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The Oral Biography

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Biography

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Abstract

In recent decades the oral biography (a narrative of a life researched primarily through interviews) has found increasing popularity among the reading public and among researchers in disciplines ranging from anthropology to sociology. This essay offers a typology of the genre and an exploration of the subtle ways in which oral sources shape life-writing.

The oral biography has steadily increased in significance for those documenting American culture. Prompted by technological innovation in tape recording and by increasing use of oral historical segments in radio and television broadcasting, this form has arrived at center stage in debates on (and public appreciation of) modern biography.

Over the last two decades the oral biography, a life narrative researched primarily through interviews, has been used to democratize history by incorporating vantage points of those often excluded from the historical canon: women and minority-group members. Sociologists have used orally gathered survey data to collect composite portraits of a people, as regional or national biographical overviews. Anthropologists have turned to intensive oral interviewing to establish a "life history," narrated biographies of the unknown and the historically disenfranchised, those individuals whose lives of quiet, community-oriented distinction leave no wake of speeches, news articles, and published letters.

This essay does not review the extensive collection of oral biographies, nor encapsulate specific procedures for creating such a work. Rather it raises theoretical questions and explores them inductively, based on my lives of Pete Seeger and Aldous Huxley, to define the genre of oral biography across disciplines and distinguish the form from what the anthropologist calls "life history" or the folklorist, "life story."

VARIETIES OF ORAL BIOGRAPHY

Among the most common literary formats for oral biography are 1) the orally sourced biography, 2) the group memoir, and 3) the oral memoir.





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