The Art of Careful Listening
Michael Riordon in conversation with Nicole Chaplin, August 2004

Nicole: What drew you to the subject of oral history?

Michael: I somewhat stumbled into it, in videos that I made on various subjects, including HIV/AIDs early in the 1980s, and also radio documentaries. I was in the position of trying to understand the complex realities of people's lives in situations much removed from my own, all over the world, and the natural way to do so, it seemed to me, was to ask people a lot of questions, to the extent that they were willing to share that kind of information with me. The approach just organically lent itself to this kind of careful listening, and then trying to draw on what I heard, to create documentaries that were as faithful to the experiences I'd heard that I could make them. That, I discovered a few years ago, is generally called – especially in North America and Europe – oral history. Once I understood that there was a formal designation for it, I began to think about it and was asked to give talks, and I began to think, 'well, what is it that I actually do?' And then, by extension, the other people who do this kind of work: what do they do, and why, and how, and what obstacles do they face? Hence the book.

N: Given that you came to it pretty much organically, how would you define oral history?

M: I would define it as the gathering of people's life stories, or aspects of their life stories, and the preservation of these stories in some form for the future. Also – now, some people wouldn't include this as part of a definition, but I tend to –conveying that material to others so that it has a kind of extended life; so that it has other listeners besides just the person who sat with the tape recorder and the narrator; so that it can create an impact beyond the initial conversation. It's a kind that I would call engaged oral history: to reinsert the people who have gone missing, that have been deliberately written out of the official version, as with First Nations people in Canada; to deliberately create a space in the larger history for those voices to be heard, so we get a more authentic and fuller picture of our shared story.

N: You call your book An Unauthorized Biography of the World; is this because you have a specific meaning you want your audience to draw from the book, the particular tales? And what sort of meaning would that be?

M: It varies from chapter to chapter, story to story. The overall meaning, or value, is that it is worth paying attention – close attention – to the voices of the people of very diverse experience in the world. Within the larger, overarching meaning, I hope that readers are able to – in the way that I was able to, and honoured to – encounter the struggles that people are engaged in in different countries and different contexts, to value the richness of what people bring to their lives and the potential power that we have to shape our world, up against undeniably powerful forces. There are people living under very difficult, and often dangerous, circumstances still trying to preserve the land, to continue to work for justice, for equality, for peace. These are things that are essential to life. I hope people will, as they encounter each of these stories, get a glimpse of the richness and diversity of human experience.

N: The stories you cover span very broad territory, such as New York City, Manitoba, Turkey and Peru. What drew you to these particular subjects?

M: I wanted to look as broadly as I could not only at types of experience, but at the ways and circumstances under which oral history is done. And through that, at how people use this thing called oral history to elicit the stories and what impact the stories can have in developing these various issues. To some extent, it also depended on encounters I had with people; people I heard about either through the oral history list-serve or people I met directly and their willingness to talk to me.

N: These topics are different from your usual focus on gay and lesbian communities. Did that affect the way you approached these stories at all?

M: This is an interesting question that's often discussed in oral history circles: insider/outsider interviews. Since my previous books have all dealt with aspects of gay, lesbian and transgendered experience, I could be called, to some degree, an insider. Whereas with many of the issues that this book looks at, its frame is much larger than my prior books and I could be called an outsider, for example with the Quechua-speaking women of the Andes. One of the interesting things about oral history is discovering what common ground there is between people: you actually discover humanity, which is vague and abstract. But you do have similar needs, in terms of our survival on this earth. We do have similar desires, presumably, which have to do with having a life that is worth living and loving and being loved, and having adequate nutrition and access to water: common ground.

I probably didn't do much differently, though, because at the heart of this kind of work is a really respectful kind of listening. I pursue certain things; in this case it's defined partly by the fact that I'm talking to people who do this kind of work, so I'm talking to colleagues about things we all understand: how complex it is to build trust, the responsibility that's inherent in having somebody entrust you with their story. In general, the continuous thread through all of my work is how carefully you listen and how carefully you respect what you hear and deal with it in whatever form it's going to take; in this case, a book.

N: While interviewing these colleagues, did you find anything problematic, since they do the same kind of work as you?

M: The short answer is no. [we laugh]. Actually, what a number of people identified was that it was a rare experience for them to actually talk about what they do. This kind of work, which involves paying close attention to other people, doesn't leave much room to pay attention to your own process. For example, talking to people who had done interviews with survivors of the attacks on the World Trade Center, I learned about something called secondary trauma, which is the cumulative effect of closely and empathetically listening to the experiences of people who had been through intense traumas.

For the person who is telling their own experience, there can be a kind of release in finally speaking this thing that you have bottled up. So the person who is listening to it, especially if they are doing a series of these, can become quite burdened with these stories and their content of horror.

Part of the value for the people in talking to me, was that they rarely have a chance to reflect on their own work, to release the experience, because they just do it. Usually it's under pressure, sometimes it's under dangerous conditions, but they just do it. So in my questions, coming from a similar position, I think it provided an outlet for people to explore some of their own dilemmas and tensions and conflicts in doing this work.

N: With regards to trauma, how do you remain objective in the face of emotion and horror? How much of yourself do you invest in your work? And is objectivity even necessary?

M: Yeah, I don't think I'm particularly objective; nor do I think this book is. I think one of the values of it, and of oral history, is that it's not objective, using that word the way the people in the media do. I think the mass media operate under the illusion that it is objective somehow, but isn't necessarily. The value in oral history is not the one story, but in the fact that you accumulate many impressions of similar events, whether it be genocide in Peru or struggling against a transnational goldmine in Turkey. What you get is like a mosaic, a cumulative picture of reality. You get a much richer, more layered,

more complex picture of the reality that we are living in from this kind of technique than from the single voice of the national radio or the New York Times or any of the mass media.

So in doing it, I'm not particularly objective. I feel quite impassioned and I'm very moved, often, by people's stories. I'm quite professional when I do interviews, in the sense that I keep very clear sight of my job – to create a context in which a person can tell their story with a certain amount of safety and comfort – but sometimes when I'm listening to the tapes later on, then I'm freed to have an emotional reaction to them, which can often be quite profound. Because as you're listing to someone's life story, it's very human to feel empathy. That's the challenging part for me, and conveying their story as authentically as I can.

N: Throughout the book, you adhere to the notion that the unspoken voices within history are in need of being drawn forth. What role within our current society do you think oral history must take?

M: I think its role is becoming increasingly important as the media that's loud in our lives becomes increasingly monolithic. It becomes increasingly compelling that we hear other voices because those other voices have extremely important truths to tell and it's at our peril that we ignore them. For example, in the book's section on First Nations, we are not just conveying grievances about their land being taken away. We're also listening to ways of understanding the world, and being in it, that are fundamental to all of our survival. There are voices of the villages, the peasants, in Anatolia who are defending their land. Similarly, they're not just defending their little patch of land, they're also defending the sacredness of earth and water, the integrity of those things, against poisoning by arsenic and cyanide from the mine. That has implications for all of us. Those voices which are either silenced by the military, or ignored by the mass media in favour of celebrities and politicians, those voices need to be heard. That, I think, is one of the crucial roles of oral history.

N: Why this book now? Is there something about this particular time period that begged the book to be written, maybe on a more personal note?

M: For myself, the timing of it began a few years ago, of taking some time to reflect on what I was doing. People were asking me questions about it and I wasn't very able to answer them because I hadn't thought much about the implications of what I was doing or the techniques or the ethical dilemmas. So for me, it became important to pay attention to those things. I wanted to understand, in context, what I do; in a much larger context of other people doing this work, and under more difficult conditions, with deeper ethical dilemmas.

N: Is there a common goal behind the practice of oral history in general?

M: The book would suggest that there are a lot of common dilemmas and approaches, but each person works in their own particular context. People come up with their own approaches, if they haven't defined their work as oral history, because they simply, as I did, said 'Well, ok so it's very important that these stories be heard'. They approach these things with something in common: the need to elicit and preserve people's stories that might otherwise be lost.

N: How would you counter critics that say history is 'facts' but oral history is 'subjective interpretation'?

M: There's two things to be said to that. The first is that there's truth that's inherent – and people understand that memory is faulty and partial. What people who do this work for a long time discover is that there can be a remarkable consistency when you talk to a number of people about an experience they all went through. There might be a fudging of

the details, but what you find is that there are essential truths about experience. As you accumulate these fragments of stories, you begin to see trends and patterns so they become cumulative truth.

On the documents side, there's evidence that documents are, as much as people's stories are, created by human beings with vested interests. Therefore the only way to look at documented history is to look at a lot of documents and see how they compare. But even then, since the documents often depend on each other, you could still end up with this dominant voice, which is, I would call, the official version and it has remarkably little resemblance to the real people on the ground.

In the chapter on Israel/Palestine, Efrat Ben-Zeev talks about her images of macro and micro versions of history. The macro version is what I would call the official version. The micro version is the same events as experienced by the villagers, for instance. So what you get is, in some ways, a similar story, but with details of how people experienced the attacks, with very different interpretations and motives. So, by unearthing the experience of people who underwent these events themselves, you can end up with a much richer, and probably more honest, version of what happened than the official version, which as been very clean cut.

N: How should oral history be brought to everybody's consciousness?

M: Any way it can be. I think it's quite challenging to do, and this is partly why I wrote the book, because I think generally the pattern of media conglomeration is to have a continuously shrinking space for other than the dominant voices. So I think that any work that finds any way to focus these stories in any medium is useful, even crucial.

For example, Efrat reports from Israel that it's getting harder all the time to get Palestinian stories heard in the Israeli media. Rather than listening to this person you define as your enemy and seeing if there's any common ground to be found, they're shut up. She and others argue, in other contexts similarly, that the only way you're ever going to have any kind of peace, which people desperately need in order to live, is by listening to the other and trying to discern where common ground is. As long as we are mired in defining ourselves by how distant we are from the other and how much of a threat the other is – look at U.S. Homeland Security – the less room there is to make peace and create a kind of world that really is the only one that people can survive in: a cooperative kind of world.

That's what I think this work has to do. It's why I wrote the book: I want to honour where people are doing this and forcing the space, you know, scrambling any way they can. Here's the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Peru; these women work very hard, they've never spoken out before – even in the villages – to create a space where the particular experiences of women during the genocide can be heard. And then once they're heard, that they don't just disappear into an archive somewhere; that the stories remain alive and a vital part of the ongoing national debate.

N: So, sort of humanizing the victims?

M: Yes, exactly. She specifically refers to that. The Andean people went from being non-existent, to being a problem, to being terrorists to being victims, and now, maybe, to becoming citizens – which is the ultimate objective of course, because none of those other categories offer much potential for life or growth. They now have a voice.

Also, I often find when I encounter people they say, 'Oh, why would you be interested in my story?' People have this notion that their stories are unimportant, but once you start listening and asking the right kind of questions, what you get is this rich life history that they don't value themselves, but begin to realize matters. That's often the case with this work: people who have come to believe that they don't matter actually begin to think,

'Well maybe what I have to say does matter and maybe I can speak and have some kind of impact'. That's what impassions me about me about all of the interviews.

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