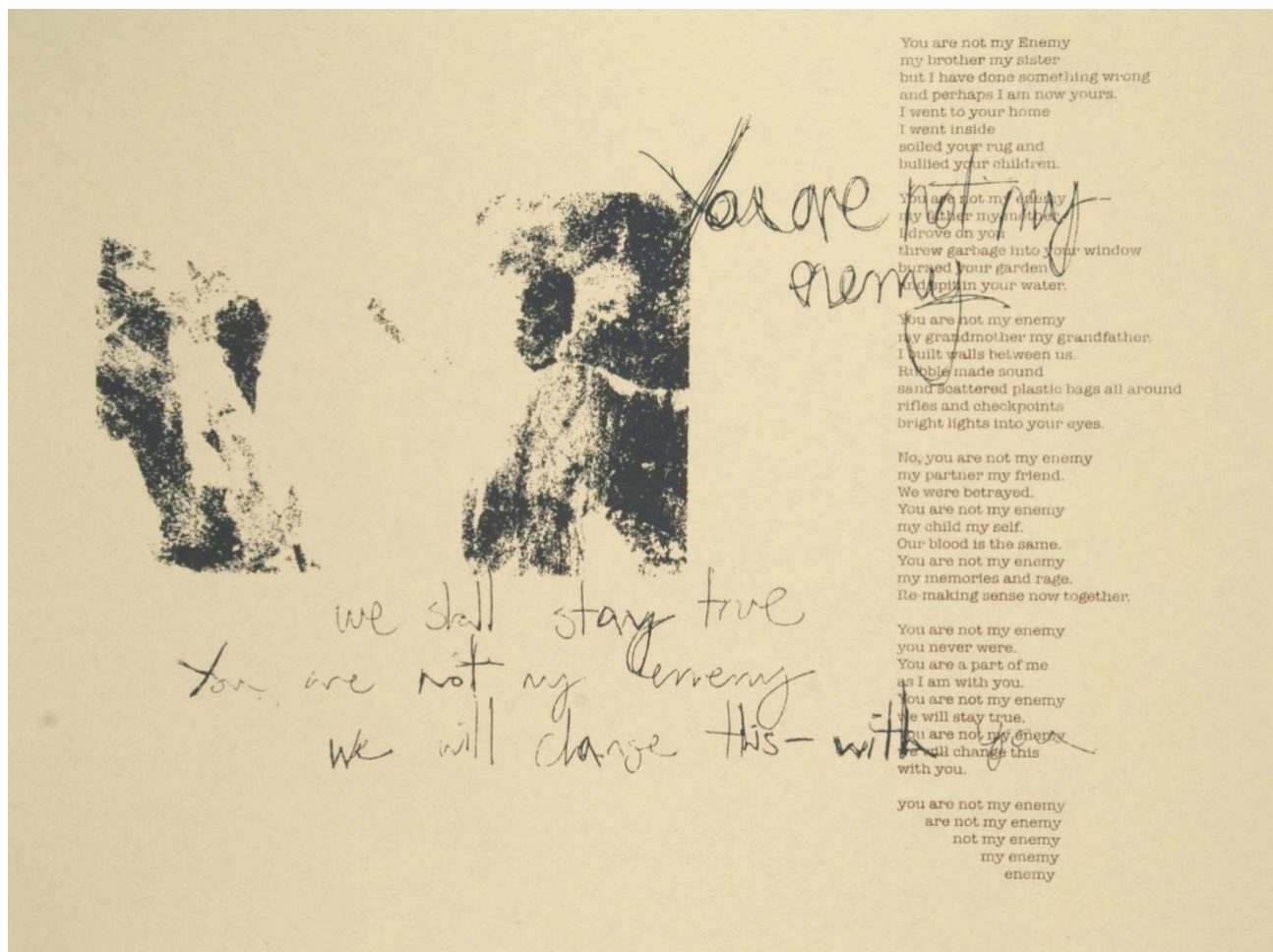


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Radicalism of Oral History: Teaching and Reflecting on War, Empire, and Capitalism

by Philip F. Napoli, Matthew Gherman, Elizabeth Jefimova,
Joshua Spanton, Cheyenne Stone



"YOU ARE NOT MY ENEMY" BY DREW CAMERON. THIS IMAGE BY MARK PINTO AND KOJI PINTO IS FROM CELEBRATE PEOPLE'S HISTORY/IRAQ VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR: TEN YEARS OF FIGHTING FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE, A PORTFOLIO THAT CELEBRATED IVAW'S FIRST TEN YEARS AND WAS PRODUCED BY JUSTSEEDS, IVAW, BOOKLYN, REPETITIVE PRESS, AND THE CIVILIAN SOLDIER ALLIANCE.

Daniel Kerr, Linda Shopes and Amy Starecheski have recently reminded us of the radical roots of oral history as a methodology "deeply implicated in movements for social justice."¹ Early practitioners and activist oral historians understood the power and ability of the practice to create connections among people and community across difference, and there is a strand of oral history research work that continues the tradition to this day.² Similarly, there is a deep academic literature concerning almost all aspects of using oral history as a teaching tool in North American elementary, high school and college classrooms.³

In this essay, my students and I underline the pedagogical value of oral history as a tool for learning about war, capitalism and empire and what students can draw from that opportunity. Unsurprisingly, we find that students benefit from the personal connection and emotional involvement generated in oral history interviews, but this pedagogy is especially meaningful for persons who have direct personal experience with the issues under discussion. For war veterans, the opportunity to listen, reflect on and create using the recollections of other soldiers has been profoundly influential and even transformative.

I (Philip F. Napoli) joined the Brooklyn College faculty full-time in fall 2001. While I arrived as a historian of American popular culture, my public history work led me into teaching oral history right away, and in 2003 to document and write about the history of New York City's Vietnam veterans. That same year, I began to teach a course on the history of the American war in Vietnam and since 2015 I have taught a course on American wars in the 20th and 21st centuries. In each class, students conduct oral history interviews and make use of that material as primary source information for essays, dramatizations or electronic presentations of one kind and another. Students who take my advanced undergraduate class in oral history theory and methods complete seven hours of interviewing and produce an interpretive product using what they have heard. Undergraduates in regular elective classes typically conduct two interviews of approximately one hour each and use them to compare and contrast the experiences of the two individuals.

Through nearly 20 years of work training undergraduates in the theory and method of oral history I have come to the conclusion that the greatest, most powerful, indeed radical, impact that the oral history methodology can have lies in its ability, even demand, that interviewers approach their research subjects, their interviewees, with empathy, honesty and attunement. Successful interviewing requires that students develop the ability to step outside themselves and their intellectual and social circumstances in order to come to know and learn from people unlike themselves. Through sustained engagement in this technique, practicing active listening and emotional openness, students come to acknowledge others as co-equals in the research process, and also as people like themselves regardless of difference.

Significantly, despite the radical roots of the oral history method, the political results of the process do not run in a single direction and oral history does not necessarily convert students into progressives. The methodology can have radical or conservative consequences and implications, as historian Paul Thompson pointed out long ago.⁴ It is, of course, difficult to predict in advance how engagement with the methodology will turn out. Oral history, in and of itself, is not an inherently radical undertaking.

Except, perhaps, in one important sense. Alessandro Portelli argues that oral history is "an experiment in equality." In his seminal article in oral history studies, Portelli asserted that during an oral history interview both parties, the researcher and the "researched," must be willing to acknowledge a baseline similarity across differences of gender, age, class, social position and more. Portelli argues that an interview is always an exchange between subjects, what he described as "literally a mutual sighting."⁵ Successful interviews require an acceptance of that difference and a willingness to reach across that space. In this emotional and intellectuality equality, which is a kind of leveling, an intersubjective openness, we find oral history's greatest pedagogical value. It provides a location from which students are enabled to take a broader view of themselves and of others, and to see the connections between biography and history, individual and society, self and the world, engaging what C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination."⁶ It offers students, therefore, opportunity for sustained thought about some of their most fundamental values and beliefs.

What is the Process?

Readers of this journal are likely to want guidance and clarification regarding Institutional Review Board rules concerning oral history and specifically its use in the classroom. The Revised Common Rule concerning research with human subjects that went into effect in 2019 specifically exempts oral history from IRB review.⁷ Nevertheless, college and university instructors wishing to have students conduct oral history interviews for classroom purposes are urged to contact their campus Human Research Protection Program coordinator for advice about their institution's rules and practices. In my case, because I work at Brooklyn College, CUNY, the IRB was consulted and an exemption letter was issued, as this work was determined to be not research contributing to generalizable knowledge.

Nevertheless, before sending students into the field to conduct oral history work, I frequently (but not always, depending on the course) require that students take the online CITIPProgram "Basic Course" in Research Ethics and Compliance Training, and provide me with a certificate of completion.⁸ In every case, students read about oral history ethics and technique and I provide in-class instruction on that topic and on interview procedures. Sometimes a model oral history will be conducted in class. Students are always provided with an informed consent form.⁹ In order for an oral history research assignment to be completed in an acceptable fashion, the informed consent statement must be signed by the interviewee.¹⁰ If both parties to the interview wish, the resulting recordings and other items may be

deposited with the Brooklyn College Listening Project archive when deeds of gift are completed and submitted.¹¹

Nevertheless, having undergraduates interview combat veterans is a potentially tricky business. While I knew most of the interviewees that the co-authors of this article interviewed, that's not always the case. Sometimes students select their own research partners and it's entirely conceivable that such an interview could go badly.¹² Because this is a classroom assignment and by definition undergraduates are unskilled in the technique, it is possible that they may stumble into asking insensitive or inappropriate questions. I try to avoid this by providing an interview guide to direct the conversation and example language for asking questions. I share a sheet of paper containing contact information for the local Veterans Administration hospital and an admonition that if a veteran appears to be in psychological distress, 911 should be called. This has never been necessary.

Technology is no longer the hurdle it once was to having students produce relatively high-quality oral history recordings. In some undergraduate courses, I permit students to record their interviews on whatever technology is most convenient. Many elect to record on smart phones, which generally deliver passable results, permitting both listening and transcription. If the objective is to produce a multimedia presentation from the recording, I strongly urge that students use a dedicated digital recorder and external microphone. Once completed, the recording can be offloaded and submitted as part of an assignment package using Dropbox, Google Drive, Wetransfer.com or a similar service.

Students and Oral History

To write this essay, I asked four former students – none of whom knew one another -- to reflect on the impact of conducting interviews with American war veterans and to think about what they learned about war, capitalism and empire. Drawing on an oral history approach which privileges reflexivity and introspection, I interviewed each student for approximately one hour, asking them to reflect on their experience. After all, the dialogic nature of oral history and the injunction to use interviewing as an experiment in equality seems to demand that students have a co-equal voice in the interpretation of their learning.¹³ Having drafted the article, I sent it to each student for revisions and commentary. The result is a truly collaborative effort.

The four former students are:

- Joshua M. Spanton, who finished his undergraduate work at Brooklyn College in spring 2019 and is currently staying at home with his children. He plans to pursue a career in social work once both children are in school.
- Cheyenne Stone, who earned his BA at Brooklyn college in 2017 and his MA in 2019. He is in his first year as a high school history teacher in the New York City public school system.

- Mathew Gherman, who completed his undergraduate and master's degree work at Brooklyn College, finishing in 2008. Gherman is presently a history teacher at Edward R. Murrow High School in New York City.
- Elizabeth Jefimova, who finished her bachelor's degree work at Brooklyn College in spring 2019 and is presently enrolled as a master's degree candidate in the Columbia University oral history program.

Notably, two of the students were combat veterans themselves and two were not.

Joshua Spanton's experience, in his own words

What was the significance of listening to oral histories with American combat soldiers? For my co-authors, the impact was deep, but different in each case.

Spanton joined the U.S. Army so that it would introduce him to the larger world and in the hopes that it would provide better opportunities in the future. In many ways it did, as after leaving the service, graduating from college became his most important goal. The military absolutely opened his eyes and broaden his horizons. In what follows, he compares his personal experience to what he learned in conducting oral history interviews with World War II veterans for my class.

After 9/11 I was 13 years old, 14. I was very conservative just naturally. As a kid you had this idea that America is untouchable with the big victories in the past. I'll tell you, it's all in the media and propagated through the schools.

And when 9/11 happened, it shook my world. Those were the first days that I realized that politics and war and all this stuff was something of interest to me....

I was politicized after 9/11, and then as I got older, I became kind of more liberal thinking as time went on. But I wasn't really engaged or thinking on these larger levels [at the time].

Prior to joining the Army, I had no conception of capitalism, empire, nationalism, imperialism, any of that stuff. I was just not mentally ready to go to college prior to joining the military....

I think by the time I got to Brooklyn College and I started to learn about capitalism and empire, nationalism, imperialism, all these things started to connect for me. And that's why I became so radical in my views. Today I consider myself very far to the left on the political spectrum.

I know that capitalism has done a lot of good things for society in the world and all that, but I'm also very

anti-capitalist because of these experiences. I've been able to see how profit drives these wars.

That experience is what allowed me to become radicalized, even though I don't think it's that radical.....

My first experience [of seeing] the world from a bird's eye view, from an objective view, almost as if I'm looking at all the moving pieces, was during my first fire fight.

I was a 240-machine gunner [in an armored vehicle]. I was in the gunner's turret. I was a trail vehicle on our patrol. We went to patrol all up and down what we call MSR California. It was a nice paved road. We patrolled up and down this road for miles just to make sure everything was going smoothly.

And we got ambushed.

I was getting shot up with AK 47s, RPGs and all this stuff.

Eventually a lot of our guys dismount — but not me — and they assaulted the ridge lines. And we killed all these guys in conjunction with some of the helicopter pilots that helped us out.

It was a long haul. We were probably there eight hours.

It was a rough day because my [truck was] getting hit and I couldn't find the guys that were shooting at me. They just kept lighting me up and I'm just holding my head down and going, "Fuck." I was like, "Oh my God, I hope I make it through the next few minutes."

What was unsettling was these guys were shooting at my [head] and I couldn't see them because [Afghanistan's] beautiful, but you got these huge mountains.

You always think that it's a desert, but a lot of Afghanistan, especially on the North Eastern side, is mountainous and these guys are just lying behind a rock somewhere and it's impossible to find them. So, they're lighting me up and it was unsettling because I just couldn't keep an eye out for where these guys were.

After they cleared the objective and all these guys were dead and stuff like that, they were still up there forever, just, you know, doing their thing, whatever.

And, you know, for the first time I'm thinking, 'Why am I here? Why am I getting shot at, [and] why am I shooting at other people?' These big questions started entering during this eight-hour process because I had a lot of time to think.

I'm out here in the middle of fucking nowhere, you know, [and] people here [in the United States] are just going about their day, go into work, [and] have no clue what I'm doing and I'm fighting these wars.

It became very obvious to me that I was just a small tool in the grand scheme of things.

I was doing this [and there are] much larger moving pieces.

It was almost like I had an out of body experience when I was looking over the area where we got ambushed and I got guys shooting at me.

I'm shooting at these guys and both parties have no idea why we're really shooting at each other.

It was absurd to me. It was nonsense. It was not worth dying over, to me. It made no sense.

This kind of all came together when we captured one of the Taliban guys. I hear over the radio that they're bringing this Taliban guy to my truck. We're going to put him in my truck and we're going to transport him to wherever.

Holy shit! We got this guy?! And we're going to put him in my truck?!

In your mind, you're thinking, like, this is a boogeyman, a monster. You know what I mean? Like they're going to bring [me the] Taliban.

So, they dropped down the hatch to my truck. They bring this guy in. They sit him down and it's dark out. The only thing in my truck, the only way I could see [is because of] the multiple red and green lights that are in my truck from whatever pieces of equipment. And they sat this guy down.

My God.

This [is a] teenage kid. He's 17 years old. Dark skin, some facial hair. But a scared kid, like an American kid would be scared.

I'm sitting in my gunner's hatch. I'm looking down while the flashing red and green lights lit up his face.

[He] just looked like an empty vessel, like an empty soul, like [he] just had no idea.

I guess I'm very intuitive and very in touch with my emotions and what's going on around me. I could just tell that this person was just a lost soul in many ways.

I felt so bad for this guy.

In that moment I realized. "Holy shit. We are too."

I was 24 at the time.

You know, they found that some of the dead Taliban were carrying Pakistani high school IDs. I am not sure if this particular kid was from Pakistan [but] we were right on the Pakistani border.

It's just some other kid who, like us, has no idea. It was sad. It was the saddest thing I saw.

We just sign up and we go do whatever.

And it made me realize, wow, if I die out here, it's going to be for fucking nothing.

You know, guys don't actually feel like they're over there are doing some type of freedom work. It was always the running joke, even amongst the most

enthusiastic of young guys over there. The underlying message in there is, this is not really for freedom.

Some guys, when they get out go, "Fuck, you know, we put our lives on the line. This war is even more bullshit than we originally thought before joining."

[Other] guys after they get out, they might embrace the fact that the U.S. is always at war, because they want to give more meaning to the fact that they went to Afghanistan.

But when we were all in Afghanistan or preparing to go to Afghanistan, it was kind of an underlying joke when we said "freedom!!!" or you know, "We're going to fight for freedom!!!" and stuff like that.... It is undoubtedly true that most post 9/11 combat veterans know that they're not really fighting for a noble cause.

The interviews with the World War II veterans [were different]. They really believed that they had a real strong purpose.

When I did the interview with George,¹⁴ it was my impression that if he got killed, if he got blown up in his airplane, yeah, that would have been sad. Yeah, it was bad that his friend died. But I remember him saying, but you push forward, and you just move on.

That struck me. He felt like he was putting his life on the line for a real purpose. Something worthy of dying for.

I didn't see that when I did my interviews with post 9/11 veterans.

It seemed like World War II veterans had an easier time in the sense that, 'Did they feel like they had a purpose and a reason for dying?' Yeah.

I feel like their transition [out of the military], were a little easier [too]. That's just my view and I could be wrong.

But in the post 9/11 veterans, they're just more traumatized in the sense that you're putting your life on the line for something that you know means jack shit to you.

I think that's even more traumatizing and problematic.

While it seems as though Spanton came to an appreciation of the realities of American empire while serving as a foot soldier in that empire in Afghanistan, the significance of that understandingly became clear when talking to others who had a different military experience. The contrast between his post-9/11 military service and the reflections of a member of the "greatest generation" provoked a kind of sorrow, it seems; a recognition that the singularity of his generation's experience makes them very different from the 'heroes' of earlier wars.

Cheyenne Stone's Experience

For Stone, interviewing combat veterans of other wars has been life-transforming. But by contrast to what Spanton found in interviewing World War II veterans, in speaking with Vietnam veterans Stone discovered men whose experience resonated deeply with his own. Stone found his tribe: a group of men who felt abused by their own government but nevertheless were entitled to pride in their service. Oral history about war and empire, both recording it and providing his own to others, has provided this veteran with the tools necessary to remake his self-identity.

In college, doing the interviews with you early on made me think, well, maybe I can tell my story. So, I started pushing myself to talk about more stuff, just to see what would happen.

First year I was scared of whatever, but I started talking [and] I was getting closer with people faster by being honest.

And then I started realizing over time this was really helping me change my style. It kind of helped me change my story. I had transformed the story in my head, in a sense....

Like there's things that you do; like, I did this thing. This is an action. This is what happened. Okay.

But then there's also how you choose to talk about that thing.

There's kind of different level.

There's the actual experience and then there's what you kind of put onto the experience by talking about it.

I started to realize [that], especially in college; people would point that out to me all the time.

I'm labeling it in a way or I'm spinning it in a way in my head. You have to separate the two.

Doing that really helped me out.

When I got out [of the Marine Corps], I was homeless, and I just really went left field from away from all of that stuff. I couldn't even be around military and veterans' stuff.

It wasn't even until this year [when] I'm marching in a parade. It was the most profound experience I've ever had in my life.

Tom took me.

We went [to the Veterans Day Parade] in Manhattan, [the] big one.

Oh man. Every generation from World War II -- all the way back.

And I went with the Vietnam war [veterans].

He was like, 'Look, you can go, you can go to the Afghanistan vets. [They are] in the back. They'll welcome you. They're not going to tell you no. You just show up and tell him like who you are, and they'll let

you walk with them. But you can also feel free to walk with us. You can hang out with us too.

So, I got to meet all his friends and we walked. But I was really nervous. He's been inviting me every year since I've known him. So, it's been what, like three years in a row that I didn't go. He's been inviting me year after year and finally, I was like, you know what? I will go.

I went and we were standing there at first. We're all crowded; everybody's all standing around and stuff. It's all little awkward. I don't know if I shouldn't be doing it.

But then once you start walking and everybody's clapping and yelling, saying thank you for your service and other veterans are in the crowd and they're like, you should go up and shake their hand. You could tell them to come walk with you. And you pull them out of the crowd, and they start walking with you.

And everybody's telling you thank you and stuff like that. You get to feel proud about it for a day. A lot of times with military people, they don't feel so proud about it. [But on this day] they all allow themselves to be proud about it. But in that moment, you kinda can't help it.

It's an overwhelming sense of honoring yourself because you and all these other thousands of people did the same thing at one time or in their life or another....

This was life altering, in a way.

Tom says to me sometimes, he sees a lot of himself in me. That's why he like really likes to talk to me.

But he says I've come to [this] point so much faster than he did. It took him 25 years to really be able to even look back on it and to think about it and talk about it. It was a slow process. He came back and just worked and worked and worked more. [He did] everything that he could to keep his mind off of [Vietnam].

Doing everything that he went through and then he comes home trying to figure everything out. It's this whole journey of trying to figure out how to come back and be civilian.

A lot of the guys did the same thing; these older guys I talked to, it took them a long time to come to terms with who they were and who they allow themselves to become out of this situation.

Being able to have that information now was really good because before I was kind of on my own dealing with what I was going through.

Talking with him, I think that was the main thing that was really intense.

It's [the difference between] where I was then and where I am now.

It made me realize that people change over time. How you are now is not always how you're going to be....

So, having like these older males that went through the exact same thing, who can give me an insight of how each one of them live their life differently and made different decisions and process their lives differently, but ultimately kinda came to the same conclusion of figuring out how to be good again....

I think I'm doing good. I'm so much farther ahead of where he was at my age, being able to understand myself and coming to terms with my experience in the war. You know, everybody's different. But wars is war, though.

Being honest with yourself, it kind of starts to change the story a little bit.

Someone can talk to you about it and you get to experience it with each other and then maybe that person pushes you to think about it in a different way. Every time you tell it you tell it a little bit differently. It can kind of help you map your own story and take control of it rather than letting it control you.

If you just don't talk about it and keep it in your mind, you know, you can put labels and label yourself and beat yourself up over it....

When I'm in school teaching about any type of war, I'll bring in like pictures of my experiences and I'll be honest with the kids. I think it changes their mindsets on warfare and the kids really, really, really like it because they see how honest I am with it.

I even have a picture of myself being life-flighted from out of combat after getting blown up the fourth time.

This is how far I've come.

Before, when I met you, I was not able to talk about these moments and say, 'I can talk about things that were really not me,' you know?

Now I'm getting to a point to where I'm starting to.

There are some things I [did] there. It could be just one moment... You could do a whole bunch of things and then one moment just ruined everything for you; destroyed your whole idea of yourself in one moment.

And you can't get out of that line of thinking; it's so hard to change how you think about yourself when you're haunted by something that you did, or you're blaming yourself for being a part of something, or you let yourself get pushed into a state of mind that you're an animal.

It's very hard to change that.

But by talking about it and letting people judge me by letting go, being vulnerable and by doing it over and over and over again, I started to realize [that] this is what has helped me change the way that I view it in my own head. [Now], the way that I talk about it's more like, 'This is an experience that I did. There are things I

could have [surely] done better; things I wish I could change, but I can't change those things.'

And ultimately, I'm stronger because I went through all of these things and I wouldn't want anybody to go through them. It's something that I don't think anybody should go [through]. And I wish no one did, but that is what happened.

And I don't want to carry around that anymore...I don't want to carry around that [shame].

I'm letting it go and I'm letting the world deal with it.

We can talk about it. I'm not gonna be upset about it anymore, you know? I'm just wanting to use it as a tool.

You gotta be in control of yourself and know who you are, at least.

When Stone told me these things, I admit that I was thunderstruck. This young man has come so, so far in the four years that I have known him. As an instructor, this is among my proudest moments; oral history has helped Stone begin the process of healing from the emotional and moral wounds of war. He's on the road, starting a journey that will last the rest of his life. He has made an astounding start.

Elizabeth Jefimova's Experience

Jefimova, a sophomore at the time, interviewed Seymour Kaplan, a World War II veteran.¹⁵ Kaplan was 17 years old when he left high school to enlist in military service and he became a machine gunner with the 692 Tank Destroyer Battalion attached to the 42nd Infantry Division in Europe. The conclusion of the war brought him to the Dachau concentration camp, where at age 19, he served as a Yiddish language interpreter. The unit eventually made its way to Berchtesgaden, Hitler's Alpine headquarters, from which Kaplan managed to pilfer some souvenirs. For Jefimova, some of the impact had to do with personal contact with traces of humanity's violent past.

My very first interview was with Seymour Kaplan. He was my first real, hands on experience interviewing veterans and he was the oldest veteran that I spoke with.

His story was a little bit hard to hear. I was a college sophomore and the worst thing that could have happened to me in that time [was] taking my organic chemistry tests or preparing for midterms or getting certain assignments on time. But when he was my age, he was in Europe fighting in World War II. He was there on the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp.

And you just sit there and you just, you know, in a way you were back in your own experiences as well. Holy shit, I have nothing. I can't complain about anything that I'm going through now because it doesn't even come close to what Seymour went through.

It was a six-hour interview and it was just very dark, but you need to listen to these things because you still have people who don't believe the Holocaust happened.

And then you have people like Seymour who are saying "No, this is what happened, and I have proof." And I remember him taking out all the newspaper clippings and showing all these pictures just so he could share his experience with me.

It is important that these types of stories and narratives be heard, especially by people my age, so that they understand the big picture of what's really going on and how history can always repeat itself.

Additionally, the reaction of Kaplan's family to learning about hearing about these experiences left a powerful impression, too. In her research paper about the interview, Jefimova wrote,

Before he left for the war, Mr. Kaplan told his mother that he would steal Hitler's teacup and pee in it. Anyone who heard his story would either cheer in a supportive manner or tell him to knock it off. In reality, he succeeded, but the reaction to this was anything but proud. Upon returning home, he started to share some of the things he witnessed with his family, but they would have none of it because it was too difficult for THEM to hear. Mr. Kaplan hasn't shared his story until years later when he was asked to.

The familial rejection that Kaplan narrated was among the most difficult things for Jefimova to hear. As she told me, "In the end, I just remember coming out of that interview and I had to process a lot." This was, of course, her very first encounter with combat-induced post-traumatic stress. Yet she came away with respect for Kaplan's emotional resilience. Eventually Kaplan found treatment within the Veterans Administration system and since that time has spoken freely about his World War II experiences, becoming something of a local celebrity in Brooklyn, often retelling his story on local college campuses and in area schools. Jefimova found much to admire in this, writing, "to live as long as he had, and to have experienced what he experienced, takes a lot of will power and strength. What his family could not provide to him, in terms of lending an ear, he found in conducting interviews."

Jefimova also interviewed two women with experience in Vietnam. One was a nurse in the Army Nurse Corps and the other served as a Donut Dolly, a volunteer for the American Red Cross. In both instances she heard stories about sexism that left a deep mark on both the interviewer and interviewee.

Both women wanted to escape that 1950s culture of what was expected of women and they both faced sexism.

I remember Sam told me that when she was going to her unit, a young officer came up to her wearing only a small red Speedo and he said to her that before she helped his troops, she had to help him.

She also got like the numerous, "Oh, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Sue talked about how she was almost raped.

And it's a narrative that keeps being repeated.

Matthew Gherman's Experience

Similarly, Gherman's oral history interviews have had a deep, lasting, indeed permanent impact on him — and his family. He interviewed a single military veteran, Vietnam veteran Tony W., for his master's thesis, amassing 35 hours of recorded and transcribed conversations.

We would meet once a week at Brooklyn College library for two hours a session.

It was a blast just to sit and talk about every aspect of his life from when he was young, through Vietnam and then what it was like to, to come home.

We still try to see Tony a couple of times a year. I'd started reaching out to him around April 15th to say welcome home. And then a couple of other times during the year as well.

[He's] what it means to be a good person, a great person and what I think it means to be a man and American and patriotic.

This person [has] just so much life [and] lessons to learn from it.

Just to hear their stories and what they went through can provide such a different perspective, a more human perspective, on history than what you're reading about.

It also makes us confront our own points of view about war. What's our exposure to their stories? Hollywood? Maybe a quick news headline?

We have so many preconceived notions about war, and oral histories make us reflect on it and challenge them.

I remember first studying Vietnam and thinking, "How could we leave?" and then listening to Tony and what it was like to fight, and how at the end, Tony says, 'it was such a waste of life, yet if he had to go again he would.' That made me reflect on how our government failed the people who were fighting.

It really is the most important academic thing I did.

My son's middle name is Anthony after Tony. He's been such a tremendous influence on my life.

This is a perfect instance of learning across difference. Gherman, a twenty-something year old white male college student, became friends with Tony, at that time a 60 plus-year-old African American church deacon. Plainly, they found a way to connect across the twin gulfs of race and

age, demonstrating the power of oral history and active listening to create space for personal and emotional growth, change and acceptance.

War, Capitalism and Empire

What did the students learn about war, capitalism and empire by speaking with veterans? For some, oral history did not change their views, but rather seems to have solidified ideas they brought into the interview setting.

Jefimova asserts that the idea that the United States engages in empire building was strengthened and refined in the course of conversation with veterans. She told me:

It is easy to conclude from basic studies in American history that the drive for capitalism has always been a prominent factor in empire-building and war.

Although I still very much agree with this, oral history can never fully coexist with simple conclusions because it relies on individuals, subjectivity, and sometimes fallible memory. We have to remind ourselves that the pursuit for truth and understanding is a fluid course filled with considerable nuance.

Oral history has allowed me to reframe my understanding of concepts such as capitalism, war, and empire from a more rigid academic perspective to a more fluid discussion that is based on personal experiences. If we limit ourselves to specific academic sources then we shut ourselves away from a more balanced understanding of history and, ultimately, humanity.

For Jefimova, the youngest student in the group, the significance of interviewing combat veterans seems to be found in the ability to listen to eyewitness testimonies of injustice. She has recently announced a determination to become an attorney and hopes to do work on behalf of victims.

The narratives I heard from women like Sam and Sue make me think that no matter how modern we are as a country many obstacles still remain for women to work in the military or even the federal government. Yet I don't take these obstacles as an utter defeat for equal treatment. Rather it pushes me harder to achieve my goals to help create a safe space for people, like Sue and Sam, to serve their country without having to face discrimination or assault.

Gherman, who like Jefimova is not a veteran, considered joining the service before deciding on a career as a history instructor. His experience teaching in the New York City public schools system shaped his response to my question about what he might've learned about war, capitalism and empire in the course of his interviews. He is pained by the fact that city high schools teach very little about the individuals who carry out American policy — and nothing at all about the views of "the enemy."

In terms of American empire and war and power, one of the things that annoys me about the New York state curriculum [is that] it talks about the causes of war. It talks about certain social aspects that you have, [for instance], the changes at home and the effects of the war. And you have three lessons and there's just nothing in between about the people who fought there and what they saw.

So, I always make sure to take an extra day and choose the people who fought there and here's some quotes about how the war impacted them as people. The kids need to know about the people who fought.

That just contrasts with the history curriculum.

[In school this week] we just the did the Spanish American war [unit]. That's really the springboard for American empire building. So, we do connect the dots, like this is how it sits geopolitically, and this is how it fits in historically.

Gherman's point is that the intimate, human reality of war and empire building is absent from the material that students are taught. As a result, Gherman continues to invite Tony into his history courses year after year, the result of which is to make the impact of war on America's underclass physically visible to a new generation of students. As Gherman relates it, the students in the classes react in various ways. A few tune out. But often, after Tony gives a talk about his experiences, he will be approached at the podium. According to Gherman, three groups of African American students step forward. These include kids with family in the service at present, students considering joining the service themselves, and others seeing in Tony a possible mentor. When asked if he would recommend that students join the military, he will say 'no,' and then explain that a young African American student today has many other options -- options that he did not have when he was drafted into the Army in 1969.

Interestingly, the two combat veterans who are co-authors here, both of whom interviewed other combat veterans, articulate a clear sense of their personal role in the construction of American empire. In Stone's case, it is a result of having done significant oral history interviewing and what he learned from other veterans in the process.

Stone, a Marine Corps veteran of the war in Afghanistan who received a Purple Heart as a result of a wound caused by an improvised explosive device, interviewed three Vietnam veterans; with one veteran, Tom, he recorded more than 16 hours of conversation; with Herbert, more than 5 hours; with Joe, approximately 3 hours.

Herbert pointed Stone in the direction of a written resource that helped him recognize truths about his personal experience. "Herbert, he kind of pushes the concept and talk about Smedley D. Butler," Stone said. Butler is a famous figure in Marine Corps history who earned 19 medals in his 34-year career, including the Medal of Honor twice. In 1935, Butler published a book called *War is a Racket*, a stinging critique of American wars and warfare, asserting that the United States was engaged in imperialism and that

corporations lay at the root of American foreign policy behavior.¹⁶ Stone said:

Herbert he was kind of stuck on Smedley Butler. I didn't even know about the book. And so, I read the book actually, and it was really intense and it kinda made me think a lot about my like [honor and] our little individual roles continuing this process.

Stone's interview with Tom, who served in the Navy and did two tours in Vietnam, led to comparisons between the experience of enlisted personnel and the contemporary American military practice of using contractors for warfighting. Stone here too saw the ways he was being exploited.

One thing that me and Tom talked about a lot was [government] contractors and the way that people make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year overseas. Like me, I'll make \$30,000. But over there, contractors were making \$250,000 tax free and they were doing all types of jobs from communications to mechanic work to Blackwater type of jobs. They were running around in civilian clothes and [riding in] Jeeps and driving all through the city and doing crazy shit, you know, when we were out there.

For Stone, at a fundamental level the interviews with Herbert and Tom were important because they were cross-generational conversations about what it means to be a veteran in 21st-century America. As he put it, "We kind of always talked more [about] personal deep stories. They were trying to help me understand myself, in a sense. I think they allowed themselves to be a little bit more vulnerable in that regard. And that kind of pushed the conversation into a deep analysis of their experience over there and coming home rather than a political overview of what was really going on." For Stone, these oral history interviews were, as they always are, reflections on the present meaning of the past; conversations about what the recollections of the veterans of Vietnam could teach the veteran of Afghanistan. Through them, Stone was brought to rethink his identity and role in the world.

My conversation with Spanton provoked the most intense reflections on issues related to war, capitalism and empire. The connections between these phenomena were made, not in the classroom, but earlier, during his service in Afghanistan, although the classroom oral history experience interviewing veterans of World War II enabled him to articulate the difference between his experience and that of earlier soldiers. Again, the past made the present meaningful, shaping Spanton's sense of self.

Teaching about war, capitalism and empire through the pedagogical tool of oral history gives students the opportunity, as Mills suggested, to connect biography -- and autobiography -- to history; to see themselves as products of a particular society at a specific moment in time; to

understand themselves in the world. Sometimes this means that students also reevaluate American behavior as a capitalist and imperial power. Sometimes it doesn't. But in all cases, listening to eyewitness stories about American wars was transformative. For Jefimova, the youngest of the group, hearing a combat veteran describe his journey across Europe to Hitler's Eagles Nest and then Dachau and finally home to wrestle with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress made history real in a fashion never before possible. For Gherman, the exercise resulted in the addition of a new name in his family tree as Tony's first name was given to Gherman's child, and it shifted his professional identity as an instructor, stimulating him to enrich his history curriculum. For the two veteran students, transformation came in talking with men much like themselves. The act of listening to recollections and reflections became an opportunity to re-conceive their own lives and experiences within the context of the history of war and American Empire.

Notes

1. Daniel R. Kerr, "Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather: The Roots of Radical Oral History Practice in the United States," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 2 (September 2016): 367–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohw074>; Linda Shopes and Amy Starcheski, "National Council on Public History | Disrupting Authority: The Radical Roots and Branches of Oral History," March 3, 2017, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/disrupting-authority-the-radical-roots-and-branches-of-oral-history/>.

2. To list a very few such studies: Linda Shopes, "The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project: Oral History and Community Involvement," *Radical History Review* 1981, no. 25 (January 1, 1981): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1981-25-27>; Alistair Thomson, "Oral History and Community History in Britain: Personal and Critical Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of Continuity and Change," *Oral History* 36, no. 1 (2008): 95–104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40179971>; Manissa M. Maharawal and Erin McElroy, "The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project: Counter Mapping and Oral History toward Bay Area Housing Justice," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, no. 2 (March 2018): 380–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1365583>; Eugene F. Provenzo et al., "Photography and Oral History as a Means of Chronicling the Homeless in Miami: The StreetWays Project," *Educational Studies* 47, no. 5 (September 2011): 419–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2011.602151>.

3. It would be possible to fill an entire volume with the citations to such studies. Here are a select few: Grant R. Miller, "Beyond a Story Well Told: Using Oral Histories for Social Justice Curriculum," *Action in Teacher Education* (Association of Teacher Educators) 32, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 55–65, <https://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26db%3def%26AN%3d508189459%26site>

[%3dehost-live%26scope%3dsite](https://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26db%3def%26AN%3d525894437%26site%3dehost-live%26scope%3dsite); David Stieber, "Civics Voices Profile Activists for Change Around the World," *Insights on Law & Society* 11, no. 3 (July 2011): 20–21, <https://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26db%3def%26AN%3d508129426%26site%3dehost-live%26scope%3dsite>; Catherine Irwin, "Celebrating Twenty Years of Honors through Oral History: Making an Honors Program Video Documentary," *Honors in Practice* 6 (June 2010): 221–34, <https://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26db%3def%26AN%3d508129426%26site%3dehost-live%26scope%3dsite>; Claire Hirshfield, "New Worlds from Old: An Experience in Oral History at the Elementary School Level," *A PATHS Project* 82 (June 5, 1991): 110–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.1991.9958318>; Joan Miller, "Migrant Memories: Creating an Oral History," Part of a Special Issue: *North American Migrations* 23, no. 4 (October 2009): 43–45, <https://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ebscohost.com%2flogin.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26db%3def%26AN%3d508095301%26site%3dehost-live%26scope%3dsite>; William Burt Lauderdale, "Future Teachers Recover the Past through Oral History," *Journal of Teacher Education* 37 (August 7, 1986): 16–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002248718603700403>.

4. Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

5. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (SUNY Press, 2010) p. 31.

6. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

7. "Scholarly and Journalistic Activities Deemed Not to Be Research," Text, HHS.gov, July 20, 2018, <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/requests-for-comments/draft-guidance-scholarly-and-journalistic-activities-deemed-not-to-be-research/index.html>.

8. "CITI Program – Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative," accessed March 6, 2020, <https://about.citiprogram.org/en/homepage/>.

9. "Materials | The Brooklyn College Listening Project," accessed March 6, 2020, <https://bclistingproject.org/materials/>.

10. Napoli is happy to provide a copy of the informed consent statement used most recently. Send email to pnapoli@brooklyn.cuny.edu

11. See: "Brooklyn College Listening Project," accessed April 30, 2020, <https://bclistingproject.org/>.

12. Despite having made this assignment many, many times, Napoli has never had a veteran interviewee

complain about the process. Naturally, that is anecdotal evidence and it may not hold true in all cases. But Napoli's experience, and the enormous success of the Library of Congress Veterans Oral History Project, which is largely aimed at high school students, suggests that veteran interviews are not inherently risky.

13. In the material that follows, text in italics is drawn from our interviews. Interviews have been edited for readability. Words not actually spoken by the co-author/interviewees are inserted in brackets, thus [].

14. Throughout this article, student interviewees are referred to by first name only, unless they have gifted their interview into the public domain.

15. A five-minute excerpt of her interview with Kaplan can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGqMlzwMoGs&feature=youtu.be>

16. Smedley D. Butler, *War Is A Racket: Original Edition* (Dauphin Publications, 2018).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.org/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/).

Copyright of Radical Teacher is the property of Center for Critical Education of New York State (CCE of NY) and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.