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Discovering the Position (or lack thereof) of the Black Woman's Voice in the 1970s Feminist Movements

Reflection on Choice in Topic

The black woman's voice throughout history is a delicate and frequently ignored subject. Trying to find research material prior to the twentieth century is incredibly difficult with the lack of primary sources. Visiting museum after museum emphasizes how ignored their voices are. My personal interest in the latter half of the twentieth century, specifically the 1970s as a time period in which desegregation and civil rights were gaining fast momentum, lent me the idea to explore the black woman's voice within this decade. Conducting this oral history process with two interviewees emphasizes the importance of the black woman's voice in investigating the importance of the individual within the context of grander events unfolding in the 1970s. The voice is important in discovering the emotion and the plurality of the past. The black woman's voice is essential as a mainstream part of American history and by studying both the successes and the prejudices my interviewees faced, the black woman's voice is shown to be increasingly involved and elevated in the historiography of American history after the events that occurred in the 1970s.

There is an idea that studying the history of the ignored voices in history means the texts surrounding it will be filled with sorrow, bitterness, prejudice, hatred, and many other adjectives to describe a feeling of "other." These notions are true and can be found time and time again in reading histories of disadvantaged individuals. However, life is never truly filled with pure sorrow or pure pain. That would be no way to live. Life is ups and downs, sometimes more

downs than ups and sometimes more ups than downs. As Voltaire wrote about humanity in general, "if there is one of them all who has not cursed his existence many times.. I give you permission to throw me head-first into the sea."[1] In no way does this quote discount the struggles individuals faced in liberation, it instead elaborates and clarifies an idea that although life is filled with suffering, there is room for something more than just suffering - hope and joy.

Writing just about pain would be no way of honestly and genuinely remembering those who have struggled to gain freedoms and rights. Nikki Rosa, a black poet, wrote in 1969, "I really hope no white person ever has cause to write about me… [they'll] never understand that all the while I was quite happy."[2] I will take a moment to apologize to Rosa, because I am a white man living in 2018, writing about her and other women like her. However I would like to emphasize oral history as a slightly different way of writing history, a different way of remembering women like Rosa. Oral history attempts to use the memory and "make sense of the past and to give a form to the [interviewee's] lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context."[3] In doing so, oral history seeks to reconstruct the past which can effectively be done by conducting a life history interview. The life history interview addresses the interviewee with a question that begins the story with the childhood and builds it from there. By exploring the nature of childhood and the intricacies of an individual's life, multi-layered stories emerge. The synthesis of these stories creates the idea that life is not a singular line composed of pure prejudice and pain. In contrast to what Rosa says, oral history emphasizes the

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[1] Voltaire, *Candide* (New York City: Enriched Classics, 2005)
[2] Nikki Rosa, "Poem," in *The Black Woman Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005), 12.
[3] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Ritchie, Donald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54.

happy moments in tandem with the sorrow of an individual's life to further develop the image of a life shaped by the years in which the interviewee grew up in.

Originally when starting this oral history project, I had a broad sense of what feminism meant in the 1970s. It was a series of movements elaborating on the Civil Rights act in the 1960s and the many decades of oppression against both women and minorities. The movements continue to this day with the rising frequency of women marches across the United States. In 2017-2018, a MeToo movement emerged proclaiming justice on those who committed sexual assaults without any acknowledgement of its atrocity. My voice is shaped by the outcome of the events in the 1970s and the events that happen around me today. However, I lack the perspective to fully empathize with these movements. By studying topics like black women in the 1970s, I am beginning to explore my own placement within the world and my identity. As Yow suggests, "the process of studying a life compelled me to establish a connection to another and to feel empathy with that person."[4] I do not want to assume the position of an expert or anywhere close to that title on these topics. However, I would like to explore how oral history may suggest a different way of studying often ignored voices that creates a balance between the individual studying it (me) and the subjects of the study. The aurality of oral history places a unique perspective by including my interviewees in shaping how I examine my topic. In conducting my interviews, I heard my interviewees emotion crack through their narratives and provide context to the prejudice commonly found in their lifetime. By writing about this topic, I am assuming a position of balance between my extended studies beyond the interviews and the narratives I collected by conducting these interviews. The narratives provide humanitarian perspective to the

[4] Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History : A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (California: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 222.

sources I study. In selecting this topic, I jumped in assuming feminism was a topic my interviewees could talk about at length. I quickly learned the exclusion of black women from these feminist movements and the importance of succeeding in a society where it seems like fate is blowing the other way.

Introduction of Interviewees

I interviewed two individuals, Gloria Thomas and Bettina Shuford. Gloria Thomas is the current director of the Women's Center on the UNC Chapel Hill Campus and Bettina Shuford is the current vice-chancellor of Student Affairs at UNC Chapel Hill. Thomas grew up in Chester Pennsylvania, she attended high school at the end of the 1970s and college in the early 1980s. Shuford grew up in Salisbury, North Carolina, she attended high school in the early-mid 1970s and college in the late 1970s.

Prior to conducting the two interviews, I emailed both individuals a list of brief questions regarding the feminist movements in the 1960s and the 1970s. Thomas replied, "I didn't really have a feminist consciousness in the 1970s and 80s..my personal rebelliousness mostly became the way that I would respond." Shuford replied, "The feminist movement during this time was not reflective of women of color.. I think I have always had a womanist mindset growing up, but did not have a formal name to frame how I felt."

The Use of Oral History in Exploring Gloria Thomas's Life Story

"The white women's liberation movement is basically middle-class. Very few of these women suffer the extreme economic exploitation that most Black women are subjected to day by day."[5]

[5] Francis Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *The Black Woman Anthology*, 109.

The above quote was written by Francis Beale, a black feminist who co-founded the Black Women's Liberation of Committee of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1968.[6] In conducting oral history, her statement suggesting the economic exploitation is an oversimplification. Referring again to Rosa's poem, the significance in studying black women during this time period is to, in part, learn how they succeeded in spite of their circumstances. Using economics as the ground-point to differ white feminists from black feminists strips the human nature of struggle and succeeding in spite of the circumstances. Thomas applied to an Upper Bound program in high school that would place her in a boarding school with a much higher quality of education than the one she was receiving in her high school. She did not receive that scholarship, instead this story plants the early steps Thomas took in high school to pursue her ambitions - college and education beyond. Oral history confirms the economic struggle Thomas faced in her high school. However, Beale's statement is focusing the light on the wrong spot. To further develop this argument, Beale was an interviewee in an oral history study at Smith College in 2006. This interview was three hours in length and allowed Beale to speak at length about her family and how her childhood shaped who she became as an adult.[7] The core problem with Beale's quote is that it narrows these struggles to a single word - feminism.

There is nothing inherently wrong with using the word feminism, however, in conducting my interview with Thomas, I learned how she created her own voice shaped by the struggles she faced and her accomplishments. Studying the woman's voice through oral history in the 1970s reveals that there is a lot more depth to the question of how the feminist movement played a role in shaping the voice. Although Thomas suggested that she did not have a feminist consciousness

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[6] Francis Beale, interview by Loretta J. Ross, Smith College, March 18, 2005.
[7] Ibid.

during this time period, she created a voice independent of the movement that still promoted a sense of mobility in a society that wanted anything but that.

Throughout the course of my interviews, I began framing my reference of feminism in the 1970s in a different lens. Rather the voice being shaped by feminism, my understanding of the voice evolved it into a subject shaped by the unique atmosphere the individual lived through. Comparing the two interviews, Beale and my own, reveals a few similarities between the individuals. Both Beale and Thomas had similar childhoods in a few regards - fathers were truck drivers who passed away at an early age, possibly (unknown on Thomas's end) mixed heritage, and raised/lived in the north during the 1960s-1970s.[8] Comparing the two oral histories, the voice might be suggested to be shaped by similar significant life events. The lack of a primary paternal figure and the northern environment are two factors that shaped Beale and Thomas's view of the world. As a result of how Thomas's father treated her, she became wary of men and alcohol. On a high school trip, a teacher invited Thomas into his hotel room. The connotations of this invite led Thomas to desperately and successfully find a ride home immediately after that happened.

These snippets of Thomas's life can be used to create a general schema of the black woman's voice during this time period. The voice can be traced through this concept of silence, a concept that "there are so many silences that need to be broken."[9] Neither her father or the teacher considered her to be a human deserving of respect or equality. The shapes of oppression and prejudice can take many forms and can appear both in the familial and the school setting, which many might consider to be a safe zone.

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Audre Geraldine Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Crossing Press, 1984.

Placing these memories in the context of oral history means considering my role as the interviewer. Using that same concept of silence, Thomas shared with me at a later point in her interview that if her children wanted to know anything about her past, she would try to be as open as possible. For the children to accept that invite and to inquire into her past creates this sense of a "family heirloom", Thomas's stories and memories are passed down from her own life to her children's. They remain bound to the familial circle or through small stories Thomas or her children might share with other friends and family. My role as an interviewer, was to create a space that was comfortable and open for the interviewee to speak at length about her past. This comfort and openness can be traced visibly throughout the course of the interview. At the beginning, the interviewee might feel tense or uncomfortable; unaware of what oral history means or why a stranger might want to hear their story. However, as Portelli suggests, the role of oral history is to "give form to [the interviewee's] life."[10] These memories Thomas shared with me become elevated beyond just her life. They become reflections and appreciations of the life Thomas lived. Through the course of the interview, the interviewer's push to creating a sense of interest and fascination in an individual's life can be felt in the room. The interviewee feels this and the stories become richer and more colorful. Oral history plays a significant role, not for me to become the sole record-keeper or speaker on these issues, but to create a space where individuals who lived through these eras can create their own histories and contribute their lives in this progressing and evolving idea of the past.

The Use of Oral History in Exploring Bettina Shuford's Life Story

[10]Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History,* 54

"Of course, one of the dangers of standing at an intersection-particularly at such a suddenly busy, three-way intersection-is the likelihood of being run over by oncoming traffic."[11]

The above refers to a notion of intersectionality, an overlapping of different identities in shaping how an individual perceives the world. In order to study the black woman's voice of any decade, this concept is highly important in analyzing how individuals like Shuford react to certain events throughout life. Her father was a principal and one of the first in her local area to receive higher education. Shuford's close relationship with her father and his early passing (when Shuford was a preteen) can be used to analyze how her perception of the world evolved throughout her life. To begin with childhood, her parents and siblings sheltered her from the world so many of her concepts of being both a woman and black emerge through small previews of the world as she aged. Through this seemingly sheltered life, how did her voice emerge? The voice emerges as the individual gains agency in their world.

This answer can be further emphasized by looking at Shuford's high school career when she joined the cheerleading team. The high school, prior to Shuford's entrance, was a segregated school for white people. After desegregation, the cheerleading team and many other aspects of life were still segregated to an extent. The cheerleading team, in an attempt to push for desegregation allowed for two spots to specifically be for black individuals. Shuford took this opportunity to join the team and from there was able to educate her teammates and her captain on racism. In this case with the cheerleading team, her intersectionality clearly stems from the gendered notion of cheerleading being for women at the time and its progress towards desegregation. Shuford's voice, in this example, was invisible and considered inferior to a point

[11] Ann Ducille. "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies." Signs 19, no. 3 (1994): 592. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174771.

where the only way to break that inferiority on a societal level was to create two specific spots for black women. However, by creating those two spots, her voice was given a platform to speak out against prejudice.

Referring again to the idea that oral history "[gives] form to [the interviewee's] life"[12], the narrative of Shuford's life is not composed of distant and disconnected snippets. Her voice was shaped by each of these moments and emerged piece by piece. Her father's success and position as principal might be considered normal to her so this concept of pursuing higher education became a doable facet of life. This normalcy is important in contrasting Shuford's background to other individuals who did not have family members with similar educational experience. Following this path, Shuford's goal was to always attain higher education and get a degree. Growing up without this father figure does not mean that sense of normalcy was lost when he passed. Her aunts and uncles also balanced a work-life with family life, emphasizing this notion of pursuing work regardless of gender or race. Concepts of normalcy follow Shuford as she made her choices in how she wanted to live life. Seeing her family live like this was her concept of normalcy and it only made sense for her to pursue higher education even though a black woman at the time was considered inferior.

Shuford's voice was influenced by her family background and her perseverance in pursuing opportunities like cheerleading. Even though she was not an active part of the feminist movements, she was still an active part of creating a sense of humanity in a black woman's voice within her local community. The cheerleaders she interacted with learned that there was no difference between them and Shuford. As Shuford put it, "this presumed difference is just a lack

[12]Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History,* 54

of awareness…we're all just individuals." The voice in her lifetime was by pushing for spaces where her voice was originally excluded and then using that space to educate those around her to appreciate and respect her position within the world.

Implications of Oral History for Studying the Black Woman's Voice

"As the movement toward the liberation of women grows, the Black woman will find herself in a serious dilemma... the Black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of Blacks as a class… the feminist movement, on the other hand is almost totally composed of white females... Thus the Black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression."[13]

The results of my interviews demonstrates the plurality of emotions in living. When studying the histories of ignored voices in history, frequently the topic of sorrow and suffering emerges and becomes the focal point of research. However, as demonstrated in my interviews, my interviewees lived rich and colorful lives. They pursued after their ambitions and dreams even after countless circumstances urging them to do anything but that. Dr. Shuford and Dr. Thomas are both successful individuals working at UNC Chapel Hill and both have shaped and transformed countless lives for the better. Ignoring the time constraint of this paper (the 1970s), continuing the study of the black woman's voice in the future will require an emphasis on the plurality of emotion.

By studying the black woman's voice, it is important to consider the fact that they are humans, individuals just as deserving of equality and respect as anybody else. Those words may sound shallow and empty, but the stories my interviewees shared with me demonstrate how

[13] Kay Lindsey, "The Black Woman as a Woman," in *The Black Woman Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005), 103.

frequently they are treated as something "other." I am not proclaiming to be the voice of their history, I am pursuing this research to gain further insight into how to elevate the black woman's voice within the mainstream.

To a general public, I hope the enthusiasm and hope came out in my writing and I hope to spread that enthusiasm to a general public. In doing so, I aim to create a balance of speakers in investigating the rich past of the black woman's voice within American history. Their voices are filled with both joy and sorrow, the same as any other individual. However, in studying their voice, remembering to consider the significant events throughout history that shaped the group as a whole is key to questioning and analyzing the individual's role within these events. Oral history plays a fundamental role in investigating the individual within the broader scheme of events like segregation and desegregation.

In the future, returning to the original two interviewees with what I know now would provide further insight and further investigation into the subject of the black woman's voice within the 1970s. After this return, narrowing the scope to certain regions and studying how regions shape the voice might prove to be a promising area of interest. Both Dr. Shuford and Dr. Thomas were raised in two different areas of American culture and I did not realize this until after conducting the interview. Although both interviews were incredibly rich in their content, narrowing the scope and creating steps towards investigating the black woman's voice across the United States might provide a way of incorporating ignored voices fully into mainstream discussion and memory of American history.

Reflection on My Interviews in the Context of Oral History

"I reject the assumptions — otherwise known as prejudices — that certain life circumstances prohibit sensitivity and sound judgment while other conditions guarantee them."[14]

The above quote is taken from a New York Times article, an opinion piece by Frank Buni, a journalist with notable credentials in working for the White House, Times Magazine, and currently the New York Times. However, his statement above, although genuine and honest, needs a slight adjustment. Certain life circumstances do not prohibit sensitivity and sound judgement, however they do blind an individual to the circumstances that might shape a general population (bound together by a common thread - may that be race, gender, or both). Buni is correct in stating that there must be room made for the narrative of individuals from these backgrounds.[15] Although my role as an interviewer is impartial to the biases I enter the interview with and the information I am looking for to do my research, the interview setting creates a balance between this room Buni is suggesting and seeing the truth behind these lives.

Engaging with oral history interviewing taught me how to find that balance. When I organized my information with my interviewees, I began with a broad list of questions. These questions were shaped by the preconceptions I had about the feminist movement in the 1970s. When my interviewees replied back with answers that suggested they had no involvement or were excluded from these movements, I felt stuck and lost. However, progressing with the interview taught me how much more layered a life can be than the general category of "feminism." Even though Dr. Shuford and Dr. Thomas did not necessarily grow up shaped by a feminist conscious, they approached life in fascinating ways and they both persevered to succeed with their ambitions. I feel embarrassed now, reflecting on those questions I originally sent Dr.

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[14] Frank Buni. "I'm a White Man. Hear Me Out.," *New York Times* (2017): https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/opinion/sunday/identity-politics-white-men.html.
[15] Ibid.

Thomas and Dr. Shuford. I should have been keen to that idea of exclusion and used it to further shape my questions. I realize now that still would not have been the correct way to prepare for the interview either. Instead, it would be better to prompt the interviewees with general ideas of womanhood and race and follow the shape of the interview from the interviewee's perspective. In doing so, the subject matter that I was researching, the black woman's voice could be adapted to the interviewee's life story rather than what I was aiming to find.

Completing this research project taught me the importance of aurality in exploring research topics like black women throughout American history. I learned the importance of not taking over in speaking for these people, but rather exploring how to balance research to increase the awareness of their voices in the mainstream. As someone who did not live through these experiences, I feel humbled and overwhelmed by the stories I heard. There is a weight I now carry and I feel responsible to communicate that weight with those willing to listen. A continuation of oral history through dialogue elevates my interviews beyond .mp3 files and into a general perception of the black woman's voice within the 1970s.

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