SUBJECTIVE LISTENING:
METHODOLOGICAL AND INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CONSTRUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY DATABASE

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Introduction

The practice of oral history has experienced a remarkable turn toward digital technologies in the past decade. Much has changed since Donald A. Ritchie wrote that the digital was a new and unreliable mode in his 2003 training guide Doing Oral History.\(^1\) Other major training guides were similarly cautious at the time.\(^2\) Since then, the ground has quickly shifted as oral historians recognized the ways in which the “digital revolution” is changing how we “do” oral history. According to Alistair Thomson, the turn towards the digital represented a paradigm shift in the field.\(^3\) Guides to producing high quality digital recordings are now commonplace, as are the digital tools available to oral historians.\(^4\) Questions about digital media are now directed mainly toward the possibilities and challenges of using these new technological tools to disseminate research and increase access to the audio-video recordings.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Discussion of the reliability of digital media was most discussed in terms of the potential for hard drive failure. For her part, Valerie Yow also noted that digital recording technology was unreliable due to the possibility of computer crashes, and so placed her emphasis on prescribing the best practices for analogue tapes. *Recording Oral History 2nd Ed* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2005), 84-85.


While the wider ramifications of digital technologies and the internet were still being debated, a few oral historians raised questions in the early 2000s about the access to, and reuse of, existing oral history collections. Analogue audio and video recordings are difficult to access, and this serves as a strong deterrent to their subsequent re-use. In addition, “incomplete data sets and deficiently processed data,” have prevented researchers from using existent sources effectively. Another barrier is the predisposition of oral historians, and qualitative researchers more generally, to generate new interviews rather than to re-interpret or consult old ones. As Irena Medjedović has aptly stated, social science research “is dominated by the primacy of primary research.” Researchers establish their own collections because of a persistent feeling that only in this way will they be able to address their core research questions. The re-use of interviews by others has also provoked concern over “distance,” as subsequent listeners lack the embodied experience of being there. Likewise, the subsequent reuse of source recordings risks


7 Irena Medjedović, “Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data: Objections and Experiences. Results of a German Feasibility Study,” Forum: Qualitative Social Research 12 no. 3, Art. 10 (2011): par. 32, online at http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1742 (accessed March 18, 2013). Medjedović notes that this problem was also experienced by researchers re-visiting their own group-based projects after some time had lapsed.

8 Ibid., par. 23 (original emphasis). Medjedović makes a point of noting that researchers do frequently re-use existent sources, but they are the sources within their own collections.

9 Ibid, par. 24.

decontextualizing the interviews when interviews are quickly mined for data or sound bites.\textsuperscript{11} A 2010 report on oral history and new media indicated that “ethical issues like informed consent, the right of withdrawal, and the mitigation of harm – become much more complex.”\textsuperscript{12}

That said, a growing number of projects have sought to render large oral history collections searchable and therefore usable.\textsuperscript{13} The promise of automated annotation, or speech recognition, has driven software development by the Shoah Visual History Foundation (VHF, USA, 1990s), the CHoral project (Netherlands, 2005-7), and most recently, the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library oral history collection (NCSML, USA, 2009-present).\textsuperscript{14} The links to collections that the CHoral project provides, and the databases of the NCSML and VHF, are inspiring examples of a movement toward accessibility; they are all highly searchable databases.\textsuperscript{15} Each however, poses challenges from a research standpoint. The NCSML, for example has taken a middle-of-the-road approach in providing short clips embedded in a transcription, and does not share full interviews. It is the only one of these projects, however,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}See, for example: Michael Frisch, “Oral History and the Digital Revolution,” 104-112 “Three Dimensions and More,” 7-8 and 10-12; Steven High and David Sworn “After the Interview,” Sec. 3.0: 3 “Fragmentation.” Another concern of decontextualization is a wariness of re-using existing oral history interviews for ethical reasons relating to informed consent. Bornat, “A Second Take,” 50-51.
\item \textsuperscript{15}For the links provided by the Choral project see: “Demonstrators,” http://hmi.ewi.utwente.nl/choral/demo.html. (accessed March 18, 2013).
\end{itemize}
that provides a biographical summary of the interviewee alongside their interview.\textsuperscript{16} Beyond providing a brief summary of the project and its goals, all three projects fall short of providing additional information online about the interview context. Typically, this can be found in interview guides, and other project documentation such as interviewer’s notes, and interview summaries or transcripts.\textsuperscript{17}

It is rare to find complete oral history interview recordings on the internet. For the most part, oral history online is limited to textual guides and catalogues, interview transcriptions and short audio or video extracts selected for online publication.\textsuperscript{18} Though such automated processes have yielded so-called “dirty transcripts” and allowed faster application of index terms, they bypass the interpretive value of human cataloging.\textsuperscript{19} In light of this, it is fitting to pause and question whether or not the limited availability of online collections might also be a result of our failure to integrate post-interview processes such as database-building into oral

\textsuperscript{16} Projects such as CHoral’s “Buchenwald” (http://hmiapps.ewi.utwente.nl/buchenwald/results?page=0 ) and the USCSF interviews include biographical “profiles” that include information such as the interviewee’s gender, and place and date of birth.

\textsuperscript{17} The website interfaces of the USCSF and the Choral project require the user to navigate away from the interview in order to access any other documentation that might be available.


history methodology. Although establishing accessible collections is no longer solely the province of archivists, oral historians tend to relegate this to a distinctly separate aspect of doing oral history, which is often neglected.

This essay draws on my own experience as a member of the Montreal Life Stories Project, a five-year (2007-12) community-university research alliance that recorded the life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and other human rights violations. The Project team organized into seven working groups (Refugee Youth, Haitian, Rwandan, Cambodian, Persecutions against Jews, Oral History and Performance, and Life Stories in Education), aimed to collect more than 500 oral history interviews. One of the goals of the project was to make the interviews accessible for university researchers and community members. I became a team member in 2011, first as a member of the Oral History and Performance Working Group, and later, as part of the database building team. Though I did not interview any of the project participants myself, I spent untold hours listening to these stories and mapping their content using the Stories Matter software developed by the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. In the twelve months of building the database, our team integrated a total of one hundred and fifteen interviews, comprising about three hundred and fifty-two hours of recorded video.

Within the specific context of the Montreal Life Stories Project, significant resources and planning were channeled into conceptualizing and implementing a database-building methodology using the Stories Matter software. “Built by oral historians and for oral

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21 Freund notes that in emphasizing the interview phase, pre-and post-production phases are often ill attended to for lack of time and financial resources, as efforts are channeled mainly toward the interview production phase. Freund, “Oral History as Process-generated Data,” 28.
historians,” the software provides a viable alternative to transcription that relies on manual indexing.23 The methodology of the Project therefore included designing protocols for data entry that would effectively map the content of interviews.24 As well as providing a means of dividing interviews into clips that can be indexed and accessed through search tools, *Stories Matter* is also designed to mitigate the risk of search results being presented in a way that does not risk “fragmenting and de-contextualizing the narratives of those interviewed.”25 Though *Stories Matter* is designed to draw the user into engaging with the interview media, when listening, a clip is always presented within its context in the interview, which includes biography of the individual visible at all times, and a navigation aid always shows the interview within its project context. In addition, the software includes several spaces in which to embed information about the interviewee (such as birth date and place of birth) and the interview (such as the location and date), include notes on the interview, and attach other supplementary documents. The structure of the database is designed to accommodate entire interviews. Even though fragments and metadata are retrievable the user can “see and hear the person always.”26

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25 High and Sworn, “After the Interview,” Sec. 1 Par. 5.
26 Sworn and High, “After the Interview” par. 6.
When I began database-building using Stories Matter, my own mode of deep listening was to focus on how information was conveyed and received as interview conversations unfolded. While this back and forth process conjures images of tellers and listeners interacting face-to-face, I observed that this dialogic extended outward into the process of listening, interpreting, and writing that was required to build the database. In considering what Alistair Thomson described as the “technological, ethical, and epistemological implications of the digital revolution” in practice, I had two questions: How might database software facilitate access to oral history collections, and how might it create new opportunities for researchers to find meaning in the content of interviews? Building the database was an exercise in identifying both the technological and human impacts of interpretation as it occurs in representing oral stories through text.

This essay, written in two chapters, considers the benefits of including database building as part of an overall methodology to “doing oral history” in the digital age. In exploring the Montreal Life Stories database building methodology, Chapter One, “Intersubjective Dynamics After the Interview,” begins by emphasizing the complementary relationship between digital
media and text. Here I argue that juxtaposing rich textual summaries with audio visual media in a database offers a more efficient and effective means of navigating through interviews and accessing their content than text or digital media alone are capable of doing. Further to this, the process of summarizing interviews and integrating them into a database creates a unique opportunity to engage with their content.

Human indexing and annotation is a process that embeds the subjective interpretation of the writer into the database. In juxtaposition to the database builder’s own interpretation, the interview and other accompanying documents reveal layers of subjectivity, creating an opportunity to draw connections between them. As Portelli suggests, “errors, inventions, and myths lead us beyond facts to their meanings.” 27 Though this is usually ascribed to the stories interviewees tell, errors and inventions also become embedded in accounts during the creation of textual summaries. While they might be dismissed as anomalies in any single account, when they are considered across many interviews they offer potential insight into how interpretation is influenced by larger patters of social storytelling, which shape the story told by the summary – a story that is as unique as the interview itself.

Whereas transcription requires the writer to make decisions in form (including annotation, punctuation, and paragraphs structure) in order to relate the layers of mimesis and deigesis of the interview and within the interviewee’s story, the process of annotating the database with descriptive summaries requires the writer to become the storyteller. 28 Though in the database-building phase, the listener is not a part of the conversation between the

interviewer and interviewee, they are subject to a meaning-making process similar to those within the interview. But, as they are not permitted to make meaning in conversation by asking questions, they must do so using the resources available to them – the recorded interview, accompanying documents, and the knowledge they bring to the task.\textsuperscript{29} The internal process of hearing and interpreting in the moment is what I call \textit{subjective listening}. It is grounded in the phenomenological view that individuals make sense of their experiences, of what they hear, through the context of their culturally acquired, pre-existing knowledge.\textsuperscript{30} Through the concept of subjective listening, I explore how listeners who were not present to the interviews understand them subjectively. In adopting the role of storyteller, summary-writers and database-builders are tasked with condensing the content of life stories as they unfold in conversation. In this process, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misgivings occur as they attempt to do so with regard to both accuracy and ethics.

In Chapter Two of this essay, “Narrative Inquiry into an Oral History Database,” I begin by exploring how listeners engage with stories according to familiar frameworks. I then return to the interview itself, applying the notion of subjective listening to the stories as they are formed in these conversations. From the dual perspective of database builder and researcher, I suggest, that with an ear attuned to subjective listening database-building can be a useful process in developing a model for \textit{conversational narrative inquiry}, an analytical mode that considers equally the contributions of the interviewer and the interviewee. Rather than concentrate exclusively on the intersubjective dynamics that impact the shape of the interview, I

\textsuperscript{29} Although resources such as the internet and maps can assist in the process of database building, the importance of efficiency in database construction in large-scale projects places time restrictions on the use of these resources. For an example see Chapter One, footnote 58.

apply the idea of subjective listening to how individual understandings and expectations of story forms influence how a story is heard, and also shapes the story that emerges in the interview space.

In beginning with the post-production phase, before moving forward to the interview making process itself, this paper’s structure is indicative of how digital tools are opening new interpretative pathways into the oral history process. As a database-builder, it was my holistic examination of the interviews and their accompanying documentation that inspired me to return to the interviews to ascertain how subjective listening shaped the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. As subjective listening is part of the interview and post-interview stages of oral history, my paper responds to the gap in oral history scholarship that presumes “the interviewer and the listener as identical.”31 Although some researchers have taken a skeptical stance toward the subsequent interpretation of existing interviews, listeners who were not part of the interview occasion can make important contributions to oral history. Not having been there, these listeners offer an element of critical distance that is sometimes needed. My motivation in exploring subjective listening both during and after the interview is inspired by Frisch’s query as to what the potential effects of turning to digital tools might be – to “how, why, and especially to what consequential effect it matters that historians are doing history in new ways […] and how they will transform not only what practitioners do and how – but what they produce and what it means for understanding the past.”32

31 Alexander Freund, “Oral History as Process-generated Data,” 37. Portelli has noted two audiences of oral history, the “determined addressee” (the interviewer) and the “undetermined and multiple” audience that will read the historian’s work, similarly neglecting the listeners in between. Portelli “Oral History as Genre,” in Narrative & Genre: Contexts and types of Communication, eds. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 31.
Chapter One  
Intersubjective Dynamics After the Interview

Digital audio and video files can be integrated into online platforms, and are far more accommodating than analogue tapes in terms of their ability to be paused, played and skimmed through quickly. However, these advances have not necessarily provided oral historians with a more effective means of accessing and engaging with recorded interviews. These advantages do little to mitigate the challenge of moving knowledgeably through content. Without some form of textual guide to the interview content, the ease of digital navigation only presents the possibility of accessing interviews and skipping forward and backward through time without a known destination. It is in light of this that textual documents, particularly transcriptions, remain the primary means of accessing interview content. As Michael Frisch has already described, this reliance remains primarily due to “the assumption […] that only in text can the material be efficiently and effectively engaged – text is easier to read, scan, browse, search and research, publish, display and distribute.”

Yet the shortcomings of habitually turning to transcriptions are numerous. As Linda Shopes notes, “[t]ranscribing is both a highly developed skill and a labor-intensive practice.” In addition to the time and cost of transcribing interviews, oral historians recognize that transcribing oral sources requires a significant amount of authoritative decision-making. Inevitably, decisions must be made in punctuating the spoken word and formatting the text,

which in effect, superimposes the voice of the transcriber over the first person account of the narrator. However carefully crafted a transcription is, it is nevertheless an interpretation.\footnote{Paul Thompson, \textit{Voice of the Past}, 258-59.}


In 2007 Alistair Thomson asked, “who will have the time and inclination to generate a non textual-reliant digital indexing of audio and video interviews?”\footnote{Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” 6.} This either/or division between text and orality, however, misrepresents the challenge (and the opportunity) of constructing a searchable database. The challenge is not one of eking out a mode that will abolish the use of text, but rather developing a model that displaces text as the primary source and uses it as a tool to facilitate access to the recorded interview. Although Portelli wrote in
response to a different problem, that of favoring written sources over oral sources and vice-versa, he has underlined the fundamental problem of thinking in such either/or terms:

> Written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have common as well as autonomous characteristics, and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other). Therefore they require different interpretive instruments. But the undervaluing and overvaluing of oral sources end out by canceling out specific qualities, turning these sources into mere supports for traditional written sources or an illusory cure for all ills.39

Neither digital audio/visual media nor text alone is able to provide an efficient and reliable route into navigating the content and meaning of oral sources. *Stories Matter* relies on the mutually supportive nature of text and orality. It brings the timely navigation capabilities of digital audio and video media together with the ability of text to create detailed maps of an interview’s content, and juxtaposes the two. The logic of *Stories Matter*’s form is to interrupt existing patterns of oral history research in which textual documents supplant the recorded interviews. 40 The software is designed as a space where cataloging and indexing meet. 41 In order for the database to function reliably in both capacities, consistency in form is essential.

As Sworn and High discovered in their initial database experiments using *Interclipper* software, the clipping of interviews without specific guidelines “remained relatively unsystematic – clearly no two researchers would choose to clip and label the same interview the same way.”42 By the same logic, this notion of consistency extended to the form of the text to be integrated into the database, from the labeling of interviews, sessions and clips to the

40 For more on textual search functions in the context of oral history research see Frisch, “Three Dimensions and More,” 8.
chronologies, as only with consistency in form would the software would be able to support effective mapping of each interview’s content, and foster a consistent user-experience. In light of this, protocols both for the construction of interview chronologies (summaries) and for the database were developed and used in training the project participants.

The interview chronologies served as the textual foundation for the database, providing a non-verbatim, time-stamped summary of interview content. Written by the project’s affiliates, volunteers, interns and staff, these third person summaries provided a quick guide to the recordings. As the chronologies, and subsequently the database, would be crafted by multiple people, establishing a uniform method of data entry was essential to creating a database that would function consistently and present textual information to the user uniformly. For the Montreal Life Stories Project, the chronologies were organized according to the question and response structure of the interview. Each question posed by the interviewer is written in bold font and marked by a time stamp, followed by a summarized version of the content, and subsequently labeled with the index terms designed for the database. The chronology writing protocol emphasizes the form of textual construction, for example, the header and footer of each page, and the font, alignment and spacing of the time-stamps and question and answer paragraphs. The protocol also includes similar specificity as to what kind information to include, such as what elements of the interviewee’s life experiences to include in their biographical summaries, and where to include it. The aim of providing such extensive guidance was ultimately to foster an intuitive experience for the user; s/he should find the same information in the same place, always. This level of instruction was also found to be necessary.

in light of the interpretive choices found in the summaries documents when they had been constructed according to the first draft of these guidelines that were less specific. Since the first chronology writing protocol had been designed in the early phases of the project, through the database building process it became evident that the diversity of the chronologies that had been produced warranted that the protocol be revised. Differences in chronologies included what elements of the interviewer’s life were included in their biographical summary, different methods of paraphrasing the questions posed by interviewers, and variations in the amount of overall detail integrated into the summaries.

Where some chronology-writers chose to summarize in point form, others chose to summarize using full sentences and paragraphs. Efficiency was at the root of this disparity. Although point form takes less time, the amount of insight one gained into the interview was highly varied, and at times the amount of information included was simply inadequate. Summarizing the content of the interviews more prosaically, using full sentences and paragraphs was also problematic at times, resulting in summaries that were perhaps too detailed, and in effect tantamount to transcripts written in the third person.44 However, the more prosaic examples related more about what happened in the interview space when compared to the point form examples, which often left large gaps between the facts presented, and as such did not accurately convey the richness of the interview dialogue. At times, where interviewees had spoken at length, the chronology had included very few words, a reduction that had potentially deleterious consequence on the efficacy of the search tool. Reducing the number of words in a summarized account reduces the potential results of this type of inquiry. Using a more prosaic style that included not just bare bones “facts” of the interview, but an amount of

44 High and Sworn note a similar experience in the building the prototype database for Sturgeon Falls project. See High and Sworn, “After the Interview,” sec. 2, par. 8.
description as well increased the potential for rewarding searches as well as conveyed more of what happened in the interview space. Although the debate concerning point form and prosaic renderings was never resolutely decided in favor of one or the other (as a result there are both types of entries in the database) there was agreement that although the summary would be included beside the original media, its content should be descriptive, both in terms of the subject matter and the richness of the narrative. The chronology protocol reads: “You do not have to include every detail but make sure the reader can understand without having to go back to the recording.” Ideally, the chronologies should vary in length in direct proportion to how long the interviewee spoke in response to each question, rather than according to the personal interests of the chronology-writer. Basically, the process of integrating the chronologies into the database was an opportunity to subject each document to a second reading by the database-builder, and provided an opportunity to reconcile the different approaches and to insure a measure of quality control. While I initially dismissed the often rudimentary chronologies completed in the project’s early days as simply inadequate, there was a certain logic to the way in which particular elements of content were included and negotiated. As I worked my way through one chronology after the other, particular patterns suggested that the varying inclusion and omissions were the result of socially influenced phenomenon rather than individual idiosyncrasies.

Oral historians have written extensively about the many ways that age, race, ethnicity, gender, class, education and politics shape what is said during the interview. Few oral

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historians however, have explored in depth how intersubjective dynamics function after the interview, in listening and in creating textual representations. In the practice of rendering a prosaic summary, the writer pens their own narrative about what they have heard. Though the task is ultimately to preserve and map the interview, as Trin Minh-ha reminds us, “to listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn for understanding means creating.”

Although the act of summarizing seems tantamount to technical writing – an attempt to convey what was said without imposing one’s own views of what is or is not important, or thoughts on any deeper meaning beyond the surface of words spoken – this is perhaps an impossible ideal. Despite being labeled “a more cautious approach,” summarizing nonetheless requires us to “select those elements of experience to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect the stories available to us.”

In the following pages, I have juxtaposed the old and new chronologies of selected interview extracts. The “original chronologies” are the initial drafts submitted by the Montreal Life Stories Project members who took on the task. Some of these were penned before extensive database building began, and thus reflect the less-specific instructions of the initial chronology model noted earlier. The second set of chronologies, labeled here “revised chronology” are those that I modified in the process of building the database, either because they contained inaccurate information, or because they did not accurately convey the richness of the interview content (i.e. there were too many details missing). Each of the examples is intended to illustrate a particular patterns of subjectivity I observed within the database. I chose

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48 Shopes, “Transcribing Oral History in the Digital Age,” par. 11.
each of the following examples because they were memorable to me in terms of the ethical and technical concerns that arose in light of their interpretations.

The most common manifestation of subjective listening, as seen in the interview chronologies, was when a misheard word resulted in a mistranslation of the interview content. Although this did not always significantly alter the life story of the interviewee, on occasion it did. For example, in the chronology of the interview with Abraham Weizfeld, the author had followed the content guidelines of the protocol. As a result, very little had to be adjusted during its integration into database. However, in listening to the interview it became apparent that the story told by Abraham was not quite the same as that related by the chronology, particularly concerning his family’s history of political involvement – a central theme in his life story. The following excerpt is from the point in the interview where Abraham introduces his family’s past political involvement, as reflected in both original and revised versions of the chronology:50

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Chronology</th>
<th>Revised Chronology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[...] Abraham shows a reunion picture of his mother, his aunt and his uncle. The group his uncle was a part of was a Yiddish worker cultural organization, they were Buddhists and they were socialist not communist. In 1903 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks both expelled the Buddhists because they refused to assimilate into the general working class formation. However, since they were living in Apartheid like conditions, whereupon the Jews were not allowed to work in the same places as non-Jews, the Jews had their own unions by default. By expelling the Jewish Buddhist movement Lenin was left with a majority.</td>
<td>[...] Abraham shows a reunion picture of his mother, his aunt and his uncle. The group his uncle was a part of was a Yiddish worker’s cultural organization, they were a Bundist-based organization and they were socialist, not communist. In 1903 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks both expelled the Jewish Bund because they refused to assimilate into the general working class formation. However, since they were living in apartheid-like conditions, whereupon the Jews were not allowed to work in the same places as non-Jews, the Jews had their own unions by default.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

50 Abraham and Célie Weizfeld, interview by Joan Simand and Isabelle Dicarie, August 16, 2009, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Shoah and Other Persecutions against Jews Working Group, Session 2, Clip 8.
In this example, the most evident manifestation of pre-existing knowledge (in this case a gap in knowledge) in shaping what is heard, can be seen in the writer’s mistaking the word “Bundist” for “Buddhist.” Despite Abraham’s extensive explanation of this group’s activities and purpose, the mistake is consistently applied. It is clear that the writer was unfamiliar with the word “Bundist,” and in listening to the interview it is not difficult to understand that this knowledge gap could result in this mistake. If indexed in line with the chronology, the database would have tagged each clip where “Buddhist” appeared with the term “religion et croyances / religion and beliefs” rather than “politique / politics,” mis-directing future users. Although less noticeable, this interview also contains a second example of how pre-existing knowledge shapes the interview summary. In speaking of the efforts to smuggle Jews away from the camps, Abraham does not himself use the phrase “underground railway.” However, the writer draws from her own historical knowledge and forms an analogous comparison between the Jewish Bund’s acts of resistance and those in 19th Century North America who smuggled slaves to freedom. The implication of this for users of the database is that searching for “underground railway” would return a search result. The result though would be a false positive, as it would not reflect the information imparted by the interviewee but rather the chronology-writer’s own interpretation of that information.

Another example of how gaps in knowledge shaped the content of the chronologies was found in how geographical locations were named, or omitted, within the chronologies. Although place names mentioned by the interviewee were often omitted where uncertainty overwhelmed an educated guess, attempts to negotiate this knowledge gap included a range of strategies that included stating the proximity to well known nearby cities (in most cases this

51 Abraham and Célie Weizfeld, interview by Joan Simand and Isabelle Dicarie, August 9, 2009, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Shoah and Other Persecutions against Jews Working Group, Session 1, Clip 3.
spatial relationship had been established by the interviewee). In some cases, the chronology-writer attempted to transcribe a phonetic facsimile. In some cases this turned out to be extremely problematic, as the place names were in essence invented, and provided no help in identifying the actual location.” If the name of a particular place could not be identified, as in transcription, the convention of square brackets was used to note that a place name was mentioned but indecipherable, for example: [Berlin?] or [unclear: name of village]. This at least identified the occurrence of place in the narrative and marking it so that later listeners, perhaps more familiar with the geographic region might have an opportunity to fill in the blank. In this case, had no effort been made to include occurrences of place within the textual information, any subsequent efforts to mark this geographical data using new features of the software would have been significantly hindered.

Although errors and omissions such as the above examples might be identified simply as human error, they nonetheless demonstrate the potential consequences of an interview passing through only one set of ears. But, other patterns of inclusion and omission influenced by subjective listening more poignantly reveal the subjectivities, social boundaries, and intersubjective dynamics at play after the interview that impact textual representation. As you would expect, most of the interviews dealt with conflict, violence and death. The chronologies for interviews that included such difficult subject matter often showed clear attempts to negotiate around difficult subject matter through careful word selection. This hinted that the

52 My own method of searching out place names was based on a “three minute rule” I created for myself in order to maintain productivity. If I could not identify the place name in that amount of time, by listening to the interviewee pronounce it and using Google web and map searches, I would move on with the latter, unspecific style of entry. The method was effective, as an advantage in doing this type of searching is that very often, even if names are spelled wrong, the corrections offered by the search engine are accurate. In addition, in using search engines often reveals results even if the initial inquiry is misspelled. More obscure place names, particularly those in eastern Europe countries that had changed over time, or had different sounding names in different languages, could be found within the academic publications or historical websites retrieved.
boundaries and taboos and negotiations present in daily social conversation were also present outside of conversation in the writing process. As Jean Peneff has observed, when an interviewee shares their life story “often whole sections of life are left out, especially painful or questionable episodes which could harm the image of the speaker.”53 Frequently though, there were occasions where the dynamic between the interviewee and interviewer, and the course of discussion fostered candid discussion of matters that are difficult to discuss. These interviews offer the most opportunity to observe how chronology-writers wrote about interview content using strategies that distanced themselves from the uncomfortable subject matter.

The interview with Janet Lumb was one such interview. Janet’s interview is strikingly candid and rich in storied detail, its form echoing her feeling that “all aspects of her life are interrelated.”54 In contrast to Janet’s words, the inefficacy of the original point form chronology is revealed not only by the amount of information that was omitted, but by the strategies of inclusion and omission within. In the first interview session Janet and the interviewer focus on her career, and in the second session they focus on her personal experiences: her family, her childhood community, and her experiences coming of age and in adulthood. In the interview, amidst Janet reflecting on her experiences of traveling through, and living in, different Canadian cities, there are two separate occasions in which the subject of rape arises. The context of the first is a story about Janet and a friend hitchhiking across Canada, and in the second she tells of her experience of being abducted, forcibly confined, and raped. The

following excerpts from the chronology reveal how this act of violence was handled initially and then revised.\textsuperscript{55}

**Excerpt 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Chronology</th>
<th>Revised Chronology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How was the experience of your first trip across Canada?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Q: I wanted to ask you about that first trip across the country hitchhiking; you were nineteen. What was that experience like for you? Was it a memorable experience?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It was a memorable trip and she is sure her friend and she tricked 2 guys out of raping her.</td>
<td>A: Janet states that the trip was memorable. She had gone with a friend and is sure they tricked two men out of raping them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It took them 3 months to get across. They went to see friends in Northern Ontario and helped them to build a house and they also went to Winnipeg for a bit.</td>
<td>She describes that hitchhiking then was a more common thing and shares a story of the first hitchhiker she picked up and ended up kicking him out of her car. She was disappointed in the experience. [...]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She explains that when the dynamic was off with a male in the car she would begin to talk about either her boyfriend, his girlfriend or his mother, and the dynamic would change. [...]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Excerpt 2:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Chronology</th>
<th>Revised Chronology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Had you already worked as a composer or just a musician at that moment?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Q: Had you already been working as a composer [before moving to Montreal] or were you still just a musician [on the] stage?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No she was only a musician on the side. She worked as a social worker with juvenile delinquent kids. She could not find a similar job in Montreal.</td>
<td>A: Janet explains that she was only a musician on the side. She worked as a social worker with juvenile delinquent kids. She could not find a similar job in Montreal and she found that the practices of working with children in Vancouver were more progressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- She had a very bad accident while jumping a fence at Lafontaine Park when she was babysitting a kid. It took over a year for her to be okay.</td>
<td>When she first got to Montreal she received UIC, which allowed her to become familiar with her new environment. She also played with bands during this time. She later found a part time job working at a school for autistic kids, and also played in about four or five bands at the time. [...]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- She also talks about a tough moment where she was raped after being picked up while hitchhiking. Her friend was a key person to help go through this tough moment.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

\textsuperscript{55} Excerpt 1: Janet Lumb, interview by Alan Wong, Montreal Life Stories Project, Oral History and Performance Working Group, April 2, 2009, Session 2, Clip 14; Excerpt 2: Ibid., Clip 16.
She describes a new word she has learned "Caordic" meaning order coming out of chaos. She does not have any sense of what her strategies are, but good work situations have found her and she was receptive to them. It was around this time that the Accès Asie Festival was also beginning.

(continued)

She describes the difficulty and depression she had during that time, but coming to realize that it had been a blessing in disguise.

She describes that as one of two tough periods she has had in her life, and explains that the other was after she had been abducted and assaulted when living in Vancouver. She describes what happened and that she had been confined by her abductors in a house for two days.

She was living in a communal house at the time, and called her friends who picked her up. She thinks that because of the support she had in the house she did not become catatonic.

Janet recalls the process of going to the police and how her friends had supported her when she returned home.

Each excerpt demonstrates specific challenges inherent to representing such difficult subject matter in summary, and there are implicit ethical and research implications in both instances. Janet’s frank discussion of rape, and the threat of rape, are important both in the context of her life story and, from a research perspective, in their relevance to persistent areas of silence within women’s social history. Although there is a developing body of scholarly literature of women’s experiences of violence, social and scholarly discussion (which is to say speaking out loud) about sexual violence remains rare; this includes access to interviews in which women speak on the matter.

In the original chronology these occurrences are related as points on an unspecific timeline. The abbreviated sentences here are posited as central points in Janet’s narrative with
little surrounding context whereas in the revised chronology these points are embedded within richer context. The difficulty of the original chronology is that the representation, isolated from context, privileges the threat of rape, and rape, within Janet’s narrative, in effect sensationalizing it through brevity at the expense of the other information she relates – both the context of Janet’s life story, and in the context of the interview. Although the original chronology does not omit these difficult stories, in the second excerpt the event is isolated from its context. This is problematic because Janet talks about rape in this second instance explicitly because it was an experience that contributed significantly to her experiences of depression.

In the revised chronology, which includes more context, it is easier to see that these instances arise organically within her narrative, and that rape *per se* is not the central subject. These stories are shared when Janet speaks to the obstacles and risks she has faced in growing into adulthood and achieving successes in her career. However, despite the inclusion of context, the revised chronology is not entirely unproblematic. Although included in the first instance, in the second excerpt the word “rape” was omitted entirely. Juxtaposing the two excerpts from the revised chronology implicitly conveys: it is acceptable to name rape in the instance where it does not happen, but not acceptable to name it when it does. Although an attempt to avoid sensationalizing through brevity and abruptness, the omission of this word in the revised chronology superimposed a silence upon the interviewee. Although in watching the interview with Janet one can both see and hear that this story is not entirely easy or comfortable to share, she, unambiguously, called her experience by its name. In addition the questionable ethics of imposing a social silence that the interviewee had broken, omitting either of the words depression or rape from the chronologies, also meant that one of two valuable key words is
omitted from the database, creating an obstacle to its efficacy as a tool for helping to fill such gaps in historical knowledge with the use of oral sources.

Further instances of negotiation were also found in the chronology writers’ attempts to represent interview content that included statements by the interviewees that were perhaps incongruent with their own values, or could project a negative image of the interviewee. Although it is impossible to determine which of these possibilities influenced the writers’ choices without speaking to them directly, the incongruity between the words spoken and those written indicates hints that writers did experience some conflict. It is useful at this point to introduce the following discussion with reference to Sheftel and Zembrzycki’s reflection on the intersubjective dynamics that they encountered in their own interviews with Montreal-area Holocaust survivors. Although not easy to hear, they found that the “gory details” of violence and death were not necessarily the most uncomfortable moments for them to sit through, at times it was the “conversations about comparative genocide, race and other politicized issues.”

The supporting documents produced by the Montreal Life Stories project hint that these types of stories also presented team-members the most difficulty after the interview.

Although there were negotiations in writing about uncomfortable topics such as death, they primarily included minimizing the specific details, and avoiding the word “death” or “died” in favor of more delicate phrases such as “passed away,” despite the fact that each clip would be subsequently labeled with the more straightforward “mort / death” tag term.

Chronologies that included more politically and emotionally volatile discussions though, showed an alternate strategy, that of a refusal to negotiate words in the written representation.

The following, rather extensive excerpts, are from an interview with Dana Bell, a Holocaust

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survivor. They are used here to illustrate how in-between the acts of hearing and writing are, spoken words require passage through an individual’s consciousness, and choices are made accordingly. Difficult content such as this should not be dismissed as simply Dana’s personal idiosyncrasies or opinions; these discussions are an integral part of her attempts to grapple with the past and present events and experiences that defy complete understanding, but are essential to her sense of self. ⁵⁷ As authors such as Sheftel and Zembrzycki, and Katherine Blee have poignantly demonstrated, such convictions are one aspect of interviewees who are fully human, and whose life stories are rife with complexities that offer potential for insight into the social roots of such difficult subjects. ⁵⁸

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Chronology ⁵⁹</th>
<th>Revised Chronology ⁶⁰</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What was the impetus to start writing your book?</td>
<td>[...]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Started writing her memoirs since 1994, sent it to Israeli Foundation</td>
<td>Q: Did you begin writing [your memoir] more for you family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Wrote it for her family – when her mother died, she had nothing left of her; always separated, always fighting for their lives, no time to bond</td>
<td>A: Yes. Her mother died, she had nothing left of her. Because of their experiences, they had little time to bond. They were always separated, always fighting for their lives. She feels it is important to leave a legacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Important to leave a legacy; her children did not know about the stories until they were older 400 people in her mother’s family and not one survived.</td>
<td>Q: Did your kids grow up knowing the stories [of the Holocaust]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A: Her children did not know about the stories until they were older. There had been 400 people in her mother’s family and not one survived. She recalls her father saying: “The only crime I ever committed was that I was born a Jew.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She notes how “Muslim fascists” are persecuting Jews today. She recalls the words of a Rabbi, that conclude with “When will it be enough.” She speaks to the current situation in Israel.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁵⁷ For more on the relevance of “difficult statements” in the narratives of Holocaust Survivors, see: Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human,” 203-208.
⁵⁹ Chronology of the interview with Dana Bell, January 29, 2009 and March 8, 2011, Chronologies, transcriptions et traductions, Basecamp, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Montreal, QC.
⁶⁰ Dana Bell, Interview by Matthew MacDonald and Stacey Zembrzycki, Montreal, QC, March 8, 2011, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Life Stories In Education Working Group, Session 2.
Q: When your grandsons came back from March of the Living did they have questions for you?

- She went to lunch with each one separately and talked with them.

Q: What did the trip mean to them? Did they relate your story to what was going on? It must have been very powerful for them.

She made an album for them, with photos and some stories. Her grandson told her that he was the only one with a survivor grandparent. The thing that struck him most was the children’s shoes. She talks about children being killed during the Holocaust and how the Russians were relatively more humane precisely because they did not put them in orphanages. There were others who enjoyed the violence they perpetrated. She still does not trust Germans; she “never will.”

Similar to the strategy used in representing Janet Lumb’s reflections, the writer of the original chronology neglected to include the context of Dana’s points – in this case to a degree that misrepresents the richness of Dana’s words and also the conversation in which they occur. However, the original chronology here poses no significant problems in the functionality of the database search tool, as significant key words, particularly pertaining to religion, such as “Christian”, “Palestinian”, and “Israel(i)” and “Muslim” are included and could be retrieved using either the word search, under the inclusion of “religious, ethnic [and] national identity” tags in the tag cloud.61 Despite the comparable thickness of the edited chronology, it is equally as searchable as it contains the same basic keywords noted above. The revised chronology does offer more potential as a map however, in detailing the path of the question and answer dialogue.

Although the revised version contains more context than the original, both writers chose to save time and text by avoiding a description of what specifically Dana had to say about

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“Muslim fascists,” “Muslim fanatics”⁶² and the “current situation in Israel.” In addition to this lack of specificity, these potentially objectionable terms were included, but in quotation marks. In this excerpt, the quotation marks around “Muslim fascists” and “the current situation in Israel” were in the original, and kept in the revisions. Although there were not originally quotation marks around “Muslim fanatics” they were added in editing. The inclusion of quotation marks can be read as the chronology-writer establishing distance from Dana’s words, as isolated from any significant verbatim quotations, they serve no other practical function in the context of this type of summary (other than hinting at a more substantial discussion in the interview that was problematic to summarize or quote at length). The quotation marks, in these instances, are an indication made by the chronology-writer that they did not choose these words; they are Dana’s. Despite chronologies being primarily a third person perspective of the interview content, neither chronology writer attempted to convey this content through alternative word choices, perhaps due to a conflict in perspective, or simply because it is a difficult and time consuming task to concoct a softer expression of such emotional and potentially volatile discussion.

In striving to observe ethical integrity in creating chronologies that can also serve as effective maps to content, perhaps using the interviewee’s own expressions is an effective means of representation; it is a method of inclusion that avoids the potential for the chronology-writer, through a third person perspective, to project a view by using language that the interviewee did not. It is important however, that such quotations are included within their context. In the simplest sense, presenting potentially volatile statements within their contexts

⁶² Though not reflected in the included excerpt, this expression is used later on in the interview. See Dana Bell, Interview by Matthew MacDonald and Stacey Zembrzycki, Montreal, QC, March 8, 2011, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Interview with Dana Bell, Life Stories In Education Working Group, Session 2, Clip 4.
decentralizes them, and avoids sensationalizing them. Although it is a more nuanced approach, it is necessary to include such references in a map of the narrative path of the interview. The inclusion of context also offers potentially valuable insights to researchers as to the deeper meaning of such statements within a life story narrative, and the ability to find connections in searching the database.

As illustrated by these examples, layering perspectives in the written documents provided an opportunity to fill in any significant gaps that may have been present in the original draft, adjustments that worked to adequately convey the content of interviews and were necessary to maximize the potential of the word search tool. It also allowed for the opportunity to negotiate some of the aforementioned socially rooted difficulties and ethical difficulties encountered. Where one person found aspects difficult to write about in summary the other could make the attempt at inclusion, and either perspective could be useful in providing unthought-of words and alternative descriptions that could be used to achieve a textual representation that was both tactful and functional. Dual perspectives were also useful in applying the tag terms to each interview simply in the sense of having an extra set of eyes present to identifying what was missed. Although the list of index terms provides descriptions of how and when each is to be applied, some, such as “famille / family,” and “mort / death” and “travail / work” are ubiquitous and as a result occasionally missed.

However, layering perspectives might also be problematic in the sense that such layers can obscure the patterns of inclusion, omission and negotiation present in the un-revised drafts, which quietly speak as much to the social norms and conditions of production of their time as the recorded interviews do – although with Janet Lumb’s interview, we see that this is not
always the case.\textsuperscript{63} For the purposes of building the database, the creation of functional textual maps was of key importance, and many changes to chronologies were needed to ensure it functioned optimally. In the Montreal Life Stories database, each chronology that was revised includes the names of the original chronology-writer and notes the name of the editor. All of the original chronologies have also been preserved unaltered.

The chronologies written after the interview, and other textual information within the database show individualized processes of meaning-making, and the negotiation of social norms during the process of listening. Though it is impossible at this point in time to think of a searchable database that is not text-reliant, one must consider also if such a platform would be desirable. Without text, the obstacles in the way of efficient and directed navigation remain. In addition to this, oral history is a discipline that has grown to embrace the value of subjective memory within the interview, and to recognize the intersubjective dynamics that shape these conversations. Compiling textual interpretations, at the summary level and beyond, and juxtaposing them to the original interview media can show how subjectivities and social determinants also shape the documents and texts that are constructed upon such sources.

As Alexander Von Plato identified, one critique of oral history as a discipline is that interviews are primary sources which are “created mostly in dialogue with others who are preponderantly also the interpreters and who thereby create their own sources. At best, they say something about the time of their creation and the views of the participants, the codes of their perceptions, their repudiations or their personal identifications.”\textsuperscript{64} Implicit to this criticism is

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{63} For more on the importance of the context of the time of an interviews recording, see: Michael Frisch “‘Hard Times’: A review Essay,” \textit{The Oral History Review} 7 (1979): 70-79.

\end{flushleft}
the present nature of oral history research, which relies on oral history interviews as single use sources, or alternatively, sources available to only one author/researcher. However insightful and carefully prepared oral history texts are they remain, like all other textual representations of the oral, influenced by the subjectivities which form the gap between what is said and how it is filtered though an individual’s consciousness. While the research and manuscripts of others are invaluable in informing understanding and interpretation, and in developing theory, there is inevitably much lost in what Frisch called the “historian’s controlling mill.”65 While the conscious level of “milling” described by Frisch is one of including information relevant to research goals, there is another milling process that occurs in the process of translating the interview into summarized text.

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Chapter Two  
Narrative Inquiry into an Oral History Database

Database applications such as Stories Matter, which rely on the mutually supportive nature of text and digital media, provide a distinct navigational advantage to oral historians who wish to revisit collections, or integrate existent collections into their research. But, as Michael Frisch has written, despite the increased experimentation with digital tools in the effort to collect quality sources, and subsequently manage them, “there has been relatively little attention given to the implications of these developments for what happens next - to ‘doing’ historical work with oral history documents.” In Frisch’s notion of a “post-documentary sensibility” he emphasized that while “usable meanings and outputs are indispensable, such tools also present the opportunity to discover new approaches to meaning-making [that are] more open-ended, less linear, and hence, a more sharable space.” As discussed in the first chapter, scrutinizing the ways in which the original interview content is represented through text within the database can reveal the lack of verisimilitude between the oral narratives and the textual representations in light of subjective listening.

The Montreal Life Stories project generated audio or video interviews and textual summaries, collected reflections on interviews penned by the interviewers post-interview, and collected other supplementary documents from interviewees. With this selection of documents, there is ample opportunity to explore subjective understandings of narrative elements of the interviews by drawing connections between them. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which

67 Michael Frisch, “From a Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back,” 130.
the question and answer structure of the database, (which reflects the structure of the interviews) led me to revisit the interview itself, in order to explore how subjective listening shaped these stories. Narrative provides a framework for what is “tellable” by the speaker and “hearable” by their audience. While existing narratives provide points of reference and context in both imparting and understanding an individual’s experience, the ways in which they are received is largely dependent on the listener’s pre-existing, culturally acquired familiarity with storied frameworks. Though familiar frameworks are essential in conveying meaning through story, this culturally acquired, subjective knowledge is both conducive and constraining to the transmission of stories and experience – including that which takes place in the oral history conversation at the time of the interview.

The key to listening for narrative expectations relies on what High and Sworn have described as “holistic examination of the conversational narrative.” This includes the interview itself, but also any supporting documentation that accompanies it. Within a database, representation of the interview content necessarily encompasses the inclusion of the contributions of the interviewer. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the textual inclusion of the interviewer’s questions serve as useful markers in navigating interview content, and in providing context to the words spoken by the interviewee. Within the interview itself, though interviewer’s contributions generally to not match the interviewee’s in volume, they do constitute one half of a dialogic whole. As oral historians have noted, the interviewer’s

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68 These terms are borrowed from Henry Greenspan’s *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony 2nd Ed.* (Minnesota: Paragon House, 2010) 2.
69 See Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, *Telling Stories*, Chapter 4, “Personal Narrative Research as Intersubjective Encounter.”
70 High and Sworn “After the Interview,” 4.
questioning both prompts and directs the interviewee’s responses. These questions provide important clues as to the genesis and synthesis of the recorded narrative and how these narratives are shaped by historical context and particular narrative traditions. It is in this last respect that any supplementary documents uploaded into the database assist us in understanding what is seen or heard in the interview recordings.

As Jill Sinclair Bell has aptly illustrated, an effective approach to “narrative inquiry requires going beyond the use of narrative as rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates.” In oral storytelling such “insights and assumptions” occur within the conversational context of the stories told. Rather than viewing genre traditions and story structure as categories in which to contextualize an interviewee’s narrated life, the conversational narrative approach illuminates traditions of storytelling, or genres, as “ways of knowing.” Revisiting interviews through a searchable database makes it possible to both observe and index patterns in the ways in which individuals have, or do not have, shared expectations as to how a story should be told. Just as a second set of ears is important within the process of constructing the database, bringing new ears to the recorded interview is important to the process of identifying where particular modes of storytelling are mutually understood or agreed upon by participants, where there is a rupture in shared understanding influenced by different narrative expectations, or where one mode of storytelling is, sometimes unwittingly, imposed upon another.

As Portelli wrote, “modern orality itself is saturated with writing.”\textsuperscript{74} The patterns and devices of genre are deeply embedded within oral life story narratives. For instance, the preexisting knowledge of genred storytelling works to “define secure paths in the uncharted territory of discourse.”\textsuperscript{75} The interview is unique in that such “twice-told tales,” for the most part, have never been told before as a “coherent whole,” but rather only in “fragments and episodes.”\textsuperscript{76} In the interview, and within conversational storytelling, genre is seldom observed as an overarching coherency but rather occurs within these “fragments and episodes.” Only after the interview is complete do the fragments constitute a whole narrative to which, in post-interview analysis, such taxonomies are applied. For this reason, as Sinclair Bell described:

> narrative inquiry is therefore rarely found in the form of a narrative. Hallmarks of the analysis are the recognition that people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them, that stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, and that stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives.\textsuperscript{77}

Within oral history interviews, the broader importance of culturally produced, genred stories can be heard in frequent references to books, videos, and plays. Such references are a strategy used to convey the conditions of a particular time, place and experience by providing context though a comprehensible framework. The act of drawing parallels to existing explanations and imagery attempts to deepen understanding between teller and audience. For example, in their book \textit{Telling Stories}, Maynes, Pierce and Laslett explain that “the circulation

\textsuperscript{74} Portelli, What Makes Oral History Different?” 37. See also Elizabeth Tonkin, \textit{Narrating Our Pasts}, 14.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
of plotted stories reflects and structures how people talk about their lives.” Interviews such as those with Holocaust survivors Mayer and Rena Schondorf, and Olga Sher, from the Life Stories in Education Working Group, provide an opportunity to reflect on how existing narratives are helpful to them in telling about their own life experiences. In the following excerpt from an interview with the Schondorfs, Meyer explains why he uses a video, “Daniel’s Story,” as an introduction in telling his own life story to school aged audiences.

Meyer: Very often I go to a school... and I have a tape - I don’t know if you’ve seen it - called “Daniel’s Story.” Did you see it? That’s a very good opener. Very good opener. It’s, I think, eleven, twelve minutes, and it gives them an overlook. And then they can understand much more, what I am talking about.

Interviewer: Do most teachers, like when you come into a classroom, do they do that? Do they show... Is it part of a larger sort of lesson where they have a film or they have a lesson on the Holocaust and then they come in? Or are you it? Are you...

Rena: We are basically it.

Meyer: We are it. But in some schools that I have been going to I have used it, Daniel’s Story, as an introduction. And I find that it makes my life much easier. It makes my life much easier, and it makes them be able to understand what I am talking about. Because we also introduce a certain type of language into it, which... we take it for granted.

“Daniel’s Story” interweaves photographs of the museum installation (Daniel’s house), along with historic photographs of a Jewish Ghetto and a concentration camp, which are set to corresponding sound effects. The narrator of the story told is Daniel, an eleven year old child.

78 Maynes, Pierce, Laslett, Telling Stories, 70.
79 Daniel’s Story is a video produced by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for the traveling exhibition Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story. It is available to watch online at http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/traveling/details/index.php?type=past&content=remember_children_daniel (accessed March 18, 2013).
80 At the time of writing, the integration of the Schondorf interview into the database is still in process, and not yet a completed portion of the database. Rena and Meyer Schondorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Archives, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University, Disc 1: 1:16:54.
“a composite character, [whose] story is based on the diary accounts of many children who recorded their impressions of life during the Holocaust.”81 “Daniel’s Story” encompasses his life before and during Nazi Occupation, his family’s removal from their home, first to a ghetto then a concentration camp, and concludes with Daniel’s ultimate survival and an invitation into the interactive exhibition. Contrary to Meyer’s explanation, beyond the word “camp” and subsequently “concentration camp,” “Daniel’s Story” contains no other language that would be difficult to understand for a middle school audience. It is precisely because of this that the video functions as the bridge, making it easier for Meyer to speak to the children. It introduces the Holocaust to young audiences, from the perspective of someone who was near their age at the time.

Similarly, in her interview, Olga Sher also shares a story that is not her own when, as a docent, she guides school groups though the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. This story serves a similar function, acting as a generational bridge between young people then and now. As Olga explains:

I don’t think I ever, till today, tell children the whole story [of her experiences], I select. And sometimes I don’t even tell them my story, but a story that, as a matter of fact [unclear] gave me, that illustrates the terror in Germany. It's a story about a non-Jewish boy, who comes home from school and tells the parents,

"What should I do? Because they told us to break the windows in Jewish Stores tomorrow."
And the father says, "What do you think you should do?"
And the child answers, "Well, I don't know. I don't know any Jews here."
The father repeats the question, "What do you think you should do?" So the boy, who is very smart, understands, and goes out.

And I ask the children at this point, "What do you think he did?"
So they think a little bit about the question. It's very nice how they answer. Some say, "I would," some say "I wouldn't," and we discuss why they say that. Some say, "I would pretend." And we go further.

So I said, “What else did he say, the boy, when the father said, ‘What do you think you should do?’”

Well, he told the parents they would also kind of be suffering consequences of his decision. Why did he say that?

So we discuss it, what is the terror, why the parents should be afraid, and [unclear] and so on. So what I'm saying... I'm illustrating my experiences by somebody else, and lowering the age, because it's maybe more approachable to the young kids.82

In the third interview session, Olga again shares her logic in telling this story to the schoolchildren that she guides through the Museum.

Q: Are there some stories or some memories that you absolutely have to say each time, or…?

Olga: First of all, I always tell them, whatever I say, I have references. If it's not mine, I can give you reference; I do not invent things. And I begin very often with this story, undressed story that [unclear] said a long time ago, and I like it. Because it opens up... It touches them because it's... about thirteen years old. [...] But I think... “What would you do? Put yourself in the position of this boy. You are thirteen years old and you are told to throw the stone and brick at the windows.”83

Similar to Rena and Meyer, Olga attempts to illustrate to children the destructiveness and harm of prejudice and discrimination by beginning with a story that, through age, the children can relate to. Olga also gives the children a moral quandary to ponder, which emphasizes the role of the individual within a story of social persecution. Olga creates a

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82 Olga Sher, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, December 19, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Life Stories in Education Working Group Session 1, Clip 1.
83 Ibid., Session 3, Clip 4.
generational bridge, but at the same time, draws a parallel between individual choices and large-scale social persecution.

Borrowing narratives is a communication tool that helps to develop and define, as Henry Greenspan puts it, “events that are ‘proven’ ones that we already know are tellable by us and hearable by our listeners.” Meyer and Olga show that “plots and meanings” that have been well-received by previous audiences are borrowed in attempt to bridge the distance between teller and listener, to allow the listener to find the intended meaning in the teller’s words.

Culturally understood, or ‘proven’ narrative frameworks – the plot, structure, and other common elements – are essential in conveying a story from which context and meaning can be grasped. The supplementary materials included in the Montreal Life Stories database allow the listener to explore certain gaps between the teller’s intent, and the ways in which ubiquitous narrative structures may interfere with that intent. For the interview with Meyer and Rena the most telling examples of this are found in the many thank-you letters written to them by the school children with whom they’ve shared their stories. Despite Rena’s and Meyer’s insistence that they were not heroes, an overwhelming number of students are nonetheless left with precisely that impression. Some students even offer a counter-argument to Rena’s and Meyer’s rejection of this distinction (see Appendix I, Figures 2 and 3).

One possible explanation for the young audience’s insistence is the conflation of hero in the sense of one who acts heroically, with the hero as a narrative protagonist. The oldest formal (Western) narrative framework for storytelling is the dramatic structure first written about by

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Aristotle in the fifteenth century. In this model, narrative consists of three basic elements: plot (the sequence of events), character (the players), and idea (the meaning of the story). The characters are not simply the people in a story; they act with purpose, toward the meaning of the plot. Although an ancient model, used for centuries to structure live dramas, this narrative framework continues to guide modern storytelling, and is particularly evident in plots that position good and evil in binary opposition. Accordingly, such plots rely on another stock character, the antagonist, who acts in opposition to the hero. Simply said, the protagonist/hero’s role in this type of narrative is to overcome the obstacle posed by the antagonist, as they represent good and evil respectively. The many of the letters received by Rena and Meyer indicate that an overwhelming number of the students had no prior exposure to the history of the Holocaust, and Rena and Meyer indicate that they encounter a general lack of knowledge among students about the Second World War. In light of this, the gap between teller and listener in this case, likely occurs because the children find meaning in Rena and Meyer’s according to a story framework familiar to them, in which the social complexity of the Second World War and the Holocaust are reduced to individual players. Meyer and Olga indicate as well, that one of the most frequent questions they are asked is: “Did you see Hitler?” As much as this might suggest that the students know of Hitler in an historical sense, it also suggests that they are aware of the antagonist’s role in a narrative, which contributes to

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86 Ibid., 39-45.
87 Ibid., 39-45.
88 One only need to look to most Disney movies, or to comic books, to observe how this narrative framework is ubiquitous, and influential from an early age.
89 Rena and Meyer Schondorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zymbrzyki, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Archive, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Life Stories In Education Working Group, Disc 1: 02:35:06
90 Olga Sher, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, December 19, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Life Stories in Education Working Group, Session 1, Clip 15, and Rena and Meyer Schondorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Archive, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University, Disc 1: 2:20:39.
his status as an infamous villain. The students’ narrative knowledge, along with the Schondorf’s and Olga’s role as honored guest in the classroom and status as “survivors” all serve to position them as heroes in the narrative sense. Further evidence of the students making sense of these stories according to this common narrative pattern can be found in letters where a student casts him or her self in the role of survivor and hero, imagining how they might have acted differently than Rena and Meyer (see Appendix I, Figure 4). 91

But, not all is lost in this gap between teller and listener. The use of familiar frameworks allow the students to recognize the separateness of Rena’s and Mayer’s experiences from their own, yet grasp the intent (or idea) of their stories – which is to illustrate the destructiveness of persecutory behaviors and discriminatory beliefs – and draw parallels with their own lives. Megan Boler described this type of exercise as “testimonial reading,” in which an audience develops “the ability to recognize that a novel or biography [in this case an oral story] reflects not merely a distant other, but analogous social relations in our own environment.”92 (See Appendix I, Figure 5) Each instance described above demonstrates how pre-existing knowledge of such narrative conventions shape how the Schondorf’s stories are understood differently by school audiences.93

Where the methodology of the Montreal Life Stories Project (clipping and indexing the entirety of each interview, and including textual summaries of the content) provides a timeline

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91 While Meyer, Rena and Olga all, to an extent, encourage the children to identify with the stories they share, finding it helpful in relating to them, Susan David Bernstein provides a more cautious exploration of teaching using though methods that encourages young readers/viewers to identify with those they read about. Her view is that promoting identification with autobiographical accounts is problematic as it fosters the dishonest sense of “authentic mutuality” which cannot exist between survivors of trauma and those who have not experienced the trauma. In “Promiscuous Reading: The Problem of Identification and Anne Frank’s Diary,” in Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust, eds., Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Gleijzer (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 141-161.
93 Susan Bernstein calls this type of knowledge garnered from books and films as “reel knowledge.” Susan Bernstein, “Promiscuous Reading,” 142.
of the interview, *Stories Matter* also provides the opportunity to rearrange this information in order to construct thematic timelines, or playlists. In doing so, one is able to juxtapose sections of the interview to explore the ways in which popular narratives are employed in contextualizing the interviewee’s life story. In the following interview timeline, edited to include only the references Olga and the interviewers make to the published and produced narratives in wider culture, one can see both the frequency and the contexts in which such references arise. In this interview, reference to narratives in popular culture, such as books and film theatre, and news articles are an important aspect of Olga’s life story, and her dialogue with her interviewers. Through the course of the interview both Olga and the interviewers elicit conversation about such stories in order to contextualize Olga’s life story, her efforts to share her experience with others, and to educate about the Holocaust. Though the below excerpts are only from the first interview session, this pattern continues throughout the three interview sessions.94

94 Olga Sher, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, December 19, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Life Stories in Education Working Group, Session 1.
**Session 1/4**

| Q: I guess the question I would like to start with would be: Tell me about the first time you told your story in public. | A: Olga does not remember the exact date, but she explains that it was when she became involved with the Holocaust Memorial Centre. She explains that she taught child psychiatry at the Jewish General Hospital for twenty-five years, and it must have been after that. 

She doesn't remember the first time she shared her story, but imagines that she was very nervous. She remembers having to put her memories in a condensed form. She adds that today she still does not tell children the whole story; she is selective. Sometimes she does not tell her personal story but a story that "illustrates the terror" of that time.

It is a story of a non-Jewish boy who comes home from school and asks his parents what he should do when he was told to break the windows of a Jewish store. She recounts the story for the interviewers.

She describes how when telling this story, before going on, she asks the children what they think the boy did, giving them a chance to think about it and what they would do. They discuss why the children feel the way they do. She explains that she is illustrating her story through someone else and lowering the age so that perhaps it is more accessible to her audience. 

Q: Do you remember why [you shared your story], what motivated you? 

[...] 

Olga states that the museum approached her. She had only been to the Museum one time before because she wanted to see if the town where she survived was on the walls there. It was.

She recalls that at first the environment was an unfamiliar one, and she didn't know the people there. But she listened, walked around the museum with groups and became familiar with it. She thought it was important to participate.

Olga explains that she read a lot about the Holocaust; since her own liberation she was interested in knowing how others survived.

She was liberated by the Soviet Army in eastern Poland in 1944. She was 16 years old when the War began, and she had a strong desire to further her education after the War at the age of 21. She went to university.

She explains that through different times in her life, this background was always present in her life. She adds that she and others did not talk openly about their experiences during the Holocaust; they wanted to "put it away" and have a normal life. She adds this "did not work out too well, but we tried." She did this through school, "books and studying." 

Q: What age group do you prefer to speak to?

Olga does not mind speaking to very young children, although some people do not like to do so. She adds that she has not had any problems managing a class of children. She encourages teachers to search for literature and bring something.

She states that she encourages the classes to send letters, not particularly full of thanks, but indicating what they remember. 

[...]|
### Session 1/4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Q: So, when you talk to say, ten or eleven year olds versus when you talk to a fifteen, sixteen year old... what decisions do you make in terms in what you say and what you don't.</td>
<td>A: Olga explains that she tries to allow children to identify with children their own age. She explains that there were kids their age, and shows the students pictures. She states that although they try, it is difficult. She states that the Holocaust is so distant to the students she is unsure if they believe it existed. She recalls the ways that different children experienced the Holocaust; she mentions pictures, a book, that some children's parents continued to educate them, and although she does not usually tell students this, there were children who were suffocated when they made too much noise. She does not try &quot;paint pictures that were so horrid.&quot; She believes that the students will find out later if they are interested.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: It is a beginning point [...] There's a lot more education that goes on after.</td>
<td>A: Olga states that the adults wrote their memoirs of what it was like as children in that situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: It's the same teachers every year that request..?</td>
<td>A: Olga responds that it is many of the same teachers that come each year. She shares a story that at Auschwitz there was a group of French, Jewish and Polish girls who wanted to celebrate one girl's 21st birthday. The girls cut out paper hearts. She explains that the girls would have had to trade for the paper: give bread for the paper, margarine for a pencil. The hearts are on display in the Museum. She adds that she engages the children by asking them how they would feel if someone made such an effort for their birthday. Olga states that she has forgotten the initial question.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: I was asking about Jewish kids and non-Jewish kids, and how people's reactions differed, what they hold on to.</td>
<td>A: Olga states that in the Museum there is a lot of video, because she feels that then the children will not be &quot;so visually bored.&quot; She adds that near the end she goes faster because she can see she is &quot;losing them.&quot; She states that the children enjoy hearing survivors speak, if they do not speak for too long, and they enjoy watching the TV.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q: Are you a docent and a speaker? Q: Tell me about that. Why is that..?</td>
<td>A: Olga is both, although there are not many who are both. A: Olga explains that firstly, she knows quite a lot both about what is in the Museum and outside the Museum also. She adds that she is currently reading a book about the family who owned the zoo in Warsaw before the War, because when she lived in Warsaw she went to that zoo. She recalls writing to a friend to ask about where the zoo had been located, and her friend responded by telling her, and also telling her where the zoo is today and sent her a booklet. She states that now she can tell this to the children. She explains how some animals were killed, and some, such as the birds, were left alone because they were not dangerous to the public. She explains that in 1939 she was in her last year of high school, and that she notes information such as this so the kids can draw parallels. She states that some things she skips, because she knows it's too much for the children; they will not get it.</td>
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**Session 1/4**

| Q: So to walk through the Museum... | A: Olga explains that while they walk, they children asked her how she survived. She explains some things that were tragic and also some things that were nice. She states that in the last four months they stayed in an attic, and she was lucky to survive, but it was also because there were good people who helped - paid for their hiding, brought their food, etc. She explains that some are noted as "Righteous Gentiles Among the Nation," and that the name of one man who helped them is on the walls of Yad Vashem. She states that those who helped should not be forgotten. |
| Q: Are there many survivor/docents in Montreal or are they mainly second or third generation? | A: Olga states that there are not many. She thinks that not everybody had the same chance that she did to go to school and university. She explains how her own personal family circumstance provided the opportunity. Others could not continue their education, they had to work, and their families changed. |
| Q: It sounds like the docent's role is to provide sort of the big picture, right? And then the speaker's role is to tell the story. And in a way you do both in your speaking, too. It sounds like you... | A: Olga states that she shows videos, and asks the students if they have any questions. She recalls noticing a difference between a class of advanced students and more average groups. Olga states that one has to listen to the children. Even if they do not say anything she pays attention to their behavior. She states that sometimes she is hurt listening to the docents who are not survivors. She is able to say, "We" when she speaks of what happened, and the other docents say, "They." She states that this is part of the reality of moving into the future. |
| Q: Is there a survivor community in Montreal, like a web of friendships and so on? | A: Olga states that she thinks there is one around the Museum. There are also writers, and people buy their books to support them. They also meet at the library. Olga also has a book club where they read books about the Holocaust. There are 7-10 people who attend; two are not survivors but the others appreciate that they come. Olga explains that she chooses a book and asks the others if they approve of it, and then they read and discuss. |
| Q: How often do you meet? | A: Olga states that they do not meet that often because they do not have much time; they meet about four times a year. She states that there is also a group of nurses who belong to [unclear] and Olga reviews the books with them. They do not only read books about the Holocaust, but also books about Jewish tradition or religion. The most recent was about a Hindu woman who discovered her Jewish past. |
| Q: How long have you been meeting as a book club? How many years? | A: Olga states that they have been meeting for years. She explains that it was not entirely her initiative and a man approached her about starting one. He could not participate any longer after experiencing a personal tragedy, but Olga continued to do it. It has been going for more than ten years. |
As Henry Greenspan wrote, particular to the life stories of Holocaust survivors, the process of transmission is complicated by the struggle to “‘make a story’ for what ‘is not a story.’”\(^\text{95}\) He describes: “The very act of making a story depends on using plots and meanings that are alien to the destruction [of the Holocaust] itself. They must be retrieved from elsewhere: from all the rest of who survivors are, what they have lived and what they remember.”\(^\text{96}\) Olga explains that for her, communicating that experience is sometimes difficult, even to adult listeners, when they to not have kind of context that film and literature are capable of providing. In a sense, they prepare the listener to hear her story by developing an imaginative perspective as to what her experience might have been like; they act as a buffer between one who understands an experience first hand, and one who may not have any idea what such an experience entails. Olga explains:

People have a false imagination in a sense. "Were you in hiding all the time?"
"No, I was free, but I wasn't free," but they couldn't picture...
“If it was so horrible how could you be free?” With the guards, with the very limited freedom. Simple things like, "Did you wash? Did you Eat?


\(^{96}\) Ibid.
Did you dress...?" For some people it is absolutely difficult, especially if they don't see the movies, if they don't read.97

The interview with Olga Sher is atypical in that such references to books and films are so explicit and frequent (both for Olga and the interviewers) that they constitute a major theme in the interview. It is very common however, for interviewees and interviewers to reference books and films and other narratives in an effort to communicate a point or an experience. While on the surface such references provide no immediate value apart from indicating a story or two that the interviewee likes, or dislikes, such references are invaluable in the effort to understand an interviewee’s life experiences in narrative terms. As Hayden White has demonstrated (drawing on the work of Frederick Jameson), narrative frameworks have ideological underpinnings that are as political as they are expressive.98 Investigating these references and understanding them within their multiple contexts – the interview, the interviewee’s life story, and in the time and place of their production – offers enormous potential in expanding the breadth of meaning that lies latent in a life story. More than offering a sense of the interviewee’s (or interviewer’s) idiosyncratic personal preferences, references to culturally produced narratives indicates an ideological position within a culture. These references are important markers in an interviewee’s life story, which continues into the present not only through remembering, but also through investigation. Popular stories, and the interviewee’s opinion of them, can provide clues as to how the interviewee has worked to make sense of a particular time and place, their personal experiences, aspects of the past they find difficult to reconcile, and interpretations of that past they embrace or reject. While researching

97 Olga Sher, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, September 21, 2009, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Life Stories in Education Working Group, Session 3, Clip 4.
all of the references made by Olga and the interviewers is beyond the scope of this essay and
there is not space enough to explore in depth what she feels are strong narrative representations
of the Holocaust and why, the variety and breadth of the books and films she has engaged
suggests an ideological underpinning oriented toward educating about the Holocaust in an effort
to ensure it is not forgotten, and as previously noted, to impart awareness of the consequences
of prejudice.

Although not as immediately obvious as such direct references, interviewees and
interviewers, through the course of the interview, draw from cultured storytelling frameworks in
order to convey and understand experience. While working with interviews that were for the
most part from the “Oral History and Performance,” “Holocaust and Other Persecutions of
Jews,” the “Life Stories in Education,” and the “Refugee Youth” working groups of the
Montreal Life Stories Project, the narrative frameworks I encountered (employed by both
interviewees and interviewers) were almost exclusively those which have evolved from Western
storytelling traditions.

Exploring the existent interviews in the Montreal Life Stories database (primarily during
its construction) offered an approach to conversational narrative analysis which marries that of
Eva McMahon’s “Conversation Analytic Approach” – which privileges the dialogic exchange
between the interviewer and interviewee – and that used by oral historians such as Daniel James
and Ronald Grele, which contextualize the stories of an individual within particular storytelling
traditions.99 In taking a middle-of-road approach that follows a dialectic similar to that used by

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History: Theories and Applications, eds. Thomas L. Charlton et al. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2008) 336-356;
Daniel James, Donna Maria’s Story: History, Memory, and Political Identity (Durham: Duke University Press,
2003); and Ronald Grele, “Listen to their Voices” Two Case Studies in the Interpretation of Oral History
Interviews,” in Envelopes of Sound, 212-241.
McMahon, using the question and answer clip structure of the database, one can observe how the narrative traditions and genres within the interview are an effective communicative strategy in relating experience, and are negotiated and shaped in the process of conversation.

Ronald Grele wrote, “[s]ince the interview is not created as a literary product is created, alone and as a result of reflective action, it cannot be divorced from the circumstances of its creation, which of necessity is one of face to face confrontation.”\textsuperscript{100} Despite the lack of literary intention, the latent influence of literary and genre traditions upon the interview are manifested as conversational elements. M. M. Bakhtin described dialogue as a “simple genre” or “unmediated speech communication.”\textsuperscript{101} However he added, that though the participants (in this case the interviewer and interviewee) must comprehend and respond to each other in real time, the expectations of culturally acquired forms of “complex genres [...] highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, sociopolitical, and so on” are nonetheless present within the expression and expectation of each participant.\textsuperscript{102} Framed according to Bakhtin’s logic, the interview is then a communicative occasion in which the pre-existing knowledge and expectations of the interviewer meet that of the interviewee. The participants simultaneously draw from their own knowledge, as well as negotiate and reform it in relation to that of their partner in dialogue, or audience, in order to generate understanding of the interviewee’s life experiences. This is the process that Henry Greenspan described in writing “a good interview is a process in which two people work hard to

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 62.
understand the views and experience of one person: the interviewee.”103 Because the structure of an interview is, for the most part, negotiated non-explicitly between the participants, James’ and Grele’s approaches must be modified to consider how genre operates within the organic whole, and not within a synthetic whole pieced together post-interview, or fragments isolated from their context.

While Portelli has established that “orality is saturated by writing,” Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson have summarized how theories of genre have – from the formalist applications of genre to canonical literary and structuralist theories of genre in the Enlightenment, through to the post-modern and feminist schools of thought – evolved into the present, according to the fractal-evolution of genres.104 This is the complication most evident within a conversational narrative analysis; broad overarching definitions have branched out into numerous categories and definitions that frequently coexist in a single narrative.105 Chamberlain and Thompson find that genre is now recognized as “more akin to language with its fundamental flexibility, but at the same time its common assumptions between writer, speaker and audience of convention, manner and tone, forms of delivery, timings, setting, shapes, motifs and characters.”106 A second complication to conversational narrative analysis is that in conversation, the participants do not intentionally or consistently apply genre. Rather, each

103 Greenspan, On Listening to Holocaust Survivors, 3. Greenspan describes how within his personal methodology, which is informed by a Psychological approach, “the recounter and listener can work together to understand the significance of a story, and in this case of ‘stories’ in general.” However, this level of intention is rare within historically-driven life story interviews, in which “meaning” of form especially, is a latent within the life-story, rather than an objective during the storytelling.

104 Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds. Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication, 1.


anecdote is formed unconsciously according to a framework that suits and conveys the meaning of its content, and each question is asked according to how the interviewer is making sense of the story according to their own genred expectations.\(^{107}\)

In the interview with Bracha Rosenblum – represented here by the Interviewer’s questions juxtaposed to the clip descriptions from the database, the interviewer and Bracha, for the most part, understand each other’s cues, sharing a sense of the storytelling mode; Bracha’s life story is a highly personal autobiographical account.

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<td>We’re going way, way back; your earliest memory possible.</td>
<td>Clip 1 00:08:13</td>
<td>Bracha explains that she does not recall much from her early childhood. She describes her family's experience of the deportations to the Litzmannstadt ghettos, when her father was taken there but not her mother, herself or her sister.</td>
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<td>Tell me, before you went to the train station, do you have any recollection what it was like in your town at the time, as far as the Germans and anti-Semitism was concerned?</td>
<td>Clip 2 00:04:16</td>
<td>Bracha remembers the tension where she lived, and hiding from the Germans before her family's internment. She recalls how her family was separated and one particular memory of internment she experiences as a recurring dream.</td>
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<td>Do you remember your mother explaining to you why it was happening, protecting you, what she said to you during the time?</td>
<td>Clip 3 00:12:34</td>
<td>Bracha shares her memory of the internment camp, and of communicating with her father via the Red Cross. She shares what is plausibly the story if his death, and what she used to wonder about him in his absence.</td>
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<td>Where were your grandparents at the time?</td>
<td>Clip 4 00:19:16</td>
<td>Bracha tells the interviewer about her maternal grandparents, and what little she knows of her paternal grandparents. She also tells about the cousins she met after the War.</td>
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<td>Let me bring you back to the camp; what was it like in the camp for you? You said you were living behind barbed wire?</td>
<td>Clip 5 00:25:27</td>
<td>Bracha explains that there were other children to play with and that they were given school lessons. She also recounts her mother's efforts toward getting them out of the camp on the first prisoner of war exchange in 1942, and reuniting with her brother.</td>
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<td>What was the situation in Vienna in 1942 for the Jews? I’m surprised that Jews were still around then.</td>
<td>Clip 6 00:30:26</td>
<td>Bracha describes her family's settling in Israel, finding a home and beginning school. She talks about her mother's attempt to establish a connection with a long lost sister, and her effort to develop a relationship with her own sister, who moved to Israel in 1947.</td>
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\(^{107}\) Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbara Laslett observed a similar pattern in autobiographical writing, finding that “genres are flexible and mutable, and writers of autobiography, like oral storytellers are always negotiating between generic models and their own unique opus.” Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, *Telling Stories*, 76.
<table>
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<th>Question</th>
<th>Clip</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you remember having friends at the time, and did these friends go through the same thing that you went through?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>00:31:58</td>
<td>Bracha remembers having friends at school, and doing various chores there. She recalls her brother joining the Haganah, her mother buying a house in Netanya, and joining the army.</td>
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<td>What was the situation in Palestine and Israel at the time with the war? Do you have recollection of that.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>00:41:14</td>
<td>Bracha describes her experience during high school, guarding a settlement camp [Ramot Naftali?], on the Syrian border. She recalls the events that took place there, and afterward, she and her companions all joining the army right out of high school. She tells about her path toward nursing while in the army.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where was your sister at that time?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>01:07:17</td>
<td>Bracha talks about how she came to leave her nursing job to be an airline hostess, a job she loved. She tells about her travels during that six years, and how she came to meet her husband.</td>
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<td>When did you become Canadian?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>01:22:33</td>
<td>Bracha tell the interviewer about her sons. She also shares the circumstances of her mother's death, which was particularly difficult for her, as she was living in Canada and never got to say her &quot;proper goodbye.&quot;</td>
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<td>Tell me about the time, you said, that you went back with one of your sons, to Germany. What made you go back?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>01:36:34</td>
<td>Bracha talks a little about a recent trip to Germany with her son; she didn't go to the places she might have liked to. She talks about a dream she has about living in Leipzig, and that she would like to go back to see if this is perhaps a memory, as she would like to do with the monastery as well.</td>
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<td>What effect has all this had on your present life? You’ve gone through a lot.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>01:36:55</td>
<td>Bracha explains that she does not feel like that same person as her younger self; those experiences do not feel like they happened to her. She explains that they did not stay in contact with anyone from the camp.</td>
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<td>When you were living in the camp, was there any bombing or something like that?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>01:39:07</td>
<td>Bracha states that they did not experiencing bombings and such because of their location. They did not talk about what life was like before.</td>
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<td>So, your sense of identity when you look at yourself in the mirror, what do you see when you see yourself - because you’ve gone through so much through the years. You’ve had so many different eras, different jobs, different opportunities, experiences. How do you see yourself? Who are you?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>01:40:25</td>
<td>Bracha reiterates the lack of connection she has to her younger self. She thinks that being in the army gave her strength. She does not think about the War past everyday, as she has many things to keep her occupied.</td>
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<td>Do you believe that there is a God? What is God to you?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>01:43:40</td>
<td>Bracha explains that belief in God is a difficult question. She believes that there is Jewish history in the Bible.</td>
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<td>With the resurgence of anti-Semitism today, what is happening in Israel and the Arab countries..?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>01:45:04</td>
<td>Bracha explains that she feels more connected to Israel than anywhere else.</td>
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Together with the interviewer, Bracha shapes her experiences into a coming of age story (buildungsroman) in which her years in Israel are pivotal. When after almost two hours of interviewing when the interviewer asks: “What effect has all this had on your present life? You’ve gone through a lot.” (Clip 12) Bracha begins to describe the separateness she feels between her childhood and adult selves, as though her childhood experiences were those of someone else. She explains, “Myself, I feel more ‘me’ from the time I came to Israel.”

Bracha’s story progresses fluidly through her experiences, describing her journey into her present consciousness, one that is distinctly separate from her younger self.

The interviewer, as her role requires her to do (and perhaps sensing an imminent end to the interview) continues to pose questions to Bracha, which hint at her desire for Bracha’s story to end with, or at least include, a revelation. The interviewer makes three distinct attempts at eliciting this from Bracha. Though none of the questions are leading questions in the sense conveyed by conventional oral history interviewing guides in that they do not lead the interviewee into answering on any one particular way, they are leading in the sense of their genred implications – first and foremost, that a coming of age story and passing into adult consciousness must include at least one resolute revelation. The interviewee first asks: “Do you

108 Montreal Life Stories Project, Interview with Bracha Rosenblum, June 29, 2010, Session 1, Clip 16.
believe that there is a God? What is God to you?” to which Bracha responds ambiguously. The interviewer’s follow-up question reveals her expectation that a more resolute passage into a religious consciousness would be part of her story. When Bracha explains that she is not quite sure what she believes, the interviewer asks: “That must make it hard to teach the Bar Mitzvah?” in response to which Bracha explains the value she sees in the Bible’s stories, and in the moral lessons of the teachings. This exchange lasts only about two minutes before the interviewer poses another question, this time attempting to elicit a political revelation: “With the resurgence of anti-Semitism today, what is happening in Israel and the Arab countries..?” The interviewer does not get a change to finish her sentence before Bracha begins a concise explanation, stating that “[a]lthough she was born in Germany, and it is part of her heritage, she feels more connected to Israel than anywhere else. ‘If people say bad things about Israel they are in for a fight.’ She feels protective, and a part of it.” Rather than delve deeper into Bracha’s responses, the interviewer then requests from Bracha a moral to her story: “If you were standing in front of a class or children, or your own grandchildren today, what message would you leave to them. […] Morals?”

While the interviewer is doing what interviewer’s do, encouraging their interviewee to continue to speak, and though all of her questions are formed in relation to aspects of Bracha’s life that have arisen during the interview, her expectations of storytelling inform her questions, and the storied framework of the interview as a whole. Though not discordant with a coming of age story (as Chamberlain and Thompson explained, the overlapping of genres is natural) these requests are respectively, attempts to elicit religious, political and moral epiphanies from

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109 Bracha Rosenblum, interview by Charna Young, June 29, 2010, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Shoah and other Persecutions against Jews Working Group, Session 1, Clip 14, “Clip Notes.”
110 Ibid., Clip 17.
Bracha, which on her own accord she did not feel it necessary to share. It is significant that these questions all appear at the end of the interview. It suggests that while the interviewer, for the most part, appeared to understand and agree upon the mode through which Bracha shared her story, the end of the interview reveals what the interviewer felt Bracha’s story was missing.

This interview with Bracha Rosenblum also illustrates an important consideration in the time shifts that are often remarked upon as an inevitability of oral storytelling in interviews that is influenced by the workings of individual memory. While this is indeed an inevitability of the interview, and of remembering, this interview illustrates that time shifts are also the product of dialogic exchange. They reveal aspects of the interview for which the interviewer required clarity, and can provide further examples of the ways in which expectation shaped the life story if the interviewee as told in the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clip</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>00:04:16</td>
<td>Tell me, before you went to the train station, do you have any recollection what it was like in your town at the time, as far as the Germans and anti-Semitism was concerned? Bracha remembers the tension where she lived, and hiding from the Germans before her family's internment. She recalls how her family was separated and one particular memory of internment she experiences as a recurring dream.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>00:25:27</td>
<td>Let me bring you back to the camp; what was it like in the camp for you? You said you were living behind barbed wire? Bracha explains that there were other children to play with and that they were given school lessons. She also recounts her mother's efforts toward getting them out of the camp on the first prisoner of war exchange in 1942, and reuniting with her brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>01:39:07</td>
<td>When you were living in the camp, was there any bombing or something like that? Bracha states that they did not experiencing bombings and such because of their location. They did not talk about what life was like before.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>01:49:49</td>
<td>I’d like to know a little bit more about how it was for you when you came to Montreal, how it was for you to build ties here, how you were accepted here. Bracha states that she was very lucky coming to Canada, as she made many friends, but there was a fire at the harbour in which she lost all of her possessions. She shows the interviewers several photos she has, and reads a postcard sent by her father from the ghetto.</td>
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</table>

With the exception of the last question in the above excerpt, which despite bringing the conversation back to Bracha’s arrival in Montreal, is truly open ended, the previous three questions bring Bracha back in time in order to explore periods in her life that offer the greatest potential to illustrate interpersonal confrontations and the threats of violence. Although Bracha responds to these questions, she does so while maintaining the forward progression of her experience through time.

Although the interviewer’s questions do not get Bracha to speak about these times in her life at length, the interviewer’s contribution to time-shifts is a layer that must be taken into account when applying theories of time to an oral account that is shaped by conversation. For example, in considering that, as Portelli suggests, “dwelling on an episode may be a way of stressing its importance,” the conversational dynamic dictates that the amount of time devoted to a particular period or experience may also indicate what is most relevant or interesting to the interviewer.\(^\text{112}\) In the interview with Olga Sher, for example, the conversation about Olga’s book club shows that interest of the interviewers in this topic. Although it is a significant aspect of Olga’s life, she does not assign it a central place in her narrative without the encouragement of the interviewers.

The content and structure of an interview are a direct reflection of both the interviewee’s and interviewer’s input. Because of this it is problematic to consider a life story, as imparted in oral history interviews, under the overarching umbrella of a single genre. Although particular patterns may be drawn on more often than others, to omit the less dominant “fragments and episodes” in analysis is to obscure the dialogic process by which genred tales are constructed in conversational narratives. In order to explore where “common assumptions” do and do not

\(^{112}\) Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” 35. Portelli wrote this, preceding it with the caveat that “we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation.”
occur, rather than seeking out an overarching genre (or genres) it is perhaps more useful to consider the overarching assumptions associated with genres, according to which participants initiate genred tellings, and to what extent these are understood and/or reciprocated. In the context of oral history interviewing, is it particularly useful to look at the assumptions that accompany the genres most applied to oral history narratives: autobiography and history.

Hayden White has written of the narrative structures which shape history-telling. He describes: “historiography in the West arises against the background of a distinctively literary (or rather ‘fictional’) discourse which itself took shape against the even more archaic discourse of ‘myth.’ In its origins, historical discourse differentiates itself from literary discourse by virtue of its subject matter (‘real’ rather than ‘imaginary’ events), rather than by its form.”113 Similarly, autobiography is different from other genres based on the narrator’s assertion of “truth.”114 Accordingly, the prevailing narrative expectations for oral history interviews, is that the interviewees life story will emerge at the intersection of autobiography and history-telling – a true, first person, personal account of the past that occurs within, and thus reflects, larger political and social contexts. Though these two genres of telling about the past have much in common, such as subjective realism and chronological progression, inspecting the conversational ebb and flow reveals that these two narrative forms do not always peacefully coexist within a conversational narrative. As Portelli has illustrated, narrators speak on a spectrum of perspective and, “seek to confer coherence to their stories by adhering to a

113 White, The Content of the Form, 44. White. See also Portelli: “Oral History as Genre,” 23
114 Maynes, Pierce and Laslett describe place in the context of Philippe Lejune’s description of “the autobiographical pact,” in which the author [teller] does not inherently tell the truth, but rather states that he or she is doing so. Maynes at al., Telling Stories, 77-78, quoting Philippe Lejune, From Autobiography to Life-Writing, From Academia to Association: A Scholar’s Story,” (Plenary Lecture, 58th Annual Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, 22 April, 2005, University of Kentucky, Lexington), trans., Marie-Danielle Leruez.
(relatively) consistent principle, or ‘mode’ of selection: the sphere of politics; the life of the community; and personal experience.”

In the interview Abraham Weizfeld, the struggle between genred expectations is more evident. They reflect the different expectations of the interviewer and the interviewee in terms of a “mode of selection.” Abraham conveys his life experience in a highly political and historical mode. Although the interviewer challenges Abraham, attempting to draw out a more personal narrative, as one can see in the following timeline (again represented by the interviewer’s questions with the clip descriptions from the database), clearer insight into the interviewer’s processes of comprehension and their expectations of form during this conversational narrative are provided by the interviewer’s reflection on the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>[Interviewer]: We’re so grateful that you’re making this contribution to us.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clip 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>00:00:08</td>
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<td>Abraham states that he has never written down his experiences, and will contribute the interview to the Washing Memorial Holocaust Museum with his family's archives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>So where shall we start today?</td>
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<td>Clip 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>00:01:30</td>
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<td>Abraham tell the interviewer about how his parents met, and the Refugee camp where he was born. He talks about their immigration to Canada, giving the context of the climate of the time in regards to how people felt about Jewish refugees.</td>
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<td>So this was your experience when you went to school in Toronto? Was it something that you..?</td>
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<td>Clip 3</td>
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<td>00:09:52</td>
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<td>Abraham talks about the social relations between Canadians, Jews and Jewish refugees, and how the refugees formed a community. He remembers how his parents spoke different Yiddish dialects. He talks about his family's Orthodox faith and his own religious views. Abraham then talks about his school experience, first at Jewish School then in Canadian school.</td>
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<td>Abraham states that they just took a break so that his son could join the interview, and welcomes him as a participant. [They find seats in order to continue the interview with Célie in the frame.]</td>
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<td>Clip 4</td>
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<td>00:15:55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abraham speaks about his school experience, and about the tension between Canadian Jewish Children and the Jewish refugee children.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Abraham's Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Did Jewish kids, did they speak about the War, or did they speak about</td>
<td>Abraham continues to talk of his school experience, noting that no one inside, or outside of school talked about the Holocaust, despite the emergence of Holocaust deniers in his early teens. He continues, describing the tension that arose between Zionist Jews and Orthodox Jews in relation to language in the schools, and the pull toward teaching Hebrew rather than Yiddish. He describes how this tension was also manifested in the synagogue and shul, and how it affected the Jewish refugee population negatively.</td>
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<td>the Holocaust? Or did they know what happened to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>So what’s the course thereafter? So you can see… With the lack of</td>
<td>Abraham explains how two relatives on both the paternal and maternal sides of his families survived the Holocaust. He connects this with the geography of survival, noting that conditions in some countries varied.</td>
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<td>availability to continue your Jewish school and things not being</td>
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<td>available for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m interested in where you were talking about your realization that</td>
<td>Abraham begins by discussing his coming to comprehension of the dimensions of the Holocaust. This leads to a discussion of his intuitive adoption of a &quot;survivor mentality&quot; and his attempt to explain what influenced this and what characterizes it. This led him to many questions about religion and politics, which he sought to codify through a PhD on the subject.</td>
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<td>the few relatives in your family, compared to the Canadians with their</td>
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<td>many many family, seemed to for you… you started to [unclear] onto</td>
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<td>the fact that there was something very particular about your family -</td>
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<td>that although people didn’t talk about it you began to appreciate that</td>
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<td>here there’s only…”I don’t have these second cousins and third</td>
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<td>cousins,” that, “this is our only family.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>And how it relates to other members of your family? If your mothers’</td>
<td>Abraham shares with the interviewer several photographs of family and friends, as well as documents such as his mother's identity papers. This leads him to talk more in detail about his family's participation in the Jewish Bund, its history, and his role in the collaborative efforts to reconstruct this history.</td>
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<td>brother was lost, as you’ve described it, then she and her sister would</td>
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<td>be the remaining members of her own family, did either of them... did</td>
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<td>these politics inform their own life in any particular way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m always struck by the fact that the way you learn information, is</td>
<td>Abraham shares with the interviewer, his estrangement with one of his Israeli cousins, who did not welcome him because of his political views. He tells the interviewer about his political understanding of Israel as pertaining to Jewish refugees, and his coming into consciousness of the Israel/Palestine conflict.</td>
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<td>never by your circle of friends or family - there is no discussion.</td>
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<td>In your other interview as well, it’s through watching T.V. Something</td>
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<td>suddenly gets parachuted without any context for you to have been able</td>
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<td>to engage or make sense of, or have any appreciation. It’s again, this</td>
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<td>is like the third edition, it’s either the Eichmann trials that are</td>
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<td>getting splashed all over the news that you have to say, “what’s going</td>
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<td>on,” or in the description that you gave about the in Toronto, there</td>
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<tr>
<td>was somebody who was some kind of Neo-Nazi Holocaust denier (Zundel),</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>and that again made you question, “What is this?” And again it’s the</td>
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<tr>
<td>random person who is congratulating you in a completely different situation that illuminates the situation. So it is extraordinary the sense of complete separation…</td>
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<tr>
<td>And it relates to other members of your family? If your mothers’ brother</td>
<td>Abraham explains briefly his earliest experience learning about the Zionist movement, and how he became politically active. He explains that later his political views caused tension in his family. It was the source of hostilities at Seders, until he was no longer welcome to attend and his family began holding their own, apart from the extended family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was lost, as you’ve described it, then she and her sister would be the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remaining members of her own family, did either of them... did these</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>politics inform their own life in any particular way?</td>
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How did you and your parents ever come to terms with such a terrible trauma, of being disassociated from their family, the small family you were?

Abraham describes how his political views, and the estrangement from the extended family, contributed to the discord in his family home. He describes becoming ostracized by his father and leaving home and going to university. He adds that despite the discord his family did see each other sometimes, and there was still an emotional bond.

You made reference last time to when Célie was here, that you were very critical towards him, that you had your own difficult years, and you were happy that you seemed to have been able to find a way past that? What did you mean by that, when you said you were critical towards him?

Abraham explains the tension he and his own son experienced for a while in their relationship. He moves back to talking about his continued political involvement, which eventually led him to switching university programs, from physics to political science, and eventually working in an official capacity for the Palestinian Information Office, and to writing a book.

From this we see how Abraham makes clear at the onset of the interview that his intent in being interviewed is to preserve his family’s history. Though he speaks to political, community, and personal aspects of his history, his story is anchored in the political mode; in shifting between modes, the connections that Abraham makes are consistently “upward, to pure politics.” In turning to the interviewers’ reflections on the occasion, it is clear that both were disappointed, for the most part, in light of the mode Abraham chose to relate his experience.

After the first interview, in which Abraham related much of his childhood experience, spoke to his family’s experience during the Second World War, and to his own religious and political values, the interviewers embarked on a second session with a strategy to prevent it from taking a similar course:

Before proceeding with the second interview, we were conscious of the possibility that the session ran the risk of turning into a platform for Mr W’s political beliefs. We therefore had a strategy at hand. We would invite Mr W to show his collected photos and refer to them, throughout the course of the interview. By doing so we hoped

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116 Abraham and Célie Weizfeld, interview by Joan Simand and Isabelle Dicarie, August 09, 2009, Montreal Life Stories Project Database, Shoah and Other Persecutions against Jews Working Group, Session 1, Clip 1.

117 Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 21. Portelli describes shifts in mode on a vertical plane, either “upward to pure politics, or downward to personal life and affections.”
to inject material of a more personal, immediate and intimate nature.\textsuperscript{118}

In the second session Abraham speaks further to his family’s political involvement during the Second World War, his own growth into a political consciousness and his current political views, and his career. While Abraham’s life story is grounded in his politics, it is nonetheless deeply personal. Through his views he relates deeply personal struggles that he has experienced in light of them, including a palpable theme of alienation that crosses through his family, his communities (geographic and religious) and his academic endeavors. However, neither interviewer sees Abraham’s story as a personal story, and instead express their disappointment with Abraham’s story:

…photos from the past, of his mother and her class mates failed to suffuse the interview with any warm memories. He chose instead to focus on a particular photo, a group of resistance fighters as a launching point for a discourse on the history of the bundist movement. […] The experience of interviewing him made me feel listless and bored. I felt like the reluctant student before a droning professor.\textsuperscript{119}

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Il parle ensuite du mouvement Bund, un mouvement ouvrier socialiste opposé au sionisme, et nous en fait l’histoire. Sinon, Monsieur Weizfeld entre très peu dans les photos, se situe peu dans son histoire de vie, malgré les questions de Joan (et les miennes) à cet effet.

Ses positions politiques, comme on le craignait, finissent par prendre toute la place au détriment de son histoire de vie, et surtout le lien de l’un à l’autre n’est pas fait.

*He then spoke of the Bund movement, a socialist labour movement opposed to Zionism, and we did history. Otherwise, Mr. Weizfeld included very little in between the photos that was*

\textsuperscript{118} Joan Simand, “Thoughts after second interview with Weizfeld,” August 17, 2009, Montreal Life Stories Project, Rapport des Intervieweurs (blogs), Basecamp, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Montreal, QC.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
situated in his life story, despite Joan’s questions (and mine) to this effect.

His political positions, as we worried, took up all the space at the expense of his life story, without linking one to the other.\textsuperscript{120}

William Howarth wrote, how one “acts upon the narrative often overshadows how he acts in it.”\textsuperscript{121} The failure of the interviewers in this case, to see Abraham’s interview as a personal life story is not because it isn’t a deeply personal account, but rather because Abraham speaks from a political mode that they do not equate with an autobiographical account. In this case, the interviewer’s own expectations of story form, perhaps in conjunction with other frustrations in the interview resulted in both determining that the interview was not a good interview.\textsuperscript{122} While social science researchers have asserted that being present to the interview poses an advantage in interpretation (as illustrated in Chapter 1), in this case a very clear cut value-judgment was made based on the interviewers’ own closeness to the interview. Though there are concerns of misunderstanding and misinterpretation within this interview, perhaps the most troubling aspect of it is that in light of interviewers’ expectation of story form is the value judgment assigned to it in light of this. Because of the difference of opinion regarding the narrative mode, the interviewers felt that this was not a good interview, when in fact is a very rich narrative. While in the context of the Montreal Life Stories Project the consequences of the interviewers’ disappointment were not severe, this is only because they are mitigated by the interview having been heard by at least one additional set of ears. If the interviewers were, in

\textsuperscript{120} Isabelle Dicaire, “Second Interview with Weizfeld,” August 19, 2009, Montreal Life Stories Project, Rapport des Intervieweurs (blogs), Basecamp, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Montreal, QC. My translation.


\textsuperscript{122} As well as feeling frustrated in their failure to elicit anecdotes from a very personal perspective, recording difficulties also resulted in a negative experience for one of the interviewers. (Isabelle Dicaire, “Compte-rendu avec Monsieur Weizfeld et son fils, Célie Weizfeld,” August 10, 2009, Montreal Life Stories Project, Rapport des Intervieweurs (blogs), Basecamp, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Montreal, QC.
this case, the sole interpreters of the source material, it is realistic to imagine the interview being placed at the bottom of a priority list for post-processing – whether in the form of transcript summary or database – or disregarded altogether. This would have prevented other researchers from engaging with this source, or at least hindered it.

Though Hayden White wrote that narrative in itself is “a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted,” the potential for storytelling’s efficacy as a communicative process depends on the ability of listener to understand both content and form. In order to grasp the intended meaning of a story, listeners must be able to contextualize it within familiar genre frameworks. As shown in the interviews with the Schondorfs and Olga Sher, understanding popular cultural narratives is essential in this process both for the tellers and the listeners. In the context of oral history interviewing, since the story being recorded is co-created, the overall form of the story is negotiated. Because this process is one in which interviewers elicit through questions, interviewees respond by telling, and each party clarifies through subsequent questions and responses, the narrative form of an interview defies any one genre classification. It is rather a process of negotiation in which the narrative ebbs and flows through multiple narrative frameworks. As a consequence of this, the meanings constituted by form and genre selection are sometimes unwittingly imposed upon the interviewee’s story by the interviewer. If interviewers are unable to listen past their own expectations and understanding of story form, and hear meaning in the form that chosen by the interviewee, meaning is sometimes missed altogether.

In adopting an approach to analysis rooted in conversational narrative inquiry, critical distance – that is, being removed from the occasion of the telling – is sometimes needed in order to see

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where the gaps lie between the teller’s intent, and the meaning (or lack thereof) found by the
listener. Though all of the gaps illustrated above occur within the same Western traditions of
storytelling, authors such as Jill Sinclair Bell, and Julie Cruikshank have poignantly illustrated
the potential for communicative misunderstandings between cultures, in light of the failure to
recognize meanings across culturally-specific genres of storytelling as well.124 Adopting a
conversational narrative approach to analyzing interviews bears the potential to gain greater
insight into how interviews are shaped by both interview participants based on their narrative
expectations, and also into how meaning in transmitted and received through storytelling. As
stated in the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling’s Status Report on New Media and
Oral History, “The vast potential of oral history and new media to not only encourage
community identification and intercultural exchange, but also challenge stereotypes has yet to
be realized.”125 Listening for narrative is essential in working toward this goal. Learning beyond
familiar narrative understandings, both on a personal level and in the context of communities
and cultures, requires that interviewers and researchers provide an open-ended beginning, by
permitting interviewee’s to shape their stories, as much as possible in the manner they see fit,
and in identifying where our own culturally-acquired understandings impinge on our attempts to
communicate through story. While conversation necessarily entails this back and forth
exchange, and interviewers will always ask the questions that help them to make sense of what
the interviewee is telling, it is essential to try and mitigate what is lost in the process,
particularly doubts as to the quality of an interview that may be felt in light of different
expectations of story form, which could prevent it from being made available to other

124 See: Bell, “Narrative Inquiry”; and Julie Cruikshank, in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and
125 High et al., Telling Our Stories / Animating Our Past: A Status Report on Oral History and New Media, 10.
researchers. One way of working toward this, is to listen to the interviews with attentiveness to what we, as interviewers, might not have picked up on in real time conversation. As well, researchers who have more critical distance from the interview, can offer in their analysis, indicators of the moments when own bias might have impacted the form of an interviewee’s life story. In order to work toward this at all, and for conversational narrative to be possible, broad access to both interviews and supplementary interview documents is essential.
Conclusion

Building searchable databases of oral history interviews is a viable approach to increasing access to oral history interview media. Integrating summaries that map the interview dialogue into a database along side the original media increases the efficiency with which the database can be used. In juxtaposition to the original media they enhance the ability to navigate through digital media files rapidly by providing information needed to navigate through interviews knowledgeably. Including multiple listeners in the task of building the database mitigates the human errors inevitable in their creation. But further to this, constructing an oral history database by manually indexing the interviews creates opportunities for listeners, who were not the interviewers, to engage with the interviews.

As summary writers and database-builders become storytellers in the processes of manual annotation and indexing, they demonstrate that databases are not an objective research tool, but rather, they reflect the subjective interpretations of those who enter the data. The text generated, used to map the interviews, reveals how subjective listening influences the interpretation and representation of interview content. While variations and errors in the database text may appear to be simply human error, or to reflect the idiosyncrasies of the writer, listening to many interviews and browsing through the textual maps creates opportunities to draw connections between the interviews. As similarities emerge, it is then possible to examine how these patterns illustrate how what is hear, and what is not hears, is influenced by the listener’s pre-existing knowledge, and by social patterns of storytelling.

In addition to annotating, indexing, and organizing recorded media, oral history databases can also create virtual archives of other supplementary documentation that is useful to
consider when engaging with and interpreting what was said in the interview. Because the content of the database underscores how it is shaped by subjective listening, attentiveness to this creates opportunities to extend this concept to occasions of face-to-face storytelling. Documents provided by both the interviewees and interviewers provide more insight into the communicative nature of storytelling than the interview alone is capable of relating. Such documents are instrumental in providing clues as to how the tellers intended meaning reaches the listener, or does not, and this is influenced by their expectations of story forms.

In the database, a textual mapping strategy that incorporates both the interviewer’s questions and the interviewee’s responses underscores the co-created nature of the story told on the occasion of the interview. Adopting a conversational narrative analytical approach to interviews, which also considers both contributions equally, provides insight into how subjective listening and narrative knowledge play a key role in the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. Although popular narratives and recognized narrative form are instrumental in communicating experience in a way that is comprehensible to the listener, the expectations of the listener can also interfere with the teller’s intended meaning. In a general sense, this means that tellers tell stories according to proven frameworks, and a listener’s ability to make meaning of it is contingent on their pre-existing knowledge, and the frameworks they know. Within oral history interviews this means that the interviewee’s expectations of how a story should progress, what details it should include, and the mode used to relate it, bear a significant impact on both the form and the content of the story told on these occasions. As a consequence of this, caution must be exercised in applying narrative theory to interviews. This includes genre-theory, how the significance of events might be indicated in the amount of time devoted to the topic, and also chronological time shifts in telling.
Oral history databases, both through their construction and in rendering oral history interviews accessible, create opportunities for researchers to engage with collections, and draw connections between multiple interviews. They therefore create a space for a new audience in between that of the participatory interviewer, and those who read their interpretations and analysis. These listeners however, become an audience for the interview occasion. While they may not possess the embodied knowledge gained from being there, their absence affords a measure of critical distance that is useful in identifying patterns that are not decipherable in the moment. Engaging in oral history research from this in between standpoint offers the potential for new modes of inquiry wherein patterns observed within the documents created by listeners, in the questions of the interviewer, and the story told by the interviewee, create new pictures of how the evidence within life stories connects to a larger social picture.
Appendix I

Figure 2: Letter to Meyer Schondorf, 1999.126

Dear Mr. Schondorf,

I would like to thank you for sharing this horrible story and for teaching us a great thing as hope.
"Espoir, espoir," you showed me that hope can help you get through everything, well almost. I only disagree with the words that you said before beginning this nightmare:
"I'm not an hero, I only was in the right place at the right time," in my eyes you are very courageous because you almost give up but you're continued to fight because you had hope in your heart.

As a black girl myself, I also fight for my rights, you're inspired me, teach me and gave me a reason to keep the faith. I wish you peace, serenity, and now you're give me a mission: to continue talking about the Holocaust.

(12 years old)

126 Figure 2: Rena and Meyer Schondorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Archive, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University, Disc 2, Images: Austin Archive Scans, 06-School Letters-002, p.10.
Figure 3: Letter to Meyer Schondorf, 1999.127

Dear Mr. Schondorf,

My name is Elliot and I was touched by your tragic experience that happened during World War II. I wasn't there when the war happened, but I can tell from your story that it was a really, really bad experience and I hope it will never happen to Jews or any human in the future.

I think you're a hero because you never gave up even though the chance of living was minor. I think you were courageous.

It was brave of you to tell us your story because I know it was hard for you to talk about your story. What you told us had a big impact about what happened. The way you told your story was interesting and you expressed yourself very well.

I hope you, your family and your wife are happy now.

16 years old.

127 Ibid., p. 16.
Figure 4: Letter to Meyer Schondorf, 2006.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{128} Rena and Meyer Schondorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Archive, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University, Disc 2, Images: 2006, FTN038.
Figure 5: Letter to Meyer Schoendorf, 2006.\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{Dear: Meyer Schoendorf}

Dec 5th, 2006.

I myself would like to thank you very much for coming to Laurentian Regional High School and tell you about those painful moments when you were young. I feel really sad for what you had to go through. When I saw your tattoo I felt really sad how the Nazi’s just numbered people like slaves. I’m really sorry if I was there I would have rebelled and fought for the people I love. Thank you for coming.

\textsuperscript{129} Figure 4: Rena and Meyer Schoendorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, November 26, 2008, Montreal, QC, Montreal Life Stories Project Archive, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University, Disc 2, Images: 2006, FTN057.
Works Cited


