

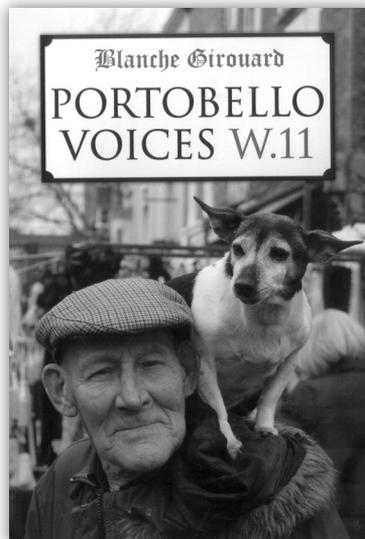
ing life around the Portobello area, is both timely and poignant. The stories capture many aspects of the unique character of the market at an important crossroads on the timeline of this London institution, whilst being a valuable record for the future. The introduction provides historical and social contexts about the area and the emergence of the market, and describes how the myth of the market has been created through fiction and film. Historical photographs and black and white images of the interviewees add visual references. Each chapter focusses on an individual narrative, many of which were collected from people whose families have been connected with the market or local area for generations. The stories weave in and out of one another, together creating an intricate and complex picture, the central thread of which is Portobello market.

The themes that emerge from these oral histories are sometimes expanded, elaborated on or contradicted by other narratives, creating a clamour of differing voices, each with its own resonances. As well as insights into specific trades, the personal stories provide fascinating and unexpected insights into individual lives, taking the narratives off on surprising tangents and revealing insights around personal motivations and private passions.

The accounts enable us to glean an insider's view of the market game. Firstly the world of antiques dealers and traders, who appear like their wares to originate from a different period. Their stories illuminate the realm of these autodidacts, providing fascinating insights and memories about their lives as well as details about how they become dealers. We are also provided with insider knowledge of the antiques trade, the auction rooms, the knocks, rings and cuts, and given a glimpse into a precarious way of life where dealers appear to be as passionate about objects from the past as they are about buying and selling them. These descriptions are at times a remarkable reflection of a by-gone era of historic house sales and fantastic things, as well as an uncertainty about the future. Throughout, there are the ubiquitous fisherman's tales about the big ones that got away, or the extraordinary finds and the money that there was to be made.

Then there is the strange breed who call themselves collectors. 'What makes a collector? It's a disease', muses Reuben, an antiques dealer and collector. Their tales are about how people and objects 'find each other' in the market. Whilst collectors appear to be titillated by the chase as well as the hunting of their quarry, they are also obsessive and compulsive about what they collect. A visit to the home of collectors Tim and Todd is revealing and evocative, showing the power of the narrators to describe and interact with their collections, enabling us to picture their house through our mind's eye.

Into this eclectic mix of stories is added those of the costermongers, who



sell fresh fruit and vegetables on their market stalls between Elgin Crescent and Talbot Road. Many of the costermongers are from local families who have worked, traded and virtually ruled the market for generations. Their evocative stories reveal personal struggles to support their families and maintain their livelihoods, as well as the hard graft of their parents and grandparents. There is a real sense of regret at the loss of a way of life in the face of new developments, but there is also a lively immediacy to this section of the book, as if the recordings were carried out as Blanche stood by whilst the costermongers served their customers: 'A couple of plums and a banana please. Where's 'e, in doors?' In these chapters we gain some sense of the flavour of the market, as well as an understanding of some of the friction

between costermongers, Saturday traders and the local council. By including differing perspectives, *Portobello Voices* juxtaposes these stories with those of the market inspector or the newcomers, such as people selling vintage jewellery, clothing or *bric-à-brac*, as eager to make money at the market as generations of traders before them have done. For those keen to understand the rag trade, there are some useful insights.

Whilst the reader will enjoy being immersed in each chapter, the book presents the narratives as continuous dialogue, without prompts or questions. We are therefore unable to observe the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee for ourselves. The interviewees speak eloquently, but there is no indication about how much editing or re-writing has taken place, making it hard to tell how authentic the voices really are. Another chance to add further colour and connection with the characters would have been to add personal or contextual information about the subjects, such as when they were born or a short biography. It would also have been fascinating to hear how Blanche Girouard came to meet and select her interviewees. Furthermore, a narrative in relation to the overall journey of the project is a lost opportunity and would have added another layer to the book.

The themes of change, loss and the threat that redevelopment poses recur throughout the book: 'When we first started, all those shops were all full of antique arcades... there were no people selling cupcakes', recalls Geoff, who works in financial services. Whatever the future of the market may be, in *Portobello Voices* Blanche Girouard has succeeded in capturing the voices of a market in transition.

■ Sarah Gudgin

ORAL LITERATURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: ARCHIVING ORALITY AND CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES

Mark Turin, Claire Wheeler and Eleanor Wilkinson (eds)

Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013, 190pp, £15.95, paperback.

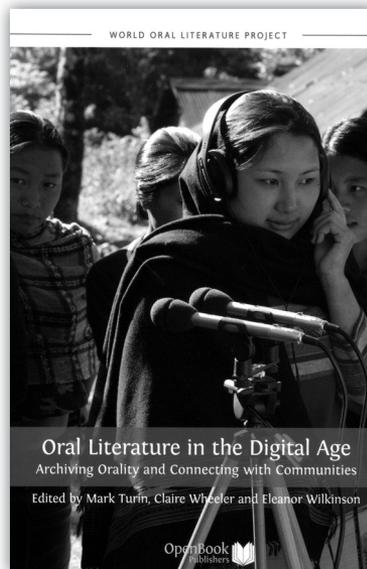
This anthology begins with a powerful epigraph: 'Only connect...' (p xxiii); and indeed, connecting has multiple meanings throughout this work. While the editors refer primarily to the digital

world in which we live and their goal of sharing oral literature – including ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, recitations and historical narratives – in print, oral, and digital formats; connectivity, as a theme, runs much deeper. Although this is an anthropological collection and the contributors are thereby rooted in that field and devoted to preserving the rapidly disappearing oral literature of indigenous communities throughout the world, there is much that oral historians can take away from this conversation. Best practices for building trust as well as sustained relationships with those with whom we work – and the ethical, methodological and practical issues that we must consider when sharing interviewees' stories and our narratives about them – provide new vantage points from which we may review our approaches to the craft. Most importantly, connectivity is a priority when it comes to dissemination and is certainly an issue to which we can all relate. How can we get stories – or in this case oral literature – out to various publics?

This book is the second volume to appear in Open Book Publishers' 'World Oral Literature' series, which is a joint initiative with the World Oral Literature Project (see www.oral-literature.org), and thus the editors have ensured that it will be easily accessed by practitioners and communities. In addition to supplementing the collection with online extras, the volume may be purchased, but is also freely available on the publishers' website (www.openbookpublishers.com). This commitment to using traditional publishing routes to make indigenous cultures accessible is an interesting framework that ought to be explored by oral historians.

The collection is divided into two sections: 'Principles and methods of archiving and conservation' and 'Engagements and reflections from the field'. Although the first section is somewhat technical in nature and discipline-specific, focused on creating digital tools that may be used to document and archive endangered languages, these anthropologists share concerns that are similar to those of oral historians. Thomas Widlock and David Nathan, for instance, ask how

we may create digital archives and documentation tools for oral literature while respecting and acknowledging the qualitative relationships and collaborative partnerships that have gone into their collection. For them, transparency and a willingness on the part of researchers to take the time to develop metadata – layers of knowledge that detail the content as much as the process for future listeners – are the key. That said, they remind us that there will always be problems when using the digital in our work: new technology does not solve old problems. Rather, it sheds light onto these problems and gives us new approaches for coming to terms with them. Likewise,



Judith Aston and Paul Matthews build on this discussion, noting that we must humanise and assure that the layers of meaning – which are so pertinent to research – appear in the digital interfaces that result. All of these contributors, like the editors themselves, are devoted to finding creative, accessible and usable digital platforms that not only close the distance between users, researchers and the tools used to archive oral literature, but also continue to connect, foster and sustain relationships with indigenous communities and those who try to access their rich and rapidly disappearing cultures. Together, they remind us of the responsibilities we have toward the people with whom we work, an ethical concern that knows no disciplinary boundaries and

continues long into the future after our recorders are turned off.

The second section of the collection comprises field notes that illuminate the complexities of language preservation in various indigenous communities in West Africa, the United States of America, Ecuador, India and China. This international and frank discussion enables us to deeply engage with the important issues that constantly surface in the field. For instance, the chapter written by Daniela Merolla and Felix Ameka, in collaboration with Kofi Dorvlo, focuses on the performativity of peoples' narratives and the often unbalanced power relationships that structure the interactions we have with our interviewees. Although the piece would have been stronger if the authors had offered a more detailed discussion of the troubling ethical dilemmas they faced when working with a particular interviewee, their piece illuminates the complexities inherent in negotiating insider/outside statuses and the choices we must make when dealing with difficult interviewees. In this case, they ponder the fine line we must walk when presenting a troubling narrative. How can we stay true to that narrative without giving voice to a person's disturbing personal agendas? Madan Meena, in a related piece that documents her attempts to record the Tejaji Ballad of Rajasthan, questions whether in commissioning the performance of this ceremony she compromised its authenticity and jaded the process. The ways that technology is changing the tradition is interesting and noteworthy, but does it mean that staying true to the endangered cultural aspects of this ballad is impossible? It seems that connecting and collaborating are complicated endeavours that force us to make choices that always come with considerable risks. And yet, the authors' transparency and willingness to discuss their challenges provide readers with important insights into the imperfect but necessary efforts being made to preserve endangered oral literatures and protect intangible cultural heritage.

The commitments that the authors, as well as the World Oral Literature Project, make to the indigenous communities with which they work is enviable, a model that must be emulated by oral historians. It is essential for source

communities to always retain copyright and intellectual property over recordings of their traditions. These are their languages, their stories. We have an obligation to remain connected to these communities, to give back rather than merely take from them. Our research, as this book demonstrates, has a greater impact when we make this kind of commitment.

■ **Stacey Zembrycki**

DEDICATED TO GOD: AN ORAL HISTORY OF CLOISTERED NUNS

Abbie Reese

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 247pp, £22.00, paperback.

Using oral histories and photography, Abbie Reese invites us to discover and learn about the lives of a community of Poor Clare Colettine nuns residing in Corpus Christi Monastery in Rockford, Illinois. This cloistered order has a long lineage which begins in Europe in 1212. They arrived in the United States in the nineteenth century and today the Rockford Poor Clares are one of twelve extant American Poor Clare Colettine communities. Corpus Christi Monastery was founded in 1916 and twenty nuns now reside there.

Through Reese's narrative and photographs, and the nuns' oral histories, we are allowed a rare opportunity to encounter the members of this enclosed order of contemplative nuns, glimpsing their individual pasts and observing their collective and individual present. This ethnographic project aims to understand why women would enter a form of life that would cut them off from the outside world, to make a 'drastic, lifelong, countercultural decision... in favor of obscurity' (p xiii). This is, of course, a typically modern take on cloistered life. The Western world values extroversion and activity and links these traits with success and prosperity; the hidden life that the nuns espouse is a bit suspect to modern sensibilities.

But Reese provides a more nuanced story. Her project unfolds over six years (2005-2011), in which she interviews and re-interviews twelve of the twenty nuns. Reese, a non-Catholic, admits to understanding very little about the nuns' lives in the initial phases of the project. The relationship between Reese and the nuns deepens over the years, and the oral histories are richer for this evolving trust. The Poor Clares' involvement suggests the need to make

outsiders aware of the life they lead, especially given declining numbers. Gone are the days of 'convent-hopping' or 'nun-runs' (p 71) and this openness about their lives is a way of potentially gaining recruits, but more importantly leaving a tangible memory of their 'hidden witness'.

I found the structure of the book initially off-putting, though on further reflection it echoes the collaboration between Reese and the nuns. Each chapter begins with a narrative where Reese expounds on a particular theme (community life; claustrophobia; monastic living; sacrificing self; agency; suffering; idealism and reality; erasure) using the oral histories to great effect;



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and each chapter ends with a three- to twelve-page contribution from one of the Poor Clares. Though not made explicit, this second narrative in each chapter is derived from Reese's interviews, reflecting her commitment to 'shared authority' via co-authorship.

Reese's striving to understand the Poor Clares' lives emphasises 'tending to the everyday' (p xv) and thus presenting the ordinariness of contemplative religious life. This work dispels many of the myths surrounding women who live cloistered lives: they are not women who are anti-social, inordinately shy or running away from their personal lives. Each woman enters religious life thoughtfully and they – and the community – have time to get accustomed to each other during the postulancy, novitiate and juniorate; it takes more than six years before they

take their final solemn vows. Their childhoods do not fit any set pattern; they are not scrupulously religious children; and parents are rarely initially enthusiastic about losing their daughter to an enclosed existence. This is not an easy life, and the nuns are frank with their uncertainties and difficulties. For some, these concerns diminish after a time; but for others, they remain constant companions. What keeps these women tied to this unconventional lifestyle is their belief in their vocation, their relationship with God and their confidence that their life of hidden prayer is powerful, and a means of influencing events in the greater world (p 5). While outwardly religious life appears uniform, Reese's narrative makes it clear that these women live their vocation in ways that reflect a community way of living that still values and accepts their individuality.

While I enjoyed this work and found it thought-provoking, there are questions that I think could have been more directly addressed. Reese notes that in respect to the Poor Clares' 'hiddenness' she has provided pseudonyms, yet she includes photographs of the nuns. Surely there are some tensions here that could have been made more explicit? I enjoyed the photographs; visual representation made the stories come alive, and despite the uniform habit, the facial expressions gave a sense of the diversity of the nuns. However, I would have liked to understand what Reese intended methodologically with the photographs. There are small errors in technical vocabulary. The term 'novitiate' is used rather than novice (p 33). Instead of 'apostolate', the term 'postulate' (p 8) is used. Reese claims that all nuns take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (p 3), but this should be nuanced. Religious women take these evangelical counsels implicitly, but not always explicitly.

Those wanting to find some sort of academic argument and analytical critique of contemplative religious life will be disappointed, for this was not what was intended. *Dedicated to God* is successful, however, in what it sets out to do: this book tells important stories that explain experiences and lend meaning (p xiv) to the diversity of religious life.

Carmen M Mangion