

Review: *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation: Approaches to Oral History in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain*

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Rina Benmayor, María Eugenia Cardenal de la Nuez, and Pilar Domínguez Prats, eds. *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation: Approaches to Oral History in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 253 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-43869-0.

The memory boom of the recent decades has been influenced to an important degree by the experiences of the post-conflict societies of Latin America. An introduction in the English language to the work from the region has therefore long been overdue. In their introduction, the editors of *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation*, Rina Benmayor, María Eugenia Cardenal de la Nuez, and Pilar Domínguez Prats, underline this wish to make scholarship from Latin America, Portugal, and Spain available to an English-speaking audience. As they put it, “Oral history scholarship is global, but access to it is not universal” (1). The 11 essays compiled in the volume therefore now appear in translation. There is a longstanding tradition in Oral History in Latin America that is in alignment with the development of memory studies. This has to do especially with the conflictive histories of colonialism and the experiences of dictatorships in the region. That is why all of the essays use the life narrative interview to “reconstruct the past, analyze memory, interpret subjectivity, and challenge official interpretations” (3) that have tended to disregard memories of former militants and slaves.

The volume is organized in three parts, the first of which, on the theme of *Memory and Collective Identity* offers insights into the process of shaping collective identity in and through memory. The first essay by Ângela Campos investigates the intriguing case of veterans from the Portuguese Colonial War, a very particular and neglected group in the study of oral history and memory among the Portuguese population in general. The veterans have been afflicted by the double trauma of compulsory conscription then and denial of acknowledgement now, and are considered a “group of embarrassing historical actors” (21). In the following essay, Pilar Domínguez Prats examines the trajectories of Spanish working class leaders of the post-Franquist era. She

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initially focuses on their early experiences and immersion into unionism in a more personal tone, and then explores their views of the transition to democracy in more political terms. Christina Scheibe Wolff, Joana Maria Pedro, and Janine Gomez da Silva's essay explores in depth the "genderedness" of memories through narratives of female militants during the dictatorships of the Southern Cone (referring here to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay). The authors argue that these narratives are structured through gender in three key areas: discrimination on the basis of gender (what positions they could occupy, what tasks were assigned to them, etc.), memories of the body (for example, experiences of torture were deeply sexualized), and masculinization as an adaptation strategy.

In the second part, *Subjectivities and Identity Construction*, the contributions dwell on the role of individual narratives in the construction of personal identities. Miren Llona opens the section with a theoretically well-grounded case study about Polixene Trabudúa, a propagandist of Basque nationalism during the 1930s. Llona shows how feelings are transmitted in narratives, leaving an emotional imprint on memory in four domains: cultural contradictions in the family, the liberating effects of nationalism, middle class constructions of identity and aspirations, and nationalist teachings as bodily experiences. In chapter 5, Maria Eugenia Cardenal de la Nuez introduces the reader to the story of Lola – a clinical social worker in contemporary Spain – and her efforts to construct a professional identity in adverse socioeconomic conditions. From her experience of working in precarious conditions, Lola is shown to gain self-worth in the form of personal growth and from being taken seriously as a working individual. The essay combines well with the subsequent chapter, by Magdalena Villarreal, exploring the life of María, a 38-year-old undocumented migrant working in agriculture in California. Through the life history interview method, María's aspirations and her interpretations of the American Dream are explored in opposition to her humble upbringing in Mexico, her understanding of her right and duties, and her contributions to the host country. Chapter 7, by Ángeles Arjona Garrido, Juan Carlos Checa Olmos, Estefanía Ación González, and Francisco Majuelos Martínez, sensibly focuses on the interrelations of migration, sex work and stigma in Almería, Spain. Interviewees from Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe express their ideas about the stigma associated with sex work, as well as their coping strategies and means of legitimizing their work. The authors also comment on the complicated research process, which involved the establishment of trust and use of more informal strategies, such as participant observation and informal conversations, to complement the life history method.

Finally, the third part, *Memory and Public Representation*, unites essays outlining the uses of oral history and memory to transform both collective consciousness and historical discourses. While the first part is largely concerned with the historico-political contexts the research subjects experienced, and the

second part mainly draws on the experiences of different working environments, the final part is easily the most diverse, covering a wide range of topics from tattoos over race relations to photography and theater performances. In “Oral Accounts and Visual Inscriptions: Narratives under Heavily Tattooed Skin”, Victor Sergio Ferreira innovatively combines oral history in his research on tattoos, explaining how the “surface of heavily tattooed skin acquired symbolic depth, transforming into a visual map of autobiographical memory” (151). As he observed in his case study of the Lisbon tattoo scene, the symbolic content of tattoos is insufficiently captured through visual methods; this is why he decided to combine these with oral history interviewing techniques. In the next chapter, Verena Alberti and Amilcar Araujo Pereira passionately underline the curricular relevance of teaching the history of race relations in Brazil through oral history accounts. As they describe it, the combination of primary sources with other educational activities helps to raise consciousness in the classroom and to build knowledge about the history of race relations. In the subsequent chapter, Alberto del Castillo Troncoso uses photography and oral history to reveal new insights about the relationship between images and words in the context of the 1968 student movement in Mexico. He contrasts the statements of three photographers from the time with the images they produced for different newspapers. Finally, Joana Craveiro describes her “Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories,” a creative and surprising seven-part performance piece about the Portuguese Dictatorship and Revolution. She uses oral testimony and private archival documents as forms of memory as well as of post-memory in order to give voice to the invisible or undervalued discourses surrounding events in Portuguese history of the 20th century. She furthermore incorporates debates with the audience as transformational processes with the potential to change not only the perspectives of the audience but also her own.

Overall, the perspectives on and uses of oral history in Latin America, Spain and Portugal offered in the volume represent a rather idiosyncratic selection, especially considering the essays on Latin America. Considering that, as the authors themselves point out, memory studies and oral history practice have developed together in this region, it is curious that only one of the eleven essays speaks of these dictatorial pasts, because it is especially in these post-conflict contexts that work on collective memory has flourished. The cases presented also represent an imagined Latin America in which the Andean countries, Central America and the Caribbean are absent. Also, the omission of works on indigenous oral traditions, which could have added considerably to the volume’s discussions of representation, is recognized by the authors, yet not accounted for. This, too, makes the selection peculiar.

While it is true that many of the stories presented in this volume could contribute to existing historical debates, salvaging testimonies of marginalized subjects should not, per se, count as a sufficient justification for research. Unfortunately, not all of the essays are able to convey the individual stories

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behind the interview snippets and effectively relate them to broader theoretical or methodological debates in the field. Notable exceptions here are the essays by Christina Scheibe Wolff *et al.*, Ángeles Arjona Garrido *et al.*, and Joana Craveiro, all of whom have capably enriched theoretical and methodological debates without losing sight of the individuals portrayed in their research.

The topics treated throughout the volume are laudably diverse and very timely, sometimes offering innovative approaches to the material; the essays by Victor Sergio Ferreira and Joana Craveiro stand out, for example, in this regard. Of particular note is the volume's emphasis on the body as a site and medium for memory. The deliberate use of methodologies incorporating bodily dimensions of oral history presents new and interesting insights: see especially the contributions of Christina Scheibe Wolff *et al.*, Miren Llona, and, again, Joana Craveiro. The volume could be valuable for researchers working with oral testimony about precarious and illegalized working conditions in Spain and other contexts of migration, and to early career researchers interested in learning about oral history in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries. However, as an introduction to the work from Latin America, it should be treated with caution, as it presents only a limited selection of the work done in the continent, in terms of both the topics and the countries covered.