

The Unexpected in Oral History: Case Studies of Surprising Interviews

Edited by Ricardo Santhiago and Miriam Hermeto.
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Published in 2023, *The Unexpected in Oral History: Case Studies of Surprising Interviews* is a unique and informative compilation of perspectives from an international group of oral historians¹ who revisited interviews they thought went wrong, awry, or off the rails. The book was inspired by Janaina Amado's 1995 essay, "The Great Liar: Tradition, Veracity, and Imagination in Oral History,"² and it demonstrates how reexamining seemingly failed or faulty interview experiences can offer new insights into the past that may not have been obvious at first. *The Unexpected* does not offer a fixed idea of what oral history should be; rather, it illuminates what oral history *can offer*³ and how interviews can be reused, reexamined, and reinterpreted with fresh perspectives.⁴

As an archivist who has only dabbled in oral history interviewing, executing the perfect interview⁵ and not "getting it wrong" has always been paramount to me. However, *The Unexpected* leaves me inspired and opened my eyes to a world of interview experiences I didn't know existed (or could exist). The case studies throughout *The Unexpected* allow the reader to understand that some interview situations may not reflect a perfect process, but this isn't necessarily license to stray from methods, standards, or protocols. Rather, the contributors explain there's much to learn, interpret, and analyze long after an interview is over.

The Unexpected is edited by two Brazilian scholars, Ricardo Santhiago and Miriam Hermeto, with extensive experience in the fields of oral history, public history, and memory studies.⁶ The book is a profound contribution to the study of oral history in general and arguably a unique perspective on the art of dialogue from a Brazilian perspective.⁷ Although contributors describe a myriad of unexpected interview experiences that have taken place across the globe (Ireland, India, Canada, United States, Argentina, Mexico), the case studies predominantly represent Brazilian culture, and most contributors are Brazilian.

The Unexpected comprises six parts under umbrella themes related to the possible types of unexpected situations that may arise within and throughout the oral history process: the unexpected as an outbreak, a falsification, a mnemonic device, a generative device, a given, and a method. Each part begins with an introduction, followed by three to four case studies, and culminating with a commentary. The book's flow is rhythmic, and well-curated contributions highlight what oral history is (creative, fragile, performative) and what it is not (rigid, predictable, prescribed, formal).⁸ The case studies are alluring. While I only touch on one to two case studies

per section below, my choices are subjective, and they should take nothing away from the case studies I do not highlight.

In part 1, titled “Scratching the Silence: The Unexpected as an Outbreak,” Hermeto and Santhiago introduce the idea that, much like a scoop sought by journalists, oral historians often hope interviews will “unveil” surprises or new information, a tendency the authors describe as “the wish to mine for novelties” (p. 17). But that wish for novelty can also turn into something unexpected, an “outbreak” more akin to breaking a silence, exposing a secret, or breaking new ground in an interview. For example, historian Richard High revisited an interview he conducted in the summer of 1988 with a former Communist Party member in rural Ontario, Florence Richards. Expecting to get the scoop on Richards’s and her husband’s political involvement, High instead listened as Richards talked about the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, which prompted High to reflect on his own experience of being sexually abused. One interview broke two silences, twenty years later. The unveiling of new information is indeed unexpected and becomes something emotionally challenging for High (the case for all three interviews in this section). This section shows that oral historians are not impartial, and there may be times when emotional investment in the endeavor is important to their own healing.

In part 2, titled “Between Lies and Half-Truths: The Unexpected as Falsification,” the editors introduce a reality inherent in interviewing: that those being interviewed are “prone to lie, to create their own versions of themselves,” and “truth thus becomes a problem that accompanies oral history obstinately” (p. 55). However, this is merely a bump in the road; as the editors explain, lies or half-truths encountered when interviewing force oral historians to be creative and engage “other sets of sources and disciplines” (p. 56). Hermeto realized in an interview that the narrator never actually experienced what he claimed to. Hermeto states “my interviewee did not lie on purpose, but he also had no memory about what he agreed to discuss” (p. 59). After analyzing this interview and her approach to it a decade later, she realized that one of the issues lay not in the interviewee but in her own announcement of wishing to solicit interviews in the first place. She realized the wording of her solicitation was too vague, inviting potential interviewees to have “just a willingness to talk” (p. 66). Hermeto is clear: she does not regret her approach; she just experienced a “little unexpected issue” (p. 67).

Part 3, titled “Deviating Routes: The Unexpected as a Mnemonic Device,” begins with an explanation and definition of *guardar na memoria*, a Portuguese phrase the editors describe as meaning “to keep hidden” or, when translating *guardar* alone, “to protect”—meaning it’s okay and perhaps beneficial to forget things from the past (p. 109). And yet, at the opposite end of the spectrum, *guardar* can mean “exposure, not enclosure.”⁹ Nevertheless, *guardar* is brought to light here to consider how oral historians grapple with memory. A particularly interesting case study in this section reveals “perplexity when confronted with unexpected mnemonic

operations" (p. 111). Luciana Heymann and Verena Alberti discuss how they revisited the raw transcript from an interview with the founder of the University of West São Paulo (Unoeste), who stopped at nothing to dodge the interviewers' questions, which focused on how universities in the private sector were formed (p. 113). Rather, he physically performed the memories he wanted to share and was more interested in discussing a religious sanctuary he had created than the university. This interview gets precisely at the suggestion the editors make, which is that oral historians are not in a position to scrutinize memory. However, they do need to pay attention to "the story individuals tell and on their narrative choices" (p. 110). To elaborate, oral historians should attend to "sensoriality, affectivity, and imagination" and consider that oral history concerns memory unequivocally (p. 110).

In part 4, titled "The Answer Is Another Subject: The Unexpected as a Generative Device," the editors explain that interviews can lead to new perspectives for the interviewer, "an 'unveiling' that is a form of creation and revelation: from the fine stories we hear, thick worlds open up" (p. 143). In other words, interviews can generate subjects altogether different from the interviewers' original intention. A great example is the case study by Camillo Robertini, who set out to develop a "working hero" portrait (p. 148) at Fiat in Cordoba but found that his interviews painted a different picture: proud Fiat workers who were seemingly unaffected by Argentina's dictatorship. This shift allowed Robertini to explore unexpected territory.

In part 5, titled "Nothing but Surprises: The Unexpected as a Given," the editors point to some key considerations of what oral history lends itself to be—all but predictable. In fact, as the editors state, the unexpected is an "inescapable element," and flexibility must be "part of the oral historian's toolkit" (p. 177). Perhaps the most profound example of the unexpected as a given is Indira Chowdhury's case study. Chowdhury was commissioned by a nongovernmental organization (NGO) to interview people who had experienced profound change in their lives due to NGO interventions. Chowdhury explains, the NGO wanted "stories of change" (p. 182). Chowdhury describes an unusual interview experience with someone whom she understood to be a former bandit who had turned his life around. The multilayered interview ultimately covered more ground than Chowdhury expected, and she found that by interviewing the individual's wife, she could get a fuller picture of him.

In part 6, titled "Avenues and Openings: The Unexpected as a Method," the editors introduce the word "method" and its historical association with oral history (p. 215). While oral historians rely on method (a term more closely related to the sciences), oral history also straddles the fence between social science and art, perhaps even *craft*, and depending on the situation, the interviewer may need to navigate the conversation "far from . . . a methodological vacuum" (p. 216). Two case studies here must be highlighted. First, Monica Rebecca Ferrari Nunes attempted to interview "young geeks" (p. 219) in Belo Horizonte at a cosplay scene. Her method¹⁰ was

to engage in cosplay to get closer to possible interviewees. Unexpectedly, she found the cosplayers disinterested and unwilling to cooperate. Ferrari Nunes admits her defeat, as she got “lost in the events” (p. 220) herself. Daring as her approach was, she realized an unorthodox research method didn’t yield the results she hoped for, nor did she understand the importance of remaining open to “shifts in direction” (p. 225). Second, Joana Barros describes how she saw herself as an interviewer: “careful . . . [and] compliant with the protocols recommended for open interviews in the field” (p. 227). She describes interviewing individuals living on the streets of São Paulo and how interviews on the streets pose countless unexpected scenarios, such as interruptions by others and modes of survival that shift daily for the interviewees. These two cases offer beautiful, multifaceted portraits of the interviewers’ approaches as well as the ways they adapted to the situations of their interviewees’ positionality, and both remind the reader that control tends to be an illusion.

Reading how each contributor revisited their interviews and the lessons they gleaned from their experiences afforded me many things as an archivist, one of which was empathy. I envisioned walking in the contributors’ shoes to comprehend the context, practice, creative methods, and uncertainties each contributor encountered. I now have an enormous appreciation for embracing the process, production, and unexpected elements inherent in interviewing, and I am grateful for the contributors’ honesty in sharing their experiences. Ultimately, *The Unexpected* serves as a new kind of guidebook for archivists interested in conducting oral history interviews, and archivists should refer to it as readily as they would more well-known manuals.¹¹ Most important, *The Unexpected* is a quintessential reminder of the most significant feature of oral history interviews: they allow us to access the past like no other source in the documentary record.¹²

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NOTES

¹ I’m using “oral historians” to refer to the contributors en masse as people who conduct oral history interviews. Many of the contributors are identified as professors, writers, directors, historians, and researchers.

² Amado’s essay was originally published under the title “O grande mentiroso: Tradicao, veracidade e imaginacao em historia oral” [“The Great Liar: Tradition, Veracity, and Imagination in Oral History”] in 1995, and then a shorter version in English was published in 1998 titled “The Brazilian Quijote: Truth and Fabrication in Oral History” (p. 7). See Janaína Amado, “O grande mentiroso: Tradição, veracidade e imaginação em história oral,” *História* 14 (1995): 125–36, and “The Brazilian Quijote: Truth and Fabrication in Oral History,” *Luso Brazilian Review* 35, no. 1 (1998): 1–9.

³ This is not to say that oral history protocol (e.g., methods and standards) should not be followed, but rather that unexpected situations do not necessarily mean that interviews will be failures; they can still offer valuable lessons.

⁴ Contributors Luciana Heymann and Verena Alberti mention the idea of interviews being fixed in time in their case study, “Who Rode in My Car? Who Do You Think? Jesus!”: Subversion and Displacement in the Rereading of an Interview” (p. 117).

- ⁵ I'm referring to the perfect questions, location, equipment, months of background research, follow up, transcript, etc.
- ⁶ Santhiago is a professor at the Institute of Cities at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp), Brazil, where he coordinates the Amabile-Arquivo da Memoria Artistica Brasileira (Brazilian Artistic Memory Archive) and directs the Centro de Memória Urbana (Urban Memory Center). He has been contributing to the fields of oral and public history for close to two decades, and he focuses on Brazilian culture. Hermeto is a professor at the School of Philosophy and Human Sciences at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil. She researches how the Brazilian military dictatorship is taught and remembered.
- ⁷ Brazil has a rich oral history tradition/discipline dating back to 1979, when the profession began defining itself. See Jose Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, "Oral History in Brazil: Development and Challenges," *Oral History Review* 26, no. 2 (1999): 122–36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3675593>. Meihy describes how oral history blossomed in Brazil after 1983 "in the process of political re-democratization of the country" (p. 128). Brazil saw its first two oral history programs created in 1976 at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina and Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (CPDOC, Center for Research and Documentation in Contemporary Brazilian History) at Rio de Janeiro's Fundação Getulio Vargas. From this point on, oral history programs throughout Brazil blossomed, culminating in approximately forty-four programs across the country as of 2004 with ongoing expansion. See Marieta de Moraes Ferreira, "Oral History in Brazil: An Assessment" (Rio de Janeiro: CPDOC, 2004), <https://repositorio.fgv.br/server/api/core/bitstreams/724d921f-04ea-4958-9c67-703a1ae32746/content>.
- ⁸ I have selected words describing what oral history *is* and *is not* from various chapters throughout the book and presented them in no particular order, as each contributor has their perspective while also adhering to the profession's lexicon of scholarly language.
- ⁹ See pages 109–10. The editors draw on the work of Brazilian poet Antonio Cicero, who stated that *guardar* has been used and defined archaically. He preferred to consider *guardar* as something one looks at and illuminates.
- ¹⁰ Ferrari Nunes describes her form of inquiry as *flânerie* from *flaneur*, defined as an observer of modern life. It is a French term used by nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire. See the etymology according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), <https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Entries?textTermText0=f%C3%A2nerie&textTermOpt0=Etymology>
- ¹¹ See, for example, Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).
- ¹² See Plinio Ferreira Guimarães's contribution, "The Devious Paths of Memory: Reflections on the Experience of Interviews with Residents of the Caparaó Sierra," in which he states how memories articulated by narrators "allow us to learn about experiences hitherto relegated either to the margins or to oblivion, opening gates for a broader understanding of particular periods and communities, as well as of elements of the imaginary that we could not usually access through a source other than interviews" (p. 156).