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## Review of Women Oral History: The Frontiers Reader Edited by Susan H. Armitage with Patricia Hart and Karen Wathermon.

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# Book Review

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Yuankun Yao

**WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY: THE FRONTIERS READER.**  
Edited by Susan H. Armitage with Patricia Hart and Karen  
Wathermon. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

## Introduction

Oral history, as a unique way for people to learn about past events and experiences (Wood, 1994), has been widely used in women's gender equity studies (Irwin, 1992; Siler, 1996; Sullivan & Bueler, 1988). The need to use oral history to address traditional history's neglect of women was recognized as early as the 1970s (e.g., Lehane & Goldman, 1976). Based on stories told by ordinary women such as ranch women, labor activists, and women of ethnic backgrounds (Armitage, 1996), such studies attempt to demonstrate that history does not happen to men only but also to women, and that history can be made in places like the home, the community, factories, offices, and fields (Stern, 2002).

*The Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* is one of the earliest journals about women's scholarship. The journal launched its first issue about women's oral history in 1977, two years after its establishment. Edited by Gluck and Jensen, this landmark issue provided the then-much-needed guide for people interested in oral history and women. A follow-up issue was published in 1983, when support for large scale oral history projects was replaced by a need for an in-depth approach to individual interviews. The two issues had established the journal as a front-runner in women's oral history. In 1998, the journal produced two more issues to make women's oral history current.

## Overview

*Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* is a collection of 21 journal articles. Edited by Susan H. Armitage, with Patricia Hart and Karen Weatherman, the book chronicles the evolution of women's oral history from its beginning in the 1970s to the present. The book documents how oral

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history provides an alternative perspective on history by uncovering important roles ordinary women have played—roles that have been typically ignored by mainstream history (Clegg, Miller, & Vanderhoof, 1995; Singleton, 1990).

*Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* has three sections. Section One, "Basic Approaches," consisted of articles that appeared in *The Frontiers'* 1977 issue. Section Two, "Oral History Applications," and Section Three, "Oral History Discoveries and Insights," presented articles that appeared in the journal from 1977 to 2001. Section One focused on different formats used to present women's oral history, and Sections Two and Three focused on the hidden meanings and insights that oral history may reveal about women and their history. Despite the different emphases, the majority of the articles in the book discussed interview techniques and gave a rich account of the life experiences of women.

### Basic Approaches

Gluck's "What's So Special About Women," the introductory article for the 1977 issue of *The Frontiers* also introduced Section One. The article provided a rationale for the women's oral history method and discussed the techniques needed at that time, Gluck justified the potential that women's oral history had to fill the gap in written information about women. Oral history was considered instrumental in reconstructing women's pasts by "challenging the traditional concepts of history" (p. 3). Gluck noted the need for the interview (a) to make successful initial contact with the interviewee(s), (b) to remain sensitive and non-intrusive during the interview process, and (c) to process the interview based on the time and resources available. Gluck observed that the oral history interview processes involved the reconstruction of the interviewee's life through the experience and perspective of the interviewer, thus distinguishing itself from the self-recorded memoir. A second article by Gluck, "Women's Oral History Resource Section," was a topical guide for oral history interviews with women. A selection of questions is provided in the guide, under such

topics as family history, education, and work experience. In the third article, "Doing Oral History as an Outsider." Strobel, drawing on her experience in interviewing women in Kenya, discussed both the challenges and benefits of using an outside interviewer.

Thomas' "Digging Beneath the Surface: Oral History Techniques" was based on the author's experience making a long cross-country trip to interview American farmwomen. Thomas found that, contrary to cultural expectations, the farmwomen she interviewed were not mere farm wives who just helped out, as they often described themselves; they were actually women farmers who performed essential functions on the farm for the survival of the family and the farm. The experience also made clear to her that when an interviewer asked a "stupid question" or presented her as "antagonistic" (p. 57), a better quality of responses may be elicited from the interviewee. Thomas suggested the need for the interviewer to become "invisible" (p. 58) during an interview process and emphasized the need to use "special marks" when transcribing interviews to preserve the reality of the interview experience.

Armitage's "The Next Step," an introductory article for the 1983 women's oral history issue of *The Frontier* pointed out the need to push women's oral history beyond the discovery stage to that of "analysis" and "intent" (p. 61). According to Armitage, when conducting women's oral history, one should not stop at discovery and exploration, instead one needs to "step back and ask questions about meanings, about comparability, about context" (p. 63).

"Reflections on Women's Oral History: An Exchange" was an exchange of views between Armitage and Gluck in 1998. The exchange centered around two questions raised by Armitage about the need for "collaborative meaning making" (p. 82) and for "generalization" or "search for patterns" (p. 82). Affirming the need for dialogue in constructing meaning and for generalization, Gluck also pointed out the need to "historicize" or "contextualize" (pp. 84-85) the narratives in oral history projects.

The last article in the section was Yung's "Giving Voice to Chinese American Women." Drawing on her experience researching the life stories of Chinese women, the results of which were summarized in *Unbound Feet* (1995) and *Unbound Voices* (1999), Yung mentioned the need for archival historical data as a supplement to oral history to provide context and meaning to the stories. Her interviews made her aware of her misconceptions about discrimination. The article ended with a touching story of Kwong Kim You, a Chinese woman who was married to a

Chinese-American who immigrated alone to San Francisco. For most of her life, You lived like a virtual widow in a Chinese village, even after she learned her husband had remarried in America.

### **Oral History Applications**

Wagner wrote the first article in Section Two, "Oral History as a Biographical Tool." Based on a granddaughter's account of the life stories of an early women's movement activist, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Wagner demonstrated how oral history in the form of family stories can be used to reveal family and personal dynamics and the implications of personal dynamics for political interaction. According to Wagner, the use of family stories by different family members added to "the richness of perspective" (p. 121).

"I Give the Best Part of My Life to the Mill: An Oral History of Icy Norman" was written by Murphy. Unlike the Wagner article, the Icy Norman story was told by Icy herself, who had spent nearly 50 years working at Burlington Industries, the world's largest textile factory. The image of family bonds, beyond the notion of blood kin, was vividly conveyed through the first person narration. A third article, "Looking Inward, Looking Backward: Reminiscence and the Life Review," written by Wrye and Churilla, demonstrated how a life review can serve a positive and even therapeutic, function for the aging and aged. The article emphasized how practitioners and researchers in the field of gerontology can learn from the life reviews of the elderly.

"Good Work, Sister! The Making of an Oral History Production," written by Kesselman, Tau, and Wickre, demonstrated how the results of a large oral history project may be presented in an effective public slide-tape show. Based on the experiences of women who were employed in the shipbuilding industry during World War II and who later were forced from the workforce when the soldiers returned at the end of the war, the article is both a celebration of the work of the narrators and the work of the interviewers.

"Filming Nana: Some Dilemmas of Oral History on Film," an article written by Broughton, gave an account of the challenges faced when trying to put oral history on film. Broughton described the challenges she faced in the process of filming the history of the mining town Burke, Idaho. The story was told through the voice of her grandmother. Broughton struggled with the issue of objectivity and the competing demands of filmmaking and history writing. Marchant's "Treading the Traces of Discarded History: Oral History Installations," demonstrated how women's oral

history can be turned into multimedia installations. Through such installations, Marchant was able to give voice to the women mill workers whose stories have often been “distorted, stereotyped, and fragmented” (p. 183). The last article in Section Two was “Patching the Past: Students and Oral History,” by Butler and Sorenson. They described how oral history class projects helped students in a history class learn from life histories of older women. The projects not only narrowed the distance between the students and their interviewees, many of whom were close relatives or acquaintances of the students, but also made them reconsider their own lives and discover the “parallel themes and personal potential” (p. 208). The group project in which Sorenson served as the student leader illustrated how the oral history project helped the students come together and patch the pieces into one colorful “quilt” (p. 208).

### **Oral History, Discoveries and Insights**

“Using Oral History to Chart the Course of Illegal Abortions in Montana,” an article by Sands, introduced Section Three. Using oral history as well as traditional research methods in an area traditionally considered a private sphere and outside of the history process, Sands learned that having an abortion did not put excessive guilt on a woman, that a respectable and highly qualified doctor could be an abortionist, and that people in the local community tended to turn a deaf ear to the existence of illegal abortions. “Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts,” by Bernal, was an alternative perspective on the history of the 1968 walkouts of mostly Chicano schools in East Los Angeles through a cooperative leadership paradigm. Based on individual and focus group interviews with eight women participants in the Blowouts, Bernal identified the different dimensions of grassroots leadership that characterized women’s activist leadership.

Jake, James, and Bunte, who interviewed two old Southern Paiute women, wrote “The Southern Paiute Women in a Changing Society.” The oral histories of the two women documented the traditional ways of the Southern Paiute women and the subsequent changes in their lives that occurred with the arrivals of the Mormons and the Navajos. Another article highlighting insights about life changes was Grim’s “From the Yazoo Mississippi Delta to the Urban Communities of the Midwest: Conversations with Rural African American Women.” Grim, who interviewed 37 rural African American women, provided an account of the feelings, hopes and hardships of the African American women migrants

who left the cotton fields of the agricultural South for the industrialized Northern cities, where there were opportunities as well as challenges.

“Domestic Violence and Poverty: The Narratives of Homeless Women,” written by Williams, provided insights about the complex connection between seemingly unrelated life experiences: domestic violence and poverty. In-depth interviews with 33 homeless women and participant observation in several homeless and battered women’s shelters in Phoenix, Arizona, provided the detail for the article. “Gender, Sexuality, and Class in National Narrations: Palestinian Camp Women Tell Their Lives,” was written by Sayigh. The article, based on the life stories of three Palestinian campus women, illustrated how national struggles in third world countries “inspired, mobilized, and constrained women’s movements in culturally and historically specific ways” (p. 317). The final article in Section Three, “Women of the British Coalfields on Strike in 1926 and 1984: Documenting Lives Using Oral History and Photography” was written by Gier-Viskovatoff and Porter. Using oral history and photography to explore the history of the British mining community women, they revealed surprising parallels between the women’s protests during the Great Lockout of 1926 and those during the Great Miners’ Strike of 1984-85.

### **Discussion**

Women’s oral history may be used for two related yet distinct purposes: (a) the promotion of women’s equity issues in the form of the feminist movement, and (b) the study of women’s history as an academic discipline. The different purposes may have different implications for the oral history method. Some authors emphasized the need for researchers to be aware of biases, and the need to remain non-intrusive during the interview process, typical advice found in qualitative research. Others, however, emphasized the need for collaborative meaning-making by introducing the interviewer’s agenda and perspective into the interview and interpretation phases. Many present day women’s oral history workers are feminist scholars (Safarik, 2000), who have both the sensitivity of the researcher and the perspective of a feminist and can balance them in their work.

Women’s oral history workers struggled over the issues of methodology, the use and interpretation of data. Taken as a whole, *Women’s Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* is a celebration of the achievements of women’s oral history. Because of such achievement, oral history has become a respectable research tool in historical studies, and is perceived to be an effective research method in women’s studies. The

insights and messages derived from the studies are encouraging, liberating, and through provoking, especially for those who are interested in using oral history to promote equity issues. The stories are enchanting and even heart breaking.

Those interested in oral history method as a general research tool will find this book to be a useful guide and resource. Even though the topic is focused on women's equity issues, the methodology may be applied to any endeavor that involves the use of oral history or qualitative research in general. Methodological insights and suggestions can be found throughout the book. For instance, questions about the issues of generalization and context raised by Armitage and Gluck are reflective of those promoted in qualitative research and method (Peshkin, 1993; Simons, 1996; Stainback & Stainback, 1988).

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