strictly heroic narrative. She was well aware of the traps of the Franklinesque auto/biography and, although she admired her friend's achievements, she wanted also to recount some of the difficulties that led to those accomplishments in order to create a more objective and compelling text. He threatened not to allow her to share the piece in class. Without sharing any confidential information, the student spoke to the class about her dilemma as a writer. How could she be fair to her subject and be faithful to what she believed was a more compelling truth? Was her job to subvert herself in the presence of his voice and write the story—as a service—that the subject wanted to hear, even if it was politically motivated in a way that she found offensive? How could she knowingly capitulate to a stereotype so often cast and critiqued in auto/biography? In the end, the student worked and compromised with her subject to write the most balanced paper they could produce together.

While this situation was disappointing to the student, I was grateful that the class had this opportunity to discuss as practitioners one of the most interesting and problematic issues in ethnography and auto/biography. This discussion fostered an awareness of the relationship between text, subject, and author in a way that thirteen weeks of reading and discussion had not done. It resulted in a new option for the assignment

(which I will remember in future semesters): in difficult situations like this one, students should be allowed to write creatively or theoretically about the process of writing an oral history, critically examining the role of writer, the role of self, and the issue of authenticity.

### **Oral Histories: Evaluation and Publication**

The most challenging aspect of the course for me was grading these oral histories. For good moral reason, I made it clear that I would make no attempt to grade the quality of a subject's life. I emphasized that these narratives were being evaluated as pieces of writing and that careful consideration would be given to formal concerns, such as coherence, content, unity, and development. Having little idea what to expect from this experimental project, I required students to turn in a one-page abstract along with their oral histories that described what they were trying to accomplish in the piece. The abstract could discuss the theme and form writers focused upon, how they came to make these decisions, and how they believed these decisions served them. Why did they use this opening, this closing, and these stylistic or symbolic elements? In short, the abstract represented the writer's goals, and it seemed to me fair to use the abstract as an informal rubric for grading. In this way, I measured the success of the paper against the author's intentions rather than against my imagined construction of the story. This methodology seemed to work well.

The best papers expertly captured a sensibility and not just a set of experiences. These student writers successfully suppressed their own voices and convincingly portrayed the struggles and conflicts of their subjects. It is not surprising that many of these students were personally invested in their subjects' stories at a level well beyond the boundaries of the course and the assignment. They were granddaughters, nieces, colleagues, and classmates who regularly exceeded the eight-hour guideline for interviews (and likely spent considerably more time on the writing than their peers). In the less-effective papers, in most cases, it was clear that a unique narrative persona was developing, but that this persona had not yet congealed. These less successful papers were not as carefully organized or presented and the essays often differed markedly from their attached abstracts, as if students had not taken enough time to revise.

So invested was this group of students that

they asked, at the end of the class, if we could collect their papers into an anthology. One of these students volunteered to print the materials at a family print shop. When a local publisher (who publishes journals in the field of education) heard about the project, he offered to publish our book so that the record could remain. Arrangements with the publisher were not completed until the final week of the semester. At the last class, all students were invited to revise their papers for inclusion in the forthcoming anthology, but the work would have to be done after the class had formally ended.

The semester following the course, sample essays were placed on reserve in the library, students were given revision recommendations, and, if interested, were paired for peer feedback. Nine of the sixteen students eventually turned in revised essays. I (lightly) copyedited the essays and arranged them according to the themes of religion, war, and identity. They were published under a title suggested by one of the students, *Nation, Language, Culture: A Collection of Oral Histories*.<sup>3</sup>

### The Promise of Oral History Recovery

One of the most valuable lessons we learned from the project is that willing and appropriate subjects are seemingly omnipresent in our San Diego community. We found that many immigrants, despite concerns with privacy, are anxious to share their tales, eager to interact with students, and happy to participate in a project that promotes community understanding.

This assignment helped to blur for a moment the artificial divisions between university and society, folding students and community members alike into a richer and more complex web of human space.

Even though this Service-Learning project steered me in a slightly different direction from the one I originally set out on, my experience with this oral history project reaffirms for me the unique and cross-disciplinary value of the personal narrative. Whether the text is a diary, an autobiography, or an oral history, the personal narrative is a unique repository for revelations of an internal self and can provide a kind of insight that is difficult to obtain in any other way. I have also realized the endless variety of questions that oral history can be used to explore. I can imagine, for instance, a history- or folklore-oriented assignment in which students use oral history recovery to confirm or contest local cultural lore; a

psychologically compelling version of this project that might study the dimensions and dynamics of human memory, especially as it concerns (immigration) trauma, investigating what is said and what remains silent; or a communication-oriented approach that might examine verbal/non-verbal behavior in relation to life crises or gender. I can also imagine, in cases in which family members are interviewed, that the interviewer rather than the interviewee might be the primary subject of the study (i.e. After writing your father's oral history, how did your perception of him change?). Of course, a crucial caveat in all such studies is to ensure that the interview subjects are well aware of how the information from their personal narratives will be used. Interviewees also deserve ample opportunity for input into and withdrawal from the project.

What makes this oral history linkage with CSL so inviting, as Nora Bacon has noted, is that the students' investment in their projects transcends the conventional desire for a good grade; they "function not as students but as writers" (42). For the (immigrant) subjects, this is a gratifying opportunity to gain esteem and validity by sharing with students stories that might enrich their lives and provoke them to see the world around them in an unfamiliar way. For the instructor, this pedagogical experience confirmed Cathy Sayer's observation that service-learning can be extraordinarily time-consuming, requiring of the instructor multiple roles and responsibilities, many of which, like that of public relations coordinator, may not be anticipated. However, in this case, it was also delightfully satisfying.

I never imagined that an undergraduate class would mobilize to publish a collection of their own writing well after the course had ended. And I never imagined that an assignment could have such felt impact in so many different ways. In addition to the students' personal gratification, this assignment helped to blur for a moment the artificial divisions between university and society, folding students and community members alike into a richer and more complex web of human space. For one short moment, traditional roles were turned upside down: students became community participants and community partners became teachers. What a refreshing and wonderful moment that was.



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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Our university's Human Subjects Review Board reviewed and approved the project and the release form, as required. But there were a few stipulations. Because the private events of life might be revealed in our end-of-class public forum, the release form provided the subjects with several choices indicated by separate signature blocks. First, they could agree to participate in this project (which included consenting to interviews and allowing the student to write a paper based on the interviews). Next, they could choose whether or not to allow the student to reveal information from the interviews in the public forum. Despite the use of pseudonyms, this permission was especially tricky because some stories contained information about illegally crossing the U.S./Mexican border. Later, when we decided to publish the essays, a second release form was necessary.

<sup>3</sup> Copies of the book are available at \$10 (each) plus \$3 shipping. Please send checks to Susie Lan Cassel, Literature and Writing Dept., California State University, San Marcos, CA 92096.

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