

Oral History and Communities of Color edited by Teresa Barnett and Chon A. Noriega. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2013. 160 pp. ISBN 978-0-89551-144-7

Ethnic communities of color in the United States have a history of amplifying their voices against harmful stereotypes. Liberation movements of the twentieth century coincided with innovations in audio visual technology. Communities of color applied this technology to problems of representation in the historical record. Oral histories and Third Cinema became vehicles to insert corrective narratives about people of color into academic and cultural discourse. *Oral History and Communities of Color* is a supplement to oral history texts used to train graduate students who wish to use oral history in their research (p. 2). It exemplifies the three components of oral history—history, narrator driven accounts, and a life history approach—via a collection of essays by researchers who use oral histories in their own work. It is intended to address methodological concerns that are important to communities of color such as ethics, sensitive issues, and community involvement (p. 1). The book is arranged into seven sections plus an introduction. Each section describes a project where oral history methodology was essential in gathering in-depth stories about a particular community.

Teresa Barnett and Chon A. Noriega situate the book at the nexus of ethnic studies, history, sociology, public health, anthropology, and media production (p. 2). Likewise, contributors seek to build a relationship between the academy and underserved communities, improving relations between source communities to foment growth and learning for scholars and research subjects. A relationship between oral history, ethno-communications, and third world cinema is also apparent in this book. Combining media as diverse as film and audio recording with qualitative data collection methods might help readers recognize communities as sites of knowledge production and hold researchers accountable for the representation of their co-creators (p. 2).

History

Oral History and Communities of Color offers a rich history of underserved minority communities in the United States. It begins with a novel method of capturing the history of Type 2 diabetes in the Sioux community. “Stories of the ‘Sugar Illness’: Using Talking Circles to Reveal Beliefs about Illness among American Indians Living with Diabetes” simultaneously tells a history of the Sioux and the somatic effects of displacement and relocation upon the community. Researchers documented the Sioux as they engaged in talking circles to contextualize their health problems within a frame of colonization,

cultural loss, and modern lifestyles adopted by the tribes people. Unlike surveys, in-depth interviews, or life history interviews, talking circles allow participants to frame their experience within the context of their place in the community, connection to traditional practices, and commitment to better health. “‘See What I’m Saying?’ Adding the Visual to Oral History” describes how and why film was chosen to capture a history of Asian American activism in the United States. Karen L. Ishizuka and Robert A. Nakamura bring the stories of Chris Iijima to life by capturing his facial expressions and gesticulations on video. Iijima was an important participant in the Asian American movement in the early 1970s. He used his entire body to perform songs that lent an aura of determination and empowerment to the movement. The authors write that seeing and hearing Iijima relay the history of the movement “adds a sensory element that imbues his words with emotion [...] but it is the sheer physicality of his delivery caught on videotape that makes his life story interview so spellbinding” (p. 8). Indeed, Iijima’s family was caught up in the performance and stopped their own activities to witness the oral history being filmed.

Narrator Driven Accounts

Narrator-centric accounts provide invaluable context to the histories gathered by projects highlighted in *Oral History and Communities of Color*. Oral historians use narrative accounts to attempt to amplify the salient points of the narrative and its relationship to larger historical arcs (p. 3). “‘It Wasn’t a Sweet Life’: Engaging Students in Oral History Interviewing across Race, Class, and Generations” and “Recording a Queer Community: An Interview with Horacio N. Roque-Ramirez” employ traditional oral history techniques: audio recorders and guiding questions. The researchers in these projects rely upon their own dedication to gather previously hidden experiences of individuals who were victims of discrimination and brutality. “‘It Wasn’t a Sweet Life’” describes the process of using college age students from various racial, ethnic, and regional backgrounds to capture the history of an African American community in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The project is notable because it required interviewers and participants to actively engage in self-exploratory thought processes that helped them understand their own identity in relation to each other. Sandra Rose employed collaborative fieldwork techniques taken from community studies to build rapport with participants. Students learned to become active listeners in order to capture the significance of dominant and subordinate relationships between groups and individuals (p. 96). Life history interviews captured the salience race continues to have on the experiences of black people in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Student narratives take on an important role in this project as they learn how their own lives fit within the narrative weaved by interviewees.

Students learned to be vulnerable and non-judgmental as they record explicit discrimination and terror African American residents experienced in Carlisle until the until the 1990s.

Life History Approach

In the final section, Horacio N. Roque Ramirez and Tersea Barnett demonstrate how the life history approach allows the participant to shape the content of the history. Their interview, presented in “Recording a Queer Community: An Interview with Horacio N. Roque Ramirez,” displays a narrative arc that captures the intersection between individual and national experiences with gay pride, AIDS, and Chican@ culture. “Recording a Queer Community” describes an oral history project capturing the Latino queer community in the midst of the AIDS crisis in the Bay area. Unlike the first five sections, the interview speaks for itself. Barnett and Roque Ramirez participate in an engaging conversation that exemplifies how an oral history ought to be. It utilizes the life history approach to contextualize Roque Ramirez within the time period. It is driven by the narrator’s captivating storytelling ability as Roque-Ramirez goes into great detail about his methods, personal experiences, beliefs, and hopes for the future.

Oral Histories and Communities of Color offers nuanced definitions of concepts such as *community* and *ethnicity* that make it easily adaptable to a range of marginalized groups. It also disrupts notions of history that privilege factual accounts that can be corroborated by objective sources. Although Barnett and Noriega note that *Oral Histories and Communities of Color* is meant to be read alongside oral history manuals written for classroom use, it would benefit from a more textbook approach to oral history techniques in communities of color in some places. For example, it could flesh out steps for conducting oral histories in communities of color that take into account the history of stereotypes, structural barriers to resources, and culturally embedded mistreatment experienced by groups featured in the book. A guide to additional examples of oral histories of communities of color would also be helpful. All in all, I recommend *Oral Histories and Communities of Color* as a valuable source for Library and Information Science (LIS) scholars and practitioners who wish to use oral history in their projects.

Reviewer

Dalena Hunter recently completed her second year as a doctoral student in the archival program at UCLA. She also holds a MLIS and a MA in African

American Studies from UCLA. Her research revolves around issues of archival inclusion and representation as it pertains to historically marginalized and minority groups in the United States. Specifically, she is interested in research methods, rights, and ethics surrounding ethnographic data collected, preserved, and disseminated by archivists and scholars about subaltern groups.