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Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence

ELIZABETH MILLER, EDWARD LITTLE, AND STEVEN HIGH
Going Public: Participatory Approaches to Oral History, Documentary Media, and Theatre
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Introduction

STEVEN HIGH

My dad was a steel worker with Great Lakes Steel, a union man, put in his thirty years [...] I grew up in Southwest Detroit which is a predominantly blue-collar part of the city of Detroit. The factories were the prevalent workplace [...] As I grew up, I had hopes for college, but the factories were the lure, the money, the pay, the stability [...] We went in with high hopes, ambition, and we settled in. But as time wore on after five, ten years, we realized we had choices to make. As we started to marry and build our families, we knew then that this was a keeper. That we were gonna be part of this [...] Hired in, it was a whole new world to me. Working for GM, “business of businesses.” We’re partners, we’re going to do this for life, this thirty-year ambition. So as time wore on, I chose to become a good worker. Be on time, come in everyday; build the product the way they wanted it to be built [...] I got married when I worked in the shop, we had a child, we moved out to the suburbs. The big dream was on. I bought the GM product, the car, the truck, the house in the suburbs, the new baby, the new furniture. And then [chuckles] the dream came crashing down.

— Gabriel Solano

It may seem strange to begin a volume on oral history in the aftermath of mass violence with the recollections of a Detroit autoworker as his story of forced economic displacement is not typically understood in these terms. We are much more accustomed to thinking of mass violence and survival in the context of war or atrocity crimes. But as this edited collection demonstrates, there is considerable value in stretching ourselves to make new connections and to revisit old assumptions. Survivor testimony has developed a conventional form and rhetoric. For the most part, survivors of mass violence are understood as either eyewitnesses to history or as people traumatized by it. Testimony and trauma are thus firmly embedded in legal and medical discourses. Survivor testimony has become familiar: indeed, ubiquitous. The contributors to this volume consider other ways to engage with survivors.
and their accounts. Particular emphasis is placed on collaborative approaches and the political and historical context in which survivors recount their experiences. What are the rightful claims of a more holistic or collaborative approach to survivors’ retelling? What are the political and ethical implications of different ways of engaging survivors’ accounts?

While the contributors to this collection respond to these questions in varying geographic and historical contexts, there is much continuity between the chapters. The underlying logic of recorded accounts is subject to examination throughout the collection. By being attentive to the form and structure of oral accounts, as well as to what they have to say directly about the past, we can deepen our engagement with survivors’ remembered experiences. According to Julie Salverson, “a significant element in the encounter with testimony is the unexpectedness, the shock of the collision between the world of the listener and the world of the event.” The narrated life of Gabriel Solano is a case in point.

I first interviewed Gabriel in his Southwest Detroit home in February 1998, after he responded to my public appeal for plant shutdown stories. He had waited a long time to tell his story, so he jumped right in. Gabriel began working for General Motors in 1977, right out of high school. Like many in his blue-collar generation, he was not comfortable for long. The North American auto industry went through a period of crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in union concessions, mass layoffs, and factory closures. You can hear the disillusionment in Gabriel’s voice as he recounts how fast his life unravelled:

[The] pressure was on. “Do this, or we shut the shop down.” Threats. The threats were coming. They were coming full force. I mean, they weren’t hidden threats, they were open threats. “Do this, give us this, or it’s your job.” At which point we then became a workforce full of fear […] The factory, GM, with their cut-throat mentality cared not one for us. We were just kicked to the curb. We were put out to the pasture to die off. Myself, personally, I couldn’t believe it and I didn’t want to believe it. After one year of being laid-off from ’86, my marriage started to dissipate right in front of me. The pressures were immense, they were intense. We bought the house, we bought the vehicles, we had a brand new baby, and the pressure was on. It, it, eventually became too much for me and my wife and we divorced. At which point I became a bitter, a very, very bitter
man. Everything that I’d worked for and trained for, I watched it fall away. I fell to the wayside, GM pushed us to the wayside, my marriage went to the wayside … Well, it was a long and bitter layoff. Seven years, eight months to be exact. I survived it. I survived. And the reason that I survived was because I gave up on thinking that they would ever call me back. I had to let go of GM because GM sure in the hell let go of me.

After such a long wait, Gabriel was finally recalled to another GM plant, then another, and then another as one auto plant after another closed beneath him. Each time, Gabriel had to wait to be recalled and then started back at the bottom rung of the employment ladder. He no longer had the seniority to hold day shift as the company and union distinguished between corporate and plant seniority. This set workers apart and changed them. By the time that I interviewed Gabriel, he had closed three GM plants. After Fisher Guide in Southwest Detroit, he worked briefly at a Livonia trim shop and Pontiac’s east plant before resurfacing at the west plant.

Plant shutdown veterans like Gabriel eventually came to identify themselves with their displacement. They were no longer simply autoworkers but something other. Transplanted workers in the area, who had considerable corporate seniority but no plant seniority, soon took to calling themselves the “I-75 Gypsies.” Gabriel explained to me that these were the workers who had come off long layoffs, having closed GM plants up and down Interstate-75:

We are the people who shut down plants up and down I-75, that’s why we call ourselves the 75 Gypsies. We have no home plants. We’re very hardened people. We’re very thick-skinned, but we’re also very good people because we’ve been to all the battles in the war called the automotive industry. And to meet one … you’ll meet the most wonderful person because at the facility I’m at, we’re gypsies: the majority in our area, in our facility. There’s like four or five hundred of us there and they stuck us all in damn near the same building. So, we’re neat because everyone has a story. And they’re beautiful stories. They’re stories of hurt, of fear, of anger, of loss, of gain … the whole rollercoaster … We’re taken in, but we’re treated differently.

Told from the vantage point of a battle-hardened, yet still defiant, I-75 gypsy, Gabriel’s account is cast in absurdist terms. The things he saw
and experienced were often ridiculous, irrational, and even humorous in a perverse kind of way. I would like to relate a story he shared with me about the closing of his third plant. He was called in to work there only after the company announced its closure:

So I get there and the foreman gave me this “you’re here to do the job,” and I mean, he’s gung-ho and I’m looking at him like I just got a free ticket on the Titanic. It’s already hit the iceberg, it’s three-quarters sunk and you’re telling me strike up the band? And I said, “Can life get any worse? And then I meet you?” So he, he reads me his riot act about what we have to do for this plant and it’s gonna shut down in two weeks. Mind you, this is at Christmas time. And I’m like, is this real? It’s real. So, you’re absolutely right. Which way is the lifeboat? [Laughs] At which point I said I have to have fun with this. And I made it fun. I was around a bunch of workers who had never been to a plant closing and I had already closed two.

At this point in recounting his story, I interjected as Gabriel had not yet revealed the second closure to me. He forged ahead without skipping a beat:

It was a Livonia trim shop. I was there briefly … I think it was the Lusitania and then I got on the Titanic. So one got torpedoed and the other hit the iceberg. So I, I was rather enlightened because I had now become calloused and I understood what was going on. To watch some of these other workers, threatening to bring in guns. I hate everyone’s mentality, it was understood: I seen, I felt it, I done it. Been there. Oh, there was one hell of an irony because it was Christmas time and I can remember this day so vividly ’cause I was taking notes because I wanted to feel this even farther down the road. So I took notes every day on how workers were acting. I mean the things that were done in there. They were horrendous … the one day that I took notes, I can still remember them so vividly. “Attention, attention.” And then they put out flyers, posters. “Free hot dogs. Pops. Popcorn in the cafeteria. Please come down!” But hey, I’ll look at the freebies. So I go down there and I’m sitting in the corner and I’m writing down, I’m watching people and I’m writing this down. You can see the anger. You can see the hurt. You can see
the anxiety. And you can see, most of all, the fear. That magic word: fear. They start playing Christmas music over the PA and I'm thinking, “Strike up the band, the Titanic's going down.” So we get in line and the plant manager and all of his colleagues passing [out] hot dogs and pop. They are so damn cheerful and they're taking pictures. So he hands me a hot dog. So I drop it on the floor. He says, “Oh, here's another one.” So I throw it against the wall. He says, “Do you have attitude?” [Laughs] And I started laughing and I says, “It’s ironic you should ask me that. Here you are shutting our plant down, putting us out of work. You're playing Christmas music. It's at Christmas time. I should be happier than a pig in you know what.” And I said, “No! No! But this is what I think of your hot dog, this is what I think of your pop.” So at which point they said, “Call security, we don’t want him in here because he’s disrupting the other employees.” I says, “No, you don’t have to call them. I’ll leave. But I just want you to know how I feel and that’s genuine. Been through a lot to have to do this but this is my respect for you, the same respect you’re giving me.” It was a hell of an irony. Christmas music, free hot dogs, plant closes at Christmas time. So, here I am on the Titanic and I’m thinking, “God, GM is just being too kind to me.”

The incongruous juxtaposition of soon-to-be unemployed autoworkers being feted by their smiling managers is not something easily forgotten or forgiven. Philosopher Thomas Negel once suggested that, in order to recognize the absurd in our own lives, we have to see ourselves from the outside: to become estranged from our condition. We see this occurring in Gabriel’s repeated mention of having written down notes as these events unfolded. His detached amazement thus sets him apart from the other autoworkers waiting in line for their free hot dogs and pop. As he says, he had become “enlightened.” But this is not simply an exercise in mass observation, as his subsequent act of rebellion attests. Gabriel is clearly angry.

Gabriel’s plant shutdown story is a tragic tale brimming with absurdity. The absurd is epitomized in Greek mythology by Sisyphus, who is condemned by the gods to roll a rock up a hill for an eternity. Once he arrives at the top, the rock rolls back down, and he has to start over again. It is all pointless, of course. Writer Albert Camus, famous for
his existential novels, believed that Sisyphus was an absurd hero because he continued to push the rock up the hill but mocked the gods who condemned him to this fate by doing so cheerfully. For Camus,

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious […] Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his misery: that is what he thinks of during his descent. The clairvoyance that was meant to be his torture crowns at the same time his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.6

One can see parallels in the interview with Gabriel Solano. The oft-repeated experience of factory closure, layoff, and recall is a similarly unending cycle of misery for Detroit autoworkers. Gabriel, like Sisyphus, thus conquers his cruel fate by heroically scorning it. There
is a movement from silence to despair to rebellion in Gabriel’s plant shutdown story: an awakening conscious. The form and structure of his story is, in itself, a product of his experience of displacement.

Naturally, my intention here is not to equate the fate of industrial workers to the slaughter of thousands or millions in Rwanda, Bosnia, Argentina, Cambodia, or Nazi-occupied Europe. Deindustrialization is devastating for those directly affected, but it is not genocide. My point is to show that acts of witness range across many sites of resistance to mass violence. First-person narratives give us unique “glimpses into the lived interior” of forced displacement and its aftermath. One of the legacies of mass violence and forced displacement, in all its varieties, is the emergence of new communities of activist survivors who form their own identities and institutions. In Ari Gandsman’s chapter, for example, we see how the surviving “disappeared” in Argentina formed their own association to undertake its historical and judicial work. Elsewhere, groups of injured workers (Storey), genocide survivors (Sheftel and Zembrzycki), eugenics survivors (Wilson), and others do much the same work. Through this broad approach to mass violence, this collection responds to some of the criticisms of “wounded attachment” raised by sociologist Beverley Skeggs, who notes that “only some groups can articulate their identities through wound and pain,” thereby “eclipsing structural inequality and suffering.”

This edited collection originates in the work of the Montreal Life Stories project, a six-year community-university research alliance that recorded the life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations. University-based researchers worked collaboratively with survivors and their organizations, envisioning the project together and co-producing its many activities. Almost five hundred multi-session interviews were conducted, and the project produced a variety of online digital stories, animated and documentary films, radio programming, live performances, QR-coded audio portraits in metro cars, audio walks, art installations, pedagogical materials, and a museum exhibition. In March 2012, we also organized an international conference entitled Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence, which drew almost two hundred participants. Presenters explored a wide range of national and historical contexts using a variety of approaches. This collection emerged from this extended conversation, both in terms of the project and the conference itself.
Beyond Testimony and Trauma is also a product of the historiographical moment. The popularity of trauma research and psychoanalytic theory in the humanities and social sciences since the 1990s was tied to the rise of memory studies and the publication of Felman and Laub’s Testimony in 1992 and the work of Cathy Caruth, published in 1995 and 1996. Soon, however, questions were raised about trauma theory. In 2001, Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin asserted that trauma theory was a “phenomenon begging analysis.”¹³ Radstone, in particular, expresses concern that the “usual cut and thrust of academic parrying and debate” was rendered “inappropriate” in the presence of human suffering.¹⁴ She raises the possibility that trauma had “become a ‘popular cultural script’ in need of contextualization and analysis in its own right – a symptom, the cause of which needs to be sought elsewhere.”¹⁵ Since then, a growing number of scholars have questioned the uncritical and undifferentiated use of trauma in the study of mass violence. Our own efforts to go “beyond trauma” are therefore part of the wider rethinking occurring across the humanities and social sciences.

The thirteen chapters that follow are organized into three parts, each taking us beyond testimony and trauma in unique ways. We start with the political work of testimony. Too often, we understand testimony singularly as an individual act of witness, ignoring the contexts in which these first-person accounts are invited, recorded, heard, and diffused. Nor do we hear enough of their important place in social movements and within survivor communities themselves. Part 2 of the book takes us into the important memory work that is being conducted collaboratively by researchers and survivors. The emphasis here is on Henry Greenspan’s notion of “sustained conversation” and “genuine dialogue.”¹⁶ Part 3 takes us into the internal logics of recorded oral narratives. Meaning can be found in the form and structure of the recorded narratives, and in the silences therein, as well as in what is actually said. We can therefore learn a great deal from reading oral accounts for the “symbols and logic embedded in them” rather than simply as sources of historical information.¹⁷ Only then, according to historian Daniel James, can we “attend to their deeper meaning and do justice to the complexity found in the lives and historical experiences of those who recount them.”¹⁸ It is this complexity found in political context, sustained conversation, and deep listening that is the subject of this book.
The Political Work of Witness

War keeps coming back in narratives and memories as the most dramatic point of encounter between the personal and the public, between biography and history.

– Alessandro Portelli

Part 1 of Beyond Testimony and Trauma comprises four chapters that explore the wider context of survivor recounting: its place and function within movements for social justice and within societies more generally. Interviewing for human rights purposes ranges from acts of “fact-finding” during or in the immediate aftermath of mass atrocities to the development of vast archives of conscience long after. Truth and reconciliation processes have now occurred in many countries, including my own. As I write, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is gathering the statements of thousands of Aboriginal survivors of residential schools. The past twenty-five years have also seen large-scale testimony-gathering projects such as that of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. To some extent, the “ethical force” of these projects stems from the “accumulation of many stories.” But even taken individually, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, “Narratives of witness […] make an urgent, immediate, and direct bid for attention and call the reader/listener to an ethical response through their affective appeals for recognition.”

What is interesting here, however, is the degree to which these large and ambitious projects encourage us to think of the large body of interviews as a whole or in terms of the individual survivor bearing witness. What we do not see as often is the survivor activism that often initiates these efforts or the central role of survivors in the projects themselves. Nor do we hear much about the survivor communities that form in the aftermath of mass violence as this occurs beyond the sight lines of the eyewitness to mass violence. Human rights discourse tends to privilege individual rights and to emphasize the innocence of the survivor. But when we listen more closely to human rights activists, we hear a subtle tension between the legal discourse of individual human rights and the language of collective political struggle for equality and social justice. Human rights discourse presents activists and social movements with a way to transcend domestic politics and long-established ideological divides, leveraging international support through
a discourse of legality. This became evident in a series of interviews that I conducted in 2010 with visiting human rights activists from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.\(^\text{24}\) I was struck by the frequency with which they corrected themselves during the interview after momentarily speaking of “student rights,” “women’s rights,” or “disability rights.” The growing importance of first-person accounts in North American social movements is similarly clear. The ACT UP oral history project with surviving members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power in New York City comes immediately to mind.\(^\text{25}\) This movement context provides us with an alternative political frame to individual eyewitness or trauma.

In Chapter 1, Ari Gandsman explores the work of survivors in post-dictatorship Argentina. Remembering mass violence in a post-conflict society is, of course, vastly different from remembering it as part of a diaspora. Gandsman’s surviving “disappeared” struggle against the societal perception that they survived because they had collaborated. For some, they are morally suspect, compromised, or tainted. Only one in one hundred of the estimated thirty thousand who were disappeared by the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 survived. These survivors have faced hostile questioning and snide remarks ever since. In Argentina, moral authority rests in the families of those killed, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Survivors have therefore been politically marginalized, despite their key role in the criminal prosecution of the killers and torturers. A member of the Association of Ex-Detainees and Disappeared, for example, is quoted as saying: “We were pointed at, left to the side, treated like traitors and ghosts. There was no solidarity for us.” Some survivors, however, do find solidarity with one another.

In Chapter 2, North Americans are reminded that mass violence is not just located somewhere else or sometime before but also in the here and now. Robert Storey specifically engages with the place of “accident stories” within the injured workers’ movement. At present, in Canada, the everyday violence of capitalist labour processes leaves a worker seriously injured (requiring time off) every nineteen seconds, and each day three workers die from workplace accidents or disease. These workers are twice harmed, first by not being adequately protected at work against injury and then by a regime that turns “hurts into harms.” Injury compensation is a “profoundly individualizing experience” as their claims are adjudicated strictly on a case-by-case basis.\(^\text{26}\) The sharing of stories that is taking place between injured workers thus
contributes to “new understandings” about their personal experiences, furthering political mobilization and resistance to changes in government policy as well as countering the shame and isolation felt by many injured workers. “Nobody should be going through this alone,” says Alice (an injured worker).

Historians and other researchers have an important role to play in building solidarity within marginalized populations. In the context of the Injured Workers History Project, a community-university research alliance, Storey addresses the political potential of “gatherin’ a little knowledge,” with movement activists and leaders sharing not only personal stories within the movement but also historical knowledge. Storey speaks to how contact with the “long history” of injured workers provides a political framework within which injured workers may situate their experiences, a process that serves to politicize their understanding of their experience of injury. Both Gandsman’s and Storey’s activist-survivors formed groups to “work with these testimonies,” filling in the blanks through additional historical research. This political framing stands as an alternative to the “preoccupation with the experience of loss and a privileging of trauma as a mode of knowledge,” which “provides an essential yet limiting framework that fixes testimony within a discourse of loss and the tragic.”

Pain and suffering need not be pathologized as an individual problem.

The politics of telling one’s story changes when the context shifts from survivors sharing with one another to the telling of their stories to wider publics. Who controls the process is of fundamental importance. The ethics of learning from survivor accounts in the classroom is the subject of Chapter 3, co-authored by feminist educators Lisa Taylor, Marie-Jolie Rwigema, and Umwali Sollange. They are in the initial stages of a participatory action project that will result in community-led curriculum development for a Grade 11 course entitled “Genocide and Crimes against Humanity.” Too often, they argue, Western audiences are only interested in the experiential stories of Rwandan genocide survivors and not their expertise – leaving control of interpretation in the hands of non-Africans. The naïve solicitation of autobiography, Salverson argues elsewhere, may “recycle scripts of melancholic loss” and reproduce “a form of cultural colonialism that is at the very least voyeuristic.” A similar point is made here when Taylor observes that “voracious empathy risks being an exercise in emotional tourism, an ahistorical, sentimentalized, and romanticized ‘feeling good about feeling bad.’” This can amount to the “theft of pain.” Public testimony,
at least in North America, is often delivered in “highly formalized settings,” whereas “insider practices” often take the form of informal “chitchat testimonies,” Sollange reminds us. Ultimately, they argue, the aspirations for survivor testimony to galvanize responses to end the violence “remain unattained and increasingly uncertain.” Researchers and educators, by working collaboratively with survivor communities, need to “work through the demands of testimony” and to re-examine the “ways testimony is framed and used within genocide education.”

In Chapter 4, the final chapter in this section, Rob Wilson explores the role of oral history in surviving a eugenics past. Canada’s history of surgical sterilization of the “mentally defective” ended only in 1973 when British Columbia repealed its legislation a year after Alberta did so. Wilson’s project, the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada, yet another community-university research alliance, is working in partnership with eugenics survivors and human rights advocates to document this history through archival research and recorded interviews. The research project is very much understood as a political intervention and part of a wider effort to take back control and to break the silence. As Wilson writes: “It is not simply that survivor oral history has been omitted, forgotten, or neglected, as in other cases; rather, it is that survivor oral history has been presumed to be precluded by the putative nature of those deemed mentally deficient.” We learn about the courage and determination of Leilani Muir, a eugenics survivor and Living Archives team member, who brought a lawsuit against the government – shining critical light on the forced sterilization of three thousand Canadians.

**Working with Survivors**

Collaboration does not mean that we abandon our own stance, that we lose our “critical edge” as scholars. It does, however, challenge our power dynamics in the field.

— Alicia J. Rouverol

Part 2 of *Beyond Testimony and Trauma* shifts our perspective to the kinds of working-through that go on in the collaborative interview or workshop. Of course the interview has become a standard tool for many humanities and social science disciplines. For some disciplines interviewing is almost banal, though it continues to encounter strong resistance in others. After years of debate, survivor accounts are now
largely accepted in historical writing about mass violence. Their immediacy, according to Geoffrey H. Hartman, “burns through the ‘cold storage’ of history.” How researchers approach the interview, however, varies. Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky, for example, suggest that a great deal of activity that looks like interviewing Holocaust survivors and calls itself interviewing Holocaust survivors may not, in fact, be interviewing Holocaust survivors. In reality, they continue, a genuine interview with a Holocaust survivor may be a relatively rare thing. For them, as for me, a good interview is a collaborative work space in which the interviewer and the interviewee wrestle with the past and its legacies.

The “democratic impulse” within oral history, always strong, finds expression in the four chapters contained in Part 2. The contributors, which include Greenspan, demonstrate a strong commitment to working collaboratively with survivors. They speak in terms of “collaborative witnessing,” “compassionate listening,” and being true “partners in conversation.” As Kathleen Blee suggests, the evidence of oral history is “embedded not only in narrative accounts but also in the process of interviewing.” It is therefore important to be reflexive in our interviewing practice. However, the line between being self-aware and reflexive researchers and being self-indulgent is “fragile and blurred.” Joy Parr, for example, insists that oral historians have “taken refuge in methodology” when faced with ethically challenging situations. Alessandro Portelli goes further when he cautions us that too much self-reflexivity can effectively erase our interview partners.

If the sharing of our research stories is fraught, the contributors to this section reveal that, in working collaboratively with survivors, methodology and self-reflexivity become part of the conversation rather than a turning inward or away. There is perhaps no better way to begin this section than with Henry Greenspan’s reflections on forty years of listening to and working with Holocaust survivors. His book, entitled On Listening to Holocaust Survivors and now in its second edition, has become indispensable to many of us in the field. Here, again, he encourages us to meet survivors as “genuine partners in conversation.” His chapter finds some of the key concepts in genocide studies – such as testimony, trauma, and memory – to be wanting. Testimony, he writes, is ill-equipped to explain the many ways, and all the reasons, that survivors retell. For this reason, Greenspan prefers to speak of accounts or retelling. Trauma likewise subsumes a wide range of anguish. In On Listening, for example, he writes that “trauma theories can be a
distraction from the kinds of listening that the best interviews entail." For its part, memory cannot quite capture “in the bones knowledge,” he writes. He proposes knowledge as an alternative to memory, at least in cases in which people survived mass violence. Knowledge, he suggests, may be grounded in memories but it also includes their implications. In this sense, Greenspan argues that knowledge is the more fundamental category, equipping those survivors—in this part and the one before—to draw on what they have learned, share it, and use it as the basis of organizing change.

The contributors that follow share Greenspan’s emphasis on sustaining the conversation beyond the confines of the formal interview. In Chapter 6, Carolyn Ellis (a qualitative researcher) and Jerry Rawicki (a Holocaust survivor) reflect on their collaborative life-writing practice. The co-authors introduce us to the notion of “collaborative witnessing” as an alternative to the usual practice of “bearing witness” in testimony-giving. Carolyn Ellis has been using interactive interviewing and “co-constructed narrative approaches” since the early 1990s. Working together, the co-authors “mutually analyze” Jerry Rawicki’s remembered stories. For the purposes of this chapter, they focus on one story in particular, called “Get the Jew,” which was developed into a literary short story. Here, for the first time, we get to read the story in its final polished form while also being able to read it as it appeared in the transcribed initial interview. The co-authors then reflect on how they got from one point to the other. Importantly, their collaboration continued during the analysis phase, resting on an ethic of friendship that did not draw a hard line between the personal and the professional.

Friendship also underlies the contribution of Chris Patti, who, in Chapter 7, relates his deepening relationship with Sal Wainberg, a Tampa Bay–area Holocaust survivor. Patti speaks to the experience of the interview, the forged connection, and the sense of intimacy that sometimes resulted. Playing with form, the dialogical structure of Patti’s piece highlights that this is a conversation. It is an authorial voice that we are still unaccustomed to hearing, at least in my disciplinary home in history. But it draws the reader into the conversation, creating a space of exchange and reflection. Although this is sometimes a messy business it is also a living process. A similar kind of dialogical work space was apparent in the previous chapter, and both chapters point to a longer continuum of practice in which the formal interview sessions are only a part of the process. Sharing and listening are thus not confined to
formal “research” spaces, nor are they set apart from everyday life. Here, again, we see a desire, and even a commitment, to blur boundaries and to extend the conversation. In talking to Sal, Patti shows us the power of “compassionate listening.”

In Chapter 8, we move away from the one-on-one interview and towards workshop environments. Much like Greenspan, Ellis, and Patti, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki work collaboratively with Holocaust survivors, but this time in the context of a series of workshops held with the survivor-speakers associated with the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. These workshops occurred after the sustained interviewing of many of the speakers by members of the Montreal Life Stories project, including Sheftel and Zembrzycki.44 The focus of the interviews and workshops was on the evolving practice of survivor-educators. What have they learned from going into classrooms week after week for years, sometimes decades, and telling their stories to school children and youth? What “worked” and what did not? Was there a “best practice”? These are questions that survivors themselves posed, but they are unfamiliar, and may even be destabilizing, as survivor testimony is supposed to be authentic and spontaneous. To broach these subjects, however, was to recognize the expertise of the survivor-educators who have been at the heart of Holocaust education for a generation. In the workshops, survivors spoke of “their personal experiences in one breath and the educational strategies they employ in another – the two went hand in hand.”

Chapter 9 also explores the pedagogical strategies of using first-person accounts to educate North Americans about genocide, forced migration, and integration. The Mapping Memories project, part of Montreal Life Stories, worked with refugee youth. Over the course of a year, a small group of young people worked with Michele Luchs (an educator) and Elizabeth Miller (a digital media practitioner and filmmaker) in the production of an immersive bus tour of the city of Montreal. It was a bus tour like no other as the interior of the bus was transformed into an immersive storytelling space. Their stories were shared during the bus journey through a combination of pre-recorded scripted stories as well as spoken word and music. These stories of Palestine, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe were anchored in Montreal at a series of stops along the way. A book published and freely available online, entitled Mapping Memories: Participatory Media, Place-Based Stories and Refugee Youth, was subsequently launched.45 The chapter published
here focuses on the next stage of this multi-year collaboration: a tour of Montreal-area high schools by Léontine, Ayanda, and Stéphanie, three of the young team members. Here, with the testimonial act front-and-centre, we learn about the challenges and opportunities in participatory outreach. Taken together, the five chapters in this section reveal the collaborative potential in working with survivors of mass violence, but it requires time, flexibility, and a commitment to work together. As Henry Greenspan writes: “Pedestals quarantine as effectively as asylums.”

**Acts of Composure and Framing**

We compose our memories to make sense of our past and present lives. “Composure” is an aptly ambiguous term to describe the process of memory making. In one sense we compose or construct memories using the public languages and meanings of our culture. In another sense we compose memories that help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives and identities, that give us a feeling of composure.

— Alistair Thomson

Part 3 of *Beyond Testimony and Trauma* focuses on the underlying logic of the recorded oral narratives. What is recorded during the interview is shaped by how people make sense of their past based on who they think they are and how they got that way. The form and structure of the narrative, as well as its actual content and the silences in-between, thus become evidence for oral historians. These acts of self-composure, as Thomson explains, never occur in isolation. In narrating their lives, interviewees draw on “pre-existing storylines and ways of telling stories.” Our memories, however, become “risky and painful” if they “do not conform to the public norms of versions of the past.” As a result, these acts of composure are never fully formed or achieved as time continues to pass and change us.

The interview, too, is an active process that frames what is said. Oral historians often speak of the “conversational narrative” that results from its question-and-answer format. To varying degrees, the interview is co-produced, but it is mediated by the interview frame of the researcher’s project design, key questions, recruitment strategies, and very presence in the room. Catherine Baker’s chapter, in particular, focuses on these “framing processes.” As she notes, “All possible frames
exist within certain configurations of power.” Baker therefore conceives of the interview as a “struggle for the power to interpret and represent.” This point may, she continues, prove “uncomfortable for oral historians, who often regard their work as participatory or emancipatory.” In exploring composure and framing, the contributors to Part 3 reflect on agency and structure in oral history.

In Chapter 10, drawing upon oral testimonies of asbestos disease, Arthur McIvor examines violence and trauma found in workplace disease in the United Kingdom. Almost always fatal, asbestos-related cancers represent one of the clearest examples of the economic violence inherent in industrial production. Much of the scholarship, however, tends to focus on state policy or legal frameworks and not on workers themselves. The chapter examines the stories of workers diagnosed with serious and terminal asbestos-related diseases, such as mesothelioma, documenting its impact on individuals and families and the political responses it generated, including the emergence of advocacy groups such as Clydeside Action on Asbestos in Glasgow. A fiercely independent working-class culture in Scotland, and economic insecurities, McIvor argues, contributed to a “high risk threshold culture.” Outwardly, many faced their deteriorating health with stoicism and fatalism; inwardly, however, there was a great deal of anger and fear. According to Phyllis Craig, a welfare rights officer working for Clydeside Action: “I think the physical and mental go together; the mental is torment; that’s the only word. It’s torture. They have severe breathlessness to the point they feel they are suffocating. And they can’t breathe. And the fear and anxiety brings it on more.” Identity mutation is at the core of the chapter, as is the successful fight (in Scotland) for what is generally regarded as the most progressive compensation system in the world regarding asbestos-related diseases.

In Chapter 11, Catherine Baker considers a series of “framing processes” that determines what is in view and what is left unknown or unstated within the interview. The UK-based project in translation studies, Languages at War: Policies and Practices of Language Contacts in Conflict, of which she is a member, considers the mediation of the interviewing process. Baker interviewed former interpreters active during the international intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and she examines the “interviewing frames” of language policy, working identities, collection strategies, and the choice of place names (e.g., Serb versus Croat). She is particularly interested in the moments when the
border-crossing interpreters interviewed felt compelled to explain terminology or practice and when their own ethnicity was made visible or put into question. Normally, testimony takes the Yugoslav wars as its frame, but Baker attempts to shake this up and “transgress the form” by shifting the focus to the framing processes found in the production of knowledge.

The final two chapters in this collection find special significance in the structure of the oral narratives themselves. In Chapter 12, a dozen interviews with Sephardic Jews in Montreal are examined for what they tell us about the nature of their departure from Muslim lands. Specifically, Yolande Cohen, Martin Messika, and Sara Cohen Fournier explore the remembered stories of departure. In their research, they were quickly confronted by interviewees who did not see how their experiences fit within the project’s title and, thus, its framing: Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations. Many Sephardic interviewees, particularly from Morocco, vehemently denied that they were forced to leave their homelands; therefore, they saw themselves as immigrants rather than as refugees or survivors. What is interesting here is that the collision with this particular interview frame prompted a great deal of discussion that further deepened the dialogue. The chapter thus explores these ambiguities. The phrase “stories of departure,” rather than “stories of displacement,” indicates the continued bond of affection that many interviewees still have with Morocco despite their being compelled to leave. This is a study of memory itself: of what is minimized, emphasized, overlooked, and forgotten.

A similar interest in the ways in which lived experience structures remembering can be found in Chapter 13. Here, Marie A. Pelletier considers the place of religion in the oral narrative of seventy-three-year-old Ven Runnath, who survived the Khmer Rouge and now lives in Montreal. Her strong religious faith offers Ven Runnath a framework for interpreting, or making sense, of her own experience. What is especially noteworthy is that she was Buddhist during the Khmer Rouge years and only later converted to Christianity. This is significant as Ven Runnath now relies heavily on Christian symbolism and imagery to tell her story. The entire chapter is thus dedicated to the narrated life of one individual. “To respect memory also means letting it organise the story,” historian Luisa Passerini once wrote.
FIGURE 0.2 and FIGURE 0.3  The Nous sommes ici / We Are Here exhibition at the Centre d’histoire de Montréal was one of the many outcomes of the Montreal Life Stories project. March 2012-April 2013. Photographs by Denis-Carl Robidoux.
Conclusion

The contributors to this volume help shake us out of the habitual ways of thinking about, and engaging, “testimony” and “trauma.” The inclusion of “survivor” workers, of eugenics, and of others contributes to a rethinking of the issues, bringing together the directly targeted disposable and the structurally disposable. We began this introduction with the plant shutdown story of Gabriel Solano. In 2004, I returned to Detroit with photographer David Lewis to visually record some of the devastation caused by deindustrialization. I asked Gabriel if he would show us “his Detroit.” The places he took us had special significance to him: the first factory in which he laboured, his father’s steel mill, the ruined river boat that took his family for weekend getaways, among others. Our relationship to the ruined city was thus mediated by someone who had lived there all of his life. Far from being universal, the resulting images of industrial ruination were made that much more meaningful by their association with Gabriel, his family, and the stories that he shared with us. Since then, a large number of coffee-table books, films, and websites have featured the industrial ruins of Detroit. This has stirred considerable debate in the city about the politics and ethics of consuming (and profiting from) other people’s loss and pain. Some have even called it “ruin porn.”

Similar kinds of concerns have arisen with respect to the interviewing of survivors of war, genocide, and other human rights violations. We risk “eroticizing injury,” suggested Salverson, finding voyeuristic pleasure in seeing other people’s pain. Should we even be interviewing vulnerable people, on “ethical grounds,” asks Joy Parr? If so, how might we “retune” our practice in these instances? Vulnerability and distress can of course be found in any interview, regardless of what it is supposed to be about. One of my first interviews as an undergraduate student was with a woman who spoke at length about the sexual violence that she experienced as a child. She wanted it on the historical record, and so she volunteered to be interviewed for my hometown museum’s “local history” project. Sometimes the risks are greatest when we encounter “difficult” or “risky” stories unexpectedly. As a result, I favour “retuning” our oral history practice across-the-board rather than simply in cases when groups identified as vulnerable are being interviewed. All of our interviewees are well served when we think things through in advance and when we forge collaborative relationships.
There are also connections to be made across seemingly disparate experiences. For example, when I shared a preliminary draft of this introduction with Henry Greenspan, who has been a bit of a mentor to me over the years, it sparked a series of recollections of his own. When he was starting out as a psychotherapist, he worked downriver from Detroit with a number of men from Chrysler, Republic Steel, and BASF, companies that had large plants located there. The BASF workers often referred to the factory as “Auschwitz,” Greenspan remembered, both because they were aware of the company’s role as one of the core parts of IG Farben/Auschwitz 3 and because that was how they saw their working conditions. Their black humour, a kind of humour often employed by Holocaust survivors, flooded back into Greenspan’s mind when he read the excerpts from the interview with Gabriel Solano. He also recalled how one of his own interview partners, Reuben, would not move his store out of his “ruined” Detroit neighbourhood because it reminded him of that other ghetto, the one in Lodz: “Everything was boarded-up. And ruined.”

Greenspan then reflected on how this might play into what it means to be a “survivor” in a more specifically American sense. The “aspiration to go ‘beyond testimony,’” Greenspan writes in his afterword, so evident in this collection, “means to move toward useful and respectful partnership.” Today, more than ever, I am convinced that an ethic of sharing is at the heart of oral history practice.

The chapters that follow will resonate with many readers, perhaps prompting the kinds of reflections that Greenspan shared with me. No two readings are the same, however. We engage with these pages in our own unique ways, finding connection with our own lives. I am the father of a severely disabled daughter, who can only speak with her eyes and her laughter, and Wilson’s chapter on eugenics touched something deep inside me. Kyle, who also communicates non-verbally but can use text-to-voice software to speak (something my daughter Leanna will not be able to do), notes that the negative or ignorant opinions of some people do not matter: “those people do not know the real me.” It may be naïve or wishful thinking on my part, but getting to know the “real me” of another human being is a big part of what oral history is about. In the encounter, if we are lucky, we also learn something more about ourselves.