



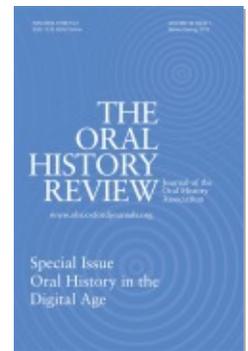
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"LISTENING IS AN ACT OF LOVE: A CELEBRATION OF AMERICAN LIFE FROM THE STORYCORPS PROJECT." Edited and with an Introduction by Dave Isay. New York: The Penguin Press, 2007. 284 pp. Hardbound, \$24.95; Softbound, \$15.00.

This review draws on conversations the four coauthors had about the StoryCorps phenomenon, which we appreciate as a provocative, contemporary example of the public use of oral narratives. Like many readers, we came to *Listening Is an Act of Love* through National Public Radio's Friday morning StoryCorps segment. Our discussions were inspired by: the weekly story broadcast's emotional "driveway moments," our knowledge of the Corps' dedicated facilitators, the public's active participation in the traveling recording booths, and the announcement that StoryCorps interviews would be archived in the Library of Congress. What, we wondered, might StoryCorps disclose about the public uses of oral stories in the twenty-first century. As we met, *Listening* was published and added to our fascination with StoryCorps as a multiply-mediated phenomenon. We use this review to explore issues that, we think, reach beyond StoryCorps' print form.

The "we" used throughout this review is collective, but the views presented here draw from our different disciplines and research histories. Our roots are in anthropology (Abelmann), folklore and history (Davis), communication and rhetoric (Finnegan), and psychology (Miller). In this review, we first examine the claims Isay makes for StoryCorps, not to undermine the great interest or significance of the project, but to think about its place in the genealogy of oral history and the implications of its radio, digital, print, and archival lives. We follow with a discussion of how we might think about StoryCorps' narratives in

Nancy Abelmann is the Harry E. Preble Professor of Anthropology, Asian American Studies, and East Asian Languages and Cultures, and Associate Vice Chancellor for Research, Humanities, Arts, and Related Fields, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL. E-mail: nabelman@illinois.edu

Susan Davis is a professor of the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL. E-mail: sgdavis@uiuc.edu

Cara Finnegan is an associate professor of the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL. E-mail: caraf@illinois.edu

Peggy Miller is a professor of the Department of Communication and the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL. E-mail: pjm@uiuc.edu

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terms of genre or mode. We close with a discussion of two issues which we argue are elided in the book's presentation of the narratives, namely the narratives' particular esthetics and historicity.

Listening Is an Act of Love presents a selection of forty-nine story excerpts chosen from more than ten thousand interviews collected since Isay started the project in 2003. Arranged into five thematic chapters that cover "Home and Family," "Work and Dedication," "Journeys," "History and Struggle," and "Fire and Water" (the latter highlighting stories of those who survived 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina), *Listening* is said to represent "some of the most remarkable stories" shaped into "a moving portrait of American life" that connects us to "real people and their lives—to their experiences of profound joy, sadness, courage, and despair, to good times and hard times . . ." (jacket copy).

Each story excerpt is the product of an interview produced (usually) two people guided by a Corps facilitator. As represented in this volume, in each case, the narrator interviews another person, usually a loved one, invoking a past experience from his or her life. Many of the stories draw on family or other intimate relationships. Isay notes that the resulting stories have been "fact checked" and that participants have given permission to have their stories edited and published. Each excerpt is followed by a black and white photo of the collaborating interviewees.

Isay and the book's back jacket reviewers link StoryCorps to the practice of history, especially oral history, claiming that it will create an unprecedented, comprehensive record that Americans can consult to find out about the experiences of their elders. Isay ties StoryCorps to the life history work of folklorists John Lomax, Alan Lomax, and Zora Neale Hurston and, most directly, to the archived Federal Writers Project (FWP) recordings of the 1930s (253–54). His celebratory and documentary aims are grand: the project is "collecting stories of everyday Americans," of "Americans of all ages and from all backgrounds and walks of life," and "preserving them for future generations" (book jacket cover). We take some issue with these claims.

First, is this oral history? We would suggest that the highly sculpted techniques of the interviews (in many cases eliciting an often-rehearsed moment, story, or memory) and the forty-minute time limit on the interview diverge from the current practice of oral history. We and many of our colleagues view oral history, with its method of intensive background research and its interest in the quotidian ecology of life, as a messy practice, one that often unfolds over a long time and is embedded in the life of a community. In contrast to much journalism, interviews are often conceived as serial, recursive, and repetitive as interviewer and consultant come together to probe and consider not only the intertwining of personal and collective pasts, but the selective ways the past has been remembered (e.g., Edward D. Ives, *George Magoon and the Down East Game*

War [1998]; Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out* [2003]). Oral history creates transcripts, and increasingly publications, that are unruly and reveal the tracks of the investigator. By contrast, the StoryCorps editing in *Listening* is so expert that it leaves no traces at all. There are, for example, no ellipses to remind the reader that this is an edited text, no false starts or digressions. Isay writes that he has rephrased some stories in print form and that “at times tense and usage were changed for clarity” (5). We wonder about what might be lost, as it were, in translation.

In our view, then, the StoryCorps interview is less an oral history interview than it is a highly ritualized performance that inserts the tellers into a larger public culture of affect and remembering. Noteworthy is that in roughly half of the stories, a younger person invites an older family member or friend to accompany him or her to the StoryCorps booth for the purpose of listening to the older person’s stories. The resulting recording session, shaped by the tastes of the project and its connection to NPR programs like *All Things Considered*, produces what are meant to be poignant moments and self-conscious gifts to the future. These are distinct from, although not unrelated to, the mode of the oral historical record.

Likewise, we take issue with the suggestion of a genealogical link to the FWP. That project, credibly seen as a forerunner of many modern oral historical efforts, was a work relief program for writers, and its life stories and folklore divisions were precisely committed to documenting the living culture of communities, defined historically, racially and ethnically, regionally, or occupationally. While Writers Project interviewers certainly treated interviewees as iconic individuals, or representative common Americans, they were also asked to interview them as knowledgeable members of particular, special, and previously undocumented groups, for example, the surviving freed slaves (Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: a Folk History of Slavery* [1945]; Nancy J. Martin-Perdue and Charles Perdue, eds. *Talk about Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* [1996]). While there has been detailed criticism of the FWP interviewers’ training and social attitudes, the directors and editors—John and Alan Lomax, Benjamin Botkin—had in mind, as Isay does, collecting materials to write a more democratic history. They were interested in how their interviewees drew creatively on community past and traditions, rather than in fragments of emotion from seemingly individuated lives.

We do, however, appreciate the project’s looser connection to the FWP legacy. Like many oral efforts, StoryCorps is, indeed, interested in the common man and woman, the unsung hero, and in the banal, albeit the heroic in the banal. And like the FWP, StoryCorps does have ambitious goals to document the nation and its historical moments, through intimate exchanges about the experience of so-called ordinary individuals, compressed and preserved into forty-minute slices of life.

If StoryCorps is not oral history, and if its intentions seem more tightly focused than those of the FWP, then how best might we think about the narratives in *Listening*? Our discussions generated several possibilities. We wonder whether the interviews are best thought of as the snapshots in a scrapbook. Or, perhaps, they are short public tributes to the power of story. Certainly, they are part of a long American legacy of celebrating the “ordinary.” Editor Isay contends in the book’s introduction that StoryCorps is about valuing the stories and wisdom of common people and affirming that the average life matters. But in this case, noticing “ordinariness” is embedded in tender celebrations of intimacy, communicated paradoxically through StoryCorps’ larger media web. Above all, we think that the StoryCorps interviews are a complex form of ritual among intimates. What binds them are not sociological coordinates, grand narrative, or historical integrity but their sensibility.

The book’s title makes clear that the stories are also about the need to slow down and pay attention. We concur with Isay that our fast-paced lives are driven by hypermediation and hypermobility and that we rarely make the time to honor the stories of those we love: to slow down, to talk, and most importantly, to listen. *Listening Is An Act of Love* and the StoryCorps project may be understood as an attempt to achieve what John Durham Peters in his book *Speaking Into the Air* (1999) has termed the “dream of communication,” a “utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited” (2). While everyday life offers only fragmentation, divisiveness, and distraction, StoryCorps creates a parallel universe that is quite the opposite: an intimate yet semipublic space in which to share ourselves. In the world of StoryCorps, the impossible dream of perfect communication may not be so impossible at all: all one needs is a partner, a silent, gently lit space, a microphone, and forty minutes. The silhouetted pairs of figures on the book’s cover signal this privileging of the intimate, revelatory space, each pair of ordinary people deeply engaged in communication. The theme continues in the opening pages of the book, where Isay uses the second person to invite the reader into StoryCorps’ utopic space of ideal communication:

Inside, the booth is completely silent. The lights are low. The room is cozy. *You* sit at a small table across from, let’s say, your grandmother, looking into her eyes. There’s a microphone in front of each of *you*. The facilitator sits down in front of an audio console and presses Record.

You begin to ask *your* questions: (2) [emphasis added].

Isay’s word picture has its visual analog in the introduction chapter’s photograph of the booth’s interior. It is sparse and simple, featuring only two empty chairs, two microphones, a small lamp, and a box of Kleenex suggestively placed within reach. Visually inviting the reader into the “sacred space” (4) of the booth, the photograph asks us to imagine that the impossible dream of communication really is within our reach, if we only resist “endless temptations to detach and disengage” (4).

StoryCorps offers itself as facilitator for the creation of the conditions for ideal communication: it fetishizes engaged, face-to-face, bodily presence. In a world where communication is fleeting, StoryCorps preserves face-to-face-ness for posterity. In a world that is distracting, StoryCorps provides a quiet, intimate space for focused attention. In a world fragmented by displacement and detachment, StoryCorps provides a place for physical and emotional communion. As one interviewee quoted in the book puts it to his grandson as their time together in the booth ends, “I just loved doing it. And just looking at you and answering you, with your eyes looking into mine and mine into yours, it’s just great” (20).

Such idealized conversations are exchanges offered at the altars of the past and the future. The interview segments in *Listening* crystallize the deliberate transmission of wisdom and feeling from one generation to the next; and indeed, at the end of the session, StoryCorps presents participants with a talisman, the take-home CD.

In the process of arguing for perfect communication, the StoryCorps project ignores one of the critical features of stories that psychologists and anthropologists have identified—that they are not prearranged events, but richly ever-present in the imperfect world of communication that surrounds us all our lives. For example, scholars of language socialization have found that in some communities, stories of personal experience are told almost constantly with and about young children. In one working-class community, Peggy Miller found that adults told stories about their past experience, in the presence of young children, at an average rate of 8.5 per hour. Viewed from this angle, the power that stories have to shape hearts and minds lies partly in their sheer ubiquity. By contrast, the interview segments in *Listening* are very unusual—not ordinary at all—in their form and genre and in their relationship to the rest of the contributors’ lives.

The story segments are remarkable because of the way Isay has summoned them, shaped them, and named their importance. What unites the StoryCorps interviews as celebrations, rituals, or snapshots is the similar, almost uniform way in which they evoke the emotions of the listener/reader. The listener, as the title proclaims, will love listening, and we would add, be moved (even to tears). The reader may experience the same emotional tug. In part what moves us is the sense that these are precious narratives, already imagined as relics in their very telling/evocation. They are made precious because lives are understood to be precarious. These are, it seems, the conversations that we would wish to have (or wish we had had) with a dying loved one.

We close our discussion on the matter of StoryCorps’ historicity. We have noted a StoryCorps esthetic in which the recorded interview is precious, moving, and even urgent. Our question became this: If StoryCorps offers the solution to a problem, what is that problem? We offer two thoughts. First, we consider

StoryCorps as a post-9/11 product; second, we appreciate StoryCorps in the era of self-publication in which, indeed, every person can, in theory, have their fifteen minutes of fame. We think it is interesting that *Listening's* overtly historical chapter, "Fire and Water," which deals with 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina appears only at the end of the book. These national tragedies, which spoke to our global vulnerability and to the fault lines of our structures of inequality, respectively, were shocking in their scale and randomness. The heroic in the banal was, perhaps, the child of this cold reality, a way to make sense in a vacuum of meaning.

The disasters of 2001 and 2005 frame StoryCorps' founding and expansion and make a context for its practices. StoryCorps and its dream of perfect communication in the face of disaster and death is emblematic of our insistently commemorative culture. The *New York Times* published an obituary for every known victim of 9/11, while museums collected posters of missing people and makeshift memorial shrines, the attacks' urgent ephemera. And in the aftermath of Katrina, StoryCorps sent a traveling booth and facilitators to Louisiana to collect memories of the catastrophe. (We note that oral history programs at universities, notably Louisiana State University, also immediately started interviewing people displaced and traumatized by the hurricanes.) Again, StoryCorps' documenting, commemorating practices celebrated the endurance and heroism of the victims and the rescuers.

Finally, we think about the ways in which StoryCorps interviews are circulated and used, in addition to the weekly radio broadcasts. Although StoryCorps presents itself as universal in its interest and deeply historical in its tradition, it is very much of the present, part of the FaceBooking, scrapbooking, blogging flow of endless self-documentation. Isay notes several people who use the booth in Times Square almost as a place to record an audio journal: a couple uses it to document their unfolding and long-term relationship, and a homeless woman creates her CD to prove to the future that she existed. Parents and grandparents plan to pass their interviews on to younger generations. And the CDs find other family uses, as material for memorial services after the interviewee has passed on. Viewed as part of the culture of self-documentation, StoryCorps interviews seem more like everything else than they seem distinct. But they do raise a question: if our records of ourselves are endless, how then can we decide what is enduring? We suggest that StoryCorps has drawn on U.S. documentary history and the contemporary possibilities of electronic media to find an answer. The StoryCorps interview is a formula for creating an enduring nugget that can be passed from listener to listener, moving each recipient to give it meaning.