

# Field Notes

With Michael Frisch

**Q: Could you give us some notes for a beginner in the field of oral history?**

There's a powerful paradox at the core of working in oral history. On one hand, it's daunting; there's a lot to learn and prepare for. Oral history can be complex and demanding; it requires careful preparation, disciplined practice, grounded research, and thoughtful reflection. On the other hand, oral history is quotidian and within reach for anyone at any time. It's about curiosity, listening, respect and genuine interest in others. For oral history beginners, nothing is more important than keeping both sides of this paradox alive: your demanding craft takes work and care, but in other ways, perhaps deeper ones, it's no big deal at all. It's simply acting as an engaged human being alive to the humanity of others and the social connections between us.

**Q: What were the challenges of your projects and how did you negotiate them?**

In most projects I've done, the key challenge has involved inflecting the oral history approach to best fit the nature of the stories being documented, and the arc of the overall project, its social purposes, audiences, and intended uses. It is helpful to think of oral and public methodology in expansive terms—not simply material that will be somehow used or interpreted.

**Q: Were there any memorable experiences that you had while working with oral history that stand out in your memory?**

My very first recorded interview, before I had ever heard of oral history, was with my 95 year old grandfather, a working class eastern European immigrant who knew five languages but had never learned to read even one. He always had stories to tell, but I was sure he would be uncomfortable talking to his college-student grandson in a formal interview. So out of a naïve and patronizing notion of respect, I hid the tape recorder in a paper bag on the floor to keep the fact of recording from intimidating him. It seemed to be working—he started right off recounting one of his great stories. But after a minute or two, he stopped short and said, "Excuse me, but wouldn't that recorder thing work better if you took it out of the bag and put it on the table?"

**Michael Frisch is Professor of History & American Studies/ Senior Research Scholar at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He is a social and urban historian involved in oral and public history projects. In IOHA 2016, Dr. Frisch is chairing a thematic panel titled, "Mosaic Oral History: Mobile App, Social Media and Photo prompted alternatives to Long Form Oral History Interviews"**



# Spotlight

"Stories From Thulo Byasi" 2015 and "Basibiyalo"



On April 25, 2015, a violent earthquake of magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Nepal, killing almost 9,000 people, injuring 22,000, and damaging or destroying nearly 800,000 homes. A year later, more than 600,000 Nepalese still live in temporary or unsafe housing. This massive catastrophe has spawned a lot of narratives around lives and livelihoods lost, lives saved and continued reminders of the earthquake in the remains of man-made objects. Personal narratives remain crucial to understand the real scope of the quakes' impact.

IOHA 2016 showcases select art works from "Stories from Thulo Byasi" by Sanjeev Maharjan and "Basibiyalo" by Subas Tamang which were created during the Camp Hub-Post Earthquake Community Art Project of 2015.

The site-specific installations of "Stories From Thulo Byasi" and "Basibiyalo" were conceived of during interviews with local residents of Thulo Byasi in Bhaktapur, Nepal. Sharing stories became a great way to connect and console in the wake of the disaster. Through these interactions, each personal narrative was situated within the larger context of the shared experience(s) of the disaster.

Mr. Sanjeev Maharjan presents the experiences of Thulo Byasi's residents through a symbolic motif: bricks. Each brick used in Maharjan's installation is sourced from a collapsed building. Besides poignantly referring to the devastating earthquake, the bricks are complemented with stories of families that lost their homes.

Mr. Subas Tamang's installation 'Basibiyalo: A Sharing Space' uses documentation, recordings and interviews to address the lack of communal spaces in the temporary camp site. "In Bhaktapur they have a nice culture, they have this community space called Falcha ...I tried to make a similar space along with my friends at the temporary centres where people could come and sit and talk.", says Subas.

Their exhibitions are on until June 30, 2016 on the 4th Floor of Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology.

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# The daily Listener

Newsletter / IOHA Bangalore 2016

Thursday, 30 June 2016



**Panel Discussion / Mesa redonda:** "Postcolonial Oral Histories" / "Historias orales en clave Poscolonial" **Speakers / Ponentes:** Sean Field (South Africa), Heather Goodall (Australia) and Pramod Srivastava (India) **Chair:** Paige Raibmon (Canada)

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As we come to the fourth day of the conference, the panels and public sessions on offer examine a number of related themes – from museums and memory; to the methodology and pedagogy of oral history; from marginalized voices of dissent to the possibilities offered by digital platforms. This edición of the newsletter reflects the day's programme, especially around the idea of culture, community and memory in a 'postcolonial' world, as will be explored in today's public panel with Sean Field, Pramod Srivastava and Heather Goodall, who is featured in our section 'On Record'.

As the exhibitions prepare to draw to a close, we include pieces on Sanjeev Maharjan's exhibit 'Stories from Thulo Byasi', Subas Tamang's installation 'Basibiyalo' and Avehi Menon's work on 'Bangalore Storyscapes'. Teinvitamos to explore with us these themes in today's *The Daily Listener*.

# Ear to the ground



Day III panels



The Herstories exhibition



Public Panel I in session

# On record



Heather Goodall

**Q:** How do you use oral histories to explore relationships between communities and ecological networks?

**HG:** I have found that few people speak about their environments in any direct way. However, they often talk about their environments indirectly, as they tell stories about the work they do or the times they share with other people. So the first step is to be listening attentively to the way people tell stories about their lives. Then you might ask them to elaborate on the things they do which involve them most directly in relation to their environments, things like farming, fishing, hunting, cooking, working, taking children for picnics or swimming, escaping prying eyes for secret assignations, escaping from fearful events or regimes, etc. All of these things are gendered of course – and the gendered nature of such actions differ from culture to culture. In Australia, for example, white women seldom fish, except when they are teaching children, whereas, Aboriginal women frequently fish with great skill and knowledge and are recognised by both male and female community members as expert fishers. So the gendered expression of cultures shape people's interactions with living and nonliving environments, all of which are built into the stories they tell about their lives.

**Q:** Can you shed more light on your work regarding the inter-colonial networks between Australia and India?

**HG:** My co-researcher Devleena Ghosh and myself, have found in oral histories and in documentary archives that during the Cold War, when there was intense international pressure on formal organisations like Trade Unions to sever relations, it was the women's movements which maintained and actually expanded their interactions. Many of these contacts were through education, not of the missionary variety, but with an interest in supporting progressive education and expanding education for girls and women. These networks were sometimes caught up in Cold War hostilities but often flew under the radar, maintaining contacts through visits and letters and sometimes radio broadcasts, right up till the blossoming of the 1980s Women's Movements in each country, with the emergence of gender studies and queer studies then greatly expanding networks in a rapidly globalising world.

# Rewind



Avehi Menon

**Avehi Menon reflects on her years as an oral historian.**

Looking back at how she came to be interested in public history, she says "I actually worked as a television producer for about ten years. While I really enjoyed the visual medium, what I liked most about it was doing interviews." When Avehi started her work as an oral historian, she brought with her some habits from her previous job. "I wouldn't pause as much because I was so keen on asking a certain set of questions to navigate the interview. I wanted the interviewee to give me the answer that I was looking for. This came from my days in the media wherein you look for a few specific bits and you listen for those."

In her initial interviews, she feels she may not have asked the right follow up questions which could have taken the interview in an entirely different direction. In time, she began to allow the interviewee to direct the course of the interview. "Now I let it be a free-flowing process. This changes the way the project shapes out. As an interviewer, I have learnt to let go a lot. I've learnt to listen better." She grins and says "I think now I am too excited in my interviews. Now I just let them go on and I have to go back to get specific content."

Avehi says that initially she would not ask tough questions about gender, caste and class. She feared making the interviewee uncomfortable. But now, when she interviews a person, she tries to build a rapport in the first session. Her introductory interviews are reflective and driven by the speaker. In her later sessions she moderates the conversation and asks tough questions. She feels that personality comes into play in these situations. With the right rapport; tough questions can be navigated with ease. Over the years, she has noticed that halfway through interviews, the interviewees forget the recorder and lean in to tell their stories. Avehi says that she was recently invited for the wedding ceremony of an interviewee's daughter. After an interview, when interviewees feel comfortable, they show her photographs and speak further about their experiences. "This sort of opening up, I love it. It's very warm and open."