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ANALYTIC STRATEGIES FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

◆ Richard Cándida Smith

Two understandings of the past confront each other across the tape recorder. In the encounter between scholar and informant, oral history interviews juxtapose the oldest and newest forms of historical method. For millennia, communities created and preserved their understanding of the past through spoken accounts passed entirely by word of mouth. No less today than in the past, people create and sustain a shared imaginative life wherever they gather and converse, be it at the kitchen table, the tavern counter, the street corner, the wedding reception, or the office lunchroom. Oral history interviews tap into a continuous outpouring of words that provide matrices defining both community and individual identity.¹ Informal collective modes of knowledge permeate the background of contemporary oral history

interviews, even though academic researchers conduct interviews primarily to collect firsthand testimony that may assist them in describing historical events or the experience of social processes. In the unusual exchange that occurs specifically for an oral history interview, collectively generated popular understandings of the past enter scholarly discourse in a verbatim record accessible for scholarly analysis.²

In this chapter, I explore how scholars have used narrative analysis to understand more fully the historical foundations of the personal experience documented in oral history interviews. I begin with Luisa Passerini's (1987b) now classic model of interviews as drawing upon preexisting oral cultural forms that translate historical processes into symbolically mediated experiences. In the second section, I discuss how

scholars have explored tensions and contradictions within narrative structures as the starting points for their analyses. In conclusion, I look at efforts to rethink the ways in which memory encodes historical processes into experience and the consequent possibilities for oral history interviews to augment historical understanding.

In common with other types of evidence, interviews contain a mix of true and false, reliable and unreliable, verifiable and unverifiable information. Details of accounts can often be incorrect. Interviews may contradict each other, and, occasionally, interviewees provide inconsistent accounts in different interview situations. Researchers need to approach oral sources with cautious skepticism. A good starting point for evaluating the veracity of oral testimony can be found in Paul Thompson's (1988:240-41) extrapolation to interviews of three basic principles fundamental to all historical research: (a) Assess each interview for internal consistency; (b) cross-check information found in interviews with as many other published, oral, and archival sources as possible; and (c) read the interview with as wide a historical and theoretical understanding of relevant subjects as possible.³

Narrative analysis allows for a historical interpretation of interview-based source material that is not dependent upon the ultimate veracity of the accounts provided. Even if only tacitly expressed, explanatory assumptions affect every aspect of an interview, from the organization of the story line or the plot to the presentation of personalities and events, to patterns of factual errors, omissions, and contradictions. The stories that interviewees share provide insight into the narrative and symbolic frameworks they use to explain why things turned out as they did. The first step in using interviews to reconstruct links among personal experience, collective memory, and broad historical processes is to address the role of storytelling in popular consciousness.

◆ *Popular Memory and Oral Narratives: The Translation of History into Experience*

In approaching interviews, whether unearthed in the course of archival research or taped specifically for one's own project, making them speak intelligibly can initially prove a frustrating challenge. Confronting the transcripts of the 67 interviews that constituted the core set of sources for the study reported in her book *Fascism in Popular Memory*, Luisa Passerini (1987b: 10-16) at first felt that there was an impassable gulf separating popular expression from scientific historical understanding. The interviews were full of anecdotes, irrelevancies, inaccuracies, contradictions, silences, and self-censorship, as well as out-and-out lies. The interviews contained plenty of colorful material, but the scattered recollections offered few immediately clear insights into the period or the effects of the fascist dictatorship on the lives of working-class Italians.

Passerini addressed her problem of making her interviews speak historically by doing some reading in anthropology and folklore. The perspectives she acquired helped her to think about how people use language to synthesize their experience into memorable images that make for interesting, often dramatic conversation. She looked for recurrent motifs in her interviews, many of which had documentable roots in Italian peasant folktales and folk songs. Everyday storytelling conventions might in themselves be historical evidence of past social relations.

Although the interviews were ostensibly firsthand testimony, personal experience dissolved into deeply rooted oral cultural forms that provided a ready set of stereotypes for structuring memories and filling them with meaning (see Narayan and George, Chapter 39, this volume). The in-

terviews, Passerini concluded, provided evidence of how communities had talked about the past and arrived at collective conclusions as to what had happened to them all. With these insights, Passerini advanced a sophisticated reconstruction of recurrent patterns within her subjects' representations. Different interviewees used the same narrative structures to recount the stories of their lives, an understanding that syntagmatic analysis could decode. The same metaphors occurred across interviews, used to emphasize conclusions about the meanings of past events. The personalities narrators ascribed to themselves and to others involved stereotyped character traits. Through analysis of these and other paradigmatic elements, Passerini (1987b:1-4, 8-11, 51-52) focused on narrative forms present in all interviews and used to express judgments and relationships (see also Passerini 1988; Portelli 1991:1-26).

Passerini no longer viewed interviews as products of narrators' immediate, personal memories. They provided no privileged access to actual historical experiences. Without external supporting evidence, one could never be certain that even deeply emotional accounts were factual firsthand reports of events the interviewee had undergone. Narrators often borrowed available mythic forms to articulate emotional truths they had formed about their pasts. For all intents and purposes, the past disappeared into a narrative structure of plot turns and symbolic motifs that embedded speakers in a particular discursive community.

THE RECORD OF A CULTURAL FORM

The cornerstone of Passerini's (1987b) textual analysis is her definition of the oral history interview as the record of a cultural form. "When someone is asked for his

life-story," she writes, "his memory draws on pre-existing storylines and ways of telling stories" (p. 8). Thus *memory*, as the term is used in the title of her book, is not a psychological category but the "transmission and elaboration of stories handed down and kept alive through small-scale social networks—stories which can be adapted every so often in a variety of social interactions, including the interview" (p. 19). Three critical elements follow from this definition:

1. Interviews are windows into collective thought processes; incidents and characters, even if presented in an individualized performative style, are conventionalized and shaped by a long history of responses to previous tellings.
2. Interviews draw upon a repertoire of oral-narrative sources that affect interviewees' selection of form and imagery; these sources include conversational storytelling, jokes, church sermons, political speeches, and testimonies given at Bible study groups and political party training schools.
3. Silences and other ruptures point to aspects of experience not fully mediated by group interpretation of past events.

The ideas, images, and linguistic strategies found in oral narratives constitute what Passerini (1987b) calls the "symbolic order of everyday life" (p. 67). What she means by this concept might be illustrated by an anecdote a woman factory worker recounted to Passerini about defending, in the years after World War II, her right to wear red overalls:

[The management] asked me, "And is it because you like red or is it because you are a Communist?" I replied: "Because I like red, because I'm a Communist, because I wear what colour I like, and because G. doesn't give me overalls and

I don't want to spend money on his account. Why haven't I the right to wear what colour I like?"

To which Passerini (1987b) comments, "The girl's reply summarises rather better than we could the multiplicity of meanings that a red outfit could assume in the daily struggle and balance of forces in the factory" (p. 106).

READING FOR SYMBOLIC ORDER

Passerini argues that reading for the symbolic order of her interviews illuminates an otherwise invisible subjective experience of the fascist period. Her aim is a broader interpretation of subjectivity as a historical rather than a natural phenomenon. She demonstrates the conventionalized nature of narratives by comparing written and oral self-representations of workers. When picking up pen to write about their lives, working-class authors typically adopt the literary conventions of the classic novel. They focus their narratives on a process of education and growth, a movement that dramatizes the hero's increasing competence in handling life's challenges. Passerini's narrators, on the other hand, showed no growth but tended toward stereotypical, timeless, "fixed" identities that closely corresponded to age, gender, and skill levels. Women, for example, particularly those born before 1900, often presented themselves as "born rebels." Men, however, described themselves as capable workers with "instinctive" or "natural" know-how, a convention that preserved traditional patriarchal and artisanal virtues when such roles no longer had any direct relationship to actual working conditions.

Such stereotypes are neither self-deceptions nor reductive but ultimately valid representations of reality. Passerini (1987b) observes that many (although not all)

women who characterized themselves as "born rebels" exhibited socially and politically conservative attitudes in their testimonies. The "rebel" self-appellation, she concludes, was part of a complex reaction to the radical changes industrialization brought to women's social roles:

The stereotypical notion of "having the devil in her" justifies and explains certain innovative choices made in moments of crisis—the decision to marry without her father's permission, the wish to work in the factory even after the birth of her son, the call for a different division of labor in the house. (P. 28)

The "rebel woman" image, deriving from Italian folklore traditions about women's supposed propensity for sweeping away conventions, is what Passerini calls a "survival." Urban working-class women reworked the tradition and changed its content to fit the emotionally ambiguous and unsettling circumstances of their lives. The power of the image derived precisely from its not being "true." The symbol helped women narrate to each other their confusions over female identity in a changing society. Modern Italy remained oppressive of women but nonetheless demanded that they abandon stable relationships promising, even if not always delivering, reciprocal responsibilities within family relationships. A self-proclaimed character trait mitigated compulsory social transformations through an assumption of responsibility that, because it was inborn rather than acquired, evaded questions of choice and decision. The symbol allowed for the transmission of an awareness of oppression and a sense of otherness from the social order within which working-class women lived. It helped them develop an openness to change, which they nonetheless often resented, as they forged new lifeways for themselves. Self-representation necessarily involves an individual's acquiescence to the role his or her character

plays in supporting group interpretations of historical events and processes (Passerini 1987b:27-28).

Stereotypical self-representations typically lend themselves more readily to humorous accounts than to tragic accounts of the past. Retelling anecdotes about individuals' lives is a form of entertainment in which the community can identify and interpret factors shaping life patterns. There is room for both tears and laughter, but humor is more likely to succeed in providing a satisfactory resolution to the tensions crystallized in an anecdote. In a collective storytelling situation, response shapes the way an individual comes to tell an oft-repeated story, causing him or her to drop those elements that elicit indifference or antagonism and sharpen those that promote good company.

Passerini recorded several brutal accounts of fascist terror, but her subjects spoke of life under fascism much more frequently with humor, laughter, and even joviality. The absurd posturing and venality of the regime loomed larger in their collective memory than its viciousness. Were the interviews evidence of a more benign image of fascism than that presented by other sources? Hardly. Behind the laughter, Passerini uncovered a complex of social and psychological forces that etched a darker picture.

Passerini notes that the humor in her interviews conducted in the 1970s, as well as that found in police documents from the 1930s, most frequently took the form of self-ridicule. One could interpret this recurrent feature as a marker of shame and guilt, as even an uneasy admission of complicity when daily life required some form of cooperation with the rulers of the nation. Passerini (1987b:125) observes, however, that although any form of antifascist statement was dangerous, police authorities were more likely to be lenient if a violator of public order appeared to be a drunk, playing the fool and making statements in jest. Police records show that verbal

antifascism evaded judicial proceedings if it took the form of regression to childhood language and humor.

In analyzing working-class humor, Passerini did not look for hidden political meanings. She understood humor as at once a symptom of the regimentation of life under fascism and a sign of resistance to it. In the fascist period, popular culture was a substitute for politics. A sense of self distinct from that of the oppressor could be expressed through jokes and laughter instead of through political action. When the world situation changed and the Allied invasion precipitated the collapse of Mussolini's government, laughter could suddenly turn into actual resistance, fueling an armed political warfare that previously would have been futile. The hidden side of humor suddenly became visible. Laughter and self-ridicule had all along been weapons of struggle, preserving identity against a hated regime intent on eradicating the rights of individuals to have personal opinions, to reflect on their lives, or to make judgments of any kind about the state of the nation. Humor helped express working-class self-identity, as well as a sense of pride in having endured and survived to have the last laugh.

Passerini's observations on Italian women's resistance of fascist demographic policy illustrate her use of oral sources to reveal the intersection of historical processes and personal experience in the generation of new possibilities for self-understanding. The natalist policies of the fascist regime subjected women to constant propaganda praising large families as a sign of femininity. Mothers were offered significant material inducements to bear additional children. Passerini's (1987b:155) interviews reveal that this propaganda had some continuing subjective effect: Even antifascist women praised themselves as being "fertile" and dismissed their enemies as "barren."⁴ Nonetheless, birthrates continued to decline, and the number of illegal abortions, the most widespread form of birth

control, continued to rise among the working classes. One-third of the women interviewed acknowledged having had abortions in those years, and Passerini assumed that other women interviewed for the project must also have had abortions but did not want to discuss this aspect of their past.

How had these women learned about birth control, given that they lived in a culture in which the practice was universally condemned? Passerini could not find evidence of underground traditions passed from mother to daughter, nor did she find evidence of working-class women's having access to or knowledge of middle-class birth control methods. Knowledge about abortion apparently spread clandestinely through social networks contained within the community and the age group most concerned about pregnancy. The choice to have an abortion was difficult and involved a radical break with community traditions. All dominant ideological institutions—the Fascist and Communist Parties and the Catholic Church—equally condemned abortion. A woman arrested for ending a pregnancy faced heavy legal penalties, with little likelihood of sympathy or support from anyone. Even 40 years later, the subject remained painful for the women who elected to share this part of their experience, although they defended their choice as an effort to make their lives better than those of their mothers or grandmothers. Passerini (1987b) concludes that, to some degree, their understanding of past behavior was influenced by feminist ideas of the 1970s retrospectively projected onto their actions in the 1930s. Still, she argues, “the fact that the meaning of actions is perceived with the wisdom of hindsight, when they had not been so clear and conscious for our subjects in the past, does not diminish the importance of their intuition in the present” (p. 181).

This aspect of Passerini's analysis suggests a model for understanding the subjective ground of ideological change. The women had recognized a need so strong that they ignored both universal ideological

condemnation and heavy legal penalties. This new behavior, conflicting with preexisting community values, made the women particularly receptive to new ideas, new values, and new ideologies that might justify what self-interest had said was necessary. A tentative process of ideological shift had begun documented by a retrospective effort to justify past transgressions that subsequently could be more broadly recognized as heroic.

LINKING PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL TIME

The conceptual tools Passerini chose are particularly suitable for reading contradictions in interview texts. Silences, self-censorship, lies and exaggerations, an overabundance of insignificant episodes told in minutest detail, the reworking of the past in terms that serve present-day interests—these offer rich sources for historical insight because such narrative blemishes indicate areas of conflict: The individual and the group could not arrive at a satisfying way of narrating painful or contentious events. Symbolic turns within a text link personal and historical time. All oral history interviews, Passerini (1987a) has written, involve

decision-making about the relationship between the self and history, be it individual history or general. . . . The problem is [to determine] what forms the idea of historical time takes at different levels of abstraction and in various philosophical or daily conceptions; and in what ways the idea of historical time is connected with historical narration and self-representation. (P. 412)

Two different but subjectively undifferentiated conceptions of time alternate in interviews. These modes of temporal experience are markedly more complex than the common observation that interviews involve a retrospective reworking of past ex-

perience into terms meaningful for the present. Interviews include a linear conception of change, and interviewees feel obligated to explain differences between the present and the past. Spiraling around efforts to understand change by narrating its causes and effects, however, is a condition of atemporality, in which a "fixed" identity locates the speaker in an eternal present. Passerini (1987a:420) argues that this combination reflects a desire to see change in the surrounding world but not in oneself, because recognition of personal temporality involves acceptance of death. The idea of personal time is inseparable from an idea of a tragic fate. A fixed identity is a narrative strategy, an imaginative leap that allows a speaker to talk about historical change and still repress confrontation with mortality.

Symbols fuse judgment of historical events with retreats into the imaginary. Analysis of the "symbolic order of everyday life" found in interviews allows historians to separate these two aspects of consciousness. Symbolization is the process that mediates the ongoing, continuous dislocation of the self between the real and the imaginary. Symbols through such mediation constitute subjective experience as both encounter and evasion of history. Reflection on individual historical experience takes on the forms of literary expression: Through metaphor and other verbal juxtapositions, interviews create their experience as symbolic expressions. In a particularly eloquent account, a woman told Passerini how the fascists administered castor oil to political opponents to humiliate them in front of their neighbors. She linked a number of distinct anecdotes about fascist terror by leaping from feces to menstrual blood to the blood of victims of politically motivated beatings. The connections between the episodes emerged in the narrator's metonymic stringing together of images linked by the transformation of bodily discharges. Feces, menstrual blood, and blood from beatings became symbols for each other, and the ensemble illuminated for Passerini a past

emotion that continued to live through a linguistic, aesthetic device. Tracing the shifts among these three symbols, she argues that shame, vulnerability, and rage still defined her interviewee's subjective experience of the fascist years. Metaphorical leaps are seldom arbitrary, even when clumsy, misguided, or fabulous. Narrative figures refer the listener (and subsequently the analyst) to an aspect of the speaker's mental representations that most clearly express her understanding of historical reality. Displaced meaning allows speakers to redescribe—in other words, reinterpret—experiences in ways that are more emotionally satisfying to them than usages that are more literal would allow.⁵

By focusing on oral narratives as cultural objects, Passerini shows that what one might dismiss as malapropism can be a key to reading oral texts. However, if metaphorical figures used by interviewees are never arbitrary, critical readings can easily be. Passerini locates the solution to this problem in the simple but fundamental observation that the structures of oral narratives arise to communicate ideas and feelings within a group. The narrative traditions of that group necessarily limit interpretations of figurative representations to what members of that group would likely find intelligible. Individuals push the boundary of sense at the risk of becoming incomprehensible. The guarantee that narrative structure must contribute to sense combines with the performative opportunities in every speech situation to generate a field of regularities and innovations vital to understanding the play of ideas within popular memory. Every interview contains within it a guide to the plotlines and symbolic structures of the interviewee's most important communities, as well as evidence of the social tensions narratives express and often displace. Passerini applied ethnographic and folkloric study of Italian working-class and peasant cultures along with psychological theory to decode the historically specific meaning of symbol systems used to narrate the experience of fascism.

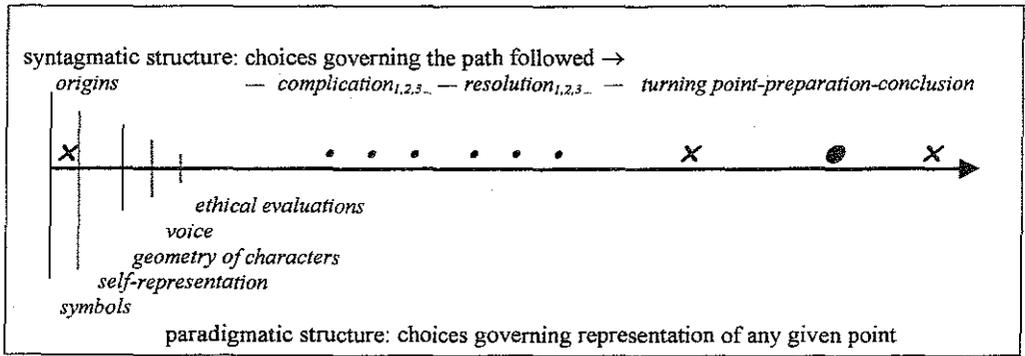


Figure 34.1. The Two Axes of Narratives

Underlying her method was a semiotic approach to language acts such as storytelling. Many scholars working with life history and oral history sources have found that before they can interpret the symbolic orders converting historical events into personal experience, they first need to analyze the narrative structures interviewees use to convey that experience.

♦ *Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Analysis: The Organization of Plot and Symbol*

Contemporary thought on narrative is structured by two contradictory ideas: Language is a set of rules that impose categories of knowledge upon speakers, but all performative acts are unique expressions that push against boundaries established by genre, content, or form of expression. Researchers undertaking analysis of the linguistic aspects of interviews begin by identifying regular verbal and narrative patterns, knowing that performance will never be precisely regular. This distinction parallels the relation of speech to language in the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who held that languages are best understood not as they are actually spoken but as ideal forms comprising regular value

distinctions combined in predictable sets. These recurrent codings render historical forces into narrative symbols and meaningful explanatory narratives (Culler 1986; Gadet 1989; Harris 1988; Holland 1992).

Narratives have two axes. In Figure 34.1, syntagmatic structure appears as a horizontal arrow that represents the emplotted, temporal dimension of narration: how a story begins and what problem is posed, what complications mark change in the development of the problem, what the turning point is that makes the conclusion inevitable, how the story concludes, with what kind of resolution. Paradigmatic analysis focuses on recurrent images that can appear at any point in the story. It describes and explains symbolic vocabulary and the ways in which associational registers express both judgments and affective responses.

Both syntagmatic analysis and paradigmatic analysis look for coded regularities. Because these understandings expressed through regularities in the interview arise in communicative acts, repetition of storytelling motifs across interviews with different informants provides evidence of a shared construction of the past. Whether marked by individual variations or presented in a stereotyped form, narrative and symbolic structures tend to reappear in different interviews conducted in the same community. Recurrent images found in more than one interview reveal a storytell-

ing language that provides a finite set of preferred expressive forms for the recollection of experience. Analysis of regularities across interviews can help define the boundaries of discursively defined communities—that is, of groups of people who may or may not know each other personally, but who are connected through shared languages (Joutard 1981; Joyner 1979; McMahan 1989:89-90; Tonkin 1992:97-112).

SYNTAGMATIC ANALYSIS

Syntagmatic analysis focuses on strategies of emplotment. Any story, whether a firsthand account of a specific event, a humorous anecdote, or a life history recounted across several sessions, must have a starting point, markers of transition, a turning point, and a conclusion. Emplotment involves the selection and highlighting of some events as most important. Other aspects may simply be dropped from the account altogether for the sake of narrative efficiency. Narrative form may also require the hypothetical construction of past events that may or may not have occurred but that the logic of the plotline demands. The conclusion determines that logic. Narratives are teleological, meaning that every story element flows from an effort to make the ending appear necessary and intelligible. Choices of significant details reveal “causes” that explain the inevitability of the conclusion. One may like the outcome or not, but narration enacts a process of coming to terms with the state of affairs that the narrator assumes characterize the conclusion.

One can find a clear example of syntagmatic analysis in Elliot G. Mishler’s (1992) use of interviews to study career paths. Mishler categorizes an anecdote as articulating an “on-line” choice when the episode led to the narrator’s taking another step toward his ultimate career goal. Even events that occur before the “turning point,” the account in the story in which

the narrator becomes aware of his goal, take their meaning from the conclusion. Complications and resolutions account for an accretion of factors that ultimately made the final status of the narrator inevitable. Mishler categorizes anecdotes about events that took the narrator away from his goal as “off-line” choices. The alternation of on-line and off-line choices develops dramatic tension. Adjusting the tempo of alternation heightens or diminishes the tension by increasing or decreasing the feeling that a detour could have affected the ultimate outcome. Dramatic tension is a narrative effect, as the outcome, even if unknown to the audience, is pre-given. The sequence presents the factors that had to be addressed and the obstacles that had to be overcome for the outcome to occur. Interviews can be broken down into discrete sections, each of which is defined by its relation to the plot. Off-line choices present complications, whereas on-line choices present resolutions that allow the story to continue. The presentation of each episode underscores the “logic” of the outcome. Mishler’s approach allows for analytic abstraction to replace a sequence of anecdotes with a structure of episodes, each articulating an important step in the movement to achieved identity (pp. 2-25, 28-33).

In Mishler’s case study of a furniture craftsman, the outcome is satisfactory, and the story affirms the ability of the narrator to overcome his own confusions by taking a dramatic leap into a new line of work (see Table 34.1). Mishler identifies “intuition” as the causal factor the narrator uses to explain his ultimate ability to overcome a previous personal history determined more by chance events than by active decision making (see episode 7 in Table 34.1, the turning point). “Intuition” does not appear as a direct explanation in every episode, but each episode is presented in a way that supports the explanatory framework the interviewee has developed to explain his personal history. To understand a narrative is to have command of the rules governing the selection and ordering of events into a plot. The

Table 34.1 ACHIEVING A CRAFT IDENTITY: THE NARRATIVE OF AN ARTIST-FURNITURE MAKER

<i>Narrative Episode</i>	<i>Identity Narrative: Interview Excerpts</i>
1. Origins	"My beginnings were in—uh I did a little bit of woodworking when I was a kid, mostly with wooden boats."
2. Complication ₁	"I'm one of those people really vague about what I wanted to do. I—I entered—I got accepted to college as a chemical engineer, because I was interested in plastics at the time."
3. Resolution ₁	"I decided I wanted to do something else. . . . I started in an undergraduate program as an architect."
4. Complication ₂	"And ah after school I had a job for a while with a firm. ah The firm . . . collapsed. Folded. And uh I met an architect, and he and I decided to design some geodesic domes, and do that kind of thing."
5. Resolution ₂	"And I met a third-generation craftsman in Indiana, who uh allowed me to share his shop space with—And ah that's when I really started to do woodworking. . . . But he just knew so much technically, and I learned an awful lot."
6. Complication ₃	"I felt like I was wasting all my—my ah schooling as a landscape architect. So [we] moved [and] I started working as a landscape architect. And I did that for five and a half years."
7. Turning point	"And ah it just wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. . . . So I did a search, and uh decided to go to graduate school in furniture. . . . I made the—ah the decision to ah, go into furniture. Just in that I had an intuitive sense about woodworking, which I didn't about landscape architecture."
8. Preparation	"So three years altogether, totally investing myself in—in ah the furniture world as a craftsman. Got a—degree in crafts, .hh ah treating furniture as an art form."
9. Conclusion	"I started teaching . . . I collected more equipment and set up the shop here. . . . Started doing some shows and commission work, and that all went pretty well."

SOURCE: Adapted from Mishler (1992:29-31).

events that serve as plotting points are symbols in that they merge description with ethical evaluation. The evaluation appears to be the result of examining consequences, but it flows from the principles that narrators assume can and do provide explanation of the concluding point.

This distinctly conservative aspect of narration reconciles narrators (and their communities) to the patterns of change they have experienced. At times, however, the conclusion can be unbearable. Utopian aspiration refuses reconciliation and prompts a reconstruction of memory so

that possibilities for change are accentuated. In his essays "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event" and "Uchronic Dreams: Working-Class Memory and Possible Worlds," Alessandro Portelli (1991:1-26, 99-116) analyzes patterns of narrative reconfiguration he found in interviews with working-class residents of Terni, Italy. Their reconstructions of the past were factually wrong. Their accounts merged or scrambled events and at times referred to events that never occurred. In effect, their collective stories had created an alternative chronology that allowed them

to maintain their own historical experience.

Portelli argues that chronological inaccuracy in the narrative helped the community maintain a sense of continuing to have a future and retaining the possibility of political resurgence during a time of retreat. Notwithstanding modernization of economic structures, the growth of educational opportunities, and a growing differentiation occurring as a result of individuals' differing personal responses to a changing society, the community maintained its political cohesion. Portelli's analysis suggests that the community's ability to maintain identity rested on a utopian, historically inaccurate, but culturally effective myth of the past. The narratives kept alive an alternative future that preserved for several decades the possibility of independent, worker-based action, even if, for the most part, members of the community were actively participating in the reconstruction of Italian society around international markets.

Disjunction between discursive and pragmatic behavior may be quite widespread and could provide insight into discrepancies in the political, economic, social, and cultural actions of social groups. The disjunction between subjective and objective factors in social relationships is an area for which oral history documents provide ideal sources of evidence. Paul Ricoeur's (1983:52-87) model of three-fold mimesis may help researchers to see how individual textual configurations (mimesis₂) found in oral history interviews intersect with collective processes of prefiguration (mimesis₁) and refiguration (mimesis₃). *Prefiguration* refers to the metaphorical transpositions that are normally available and allowed in a community, which for these purposes we can define as a group built around regularly shared communicative acts. *Refiguration* refers to the process of reconstruction of texts into experiences of meaning. In simplified terms, prefigured time (ideology) becomes refigured time (experience) through the

mediation of configured time (narrative accounts).

Prefiguration sets limits as to what will be a refigurative text—that is, one that potential audiences will accept as meaningful. Nonetheless, prefigurative conventions do not predetermine the shape of any configured text. Texts are propositions that members of a community put forward to each other. Texts must convince others that the narration accounts for what a group accepts as fact. Texts prove their aptness as explanations by providing satisfying understandings of the present and by identifying key events that others will accept as suitable evidence for the conclusion proffered (Ricoeur 1973).

As individual performances of collective prefigurations circulate with varying degrees of success, ideology becomes a fluid part of individual lives and social relations. Accepted narratives create a temporal world within which people have "experiences" that they can continue to share; that is, they have a sense of actions that remain meaningful and related logically to conclusions understood as "necessary" or, less strongly, "probable." Action may not necessarily be dependent upon narrative explanations available to a group, but stories that people exchange and accept as satisfying help establish a sense of proper, effective action, which can then be configured into new narratives. The truth of narratives rests on their ability to instigate and sustain new action. One of the values of examining how oral history interviews emplot explanatory frameworks is the degree to which they can point researchers to preferred actions as well as to likely blockages, clues that will assist with the identification and reading of other sources.

PARADIGMATIC ANALYSIS

Paradigmatic analysis complements the study of emplotment by examining recurrent symbols and other expressive motifs that are the basic constructive units of narrative flow. Oral accounts in particular tend

to synthesize complex series of events into readily comprehensible and expressible images. Symbols take their place within stories as instantiations of narrative logic (Allen 1982; Ashplant 1998; McMahan 1989:100-105; Tonkin 1992:126-30). For example, in my work on interviews recorded with painters in California (Cándida Smith 1989, 1995), I found that the special quality of light and climate in the state was a recurrent symbolic motif. Interviewees used the image to articulate a special condition that shaped their work and set them apart from painters in other parts of the world. The motif appeared to the interviewees as an indubitable natural fact that explained the particularities of painting in the region. In fact, the symbol as deployed in narratives had little to do with nature but appeared typically when interviewees wanted to encapsulate their sometimes pleasant, sometimes difficult relationship to society into a ready metaphor. In one interview recorded over several sessions, the narrator described California light as clarifying and liberatory to underscore the freedom he felt when he began painting and exhibiting. Several sessions later, he described California light as blinding and stultifying as he discussed a point when his career had reached a dead end. In either case, light was not a physical phenomenon but a symbolic displacement of professional self-representation. The value that the symbol expressed depended in both cases upon its location within a narrative plotline and the conclusion it had to reinforce (Cándida Smith 1989:3-4).

Symbols often appear in patterned relationships. Women painters in post-World War II California, for example, often found as they struggled to establish their careers that critics couched favorable reviews in highly sexualized terms. Joan Brown was "everybody's darling," according to one writer, who proceeded to describe her as a talented, energetic "receptacle of attitudes" for the "germinating" ideas of her (male) teachers. In the several oral history interviews conducted with Brown over a

30-year period, she alternated two distinctive voices as she recounted her life story. One voice used humorous hyperbole to accentuate the surreality of commerce and business and those who live within that world. This inflection drew a veil across painful elements of her life by rendering them into sharp, quick, brittle images designed to shock and get a laugh. The other voice used more expansive, philosophical language to express the wonder and excitement that a once young woman felt embarking on her career. Painting was explicitly a symbol for a journey of initiation that would ultimately result in wisdom and inner peace.

Brown never recursively marked the transition between these two voices. Her vocabulary and sentence structures changed unself-consciously as she went back and forth between the two modes of her career. She was, however, quite aware of a double self-representation that enacted her response to the sexualization of herself and her art. She used archly stereotypical sexual imagery to portray herself in interaction with the absurd world of career building. She presented herself as a compulsive liar who used dress and appearance to make fools of people she encountered. This mendacious, opportunistic character appeared in her accounts as a person who drank too much, participated in parties to excess, and let herself be carried to unspecified extremes by others. Opposed to a gendered, sexualized conception of self, another voice called within the interviews, invoking the deeper reality of an initiate who survived spiritually through recurrent journeys into the alternative worlds that painting realized for her. This self-consciously degendered self-representation gave her strength to stand her ground and make difficult practical career decisions that alienated critics, curators, and gallery owners (Cándida Smith 1995:172-89).

The recurrence of paradigmatic motifs across interviews and their structural logic suggests that they are not simply individual performative expressions. They help artic-

ulate the logic of a communication by stressing the justice of a conclusion. Self-representation is a privileged symbolic feature of oral narrations because it articulates the moral position that the speaker has taken on the turning point and its consequences. Eva M. McMahan (1989), building on the theoretical work of Livia Polanyi (1985), argues that the framing of a speaker's evaluative conclusions is particularly strong in oral narratives as they establish the relationship between speaker and listeners. McMahan (1989) states that

the teller must constantly address the implicit evaluative response of the listener: "So what?" The teller must show that the story is both topical and meaningful—that it makes a point. Generally, the interviewee as storyteller is expected to "(a) tell a topically coherent story; (b) tell a narratable story—one worth building a prolonged telling around; (c) introduce the story so that the connection with previous talk is clear; (d) tell a story that begins at the beginning, that is, one in which time moves ahead reasonably smoothly except for flashbacks that seem to serve a justifiable purpose in the telling; and, (e) evaluate states and events so that it is possible to recover the core of the story and thereby infer the point being made through telling." (Pp. 80-82; McMahan quotes Polanyi 1985:200)

In oral accounts, bracketing sections are frequently introduced so that the narrator can comment explicitly on the ethical meaning of the story, just in case listeners do not quite intuit how to feel the symbols. The narrator may elicit responses from listeners, often by asking questions. By the end of the story, as the conclusion becomes inevitable, McMahan argues, ethical evaluation begins to merge with self-representation. How listeners respond to the story determines how they respond to the storyteller, and through the account an ethical

relationship has been proposed, if not established (pp. 89-92, 93-96).

Just as emplotment can lead to a reimagination and reordering of events to strengthen the inevitability of the conclusion, paradigmatic elements may be reworked to strengthen the moral evaluation and consequently the subject position that the storyteller takes in relation to his or her listeners. Mariano Vallejo, in his testimonial collected in 1874 for Hubert Bancroft's multivolume history of California, discussed at length a meeting he claimed took place in 1846, on the eve of the American invasion of Mexico. Subsequent historians have largely dismissed Vallejo's account as legendary and in the process missed the vital political content his possible fabulation conveys. As war loomed, Californio leaders convened to discuss their options. Nominally, they were citizens of Mexico, but since a local revolution in 1836, California had been for all practical purposes autonomous of the central government. Vallejo's story condensed a series of debates that occurred within Californio society over many years into the arguments of one evening. As Rosaura Sánchez (1995) has analyzed the anecdote, the participants in the debate represented four positions. Spokesmen for a liberal, federalist, republican future opposed those who were promonarchist. Liberals were evenly divided between those who favored immediate independence and those, like Vallejo, who sought annexation to the United States. The monarchists were divided between those who wanted British annexation and those who sought French intervention. The characters presented in the anecdote articulate a geometry of political positions. Whether or not the meeting actually occurred, the characters were paradigmatic inventions that allowed the speaker to articulate his evaluation of the meeting and its ultimate consequences.

Throughout his account, Vallejo editorialized on the strengths and weaknesses of each position. He linked the arguments to several practical issues for Californio soci-

ety, such as trade and property regimes, while he ignored other issues entirely, such as slavery and implications for relations with the indigenous peoples. Vallejo's anecdote, however symbolic, articulated in crystalline form the competing ideological positions of his people in 1846 while explaining the political strategies that he and others followed. He defended his support for annexation to the United States by articulating his understanding of the American Revolution of 1776 and its, to his mind, still-universal promises of freedom, equality, and due process of law. He structured his account largely to convince his listeners, primarily the Anglo-American readers who would encounter him either directly in the transcript of his interview or indirectly through Bancroft's history, of their hypocrisy. His overall testimonial builds around his protest of the theft of the Californios' property and their political marginalization. American expansion had in fact betrayed the hopes that Vallejo and others had felt 30 years earlier. He wanted to convince his listeners that the outcome might have been very different had the Californios adopted policies opposed to annexation by the United States. Vallejo's account, motivated by moral fervor and foregrounding political and ideological choices of his people, still provides an important corrective to accounts that present westward expansion as a story with only American actors (Sánchez 1995:245-48).

◆ *Recuperating Experience Back into History*

In the context of narrative analysis, the "data" of interviews are first and foremost the ways in which a person has reconstructed the past to negotiate an ever-fluid process of identity construction. The subjective position in narration differs from psychological consciousness in its exterior manifestation and the element of self-

reflective purpose. Vallejo's interview unfolds as a conscious effort to speak through his interviewers to a broad public. Although this is not uncommon, particularly in interviews with elite figures, many interviews remain within the local, intimate historical contexts that stories shared between friends help establish. In a world of close acquaintances, anecdotes convey possibly useful impressions about what individuals might expect in future encounters. The cues are couched in explanations that, however trivial in form, remove arbitrariness from the relationship. Fred will flame you at the least provocation because "he's always like that." Characterization in this case is more of a predication than an explanation, but it serves to warn those who must or might be exposed to Fred of what to expect (Cándida Smith 1995:xxi-xxvi; Clark, Hyde, and McMahan 1980; Frank 1979; Halbwachs 1993:38; Thompson 1988:150-65).

In reading emplotment and paradigm codes, scholars often must assign meanings and values to these images that they may not have had in their original context in order to make them speak to a broader historical context. Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame (1982:192-93), for example, analyzed interviews with migrants from the countryside into Paris and found recurrent patterns in the choices of pronouns used by the interviewees. Men typically used first-person singular forms to speak of themselves as actors making decisions and changing their lives and those of their families. Women, on the other hand, tended to avoid first-person singular forms and to speak more usually either with first-person plural forms or with the impersonal third-person pronoun *on* (one). This observation allowed Bertaux-Wiame to develop a rich psychological argument about gendered conceptions of power and historical action prevalent among the French working class at a particular historical conjuncture. She readily acknowledges that her categories would seem irrelevant and foreign to the narrators whose accounts stimulated her

insight. Many historians might likewise question the validity of her interpretation. Gendered selection of pronouns became meaningful because Bertaux-Wiame turned to feminist theory for assistance in reading "data" that would otherwise be ignored. Interpersonal relations symbolized through the selection of pronouns would likely not register as relevant to the study of larger transpersonal social forces without a theoretical perspective that reread intimate interactions as dialectically constituted with political and economic structures.

The distinction between psychological consciousness and narrative self is foundational to the examination of regularities, whether syntagmatic or paradigmatic, within interviews. The narrative self takes shape in the unfolding stories within which it is deployed as one of several codes. Changes in self-representation do not provide evidence in and of themselves about how people "felt." Such studies trace instead how understandings of the self have grown from and altered in relation to other social and cultural phenomena *also* represented within a narrative.

Symbolic contradictions within narrative texts indicate areas of conflict about how to represent and understand the past. The storyteller and his or her group could not arrive at a satisfying way of narrating painful or contentious events, so they deflected issues into a variety of evasive symbolic strategies. Isolation of contradictory, confused, and evasive elements within a narrative has served historical analysis by highlighting areas of concern that communities have not been able to resolve narratively. Analysis presents a field of symbolic measures that in and of themselves are subject to multiple interpretations, but these areas of contention themselves reveal places for further historical contextualization and exploration. Careful analysis of the subject positions contained within these symbols in particular can elucidate a pattern of self-imagining that includes perceptions of the dangers that "others" pose (Passerini 1987a).

Conflicts between identity and subjectivity may be a recurrent paradigmatic feature in interviews. The challenge of reconciling differences between the subject position assigned a person due to his or her social classification with a more complex, varied sense of relationships may reveal itself at the paradigmatic level through such measures as Joan Brown's double self-representation. The challenge may also appear in performative tensions that undercut a narrator's ability to articulate either a clear ethical evaluation or a clear self-representation.

Feminist scholars in particular have worked with contradictions in self-representation to identify the translation of gendered power structures into historically situated experience of gender relations. Women's accounts of their lives negotiate, as Joan Brown's does with great elegance, the discrepancy between the self-image they have developed in the course of their everyday activities and the images of themselves that they receive from men. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack (1991) argue that women's oral history interviews usually have two channels working simultaneously across the episodes narrated. On the one hand, many women may tell their stories using dominant, masculinist emplotment and paradigmatic codes. They enunciate through the selection of complications, resolutions, turning point, and conclusion, as well as through the symbols used, concepts and values that affirm male supremacy, and the appropriateness of women's reduced social position. Within the performance, however, there may be a muted story that expresses painful disappointments and resentments as a set of ironies that suggest the purely fictional character of dominant values. Anderson and Jack advise that interviewers and analysts should focus on difficult choices that women have had to make in their lives, much as Passerini did when probing for information on birth control and abortion. They also advise paying careful attention to expressions of pain and subjects that ad-

dress the margins of acceptable behavior, particularly feelings and behaviors that the interviewees themselves identify as "unwomanly." Stereotypes about women invoked in the interview provide the analyst with an opportunity to see efforts to reconcile derogatory images with an interviewee's positive self-images. In these areas, narrative structures will be less likely to effect a comfortable ethical evaluation that reconciles the interviewee and her listeners to the inevitability of the conclusion. Anecdotes and images that women use to address their weakness in a situation often lead to a layering of codes conveying the storyteller's intellectual and emotional conflict. In these situations, logic collapses and the storyteller abruptly tacks on a conclusion to a story that was headed in another direction. A pat ending realigns her account with dominant values in her community but does so in a way that signals an experience of tensions (see also Borland 1991; Passerini 1987b:138-49).

Catherine Kohler Riessman (1992), in her work on women's accounts of abusive marriages, has observed critical differences in how women relate stories of victimization and stories of resistance. At the beginning of the 1980s, stories about marital rape were difficult to narrate, in part because the term itself did not yet have currency. Neither laws nor social custom recognized a wife's right to refuse sexual relations with her husband. As a political movement developed to demand legal change, new narrative structures emerged that helped women transform brutal facts in their lives into communicable experience. In seeking security and the right to divorce, abused women learned to speak to each other, to counselors, and to lawmakers. A shared language allowed for crisp, articulate stories in which the pain endured was coded typically in inflections of speech patterns, such as the introduction of unusually long pauses. Stories of resistance typically became less articulate when self-defense was angry or violent. Not even the

women involved were sure that their efforts to protect themselves from further abuse were ethical. Riessman (1992) observes that the language structures surrounding abusive marriages provide "for women's depressed emotions but not for their rage" (p. 246). Consequently, narration of anger is more episodic and confused, as if the storyteller herself had to struggle to understand her emotions and actions, which are ostensibly out of character for a "good" woman. A political movement had succeeded by establishing one emplotment code, which then blocked positive reception of alternative narratives arriving at conclusions less consonant with the nobility of victimhood.

Emplotment structures as well as symbolic motifs established in one discourse are then available for use in other situations. Work on narrative plotlines, and the subject positions they entail, allows for analysis of individual narrating style. William R. Earnest (1992) has examined the relation of workplace narratives to typical patterns for the interviewee's life story. In an interview with an employee in an automobile factory, Earnest noticed a syntagmatic pattern that recurred across several sessions. A grievance about work conditions in the factory welled up with considerable bitterness, but then the issues in dispute found resolution through a pattern of "self-effacement, criticism of other workers, sympathy for management rationales, and then final absolution of management" of any responsibility for the problem (pp. 257-58). When the questioning turned to family background and personal life, Earnest heard the same syntagmatic pattern applied to the interviewee's relationship with his father. Whenever anger at paternal neglect flared up, the interviewee's story line displaced his rage into criticism of others in the family. Family stories paralleled workplace stories by concluding with the interviewee's acceptance of his father's rationales and affirmation of father-son identity. The interviewee was unconscious of

this storytelling pattern. When told of it, he was surprised and doubtful, but he accepted the validity of the conclusion when shown the evidence. Confronting his experience as a narrative effect jolted him into reexamining his memories and his organization of his recollections into discrete episodes directing him to preordained conclusions. The interviewee was thrown out of experience into a historical reconsideration of how he had come to form his social relationships.

His self-reexamination began with his examination of the points in his narratives where he felt the most tension. The movement toward reevaluating the codes he used to create meaning arose, according to George Rosenwald's (1992) analysis of this case, from a conflict between identity and subjectivity that the interview process brought to the surface. Rosenwald contends that the culture-specific narrative rules ensuring intelligibility also govern identity. In opposition to the relatively stable and stabilizing patterns of self that arise as one talks in ways that are comprehensible to others, Rosenwald poses the force of subjectivity, which he defines as the "restlessness of desire" (p. 265). Recursive recognition of the rules of narration can allow normally repressed imagination of other ways of being to enter into the storytelling process.

The introduction of such self-reflection into oral history interviews is not common—at least not as a conscious aim of the interviewer and the narrator. Portelli (1997), however, in his recent work on genre in oral history, suggests that the encounter of historian and interviewee, each with such different strategies for understanding the past, must inevitably generate cognitive tension. One way interviewers have coped with this has been by effacing themselves and allowing narrators to tell their stories with a minimum of response or guidance. That strategy imposes highly artificial requirements upon dialogic exchanges. No matter how silent interviewers

strive to be, they are not invisible, and the interview situation, although drawing upon narrative repertoires that interviewees have developed, has little in common with everyday conversation.

"What is spoken in a typical oral history interview has usually never been told *in that form* before," Portelli (1997:4) argues. Even if interviewees rely upon twice-told tales to answer questions posed to them, they have usually never previously strung their stories together in a single, extended account. Narrators are also aware, like Mariano Vallejo, that they speak through their interviewers to a larger audience. Portelli notes that this leap into an imagined public realm often involves a marked change in diction. Interviewees begin to speak in a formally correct style. Even more important, Portelli adds, "the novelty of the situation and the effort at diction accentuate a feature of all oral discourse—that of being a 'text' in the making, which includes its own drafts, preparatory materials, and discarded materials" (p. 5). The task that the narrator faces is new and not reducible to the rules of everyday conversation, even if words and anecdotes spring largely or exclusively from that source.

What distinguishes oral history from folklore, Portelli (1997) claims, is the move away from "storytelling," from the sharing of familiar accounts with workmates, friends, and family that help bind them together into communities. Narrators discover a genre of discourse that Portelli calls "history-telling" (p. 6). Flowing out of researchers' theoretical and analytic assumptions, interview questions challenge narrators to transform their personal anecdotes. The process provokes narrators to reflect consciously upon the larger historical and social meanings of what has happened to them as individuals.

The relationship at the heart of oral history, as Portelli describes it, is a groping toward mutual understanding that is equally taxing for both parties to the interview. Interviewers must work to understand the

connections that narrators are providing as they consider additional lines of questioning that will build upon rather than cut short the dialogue. Historians' questions ask narrators to apply their experiences to frameworks that they may never have thought with before, but that they need to intuit if they are to respond with helpful and relevant information. An attempt to reconstruct memory so that it can speak to history proceeds within this dialectic, which if it breaks down leads to an interview lacking in either texture or information. Successful oral history interviews take on a special verbal quality that Portelli calls "thick dialogue," and the recorded conversation ceases to be a rehearsal of comfortable and conventional formulas and becomes a deeper probing of what happened and why.

Oral history has been part of a broader deontological trend in the social sciences. Collaboration between historian and narrator has helped generate greater understanding that personal experience has historical impact and is not simply an aftereffect of social process. The possibility of communication, and not simply translation, across quite different modes of representing the past rests in an understanding of the symbolic structures that narrators use to posit themselves as subjects who know the objects of their worlds—past, present, and future—in specific, practical, and community-based ways. A focus on the practical underpinnings of meaning systems reintegrates ethics, politics, and knowledge.

Memory and history confront each other across the tape recorder. Separately, both struggle with syntagmatic and paradigmatic codes that structure comprehension of what the present situation means. From their collaboration occasionally emerges a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past, the power of which lies in its having transcended the particular languages that engulf both participants in the interview. (On the alienation of both academic and community understandings of the past through the oral history process,

see Friedlander 1975:xxiii-xxvii.) The first step in analyzing oral history interviews is to recognize that they are not raw sources of information. Oral sources are themselves already analytic documents structured with complex codes and achieved meanings. An analyst can make visible neither the limitations nor the critical capacities of those meanings without delving into the text of the interview and beginning a process of dialogue with its narrator.

■ Notes

1. Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965) is the classic text on oral tradition. On the relationship between oral tradition and oral history, see Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) and Isabel Hofmeyr (1992). On the selectivity of sources and the relation of oral traditions to documentary archives, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995).

2. A large literature has developed on the social construction of memory. The classic sociological texts were written by Maurice Halbwachs prior to World War II. Lewis Coser has edited a selection of Halbwachs's work in a volume titled *On Collective Memory* (1993). See also the work of Alan Confino (1997), Susan Crane (1997), Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam (1996), Patrick H. Hutton (1993, 1997), Andreas Huyssens (1995), Iwona Irwin-Zarecki (1994), Jacques Le Goff (1992), Allan Megill (1989), Pierre Nora (1989), Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998), Michael Roth (1995), Michael Schudson (1995), David Thelen (1989), Frances Yates (1966), and James Young (1993).

3. For recent discussions of rules of evidence and verifiability in historical investigation after the narrative turn, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob (1994), Susan Stafford Friedman (1995), Lynn Hunt (1996), David Lowenthal (1989), Allan Megill (1998), and Peter Novick (1988). For classic discussions of the historical method, see Raymond Aron (1961), Lee Benson and Cushing Strout (1965), Marc Bloch (1953), Fernand Braudel (1980), R. G. Collingwood (1946), William Dray (1957), Louis Mink (1965, 1970), and Paul Veyne (1984).

4. Fascist demographic propaganda drew upon preexisting ideas and cultural expressions, which may explain to a degree the hold such ideas had on women, even those who did not act in conformity with older ideals of femininity.

5. For the classic account of displacement through narrative figures, see Aristotle's *Poetics* (1982:secs. 1451b5-6, 1458a18-23, 1457b6). See also Roland Barthes (1982), Seymour Chatman (1975), Leon Golden (1962), and Paul Ricoeur (1977).

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