Working Toward a "Shared Authority" in the Discipline and Content of Public History: A Case Study

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Historical Writing
The growth of public history as a recognized profession is linked by many practitioners to the decade of the 1970s, a time when both a shrinking job market and interest in the so-called “new social history” (“history from the bottom up”) combined to encourage newly graduating historians to look for employment outside of the academic world. Although the practice of “public history” can be broadly defined as “any history-related activity not centered on formal education,” the kind of “public” that public historians serve, beyond being anyone not trained as a historian, is not monolithic. As Barbara Franco remarks,

The term “public history” has been difficult to define and is understood differently among various practitioners. Public history can mean history for the public, of the public, by the public, and with the public. Each preposition changes the relationship of history and public and affects the nature of the historical practice.

Some public historians work for government agencies and private businesses, bringing their expertise in historical method to bear on the problem solving and decision making taking place within a particular company or group. In this branch of the profession, public historians analyze events and “[distill] research notes into prose narrative” just like their academic counterparts, but they are paid by the same public (their bosses) for whom they conduct their historical analysis. For them, they may produce “in-house” reports which advise on “the lessons of the past for current policymaking,” may serve as advocates and expert witnesses, or may write “professionally certified official histories.”

Other public historians work in historical societies, museums, historic sites, archives, or other similar institutions creating exhibits, giving tours and lectures, and

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arranging and describing documents. They may also be employed in oral history projects, as film-makers, or in other activities which present history to nonhistorians in nontraditional formats. In this second branch of the profession, "the public" is much less well-defined. They may be the individuals who visit the museum and see an exhibit, the community which may be the subject of the exhibit, or the person who tells the history of her life into the camera of a researcher. Like Franco argues, the public may, in fact, be all three--audience for, subject of, and producer of history--all at once.  

Peter Novick suggests that this kind of public history, influenced by the new social history, has a "populist aura," or as W. Andrew Achenbaum remarks, "... getting involved in 'public history' is a way to promote 'people's history.'" Henry Rousso points out that this idealistic stance is tied to nonhistorians' growing awareness of "the need for history--the search for personal roots, the desire of certain social or ethnic minorities to build a collective memory." The social history of the 1960s and 1970s was also a response to "the public's" realization of the importance of their own history, when historians began calling "into question the merit of using the acts of elites as a measure of the past." They began using as historical sources for their work the records of the "concrete and manifold details" of the existence of ordinary people in order to "join large structural processes of change to life at the local level" and to bring to light the histories of groups who had been ignored or misunderstood. They also began drawing on the methodologies of the social sciences to "enrich" their methodologies.

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5 Gerald George, "The American Association for State and Local History, 257; Novick, That Noble Dream, 512.
Thus, as Rousso notes, the word "public" does double duty when it is modifying the word "history." It reflects the claim that public historians are "in the service of the community and attuned to its demands," but it also denotes the profession's "preferred topics of study." These, like the first branch of public history, can be "government or administrative practice and public decisionmaking." Increasingly, however, the second branch deals with "contemporary history" about a present "in which the historian lives completely, turning his back on the sacrosanct rule of 'historical distance'" and, consequently, closing the personal distance between producer and subject of history. 9

Thus, many public historians, alive to the increasing engagement with history by ordinary people outside the academy and to the increasing acceptance of the historical value of those same people’s lives within the academy, “[see] themselves less as authoritative experts than as ‘facilitators,’ helping every group [in the words of Carl Becker] to be its own historian.” They, in fact, work not only for, but with the public. 10 Some public historians go so far as to argue, with Howard Green, that the term “public history” by its very nature suggests a redefinition of “the nature of authority within the historical profession . . .” Again building on Becker’s “Everyman,” Green argues that

[People] carry with them a world view, in many ways a fundamentally historical one, which explains the past, present, and future. The central task of public historians should be to bring to explicit awareness this embedded sense of history, to help people find their own histories, and to aid them in understanding their roles both in shaping and interpreting events. 11

This is similar to Michael Frisch’s idea of “a shared authority.”

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9 Rousso, “Applied History, or The Historian as Miracle-Worker,” 69, 77.
10 Novick, That Noble Dream, 512; Achenbaum, “Public History’s Past, Present, and Prospects,” 26. In his 1935 essay, Becker argues that history should be broadly defined as “the memory of things said and done,” (235) and therefore Mr. Everyman, in his everyday, practical life, needs and uses history. However, in contrast to social history, Becker also carves out a separate sphere for professional historians, who, in their concern for establishing “the ideal series of events that is only of casual or occasional import to others,” are “Mr. Everybody’s historian as well as our own, since our histories serve the . . . purpose . . . of keeping alive the recollection of memorable men and events” (247). See “Everyman His Own Historian,” in Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., Inc., 1935), 233-255.
the notion that what is most compelling about oral and public history is a capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy.\textsuperscript{12}

In his book of the same name, Frisch presents case studies which, through exploring the practice of oral and public history, suggest ways to achieve this shared authority and to move beyond what he identifies as two dichotomous positions: the hegemony of scholarly authority which does not admit to the production of history anywhere else and a romantic exaggeration of “self-empowerment through public history” to the detriment of any and all “insights of scholarship.”\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, this concept of a shared authority describes two different but overlapping relationships which according to Frisch are, or should be, denoted by the term “public history.” First, on a practical level, it illustrates what Stuart Hall, using Antonio Gramsci’s idea of the “organic intellectual,” calls a “mutually educative relationship” in which the flow of theoretical and practical knowledge circles among academics and non-academics.\textsuperscript{14} In order to produce a work of history, then, both the historian and the public bring to their collaboration an equally valid (but different) understanding and awareness of “history” itself, which, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, is both tangible past events and the meaning of those events for the present.\textsuperscript{15}

On one side of this first sharing-authority equation is the professional’s training in historical research methods (looking for the facts); in rigorous thinking and critique; and in


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., xxi-xxii.

\textsuperscript{14} Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” in \textit{Cultural Studies}, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and others (New York: Routledge, 1992), 288. Hall uses the organic intellectual idea to suggest a way for his own academic field, cultural studies, to keep advancing theoretically while remaining grounded in a practice which “always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect” (286). Like Frisch and Green’s public historian, Hall’s organic intellectual feels a responsibility to continue to be on the “forefront of intellectual theoretical work” while “transmitting those ideas . . . to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (281).

\textsuperscript{15} Michel-Rolph Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2. Trouillot calls these two meanings of the word “history”--the facts of the past and the knowledge of those facts in the present--“historicity 1” and “historicity 2” (29).
the ability to contextualize discrete events within larger processes (looking for interpretations). On the other side is the amateur’s personal and detailed knowledge of events and facts; his passion for the validity of his and others’ experiences of those events and facts; and his ability to personally contextualize those experiences within his own life or the life of his community. For both, their historical consciousness enables them to interpret historical facts to find and describe change through time, explain why it happened, and how it has effected the present. For both, their “mutually educative relationship” has the potential to move the historian’s usual focus from generalities and objectivities to particulars, and to move the public’s usual focus from specificities and subjectivities to generalities. 16

This awareness of the links between the local and the general can lead both the historian and the public to a better understanding of their own, personal location within history, even as they produce it. In other words, as Trouillot argues, both historians and the public are historical actors and historical narrators at the same time. He suggests that “authentic” history is not authoritative if it merely narrates historical facts. Rather, authentic and authoritative history must make explicit these connections between the facts of the past, the knowledge of those facts in the present, and the purpose(s) that knowledge serves for individuals and groups in the present. 17 This authentic history, which is both the process and the result of the collaborative, “mutually educative relationship” between the historian and the public, is “public history” at its best. 18

However, as Franco reminds us, the “public” of public history is heterogeneous. While some work with historians to produce history (the result of the first relationship denoted by Frisch’s “shared authority”), others are its subjects, and others are its consumers. The second sense of the phrase “shared authority,” then, refers to how the

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16 I am grateful to James Crisp for asking “What does each side [in the public history collaboration] have to offer the other?” and then suggesting some answers.

17 Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 140, 150-52.
public views the collaborative venture of public history: Is it authoritative? Is its contemporaneous subject matter (noted by Rousso) appropriately historical? Is the historical interpretation built by the shared authority of the historian and the public believable, reasonable, and accurate?

This paper is a case study the very different perceptions which reviewers (the audience/public) accorded two autobiographies which are similar in content and were produced within very similar intellectual frameworks, under very similar collaborative circumstances (between editor/interviewer/historian and narrator/public), using similar methods. These two texts, *Outside the Magic Circle* by Virginia Foster Durr and *All Is Never Said* by Odette Harper Hines, illustrate a situation where the public accepts the authority of the history-teller and another where it does not. This acceptance relies on the audience’s perception of who the author—not necessarily the narrator—of each autobiography is. Frisch remarks that

issues of authorship and interpretive authority are linked—a link manifest in the words themselves: I was tempted to title [my] book *A Shared Author-ity.* . . . Nevertheless, the concept implied by that hyphen is important . . . The key difference between the two books’ reception, then, hinges precisely on that hyphen, symbolizing the relationship between authority and authorial power. Ultimately, the phrase “public history” refers to not only history produced in collaboration with the public or about the public, but also the public’s acceptance of this kind of history.

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Virginia Foster Durr was a civil rights activist for women and African-Americans who, as a member of the New Deal-era Women’s Division of the Democratic National

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18 In Trouillot’s formulation, however, authentic history is not solely the product of public history. He argues that it should be the goal for all historians. See all of chapter 5, “The Presence in the Past,” 141-153.

Convention attended the 1938 Southern Conference for Human Welfare; was vice-president of and a lobbyist for the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax; was called before Senator James Eastland’s Internal Security Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee in 1954 to testify about her supposedly Communist connections; was involved with the Montgomery, AL bus boycott, SNCC21 and other desegregation activities; and witnessed much of the violence that took place in Montgomery during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Because of her political work, her familial connections (her husband was FCC Commissioner and lawyer Clifford Durr and her brother-in-law was the Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black) and her own strong interpersonal skills, throughout her life she came to know a wide variety of people, from Eleanor Roosevelt, Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson, and Alger Hiss to Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, Pete Seeger, and Joan Baez.

As well as being a chronological description of the tumultuous events in her life, Durr’s autobiography also traces the evolution of her political consciousness, an important factor in her increasing activism. She was born in 1903 into a white, aristocratic Alabama family of diminishing means. Her grandparents owned slaves, and she was brought up, she remarks, “on the romantic tradition of the benevolent slave system,” which assumed that enslaved black people needed to be taken care for their own good by their superior and kind white masters. She also “learned by osmosis” that various, God-given social distinctions were important: “There was always a rank so that being a Presbyterian [her family’s denomination] meant something.” In addition, “[t]here was a great distinction between what ‘proper’ people did and what ‘common’ people did.” Although she grew up in industrial Birmingham, the site of many strikes, labor violence, racial troubles, and abject poverty, she was protected from all of this strife by her family, social group, neighborhood, and ideology:22

20 Frisch, A Shared Authority, xxi.
21 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
22 Durr, Outside the Magic Circle, 5, 19
There was such a contrast between the life I led, a fairly secure life—although we were genteelly poor—and the view that I had of the life of the miners... I was told by my mother and father and everybody whom I respected and loved that these people were just that way. They were just poor white trash. If they had pellagra and worms and malaria and if they were thin and hungry and immoral, it was just because that was the way they were. It was in their blood. They were born to be poor white trash... I was told the same thing about the black people.

She took the Ku Klux Klan for granted:

I never thought anything of it... But at the same time that I was surrounded by lovely, decent black people, I would go see Birth of a Nation and believe that the Klan was noble and wonderful, and I was proud that my grandfather had been a member of it.

Although she was expected by her parents to try to emulate the beauty, popularity, and fine manners of the southern belle ideal (as embodied by her sister Josephine) and aspire to marry well, she also knew that she was different: She was not as pretty, good, and kind as her sister, and moreover she had "some brains" and "wanted to go to college."

In 1921 after graduating from high school, she went to Wellesley, where her father sent her because, according to Durr, he did not see a future for her other than being an "old-maid schoolteacher." At Wellesley, Durr was forced to begin the process of reevaluating her now automatic belief in the benevolent slave system and in the division of the world into nice people, "good plain people," and common people. In her sophomore year, she was appalled to find a black girl sitting at the dining table to which she was assigned, and refused to eat with the young woman. The Head of the house told her that she either must obey Wellesley's rules (that you eat at the table at which you are placed) or she must leave. Durr finally decided to stay.

The incident with the black girl at Wellesley may not have been crucial at the time, but it was the origin of a doubt. It hurt my faith, my solid conviction of what I had been raised to believe. But that was not the only new idea I encountered at Wellesley. I also realized for the first time that women could do something. This was the real liberation that I got at Wellesley. I realized that women didn't have to marry to be somebody.

Because of her family's increasingly precarious financial situation, she could not return to Wellesley to finish her college career, but spent the year of 1923 making her

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23 Ibid., 31.
24 Ibid., 44.
25 Ibid., 14, 49, 52, 56-59.
debut. In 1924, she got a job as the librarian at the County Bar Association ("This was unheard of, but I did it.") and in 1926, when she was 22 years old--when her family was despairing of her remaining an old maid for her whole life--she married Clifford Judkins Durr, "someone different from anybody I had ever known, someone who always told the truth." As the Depression began to squeeze Birmingham, Durr "began little by little to wake up to the world." During a hospital stay in 1931 for the second of her two miscarriages, she met a ready-to-wear salesgirl who was also a prostitute for her clients, who had gotten pregnant, and had had to give up the baby. As a member of the Junior League, she began to work with Red Cross volunteers and began to see the "mass misery" which was not only brought on by the bank crisis but also by the callousness of the big industrial employers US Steel and Republic Steel. "What bothered me most was that these poor people blamed themselves for their situation," even though it was their employers who had laid them off and driven them out of their company housing.27

In 1933, Cliff was offered a job in Washington, DC as a lawyer for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation working to restructure the banks, and the family moved to Seminary Hill outside of Alexandria, VA. It was during these years in Washington, from 1933-1949, that Durr's emerging political consciousness flowered. Because the Durrs could afford a variety of servants, they were both free to pursue their out-of-home activities (they eventually had five children although one died when a toddler). Although she began working with the Women's Division of the Democratic National Convention's on their fight to do away with the Southern states' poll tax requirement, in the beginning of her involvement Durr saw the issue in terms of the right of white women to vote. In fact, she fought with their friend Clark Foreman--who worked for the Public Works Administration to make sure that black people got their fair share of jobs--because

26 Ibid., 59.
27 Ibid., 65, 70, 77, 79.
he had hired a black secretary: "You are going back on all the traditions of the South. You, a Howell of Georgia, going back on all of it," she told him.28

She "got an education" on the fight in the South to organize labor at the Bob LaFollette Senate subcommittee hearings on civil liberties (1936-1939), where she thought the Harlan County, KY mineowners, who were using any means at their disposal to discourage unions, told a "bunch of pious lies." But it was the hearings on the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company, which "practically ran Birmingham," that brought home to her the links between wealth and poverty which she had begun to see as a volunteer for the Junior League in the late 1920s.29

Some of the fine gentlemen who had formed the Birmingham committee [against labor] were my father's friends and my friend's fathers. They had been so sweet to me all my life and were the leading men of Birmingham, the men I had had been brought up to think highly of. . . . I just didn't believe these men could do the things they were accused of--holding people incommunicado or having them beaten up or disappear. I had seen poverty in Alabama but never violence. I was terribly shocked by all this. . . .

By the time of the first meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (a coalition of a variety of groups interested in changing the South), through her interaction with a variety of politically active people and groups she

had come around to thinking that segregation was terrible. Just by osmosis mainly. I had met Mrs. Bethune and I had met other Negro people at the Foremans' house. Before that, I had always known them as servants . . . except for the few black students at Wellesley. I had never met an adult Negro who could read or write well except the postman. I remember going back to Birmingham and shaking hands with him and saying I was so glad to see him, and I called him Mr. I got hell on that. Cliff's brother heard me and said, "Now look, Virginia, if you think you're going to get by with calling the postman Mr. you are wrong. Birmingham won't stand for that. . . . [M]y thinking about race had certainly changed.31

Even though she had started out working against the poll tax just on behalf of white women, she grew to believe that

You have to work for the rights of other people, too. . . . As I see it, the discrimination against Negroes and women was all part of the exploitation of human beings by other human beings.32

28 Ibid., 102, 104.
29 Ibid., 108-9.
30 Ibid., 110.
31 Ibid., 121-22.
Durr's thinking about the various groups who were in the coalition of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax also reflects a liberality which was increasingly unheard-of and dangerous in the late 1940s and during the McCarthy era. She had no patience with Red baiting.

All the intricate distinctions about who was a Trotskyite and who was a Communist and who was a socialist...went over my head because I didn't know what they were talking about and it didn't interest me in the least. What I was trying to do was get rid of the poll tax...I always felt it was exactly like the distinctions in religions—are you going to get to heaven by dipping or sprinkling or total immersion... [The] anti-Communist crowd... were such common, vulgar people... If you weren’t an ardent anti-Communist, you were in trouble.33

In 1941 Cliff had been appointed to the Federal Communications Commission and was eventually made Commissioner. In 1948 President Truman asked him to accept reappointment, but Cliff refused the position because he was against the then-required loyalty oath which he would have had to administer to his employees. Cliff set up a private practice in loyalty oath cases, but it quickly dwindled. In 1950 he accepted a job as general council to the Farmer's Union Insurance Corporation, and for a year the family moved to Denver. However, within a year they were back in Alabama, in Montgomery. Cliff set up a private practice, and Virginia became his legal secretary. For several years, while they lived with Cliff's parents and struggled to raise their family, she engaged in very little political work. She did, however, develop ties to the black community, and continued her "education" on race relations. She once called Ed Nixon, the head of the NAACP in Montgomery, "Ed" rather than "Mr. Nixon" in public in the post office and tried to shake his hand. He later corrected her "etiquette:"

"Look, don't you ever call me Ed again. If I called you Virginia, I'd be lynched... And to shake my hand in public that way, that's going to get me in trouble. Now when I can call you Virginia, you can call me Ed. And I'll shake your hand in public when it's safe. You ought to have better sense than to come up to a black man in the public post office and say 'Hello, Ed' and put out your hand."... It wasn't that he was mad at me. It was that I was putting him in danger.34

32 Ibid., 131.
33 Ibid., 124-25, 206.
34 Ibid., 252-53.
Her appearance before Senator James Eastland's Internal Security Subcommittee in 1954 in New Orleans blew her "cover as a nice, proper Southern lady." The Durr's moved out of Cliff's parent's house and she began attending the meetings of the Council on Human Relations, "the only interracial group in the city. . . . It was a tremendous relief to me to be able to join something like that, where I was with people who were against segregation." She actively supported school, library, and zoo desegregation, the Montgomery bus boycott, Cliff's civil rights law cases, and SNCC. The autobiography ends in 1975 with her continued understanding that class differences, among other problems, remain a barrier to full political participation.35

If you right every injustice and every discrimination against black people, there still would be a class difference. The same thing is true of women . . . 36 It is difficult to be concerned with "issues of free speech," she recognizes, if one does not have financial security.37

Throughout her autobiography, in addition to chronicling her life and describing her growing consciousness of the things that were wrong in the world outside of "the magic circle" of wealth and privilege, Virginia Foster Durr also articulates some of the reasons for the inequalities against which she was fighting. One of her most interesting insights involves her awareness of the interrelationships between race and class in the South. About the poll tax and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, she remarks,

The poor whites have continually cut their own throats. They voted for the voting restrictions because they thought it would kept the blacks from voting, but at the same time, it kept them from voting, too. . . . [And because of] the disenfranchisement provisions, the South was ruled by an oligarchy.

The Southern Congressmen were just terrified of the race issue. They immediately translated the fight against the poll tax into the race issue. The Negro had no rights, couldn't vote, had no power whatever. The unions were coming South and some of them were integrated. White Southerners thought that getting rid of the poll tax would give all these people the right to vote--the unions and the Negroes and all these new labor people. The world would turn over. Cheap labor was the great selling point of the South. . . . 38

36 Ibid., 321.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 130, 179.
She is also aware of the links among political movements:

... [T]he fascinating thing is how one social issue grows out of another, how the civil rights movement of the sixties really grew out of the employment changes of the [war mobilization in] the forties.

I believe that the struggle of the blacks against segregation led to the women’s movement. The women who took part in that struggle for black emancipation began to realize that they weren’t very well emancipated either. 39

*Outside the Magic Circle* is the product of a collaboration among Virginia Durr, a variety of interviewers working for several organizations, and Hollinger F. Barnard, the editor. It was Durr’s friend Studs Terkel who suggested that she speak rather than write the autobiography she had been thinking about. After Cliff had been interviewed for Columbia University’s Oral History Collection, in 1974, William Barnard talked with Virginia for the same institution. In 1975, Jacqueline Hall and Sue Thrasher also interviewed Virginia for a study of Southern women after suffrage for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Southern Oral History Program. In 1976, Thrasher recorded an additional 30 hours of narrative, and Wilbur Hinton, Marie Antoon, and William Barnard conducted interviews for Alabama Public Television. According to Barnard’s “Editor’s Note,” both the Columbia University and Southern Oral History interviews were conducted by people with whom Durr had a rapport, so she could speak freely with them. She quotes Hall and Thrasher as remarking that Durr was “a source of vivid historical detail and a master of historical interpretation.” Barnard herself has a connection to the Durrs: Her husband interviewed them for Columbia and for Alabama Public Television. 40

Using the Southern Oral History interviews as her primary sources and the others to flesh out points or add material, Hollinger Barnard then wove the interviews into a chronological whole. She

deleted interview questions and comments, reduced twice- and thrice-told tales to the one best telling, culled most of the rhetorical traces of casual speech, and added phrases

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39 Ibid., 143, 331.
40 Hollinger F. Barnard, “Editor's Note” to Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, xvi-xvii.
when necessary to tie paragraphs together or to identify someone Virginia has mentioned.\textsuperscript{41}

There are no citations to the different interview sources, and some of Cliff’s words appear in two chapters. Durr worked closely with Barnard during the editing process, correcting names and adding details. Barnard remarks,

She is her own best biographer.

\ldots She is her own best biographer.

\ldots [T]he importance of this work lies not in accurate presentation of historical events; professional historians are trained to make those presentations. The importance of Virginia’s story is her personal perception of the times, places, and people that she has known.\textsuperscript{42}

The importance of the autobiography, then, according to Barnard, is not Durr’s interpretation of the historical events of which she was a part --the reasons for their occurrence, the effect they had on later happenings--but rather her own perception of those events--what they meant for her and for her life. Alan Megill argues that “historiography” includes narrative (which encompasses description or “recounting” and explanation), but it also involves the two next steps of argument (or justification where the historian claims “his/her recountsings and explanations are true”) and interpretation (where the historian views the past from a present point of view).\textsuperscript{43} Trouillot also makes this distinction between the moment in “the process of historical production” when narratives are made (also called “fact retrieval”) and the moment when history is made (“the moment of retrospective significance”). This final instance in the production of history is the “authentic” history that makes explicit the relation between the narrative of the past and the meaning of that narrative for the present. Thus, in Barnard’s view, Durr’s narrative is history (it details facts/recountings and interprets/explains them), but it is not “history in the final instance.” as outlined by Megill and Trouillot.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{41} Ibid., xviii.
\bibitem{42} Ibid., xix, xvi.
\bibitem{44} Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past}, 26-27. The other two moments in the production of history occur when sources are made (“fact creation”) and when archives are made (“fact assembly”).
\end{thebibliography}
Oral historians make this same distinction between an individual’s personal interpretation of her own life and the historian’s final, contextual interpretation. Oral history, of which Outside the Magic Circle is a fine example, was originally seen as an “archival practice” supplementing written records with, first, the unwritten recollections of elites who had also left a body of written documentation, and second, (in the 1960s) the voices of ordinary, marginal, or disenfranchised people who had not left other records behind. Until the 1970s, writes Ronald Grele,

[t]he role of the oral historian was akin to that of the archivist. He or she was a collector who made materials available to others who produced the histories. The goal was to produce ideologically neutral documents and leave interpretation to others. The goal of this kind of oral history was to achieve accurate representation of the past; it was a way of gathering information. And since rememberers and those who documented their words were considered too immersed in the details to be scientifically detached (and thus not objective nor accurate), neither the “public” nor the oral historian could be the final, synthesizing and contextualizing historian of record.

In the last 25 years, however, writes Alistair Thomson, the practice of oral history has broadened beyond being a research methodology. Oral historians have begun emphasizing the value that remembering has for the narrator, and consequently oral history can be thought of as the tool for exploring “how people make sense of their past,” how people connect their individual experience to their social context, and “how the past becomes part of the present.” Echoing Trouillot’s distinction between the facts of the past and the narrative of those facts in the present, Grele argues that “...history is not so much a description of reality as it is a set of arguments that create knowledge about the past in a social context.” Thus according to David Dunaway, oral historians realized that the

interview situation itself represents history, because it is "compiled within a historical frame negotiated by the interviewer and the narrator . . ." Like Durr's autobiography, which details the events in her life and her interpretation of those events, the time period covered by the interview is both the past being investigated and the present in which that past is revealed or suppressed, explained, forged, mythologized, and interpreted. 48

However, even in this formulation, the authority to produce "history in the final instance" remains with the historian, rather than the interpreting interviewee. For example, Alessandro Portelli describes in The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories the various changes, elaborations, and fabrications that townspeople in Terni, Italy added to their stories of the death of steel worker Luigi Trastulli in 1949 during a labor action. These "wrong' tales" were their interpretations of the event in order to make sense of it in relation to a larger sequence of strikes and other unrest throughout the 1950s. However, Portelli, by synthesizing the details of all their narratives, describes what are, in his view only, the three, perhaps unconscious, functions (symbolic, psychological, and chronological) which these stories serve in the collective mind of the Terni workers. 49

Feminist historians, too, have had to articulate the relationship between an individual's (a woman's) experience and a collective history. In an early formulation (1988) Joan Scott argues that history has largely been the "his-story" of an abstract, male individual whose representation as a universal historical subject can occur only in contrast to a "feminine particularity." History has been an incomplete record of the past. Thus, in order to bring women into history, to "conceive of [them] as historical actors, equal in status to men," all human subjects must be seen as particular and specific. At the same

time, she suggests, the question for feminist historians is how to move from particularity to a collective identity and shared experiences.\(^{50}\)

Some feminist oral historians feel that the genre of life history, an "oral document" that is an "extensive record of a person's life told to and recorded by another, who then edits and writes the life as if it were autobiography," provides both the method and the form to explore the experience of an individual coping with society. According to Susan Geiger, not only is life history an inherent feminist method, because it involves women interviewing women, but life histories are invaluable sources for "studying women's lives at different points in their life cycles in specific cultural and historical settings" and for providing cross-cultural or inter-cultural comparisons of women's experience or oppression. They also, like Outside the Magic Circle, provide "critical data"--including both the "content of women's lives" and their "conscious perceptions" of their experience--for understanding how "[p]eriods of intense socioeconomic struggle or political conflict" often spark women to question "sex-role or gender ideology."\(^{51}\)

Much of this question of the relationship between an individual woman and some kind of collective women's history is framed in terms of the tension and links between self and society. Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet describes two French women's life stories, in which they told a narrative of their life experiences, organizing significant facts and events temporally and causally and placing value judgments on them that helped the women to make sense of their selves in opposition or agreement to their culture's collective expectations for women's behavior and identity. Like Portelli, Dunaway, and others, Chanfrault-Duchet argues that "[t]he life story represents a meaning system complete unto itself, i.e., it is a text." They "convey a particular vision of history." Yet, because she believes that this vision of history is largely a "preconscious" one, it is the historian who,


in the final instance, draws the link between the interviewees' "world view" and "its larger context," between the "speaker's ego and women's status and image."

*Outside the Magic Circle* intersects with these several intellectual frameworks (history, oral history, feminist oral history) as they are formulated by some practitioners, and so the cumulative effect of the collaboration between Barnard and Durr, as seen from within these disciplines, is that neither are historians writing "authentic" history. From these perspectives, Durr, because she is the subject, cannot also be the final interpreter of the importance of her life. And Barnard is "merely" the editor, ostensibly a role which does not bring with it any historical authority or even interpretive authority. However, autobiography, because of its nature as a genre, makes possible this space for authoritative narration. Like feminists' versions of life/oral history, autobiography by definition is concerned with the link between the socially constructed self and the society that constructs her. Seen from this framework, Durr is an autobiographer authoritatively narrating, and thus interpreting, her personal experience.

Regina Blackburn's definition of autobiography, although related in her article to African American women's autobiographies, also accurately describes Durr's use of the form: Autobiography is "... formally written self-reports that offer analysis of self virtually neglected by critics. They consist of objective fact and subjective awareness." It is a "resource for self-analysis," and the autobiographer (subject and author at the same time) may range in time from the present to the past to the future. Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson argue that autobiography, "with its processes of selection, ordering, and reflection," can be a way for the individual author/subject to see how her "life joins the historical and cultural specificity of its lived time or moment." Broughton and Anderson confront the question of authority head-on: According to them, autobiography can be a

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forum for criticism and empowerment, and it can also be a means of "transforming 'life experience' into academic qualification . . ." Because it insists upon "the embodied social dimension of the thinking self," it challenges (a somewhat outmoded view of)

"historiography: . . . the master narratives of class-formation, white supremacy, and nation-building" as well as "the concepts of chronology and periodicity which underpin them."

The autobiographer, then, is a "self-historian," a historian with the authority to interpret her self. 54

The seven reviewers of Outside the Magic Circle see the book as autobiography and accept Durr's authority as her own interpreter. 55 According to Jacqueline Hall, "This is very much Virginia Durr's book." Sara Evans remarks that Durr's voice can be "heard" strongly: "... the person most in control of these interviews was clearly Virginia."

Willard Gatewood praises Durr as a person of "keen intelligence and an astute observer of human affairs . . . Her interpretation of the South "rests to a large degree upon what she perceives as the dominant influence of class in the region," and she "knows the people and history of the South and is acutely sensitive to the contradictions, ironies, and absurdities that have plagued the region."

Margaret Davis writes that Durr's stories are meant to set the record straight, to show us a Southern belle who moved out of her sheltered circle and into the political sphere, and to remind us that women . . . can, even should, make places for themselves in a world which has too long failed to take them seriously. 56

All seven reviewers also give Barnard high marks for her “superb editorial skills” (Gatewood) which helped bring Durr’s story out (Hall) “into a highly informative and thoroughly enjoyable account of the life and times of Virginia Durr” (Sullivan). Barnard’s ability to allow Durr’s “authentic” voice to be heard adds to Durr’s overall credibility as author. As Rosellen Brown remarks, the oral narrative is perhaps more representative of Durr’s “true voice” than a written memoir. Sullivan and Brown both point to the “unselfconscious” manner in which she tells her stories, while Brown goes so far as to call her a “true witness” (Hall notes, however, that Durr had in fact been honing her interpretations through writing for a long time before giving the interviews). 57

Although all the reviewers give a short summary of the events that Durr details in Outside the Magic Circle, it is her “journey from innocence to experience, to disillusion but never cynicism . . .” (Brown) which they believe is the best part of the book. As Evans argues, the best sections (the beginning and end) are those where Durr explores her “life in the South where gender, race, and class intertwined to define a distinctive and contradictory social reality.” Even though Wendy Gimbel feels, along with Hall, that the “narrative concentrates on the surface texture of her life,” obscuring the changes in her inner world, the strongest impression one takes away from the story of Virginia Foster Durr is of her conflict—the constant skirmishing between her inherited desire to be a Southern aristocrat and her acquired devotion to the role of political activist. . . . Her triumph is that despite the ambivalence, she made the commitment and chose to pay the price.

Gatewood, too, believes that the book “chronicles the emancipation of a ‘southern lady,’” but Sullivan has a slightly different “take” on what Gimbel sees as a “conflict.” Instead, the autobiography reflects the security and self-assuredness that comes from knowing your place. Far from being self-limiting, this provided Virginia Durr with a firm base for questioning everything else and acting without regard to personal consequences. 58

Ultimately, Outside the Magic Circle is an “extraordinary memoir,” a historically significant work which is “essential reading” for “those interested in attempting to make

sense out of the South's encounter with the twentieth century . . ." (Gatewood). It is "a worthy addition to the histories of the South and the nation," and "a highly entertaining, provocative, first-person description of a tortuous period in our recent past" (Davis). Only Hall remarks that, even as Durr is her own interpreter, her "memoir signals the beginning, not the end, of the historian's job. . . . Historians will find much to ponder here as they go about the business of writing what Virginia Durr likes to call 'the true history' of American women and the American South." 59

These reviewers accept Durr as the interpretive authority of Outside the Magic Circle because its genre—autobiography as well as oral/life/feminist history—by definition allows for self-interpretation. Even the word is part of the title, The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr, and Durr is listed on the title page as the author. At the same time, because of the, at least surface (title-page) nature of the collaboration, reviewers do not expect Barnard (or Durr) to give them a final, "authoritative" history, because Barnard is listed as only the editor. Moreover, Barnard herself notes that it is Durr's "personal perception" that is important, rather than some "accurate presentation of historical events."

It is a moot point for the reviewers and Barnard whether Durr is a historian in the final instance or not. The book is an authoritative account without that. 60

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All Is Never Said, Odette Harper Hines' autobiography, however, was given a very different reception by its reviewers, yet its content, Hines' interpretive ability, and its genre are remarkably similar to Outside the Magic Circle. Hines, like Durr, was a civil rights and voting registration activist, but she also worked as a writer in the Works Projects Administration (WPA) Writer's Project, as a Red Cross volunteer during World War II, and was the first Director of the first Head Start program in Rapides Parish in Louisiana.

58 Brown, 13; Evans, 218; Gimbel, Nation, 464; Gatewood, 661; Sullivan, 535.
59 Gatewood, 660-62; Davis, 83-84; Hall, 237
60 Barnard, "Editor's Note," xvi.
Like Durr, she also came to know a wide variety of interesting people, from Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Mary McLeod Bethune, and Maggie Lena Walker to Ralph Ellison, Walter White, Thurgood Marshall, and Paul Robeson. And, like Durr, her autobiography not only chronicles her life’s events, but describes the way in which she grew to political consciousness and articulates some of the reasons for the injustices against which she fought.

Hines was born in 1914 into an extended, middle-class, educated African American family living in the Bronx in New York City. When she was a young child, the large house built by her great-grandfather (who had come to the city from Virginia) held four generations, including Hines, her brother Jack, and three boy first cousins. All the children were loved, but Hines felt special because she was the only girl. She went on special social outings with individual family members and her artistic and literary talents were nurtured with as many crayons and as much paper as she needed.61

Their neighborhood was diverse, and her early playmates were Italian, Irish, and Polish girls, but her family was careful to transmit to her knowledge and pride about their lineage. Her father made her an African American doll which “[a]ll the kids thought . . . was perfectly beautiful.” They all “stayed abreast of what was happening to black folks” through publications and political meetings. Her mother, for example, was a member of the NAACP. She learned healthy ideas of beauty from her great-grandfather, who was adamant that African features were attractive. “How could I not feel close to a, a part of[,] every tone of black person there is? They were all in my family.” And, she learned about the South (as well as visiting relatives and friends in Virginia) and about the lives of her ancestors in the early 19th century from the stories of family members.62

Growing up knowing relatives who had been born in or close to slavery, then migrated north, gave me a living history of the experience of black people in the nineteenth century, north and south. It’s as if my own experience of what it has meant to be black in this country began in the mid-nineteenth century—because their stories are so vivid to me—and is now going into the twenty-first century. I can see how their histories have

61 Rollins, All Is Never Said, Chs. 1 and 2.
62 Ibid., 11, 36-38.
had a great influence on the way I’ve interpreted and reacted to the important events of my lifetime. 63

Attending Abyssinian Baptist Church as an older child and a teenager was also an important factor in keeping “in touch with my racial identity and my own people.” Sunday School classes concentrated on current issues and as a member of the Young Thinkers Club she participated in reading, conversation, and picketing. Hines remarks,

My family’s interest in social issues and sense of responsibility for others laid the foundation for me, but I think it was in the loving, activist atmosphere of Abyssinian Baptist Church that my social concern and involvement really blossomed. 64

As she grew older, her gender was not a limiting factor in what she could or could not do. The family had servants, and, she notes, while she got the message that housework was women’s work, it was not hers or her mother’s job. She was encouraged by her family to not be bounded by the house,

to be creative, to look pleasing, to think, to try to be charming, to stay informed about what’s going on in the world, to help others (especially those less fortunate), to be very much out in the world. . . . And that’s what I was doing in my teens and have continued to do . . . 65

She began attending Hunter College in 1931, but in her second year became very sick and had to leave. She kept up her “scribbling” though, writing “trashy love stories” and serious fiction and nonfiction and taking night courses at Hunter, and, after a few other WPA jobs once she was well enough, in the late 1930s she wrangled a position on the WPA’s Writer’s Project. This turned out to be a pivotal moment in her political and personal development.

The basis of what I am politically today was laid during my two and a half years on the WPA Writer’s Project. The activist orientation of Abyssinian Baptist Church had set me in a certain direction, but the people in and around the Writers Project clarified my thinking and explained the reasons for the injustices I’d been protesting . . . I learned the depth of the problem of racism at Abyssinian, but I learned the reasons for this exploitation and how it tied into class exploitation from my friends at the Writers Project . . . 66

63 Ibid., 38.
64 Ibid., 44–45
65 Ibid., 16, 51.
66 Ibid., 59.
She was placed on a black history project researching the lives of black people in New York City, and it was both the uncovering of “centuries of injustices to blacks” and conversing with people that she began to understand “that class inequality and poverty were not aberrations of the system, they were a necessary part of it.” The past and the present clarified and informed each other.  

Another formative experience began in 1942 when she was hired as Director of Publicity and Promotion for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It is at this point in Hines’ autobiography that she begins to detail the racism which she directly experienced and which permeates US society. A harrowing incident occurred when she was sent with a white colleague to investigate a lynching of two 14-year old boys in a Mississippi town. The reticence and fear of the black people in the town and the openness of the whites regarding the details of the incident left a lasting impression on her. But it was the necessity--no black person would give her shelter--of spending a scary night in the colored toilet in the deserted bus station before returning North which cemented her commitment to working for change (and was the reason she welcomed civil rights workers, including collaborator Judith Rollins, into her home in Louisiana in the 1960s). She was also losing her early childhood feeling of being American.

. . . [M]y position was increasingly that it was never intended for black people to become part of the American mainstream. We'd been brought here to be laborers and to stay outside the society. And in the thirties and forties that's where we were still: outside. By the time I was working at the NAACP, I knew I was not an American.

However, in the fall of 1943, with WWII raging, Hines decided she wanted to go overseas, not out of any sense of patriotism, but to see “what war was really like” and because she “cared deeply about the black soldiers.” She was accepted as a Red Cross worker--the organization was actively recruiting black women volunteers to “make” like they were integrated--and confronted the brutality of war and the racism of the white

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67 Ibid., 60-63, 66, 73.
68 Ibid., Ch 5.
soldiers in Italy, France, and Germany. She met her future husband Jim Hines, a doctor, while she was with the Red Cross, and they were married in 1946. They moved to Alexandria, where Dr. Hines set up his practice, and Hines became a mother (they had four children), got involved with the then-segregated and black-run YMCA, and worked to register black people to vote. Even Dr. Hines had never registered to vote because his parents were dependent upon whites for their jobs. “Whites watched who registered and saw those who did as troublemakers. Not messing with voting was a way of protecting yourself and your family.” Purges of voters from the roles could happen for even the smallest mistake in an application. Based on her experiences, Hines worries that the 1965 Voting Rights Act will suddenly be repealed.70

Yes, I have to admit that I do have a kind of underlying wariness, because those of us who were here in the fifties, before the Civil Rights Movement, know just how outrageous those whites folks can be.

The Hines’ were getting ready to build a house on land which they had, unusually, bought from a black landowner, when Dr. Hines was indicted for murder, in 1949. The victim was a young barmaid who was a patient of his, and although the charges were circumstantial, the jury found him guilty. Hines remarks that issues of class and race influenced both the outcome of the trial and the way in which Dr. Hines “slid out” of the conviction. “… [S]ome blacks and most whites I would say, resented a black man being a doctor and living comfortably, so were happy to see him brought down.” Thurgood Marshall advised the family to get 3,000 signatures on a petition stating that the verdict was not commensurate with the evidence, and when they present the petition to the sympathetic trial judge, he said he would reschedule the trial, but, in “[j]ustice, southern-style,” he never did. Dr. Hines was never exonerated, but he was never punished, either.71

... In the South the white aristocracy gives privileges to middle-class blacks who aren’t troublemakers… [T]hey’re seen as a buffer… But he was let off by a man who had some respect for justice and was not threatened by Jimmy’s achievements. This feudalism in the South works in strange ways. I’m not saying race wasn’t

69 Ibid., 78-79.
70 Ibid., 93, Ch 6 and 7, 146, 173.
71 Ibid., 153, Ch. 8.
important... But he was a middle-class black man accused of killing a lower-class black woman, and that gave him an advantage with powerful whites even before the evidence was presented.\footnote{Ibid., 153.}

The trial, however, was also the beginning of the end of the marriage. Hines had worked hard to be a mother and a social worker to her husband's clients and a hostess to the many black friends and barely acquaintances who passed through town and needed a place (because there were no hotels) to stay for the night. But, after all the attention that Hines received from the community over her unstinting work, while she was pregnant, to get the required signatures for the petition, Dr. Hines felt that he was no longer the star of the family. For a while Hines tried to change herself; she thought she was the problem, but they were divorced in 1956.

... I've tried to raise my daughters so that they will never have so much of their identity tied up with a man's. But that's how I was then.\footnote{Ibid., 155, 175-77.}

From 1951 to 1963 Hines carried on a preschool program in her backyard for the neighborhood children ("This was not something I'd planned to do, or ever envisioned doing. It just grew naturally out of a need I saw around me."), which would later become the basis for the first Head Start program in Rapides Parish, in 1965. For eight years until 1972 Hines was the director of the program, including writing each year's proposal and struggling with the white members of the community for facilities and assistance. This was because

... in the South, you'd expect just a small number of white [kids] because only those parents relatively free of racial prejudice would take part [in Head Start]. And those would tend to be of the upper middle class because lower-class whites had no other luxury except that of whiteness, and they were not going to hobnob with blacks.\footnote{Ibid., 166, 212, Ch. 11.}

At the same time, in the summer of 1964, she agreed to house three Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) workers, going against the prevailing fear in the black community and the increasing violence in the white community. She remembered, however, her experience spending a night in a Mississippi toilet when she was working for the NAACP.
I hated living in fear [when hosting CORE]. But the alternative was worse. The alternative was for Alexandria to remain the same. Degrading black people in every way, hanging black men who got out of line, not educating our children, not even letting us register to vote. I couldn't bear the thought of all these beautiful black children having to live their lives in Alexandria as it was... Alexandria needed CORE.75

In conjunction with the community group Total Community Action, of which Hines was a member, CORE worked to register blacks to vote, to desegregate schools, and to institute equitable hiring practices in white-owned businesses in black neighborhoods.76

From 1972 to 1977, Hines was less active politically and more active personally, as she took care of two elderly family members and two mentally handicapped children. By late 1977, both older people had died, and Hines began realizing that she "was facing burnout with all this caregiving stuff." She found a good school to send the two handicapped girls to, and began to take "[t]ime to take care of Odette." She traveled to Haiti, Europe, Japan, and China. In 1989, she suffered "the most devastating event of my entire life," a brutal rape, and struggled to not only heal herself emotionally, but also to help the other women in her rape survivors group. "My own healing really got underway when I began to worry more about their losses than about my own." She continues tutoring children, has begun oil painting, and volunteers in the community. At the end of the autobiography, she reflects back on her life.77

And I can still say I've had a good life. After all of that, even the divorce and the rape, I really feel it's been a good life. In my later years, I've learned how important it is to take care of yourself. But that doesn't mean I was all that altruistic before. No... But I did sometimes sacrifice myself too much;... I grew up thinking you're always supposed to be nice to people, even at your own inconvenience. But being sacrificing and subservient is not what we're supposed to do.... [L]ooking out for others should give you pleasure, and if it doesn't, don't do it.

... My only sadness today is not about any of the events of my life... What does bother me deeply, though, is the state of our communities and the state of the world.... It seems to me that, in many ways, America is traveling back, not just to 1954 but to 1854. In race relations, I mean, in the increasing polarization of the races.... In all those years that I was thinking I was making a little contribution, I found a lot of happiness in that. Then, when you realize that the changes you worked so hard for

75 Ibid., 184.
76 Ibid., Ch. 10.
77 Ibid., 239, 242-4.
haven’t gone to the extent that you’d expect them to, you’re deeply dismayed by that. But I’m not sorry I did any of it. It did give me pleasure.78

All Is Never Said is the result of a collaboration between friends Hines and Judith Rollins, who was one of the CORE workers who lived with Hines for seven months in 1964. Rollins writes that she soon discovered that “not only was Odette Hines politically conscious and personally engaging, she was a great storyteller,” and in the mid-1980s suggested that she help Hines to tell her life story, in lieu of writing it. They did a first round of interviews in 1987, and Rollins began writing up the narrative with “clarification and development” from taped telephone interviews with Hines. In 1991, Hines and Rollins reviewed the manuscript page by page, conducted more interviews, and in 1993 Rollins reviewed a second draft and requested a number of further changes.79

Rollins is a sociologist by training, but she is more aware than Barnard is of the complexities involved in an oral history interview. She and Hines consciously strove for an “intersubjective oral history,” the “product of an ongoing collaborative effort between two women closely balanced in power.” Rollins also claims that oral history allows a sociologist to observe the interplay between biography and history, which is the focus of sociology. Using Regina Blackburn’s article on African American women’s autobiography (and others), she directs the audience of the book’s attention to Hines’ complicated relationship as a self to the “social constraints” of race, gender, and class in which she maneuvers. Rollins also notes that Hines’ knowledge of African American history and her conception of women’s place is different from the “dominant culture” and thus serve her well in her creation of “an identity of efficacy.”82

By situating Hines’ autobiography (although she does not explicitly call it that) within an intellectual framework which

78 Ibid., 245-47.
79 Judith Rollins, “Preface” to All Is Never Said, x-xi.
80 Again, I realize that Rollins is not the prototypical “historian” in the public history/shared authority equation.
81 “Intersubjective oral history” is a phrase used by Kristina Minister to describe the “dialogic relationships” that an interviewer and narrator build together, out of which a feminist oral history is created. See her “A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview,” in Women’s Words, ed. Gluck and Patai, 27-41.
82 Rollins, “Preface,” xi-xii.
expressly recognizes the self's relationship to its context, Rollins implies that Hines
authority as interpreter of her own life extends, because it must, to her authority as
interpreter of society.

Thus, Blackburn, in addition to offering a definition of autobiographical form
which can apply to any woman's autobiography, also argues that black women's
autobiography brings a "new dimension" to the genre because these women's lives have
been affected by both sexism and racism: the "double jeopardy" of being both black and
female. Their autobiographies, then, in defining and interpreting their selves, must by the
nature of the self's often negative link to society, analyze that society.83 Gwendolyn Etter-
Lewis says much the same thing, but from a life/oral history perspective.

Black women's experiences ... are influenced by their multiple social roles, which are
acted out simultaneously. They do not have the privilege of only being women, or of
only being black Americans in particular situations.

Thus, a "recurring theme in black women's lives" is the "issue of self in relation to the
group." In fact, "a critical component of the black female self is her tie to the African-
American community." Etter-Lewis believes that the norms of women's life history genre,
which often assumes an abstract woman's identity based on the experience of white,
middle-class women, should be transformed to reflect the real-life situation of most women
whose identities are lived among interconnecting variables that include gender as well as
race.84

Anne Goldman builds on Blackburn and Etter-Lewis by contending that the
autobiographical "I" is always implicated and informed by social context. Thus, the
individual subject locates herself within a wide variety of "social, historical, political, and
cultural circumstances" which both form and are informed by race, gender, class, and other
"determinant[s] of identity." Selfhood, in other words, is not equal to one (or several)
generalized identities. An individual is a black, middle-class woman in specific

84 Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, "Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts," in
circumstances which determine how race, gender, and class operate. This leads to Goldman’s assertion that “history is twin to life history.”

Rather than being a universal organizing principle, an abstraction against which individual lives are measured, history is redefined as a contingent phenomenon, constructed and constructed differently, by the very individual subjects it [history] has in more scholarly philosophical accounts found wanting in authority.¹⁵

This kind of autobiography, then, is similar to Trouillot’s “history in the final instance” because its author by definition describes the ways in which her past life, bounded by and interpreted through various categories of identity, has been lived in a particular place and time.

An awareness of the differences among women leads Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai to question the idea that the practice of oral history between two women is inherently an empowering, “feminist” method and thus an equal relationship like Geiger claims. Rather, they suggest that in fact, narrators are not “true partners in the process,” even if they exercise some control during the interview and over the written product. Not only does the oral narrative require “considerable intervention on the part of the researcher/editor” in order to make it accessible for “public consumption,” but the interviewer often returns to her life and her “scholarly enterprise,” far removed from “the situation that led her to her subject in the first place.” Ironically, it is at the very moment, as the narrator’s control over their story recedes as it is converted to a written text, that the “feminist scholar is most actively engaged in fulfilling her sense of obligation that her research be ‘for’ women. . . . . This shift in control over the narrative reveals the potential for appropriation hiding under the comforting rationale of empowerment.”¹⁶

In another work, Goldman also critiques the creation of collaborative autobiographies. Echoing Gluck and Patai, she believes that the relations between speaker and editor are influenced by many factors, and even being of the same culture or race may not “avoid the abuses of a coercive discursive and political history.” In their introductions

and conclusions, editors tend to impose an "interpretive rubric" on the speaker, positioning the narrator as only a "textualized object" which is "malleable to the researcher's own interests and academic uses." Editors also often ignore, or even attempt to hide, the "intersubjective context out of which [the] narratives are generated," in the interests of rendering the first-person voice more "authentic." Unlike other scholars, however, Goldman also is aware of the second dimension of "shared authority," how the collaborative venture is viewed by its audience. She writes that consumers are also implicated in the "inequities of power implicit in the process of speaking, collecting, writing, editing, and publishing life histories." She would like an autobiography's readers to look beyond the title page, which is often perceived as the only and final word on the division between author/authority and subject.87

By situating her collaboration with Hines within Minister's "intersubjective oral history," Rollins shows that she is aware of the pitfalls of their cooperative relationship. By using Blackburn as support to demonstrate that Hines speaks with authority about her life and its relationship to the circumstances in which she lived it, Rollins shows that Hines brought an equal historical awareness to their shared authority partnership. The fact that the two women are friends of long-standing and that Rollins describes in great detail the long process of collaborative editing which preceded the publication of All Is Never Said also reveals a concern for maintaining an equal alliance between the two of them. Rollins' realistic understanding of where the final authority lies for the work appears to have led her to cite herself as the author on the title page. This is opposed to Barnard, who rather simplistically, yet effectively from a reviewer's standpoint, labels herself as editor and cedes final authorial authority to Durr. Unfortunately, Rollins did not take into account the reaction of the book's audience to her more nuanced approach to this collaborative venture.

and the result is that the book's reviewers overwhelmingly fault Rollins for not engaging in the kind of historical interpretation which Hines herself accomplishes in the text.

Unlike the reviewers of Outside the Magic Circle who gave a great deal of credit to Durr's authority as her own interpreter, the eight reviewers of All Is Never Said almost uniformly see Hines as only observer and subject.88 Charles Vincent writes that "Hines' discussion of lynchings, Southern race relations, and her role as an activist in the Civil Rights struggle offer insights into black life . . ." Jacqueline Rouse also says that " . . . Hines allows the reader a glance into the activities of the black middle class during the 1940s and 1950s." Maria Simson believes that "Hines doesn't shrink from mentioning the humiliations of racism she faced daily," and Linda Carlisle adds that "her story is fascinating because of her participation in so many historical events. It is most compelling, however, for the perspective it offers on racism and activism." Only Elizabeth McHenry remarks that Hines maintains authority over the project while at the same time being its subject, and this insight is probably due to McHenry's awareness of the friendly nature of their collaboration.89

The reviewers do have nice things to say about the book as a whole. Wendell Tripp calls it "[a] valuable primary source for studies of race and gender . . ." Others think it is "a rich and provocative biography" (Mary Holley) and a "striking and rich narrative" (Simson). McHenry remarks that one rarely hears stories documenting the movement of black people from North to South, and the book "is the stunning result of [Rollins and Hines'] collaborative effort." Vincent praises this "narrative of the remarkable life of a courageous and strong African-American woman . . ."

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These narratives offer an uplifting account of how to enjoy life, make positive contributions to society, and inspire others. Our society is better because of such individuals as Odette Harper Hines. Kudos to her and Judith Rollins for their labors.90

Although some of the reviewers feel that “Rollins relates Hines’s story in a powerful yet entertaining style” (Simson), others take Rollins to task for not doing enough interpretation. Rouse believes that Rollins makes no attempt to analyze this activist [Hines] and the significance of her unique experience in relation to other so-called local people in Louisiana or Mississippi. What she does is to give the reader a new voice in the growing literature on indigenous southern movements. Rollins also fails to give a historical perspective on such activism and how this unique foremother, the descendent of Virginia’s Turpins, Des Verneys, and Harpers, came into her ancestral mission of race work. We receive glimpses, but the follow-up is missing.

Holley similarly thinks the book concentrates too much on the facts.

I found the biography at times too much like a linear account of events rather than a discussion of them. It would have been more informative if Rollins had included more discussion of some events in Hines’s life that go unexamined. Had Rollins addressed these issues, her biography of Odette Harper Hines would have been an extraordinary sociological portrait.

Grothaus agrees:

Rollins describes her work as biography and history. It is much more the former than the latter, but historians will appreciate this African-American woman and her views on race, class, and gender.91

The inability of some of the reviewers to see Hines as at least an equal author with Rollins is tied not only to Hines’ nonpresence on the title page, but also to their confusion over what genre the book is. Rouse and Holley, the most vociferous critics, see it as a “memoir” and a “biography,” respectively. Grothaus believes it is a “life story.” Their perceptions of what these forms are, at least in relation to a possible sharing of authority, do not seem to include a sharing of authorial or interpretive power. Vincent, Simson, and Tripp, on the other hand, do see the book as a “narrative,” “oral history,” and “autobiography,” but also as a “primary source.” Apparently, they view Hines as “a

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90 Wendell Tripp, New York History, 190; Mary R. Holley, Gender & Society, 237; Simson, Publishers Weekly; McHenry, 13-14; Vincent, 493-94.
91 Simson; Rouse, 840; Holley, 238; Grothaus, 679.
historical source rather than an agent of history," so that "what is editorially compelling is not so much [her] autobiographical authority . . ." as her status as subject. Only McHenry, who acknowledges Hines' interpretive authority, believes that "the result of Hines and Rollins' relationship is still oral history at its best--a text that is at once autobiography, biography, and history." For her, then, "oral history," because it is collaborative, by definition includes links between the self and its larger context, making a space for a shared authority in the production of the work and in the reception of it. 93

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The ability of Frisch's "shared authority" relationship to "redefine and redistribute intellectual authority" relies not only on a realization of the difficult nature of the collaboration and an effective method to minimize the inequalities among collaborators, but also on an awareness by both historian and public that it is their audience's perception of the shared authority that really matters. Reviewers' reception of Hines and Rollins' oral history/autobiography demonstrates that, even if they worked hard to develop an equal responsibility for the work and even if Hines' interpretation of her life within its geographic, chronological, and cultural context is "history in the final instance," the shared authority they tried to build did not come through to their audience. Reviewers of Barnard and Durr's oral history/autobiography, on the other hand, had no difficulty conceding Durr's interpretive authority for her own life, even though their partnership was less equal than Hines and Rollins’. 94

The result of this limited case study is that the audience meaning of the word "public" in the phrase "public history" is just as important as its producer and subject meaning. History can be produced by historians with the public and about the public, but public history cannot be truly an authoritative history (making explicit connections between

92 Goldman, "Is That What She Said?" 190.
94 Frisch, A Shared Authority, xx.
facts, narrative, and the purpose of that narrative for the present) without conveying to the public an accurate perception of where the authority for the creation of history rests. Based on these autobiographies, giving formal authorial credit on the “title page” of the work and accurately describing the working relationship are two necessary steps toward a final shared authority in the discipline and practice of public history.
Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


