

Reflections on the Journey:
Methodologies for *Nueva York es la
Frontera*, a Latinx Oral History
Project

By Pablo A. Baeza Breinbauer

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Columbia University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

New York, New York

October 2016

When describing Latin American diasporic communities, I generally use “Latin American” or “Latinx”, a gender-neutral term, in order to acknowledge the gender diversity of the communities I am describing. “Latina” is used specifically to represent women. In using these terms, I am referring to Spanish and Portuguese-speaking diasporic communities in the Western Hemisphere and their descendents, but not those from English or French speaking Latin American or Caribbean nations. Other scholars have articulated a broader vision for the Caribbean and Latin America as a unified region for study, but I lack the background or resources to expand the dialogue in ways beyond the intersections of Spanish/Portuguese colonization, race, and the development or “Latinidad”. More thoughts on where “Latinidad” begins and ends below.

Introduction

In order to begin this oral history project, I uprooted myself from my home, traveled thousands of miles, and began a new career. To be sure, the experience of moving from a white-collar teaching job in California to become an oral historian in New York as a childless young adult is a radically different experience from the transnational lives and migrations of many of my narrators, even from those, to various extents, of the migrations of my own family, and certainly from the vast numbers of migrants forced to flee their homes for reasons ranging from climate change to political violence.

I am an immigrant oral historian whose work is focused on the stories of other Latin American immigrants. As somebody whose own biography is so tied to the issues I am highlighting as an oral historian and documentarian, it was my priority, in outlining my experience creating, modifying and executing methodologies for this project, to place my subjectivity, and particularly the extent to which I was consistently challenged to expand my understanding of and engagement with the very categories of “New York” and “Latinx,” upfront.

The importance of engaging context and relationships of power between interviewers and interviewees is central to oral history projects. As historian Gary Ohikiri states,

“The task of the oral historian is to analyze carefully that relationship between interviewer and interviewee to understand what kind of communication is taking place, what meaning is being conveyed, and what mutual influences are at work in the shaping of a conversation” (di Leonardo 19).

As oral histories aim not just to create testimony, but also aim to emphasize historical processes themselves as experienced in deeply dialogical, interpersonal spaces, shaped by interviewer-interviewee relationships, recognition of the impact of the oral historian on their narrators is paramount. In order to develop a praxis as an ethnographer that deliberately emphasized subjectivity, both my own and my narrators’, I chose to root my methodology as a feminist ethnographer and oral historian. Feminist ethnography fundamentally challenges the problematic dynamics often associated with the discipline’s history – the trope of the

fieldworker as an “objective” social scientist, studying exotic cultures from a place of wizedened neutrality. In its place, feminist ethnography demands a constant awareness of and engagement with the fieldworker’s own positionality – which is to say, I embraced the politics of my own subjectivity. In continually incorporating both my voice and the voices (literally, through audio recordings, and figuratively, represented as dialogue in my field notes) of my interviewees, I strove to highlight what oral historians refer to as intersubjectivity – the idea that the interview is a dialogue as much as it is a hierarchy. Inevitably, over the course of an interview, an interviewer’s various identities and experiences play out in everything from their pre and post interview conversations with their interviewee to the questions themselves to the shifting body language of the interview space, made invisible by the usually written or audio based nature of most oral history projects.

Michaela di Leonardo, a feminist ethnographer also versed in oral history, has written at length about the intersections of ethnography and oral history – and the challenges both oral historians and ethnographers face engaging intersubjectivity in an ethical, productive way.

“The issue of social power is of key importance here. An El Salvadorean peasant will speak very differently about the current social order to a trusted fellow than to a member of the national police. And fieldworkers are always in positions of relative power over interviewees. The interaction is one-sided, generally only one participant experiences an invasion of privacy, the judging of one’s life. If the fieldworker is also more prestigious than the interviewee by virtue of nationality,

race, gender or class, the interaction is all the more heavily skewed” (di Leonardo 12).

As an upper middle class southern cone Latin American immigrant raised on the east coast but relocating from California in order to begin an oral history project about migration, I found myself constantly shifting from a feeling of being on the “inside” to a feeling of being on the “outside.” At times, I felt myself perceived as an insider even when I felt “outside” in communities and groups in which I conducted my fieldwork – and often felt personally connected to many stories I heard in communities to which I was nevertheless perceived to be a newcomer – whether due to signifiers of race, class, gender, geography, or any of the other complex ways identity politics constantly shift and intersect within New York Latinx communities. Being able to document, and ultimately present autoethnographic writing about these experiences therefore felt like a necessary way to both contextualize my interviews and expose my own subjectivity in the presentation of my content. By displaying my writing about my interviews and fieldwork, I worked to allow my own background and narrative to be intertwined and in dialogue with the stories of my other interviewees as fellow immigrant New Yorkers, regardless of positional differences.

Additionally, I wanted to make the work as accessible as possible – which meant framing the project as both documentary and research. It is my belief that all research, especially oral history or ethnography, should inherently be designed to fit the needs of the community it’s focused on, and as an oral historian focused specifically on gathering and presenting testimony from immigrant activist

communities, I wanted to be able to generate new knowledges about Latinidad in New York, new practices for studying immigrant and activist communities, and a way to share the stories of my narrators and the spaces I documented with audiences both local and non-local. I therefore opted to do work as a documentarian-ethnographer – seeking to understand patterns in the culture and social structure of the New York migrant justice movement and of career activists within it, as well as create a portrait of that movement in the words and experiences of the Latina activists inside of it.

Ultimately, it is my hope that in creating this project I have engaged intersubjectivity in order to create something that provides a framework for listeners to engage shared narratives about pan-ethnicity, mobility, and barriers to opportunity as experienced by Latin American women of a certain generation (born between the late 70's and early 90's) in New York. It is also my hope that even outside of the possible truths generated, the individual narratives and their intersection with my story and experiences can exist as a unique, contextual small window in time and space into the vast and swiftly changing universe that is migration and immigrant political power-building in New York City.

On Starting Anew in New York

My experiences living and working in New York, and particularly in Brooklyn and Queens this past year are not my first with the region. Having spent my adolescence in suburban Maryland, I visited New York several times as a teenager,

including a trip to visit an elementary school friend whose family had relocated there. Though my friend was Chilean, he came from a highly wealthy family of businesspeople who had relocated to Long Island – and as a consequence, my experience was that of a suburban tourist in Manhattan.

From September 2009 to May 2010, I moved to Brooklyn to attend art school at Pratt Institute, living in a student apartment complex in Clinton Hill. Even during that time, I rarely interacted with Latinx communities in New York – in fact, outside of downtown Brooklyn, Bed-Stuy, and lower Manhattan, hardly interacted with much of New York at all. Still, the many cumulative experiences I previously had with New York, despite them all having occurred a half decade or more ago, created a certain, and highly racialized, understanding of the city. Moving between largely white and largely African-American communities, as I had growing up in Maryland, it was all too easy for me to ignore the barrios of New York, to not think of New York as a particularly Latinx space, even in spite of my many actual interactions with other Latinxs in the past there.

Five years after leaving New York, then, I came back a different person, and to a different New York. Enough time had elapsed for most of my friends from 2009 to have left the city – and therefore, I was confronted with building community and establishing networks from scratch in order to create both a life and a year's worth of research.

My plan, originally, was to do place-based research. I was hoping to pick a neighborhood I had heard or read about as a migrant space and find a way to

connect with immigrant communities there. I first settled on the idea of interviewing workers in a variety of different jobs and relationships to ownership in Jackson Heights, Queens. However, I soon learned of the complexity of doing place-based work immediately upon arriving in New York. In a place as busy, crowded and costly as New York, transience is the norm, and relationship networks tend to be both highly fluid and extremely tight. Additionally, in order to do research in working-class immigrant spaces, in spite of my own immigrant background, Spanish fluency, and intimate familiarity with various California immigrant communities, I needed a point of entry to engage with New York neighborhoods.

I called, emailed, and visited a great many spaces, most of them in Jackson Heights and Corona, Queens. However, I consistently found myself engaged with small non-profit organizations, which, while doing good work supporting largely undocumented temporary and day laborers in the neighborhood, were stretched thin and lacked the capacity to embed me in their work as either a researcher or journalist. Therefore, I needed to rethink my research plan – and to acknowledge my limitations, being new to the city and being part of a graduate program lasting only a year, in being able to talk to often very vulnerable and overextended immigrant workers.

After failing to establish relationships fast enough with community organizations and neighborhood institutions in Jackson Heights, I thought about embedding myself in a single campaign or social movement. I was increasingly becoming involved in immigrant-led justice movements in the city, particularly in Bushwick, Brooklyn, through a variety of new friends and colleagues. A friend of

mine put me in touch with a campaign to unionize warehouse workers for a local electronics retailer, most of whom were almost exclusively immigrant and facing flagrant human rights abuses on the job. However, in spite of participating on and off in the campaign as part of my field work, my attempts were, again, unproductive – the necessary culture of silence around working to unionize immigrant labor, the long commutes and longer hours of the New York working class, and the challenges of working through the hierarchies within organized labor made it very difficult to be able to reach out, individually, to the community I originally most wanted to be able to support in moving to New York – immigrant workers.

Ultimately, though, I decided to go for a broader approach, and one that best made use of my position and circumstances as a new New Yorker, an immigrant activist used to working bilingually and binationally, but a recent transplant from California social movements and barrios. While I was struggling to embed myself in a single community or campaign, a few months of hectically networking and trying to find community in New York led me to realize the vastness and complexity of New York Latinx communities and their struggles for grassroots political power. Unlike in California, where Mexican-Americans dominated numerically and culturally, or in Hartford, where I had spent a summer working mostly with Puerto Ricans, who had a long history in Connecticut, my experiences spending time in the polyglot neighborhoods of Jackson Heights, Corona, Bushwick and the South Bronx, where Latinxs from South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean intermingled, were unique. I came to befriend and learn from not just Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, or Mexicans, but other Chilenos, my first experience feeling truly part

of my own national diaspora anywhere, as well as various people from Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Cuba. I met Latinxs across a huge diversity of race, class, gender and migration experiences. Yet, there we all were, working in pan-ethnic barrio spaces, often both explicitly engaged in place-based, anti-gentrification work, and existing as mediators of highly diverse, ever-shifting communities – a pan-ethnic, multilingual, largely Latinx social services and advocacy non-profit office in Jackson Heights, a social movements community center in Bushwick, rallies, concerts and cultural spaces representing both national communities and pan-Latinx identity all over the city. As I began to work with and support various social movements, primarily in Brooklyn and Queens, I continued meeting activists – most of whom were immigrant women. As I began to dialogue with these women, telling them about my project and asking them if they would be open to being interviewed, I, too, became increasingly involved in a diversity of tasks in the activist spaces I was attending – making art for rallies, setting up and taking down events, making food for meetings, being part of community dialogues (albeit mostly as a listener and sometimes a translator). Increasingly, I began to notice the extensive amount of work and leadership done by women to sustain these spaces – from facilitation to meal prep to transporting art builds to strategy for direct actions. Recognizing the chronic lack of visibility of women leaders, especially in nuanced, intersectional, pan-ethnic contexts, in both Latinx communities and social movements, I decided, then, to do an oral history project of New York-based Latina immigrant activists.

Interviewing About Migration: An Intersectional Analysis

In deciding to interview a fairly broad pool of subjects, what, then, was my process for reaching out to and interviewing immigrant women across so many different identities? Outreach included a mixture of calling and emailing organizations, going to and participating in social movement spaces throughout New York City, and widening my circles of Latinx activists. Ultimately, most of my interviewees were individuals I met either in person or through people I befriended in activist spaces. While I opted, early on, to focus on women, I still wanted to reach out to people across a variety of other identities, opting for a set of interviewees that were diverse especially in terms of migration trajectory (rural to urban vs. urban to urban, time and reason for migrating), relationship to citizenship, race, class, and national/ethnic background. As described to an extent in my introduction, a lack of capacity and a need to bound the project made it difficult to interview some of the communities I had hoped to connect with, notably Latinas of Asian descent as well as more recent arrivals from Guatemala and El Salvador, and led me to choose to not interview other communities historically better represented in conversations about Latinidad in New York, namely Puerto Ricans.

Each of my interviews took place in very different settings. One of my interviews was in a non-profit office, one at Columbia, and two at the apartments of my interviewees. Before meeting my narrators, I communicated with them in person, or via phone, email, or Facebook, in order to give them clarity about and knowledge of my project. During this pre-interview, I always gave my interviewee

the option of meeting in their preferred location to assure comfort and convenience, though admittedly this made for a range of quality in my original recordings, given the varying acoustics of the spaces in which I interviewed each narrator.

In designing and facilitating interviews and coming to develop a in interview style, the guidance of two of my mentors at Columbia, Amy Starecheski and Gerry Albarelli, both in person and via their “Telling Lives Oral History Curriculum Guide,” proved invaluable. The whole of the guide was valuable as a way to deepen my ability to be a more receptive interviewer, and one whose main role was to be able to facilitate an encounter open and intimate enough to allow interviewees to take charge of their own stories as narrators. Albarelli’s approach, influenced by his experience with literary non-fiction, was particularly useful:

“I am interested in hearing from the interviewee and much less in hearing myself talk. I do all my talking before I turn on the recorder. I explain the purpose of the interview, I explain who will be hearing it, and I encourage the interviewee to be candid (if there’s something you want to delete from the record in the end we can do that afterwards) I say something to the effect of: this is your story. To some people I have said, ‘Think of your life as a movie, it might help; if I were making a movie about your life, what are some of the major scenes that would be in that movie, who are some of the important characters?’...

I go to great lengths to explain these things because I find, one, that most people feel that they are not qualified to give an interview, since they are so used to the interviewer asking for expert opinion and two, they will try to model themselves after the worst— from an oral history point of view—kinds of television interviews.

They will try to take themselves out of the interview, they will try to take their opinions and their feelings out, they'll try to be factual, to give objective accounting because of our society's bias toward the objective interview and its bias in favor of the written over the spoken word. They need to be reminded that this is something they already know how to do, this is talk, and this is talking about life, talking about how we are affected by what's happening around us" (Albarelli 19)

Like Albarelli, I opted to focus on the pre-interview rapport and on a relatively unstructured interview style that prioritized taking an interviewee's lead with few questions, most of them to follow up on or clarify material. Though I had a small list of questions, which always began with "can you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your early childhood" and included questions about migrating from the home country and first impressions of the United States, as well as questions about schooling and coming to identify as an activist, my approach was generally to follow the narrative path charted out by my narrators. In general, my narrators enjoyed sharing their stories and were what you might call "strong narrators" – that is to say, they drove the trajectory of the interview. For the most part (likely due to my taking a life history approach), my narrators presented linear stories about their upbringings, centered around growing up either binationally or in Latin America, moving to the United States, experiencing varying degrees of schooling (though a majority of my interviewees are college-educated), and describing their work and how it has evolved.

After interviewing each of my narrators, I made sure to stay in touch with them, not just to check in with them about the evolution of my project and get

consent to publish final cuts of their interviews, but also to continue rapport and be able to support and spread the word about the work each of them were doing, both in New York and in some cases in their countries of birth. As a result, I began to feel increasingly situated, both socially and professionally, in the social networks of 20- and-30-something Latinxs doing city and neighborhood organizing work, primarily in Brooklyn and Queens.

The most resonant theme throughout both my fieldwork and interview experiences was the intersectionality of Latinidad – it is this call for a more nuanced dialogue about Latin American identity that I came to realize I wanted my project to foster.

Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios, an anthology written by the Latina Feminist Group, a collective of U.S.-based Latina writers, scholars, and activists, provided a framework for me to approach the diversity and complexities of Latina identity politics. The group, which corresponded for years, meeting to share *testimonios*, or personal narratives of their experiences growing up and experiencing mobility as Latinas from a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds, finds, in the intersection of different narratives, an embrace of Latina as a coalitional term. As the introduction reads:

“Our use of Latina recognizes these tensions, even as it builds on pan-Latina/o solidarity, however fragile. We seek those spaces within and across borders where women share parallel emotional and psychic terrain along with intersecting political agendas as a means of theorizing about our experiences.

Familiar with the difficulties of solidarity with other women, we self-consciously use 'Latinas' as a coalitional term. We are not homogenizing and leveling our differences into an idealized, unified national/ethnic heritage, into what Eliana Rivero calls 'the neutral soup of *Latinismo*.' All of us emerge from various mixed inheritances, whether through ethnicity, race, sexuality, regional culture, religious-spiritual formation, class, generation, political orientation, or linguistic heritage and practice. Included in our social identities are the various places we have inhabited and traversed, and the spaces in which we have worked... Our use of the term 'Latina' builds on its emergence in coalitional politics in the United States and signifies our connections through praxis to the rest of the Americas and other multiple geographies of origin" (Latina Feminist Group, 5-6).

In this way, the *testimonios* become key ways of articulating issues of how individual stories can and cannot represent imagined communities, and how in order to celebrate and articulate a vision of Latinidad, that vision must be engaged through collective difference. As the group writes:

"Our book expands the construction of *testimonio* in our feminist desire to make visible and audible our *papelitos guardados* – the stories often held from public view – and to express the full complexity of our identities, from the alchemies of erasure and silencing to our passions, joys, and celebrations. In dialogue with other hybrid autobiographical modes... we have infused traditional literary genres of poetry and short story with the spirit of testimonial disclosure. At the same time, our *testimonios* express multiple subjectivities of individual lives, marked by uniqueness as well as shared history and context. Departing from the heroic

autobiographical tradition, we are not speaking from the voice of the singular 'I'. Rather, we are exploring the ways in which our individual identities express the complexities of our communities as a whole. As Latinas who have now experienced being on both sides of the microphone, we view *testimonios* as a practice that seeks to mediate the power relations between ourselves and our subjects" (Latina Feminist Group, 20-21).

Following the lead of the Latina Feminist Group's model, I began to imagine ways for my web-based storytelling platform to allow for the intersection of my interviewees' life stories and my own autobiographical and autoethnographic writing. In my decision to incorporate as much of my own voice and field notes as possible and to really create dialogue between each interviewee's voice and my own autobiographical work, I continually returned to the work of Luisa Passerini, particularly her *Autobiography of a Generation*, where she combines memoir, psychoanalysis, and popular history in order to describe memory's impact on the leftist student movements of 1960s Italy – as both she and others experienced them. Throughout the book, Passerini's writing style served as an inspiration, as her reflections on the interview process at the beginning of the book exemplified the kind of prose I intended to write in order to contextualize my own experiences in New York. For example, Passerini reflects on beginning the process:

"I conducted my first interviews with the protagonists of '68. The interviews plunge me into my own past; as I listen, the film of what I was doing at the time unreels. Memory redoubled in this way is hard to bear; it seems to me that until now no one has wanted to take on this burden, sometimes not even those who tell their

stories. The mirror I see my image reflected in is opaque. My interviews with the elderly about their memories of Fascism had absorbed and moved me, but they weren't so weighty, so unresolved, so enigmatic" (Passerini 1).

By contextualizing my interviewees' life stories with edited field notes and autobiographical writing, I, too, was able to create content that, while centering the life experiences of my interviewees, still allows readers to view my work through an intersubjective lens – a project produced not in a vacuum but by a scholar-documentarian whose reflections on the process, and on learning, are part of the work itself.

Ultimately, it was exciting to be able to create the space for interviewees to talk about their own relationships to race, ethnicity, migration, mobility and Latina womanhood. To a large extent, a life history approach, in combination with my framing of the project as wanting to create a dialogue about Latinidad, gender, and migration, allowed each interviewee to conceptualize being a Latina immigrant however they felt like doing. As a result, especially when talking about their upbringings and migrations, various identities emerged. This was particularly so around race and class – while all of the narrators identified and described barriers to achievement based on documentation status, either their own or those of loved ones, the experiences of my formerly undocumented narrator who experienced significant downward mobility in fleeing homophobia and transphobia in Mexico, for instance, differed extensively from those of my narrator who was able to grow up transnationally between Brooklyn and Ecuador, and from my narrator who, by virtue of growing up between Juarez and El Paso, moved fluidly between two worlds,

for example, as an upwardly mobile private school student in a Mexican city on the cusp of a deadly drug war, who later, just over the border, becomes a relatively class-privileged Mexican immigrant in a working-class Chicano public school. As a result, though I wish I had been able to interview women from a greater diversity of national backgrounds, and to have been able to interview a larger number of Afro-Latinas and white Latinas, exclusively or primarily of European descent, in order to further engage dialogues around race, class, ethnicity, and Latinidad, I nevertheless felt I was able to create a relatively intersectional mosaic of gendered Latina experiences.

My year moving to, living in, and talking to people in various New York immigrant communities proved to be personally transformative. My experiences working to document the lives of Latina immigrant activists and learning more about immigrant justice movements in New York has helped me to better understand the power and possibility of Latinx pan-ethnic organizing in the city – while also allowing me to learn about and accessibly present the intersectional nature of Latinidad in the city, challenging homogenous ideas about who Latinxs are, what they look like, and why they migrated to the United States. At the same time, the challenges arising from a cross-country move to a city of 8.5 million residents, my own positionality, and the demands of my graduate program led to a set of quickly-made decisions about how to bound, create and present this project. Therefore, while my own work documenting the lives of Latina immigrant activists can be of significant use as a form of popular history and history education,

testimony, journalism, and dialogue about intersectional identities in immigrant communities, much remains left to expand on and cover, even in the wake of the vast diaspora-specific and New York-focused literature on Latinx history and politics described in my literature review.

Moving forward, work can and should be done to document and research both spaces and communities that my work already chose to engage to varying degrees, such as the history, politics and development of such social spaces as the Mayday Space in Bushwick and the growth of coalitions on day labor and workers' center organizing in New York City, especially in Queens. Additionally my interviewees were not just unified by their experiences as immigrant women, but also by their upward mobility, largely brought about by a mixture of access to education and professional mobility through non-profit organizations. While as stated earlier it was exceedingly difficult to embed myself in worker organizing in my time in New York, it is important for me to recognize that activism exists in a large variety of everyday ways in New York Latinx communities, and that more needs to be done to highlight work happening outside activism as professional sphere and particularly within grassroots immigrant labor rights and anti-detention movements throughout New York City.

For more information on my specific interviewee encounters, I have included my field notes and author bios as part of the individual stories on my project website, nuevayorkeslafrontera.wordpress.com.

Transcription and Translation

A primary concern with this project was accessibility – how am I able to appeal to a broad, bilingual audience, having worked on a project and with narrators that fully moved between English and Spanish? The challenge of appealing to a multiplicity of audiences was particularly evident during my process transcribing, translating and curating my interviews. The process of transcription is in of itself a complex, challenging process for many oral historians, something that Elinor Maze’s “The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History” reflects on. Foremost among those challenges was to determine a way to engage my myriad audiences, not just in terms of making multilingual content accessible, but in a way that engages both the interviewees’ stories and the way they choose to, literally, articulate them. As Maze states:

“It is important to remember... that transcripts are created for many kinds of readers. Oral historians, interviewees and their families and community members, and scholars from many academic disciplines, all differ in their interpretive sophistication and critical experience, their attitudes towards printed texts, and their ability and willingness, Olson argued, ‘to infer those aspects of meaning which are not represented graphically at all’ in those texts” (Maze 236).

When Maze speaks of “those aspects of meaning not represented graphically,” she is primarily concerned with the notion of orality – not just the content of my

narrators' stories, but the meaning in their cadences, inflections, voices. As Maze states:

“An interviewee’s innermost intentions—certainly complex and perhaps at least partly nonverbal—may not be accessible to either listeners or readers, but the former may have more to go on in their interpretative efforts. The oral history interview begins not as a composed text but as an interpersonal event, a conversation, a dual performance, created not only with spoken words but with gesture, silence, intonation, rhythm, volume, accent, and dozens of other elements of expression that are utterly lost...” (Maze 233).

In order to highlight both the content of my narrators' stories and their spoken narrative form in a way accessible to monolingual speakers, I chose to present my interviews in condensed form, while displaying bilingual, ethnopoetic transcriptions alongside each one. Poet and theorist Jerome Rothenberg, an early creator of the form, defines ethnopoetics as following:

“(1) A comparative approach to poetry and related arts, with a characteristic but not exclusive emphasis on stateless, low-technology cultures and on oral and nonliterate [nonliteral] forms of verbal expression. (2) The poetry and ideas about poetry in the cultures so observed or studied. (3) A movement or tendency in contemporary poetry, literature, and social science (anthropology in particular) devoted to such interests” (Rothenberg)

Of course, though my project sought to engage orality, and oral history narratives as literature, my engagement with ethnopoetics, or transcription in verse, in many ways bears more of a similarity to the documentary poetry of Muriel

Rukeyser or Charles Reznikoff, two early 20th century U.S. poets that sought to document societal inequities through their journalistic approaches to poetry. Reznikoff's *Testimony*, which drew from archived trial transcripts from the late 19th and early 20th century U.S. courtrooms, engaged the testimonials of witnesses, victims and perpetrators alike to draw attention to histories of marginalization in the midst of the expansion of American empire, a bottom-up approach to history and poetry that served as thematic inspiration. Meanwhile, Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," a hybrid of journalism and prose-poetry, featuring interviews with West Virginia coal town residents as part of an expose-in-verse of working conditions for miners in early 20th century Appalachia, also served as an inspiration. During my time working on the project, I wrote field notes, autobiographical essays, and poetry about my process, even as I interviewed, transcribed, translated, and transliterated the stories of my narrators into verse. As part of my desire to continue engaging intersubjectively with the creation of the project, I, too, opted to integrate interviews and poetry, albeit through a contemporary, web-based format.

Though there are significant challenges as far as a lack of availability of internet access to many communities, I nevertheless felt like a website was the best way to be able to curate my content in a multilingual, multilinear fashion, giving many different audiences access to my content in both written and audio form. Furthermore, I was able to use my own writing, as well as some photography, both my own and my author's chosen bio photos, as a way of contextualizing the many different diasporas I sought to portray in my project. As Maze writes:

“Furthermore, as Mary Larson pointed out, the capacity of the Web to bring together in a single point of access information in many media and from many physical sources can ‘give a researcher a much more solid background... particularly important in cross-cultural settings where chroniclers are concerned that their words or images will be misinterpreted by people who know nothing about their community’” (Maze 251)

Still, the work of curating and laying out my interviews in order to present them on the website proved complex. After transcribing and translating my interviews, I opted to lay out the ethnopoetic transcriptions in two columns – a transcription of the audio, arranged for both clarity and to loosely imitate the narrator’s speech pattern, and a translated second column, either into English from the original Spanish or into Spanish from the original English, creating three overlapping presentations of the interview, one oral and two written.

The challenge of attempting to twice translate (first from oral to written, then from one language to another) my narrators’ narrative form compelled me to make key decisions to retain a significant amount of repetitions and often delete verbal flotsam such as “like” or “um” so as to not create further incongruity between translations. Yet I struggled significantly with questions of the agency of my narrators in what I found to be largely personal creative decisions around enjambment and editing for clarity. Here, Maze quotes historian Michael Frisch, who describes the need to strike a balance between faithfulness to the recording and clarity of content:

“To transcribe each pause or false start or tic would make an otherwise clear tape absolutely unreadable on paper, inevitably suggesting to readers an inarticulateness anything but characteristic of the speaker-as-heard. On the other hand, to eliminate them all arbitrarily might risk a distortion of a different kind... When one knows an interview intimately, it is possible to sense how many ‘you knows’ are needed in print to give the feel of a speaker’s rhythm and style without distorting how their voice ‘reads’” (Maze 249).

I ultimately decided to strike a balance, between a relatively prose-like prevalence of end-stopped lines and a decision to omit many of my “ums” and other filler words, while choosing to retain some unusual grammar and filler words in the service of attempting to highlight the drama of the particular excitement or hesitancy shown by narrators in certain moments. Still, many of these edits at first felt tentative, irrational. I found myself, during my second round of edits, thinking more thoroughly about voice, especially after feedback from classmates around having translated the relatively colloquial Spanish of one of my narrators in an overly formal English way. I soon realized the importance of deeper listening in order to know an interview enough to make the authorial decisions necessary, not just to edit, but to translate it.

As I worked to create transcripts of life histories recorded with women who, while also activists from Latin America, come from a diversity of ethno-national, racial, and class backgrounds often quite different from my own, that of an assimilated white-passing male graduate oral history student, I had to think a lot about context and agency. To this end, Gayatri Spivak’s “The Politics of Translation”

provided me with a framework to be reflexive as both an oral historian-ethnographer and translator. Particularly, as an oral historian working with transcripts, and in ethnopoetic form, I identified with Spivak's points on the translator's challenges of translating the spontaneity and boundlessness of language as meaning-making. In needing to listen to both my translator's voices and reflect on the extent to which mine is in alignment with theirs, I thought of the practice of "intimate reading" as necessary to translation as intimate listening is to the interview. Spivak describes translation in precisely this way:

"First then, the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner. Some think this is just an ethereal way of talking about literature or philosophy. But no amount of tough talk can get around the fact that translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (Spivak 315).

Of course, Spivak is alluding to the task of translating a written text composed by an author that a translator generally has no personal relationship to. The right to intimate reading that she alludes to takes on a different dynamic when the translator's task is to translate the transcript of an interview they conducted, rather than something from a book or archive or anthology. Still, while consent forms and relationships built before, during and after an interview can certainly create the conditions for a particularly intimate translation process, the act of

knowing the person whose words one is translating also creates a particularly urgent need for accountable reading, to honor the words of the participant while making them clear to multilingual audiences. The need to strike such a balance can be especially challenging, as my narrators had varying degrees of English fluency. Still, it became increasingly important in my practice to adapt Spivak's concept of the "right" to translate intimately to the ongoing, dialogical process of creating and updating content for my website.

By showing my narrators both their transcripts and my translations, I worked to more accurately depict their voices. Though this was challenging, and given the length of my transcripts, not entirely successful, feeling affirmed by my narrators in my decision to present not just sensitive information but to do so in the poetic way I opted to felt crucial to creating dialogue and shared agency in my work. In the future, with more time, I would like to shift towards yet more co-creation and co-ownership in translation projects. In "The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves," Kathy Davis talks about the significance of translation in the titular book's journey from grassroots feminist advocacy developed in a largely white, educated, and class privileged U.S. feminist milieu to a highly malleable success story of transnational feminism. Her passages on the Latin American translation are in many places particularly relevant for my work. For example, Davis writes about Latin American women articulating their own feminism, which both dialogues with and contests the U.S.-based feminism of the original *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Rather than being a direct translation, the Latin American adaptation, as is true of the book's many other

translations, serves to adapt the premise of the book to the specific worldview of Latin American women. Davis writes:

“Mindful of the ‘imperialistic’ tendencies of U.S., feminism, the editors were especially keen to show that feminism was not simply a U.S. product. They did not believe that Latin American feminists must pattern themselves on feminism as it was practiced in the United States. On the contrary, they believed that U.S. feminists had a lot to learn from their Latin American ‘sisters,’ and they viewed the translation as a means of facilitating the flow of knowledge in both directions” (Davis 180).

It is problematic to address Latin American women as a universal category, as notions of pan-Latinx identity must be qualified with nuances that address the diversity of political and cultural contexts that are the legacies of colonization and foreign intervention, among other things, a point which Davis herself later addresses as a challenge of the book’s Latin American translators. Despite the inherent challenges in the Latin American adaptation of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, arising out of the complexity of unifying Latina feminist identity, I am interested what Davis sees in the adaptation’s approach to translation. Like Davis’s translators, I chose to depict a frame for migrants’ rights advocacy that centers the experiences of people who were themselves Latin American migrants. In doing so, by using the variety of life stories I facilitated and curated through my project, I was able to engage the concept of pan-Latinidad, as the Latin American translation of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* does, to convey varied transnational perspectives on migrant solidarity and support. Ultimately, I felt it important to convey histories not just across languages, but across geographies, acting to amplify several different national and

diasporic histories. Such an approach is especially important for U.S. activists and service providers approaching their work as people who may be previously unfamiliar with Latin American politics, whether in the U.S. or abroad.

Engaging with Spivak's notions of agency and the right to translate, along with Davis's focus on context, I set out to contextualize the transcripts themselves through field notes and biographical information about all of my narrators and their ongoing work. Yet the project's focus is still on the narrators' own stories, and therefore, the individual transcription-translations. The edited interviews themselves, split into parts which the user can select from the author pages, come as edited audio, and, significantly, as two-column ethnopoetic transcriptions. I opted to make the first column the speaker's language of dominance, and the language the interview is predominantly in, and the second column, the translation. Here I was confronted with a number of challenges – particularly choices around punctuation, enjambment, and verse structure that I had to decide on even before translating from one language to the other in the second column.

For example, one of the biggest challenges around creating ethnopoetic transcription-translations involved transforming sentences into verse and deciding what decisions to make in enjambment. At first, I thought to attempt to mimic the speech patterns of my narrators as much as possible, something very visible in many parts of the end-product, including this segment, describing one of my narrators' childhoods in the Dominican Republic:

“We had mango,

avocado,
soursop,
we had oranges,
and the neighbors across the street,
too,
they had the dog, they had
their tree,
they'd go get the water,
go down the alleyway,
we'd go out together,
and that way, it was always happy,
always happy
when we were living that way."

However, there were many instances where it became difficult to adapt the narrator's flow into a rhythm in verse. Most frequently, a narrator would move from uttering a very short sentence quite slowly to rapidly describing something in a barrage of words, making it hard to convey these changes in the flow of conversation. Oftentimes, it was simply difficult to create enough space to legibly format two side-by-side columns of text with two long sentences, so I had to find logical breaks in a narrator's ideas, even when they were in the middle of what textually appear to be long run-on sentences. Perhaps even more challenging still, however, were the inherent rhythmic differences between the various dialects of

English and Spanish spoken by each of my narrators and my own English and Spanish dialects – in which case I had to, unfortunately, lose some of the richness of the original language in order to provide a clear translation.

After making these decisions, in translating ethnopoetic Spanglish monologues, I also faced choices around slang and vernacular, and around the often multilingual nature of the original transcripts. One of the hardest challenges for me was engaging with the multilingual nature of many of my narrators' testimonies. At first, I tried engaging with multilingual translation in both columns, translating, for example, the beginning of my narrator Laura's piece, in Spanish, into English in the second column, in contrast to the mostly English of the rest of her story, translated into Spanish. I was hoping multilingual translations across columns could create a kind of dialogue, yet I struggled with their equivalency, their valence. I ultimately opted mostly to translate unidirectionally, keeping the original transcripts intact, whether the speaker spoke primarily Spanish or primarily English. Ultimately, in spite of attempts to translate Spanglish, I found that I was unable to create translated multilingual phrases with the clarity and verve of my narrators' original dialogue. Therefore, I opted for a largely monolingual translation that prioritized clarity, unfortunately sacrificing much of the multilingual nature of the originals.

The experience of literally translating from one poem-column to another taught me the impossibility of configuring Spanish's rhythms and sentence structures to English and vice-versa. It also taught me about the diversity of Spanishes I worked with, given the colloquial nature of most of my interview content and the many countries my narrators hailed from. While I ultimately ended

up losing much of the richness of specific regional slang, in both English and Spanish, to the need to translate for clarity to reach larger audiences, I did create a glossary for specific terms, especially useful for my decision to incorporate varying regional slang for words like “cool,” translated from the English to my adaptation of Ecuadorean Spanish as “bacan,” but interpreted in the Spanish translation for my Chicana narrator’s story as “chido.”

I came to realize that translating a transcript was an act of double-translation – an interpretation of an interpretation. When I began translating my transcripts, I wanted to be ethically “faithful” to the original words of my narrators, forcing myself to think about not just translating content, but also the narrative voices and cadences of each of my narrators. Even with a participatory process, however, my ideas about “faithful” translations became increasingly complicated. Between the language barriers of some of my interviewees, limiting their ability to comment on my translations of their words, and the vast amount of editorial choices necessary to first transcribe and then translate a transcript, I soon began to realize I could not escape the authorial nature of translation – of taking stories across linguistic borders. The end result of my creative process is that I ended up with something legible differently by different audiences, in order to create space for bilingual readers to directly engage both the stories and my work translating them. Through my website, I made all three versions; the audio recording, the transcript, and the translation, available for a kind of comparison. Yet, despite an urgent need to make interviews accessible and compelling to a bilingual audience, part of the experience of engaging with my work, as is true, generally, of diaspora, is the inevitability of lost

meaning – for monolingual speakers of both Spanish and English alike. Nevertheless, in engaging in Spivak’s intimate act of reading my narrators, being in dialogue with their stories as Davis’s translators were with the transnational feminist translators of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and ultimately piecing together the fragments, I ended up making key choices to ensure that my translations were clear and compelling, while keeping them as faithful to the distinct, specific voices of my narrators as possible.

Next Steps and Conclusion

Ultimately, I believe that *Nueva York es la Frontera* exists as a possible model for ethnographers and oral historians to continue to work, in both theory and practice, as both researchers and documentarians. What academics I met throughout the year frequently referred to as “public humanities” is something I think both academia and documentary work stand to gain from – accessibly written, applied research is not just more useful to those whose communities are directly being talked about, but it also fundamentally shifts the paradigm of knowledge, as oral history interviews tend to do, into a kind of collaboration or co-creation. Similarly, public humanities work, particularly in oral history and documentary projects, allow for a depth of analysis and nuance that allow for stories to emerge that represent multiple vantage points on a subject – an intersectional, intersubjective approach to documentary production, which is to say, reporting that challenges the notion of an objective, simple story. It is that intersection of researching and reporting, and that focus on dialogue, that I believe this project has

best highlighted, and that it has, in its own way, been able to become a form not just of teaching and learning, but also of dialogue, about migration, ancestry, and especially, about the complex-yet-universal nature of immigrant stories, and the stories of so many contemporary Latin American communities.

Bibliography

Albarelli, Gerald and Amy Starecheski. *Telling Lives Curriculum Guide*. New York, NY: Columbia University, 2005.

Davis, Kathy. *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Duke University Press, 2007.

di Leonardo, Micaela. "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter." *The Oral History Review* 15.1 (1987): 1-20.

Latina Feminist Group. *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. Duke University Press, 2001.

Maze, Elinor. "The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History." *History of Oral History*, edited by Thomas L. Charlton, Loise E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, AltaMira Press, 2007, pp. 227-261.

Passerini, Luisa. *Autobiography of a Generation*. 1988. Translated by Lisa Erdberg, Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Reznikoff, Charles. *Testimony*. 1934. Black Sparrow, 2015.

Rothenberg, Jerome. "Ethnopoetics: Discourses." *UbuWeb*, <http://www.ubu.com/ethno/discourses.html>. Accessed 8 September 2016.

Rukeyser, Muriel. "The Book of the Dead." *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, edited by Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005, pp. 73-110.

Spivak, Gayatri. "The Politics of Translation." *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2000, edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2012, 312-330.