https://doi.org/10.51880/ho.v25i2.1301

Sharing stories and the creative challenge of keeping them alive: interview with Steven High, founder of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University, in Montreal

Mayra Jucá*

ORCID iD 0000-0002-8331-1618
Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Contemporary Brazilian History Research and Documentation Center, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract: Interview with Steven High, a Canadian oral historian and acclaimed author of over a dozen books, founder of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS) at Concordia University. Since its launch in 2006, COHDS became a reference at diverse levels, from the models of partnership beyond the academy gates, involving researchers, artists and community leaders, amongst other connections, to its use of digital technologies and the promotion of intersections between oral history and creative productions such as theatre, museum exhibitions, sound-walks and films. In this interview, Steven High gives us an in-depth look at his approach to oral history, the research-creation process and digital tools developed by COHDS over the last 15 years, and discusses how oral history can be transformed from a disciplinary methodology into an interdisciplinary creative practice.

Keywords: Steven High. COHDS. Montreal Life Stories. Research-creation. Digital storytelling. Shared authority.

Sobre compartilhar histórias e o desafio criativo de mantê-las vivas: entrevista com Steven High, fundador do Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling na Concordia University, em Montreal

Resumo: Entrevista com Steven High, historiador oral canadense, autor de pelo menos uma dúzia de

* Ph.D. Candidate in History, Politics and Cultural Goods at Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil - Fundação Getúlio Vargas (CPDOC-FGV). Research internship (2021-2022) at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS) financed by Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes) – Brazil. Finance code 001. E-mail: mayrajuca@gmail.com.

livros, vários deles premiados, e fundador do Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS) – Centro de História Oral e Narrativas Digitais –, na Concordia University, em Montreal. Desde que foi fundado, em 2006, o COHDS tornou-se referência em diversas frentes, desde os modelos de parceria para além da academia, envolvendo pesquisadores, artistas e lideranças comunitárias, entre outras conexões, até o uso de tecnologias digitais e as interseções entre história oral e produções criativas como teatro, exposições, "*sound-walks*" (caminhadas sonoras), e filmes. Nesta entrevista, Steven High fala sobre sua abordagem da história oral, o processo de "*research-creation*" (pesquisa-criação) desenvolvido pelo COHDS nos últimos 15 anos, e sobre sua visão da história oral, não como metodologia disciplinar, mas como uma prática interdisciplinar e criativa.

Palavras-chave: Steven High. COHDS. Montreal Life Stories. Pesquisa-criação. Narrativas Digitais. Autoridade compartilhada.

Introduction

Steven High[1] often introduces himself as "an interdisciplinary oral and public historian", which already says a lot about him. Founder of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling[2] (COHDS) at Concordia University, in Montreal, High is constantly stressing the importance of broadening the "disciplinary boundaries" of History and the political role of Oral History in opening up spaces for dialogues across differences. Going far beyond the interviewee and the interviewer, he promotes dialogues between theory and practice, academy and communities, research and art, bringing together people from diverse academic and professional backgrounds, cultures and generations, both inside and outside the university.

Although a considerable part of High's academic production is about oral history theory and ethics, his central interest in the course of his career has been the deindustrialization process and its impact on cities and communities. His first book, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt* (UTP, 2003), won prizes from the American Historical Association (AHA), the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association (CSAA), and the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS). He published several works developing on this field,[3] some of which were written or edited in co-authorship, most of them gaining recognition being awarded important prizes. High has also published on topics such as World War II,

1 Steven High is a full Professor and Research Chair at Concordia University. See his complete and updated profile. Available from: https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/physics/faculty.html?fpid=steven-high. Access on: 22 jul. 2022..

2 F*or more on this, see the website*. Available from: https://storytelling.concordia.ca/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

3 "Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization" (Cornell / BTL, 2007), co-authored with photographer David Lewis; "The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places" (UBC, 2017), co-edited with Lachlan MacKinnon (Cape Breton University) and Andrew Perchard (University of Sterling); and "One Job Town: Work, Belonging and Betrayal in Northern Ontario" (UTP, 2019), which won the Clio and Fred Landon Prizes.

forced migration and mass violence.

Over the past 10 years, his writings reflected on initiatives launched by COHDS, that began with the Montreal Life Stories, a large scale 6-year long collaborative project in which more than 500 Montrealers were interviewed, generating an archive with life stories of immigrants escaping from violence in countries such as Rwanda, Cambodia, Haiti and Chile. Besides authoring dozens of articles and book chapters, High published works such as: *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance* (2013); *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement* (2014); *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence* (2015) and *Going Public: The Art of Participatory Practice* (2017).[4]

By "working across disciplines in a variety of ways without losing its home place", in High's own words, COHDS has attained international recognition on promoting intersections between oral history and creative productions such as theatre, museum exhibitions, sound walks and films. These creative outcomes attract new audiences to the research content, but, when asked about the strategies he uses to publicize them, High makes us think about how research is done, not how it is divulged. Co-creation and shared authority are key concepts in COHDS's work. Combatting the "academic monopolization of interpretative power", as High says, at COHDS they are opening up the processes and doing "research that goes beyond the extractive approaches", leading to new ways of working with personal stories. It's also about decentering, and avoiding "the danger of reducing, for example, people who experienced violence to the context of violence, by making visible that their lives are much fuller, there is joy, there is laughter".

In this interview, which took place on February 22nd, 2022, in Montreal, Steven High, who is also currently the President of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) (2021-23), speaks in-depth about his career, the research-creation products developed by COHDS and how oral history can be transformed from a disciplinary methodology into an interdisciplinary creative practice.

Mayra Jucá – Thank you for accepting the invitation for this interview, Professor High. Before we start, could you introduce yourself in your own words, and tell us about your motivations to become a historian and an oral historian?

Steven High – Thank you so much for inviting me and for doing this! Well, my name is Steven High, and I'm originally from Thunder Bay, Ontario, which is a small resource town on the north shore of Lake Superior. The next town is about five hours drive away, so it's very isolated… My father was a railway switchman which meant I had a railway pass until I was 26. I could go anywhere in the country, which was super! My mother was a primary school teacher, and so I grew up in a working-class family. My

4 See bibliography for complete references.

father was on night shifts until I was 16… But they certainly instilled in me the desire to go to university and that education was important.
In high school, I was very… engaged politically. I was very engaged around issues like US foreign policy in Central America at that time, you know, Nicaragua, El Salvador…. That really profoundly influenced me, I always believed in public engagement… we want to make the world a better place. And for me, history isn't just about studying the past for the past's sake.… It's learning about the past, but also, it's the reason why the present is the present [laughing], and everything we see around us is historically constructed, choices were made and forces were at work… History to me is a great field because it's people-centred, which to me was very important. And it unpacks certain generalizations, the assumptions about the world that we live in. I've always felt that research is political, no matter what you do...
I first came to oral history by chance. I got hired by my home-town museum as an "oral historian" [laughs] which was a minimum wage [job]. I think 4 dollars and 15 cents an hour. They gave me a bunch of analog cassettes, because this is back in 1988… and they said "go interview old people." I spent the summer interviewing about 40 people from my home town community and learned about the history of where I come from. I found that really great. And I was [later] able to bring oral history into my studies. You know, there were no oral history courses to take; many oral historians are essentially self-taught.

MJ – Now, could you tell me the story of how the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS) was conceived?

SH – Well, my first professor job was at Nipissing University, a small university in my home region in northern Ontario. I got hired there in 2002 and I stayed for three years. It really changed me in the sense that… the students were very keen on going public, so my teaching was transformed in terms of going beyond the classroom. I started teaching oral history and then started to design courses that would lead to public events, opening up a space where people could listen to stories but also tell other stories, new stories… During those three years, I started to think about [creating] an oral history center. How we needed an institutional space to facilitate these kinds of conversations. And that would be a space that would be [shared] between the university and the community. To me, when we talk about community engagement in the academy we often think of professors going outward, outside the walls of the university… But I think it's also about pathways into the university for community people. To me an oral history center on campus can bring these two worlds together.
I started conceptualizing this and then a job came out at Concordia for a Canada Research Chair in Public History. Public History is often associated with museums and public memory, and so I contacted them and said "Well, I'm an oral historian,

does that count? [laughs] Is that Public History?" I wasn't sure how they would define it, and they said "yes, yes, it's public history." So I applied. A Canada Research Chair is meant to be ambitious, in the sense of creating a space, doing something above and beyond teaching and writing your own books… I proposed an interdisciplinary oral history centre and brought outlines of what the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling might become.

People got excited. I got the job, and with the job came an external grant that paid for, essentially, space, for [research] infrastructure. And that allowed us to have the space that we have, which is quite a lot of floor space, in the context of the humanities and social sciences. [laughing] We don't get a lot of space… [They] assume that we just write books: we don't need laboratories, and we don't need collaborative spaces. But oral history is based on collaboration. It's based on community-building in a way. And so space was very important.

Between 2005 and 2007 we designed the space, designed the governing structures ...trying to get away a little bit from the hierarchy of the university… Oral history is a field that, unlike ethnography, which is a methodology for anthropology, so it's a disciplinary methodology, oral history is not a disciplinary methodology. You can find oral historians all over the place... COHDS would have that kind of "in-between[ness]."

MJ – The project Montreal Life Stories was the first initiative of the lab, a large-scale project that was "avant-garde" on diverse fronts, that generated films, books, exhibitions, performances, web platforms... To what extent did the project experience shape the lab and vice versa?

SH – The idea of Montreal Life Stories came very quickly. Oral history is very local work, but it's also very global. Montreal is a global city, people from all over the world are in Montreal, and it connects to stories around the world… Certainly at Concordia, one of the core strengths of our university is [the presence] of cultural communities. We have people in the University who experienced mass violence and who are studying mass violence, or studying forced migration… We [Montreal Life Stories] grew organically over a six or seven months period... It wasn't like we had a roadmap saying "this is the plan" that we had to fit into… We interviewed 500 people who experienced mass violence and who now live in Montreal… and then we worked with those stories to open up spaces for conversations, whether it's digital spaces, like digital stories, films, or performing spaces or visual art kinds of spaces, pedagogical spaces...

We often talk about Michael Frisch's notion of Shared Authority [Frisch, 2008], and what he talks about is how in the interview you have a dialogue. It's a dialogical kind of thing where you have experiential authority in dialogue with expert authority. And so you learn <u>with</u>, back and forward, back and forward, back and forward… And because it's listening across difference, it transcends each sort of positionality. And that's hard

work, it's not easy… When we designed the project, we wanted to ensure that this dialogic, this learning with, wasn't just in the interviews, the interview ends and you turn off the recording device and that's that... We worked really hard to find ways to open up the research process. To have this sort of sharing authority from the beginning to the end. Who is in the room, in the beginning, was really essential: [the] Rwandan community, Cambodian community, Haitian community, Jewish community, all the past survivors and their descendants, were all there in the room, as well as researchers, and again a lot of the researchers were from these communities.
That was really important because if you design a project yourself and then you invite others to come into it, it's collaboration but it's under your terms. Whereas if it's organic, it can actually be co-created and I think that takes it to a different place both politically and in terms of potential it has.
This major grant was called "The Community-University Research Alliance," and it's a beautiful grant because it's premised on sharing authority, you know? To get the grant you have to demonstrate that you are not approaching communities in an extractive mindset, that you are working with them, and that the research benefits the communities you're working with a s well as the researchers. The research has to "empower" and you have to show that in the grant application.

MJ – Just to clarify, one grant you received was for establishing the COHDS and another one to start the Montreal Life Stories Project?

SH – Exactly. We were very fortunate in Canada, because the national Canadian research funder, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, they took the leadership in valorizing collaborative work. This is an example maybe of change from the top. They were providing an incentive to disciplines that tended to work in more traditional ways, where the academics hold the monopoly of interpretation, and where research is by and for academics. Here you have a context where a funder is shifting the focus and putting resources into another mode of academic production, another mode of research… and I don't know many countries where that's the case… That was huge because with the external grants comes recognition within the university.
But there was [also] resistance within, let's say, the history discipline… [laughs] The idea that oral history is not "theorized," or it's not as "serious" as other kinds of history… Certainly over the years, I had all kinds of push-back from my own department [laughs]. But it's also in the context where historians were feeling under siege, where universities are generally moving resources towards Engineering and the Sciences, away from the Humanities. They were feeling threatened. Whereas oral history was in a better position with these shifts to bring people together.

MJ – Can you give some examples of how the Montreal Life Stories evolved during

those six years?

SH – It took us a year to even start interviewing because we needed to think through ethics, and all the issues that involve interviewing survivors of mass violence. … We had a policy that everyone had to be in the interview space, so we didn't want to create a hierarchy where a few people are interviewing and everyone else is interpreting... We wanted everyone to experience that first-person experience of interviewing someone and being responsible for that interview space, which is a big responsibility...
And when we started interviewing we tended to interview the oldest first. Of course, people thought "well, they're not going to be here that long..." There is a sense of urgency.… They interviewed mainly people who were senior in the sense of status within the community. But four, five years later, they were interviewing youth, 20-year-olds... So there is a progression that happens over that time. And you're not just interviewing people who had first-hand experience, who were in Rwanda in 1994, but even people who were maybe exiled beforehand and who lost all kinds of family or people who were born after, who have inherited that story...
Because the project was open to new people, there was almost a migration into the project, where interviewees became interviewers... It allowed for an evolution. A lot of young people from the communities joined, who had a lot of questions,... like young Cambodians... [There was] a lot of silence in their families about the *Khmer Rouge*... They were able to open up a space for a conversation within their families but also within their community.

MJ – COHDS has a range of projects based on cartographic narratives. You've created methodologies such as walking interviews, developed apps with audio walks,[5] and even a web tool connecting places to stories, can you tell more about this effort to give a local perspective to the stories?

SH – There is no one way to interview. If you are studying a place, and that place is nearby, why wouldn't you go there with the interviewee and let that place prompt remembering? Usually, memory-based audio walks are, as you were saying, very local: you hear what was, you see what is, it's not the same thing, and so there is a dissonance. There is a tension. There is friction between past and present. And that, to me, opens up all kinds of possibilities and generates questions, which is a good thing.
With Montreal Life Stories, Rwanda 1994, that's a half-world away from Montreal; 1994 is another time. So how do you bring that here? That time, that place: here and now? We thought a lot about that. We created an audio walk that grounds itself in the annual commemorative walk.[6] The community of survivors here in Montreal walks from a church down to the waterfront, [where] there is a memorial tower, and they

[5] For more on this, see the website. Available from: https://storytelling.concordia.ca/research-and-creation/audio-walks/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.
[6] For more on this, see the website. Available from:https://storytelling.concordia.ca/projects-item/a-flower-in-the-river/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

throw flowers into the river. In Rwandan culture, all the water flows together and it has symbolic importance and ... symbolic connecting there and here. And it's beautiful. I've done this memory walk many times... To create a sense of almost joining that walk, virtually, we have a soundscape below the audio, you hear the community on the way, talking, so the background noise gets you to feel like you are being accompanied. And then over the course of the walk...as you are listening, and doing it by yourself, you are accompanied by 6 people, one at a time, who join you for a period of time, who share their stories with you. The next person comes, and the next person: it's consecutive... We were trying to re-ground global stories in the local. The challenge is how you go from global to local, instead of the local to global.

Other projects are very local... [such as when] we worked on the structural violence of economic change where neighborhoods are emptied out. Factories were closed, stores closed, churches closed, schools closed. What's left is poverty and community fracture. And there, again, the idea of the audio walk is to walk through these spaces, to hear people's stories and to see these places with new eyes and from different perspectives.

What I also like about audio walks is that the problem of online stuff, like digital stories, is that people are constantly moving, they are surfing. Time is accelerated in a way, and it's hard to slow things down for people to listen. To take people on a journey. The audio documentary form of the audio walk and the act of walking through the city is a way to take people on a journey, not just geographically, but also politically, also intellectually, in terms of knowing the local knowledge of these places.

Now, the challenge is that oral history, our standard practice, is to transcribe those interviews and that's fine if it's a sit-down interview, because the transcriptions have time-stamps allowing you to go back into the recording. But with a walking interview you need to know where they are to understand what they are saying. You need geographic stamps. So we experimented working with tools like Google street view and Google maps ... [in our multimedia transcription methodology][7] you can actually see where people are and what they are talking about. If you have that option it's actually really interesting.

MJ – What about the platform Atlascine[8]? Could you briefly explain the idea behind it?

SH – Yes, it's another way of experimenting [with]... that geographic dimension. Montreal Life Stories ended and then we had a new project that was called the Living Archives of Rwandan Exiles and Genocide Survivors in Canada.[9] Because the project ended, and we had an archive. How do you continue to activate those stories? How can

7 For more on this, see the website. Available from: https://storytelling.concordia.ca/projects-item/webinar-3-transcribing-walking-interviews/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

8 For more on this, see the website. Available from: http://geomedialab.org/atlascine.html. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

9 For more on this, see the website. Available from: https://livingarchivesvivantes.org/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

those stories continue to be living? And continue to serve the communities that they are from? But also the wider public?
This was a three-year project only with the Rwandan community and we were experimenting with the creation of an online platform that allows you to listen to stories. We tied the transcripts to the interviews, allowing [us] to search them, to enter into the stories in different ways [and consider]... How a map interface allows us to enter stories, because these life trajectories were also spatial. Especially with forced migration, where they are going from Rwanda, not just coming to Montreal, they are going all over. There are multiple displacements happening. And so how can we imagine a map that represents these trajectories but also allows us to enter these stories both in terms of individual narrators but also via a corpus of interviews?...
We have a cyber geographer, Sebastian Caquard, who is co-director of COHDS, who has thought a lot about these things in very sophisticated ways. Not like you would normally do on Google and put a little pin, but thinking about space and narrative in more sophisticated ways. Part of this project was to develop this new tool that allows us to map stories and to visualize them spatially.

MJ – And you also developed another web tool called the "Tension tool",[10] could you comment a bit on this one as well?

SH – In oral history we talk a lot about how it's a conversational narrative [and] oral history is co-produced. The structure of the interview is questions and answers, that back and forth, right? That dialogical thing. How do you analyze the interview dynamic itself? How can that be at the center of our analysis? Because of course, it's a dual agency. Interviewers have agency in asking questions, they are inviting the interviewee to go in this direction, or go in that direction. At the same time, the interviewee has agency. They may not *wanna* go, they might deflect questions, they might hesitate, and they might pull the interviewer in a different direction...
So, yes, we have a tool that allows us to work with transcripts to identify points where we think that there is an underlying tension, where the interviewer and the interviewee may not be on the same page... where there seems to be dissonance. That invites us to think about what's going on. And this is useful for training interviewers, but it's also useful in terms of analyzing interviews as a narrative, or a conversational narrative... There is no one way to interpret the interviews, what we want is to engage the interview in multiple ways. And that helps us to go deeper and to understand what's going on.
That's the "TensionTool". I don't like the name, because it's not about tension... it's more about the interview dynamic, it's about the relationship... You can put a transcript [in] and within 30 seconds it generates all the points of potential tension within the interview. I have exercises with students [where we] go through a transcript

[10] For more on this, see the website. Available from: https://livingarchivesvivantes.org/tools/tension-analysis/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

and identify all the points where there is hesitation, or deflection, reticences... and then we compare that to what the computer-generated. It's pretty much the same, which is quite amazing...

MJ – Finally, could you comment on the Stories Matter software, whose new version is about to be launched? It was first launched in 2009 but in 2021 it "died" because the Adobe Flash tool was discontinued… How do you deal with this problem of sustainability of the web platforms? Many websites and platforms disappeared and were lost forever for the same reason…

SH – These are all great questions... So, the main tool of interpretation and the main search tool we have in oral history is the transcript. And anyone who has transcribed knows how much is lost in transcription. The words that we speak are wrapped in emotion, they are embodied, and so the meaning can be different from the one ...on a transcribed piece of paper. We started to explore alternatives to this.
When COHDS started up in 2006, and 2007, we worked with a software called Interclipper, which is for marketing campaigns and focus group interpretation. Basically, it is a clip and index software that allows you to create clips and tag terms. We can follow threads across interviews. And this has value because another problem with transcription is that each interview is an island in itself. How do we interpret oral history collections? When you start to database interviews you are actually mapping narratives. Questions and answers becomes a clip. You create a whole list of tag terms, your keywords, and it's a very intellectual exercise. What in the end are you looking for? What are you trying to connect?
We learned a lot in this process. It gave us a lot of experience as users of the software. But it's proprietary software, we had to pay very expensive fees. We couldn't change the architecture of the software… And we thought we can do better! Let's make an open-source software that is free, that can evolve naturally. We hired a programmer, and over a two-year period, we developed this software that allowed us to create playlists, export, put different clips together, merge interviews and create a database. And to me, it's a different way of listening. You know, listening is subjective. Who the listener is matters; also the positionality of the listener matters. If you are transcribing, you are in the language: it's close proximity. With databasing, you are thinking about story units. You are thinking about the narrative itself. You have a little more distance and maybe see the silences, the places where the narrative skips over, where they linger…That, to me is a different kind of listening. Not better, not worse: just different.
In the end we had 1500 hours of interviews in a database environment. Well, a lot of people used Stories Matters, but not a lot of programmers: so the software got old. There weren't smartphones in 2009! Eventually, it started to age. And there was the problem with [Adobe] Flash. It was really, really terrible news when Adobe announced

the discontinuity of Flash… sustainability is a huge issue.
Thankfully, the good news is that after a year now, we convinced Concordia to invest 120,000 dollars and we are going to have a new version of Stories Matter that will be completely open-source with no external components... That was a long answer, sorry. But I'm really excited because it is great software and I believe in it. The challenge has been sustainability and connectivity. Ideally, we want these kinds of tools to speak to each other.

MJ – About the term "digital storytelling", could you talk a bit about this choice and the debates around this concept?

SH – What I really like about the "coupling" of Oral History and Digital Storytelling is that it opens outward, it's not closed. In the beginning, ...there was a very strong digital component...
But certainly, our thinking was that we were working with oral history but not in a collectionist mindset, like collect, preserve, archive... Most oral history centres in the world are located in a part of a university library, so there is a very strong collection mindset, and we were thinking about curation and about bringing people together and sharing stories in creative ways, both digital and in other ways. So the name ... [has] served us well.
And there is certainly a debate within North American oral history circles about whether oral history should be associated with storytelling, whether storytelling is a problem. I'm thinking of Alexander Freund's article that won a prize for best article in the United States. [He writes] about storytelling as a neo-liberal practice sort of individualism gone crazy... And there is a critique to be made about corporate kinds of storytelling, but I think he goes way too far. I think what he prescribes, in the end, is oral history as a disciplinary practice and that we need to create distance. We are scientists. We are researchers and they are subjects. I think we would lose something profound if we went in that direction. I'm really proud that storytelling is actually in our name because it acknowledges that there are many ways to engage with a personal story.
It's not just about research but it's about story sharing, it's also about community building, it's about truth and reconciliation, it's about art... It's all kinds of things... And I think that enriches all of us! That diversity of approaches, that porous nature of oral history as a field, in my mind is its greatest strength, not a weakness. And that's a bit of a debate that's going on, certainly within North American oral history circles.

MJ – Another term which sounds different or innovative, at least for a Brazilian, is "research-creation". Can you explain what is it? And to what extent is it a Canadian approach/concept?

SH – Research-creation is a term where we are thinking about the connections between research and artistic practice or creative practice: how can research inform creative practice, and how can creative practice inform the research. Creative practice can be an input to research itself. At Concordia you can do a Ph.D., it's a research-creation Ph.D., where you [produce] a film, or graphic novel, or some other kind of creative output... It's not just a black box, not just a product, but the process is really important. In oral history, one of its strengths is this deep reflection on the process, this reflexivity...it's a community of practice, essentially...

MJ – COHDS became a reference of innovative ways of going public with research based on oral history. Could you comment on the main strategies behind this?

SH – We have a whole book on it! Called Going Public[11] [laughs]. This is a book I wrote with Elizabeth Miller, who is a fantastic filmmaker and Ted Little who is a theater practitioner. Those two were integral to Montreal Life Stories. At the end of Montreal Life Stories, we were thinking a lot about the relationship between research and publics, you know, how projects go public, what we mean by public...
Going public in a classic academic way: you do research and at the end, you go public to find your audience. [In this,] you have this notion of a very passive public that is a consumer of our knowledge production. And that's not how we were thinking of it. We were thinking about how going public is part of our research practice itself.
The idea of sharing authority, where we open up the process: what does that do? And other ways to imagine research that goes beyond extractive approaches. And so, the purpose was reflecting on some of these power relationships. I really like Eve Tuck's work, she works on indigenous issues and she talks about how the danger of reducing people who experienced violence or colonialism, to reduce them to the violence. In fact, their lives are much fuller, and there is joy, and there is laughter.

MJ – You usually highlight the interdisciplinarity in oral history, and you present yourself as an interdisciplinary oral historian. Is it kind of a lobby or militancy?

SH – Yeah, I think there is a lot of resistance to some of these changes because they do threaten sort of disciplinary forms of knowledge production. You know, I'm a historian, all my degrees are in History. I believe in the discipline of History. I just don't think that we need to have a medieval wall around us, to separate ourselves from other "home places". Other villages, like Anthropology, this and that... To me, it's about not having walls, but still having a home place.

MJ – In a recent article,[12] you debate the "critical distance" of History, and you say

[11] For more on this, see the website. Available from: https://goingpublicproject.org/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.
[12] See High (2021)

that "there is a new generation challenging the pretense of disinterest". How, in your perspective, is this "old logic" changing?

SH – Well, yes, there is a couple of things there. My thinking on disciplines has been influenced by the work by Bertold Brecht. There is in traditional theater, there is a "fourth wall," that invisible wall that separates actors on stage and the audience, that creates the illusion that what you're seeing are not actors but actually real people. And that's the beauty of theatre. But he thought about how that distance separates the audiences and becomes escapism rather than challenging societies. I think that's a really insightful thing and I thought History and other disciplines have a similar kind of practice. Third-person, past tense, are all ways of separating the past and the present. Historians study the past, not to present. And by policing that border, and even having negative terms, in English we say "presentist" if you are being too present-minded, that's pejorative, that's a bad thing. I'm not sure if in Portuguese you have that, but in English you do... You have this active suppression of the present within classic historical practices. I would argue that the danger of that is that it can depoliticize. And actually, it can be dishonest too, because of course the present is shaping your practice. Of course it's shaping the questions you are posing, the sources you consult, the issues that are driving you, who you are as a person, what you bring to the table. And so oral history is about the relationship between the past and the present, and that's complicated! I think having those complications sort of visible, makes your work more sophisticated. And deeper, at its best...
I do think that some things that are visible at a distance, are not visible up close. Absolutely. But it's also true in the inverse. I think what we want is a range of distances. And each of those distances allows us to see and hear things in a different way. I think the ethos of oral history, being porous, allowing different influences, different flows into it, and different traditions, it's actually a strength. It helps deepen and helps to see things from multiple points of view.

MJ – In this same article, you mention the scholars who have proximity to the stories they study, like racialized scholars...

SH – What we are seeing increasingly is a demographic change within the old disciplines like History...You have people studying indigenous history, who are themselves indigenous, and having their voices in the conversation changes everything. It's not about the white person's interpretation being wrong, but if that's the only interpretation, that's distorting. Having that diversity to me is really important. And again, with Montreal [Life] Stories, it was the same idea. We had people interviewing their parents or their grandparents or people from their community... And each of these conversations was different. You interviewing my mother and me interviewing my mother is not the same interview. That doesn't mean that my interview will be

better because I'm her son, because maybe she's willing to tell you things she wouldn't tell me [laughs]. Who knows? But it matters in the sense that, of course, it shapes the conversation. Oral historians think a lot about the underlying logic of what's being said, what's not being said, who is in the conversation, and who is not in the conversation. This is true for the interview, but also true for a project and even for a discipline.

MJ – Can you tell me a bit about your current project, Deindustrialization And The Politics Of Our Time (DEPOT)?[13]

SH – From the beginning, I've been interested in both mass violence and structural violence. Structural violence, like poverty, factory closures, and homelessness are part of our every day and are not always even seen or recognized as violence. I come from a working-class community and so I've always felt strongly that this process has been devastating for communities around the world. And politicians are not listening, so there has been a silence. The project is looking at deindustrialization, the collapse of industrial working-class communities in North America and Western Europe, areas that industrialized early on, that were industrial nations, where the industry was important to the economy but also to the society itself. It's talking about the politics of Donald Trump, Brexit, the rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe, but also closer to our home [in Montreal] in terms of what's been happening with anti-vaccination movements... We are interested in the anger, emotions, people's interpretation of what's been happening. The project brings together researchers but also trade unions, and industrial heritage museums... We are coming together to think about it as a transnational process. It's not just about Donald Trump. What happened in the US, similar things are happening in the UK and so on. So what's going on? And there are a lot of assumptions in the media, but not a lot of research and certainly not a lot of research with working-class people themselves.

In oral history, we tend to interview people that we like, that we admire, that we identify with. I don't think that we interview enough across differences, those with who we might not agree, that we may not like, but we need to understand. If we want to understand why people are angry, or who are hating, we need to go there. Not to justify their hate but to understand it. And that's how we can effect change. That's the hardest kind of listening, in my opinion. And that's what the project is doing.

It's a 7-year project [started in May 2020], and it's about connecting people from six different countries [Canada, United States, Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom]. But this is not confined to these six countries, it's global. You are from Brazil [laughs] you know something about this... We are interested in making wider connections. We want to connect globally because it's a global phenomenon. We invite people to present and they become part of the conversation and then they join the

[13] For more on this, see the website. Available from: https://deindustrialization.org/. Access on: 22 jul. 2022.

project. Increasingly people are joining from outside the six countries that are at the core.

MJ – Well, I think these are all my questions... Thank you so much again for your time and availability!

References

DUONG, Thi Ry; HIGH, Steven; LITTLE, Edward (Ed.). *Remembering Mass Violence*: Oral History, New Media and Performance. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.

FRISCH, Michael. Three Dimensions and More: Oral History Beyond the Paradoxes of Method. *In*: HESSE-BIBER, Sharlene Nagy; LEAVY, Patricia Leavy (Org.). *Handbook of Emergent Methods*. New York: Guildford, 2008. p. 221-238.

HIGH, Steven (Org.). *Beyond testimony and trauma*: Oral history in the aftermath of mass violence. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015.

HIGH, Steven. *Industrial Sunset*: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

HIGH, Steven. Oral History as Creative Practice at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. *Bulletin de l'AFAS*, n. 47, p. 108-121, 2021.

HIGH, Steven. *Oral History at the Crossroads*: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015.

HIGH, Steven; LITTLE, Edward; MILLER, Elizabeth. *Going public*: The art of participatory practice. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017.

Received in 05/15/2022
Approved in 06/08/2022