



An artful interview is complex; a tapestry of threads, colors, textures, sounds, and voices as it weaves material among ourselves, our interviewees, and our audiences. What should we include in an interview? What choices do we have when we want to conduct one? When do we want to present what we find to an interested audience? How can we better understand the interview as an art form: its genres, purposes, processes, even its page layouts? How do we best present an oral interview on a written page, in a digital recording, or on a screen? What are the rules? And most important for teachers, how do we enable our students to create and disseminate the products of their interviewing adventures? It's a dense subject, a thick tapestry, and luckily each interview, like any work of art, is and should be unique. You'll see this idea play out in the following pages.

In this 2019 volume of JFE, we invite you to enter the breadth and depth of our special collection about the art of the interview, a set of skills often overlooked in haste. Interviewing is important, nuanced research: a data source as valuable as published citations, material objects, historical records, timelines, and charts. An interview requires what I like to call "collaborative listening." An interview requires guided yet unpredictable time. An interview needs to be an intricate, interconnected, intersubjective interweaving between the interviewer, interviewee, and subject, all with a sensitive eye toward an audience. Questions can be closed or open. Timing can be flexible. It requires preparation of your own design. It's consistent with what folklorists study as "performance theory." As humans, we've lived such performances since people have been talking to one another across space and time. An artful interview combines informal and formal data and finds a way to bring life to a final presentation.

Even the most traditional examples illustrate how the process works: Seek information, choose data sources, plan a living encounter with your subjects, reflect on what you've gathered, analyze patterns and themes in your data, check them with your subject, project those themes toward larger ideas, and eventually make decisions about how to present all you've gathered to an audience in the most artful, compelling way you can.

About the photo: Linsey-woolsey coverlet that belonged to Co-Editor Paddy Bowman's great-grandmother.

First, I offer you an unlikely example to illustrate the artful interview process, drawn from a most traditional English teachers' canon. In the final stanza of William Butler Yeats' classic poem, "Among Schoolchildren," a late middle-aged poet meditates on a visit he's just had at an Irish primary school for girls, having talked with the children and the "kind nun in a white hood" who answers his questions. He's ambled around the classroom and observed the details of a most enjoyable day. "The children learn to cipher and sing/To study reading-books and history/To cut and sew, be neat in everything." And as he reflects on the scene and the talk, he loops inward to his own life and longings and then he loops outward to influential scholars and writers he's encountered and, ultimately, to us, his audience, about the complexity of his experience. His famous last lines illustrate the ironies he finds as he thinks about that scene:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Even a one-day visit to a school is artful and interconnected, Yeats reminds us as he meditates on the scene. The overarching effect (the strong rooted "chestnut tree") is not a single element but a complicated sum of its parts. Beside solidity, strength, and nourishment, the tree and its parts suggest history and possibility, uniqueness and similarity, parts and whole. Both in short and in symbol, the poem holds the irony of a life dancing in the midst of other related lives. To me, the image is what we should find in an artful interview.

Closer to home, contemporary folklorists and anthropologists have other artistic ways of describing what happens in an interview. Renato Rosaldo, in his *Culture and Truth*, uses yet another dance metaphor when he writes, "...the optimal fieldworker should dance on the edge of a paradox by simultaneously becoming one of the people and remaining an academic. The term participant-observer reflects even as it shapes the fieldworker's double persona" (1989, 80).

In *Translated Woman*, Ruth Behar describes the process of bringing to life the story of Esperanza, a woman with whom she spent 14 years interviewing, whose village considered her a witch. Behar's job, she knows, is to bring Esperanza to life on the page: "As I undid necklaces of words and restrung them, as I dressed up hours of rambling talk in elegant sentences and paragraphs of prose, as I snipped at the flow of talk, stopping it sometimes for dramatic emphasis long before it had really stopped, I no longer knew where I stood on the border between fiction and non-fiction" (1993, 16).

As I wrote my own book *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*, over four very different editions and 20 years, my co-author Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and I realized more acutely with each edition that an artfully conducted and carefully presented interview is the fundamental basis of any account of people and culture. In fact, we devote two separate chapters to elements of interviewing: "Researching People: The Collaborative Listener," "Researching Language: The Cultural Translator." In each edition, we offer samples of fine published essays and interviews (most recently, psychologist Oliver Sacks' portrait of autistic scientist Temple Grandin, 19th-century American journalist Lafcadio Hearn's analysis of the term "cheek," poet Ofelia Zepeda's fascinating observations of writing in her non-written native language). But we also present our

own students' work with interviews: a college freshman's study of a woman in a biker bar, a graduate student's account of popular culture items in a presidential museum archive, a university professor's photographic interviews of hospital workers who are invisible to many people.

Over the years I've taught interviewing, my students have covered an astonishing variety of topics and people: An elderly farmer and his family talk about their history by simply looking at their great-grandfather's old ledger, a young woman interviews five members of her family and a region's literary history about a single book in her grandmother's garage, a Native American man sees tribal rivalry by interviewing a woman in the gift shop, a graduate student studies a 19th-century woman who mapped the ocean floor and eventually publishes it as a book. Of course, I could go on. I write this not to brag (although I'm so proud), but to recognize the literary and cultural nuances that come with teaching the art of the interview, guiding the processes, and reading hundreds of artful interviews written by professionals and by students.

There are great rewards in such work. You need time to do it well. And support. You will find a rich sample of new rewards here, along with the teaching strategies, thoughts, and support materials that accompany them. You will find sources of support, suggestions for projects, and samples of very different kinds of interviews as you look through the table of contents. I invite you to wrap yourself comfortably into the tapestry that is this volume, and arrange it to fit your future.

Works Cited

- Behar, Ruth. 1993. *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Boston: Beacon.
- Rosaldo, Renaldo. 1989. *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon.
- Sunstein, Bonnie S. and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater. 2012. *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*. 4th Ed. New York: Bedford St. Martin's.
- Yeats, William Butler. "Among Schoolchildren," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43293/among-school-children>.