

Chapter 1. Weaving Career Trajectories: Academic, Professional, Intellectual, Personal

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Michael Frisch graduated from Princeton University as part of an unusual cohort in a short-lived experiment in an Oxford-Cambridge-influenced, three-year PhD program with guaranteed sessional appointment. He then found a new career path in a tenure-track position at what was then named the State University of New York at Buffalo. That opportunity and its geographic location led him to change fields; merge labor, local, and oral histories in new ways; and reshape knowledge and how he developed it.

For more than fifty years, two interconnected threads have run through this historian's career. One involves the evolution of my interests, practice, and scholarship, both applied and theoretical—not so much a change as a broadening in substance, and a move toward engagement beyond the university and academe. The other involves a late-career shift in the locus but not the focus or substance of my work, which remains consistent and continuous: a shift from academic teaching and research to a consulting office pioneering new tools and applications. Taken together, the weave of these threads, traced through informal stories and reflections, speaks to the concerns underlying this volume's essays.

As an undergraduate at Tufts University, I was propelled, by inspiring freshman English and humanities courses, from a not-deeply-grounded pre-med path to an American History major. My history senior thesis drew on the teenage experience in Shaker Village Work Group, a summer project located in and helping to restore the 18th-19th century Shaker Village in New Lebanon, NY, one of the centers of this remarkable Utopian religious community.

Shaker Village Work Group—which lasted nearly 25 years—was an effort, utopian in its own way, for teenagers to imagine and build a kind of secular translation of the Shaker ethic—about the sanctity of craftsmanship and work, and about the grounding of individual creativity and social relations within a community defined by gender parity, collective respect, and inclusiveness. After two summers as a teenage “villager,” I returned for two summers on staff while in college. From that I had access to a trove of primary Shaker documents and resources that I plunged into for a transformative senior thesis, exploring the latter years of Shaker history.

Graduate school followed but kind of by accident. An older Tufts student in my dorm, recently returned from a year in England, told me about a tutorial program at the London School of Economics (LSE) where I could do independent

research on my own while enjoying a year in London. Eager for a “break” before graduate school, this was intoxicating. But thinking it obvious, my friend did *NOT* tell me that applying to LSE then was more or less like applying for a public library card—you’d be accepted automatically and be assigned a tutor to meet with you once or twice.

Given this omission, and not long past the stress of college admission decisions, I assumed I needed to have fallback options against possible rejection. And so I applied to American history graduate programs. My record was good if not compelling, and I was rejected by some and, of course, accepted for LSE. But then came a telephone call from Princeton, at the time recruiting for an American history program that was strong and growing, if not the strongest, in an eminent history department.

With a (then) rising demand for professional historians in an expanding university world, and with an eye to what was (then as now) considerable attrition in most graduate programs, Princeton offered *every* accepted grad student a complete four-year fellowship. When this was announced on the phone by Professor Wesley Frank Craven, a renowned colonial historian, I politely requested that the offer be postponed so I could spend my LSE year in London. In a gentle southern drawl and with a bemused smile I could imagine, Professor Craven said, “Well, Mr. Frisch, I’m afraid we really can’t do that. And, you know, admission IS getting MUCH tougher each year. ...”

Reality and a four-year fellowship beckoned, so I entered Princeton. I began my studies with a Shaker-thesis-inflected interest in artisans. This broadened into 19th century labor history and finally into the relatively new field of urban history, focused for me on the meanings and dimensions of community change in 19th century urbanization.

Still intent on getting a break from the university library, this led to field research in and on a target city—Springfield, Massachusetts, where I lived for a year. I completed my dissertation in a second writing year in Cambridge. Not quite LSE or London, but ...

Shortly after finishing, I was invited to join a group of graduate students, new assistant professors, and senior scholars locked up together for a long weekend conference on “The 19th Century City” at Yale University. The dissertation became my first (and tenure-earning) book, *Town into City: Springfield Massachusetts and the Meaning of Community, 1850-1880* (Frisch, 1972), one of a parade of single-city studies, many from the grad students and assistant professors at that Yale conference defining what was grandly called “The New Urban History.”

II

Nineteenth-century American urban history was the field for which I was then hired by the history department at the University at Buffalo (UB), at the time inelegantly known as SUNYAB, State University of New York at Buffalo. UB was a

private university incorporated in a new state university, on its way to becoming the system's flagship research university.

The transformed and expanding history department, with no room in its campus building, placed offices for me and several colleagues in one of several houses on a residential street bordering the campus. This led—not quite by accident, but certainly serendipitously—to a broadening that profoundly reshaped my academic, intellectual, professional, and personal trajectory.

The agent for this transformation was, literally, the house next door. This is where UB had located a new American studies program (AMS) grounded in cross-cultural anthropology and arts-focused multi-disciplinarity, rather than the conventional history/literature combination of leading programs—such as Yale's, from which Lawrence Chisolm and most of the initial UB faculty had happily decamped to build an entirely new program from their own imagination. The new program almost immediately attracted a remarkable cohort of graduate students, most of whom were already deeply involved in cultural/political activism.

This next-door AMS, along with lively and new history colleagues, became my community in the first few Buffalo years. It also drew on the expansive energy transforming UB across the board—especially in an already legendary English department featuring scholars, poets, and writers like Leslie Fiedler, Robert Creely, Robert Hass, John Barth, and a junior faculty member in my cohort later to earn the Nobel Prize in Literature, J.M. Coetzee. There were other such icons at UB, established and becoming, in music, theatre, media, and the arts. UB connections to the similarly and surprisingly electric (and eclectic) avant-garde cultural scene in Buffalo were extensive in both directions.

Meanwhile, in the AMS house next door, politicized new graduate students decided to launch an annunciatory journal of radical American studies. They secured funding, a printer, and an agent to obtain subscriptions from around the world, even before there was a first issue. Each issue was to be thematic, with the first on Native Americans—a defining axis of the new AMS, which had a Native American studies component created by students like the soon-to-be-renowned John Mohawk, and the professor these students recruited, the already-renowned Onondaga Faithkeeper, Oren Lyons.

To honor that focus, as well as the Buffalo setting and not incidentally their left politics, the students named the radical new journal *Red Buffalo*, and they planned a second issue on oral history. (It was also the last: for years, letters arrived from subscribing libraries as far away as New Zealand, asking when they would receive their remaining issues.)

As a next-door history professor informally part of the AMS community, I was asked if I could write something for the oral history issue. I told them I didn't know much at all about oral history, but that I was then reading Studs Terkel's book about the Depression for my American history survey course. I said, Well, I'm reading *Hard Times*, an oral history of The Great Depression, so perhaps I could write a review essay?

I knew what I might write in an article about the 1930s, but not for an oral history journal. I remember looking at the blurbs on my paperback's cover: "This is the voice of the people; It's an anthem in praise of the American Spirit; It's Carl Sandburg and the nobility of the ordinary; Just listen to these voices—this is the way it really was." I thought: that's not the book I just read, which seemed darker and much more complicated. I noticed Terkel's very first line: "This is a memory book." My review essay focused on what a "memory book" might mean—and what Terkel was doing and saying through his oral history.

Hard Times is a mosaic of 150+ interviews about American lives in the 1930s, collected and mediated by a Chicago radio interviewer with a gift for careful listening and thoughtful responses. I was struck by how well the book conveyed pain and lost dreams, how people felt they had failed rather than society failing them. My essay explored how these sensibilities informed Terkel's selection, editing, and presentation: he offered oral histories both as primary sources and as an historian's interpretation.

Side note: the *Red Buffalo* editors commissioned an introduction from a friend in Wisconsin. What they got uncritically celebrated Terkel's collected memories of ordinary people—a left-populist version of the paperback blurbs. The editors found that romanticism terrible, and so the issue appeared with two introductions, one as commissioned, the other their own left-theoretical critique of hegemony and false consciousness.

My review essay didn't have that tonality but it did explore—a new curiosity for me—the complexity of memory, given and received, as a source of history. This seemed to strike a chord with readers similarly looking beyond the romantic "blurbosphere." That was the beginning of oral and public history as an emerging, ongoing focus of my work, in both theory and practice.

Somehow, my little review essay came to the attention of Ronald Grele, then directing the Columbia University Oral History Office. Ron liked it, drew me to my first Oral History Association meeting, and put me in contact with a generation of writers, especially in Europe and the UK then beginning to converge on similar ideas and sensibilities—Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson, among others. I joke with friends that a great way to become known is to write a pretty good article that nobody can find: Well, I hear there's this interesting article in *Red Buffalo*. What is *Red Buffalo*? Anybody know where I can find *Red Buffalo*?

A related story involves Terkel himself. Ronald Grele's (1975) *Envelopes of Sound*, presented a panel with several leading oral historian—and Studs Terkel. At one point, Terkel said something to the effect of, "Well that kid, what's his name, Buffalo Red, he made a good point." Years later, the Oral History Association honored Terkel at a 1990s annual meeting in Milwaukee, a controversial step upsetting some who felt a best-selling popular author could not really be a legitimate, respectable Oral Historian. I had never met Terkel, but an elevator door opened and there he was, in trademark knit tie and checkered shirt. I was starstruck, but managed to say,

“Mr. Terkel! Great to meet you, I’m ...Buffalo Red!” He broke into an instant grin, gave me a big hug, and we talked about the essay.

III

In the years following this 1970s start, reflections on oral history and then practice, moved more and more to the center of my own work. They propelled my broader engagement in public history and the dialogue among historians and our different publics. Sometimes, this was in tandem with my formal history grounding in urban history, especially (but not exclusively) in projects and collaborations that engaged the fascinating and complex history of Buffalo, my adoptive home city.

Both dimensions of this broadened academic trajectory informed a 1990 collection of occasional pieces I’d written, drawn together as *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Frisch, 1990). *Shared Authority* proved an enduringly well-chosen title whether the book is still much read or not (I know it’s certainly not frequently purchased!)

By the 1990s, this balanced urban-oral/public history combination had become the center of my academic and professional life. This is embodied in *Portraits in Steel* (Rogovin & Frisch, 1993), oral histories and photographic portraits of Buffalo steelworkers and their families following the closing of most of the Buffalo region’s steel and iron facilities. This was a collaboration with the eminent documentary photographer Milton Rogovin—local, but already well known and respected world-wide. Rogovin had taught darkroom photography while completing, in his 70s, an unneeded but satisfying American studies MA degree.

For most of the 1990s, with an official joint appointment, I chaired the now PhD-granting multicultural American studies department, then also housing women’s studies and Native American studies, which later were to become independent departments. American studies also included Puerto Rican studies/Caribbean studies and developed close affiliations plus graduate degree tracks for African American studies at UB.

All this—and national visibility grounded in the broader developments at UB—led to my selection/election as President of the American Studies Association for 2000–2001, at the turn of the millennium. At this time I was also deeply involved in civic efforts to imagine and implement what the centennial of the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo could mean and do on an appropriately international stage—so that Pan-Am and Buffalo might be remembered not only for the assassination of President William McKinley in the Exposition’s Temple of Music.

In turn, this involvement also set the stage for a dramatic change in my academic trajectory at the start of the 21st century. Significantly, this in no way involved a change in the content and direction of my scholarship and practice. In fact, the impetus was the opposite. Understanding why requires a brief excursion into intertwined personal and institutional developments.

As it happened, at the end of the 1990s and the century's turn, I had been granted temporary release from major teaching in both AMS and History in support of the American Studies Association presidency and the Pan-Am Centennial efforts. In 2001-2002, I was due to return to a full-time workload in two departments. In a second marriage and with a later start, my wife Jo and I were then also parents of two daughters under age ten; Jo was (and remains) full-time UB faculty in Epidemiology and Public Health.

In this context, I began to think seriously about taking the early retirement for which I was newly eligible. When I shared these musings, friends uniformly had a single reaction: Oh, you want to spend more time with the kids! But that wasn't it at all. I explained to my friends how we each were doing and would *continue* to do as much as we *each* could with and for the kids. But were I to return to full-time teaching—four courses plus graduate advising and thesis direction, plus committees and leadership on recruitment—and in light of our family demands, I feared I might not be able to read a book or do urban research or develop public/oral history projects. And so, with decades of TIAA-CREF retirement resources, I approached my deans to explore early retirement options.

IV

Then, another surprise: Creative administrators faced their own dilemma—they found themselves bribing faculty into early retirement in order to free resources for hiring. And with UB in Buffalo, administrators said, some of the most productive faculty take the offer and move to New York City or Cambridge or Berkeley, where they did not need tenure-track jobs but wanted only appointments offering access to colleagues and graduate students.

In response, some university administrators began to imagine an in-between option. As our Bills-fan/football-savvy then-President Bill Greiner said to me, “You’re the experienced, high-priced lineman we need on the field and in the locker room. So why don’t we together ‘restructure your contract’ with regard to state resources, including both salary and pension, so that, as in the NFL, we can free up ‘room under the cap’ for going into the draft for new hiring.”

In this spirit, UB offered me an innovative in-between role: Senior Research Scholar, teaching one course, not four—but in every other way remaining a full citizen of two departments. As my dean said, “We don’t need you to teach the survey course for the 25th time. We need your experience and leadership for directing dissertations and senior theses, and graduate advising/on committees, search committees and internal leadership roles, not to mention the national visibility of your work.”

For this new role, UB provided around 40 percent of my former salary, not—as is otherwise common—a minimal adjunct fee for teaching one course. Overall, this was a win-win for me, as my entire impetus for early retirement was to continue meaningful work—NOT to step back from it. And it played out that way for

the fifteen years I continued in that Senior Research Scholar/two-department-citizenship role.

As President Greiner observed more generally, university manpower models desperately need reimagination. When I arrived at UB, my job description was as follows: teach four courses, do research, advise students, and serve administratively. On the verge of early retirement, with nationally visible work and leadership, my job description remained the same: teach four courses, do research, advise students, and serve administratively. What if, Greiner said, we approached our best scholars and teachers in their late 40s and early 50s, and invited them into a role as Senior Fellows—still active in departments but with reduced teaching, expanded graduate direction, and full-citizenship leadership—all for modest reductions in salary somewhat balanced by easier-to-supply office and research support?

UB hasn't yet gone down this workload path structurally, although it remains an intriguing alternative to losing some of its best to early retirement and, more importantly, a way to derive value from the unique institutional and national leadership capacities of senior faculty in whom so much has been invested for so long.

It worked well for me and, I think, my university: It led almost immediately to my 2002 initiation of an oral/public history consulting office, the Randforce Associates LLC, housed initially in UB's Technology Incubator, and more recently in The Innovation Center of the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus, with UB's relocated Jacobs School of Medicine downtown at its center. Randforce is now in its third decade, with a practice expanding in dramatic ways.

V

We have been at work for a good while now on the frontiers of oral history content management and new forms of generating multimedia documentation with immediate, expansive uses. For many years, the center of this practice involved a third-party software, InterClipper, with unrivaled capacities to annotate and cross-index source media directly as audio and video, without requiring transcription. Its definitive strength, not yet matched in the most advanced content-management programs today, lay in offering multiple metadata fields for coding passages, each with a customized taxonomy and deployable for sorting in any combination of independent and dependent variability (i.e., filtering by, in order, "military/race relations/Vietnam era," or "race relations/1950s/ business").

We've partnered in adding this capacity to major projects across the country and internationally, including five IMLS National Leadership Grants. InterClipper itself became functionally obsolete a few years ago, never ascending from local computers to the cloud. Its developers' interest turned instead to a new web-app, PixStori—a mode for gathering and sharing photo-prompted short-form oral history on an interactive social media platform offered via Talking Pictures, LLC, one of our partners. At the same time, Randforce's adaptations of

InterClipper-style cross-referencing and indexing for long-form audio and video collections have proven approachable on other software platforms, informing our ongoing consulting practice.

In the last few years, a host of new technologies and capacities, including but not limited to those inflected by AI, have suddenly and dramatically transformed the landscape of oral and public history—and our practice—at every level, from individual projects to large institutions. The biggest impact, initially at least, has been on transcription, for so long the major time- and cost-intensive obstacle to widespread access to and use of oral history collections. If AI is a transformative earthquake, for transcription it has thrown off two powerful aftershocks.

First, automatic transcription can produce an initial transcription with up to 90 percent accuracy. Second, auto-transcription can provide embedded time-codes to connect transcript and recording at precise points—read, click, and hear/watch that precise moment in the interview. This opens a new world of text-based access to recordings for examination, extraction, and multimedia use. Still, AI transcripts require aggressive correcting and formatting, filled as they are with every speaker utterance, every speaker-change broken out as a new paragraph, and time codes everywhere. But, more importantly, AI transcripts also invite editorial engagement to make the transcription, as a kind of translation from voice to text, readable and browsable.

Adding informed, responsive editing to the simpler process of correction has moved to the center of our current work. With new tools, we discovered that we could process the full transcription and move on, in one smooth arc, to produce with surprising efficiency and ease a series of parallel transcript iterations as distinct indexes for the collection.

We first consolidate the long AI transcription (which breaks at every speaker change) into an equally verbatim but infinitely more browsable “Transcript of Record,” consolidated at carefully chosen paragraph break points covering 2-4 minutes of recording, with a single timecode at the top. We then guide client project staff in dividing the interviews into content-driven 10-15-minute chapter-like “Units,” presented in a “Table of Contents” with brief content summaries describing the coverage in each named Unit. These then flow into distinct iterations, editing the speakers’ words first as concise “Unit Digests”—usually 25-40 percent of the unit’s Transcript of Record—and then “Story Digests,” for shorter thematically focused highlight passages selected collaboratively with the project.

With no loss of content or theme, Unit Digests are an accurate, readable, browsable distillation, while thematic, focused Story Digests are especially useful for educational settings and for publication in that they are wholly in the speaker’s own words. Finally, with the Unit and Story Digests providing content flow and thematic distillations, we and the project team return to the full Transcript of Record to identify and mark, with in-out points, passages available for media export or verbatim quotation, easily locatable and extractable by students, producers, or visitors. Keywords can then be assigned not only within and across

interviews, but up and down the “ladder” of these different iterations for any section, permitting easy drilling down for detailed exploration or zooming out for different views as needed.

Our work is only one vector in a field very much in motion from various directions and across many platforms, tools, and conceptual approaches. Each developments challenge conventional assumptions about oral history, from interviewing to archiving to transcribing to indexing to producing media to public sharing and involvement. It is difficult to predict exactly what the field will look like in even five or ten years, not to mention 50, and I won’t even dare to speculate on what AI will continue to add to the mix. We’re all in the boat with Bob Dylan: “You know there’s something happening here but you don’t know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?” I don’t quite know either, but I can offer some informed guesses.

Oral and public history have for most of their history been defined by either an archival sensibility or a documentary sensibility: collect, store, and organize the material for any possible use. Or, a specific user reaches in to find a specific something for fashioning a specific output: a film, an exhibit, a research article, a website post.

In-between, and surprisingly unaddressed, lies an *instrumental* sensibility: organizing the collection to serve all those who want to *do something* with the material, and do something in ongoing ways that vary widely—over time and situation, and among what may be the very different needs and objectives of organizational users and the communities they engage.

This is the same instrumental sensibility that propelled my initial oral and public history steps beyond graduate training in my first years in Buffalo, as described above. Only recently I’ve come to recognize that this “do something” sensibility has been the consistent voice speaking to my curiosity and propelling whatever contributions I have been able to make in urban history, oral history, and public history, in modes that have appropriately taken very different forms, substantively and institutionally—over time.

It is this sensibility that led me to first sense and then identify an only-now emerging paradigm shift deeper than the transformative impacts of technology and broader than dramatic changes in a field once oriented to elite interviewing but now responsive to communities unrepresented in the historical record itself, not to mention excluded from participation in its construction, interrogation, and interpretation. The paradigm-shifting concept holds that it is not dramatic discoveries or inventions that are revolutionary. Rather, it is community-driven understandings that first lag behind, but finally—sometimes in a moment—catch up with the profoundly transformative implications of new discoveries or technologies. The revolution involves how this happens, and what difference it makes.

From the beginning, oral historians stubbornly tended to see the basic building-block elements of the field as independent and free-standing, however constellated and to what ends: Interviewing, by and for whom. Recordings. The transcript. Catalogs and finding aids. Search tools. Metadata. Indexing. Extracts

for publication or in research or in documentary production. Exhibits and community responses. Crowdsourcing.

But what if we see these elements, each and all, as facets or views of the same oral history thing—all there, all the time, all reachable, all variously usable? What if the transcript is no longer viewed as a flat one-dimensional representation of a recording? What if, instead, we can easily map interviews through different interconnected versions or views of recording-connected, verbatim transcriptions? Here, we might access a new capacity for oral history, but one totally familiar and ordinary to GPS users accustomed to pinch in or out to view a given map at various scales, from the broad region to street level, depending on what navigation is needed, what they need to see. What does shared and sharing authority in oral and public history—and history itself—look like then, and what will we be able to imagine doing with it?

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