



Edited by Mark Cave
and Stephen M. Sloan

LISTENING ON THE EDGE

ORAL HISTORY
IN THE
AFTERMATH
OF CRISIS

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*To all of our narrators who have shared their
experiences in the wake of catastrophe*

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Acknowledgments

This project began with a conversation I had with Don Ritchie on a riverboat cruise excursion at the 2008 Oral History Association meeting in Pittsburgh. We talked about the work that I was doing with the Historic New Orleans Collection to document the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He introduced me to fellow Oxford Oral History Series editor Rob Perks and to Oxford executive editor Nancy Toff. My initial intent was to focus the book entirely on the Hurricane Katrina project that I had been working on, devoting each chapter to a different lesson learned. Nancy and the series editors (who also included Todd Moye and Kathryn Nasstrom) wisely recommended a broader approach as it would give the reader insight into the varied nature of crises. Nancy and Todd put me in contact with Stephen Sloan, who at the time was the chairman of OHA's Emerging Crises Research Fund. I had known Stephen for a number of years and was thrilled with the opportunity to partner with him on this project. The experience of working with both Stephen and Nancy has been an enjoyable one from start to finish.

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—Mark Cave

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—Stephen M. Sloan

INTRODUCTION: WHAT REMAINS

Reflections on Crisis Oral History

Mark Cave

Crisis is a historical constant. In 2011 alone, we watched the television news in horror as the ocean swallowed coastal communities in Japan. We were touched by the sight of families digging through rubble after tornadoes in Missouri and Alabama and after earthquakes in Turkey and New Zealand. We were sickened by the senselessness of a school shooting in Brazil; angered by terrorist attacks in Russia and Norway; and inspired by revolution in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Our attention to these events is held, but not for long. Our thoughts are consumed by daily routine or captured by the next headline. What remains when the cameras turn away, and reporters go home, are individuals and communities in the process of redefinition, forever changed by the event. Exploring the process of this change in a single life or the life of a community can tell us a great deal about who we are and who we are likely to become. Oral history as a methodology, with its patient, open-ended approach and emphasis on empathy, is well suited as a tool for this exploration.

Recording the experience of crisis is central to what the oral historian does, but most commonly such recollections have been captured long after events. In recent years, there has been a trend to conduct interviews soon after, or even in the midst of, crisis. This work presents unique possibilities, but also some significant concerns. Perhaps in reaction to the recent popularity of interviewing in the aftermath of crisis, many oral historians have expressed concerns regarding the psychological impact of the interview process on interviewees. Clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst Ghislaine Boulanger has been an important figure in recent years in bridging the gap between the psychology and oral history communities. She has taught at the Columbia Center for Oral History (CCOH) Summer Institute and worked with CCOH's Rule of Law Oral History Project. Boulanger suggests that if an interviewee is willing to talk about his or her experience, then it is generally safe to proceed with an interview. In fact, the process can serve to validate the individual's traumatic experience and help the survivor

begin to make meaning of the event.¹ Oral historians are in a unique position to provide this validation since they are often seen by interviewees as agents of a community's collective memory.

Boulanger first became involved with the oral history community as a narrator, interviewed by oral historian Mary Marshall Clark concerning Boulanger's psychotherapy work following the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City.² She and Clark brought attention to the issue of vicarious traumatization among interviewers who opened themselves up to a flood of horrific stories in the aftermath of the World Trade Center's destruction. The indicators of vicarious traumatization are similar to those of direct traumatization and can include preoccupation with the stories told by survivors, difficulties concentrating, sleeplessness, feelings of alienation, or emotional volatility. Interviewers and administrators of oral history projects should educate themselves about the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and be mindful of the impact that listening is having on the mental health of interviewers, particularly for projects in which large numbers of witnesses of traumatic events are being interviewed. Interviewers who have been affected by traumatic experience in their own lives may have an increased vulnerability to vicarious traumatization and should be particularly cautious.³

Dutch oral historian Selma Leydesdorff conducted life story interviews with women who survived the Bosnian genocide, and she has written and lectured extensively on the issue of trauma. Much of her work relates to the impact of traumatic experiences on memory. She notes how a traumatic experience can distort the recall of events, causing a chronological incoherence within narratives. For some, the traumatic event dominates their life story and colors the memories of their life both before and after the event. This obviously presents challenges for the oral historian. Interviewers need to be patient and empathic listeners and embrace the process of helping the interviewee create order in a chaotic memory.⁴ Making sense of, and finding meaning in, what had happened is a necessary first step in healing. French oral historian Jean Hatzfeld remarked on interviewing survivors of the Rwandan genocide: "Alone, faced with the reality of genocide, a survivor chooses to speak, or to be silent. A survivor who chooses to speak accepts the constant need to question and challenge the confusion of his memory."⁵

Trauma is a social issue as well. Communities that have known the impact of a traumatic event often feel alienated or set apart by their experience from society at large. Carolyn Mears was the mother of a student exposed to the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. She was prompted by her experience as part of this grieving community to develop a research methodology that not only documents the event and its aftermath but also promotes recovery. Her work offers a unique model for conducting research in the aftermath of traumatic events. In this method of inquiry, which she calls the *gateway approach*, oral history interviewing creates a gateway between a traumatized community

and the larger society, helping to mitigate the alienation felt by the impacted community. Content from Mears's Columbine study has been used to shape documentary responses to school shootings at Virginia Tech; Jokela, Finland; Chardon, Ohio; and Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut.⁶

Although oral historians can help interviewees with the process of creating meaning from moments of crisis, they should never consider themselves healers. The methodology used by a psychoanalyst may seem similar to an oral historian's approach, but the intention is much different. A psychoanalyst's primary concern is with what is taking place in the session itself, with the ongoing therapeutic relationship and with the gradual unfolding of the survivor's story, as the survivor/patient strives to come to terms with the traumatic experience. The purpose of conducting an oral history is to document the emotional perspective of a witness or participant to events. The process of creating this document can validate an individual's traumatic experience and give him or her a sense of empowerment and purpose, but its essential purpose is to create a historical narrative.

South African oral historian Sean Field has written extensively on trauma, particularly in connection with testimonies provided to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as well as interviews with Rwandan genocide survivors.⁷ Field stresses the differences between the psychoanalyst and the oral historian, but he advocates for placing an emphasis on childhood and family experience in interviews with those who have suffered traumatic events. He notes how important it is to consider these individual experiential and cultural influences when interpreting an individual's memory, and not to assume that people will react similarly to trauma. Gaining insight into an individual's life prior to the traumatic event is necessary to understand how memories of a traumatic event are shaped. Field states that "we must privilege the interviewees' powers of imagination and creativity in conveying their 'verbal pictures.' By providing opportunities for people to remember and narrate their disruptive pasts we provide space for the affective force of their memories to be articulated and imaginatively contained."⁸

Field explored how an interviewee's imagination frames what he or she remembers about personal thoughts or feelings in the past. He argues that meaningful and imaginative remembering is necessary for a survivor to move beyond a crisis.⁹ This process of meaningful remembrance is a social process. Field notes that "it requires social ties to others who share these memories within spaces such as family homes, museums, schools, burial societies and other civic gatherings, where stories are told and re-told."¹⁰

A community's imagined memory, however, is shaped by the immediate needs of recovery and often has little to do with the truth. Any imaginative process of remembering requires an *explanation* for why the crisis occurred.¹¹ In humanity's distant past mythologies provided these explanations: an upset Poseidon pounding his trident on the seafloor caused the earthquake; the Judgment of

Paris led to the fall of Troy. In most modern societies, the media is the major force in contextualizing events. Journalists tell us why things happened. When the media cannot provide the answers, communities find it difficult to move beyond crisis.

Journalists and oral historians share a responsibility to help communities make sense of crisis. Communications scholar John Tisdale, in his study of the journalistic coverage of Hurricane Audrey, which struck Louisiana in 1957, notes that the observational style of reporting journalists often use while covering a crisis is very similar to oral history. In this style of reporting, the journalist becomes the narrator telling his or her story to a reader or viewer, who acts as the interviewer. Of course, in most instances, the reader or viewer cannot ask questions as an interviewer can, but he or she can choose to change the channel or read the sports page instead.¹² In Tisdale's words, "a dialogue of expectation exists between the writings of journalists and the expectations of the reader. If journalists do not retrieve and present certain information in a news story, the reader (interviewer) is likely to find another source of information (the competition)."¹³ The need to respond to the demands of their readers or viewers limits the capability of journalists to document an event. To some extent, these demands are in response to what the public wants in order to contextualize the event. But what people *want* may not always be the truth, and thus the oral historian must be on the lookout for how the collective understanding of a crisis differs from the truth. Oral historians should target their work in a way that will provide future generations a clearer understanding.

An essential part of the explanation process is finding someone to blame. For a community to heal, it needs to transfer responsibility of an event, usually to a higher authority.¹⁴ For most of our history, "the will of God" was used to free us from responsibility for events. Even in 2005, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, some saw the destruction of New Orleans as God's wrath on a sinful city. A more effective coping mechanism for most people in modern society is to blame the government or community leaders. Bureaucrats normally serve as good targets, and a few firings or the restructuring of governmental agencies generally enables the community to move on. In contextualizing crisis, one of the key roles of the media is to help the community find who is to blame. This role, however, often puts journalists at odds with important groups of witnesses. The oral historian, who in general is not seen as judgmental or opportunistic, may often gain access to people who will not talk to the "media." Offering oral history as a means for these individuals to contextualize their experience can lead to a more nuanced understanding of events. That said, the oral historian should be attentive to how interviewees may try to use the interview process for their own ends. Interviewers may also want to reevaluate current notions of shared authority.¹⁵

Oral history and journalism really are what Mark Feldstein called "kissing cousins."¹⁶ They both play an important role in helping communities process

events. Journalists are the primary creators of the explanations needed to move beyond crisis, but they are inhibited in what they can do by their need to be responsive to the consumers of their product. They are also limited when they cannot get access or cooperation from witnesses. In the aftermath of crisis, the oral historian can do much to help prevent gaps in the journalistic coverage of an event from being reflected in the historical record by attending to how the event is being covered in the media and purposefully seeking out interviewees who can offer alternative perspectives. This work will undoubtedly create a more nuanced record of events. It can also provide a useful blueprint for further historical inquiry as well as a baseline of emotional perspective.

Emotion is a big part of truth, particularly in times of crisis. It dictates how we interpret what is going on around us and often determines what choices we make. To know what someone did is to know only half the story. No other archival methodology can record emotion as well as oral history. But passions fade, so the oral historian needs to act quickly to document experience. Not only is emotion the key to understanding the actions and attitudes of interviewees, it is often the glue that holds the memory of events together. As the powerful feelings associated with an event begin to fade, the memory of the details of the experience begin to degrade. Our weakened memories then become vulnerable to change, often influenced by changes in our own values and attitudes, as well as by collective interpretations of events.¹⁷

A possible exception to this pliability of long-term memory is what Alice and Howard Hoffman have called "archival memory." These are normally memories of important events that a witness/participant is frequently called on to remember. A story is told again and again, and every time it is polished more finely. Certain details deemed unnecessary for the narrative are omitted and, over time, forgotten. What is left is permanently etched in memory, and virtually nothing can alter it. To demonstrate their ideas on archival memory, the Hoffmans executed a long-term study on Howard's memory of his military service during World War II. Alice conducted interviews with Howard about his military service in 1978, 1982, and 1986. For the 1978 interview, Alice did not do research; she simply prompted him to tell his story. For the 1982 interview, she researched his service in the war and asked probing questions about his experiences. The 1986 interview was set in the backdrop of a reunion of men with whom Howard had served during the war. There was virtually no significant difference in Howard's responses. The questions that Alice had asked in the 1982 interview, posed again to Howard in 1986, did not trigger any new memories; nor did his interaction with the soldiers with whom he had served. The memory of Howard's war experience appeared unchangeable, but what was alarming was that Alice found evidence of episodes in Howard's war experience that he simply could not remember. These events were confirmed by other soldiers and by photographs, but nothing could trigger his memory. It was not a traumatic event that had been repressed, but simply an event that did not fit easily into

the story arc that Howard had created and “rehearsed” again and again through his adult life.¹⁸

By conducting oral history in the midst of a crisis or soon afterward, we can capture the emotions of those involved, providing future generations with greater insight into participants’ motivations. By capturing accounts while the feelings associated with events have not faded, we are able to record memories before they are influenced by changing circumstances or shifting collective interpretations. We can also salvage memories that may otherwise be lost in the process of creating “archival memory.” There is still much we do not know about how memory works, and the oral historian is in a position to add greatly to our understanding. By conducting interviews in crisis environments soon after events, and then interviewing again years later, we may be able to shed more light on the process of memory.

We have only just begun to explore the value of doing oral history in crisis environments. Although it may be presumptuous to think that what the oral historian does is “healing” for those who have experienced traumatic events, offering an attentive ear to people who want to talk about the experience does help them process and perhaps move forward. Although the media are the major force in contextualizing events, they are limited in what they can do by the demands of their consumers and by their ability to have access to witnesses. Oral historians, whose work is generally not as market driven as that of journalists, can often target their work in ways that add texture and nuance to our understanding of events. And since their work is generally not seen as judgmental or opportunistic, they can often get access to witnesses when journalists are unable to do so. Perhaps most importantly, the oral historian can record the perspective of an individual, capturing for posterity the emotional resonance of events and ultimately adding depth and feeling to our understanding of our past.

Although the practice is growing in popularity, recording narratives in the aftermath of crisis is not new. During World War II, in an attempt to give wounded soldiers the opportunity to understand the situations in which they were wounded, the U.S. military hired and trained combat historians. Academic historians or journalists by trade, these combat historians followed soldiers into battle, interviewing participants of conflicts sometimes mere hours after the activity had taken place.

In his memoir, the combat historian and eventual chief of the army’s historical branch, Samuel L. A. Marshall, wrote: “In the Pacific I had learned by trying it three times that a combat historian can get nothing effective done in the hour of landing amid the chaos of a littered beachhead. He but risks his life to no avail. His rule of action must ever be to push for the opportunity to deal with troops at the earliest moment when they will respond. That excludes the clinching hour when they are under flat trajectory fire, scattered and scared to death.”¹⁹ Combat historian Forrest Pogue followed the troops who landed on Omaha Beach during the invasion of Normandy. He conducted his first interviews the

day after the initial assault, while stationed on a hospital ship. One of his first interviews was with a soldier “who was shot through both hands,” according to Pogue; the soldier “greeted me eagerly and expressed his willingness to talk if I would hold a milk bottle while he relieved himself. Someone had handed him the receptacle, forgetting that he was too completely swathed in bandages to make use of it. Thus, feeling not at all like Florence Nightingale, I started my interview.”²⁰

Combat historians such as Pogue and Marshall were learning on the job, and as the war progressed they developed a system. They interviewed unit commanders first to acquire an overview of each unit’s activity. The historians asked about the exact location of an engagement, the nature of the terrain, weather conditions, the effectiveness of the weapons used, and the nature of support received by other units. The interviewers also inquired about problems encountered during a particular engagement and recorded the names of soldiers who distinguished themselves in the conflict. While the combat historian conducted the interview, the unit commander called in soldiers to help verify his memory, so that the interview evolved into a group discussion about the engagement. Often these forums became quite large, involving, as Pogue notes, as many as twenty soldiers.²¹ Combat historians used this method for the remainder of World War II and employed the approach again during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.²²

On the evening of October 2, 1968, hundreds of student protesters were killed or wounded by the Mexican army and special police in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City. The event, which occurred as the city was preparing for the opening of the Olympic Games, is known in Mexican history as the Night of Tlatelolco. The morning following the massacre, a shocked journalist and young mother, Elena Poniatowska, wandered around the blood-stained plaza with a tape recorder, interviewing eyewitnesses to the horrific event.²³ She continued her work for months, interviewing surviving protesters in prison, grieving parents of slain students, as well as poets and intellectuals who had inspired the student movement. She initially took her interviews to the local media, but they refused to print them in fear of retribution by the Mexican government. Ultimately she published selected excerpts of these interviews in a book called *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral*. The book was a montage not only of oral history excerpts but also of printed documents related to the event, such as posters and poetry. Poniatowska herself called the book a “collage.”²⁴ In many ways, it precipitated the nature of online memory websites that were so common after September 11 and Hurricane Katrina.²⁵

When a major earthquake struck Mexico City on September 19, 1985, Poniatowska reacted once again.²⁶ She initially responded as a disaster relief volunteer, but she was convinced by her friends and colleagues to devote her time to oral history. She led a team of interviewers who were for all practical purposes embedded in the response effort. They visited shelters and hospitals and searched for missing persons. Following this experience, Poniatowska made

a poetic and passionate argument for the use of oral history in the immediate aftermath of events—particularly in documenting the experience of victims. She compares oral history to the faint sounds of survivors buried deep in the rubble: “I imagine that oral history is like those signals that the sensors detected under the layers of concrete and the beams that covered the survivors. Those voices are intertwined to make up the unique and plural voice of the anonymous suffering mass, the voice of those who have no voice, the voice of oral history.”²⁷ Poniatowska’s work in Mexico City was a turning point in crisis oral history. Her poetic arguments for conducting interviews in postdisaster environments inspired many others.

Peter Parkhill and Richard Raxworthy interviewed emergency personnel who responded to an earthquake that struck Newcastle, Australia, on December 29, 1989. The project was conducted with the cooperation of the National Library of Australia and the Newcastle Region Public Library. In the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake in northern California, Reserve Army officer Eve Iversen began an oral history project documenting the response of U.S. Army officers stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco. The quake occurred on October 17, 1989, just as a national TV audience was tuning in to see the third game of the World Series between the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants. It was the first time a nationwide American television audience viewed such an event live. The perspective this event provided was a precursor to the closeness to crisis that developed worldwide as twenty-four-hour news networks expanded in the 1990s. This “closeness” to moments of crisis undoubtedly nurtured further the interest in crisis oral history.²⁸

The sudden and dramatic collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe beginning in March 1989 inspired important oral history fieldwork. The transformation in these societies is in many ways still a work in progress. Perspectives are in flux as individuals adapt to new economic and political systems. In connection to his work in the early nineties documenting the Velvet Revolution in Prague, journalist and oral historian David Leviatin remarked: “Oral history, by combining aspects of journalism and history, is ideally suited to capturing the *process of change* taking place between the headline and the monograph.”²⁹

Although the international community sat on its hands during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the event provoked significant oral history work. Jean Hatzfeld, a correspondent for the French daily newspaper *Libération*, reported on this horrific event. On his decision to return to Rwanda, Hatzfeld wrote: “Today, some Tutsis explain that ‘life has broken down,’ whereas for others, it has ‘stopped,’ and still others say that it ‘absolutely must go on.’ They all admit, however, that among themselves they talk of nothing but the genocide. That was what convinced me to return to Rwanda and speak with them, to drink Primus beer in Marie-Louise’s shop or banana beer at the bar in Kibunga, to keep visiting the adobe houses and cabaret terraces, to chat in the shade of the acacias, hesitantly

at first, then with increasing confidence and familiarity.” He notes the isolation that many Tutsi felt, the distrust that inhibited them, and the guilt that many felt for being alive when so many of their own were dead.³⁰

Hatzfeld went on to interview Hutu men imprisoned for the murders they committed during the genocide. When he first set out to interview these men, he admits, he felt nothing but hatred for them. But as their relationship developed, his curiosity over what motivated them overcame his aversion. To get these killers to open up to him, he used a tactic similar to that used by combat historians: that is, getting them together in a group. Hatzfeld notes: “Their friendly solidarity, their disconnection from the world they soaked in blood, their incomprehension of their new existence, their inability to notice how we see them—all this makes them more accessible. Their patience and serenity, and sometimes their naïveté, finally rub off on our relationship and touch particularly on their mysterious willingness to talk.”³¹ In crisis oral history fieldwork, oral historians may find themselves interviewing individuals they don’t necessarily like or identify with. Hatzfeld’s work is a good case study in how this type of work can be done effectively.

Mary Marshall Clark, the director of the Columbia Center for Oral History in New York, initiated the September 11 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. According to Clark, the most difficult part of getting such a large-scale project off the ground was creating the “sociological framework” for the study. That is, how to select a diverse and representative pool of potential interviewees that would provide a snapshot of New York in 2001 for future generations? For help she turned to Columbia sociologist Peter Bearman, then head of the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy. Together they trained interviewers and selected a wide range of interviewees, from first responders and public health workers to taxi drivers and Muslim Americans. Sampling techniques used by sociologists can help oral historians achieve strategic goals for the selection of interviewees, and when this expertise is available, and if the nature of the project calls for it, as it did in Columbia’s September 11 project, these methods should be embraced.

The terrorist attacks triggered protracted and controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and significant suspicion and mistreatment of the Muslim American population in the United States. Shifts in perspective were inevitable, so from the outset Clark and Bearman planned multiple rounds of interviews with the same interviewees in order to capture changes in perspective over the course of the decade that followed September 11. Such longitudinal studies are challenging to execute and require institutional stability and the maintenance of relationships with the interviewees over a long period of time, but the outcomes can tell us a great deal about how the memory of events is shaped. The ongoing nature of the crisis triggered by the September 11 attacks and the shifting perspectives that followed also led Clark and the Columbia Center for Oral History to establish the Rule of Law Oral History Project in 2008. This project explores the state of

human and civil rights in the post–September 11 world and has recently focused on the use of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility.³²

Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005, was the topic for a flood of oral history work. In the aftermath of the storm, the population of the city of New Orleans was evacuated after the levees that protected the city failed and it spiraled into chaos. Citizens ended up in evacuee shelters set up throughout the southeastern United States. For many of the city's poor African American population, returning home was difficult if not impossible. Obstacles were being placed on their ability to return home, and many felt they were not entirely welcomed in the communities to which they were evacuated. American historian D'Ann Penner directed the Saddest Days Oral History Project, which conducted interviews with New Orleanians who had been evacuated to seven southern states. The work not only provides a rich document of the events in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, but also reveals the difficulties that exiled individuals had in creating what Field referred to as "meaningful remembrance," because they did not have the community support necessary for constructing agency in the aftermath of traumatic events.³³

The Historic New Orleans Collection, a museum and research center devoted to the history and culture of New Orleans, created a project focused on the experiences of local, state, and federal first responders. In the aftermath of the disaster, response groups were blamed for the slow response to the crisis; in many cases, responders such as policemen and firemen were reluctant or forbidden by their agencies from talking to the media for fear of being misrepresented. The agencies were more open to participating in oral history work. The Historic New Orleans Collection created formal partnerships with some of these agencies, and in some instances the agencies tied the oral history work into their own after-action studies of their response to Katrina. The project provides an interesting counterperspective to the work done by D'Ann Penner, and it has proved to be an important blueprint for further inquiry into the crisis.³⁴

In 2005 author Dave Eggers and human rights activist Lola Vollen founded a nonprofit book series called *Voice of Witness*, devoted to using oral history to document human rights crises throughout the world. The series began with a project centered on post-Katrina New Orleans, but contributors have since worked in a wide range of crisis environments, interviewing survivors of Burma's military regime, abducted and displaced people from the Sudan, and undocumented workers and refugees living in the United States. The intention of their work has been not only to give a voice and thus empowerment to victims of human rights abuses, but also to use the humanizing function of oral history to nurture empathy in readers and hopefully inspire action on the part of the international community to the crisis to which they are bringing attention. Educational outreach has become a core function of their mission, and teaching

guides based on their oral history projects have been developed with the intention of bringing students closer to crisis.³⁵

The growing awareness of crisis nurtured by the growth of television and the Internet has resulted in an increase in oral history responses to crisis. This trend was acknowledged in 2006 when the Oral History Association established the Emerging Crisis Oral History Research Fund. This fund sponsors oral historians working in crisis environments and by doing so encourages this work to take place. The fund has financed such work as filmmaker Karin Mak's interviews with women workers in China who had been poisoned by cadmium while employed by a multinational battery manufacturer. Her work was done in the midst of China's preparations for the Beijing Olympics, a time when the government was particularly sensitive to bad public relations and freedom of expression was even more limited. Another recipient was Eric Meringer's *Ciudad Juárez: Lives Interrupted* project. Meringer explored the impact of drug war violence on residents in the Mexican city of Juárez, and he revealed significant differences between how the international media reported the violence and how local residents perceived the violence.³⁶

It is clear that conducting interviews in crisis environments is no longer a tangential issue. Such work has become a fundamental part of what oral historians do. Today, interviews are being conducted in crisis environments in almost every area of the globe. Every interview is unique. Each one can offer lessons, not only in oral history methodology, but also in the complexities of the human heart and mind at the moments when the limits of individual fortitude and community cohesion face their greatest challenges.

Compassion and chance pull oral historians into crisis settings more often than academic agendas. Only seldom does circumstance involve the attention of established scholars in the field. As a result, literature on the best practices of oral history fieldwork in the aftermath of crisis is limited, particularly in relation to the volume of work being done. It is important that as a profession we acknowledge the unique problems that this work presents and make a concerted effort to better equip oral historians to meet these challenges. Crisis happens. A natural disaster or a mass shooting can destroy in an instant any community's sense of well-being. Individuals will be left traumatized and in search of meaning. Oral historians have an important role to play in helping them make sense in what remains.

Notes

1. Interview with Ghislaine Boulanger by author, January 23, 2013; see also Ghislaine Boulanger, *Wounded by Reality: Understanding and Treating Adult Onset Trauma* (Mahwah, NJ: Analytic Press, 2007).
2. See Mary Marshall Clark's interview with psychologist Ghislaine Boulanger in *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001 and the Years That Followed* (New York: New Press, 2011).

3. The issue of vicarious traumatization has been a concern of those working in the mental health field. Boulanger conducted numerous interviews with mental health professionals in New Orleans about the impact of listening to the stories of survivors of Hurricane Katrina. The results of her work are outlined in "Fearful Symmetry: Shared Trauma in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 23 (2013): 31–44. Vicarious traumatization has been a concern for journalists as well. In her article "Aftershock: Journalists and Trauma," *Quill* 87, no. 9 (1999): 14, Michelle Johnson writes, "Many journalists believe they are not supposed to be among the traumatized and despite growing evidence and acceptance in the industry that traumatic stress is affecting journalists, the industry clings to images of valiant reporters unscathed by endless horrors and catastrophe." In her book *Beyond the Trauma Vortex: The Media's Role in Healing Fear, Terror, and Violence* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2003), Gina Ross devotes a chapter to the issue of vicarious traumatization. She uses the example of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, who committed suicide not long after winning the Pulitzer Prize for an image that he captured in Sudan of a vulture landing near a starving child. In his suicide note he mentions that he was being haunted by the horrific images seen on the job, and he stated that "the pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist." Ross recommends that journalists talk about disturbing experiences to those close to them and not isolate themselves.
4. Interview with Selma Leydesdorff by author, January 24, 2013; see also Kim Lacy Rogers and Selma Leydesdorff, *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Selma Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
5. Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage, Jean Hatzfeld nomination, 2004, <http://www.lettre-ulysses-award.org/authors04/hatzfeld.html>.
6. Interview with Carolyn Mears by author, January 31, 2013; see also Carolyn Mears, "A Columbine Study: Giving Voice, Hearing Meaning," *Oral History Review* 35, no. 2 (2008): 159–75; and Carolyn Mears, *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
7. The TRC took the oral testimony of twenty-two hundred people between 1995 and 1998. Victims of gross human rights violations during apartheid were invited to give testimony at public hearings, which were televised throughout South Africa. President Nelson Mandela said of the efforts of the TRC: "Only by knowing the truth can we hope to heal the terrible wounds of the past that are the legacy of apartheid. Only the truth can put the past to rest."
8. Interview with Sean Field by author, February 11, 2013.
9. Sean Field, "Beyond 'Healing' Trauma Oral History and Regeneration," *Oral History* 34, no. 1 (2006): 31–42; and "Disappointed Remains: Trauma, Testimony and Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142–58. See also Sean Field, *Oral History, Community and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
10. Field interview, February 11, 2013.
11. Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman writes, "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims." See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 1.
12. John R. Tisdale, "Observational Reporting as Oral History: How Journalists Interpreted the Death and Destruction of Hurricane Audrey," *Oral History Review* 27, no. 2 (2000): 41–65.
13. *Ibid.*, 43.
14. Katherine V. Cashman and Shane J. Cronin, "Welcoming a Monster to the World: Myths, Oral Tradition, and Modern Societal Response to Volcanic Disasters," *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 176, no. 3 (2008): 407–18.
15. Erin Jessee, "The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings," *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 289–307.
16. Mark Feldstein, "Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History," *Oral History Review* 31, no. 1 (2004): 1–22.

17. For more information on the relationship of emotion to memory, see David C. Rubin, *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Daniel Reisberg and Paula Hertel, *Memory and Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
18. Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History: The Case for Memory," in *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, ed. Jaclyn Jeffrey and Glenace Edwall (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 107–36.
19. S. L. A. Marshall, *Bringing Up the Rear: A Memoir* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1979), 90.
20. Forrest C. Pogue, *Pogue's War: Diaries of a WWII Combat Historian* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 58.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Professional literature in the field of oral history is sparse prior to the 1970s, so finding out what civilian oral historians were working on before that time is difficult. In the United States in the late 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project life history work undoubtedly sparked in many an interest in oral history. During the 1940s and 1950s jazz historians such as Alan Lomax, Frederic Ramsey Jr., William Russell, and Charles Smith collected life stories of American jazz musicians. With this much interest in oral history, it is likely that projects were carried out in crisis environments, and products of this work have found their way into an archive. For instance, the Historic New Orleans Collection contains the papers of Frederic Ramsey Jr. He is noted for his documentation of American musicians, but included in his papers are transcripts of interviews he conducted with a diverse sampling of citizens in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1964. The interviews focused on reactions to the civil rights movement in a small southern town that became a focal point in voter registration protests. The interviews are not extensive and the project is small in scope, but it is an example of documentation that may not be noted in archival cataloging records because the subject matter is not a primary focus of a particular historian's work.
23. Earlier that year the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University recorded the stories of participants and observers of the school's student protests of April and May 1968. The interviews, conducted that May, captured the emotions of this important turning point in the history of the university and are fairly significant in scope, producing 2,426 pages of transcript. Interviewers asked student activists, faculty members, administrators, and parents of students to comment on the student occupation of campus buildings, police intervention, the campus strike, and university reorganization.
24. Michael K. Schuessler, *Elena Poniatowska: An Intimate Biography* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007). See also Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2012).
25. The aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks also saw the proliferation of web-based documentation tools as means of gathering firsthand accounts. The September 11 Digital Archive, hosted by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, is the most comprehensive and boasts a collection of more than forty thousand firsthand accounts. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Center for History and New Media created the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, a site similar to its September 11 Digital Archive. In addition, a wide range of web-based testimony project sites appeared in the aftermath of the storm, including the I-10 Witness Project and the Alive in Truth: The New Orleans Disaster and Memory Project. These sites developed quickly and blurred distinctions between oral historian and journalist in the immediate aftermath of the storm.
26. See Elena Poniatowska, *Nada, nadi: Las voces del tembloer* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988).
27. Elena Poniatowska, "The Earthquake: To Carlos Monsiváis," *Oral History Review* 16, no. 1 (1988): 15.
28. For another example of an oral history project inspired by a natural disaster, see Joy Preston, "Collecting Personal Accounts of the Lewes Floods of October 2000," *Oral History* 30, no. 2 (2002): 79–84. In October 2000, torrential rain in England caused the River Ouse to overflow its banks and inundate the small town of Lewes in East Sussex. A group of amateur oral historians responded. The Lewes U3A (University of the Third Age) Oral History

Group, as they dubbed themselves, interviewed Lewesians who had lost their homes or businesses in the flooding, as well as first responders and politicians. Group member Joy Preston commented on the value of conducting the project over the course of the recovery, noting shifting perspectives as the community moved beyond crisis. Her article also examined the importance of capturing the emotional resonance of the event as a means to assess the human impact of the disaster.

29. David Leviatin, "Listening to the New World: Voices from the Velvet Revolution," *Oral History Review* 20, no. 1 (1993): 9–10.
30. Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Other Press, 2006), 4–5.
31. Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 242–243.
32. Interview with Mary Marshall Clark by author, February 19, 2013.
33. D'Ann Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also D'Ann Penner, "Assault Rifles, Separated Families, and Murder in Their Eyes: Unasked Questions after Hurricane Katrina," *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 3 (2010): 573–99.
34. Mark Cave, "Through Hell and High Water: New Orleans, August 29–September 15, 2005," *Oral History Review* 35, no. 1 (2008): 1–10.
35. See Chris Ying and Lola Vollen, *Voices from the Storm: The People of New Orleans on Hurricane Katrina* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2006); Peter Orner, *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2008); Craig Walzer and Dave Eggers, *Out of Exile: The Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2008); Peter Orner and Annie Holmes, *Hope Deferred: Narratives of Zimbabwean Lives* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2011); Maggie Lemere and Zoë West, *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma's Military Regime* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2011); *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2011).
36. The annual meetings of the Oral History Association in 2010 and 2011 had general themes related to oral history and crisis. The programs featured plenary sessions devoted to the work that had been done in the five years since Hurricane Katrina and the ten years since September 11, 2001. Other highlights included a presentation on work conducted on human rights crises by the editors of the Voice of Witness book series, numerous panels on the issue of trauma, and talks about projects related to the Haitian earthquake and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. It is clear that conducting interviews in crisis environments is no longer a tangential issue. Such work has become a fundamental part of what oral historians do.

PART I

CLAMOR

1

WHEN ALL IS LOST

Metanarrative in the Oral History of Hanifa, Survivor of Srebrenica

Selma Leydesdorff

**Oral history by Selma Leydesdorff with “Hanifa,” refugee camp,
northeastern Bosnia, April 2004**

In 1995, Serbian forces murdered more than eight thousand Bosniaks (mostly men) in Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. The massacre was the largest mass murder in Europe since the Second World War. Between 2002 and 2008, I interviewed female survivors of Srebrenica in villages and refugee camps throughout Bosnia. They shared with me their memories not only of the traumatic experience but also of their lives before the war, as well as how they have tried to cope with their fate in the war's aftermath. These interviews go beyond the rape, murder, and harsh atrocities of a dark time to show the agency of these women, despite their circumstances.

HANIFA: My father died. In fact, I did not know him; I was two. Our mother took care of us, she worked in the fields. She was not educated. Tilled the land and fed the two of us. Two years later, she got sick. I never asked about her illness. I didn't even ask my uncles. She forced them to take her to the hospital. They carried her on their back—there were no cars, so they carried her. . . . My mother died four years after my father. My grandfather brought us up. . . . Our uncles and aunts loved us like their own children, but our aunts also sometimes shouted at us, hit us . . . well, a lot happened. . . . You see, I would have been happy if I had had my parents, even without enough to eat. I went through a lot. When they hugged their children, it made me so sad; I would have given all my dinners for that. They used to tell their children, “Come here, Daddy loves you, Mommy loves you. . . .” I don't remember that I've ever used the word Mother or Father. Now it's different. My child has no father, but neither has this one or that one. But at the time, it wasn't common to have people dying so young. But our parents, they both died. I was young, healthy, I was happy with a piece of bread, but whenever somebody called out “mother, father. . . .”



Hanifa with her grandchildren and youngest daughter at a temporary settlement in northeast Bosnia where she has lived since 1996. The settlement is far from the world, and buses go by sporadically. Most people are unemployed. *Photograph by Selma Leydesdorff.*

Hanifa got married at a young age to the boy she loved. When the war reached their village, she and her husband decided to go to Srebrenica, an area declared safe by the United Nations in 1993.

HANIFA: So we left, I was barefoot, I only took some food, it was Ramadan. I just took some bread. Coffee was ready and stayed on the stove, everything was prepared for dinner. It was dark. We were given orders to go. We heard shooting; we walked along the river Jadar, below our houses. We did not dare to go along the asphalt road. Those who took the asphalt road didn't go anywhere. We left for Srebrenica in 1993....

We came to a village; we could not go directly to Srebrenica because of the shelling. We arrived in Srebrenica, I don't know when exactly, around April 2nd or 3rd. In 1993, relief started to be brought in. We were in the village called Milačevići. We were looking for accommodation, but no one let us into their house. They told us to go to the school, where there were people already. We went to the school, but they didn't let us in, the rooms were full. Snow, frost, snow, it was March 10th. No one let us go inside the school. My daughter, her child and I were sitting in the snow, and I was pregnant. I got pregnant in 1992. So we were sitting in the snow, me and my two girls. An old woman came and told us that we could get in, but only to sit there, because there was no room to sleep. So she let us stay over for the night in the school. We were

sitting in that room, a small one; it was a teacher's room. The old woman was there with her two grandchildren, her daughter, and two old persons. We sat on the clothes we had taken with us, we didn't have dinner.

I took my cow and milked her. Yes, I had a cow with me, because I had a small child. We drank that milk. My husband came in later; he was asking people for accommodation, begging for shelter. One man said, "Give me 50 kilos of wheat and you can stay for a month here." How can I get wheat in Srebrenica? But my sister-in-law managed to take out a cubic meter of wheat. She had a horse and she did it. We gave 50 kilos of wheat and we were in a house for three days, I think. But the man got angry and he threw us out. We cried and cried, where could we go? We found accommodation with another man and so I was there with my children and my husband. We were in a village; we didn't make it to Srebrenica itself, we were in the boroughs, in the villages which hadn't fallen yet, the villages which were still holding on.

SELMA: Was your husband with you all the time?

HANIFA: Yes, he was until the fall of Srebrenica in 1995. My younger son, who is now in America, was also with us. He was wounded on a playground and was transferred on a plane. Planes transported the wounded, including my son. The older one was with me till the fall of Srebrenica. The little one was in seventh grade. He went to a playground near the school to play soccer. The shooting started and he was wounded in the head. A piece of shrapnel was taken out; another was left in his head because they didn't have good instruments, so they transferred him to Tuzla. I had a baby and stayed there; trucks stopped getting people out. They brought us food, but they didn't send the people away any longer. So I stayed in Srebrenica from 1993 to 1995.

Here, Hanifa speaks of Srebrenica in 1993.

HANIFA: On the fourth day after my arrival in Srebrenica, I felt that I would deliver my baby. I was in pain all day. Then at about the same time, the shelling started on the playground while my child was there playing soccer. When firing started everybody went to the basement, which has a hard roof. People were afraid so they went there. I didn't want to go, I lay on the bed. My daughters were crying; they were in fourth and fifth grade in elementary school. Now they are married and have their own children. Around four or five in the afternoon, the shelling stopped. Then people started carrying their dead from down there, everybody was carrying their own family members. My sister-in-law's mother went to the balcony and told me that a young man was standing with a friend down there (it was my husband), his head in bandages. I told her that my family was probably in the village of Milačevići. She saw that it was my son but didn't want to tell me anything.

I lay on the bed a bit, then got up and walked, feeling pain, but I didn't say anything to anybody. My husband came in carrying my son's jacket, which was smeared with blood. I realized what had happened and I cried. He told

me to keep quiet, that it was nothing serious. I asked him where our older son was; he told me that he was in hospital with the younger one. I didn't believe him; I thought my son had been killed. I cried but he told me not to because he hadn't been killed. The pain increased so I told him to take me to the hospital. We got there but there was no midwife, there were only dead people, in the corridor, on stretchers, they had been brought to the hospital but had died there. The nurses had even taken them to the maternity ward because the hospital was full. One of the nurses told me to follow her. The room was full of people with bandaged heads, covered with sheets. She asked them who had put them there; they answered but I didn't hear what they said. She told me that there was more room on the other side, but I couldn't see anything in the dark. There were blankets piled up to the ceiling and a big table but I couldn't get onto it. "People are visiting their wounded, so the corridor is full. If you can't walk in the corridor, stay here. If you're ashamed, come here." But it was dark in there, so I was afraid to stay. I walked for a while in the corridor but the pain got worse so I couldn't walk any more.

The nurse told my husband that the midwife had gone home but she explained to him that she was living near a white mosque and that he could go and fetch her if he didn't mind. He didn't mind so he left. He went to fetch the midwife, but I gave birth to my baby even before he reached her. I delivered the baby by myself. I saw the nurses running from the first floor to the basement and they heard the baby crying. One of them came to me and said, "Oh, you delivered the baby, why didn't you call?" "Who could I call?" I wondered. She told me that she didn't dare to cut the umbilical cord. She went in the corridor and called another nurse: "Merka, Merka, come here and cut the umbilical cord, I haven't the courage to do it. This woman just delivered the baby." So the nurse came, brought a roll of paper and a jerry can with 5 liters of cold water. She poured the water over my baby, wrapped it into the paper towel and put it on the table. "If you don't live too far, you can go now," she said. "If you live far, lie down here on the table next to your baby until dawn." It was raining and I was cold, shivering. My husband went out and did not come back for about twenty minutes. When he returned, he brought me a cup of hot water. The water was sweet. "Drink it," he said. I drank it and it warmed me up. I asked him how he had got the water. He told me he had asked the receptionist, telling him that I had just had a baby. "He even added some sugar, although I didn't ask for it," he told me. As dawn was breaking, I went home, to the house where we lived. Later on there was no food, I didn't have anything to give to the baby. Some food was distributed; we got 2 or 3 kilograms of flour. I had all my children and I'd rather give food to my children than to myself, but then the baby cried. My husband went to a community representative to ask for more flour. "But I gave you flour," he said. My husband answered: "My children were so hungry, they ate everything."