

Interview

A public history trail: A conversation with Michael Frisch

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Abstract: This is an interview with Michael Frisch, an American historian specializing in oral history, public history and, more recently, digital history. Formulator of the influential concept of “shared authority”, Frisch presents, in this interview, moments of his formation, insertion in different institutional cultures and the relations between public history and multiculturalism. He discusses the role of technology in historical research on oral and public history – amid the current context, under the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Oral history; Public history; Digital history.

Trilhas de uma história pública: uma conversa com Michael Frisch

Resumo: Esta é uma entrevista feita com Michael Frisch, historiador estadunidense especialista em história oral, história pública e, mais recentemente, história digital. Formulator do influente conceito de “autoridade compartilhada”, Frisch apresenta, nesta entrevista, momentos de sua formação, inserção em diferentes culturas institucionais e as relações entre história pública e multiculturalismo. Discute, também, o papel da tecnologia na pesquisa histórica sobre a história oral e pública – em meio ao contexto atual, sob os efeitos da pandemia da Covid-19.

Palavras-chave: História oral; História pública; História digital.

For at least 30 years, Michael Frisch's work has been known to historians who work with oral sources, the public communication of their research works, or the dilemmas of history of the present. His important book *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* was released in 1990, at a moment when the canon of these practices was being shaped. The concept he engendered – shared authority – became central for the understanding of the nature of oral history and, in a broader manner, the participative dimension of research and the actions of history professionals.

Since then, Frisch has critically reflected on practical, political, and poetic aspects in the construction of knowledge of the past. Social memory, historical writing as cultural production, and the role of difference in research and in the way sources are treated are some of his classic themes. More recently, his keen eye has been directed to the implications of the digital revolution for historical knowledge, the vast production of images in contemporary times, and the potential of informational cartography and other IT tools as allies of the historian. They are reflections which accompany committed practices, ranging from the development of software and applications to the occupation of the artistic scenario: with *The 198 String Band*, for example, Frisch has developed musical concerts based on historical documentation.

The conversation presented here reflects this multiplicity of viewpoints and creations – and also the generosity and genuine curiosity of Frisch in accompanying the public history practiced in Brazil. The first part of the conversation, oral, was recorded in 2012, in dialogue with Ricardo Santhiago, when Frisch was in São Paulo as a keynote speaker for the first International Symposium of the Brazilian Network of Public History. The second part, written, was prepared in 2023, in dialogue with Juniele Rabêlo de Almeida, after other visits (including the 4th International Symposium of the Brazilian Network of Public History in 2018, held in São Paulo simultaneously with the 5th Annual Meeting of the International Federation of Public History) and many dialogues cultivated in the common field of interests of his interlocutors.

Together, the two parts of the conversation, which we have the pleasure of sharing, show a historian truly fond of dialogue, inventiveness, and the search to guarantee a public form for historical reflection, giving consequence to its relevance.

Ricardo Santhiago & Juniele Rabêlo de Almeida: We want to start this interview by trying to understand how you came to be the sort of unorthodox historian you are. Could you tell us about your education and influences?

Michael Frisch: In some ways, it is a story of becoming less orthodox than when I started. I had a sort of early conventional background. When I went to college, I had very vague ideas about what to do. I was actually pre-med, I thought I would be a doctor, and then I

abandoned that pretty quickly and wandered quite a bit in college, trying to find a major, and finally ended up in history and was pretty happy with that. I would have shifted to music, but I didn't really have an image of what you could do with that, and at that point, people usually graduated in four years. The idea of stretching it on seemed odd, so I stayed with a history major and had no real direction. It ended up being almost an accident that I went to graduate school.

I applied to American graduate schools and only got into one, a very good one, Princeton, but it wasn't so good in American history at that point. It was a weaker part of the program. But it was a moment in which they were very concerned about the need for more professors and how many people never finished graduate school. So, their solution, being a wealthy Ivy League school, was to throw money at people. Everybody they accepted was offered a four-year fellowship, so I ended up going to graduate school.

At that point, the only other real influence I had was that I had, as a teenager, a very interesting kind of camp, but also a kind of social project for teenagers. There was a 19th-century Utopian movement in the US called the Shakers. It was a religious communitarian society and a very strange religion, Christian, but they had no private property, they lived communally, they had 20 or 30 villages, over 6,000 at one point, and it was very successful and lasted – in some way, it is still going, in some form. But they had really a major influence on American crafts, and there was this project that was basically restoring one of these villages and trying to draw a lesson from this history – not religious lessons, but lessons about social commitment, about the dignity of work and how important that was in a society where young people didn't get a chance to do meaningful work. It was kind of like a secular progressive translation of this Shaker religious ethic. I went there and was very influenced by that. In college, my senior thesis – I had access to a lot of documents – was about the history of this community and how they negotiated the fact that they were starting to lose their appeal and had to work through a lot of complicated political decisions about whether to try to broaden their appeal or to become more pure. It was my first real research in primary sources, and when I got to graduate school, I thought maybe I would do that, maybe do some things that had to do with craftsmanship, artisans, and labor, but gradually evolved and ended up doing what we called “urban history,” and I came up with this plan to do my dissertation. It was really driven by wanting to get out of the university. I was tired of being locked in a library. And so, I became part of a movement to do community studies, and I picked a city in New England – there was a lot of interest in how cities grow and develop, and in a place called Springfield, Massachusetts, I did my dissertation, and it got me out into the world.

From that trajectory, although there were a number of influences, it was a time of enormous academic opportunity. It was not a problem getting jobs, and I ended up at [The

University of] Buffalo, which was then very exciting, expanding, and new. It had been a private university that had been taken over by the state and part of the growing New York system. So it was experimental, a lot of energy, and it seemed a great place to be. And then what happened is, if that was all I was doing, I would have remained a sort of interesting but fairly conventional academic in this exciting new field of urban history. The work was pretty good, and my dissertation became a book that was well-received. There was a nice path going there.

But what also happened at Buffalo is that I became part of an American Studies Program, which was attempting to be rather different from the straight academic path. It was people who were brought from Yale looking for an opportunity to do some things that were very original, so we came up with this conception of a program that would be much more international. To be in “American” studies meant you had to know something about the rest of the world, and you had to go someplace and experience a very different set of cultural realities. It very quickly developed into the place on our campus where all sorts of unorthodox things were brought together, so it became an umbrella under which we had one of the early women’s studies programs, there was what began as a Puerto Rican Program, but really quickly became Caribbean and hemispheric, and probably most important, we were in an area with a lot of indigenous reservations of Iroquois Indians. So it became the base for a native program, developed originally by native students, one of whom became one of the major indigenous intellectuals in the world, John Mohawk. He recruited a man who is quite famous, Oren Lyons, who is a chief of the Onondaga nation, which was part of the Iroquois Confederacy. Oren really has become one of the most respected voices representing American indigenous people in the global community of indigenous people, which has become very significant in the United Nations and elsewhere and been very involved. He made a major presentation at the [1992] Rio Conference on global ecology. So it became an extraordinary constellation of people in our little program in Buffalo.

And there was this: because of the political atmosphere at the time, it was a program that was much more engaged and increasingly involved in getting our students out into the community, to do activist work. So when you put all these things together, for many years, because these were two different departments, it felt like I had a kind of schizophrenic academic identity: part of me was in a very straight, conventional history department, where I was respected but viewed as slightly different, and the other part was in this American studies program, most of which was filled with people much more radical than me and doing these very unorthodox things in the university, thinking for the first time about native people, or women’s studies, or bilingual complexity, and all sorts of things. I really felt split for a long time, and it took me quite a while to realize that maybe they weren’t so split. I was just one person.

Around the time, I got around to what became the book *Portraits in Steel* [published in 1993], which is about steel workers, in conjunction with the photographer Milton Rogovin (Frisch and Rogovin, 1993). It was an oral history but grounded in urban history. I think at that point, I began to be much more comfortable with how my history was becoming a little bit more unorthodox – you go through lots of sort of forks in the road that you are not even aware you are making choices. But as I got more deeply involved in oral history, and there was a lot of response to the things that I was writing, that became more and more the center [of my work]. Yet there is a tendency sometimes, in oral history, to be so romantic about the voice of the subject that you forget that it really helps to know what else we know about history, aside from what people may be saying about it, so that you can measure that difference between memory and whatever is known more objectively in some cases. That is, I think, how [formal history and oral history] tend to come together a little more.

RS & JRA: The concept you developed of “shared authority,” is different from the romanticized view of oral history as a method of “giving voice to the voiceless.” How did you come to establish this concept?

MF: I would say accidentally. Or, to put it better, because it relates to the things we talked about, it is always amusing to me that people often put it under the heading of “theory” when they are trying to locate me. I’m not sure what that always means, and I’m not sure how theory is used in lots of strange ways in modern intellectual discourse, but to me, the interesting thing about even that claim is the degree to which everything that I had to say in that book and every answer I could have to the question that you raised, comes out of practice rather than out of my head. So, if I had been able to think about it in ways that are helpful, that would have been nice – but the start was *doing something*. Or *something happening* – and then requiring some reflection rather than something that begins as an abstraction.

To be specific on your point, there are a couple of milestones – some of which are in the book¹ but have to be put together as a story, a funny story, actually. We have very interested graduate students, and we had one group that were all Trotskyites, and at that point in time, it [meant] to be interested in kind of high-level organization – they were very disciplined. A little crazy, but very disciplined: you had to get things done. So they decided they wanted to create a journal and went out and got some funding. They found somebody to print it and got a subscription agent. They sold subscriptions all over the world, even be-

¹ The book that brings together the pieces mentioned in this answer, where Frisch initially conceptualizes the idea of “shared authority,” is *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. (Frisch, 1990a).

fore there was a first issue. Each issue would have a focus. The first was basically about this early work on native stuff – about Indians. They decided to call the journal the *Red Buffalo* – the meaning, of course, was that we were in Buffalo, and they were Reds, meaning Communists, but they were also dealing with Indians who were red.

They were so organized that all around the world there were libraries that had a subscription to *Red Buffalo*, but they only produced two issues. The second one was on oral history. They did not know anything about the Oral History Association, but they knew there was interest in something called oral history – and they tried to get everybody to help contribute. I was a professor in the program, I had never had any connection to oral history, and they asked me if I would write something for the journal. And I said, “Well, I don’t have anything to write about.” But then I realized I was, at that point, reading Studs Terkel’s book about the Depression for my other teaching. It had just come out a little while before. I said, “Well, I’m reading *Hard Times*, it’s an oral history of the Depression, and I could write a review essay.” That is how I got to write that article, which really got a lot of notice. Ron Grele sort of brought me into the circle of oral historians, [Alessandro] Portelli noticed it – so that was the entry point: “Here is this guy, and he’s saying something useful.” I always joke with friends that the way to get really famous is to write a pretty good article in some place that nobody can find. That was the first piece on shared authority and the one that kind of connected me with oral history as a field. And at some point, you say, “Well, if people are finding what I say so useful, then this is probably an interesting place to do more work.”

To get back to your question about the idea of shared authority – so, they are doing this journal on oral history and commissioned this person, I think in Wisconsin, to write an introduction. It was a friend of theirs but not a Trotskyist. When they were finishing the piece, they looked at this introduction and thought it was just terrible. It was just the most kind of simple-minded romanticized [view] – the “wisdom of the people” and “oral history is about letting them guide us” and on and on about that. They found that very problematic and wrote a counter introduction, so the journal came out with two introductions – the other was their critique of false consciousness, using a lot of Althusser to talk about the problems of accepting whatever people might say, if they are coming out of a system of domination and oppression, as somehow having a “truth” value. The tension was really interesting. I thought a lot about that. [Also], in the Terkel essay, I started by – I literally can remember where I was sitting, looking at the back of my paperback [of *Hard Times*] and looking at what we call the “blurbs,” little statements on the back of the paperback. I had just finished the book, and they were all sort of saying, “Oh, this is the voice of the people; just listen to these voices, and this is the way it really was.” And I said, “Well, that’s a crock. That is not what I read in this book.” I thought in Terkel’s own posture, very atten-

tive to how screwed up people got by the Depression and how, in reciting their memories, there is all this pain, this sense of lost youth, anger, generational differences, and people who worked so hard so that their children would have the opportunities they didn't have but are deeply scarred by this fact. I thought a lot of political lessons about how social failures are internalized as individual failures, and people who felt that somehow they had failed rather than there is something failing them in society. My politics at the time was attuned to that, but I thought, "Boy, this is pretty complicated stuff coming through these memories." And then I go to the back cover, and there is just no interest in that at all! All they are saying is, "This is the voice of the people," and how "wonderful," and "inspiring," and "noble..." I found the book pretty depressing. That is really that tension between the same romantic view versus a critical view. So in a way, everything came out of this experience with these Trotskyists in this little essay on Studs Terkel.² Not quite yet shared authority, but something about [how] oral history is [not] just a window into the real experience from another time – it is a pretty complicated window.

Probably the next piece on that was an article for *The New York Times Magazine* on unemployment in Buffalo. They had asked Studs Terkel to do it, but he was not interested. So they asked us, at the American Studies Program, to do this article. It was pretty exciting, and then, as I described in that piece, we ended up having a huge battle over editing the texts with the *New York Times*. We sent it in, and it had to be shortened by, I don't know, 30%. They did a version of it, and something seemed wrong with their version, so we insisted on the right to produce our own because all we had really done was edit – we hadn't written anything. They didn't see what the fuss was about, but they finally gave in. Then a couple of years later, one of my students and I found their version and did a kind of analysis of their editing. It ended up helping to crystallize a lot of these ideas. The point is that the difference in the edits was not at all what we expected: it was not political (that we were more "left" and they were more "right" – if anything, there was a kind of "radical chic," they wanted more "angry" workers). But the real difference was that they were very impatient as journalists, and they kept saying, "It's just journalism. We are not making value judgments, we are just interested in a good article." What it came down to was that, in almost every case of the decisions they wanted to make about what to cut out of the article, was essentially where people were being reflective or analytic. Where they were being historians. Where they were saying, "Here is what I think is going on." They [the magazine editors] kept saying, "We are interested in what *happened* to them." The conclusion we

² Republished as "Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay", in: Frisch (1990b, p. 5-14). A more recent article in which Frisch (2010) examines Studs Terkel work, arguing for his reconsideration by the historical discipline, is: "Studs Terkel, historian."

came to was that in their approach, the purpose of the oral history was only to provide this raw experience that they would retain – and their cosmopolitan readers by extension. You serve it up, as a kind of pornography. They wanted pain, they wanted a jolt of authentic emotion, with the implicit posture that “our readers will then figure it out.” And so we came to think of this as the “Sunday brunch problem:” they wanted to serve up these stories from Buffalo as bagels and lox. And the people, when we interviewed them and talked with them afterwards, the people felt like they were being invited to brunch: they had things they wanted to say, they felt that they could talk to the readers, and they weren’t at all confused about that. It all had to do with where the interpretive authority was and whether oral history is just raw material. It was a very profound experience.³

Between [the article on] Studs Terkel and that, a lot of other things that are in the book grew out of things coming out of my history work, where I was starting to do a little more work on museum exhibits, and gradually all these things began to [come together]. But it wasn’t until I had the chance to pull the book together that I realized there was much more consistency in this. So it was pretty exciting when I was deciding what to pull together for the collection, and had to do an introduction, and the theory came out. That is where the whole idea of shared authority came from. Intellectuals still have a role. It is really important to still do real historical research. But there can be this dialogue about meaning with people who bring to it a different level of experience.

RS & JRA: However, some individuals do not necessarily want the authority to be shared at this deeper level – interviewees who are willing to tell their stories but don’t want to participate in the research process. And, if you bring too many people to a kitchen, as in the metaphor you have used recently, you may come up with no dishes to serve. Thus, how messy the public history kitchen can be?

MF: I think that is where I suppose my own romance can come in – always thinking there will be a neat constructive dialogue. So: sometimes it is implicit, sometimes it is in how we read the documents. For example, when I was doing my book on steelworkers, it was very fashionable for everybody to say we wanted all the subjects to be involved in the editing, so I made all these efforts and, by and large, I found these were all working people and their position was, “That’s your work; that’s not our work. *You* do the editing, and we’ll look at it.” And they would sometimes correct me on technical terms, but they didn’t really have any problem with the idea that I was in some ways making judgments about what was more interesting and what was not. And they had the chance to do that. I gave

³ Republished as “Oral History and the Presentation of Class Consciousness: The *New York Times* v. The Buffalo Unemployed”, in: Frisch (1990c, p. 59-80).

them both the full interviews and the edited version; in most cases, they didn't want to take that on. They read it, they were comfortable with what they read and how it represented them.

There is a famous story that maybe ties back to some of the politics we were talking about: there was a fellow named Jeremy Brecker who was one of the creators of a kind of "left public history." He did a lot of work on industrial communities and created projects, mostly in Connecticut, where he was involved with the displaced workers in the area and constructed exhibits. Then he did a pretty good book called *Brass Valley*, which has oral history and has their kind of collaborative development of community exhibits to try to process that experience of plant closing (Brecher, Lombardi and Stackhouse, 1982). He had a story, I heard him tell it: like a good sort of left progressive oral historian, he was very anxious about not wanting to be exploiting people, so he was constantly emphasizing how much he wanted to give back to the community. And he described how one of these workers at one point sat him down and said, "Will you shut up about all of this 'giving back?' Because it sounds like you're trying to pay me, and I gave you that interview as a gift. I don't want to be paid for it. I am happy to give it to you. And every time you try to return something, it makes me feel like you are paying me, and that devalues my gift. I am not asking for anything." It was a very moving little discussion. James said: "So here I am, the big leftist, and he is pointing out that I was falling into the capitalist trap – of exchange of value. Here I thought I was transcending the market economy and was actually re-inventing it, and it took this working guy to say, 'Will you shut up, I just want to give you a gift.'" I thought about that a lot when I was doing my steelworker book. I made all the right efforts to make sure that I was respectful and involved them to the extent, but by and large, they were giving a gift: "My craftsmanship is in the steel mill, and yours is in working with these interviews."

RS & JRA: You mentioned journalism, and journalists and oral and public historians may share many tools. But do you think the audience can grasp the differences between the works done by these different professionals?

MF: I don't know that it is anything absolute, because there are lots of kinds of journalists and there are lots of kinds of public historians, and I think there can be a lot of overlap. But, generally, I think, on the simplest level, you will find that usually the journalist will, by definition, have a more immediate focus. There may be a little bit of background, but they are not so interested or able to give that much attention to the broadest context. When I was doing the steelworker book, we had a lot of trouble getting a publisher. Partly because the photographs were very expensive to reproduce, and the photographer was

very concerned that they needed to be a good production. But other things scared a lot of the publishers, and one of them speaks to this question.

I was working with his pictures, some of which had been taken earlier, that showed the people at work. The whole idea of the book was to follow people from the original photographic time, which was the 1970s, when they were working in the steel plants, to the time when they were no longer working in the steel plants. So I began each interview with the photograph of them at work. It just seemed natural to have them describe what their work was, and what was going on, so we didn't get to the journalistic questions of their response to the plant closing, and what they are doing now, and how they see it, until one or two hours into the interview. In the book proposal, we insisted that these would be relatively long interviews, so that you would have that full sense of context to move from the photographs into reality. And for many of the publishers this made no sense at all. One of them said it to me – it was a very telling moment –, “They are not doing these jobs anymore, so who cares about the details of what they did in the steel plant? It has nothing to do with how they are responding to losing their jobs.” And I said, “Well, I think it has a lot to do with who they are.” [Another publisher] said, “We will be happy to do it if you cut all that stuff out and just give us the part about losing their job.” And we were not so interested in that.

So, in terms of the nature of journalism, the pressure will be to be much more targeted, and to deliver the story in an immediate way. But we have many journalists who, when they get into a story, decide they will write a book. Think of somebody like Robert Caro, the biographer of Lyndon Johnson, who is in his fourth volume about Lyndon Johnson. So I think the differences are not there [in the profession], but in the immediate press of journalistic work.

RS & JRA: You said earlier that all your theory came out from practice. But your book *A Shared Authority* became a canon in the oral history field. Some may argue that canon today is still the same as the 1990s. Is it possible to talk about “novelty” in terms of oral history?

MF: I think it is just starting to happen. I will back up a little bit and say that I think that it's not that all the theory was done, was completely dominant and nobody is doing theory. I think one thing that has happened is that so much theory moved into other areas, so some of that energy has shifted from oral history as a narrow field to this broader sense of how cultural texts get produced. In my view, what is happening now is that a lot of that theory is somewhat disembodied. One of the exciting things, a place where I would look for the next kind of generation of synthesis, would be to draw the best from some of that theoretical energy. Walter Benjamin, for example. You find people like him quoted a lot –

some of that is older, but a lot of it is being done now: transnational theory, issues about cultural flow... There is a lot going on in those realms, and oral history has not quite profited from that very much yet. And in some ways, it is needed.

I do not think people do a terribly good job in oral history when they think formally about theory: there either is nothing there, or it is just being done to dress up. If all we do is write “as Pierre Nora says, *les lieux de mémoire*” and then talk about a place in South Carolina, it is not clear that we need that. We are perfectly capable of talking about South Carolina for ourselves. But that is what often happens with theory. I think we need to situate oral history a little more in the context of other kinds of theorizations. Oral history, in its complexity, is all about culture. It is all about how people inhabit and represent their world. So there has got to be more to be said about that, and oral history offers this grounded base in real experience.

In my seminar, for instance, I often get people coming from the English Department, or comparative literature, where they are filled with this theory. Many of the same issues have been in oral history for a while, but usually not in such elaborated language, not presented as theoretically, and that could be a very productive interface: the value in the oral history approach is that questions not just come from practice, but they are encountered in practice. Sitting in an interview requires a lot of fairly sophisticated understanding about how meaning is being constructed, how it is exchanged, and how its boundaries are being set. All these things are present in much of the cultural theory about how texts are created, about collective memory, but we haven't yet, I think, figured out the best ways to bring all those together.

RS & JRA: Moving from oral history to public history: how would you define it? Do you see it as an impulse, a field, a practice? Or is it better to not have a definition at all?

MF: I have mixed feelings – similar to oral history. I always begin my course by saying that we should not be giving courses like those because there is a tendency to turn them into areas of expertise and soon you have to have a “degree” or a “certificate.” I have a story of somebody who once came to my office and was begging to be in my seminar that semester. Why? “Well, because my grandfather is 97, he's ill, and I really need to interview him. I need to have the course now, so I will be prepared.” I said something, “I can give you a couple of things to read, but just go interview your grandfather, you will probably be fine.” There is that danger with a lot of public history – the idea that you need to have the training and the discipline, and that leads down to a path that points towards professionalization, certification, and gatekeeping. So, part of me is resistant.

Public history is complicated in the United States, and I am sure here [in Brazil] it can

mean so many different things too: from people who are working for corporations to people who are working in government agencies, from anybody who works in a museum to teachers in public schools. So, there can be a limit to what is gained by simply raising that umbrella. But, having said that, there is something broader in it: to me, the defining axis is this broadening of the conversation about history. With that, is the vision that intellectual work can become a public resource through which ordinary experience can be brought into a broader discourse that is beneficial to everybody. This is where my romantic side comes in: that people are really capable of communicating. That is my central orientation, and I think that itself remains. It doesn't always have to be a dialogue between a progressive historian and a working-class community. It can be within business! I know some people who have made a nice living as historians or public historians within industry or government agencies, because [if it were not for them] there would be no memory. Institutional memory is certainly not in the records of their meetings. People get transferred to another office, and nobody has the slightest recollection of why they decided to build a factory in Belize and whether that was a good decision or not. There is a general sense that having a broader perspective, as opposed to being trapped in the present, is an important thing, and that public history can play a pretty valuable thing in that, in different levels and expressions. To me, if the central axis remains – having a sort of historical consciousness being a broader part of social experience –, then that is a pretty good basis and might justify whatever theorization and even organizational forms are at stake.

The other thing I would comment on is that it is coming out of a period of real political ferment. I think it is generally acknowledged that, although university work and scholarship by and large remains, certainly in our context, more progressive and left than ever, there is lots of awareness that it has, surprisingly after a period of much more engagement, become much more isolated, self-centered, and cut-off, with people talking to themselves and reinforcing their world view. So, this is one of the reasons we need this kind of general public history sensibility now. Good museum exhibits, documentary films, all kinds of things, have the capacity to reach people. There is a potential in public history for the dialogue to really become very interesting.

RS & JRA: Should a researcher be interested in pursuing some sort of “international public history” – what would you, as a US citizen, want to read about, for example, Brazilian history or the history of any other foreign country?

MF: I guess what I would say, just off the top of my head, is that there are shared elements in any public historical situation: issues of tradition, issues of who has a stake in it, and what is being done with it. That would provide a point of connection. So, even if the context is totally different, you can recognize a kind of constellation of forces and have a

way to connect. Otherwise, if I just pick up a book on Brazilian history, everything – unless it is a particular issue that I am very interested in – is a little harder. A friend of mine in New York, named Daniel Walkowitz, has co-edited two major volumes essentially about the problems of public history in relation to nations in transition (Walkowitz; Knauer, 2004). I think it works because anybody can read them! I don't know anything about Scotland or Bolivia, but they have set out the problem, and it is interesting to watch them. How do we narrate the story of the dirty wars in Argentina? How about Rwanda? And Brazil? To me, that is the root for transnational public history: elements that are easy to abstract in terms of tradition, change, power, participation. I have a line someplace that says, “theory is like throwing in the clutch when you're driving.” Theory is what allows you to lift out of one gear and move into another. When you put in the clutch, you can shift – so when you have theory, you can move from Brazil to the US, from the US to South Africa, from South Africa to Vietnam. So theory is essential if you are not to be imprisoned within whatever context you are in. But maybe a way to put it is that a lot academic work is like we put in the clutch and never let it out. I think it is a very helpful metaphor. That would be the direction I would go in for somebody doing international public history: to look for those elements where you can translate. I am just thinking my way through it, but your question about public history and international stuff, and your other question about what is the next generation of theory in oral history, may be connected in some ways.

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RS & JRA: What are your main research interests in recent years? Could you talk about your current research looking for new forms of digital software for audio and video documentation? How is the development process of this software going and what can it mean for historical discourse, both academic and public? What were the impacts of the “Covid-19 Pandemic” on oral history and public history practices?

MF: It's certainly curious for me to read today this conversational interview with Ricardo Santhiago, recorded on my first visit to São Paulo back in 2012. I was there to present a conference keynote at the launch of what has become a very substantial public history community in Brazil.⁴ Not only was the interview more than ten years ago, but its focus looked back even further: Ricardo and I discussed how a traditionally trained historian, in a traditional history department, had come almost accidentally to be trans-

⁴ The keynote speech, revised, is published as: “A história pública não é uma via de mão única, ou, De 'A Shared Authority' à cozinha digital, e vice-versa” (Frisch, 2016, p. 57-71).

formed through evolving practice in oral history and public history. We explored a range of projects and involvements, and how my reflections on that practice became my 1990 essay collection, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. This has somehow survived as a landmark in the field – at least its title has (I’m not sure how much it is actually read, and though still in print I *know* it has never come anywhere close to being a best seller!)

But of course, it’s gratifying that *A Shared Authority* seems to have helped crystallize a useful discourse that continues over time, hence the focus of the interview with Ricardo. And gratifying that a decade-old conversation about it may still seem worth publishing today. And even more gratifying, though also challenging, that I’ve now been invited to add a postscript updating the trajectory of my work since that 2012 discussion and conference.

Maybe not surprisingly, then-and-now contexts are connected at the hip. We’re lucky if we stumble upon a few really good ideas at the core of our work over a career, and for me, this has certainly been the case. So for these invited remarks, the point is simple: What I’ve been doing since has been very, very different, in new forms and modes, technologically and otherwise. But in terms of propelling sensibilities and ideas, it’s been pretty much the same variations, some dramatic, on themes at the heart of *A Shared Authority*.

This was true even at the time of that 2012 conference. While Ricardo and I discussed how I had gotten there, my keynote presentation at the conference focused on then-present work, and pointed forward – its own implicit then-and-now.

At that point, I was deeply involved, via Randforce Associates, a consulting office I created, in applied work using new digital tools to index and make accessible the primary source in oral history – the actual recordings. Our practice was based on a software tool, Interclipper, initially developed in market research for quick tagging of passages from focus group recordings. We expanded the use of its ample platform to develop and apply multidimensional coding frames for precise cross-referencing, instant access, and exporting audio/video content across hours and hours of interviews.

In my São Paulo 2012 keynote, I discussed this emerging digital work drawing on terms – playful but serious – that my colleague Douglas Lambert and I offered to locate our consulting practice: The conventional choices in oral history, and public history by extension, have come down to “raw” or “cooked” – *either* collections of data, not often transcribed and rarely very explorable in media or text, *or*, alternatively, selected material extracted for a specific purpose – a film, exhibit, website, and so on. In contrast, we located our work in the in-between space of “the kitchen” – a place where the raw can be cooked into anything, limited only by what’s in the pantry, spice rack, refrigerator, and freezer (Frisch; Lambert, 2010). And we proposed, again a major theme in the keynote, that if legibly organized and with suggested recipes on hand if needed, or not, this

could be imagined as an open restaurant kitchen that anybody in a community could enter to cook, collaboratively or on their own. “A Shared Cookery” so to speak. In the references at the end of these remarks, you’ll find a couple of essays on these themes from a time bracketing the São Paulo 2012 conference.

So if this was the 2012 “then and now” linking the Shared Authority interview to the São Paulo keynote, what has been the trajectory since that point? Well, it’s been pretty much the same story – a core commitment taking dramatic new forms, different...but not really. This came about in two major developments, one from 2016 on, and the other only in the last year or two. Each came not by design but almost accidentally; each only gradually revealed an underlying consistency in value and commitments in oral and public history.

The first initially seemed a tangent: With Mike Haller, the creator of Interclipper, I co-developed a new modality we called “PixStori” – a local smartphone app for adding brief audio stories or comments to still photographs and sharing these via email or upload to dedicated web galleries.⁵ The original PixStori was an IOS app for I-phones; it is still useful and available as a free download from the Apple App Store. But we went on to develop a new web-app version, www.pixstoriplus.com, fully in the cloud, accessible for free from any mobile device or computer. PixStories can be made and posted to public or private/members groups for any family, organization, or purpose. PixStoriplus offers a more controllable and “safe” social-media resource – only group members can post, like, and comment in text or especially in voice, leading to real conversation threads over time. Meanwhile, individual and subsets of Pixstories can be easily exported in generic formats for sharing, as guests with no PixStori signup needed but without the ability to post or comment.

It’s been an instructive surprise that oral and public history projects have been prominent among those attracted to the new web app, and we’ve been helping museums and others to deploy it as a kind of short-form story-gathering oral history, with photos as the prompt rather than an interviewer’s questions. Where is it written that oral history MUST take the form of a long, recorded conversation?

To this point, I did a presentation for one initially skeptical audience that proceeded through a series of bare PowerPoint slides inviting the audience to respond with an imagined mental picture: 1) Imagine an Oral History Archive. Then 2) Imagine an Oral History Archive holding 10,000 interviews. Then 3) Imagine an Oral History Archive holding

⁵ See three brief “mini-articles” on PixStori posted to LinkedIn profile page to Michael Frisch: “Room Beyond Zoom: value and uses of a-synchronous social media modes”; “Grounded but not Bounded: Photo-Prompted Story Gathering”; and “Community Building with Talking Intro-Directories”. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/michael-frisch-2477288/>.

10,000 interviews none more than two minutes long. This being close to unimaginable, a fourth slide followed, a picture with no text at all: a huge byzantine mosaic from Ravenna, Italy covering the wall of a cathedral, composed entirely, as mosaics are, of tiny tiles a few centimeters square. QED.

This has opened a path to imagining, and constructing, a kind of “mosaic” oral history composed of short responses to photos or other images, which taken together can tell the story of a community, a family, an organization, or an institution. And this, in turn, has underscored a number of capacities that couldn’t be more resonant with the notion of a Shared Authority:

PixStori is especially suited to crowdsourcing of responses around any theme, whether involving people “story-ing” their own photos in response to a broad general prompt, or responding to provided “seed” images with personal responses, anecdotes, testimonies. These can then be “curated” mosaically for exhibits, online web presentations, and the like. Among the more productive uses of this approach have been collecting of short-form Covid-19 experiences, and also those of LGBTQ communities post-Stonewall.

As we work collaboratively on such projects, we’ve been struck by the open-endedness the short-form method produces, with substantial implications for oral and public historical practice. In a 1 or 2-minute PixStori, many respondents take only 15 or 20 seconds to literally describe and context the actual photograph. And then, more characteristically, they “take off” to a broader story or reflection sparked by the photo – resulting in anecdotes or commentaries that are “grounded but not bounded” by the prompting image. Which is to say, a kind of directed free association unfolding personal meaning in a concentrated, immediate form, far from what an interviewer might have anticipated or asked in a question. Which is to say, a shared authorship in the content and interpretation of the historical being produced. And the short, modular form has led a number of museums not just to crowd-source collecting, but to crowd-sourced collaboration in curation itself, the community helping to select PixStories to add to a major community exhibit, online and/or on-site.

There has been a second major axis in my evolving work since 2012 – just in the last couple of years, and with its own more literal connection to Shared Authority:

The Interclipper digital indexing discussed in that 2012 São Paulo keynote was all about the recordings – it didn’t require previous transcribing, or transcribing at all. Our work tended to fall into an implicit either/or posture about transcription: I approached the recording as the primary source in any number of ways – and open to richer indexing than limited text transcription, rarely indexed all, especially given the temptation of instant text searching. Mapping and exploring, rather than the specific searching that requires you to know what you’re looking for, seemed important for broadening access – for shar-

ing the capacity to engage and interact with oral history, and for the dialog that public history invites. And this is what media-based indexing interfaces like Interclipper offered.

This has changed, seismically, in the last few years. In our particular practice, the Interclipper platform, for all its wonderful media cross-referencing capacities, never migrated to the cloud and so became increasingly obsolete for substantial projects requiring both local and cloud dimensions. And meanwhile, dramatic new capacities were pretty much obliterating the either/or transcription-recording divide for making interviews broadly explorable and fluidly usable for public history projects.

Two intertwined dimensions have been the key to this obliteration. First, instant automatic transcription is improving and more and more is available for instantly producing an initial text version. This is still far from adequate, but it starts you off with 80-90% of the work done, and a basis for then checking, correcting, and formatting into what we've come to call the "transcript of record," both accurate and easily readable/ browsable. But this leads to a paradox: the more comprehensive and accurate the auto-transcribing becomes, the more it requires aggressive formatting, filled as it is with every speaker alternation around every utterance, and littered with time codes. Intervention is needed to make the results readable and browsable.

The second dimension is that auto-transcription can provide embedded time codes that connect the transcript and the recording at precise points – read, click, and hear/watch that precise moment in the interview. This opens up a new world of time-code indexing-text-based access to the source recording – for examination, for extraction, and for multimedia use. These features are now staples in online oral history and multimedia e-publication platforms, such as the well-known OHMS and AVIARY, due to merge later in 2023.

Just a year or two ago, we began plunging into a new integrated approach to markup and indexing, starting with the automatic transcription and moving on to a series of refined iterations. We found an ideal in-between platform offered by a recent startup, TheirStory, which has been unique in offering an optimized platform for remote conduct and gathering of video interviews.

For our work, the appeal of TheirStory lies in its offering an enhanced mark-up capacity, some of it grounded in the unique Timecode Indexing Module (TIM) developed in part by Doug Lambert, my former Randforce Director of Technology. We've been collaborating on applying these capacities for what I've come to call "Indexing for Use," or perhaps better, "Indexing for Use(s)." This involves an arc moved through with surprising ease – from raw dump to the transcript of record to digests turning vocalizations into readable text with no loss of content, to specific indexed passages available for media export or verbatim quotation. Each of these iterations has distinct uses; each is saved and always accessible –

nothing is “left on the cutting room floor” They are all linked to each other and to the recording by time codes, and each can be coded or keyworded using a shared custom taxonomy or control-vocabulary thesaurus.

A particular satisfaction for me has been re-discovering the usefulness, in this process, of transcript digests, as compared to the externally written summaries other systems rely on. These digests end up at about 25-40% of the full transcript of record with absolutely no loss of content or theme – it’s just “squeezing the water out” to produce an accurate, readable, browsable distillation – wholly in the speaker’s own words. Digests are especially useful for publication, with the full original always available for checking or giving heightened attention, say, to the dynamics of a real conversation. Not at all coincidentally, developing this dimension brought me back to one of the more unusual chapters in *A Shared Authority* – a discussion of editing for publication based on presenting “before and after” versions of one of the way-too-long-to-publish interviews in *Portraits in Steel* (1993), my oral history, in collaboration with the internationally renowned photographer, Milton Rogovin, of Buffalo steelworkers after the shutdown of most of our community’s steel making facilities.

We’re now collaborating with a range of partners – almost all oriented to public history – in applying the “indexing for use(s)” approach to focused oral history interview collections.

I’m pleased to be able to provide a way for readers to explore all this for themselves. Having learned something from two-plus years of enforced conference virtuality, we prepared – for the 2022 (US) Oral History Association live Los Angeles meeting – a set of online examples, position papers, and demonstration models for both the short-form PixStories and the “indexing for use(s)” for long-form oral histories: There are all reachable via one portal URL: www.rebrand.ly/OHA2022.

And there you have it – “then and now,” new work wholly different but at its core driven by a resonant sensibility as to what matters, and why, in oral and public history practice.

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