

Cuban Voices: an oral history

Interview with Elizabeth Dore by Ana Vera ¹

Elizabeth Dore led the *Cuban Voices* research project in Cuba with a team of Cuban and British scholars. The project was developed between 2004 and 2015. Her book telling the life histories of Cubans born in the 1970s and 1980s will be published by Verso, a left-wing publisher in England and the United States. Elizabeth Dore is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Southampton in the UK. Cuban researcher Ana Vera Estrada works for the Juan Marinello Cuban Institute of Cultural Research in Havana. Her latest oral history book is *Guajiros del Siglo XXI*, (2012).

AV: WE KNOW YOU WERE IN CONTACT WITH THE HEIRS OF OSCAR LEWIS AND THAT YOU KNOW THE END OF HIS STORY IN CUBA. TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT THAT.

Before the *Cuban Voices* project, doing oral history in Cuba was taboo. In 1968, a decade after the triumph of the Revolution, Fidel Castro invited Oscar Lewis, the famous American anthropologist, to interview Cuban men and women about their lives. “Having an objective record of what people feel and think would make a significant contribution to Cuban history... This is a socialist country. We have nothing to hide; there are no complaints or grievances I have not already heard,” Castro told Lewis². Despite this encouraging start, eighteen months later,

¹ The interview was held in October 2012, after a lecture delivered by Elizabeth Dore at the Juan Marinello Cuban Institute of Cultural Research. Frank García did the transcription.

² Ruth M. Lewis, ‘Forward,’(Foreword) in Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Four Men, Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Cuatro Hombres, Viviendo la Revolución: Una Historia Oral de la Cuba Contemporánea), Urbana and Chicago Illinois: University of

senior officials abruptly canceled the project. They claimed that Lewis was a CIA agent, something that virtually no-one outside Cuba believed was true. The real reason why the government terminated the project was that the Cubans acted exactly as Fidel had predicted: They complained, spoke of their grievances and described the successes and failures of the Revolution. And you know that in the local code, “The Revolution” means Cuba after 1959.

As for the outspokenness of the Cubans, Ruth Lewis, the co-director of the project, wrote: “Was it possible to write an honest, credible life history in socialist Cuba? (...) We believe that the life histories (...) are as honest and revealing as those we have compiled elsewhere. The advantage of a long autobiography [is that] it allows the interviewee’s essential personality and opinion to emerge”³.

The next oral history project also ended abruptly because Cuban men and women spoke candidly about their lives.

In 1975, Gabriel García Márquez, a close friend of Fidel Castro’s, interviewed Cubans from all over the island for a book he wanted to write about the Revolution. A year later, he abandoned the project because, according to what he told his friends, what people said did not fit in with the book he had in mind⁴. After these failures, the Cuban government did not authorize any other major projects on oral history until ours, *Cuban Voices*⁵. The top political leaders may well have decided that they did not want to “have a record of what people feel and think” about their lives under socialism.

Illinois Press, 1977, pp viii-xi. The three books based on the project are: Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Women; Neighbors (Cuatro Mujeres; Vecinos y Vecinas)*; and Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura (La Gente de Buena Ventura)*.

³ Lewis, ‘Forward’ (Foreword), in Lewis, Lewis and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 1977, p xxviii (Cuatro Hombres).

⁴ Gerald Martin, lecture at the Universidad of Southampton, April 26, 2010. See his book Gabriel García Márquez: Una Vida, NY: Vintage Español, 2009; and Jon Lee Anderson, ‘The Power of Gabriel García Márquez’ (El Poder de Gabriel García Marquez), *The New Yorker*, September 27, 1999, pp 56-71.

AV: TELL ME ABOUT THE BOOK YOU'RE WRITING ON CUBA

ED: It is an oral history with *Cuban voices* about their life experiences in the Revolution. This book is intended for a broad audience and reflects key aspects of the research conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) in Havana, and its director, Mariela Castro. Several Cuban and British institutions participated in the project.

From the start, as a foreign researcher-from my perspective as "The Other"-I wanted to understand and collaborate with Cuban men and women and help record the different views on the Revolution through the stories of people who told us about their experiences, feelings, pleasures and vexations. I wanted to understand what worked well, less well or badly for them as well as the main details of everyday life in Cuba. I was thinking about the future and the possibility of contributing to the progressive movements in both North America and Europe. Although I realize that it is a very idealistic hope, I think that as socialists we have to be optimistic and learn from good experiences of Cuban men and women and also from the not so good experiences that should not be repeated. This involves learning about the history of the Cuban Revolution. As a researcher, I am interested in learning about the life histories of nameless people. That was the aim of the project: to listen and disseminate the stories told by various people.

⁵Oral history studies in Cuba include: Ana Vera Estrada, *Guajiros del siglo XXI*, Havana: Instituto Cubano de Investigación Cultural Juan Marinello, 2012; Eugenia Meyer, *El futuro era nuestro: Ocho cubanas narran sus historias de vida*, Mexico City.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007, based on interviews conducted in 1979; María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno, *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century, as told to her daughter Daisy Rubiera Castillo (Reyita: La vida de una mujer negra cubana en el siglo XX, como se la contó a su hija Daisy Rubiera Castillo)*, Durham North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000; Yohanka Valdés Jiménez and Yuliet Cruz Martínez, *50 voces y rostros de líderes campesinas cubanas*, Havana: Editorial Caminos, 2009; Margaret Randall, *Las mujeres cubanas, hoy*, La Habana, Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1972.

Through their memories, I wanted to understand how they perceived the meanings of their actions, what they understood of their lives and how they wanted to present them.

AV: COULD YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT HOW YOU SEE ORAL HISTORY AND HOW YOU CAN USE IT TO UNDERSTAND RECENT HISTORY?

ED: I am going to talk about my research experiences from what I understand by the richness and dilemmas of oral history. My first job with oral history was in Nicaragua, in the early 1990s, just after the first Sandinista government. Since the early 1980's I had worked with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Working in various ministries in Nicaragua, I was involved in a debate on the development of capitalism in the agricultural sector in that country. We discussed whether there was a defining capitalist development, and whether the prevailing forms of social relations in agriculture were not capitalistic. I was deeply involved in this debate for several years and then I started doing a microstudy of a coffee-growing area in the province of Granada. My goal was to investigate production relations to try to see whether coffee pickers could be defined as agricultural laborers or whether they had other types of relations. I spent much of that study working in the municipal archives in Diriomo, a town near Granada but I was also interviewing people to find out about their experiences of peonage in a place where this lasted until 1950. I asked them about their contract work, class and gender relations and ethnicity. I was interested in the patriarchal system and wrote a book on the subject⁶.

I came to Cuba with Carrie Hamilton from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom, where I taught Latin American history. Thanks to the link with CENESEX, we formed the *Cuban Voices* team, with Daisy Rubiera, Patricia Arenas, Niurka Pérez, Juana

⁶ Elizabeth Dore, *Mitos de Modernidad: Tierra, Peonaje y Patriarcado en Granada, Nicaragua*, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, Managua, Nicaragua, 2008. Published in English, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C. and London, 2006.

Berges, Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, Julio César González Pajes, Rolando Segura and Dayma Echeverría. We began working in 2004 and recorded life stories in different parts of the island. Several books have been published, including one by Daisy Rubiera Castillo, with Antonio Moreno Stincer, Mercedes López Ventura and Pedro Peraza Santos, *Aires de la Memoria*, containing the testimonials of four people⁷. There is also a historiographical book, compiled by Niurka Pérez, *Historia Oral:*

*Debates y análisis sobre temas afrocubanos, religiosos, sexuales y rurales*⁸. Carrie Hamilton's *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics and Memory* was published in English⁹. Articles on the results of the Cuban Voices project were also published in Latin American, North American and European journals¹⁰.

⁷ Editorial CENESEX, Havana, 2011.

⁸ Editorial CENESEX, Havana, 2011.

⁹ The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2012

¹⁰ These include Elizabeth Dore, "Historia oral y vida cotidiana en Cuba," *Nueva Sociedad*, 242, Nov-Dic 2012; "Cubans' Life Stories: the Pains and Pleasures of Living in a Communist Society," *Oral History* 40:1, Spring 2012; "Cubans' Memories of the 1960s: The Ecstasies and the Agonies," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, VIII:2, Winter, 2009; "¿Cómo leer (y escribir) la historia oral," *Historia, Voces y Memoria*, Revista del Programa de Historia Oral de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 5, 2013; "Hearing Voices: Cuban Oral History", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Special Issue: Sounds, 2015, forthcoming. Carrie Hamilton, 'Public Women and Public History: Revolution, Prostitution and Testimony in Cuba,' *Rethinking History*, 15, 2, 2011, 175-88; 'Narrating AIDS in Cuba,' *Global South* 6, 3, 2010, 64-74; 'Sexual Politics and Socialist Housing: Building Homes in Revolutionary Cuba', special issue on 'Homes and Homecomings', *Gender & History* 21, 3, 2009, 608-27; 'Sex, "Silence," and Audiotape: Listening for Female Same-Sex Desire in Cuba' in Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

These experiences in Nicaragua and Cuba resulted in what I call “methodological knots”. These knots can be analyzed according to various experiences of oral history. A key aspect of oral history is the problem of selecting interviewees. In oral history, you don’t try to find a random sample of representative respondents or one that is statistically justified. You look for narrators to meet the criterion of the study: the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of the research. You also have to be very sensitive when it comes to defining the theoretical framework. In oral history, as well as the social sciences, you learn as you go, from what the narrators say in the interviews. Researchers have to be flexible and be prepared to change the conceptual framework and the initial methodology of the project. In other words, they must keep altering their methods on the basis of what people say. So the work takes shape on the fly.

One important thing I learned was to find methodological solutions that fitted the project along the way. The work changes as you go along. In the selection of respondents for the *Cuban Voices* project, we tried to find a range of ages, social status, occupations, racial identity, gender, sexuality and types of family. We looked for different political experiences, people involved in organizations, in the party, and people who did not belong to the party and even members of the opposition. That is how we arrived at the diversity of interviewees we have now. The people who were kind enough to tell us about the way they lived helped us understand the realities and the different experiences of living in Cuba.

I think that among the hundred and fifteen narrators, we have a sufficiently diverse group of people. That is important. On second thoughts, from the start, we had several group meetings to discuss the need for heterogeneous narrators. We did not use the word ‘diversity’, which has only recently begun to be used in Cuba, although in fact we were looking for social and political diversity.

Regarding the form of interviews, in *Cuban Voices*, there is a range from completely open, unstructured interviews, where people are only asked to tell their life stories. In these cases, usually in a second interview, we asked questions that arose mostly from

their own accounts. In some cases, we also used a semi-structured questionnaire. The form of the interviews often varies according to the personalities and thoughts of the interviewers. Another thing I learned from those projects in Nicaragua and Cuba is something I insist on when I talk to people who ask me about the right methods for oral history. I always say that there are no right methods, there is no right or wrong, you cannot achieve a successful approach to oral history that way. I think it is a mistake to think so, because you have to adjust the methods to what the narrators say, to the why and what for and above all, who the project will be useful for.

From my point of view, the only correct methods refer to ethics. Researchers must be completely honest and faithful to the storytellers and not manipulate their testimonials to suit the purposes of the research. Or the researchers' perspective. This is a crucial yet difficult point. The thing is to make an effort not to unconsciously-or consciously-modify the words or meanings of the interviewees. It is actually fairly easy to manipulate this material and add the interviewers' or writers' interpretation. It can be tempting to change the narrators' meanings to support the researchers' arguments and assumptions, but this is unethical. You should always convey what the narrators say or infer, even if it does not coincide with your thinking or ideological criteria.

Another major difficulty is understanding or interpreting the meaning of what the narrators say. This often does not only depend on the words they use, but also on the tone of their voice, their laughter, body language and above all, their silences.

The fact that I was foreign gave me advantages and disadvantages in the interviews. In Cuba I could not always guess the meaning of what they were trying to tell me. When we were doing the interviews, my Cuban colleagues sometimes told me that I asked obvious things, or showed I did not understand the respondents' words. In other words, sometimes I was lost. But that had its advantages. It forced people to be more descriptive, to use their common sense to clarify their ideas, feelings and what they meant.

In the *Cuban Voices* team, we started off trying to reach a consensus on what type of interviews we were going to do. We spent a long time discussing how to conduct the interviews, whether or not we should use a form with questions. In the end, we decided

everyone should do them according to what they felt was best suited to the specific conditions. I think that was one of the strongest lessons of our project, although we have to admit it was a bit frustrating to have spent so much time discussing the interview method and then decide that everyone should do them however they wanted.

Some of the people we interviewed wanted to talk about their life story and started doing so right away, while others said very little. With these people we had to work hard, and in the end-in almost all cases-we came up with good interviews. With several of the respondents, we did multiple interviews, two, three, up to six interviews over several years. Each interview is different and I say this with pride, each one is different because we took the respondent's possibilities and wishes into account and had a team of interviewers who were deeply committed to the project and worked very empathically with the narrators.

AV: COULD YOU BE MORE SPECIFIC ABOUT THE INTERVIEWERS' WORK PROCEDURE?

ED: We always began by asking about their life stories and then we had other meetings arising from the issues the narrators themselves presented. By narrating their life stories, they consciously or unconsciously indicated what was important to them. On the basis of this, we tried to define what really mattered and we, the researchers, asked them to talk more about those moments in their lives, the experiences which were, of course, very different for each person. What they said had a lot to do with what was happening in the country and in their homes at the time.

There is a beautiful phrase by Jan Vansina, which says that oral history is past and present in a single breath. His idea is that it is impossible to separate the past from the present because the past is present in the present and you have to understand that each of those memories is creating another present, which is the present the person is talking about. This present is what the narrator has in his head. It consists of memories of the past filtered by his history and the present, by the problems in which he is involved and so on. The researcher, as a writer and historian, is also present there in the interview, in its analysis and in his interpretation of it.

Why and who oral history is to be presented to is another difficult issue. There is always a problem with oral history because it depends on your decision on how to present the results of the research, whether in a more narrative form as a testimonial or a story, or as a more academic study, or whether it should be a combination of the two forms of presentation. This depends on who you're trying to reach through books and articles. It depends on what you write and what your reasons are, and when I say reasons, I mean political, academic or literary.

But getting back to the subject of ethics in oral history, there are certainly rights and wrongs there. Researchers should be respectful and faithful to the narrators and being faithful means first getting their permission to publish their words and continuing to ask permission at every meeting, every interview, and if possible, showing them the manuscript of the book before it is published.

When I have a draft of the book, I am going to share it with some people in Cuba to talk about the book and discuss it. Ultimately the book is going to represent my interpretation of the interviews. At the same time, I will emphasize the fact that my interpretation is not the only possible one. The words have the meaning I attribute to them.

The book I am writing has long fragments of testimonial, but also my historical and political analysis and my own narrative, my voice. It is a story of Cuba in the past thirty-five years, from the 1980s until the present, based on the experiences and attitudes of Cubans born in the 1970s and 1980s. I try not to question the motives and attitudes of the narrators and instead to show empathy towards them. If you manage to achieve this, it happens almost magically, because it is not easy to be with them, sharing the experience of the interview while at the same time distancing yourself and adopting an external point of view. You always have to be open and remember that an interview is a rare moment that occurs between the interviewer and the interviewee, and that the essence of that empathy sometimes provides much more information than the questions. It is therefore very important to know who the interviewee is and who the interviewers are.

Our team for the “*Cuban Voices*” project has had very good advisors. Paul Thompson advised us for two weeks here in Cuba. He always insists that oral history is a democratic method because it provides a voice and space to talk to people who do not have access to the media; their testimonial does not take the form of writing. Consequently, oral history is a way of empowering the powerless. Elizabeth Jelin was another important advisor. She worked with us for several weeks and insisted on what she called the work of memory, the social and political struggles around memory.

AV: COULD TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT YOUR ORAL HISTORY WORK IN CUBA?

ED: Many respondents take their social role and their duty as citizens very seriously and want to participate in political life. They understand the process of telling their life stories as an opportunity to participate in political life, so most told their life histories with the conviction that they were working to strengthen civic life.

Among those interviewed by our team, there was only one case of a person who, after one interview, decided she’d rather not go on and asked us to delete her interview. All the others were proud to tell their life stories. This was obvious from the way they told them; you could tell that doing it made them feel important when they said: -I do not want you to erase what I tell you, I want you to use it and preserve it, so that history of the Cuban Revolution will take my life story into account.

Lots of myths about young Cubans have been spread outside Cuba. Fabricating a myth is relatively simple; there is no complexity in myths. Many of these myths are false, but they are convincing because they are repeated. Based on the experiences of various narrators and in their own words, the book I’m writing tries to counteract simplistic myths.

We have forty odd respondents between the ages of thirty and forty resident in Havana, Santiago, Bayamo, Havana, Sancti Spíritus and Matanzas. I would not like to provide a homogeneous image of this generation. The book shows their differences.

The issue of inequality is present in the interviews. Consequently, the issue of inequalities is one of the book's leitmotifs. Many Cubans under forty spoke of the 1980s as a time when there was more equality and egalitarianism. They told stories about their feelings of equality at the time and contrasted that with their present. They talked a lot about the difficulties of the 1990s until now, how they felt about the shortages of material things and about their neighbors who had remittances and money. Many also said they wished that material objects were less important for people today.

What I'm doing now is writing about at least eight life stories. These people will be the key figures in the book. The point is not to say that the book tells a true story about the Cuban Revolution. It is a book of memories and different attitudes to history. In the book, I create a mosaic that reflects the diversity of the Cuban people and different experiences in the past three decades.

All in all, the most important thing for me is that in this rapidly changing Cuban process, interviews with people in their thirties and forties showed that people wanted to talk and express their views. Of course, some-many-talked about leaving or felt abandoned by those who had emigrated. Others showed that they wanted to make contributions to political life, strengthen political life through their testimonials and help build a future in Cuba.