

Being a good scholar or a good person? Shared/sharing authority and the practice of taking scholarship for granted

by Annika Olsson

Abstract: What is the place of scholarship in oral history? What knowledge do scholarly oral historians contribute to oral history and our democratic societies? I explore these fundamental and major questions through a re-reading of articles focussing on shared/sharing authority, and via conversations with three Swedish scholars, representing three generations of oral historians. I argue that scholarship has been taken for granted, by myself and others. For the past fifty years, many of us have prioritised democratising, deconstructing and decolonising rather than developing and defending scholarship. In a way, you could say that we have fallen into the trap of populism that many oral historians warned us about, striving to be good persons instead of good scholars, and reinforcing the dichotomy of the two instead of deconstructing it. This also means that we have placed oral history, the humanities and social sciences in a vulnerable situation. I argue that it is high time to make visible the place of oral history scholarship not only in oral history but in society.

Keywords: academic knowledge; scholarship; shared/sharing authority; democracy; humanities and social sciences

Amongst the gravest of the inadequacies of oral history, I would suggest, is the tendency to transform the writing of history into a form of populism – that is to replace certain of the essential tenets of scholarship with facile democratisation, and an open mind with demagoguery.

Luisa Passerini, 1979¹

Gender studies is like the canary in the coal mine.

Andrea Petö, 2022²

Oral history and the practice of shared/sharing authority have contributed to an important reformulation of academic research that has improved the quality, validity and legitimacy of academic knowledge. Instead

of building on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic tradition of using what the postcolonial and literary scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls ‘native informants’, more democratic and participatory ways of doing history have been promoted, where the subaltern not only speaks but is also made visible and listened to.³ This is done through different collaborative processes so that knowledge represented by everyday people or ‘non-professional/non-scholarly’ oral historians is taken into account because their knowledge is as important, at times even more important, as that of the ‘scholarly’ oral historian.

Academic knowledge production always needs to be scrutinised and discussed if research is to create reliable knowledge and fulfil its mission to contribute to demo-

cratic societies. Much has been written about the problems of academic knowledge and scholarly practices. In this article, however, I would like to reverse the question and focus on what is so special about the knowledge that *scholarly* oral historians have and produce. In the introduction to his ground-breaking book *A Shared Authority*, Michael Frisch states, 'The hegemony of scholarly authority indeed must be challenged and often qualified, but not by rejecting the insights of scholarship by definition'.⁴ What does this mean more concretely? And why do we need academically trained oral historians at all? What kind of work is it we do, and why is knowledge produced in academia important for oral history, for democracies and for society at large? What are these 'essential tenets of scholarship' that Luisa Passerini is referring to in the opening quote? To paraphrase Alessandro Portelli, the problem I am interested in is not what the relationship between oral history and scholarship is, but rather what is the place of scholarship within oral history.⁵

Even if the question is far from new (and there have been many discussions before), I would argue that now is a good time to revisit it because we live in a time where scholarship, especially within the humanities and social sciences where many oral historians are situated, is not only criticised but also under threat. I do not think it is helpful for any of us to be too apocalyptic (there are too many scholars talking about the end of the world in the media right now), but we also need to acknowledge the threat and fight our corner. The Hungarian scholar Andrea Petö, professor of gender studies at the Central European University and an oral historian, is very articulate about the different threats towards academic freedom, academic knowledge and democracy in our current societies. She was awarded the University of Oslo's Human Rights Award 2022 and then spoke about gender studies being 'the canary in the coal mine'.⁶ According to Petö, attacks on gender studies in Hungary, and around the world, should be interpreted as attacks on democracy and academic freedom but also on higher education and academic knowledge. It might start with gender studies, but it does not end there. A recent study of the Swedish organisation Vetenskap och allmänhet (Public and Science) shows that the public does not know what research within humanities is good for and does not trust in what we do.⁷ The Nobel Prize Summit 2023, 'Truth, Trust and Hope', frames it like this: 'Misinformation is eroding our trust in science and runs the risk of becoming one of the greatest threats to our society today'.⁸

In this article, I argue that many of us need to accept some of the blame for this situation. Scholarship has been taken for granted, by myself and others, during the last fifty years because we prioritised democratising, deconstructing and decolonising over developing and defending scholarship. In a way, you could say that we have fallen into the trap of populism that Passerini and other oral historians warned us about, striving to be good persons instead of good scholars, and enforcing

this damaging dichotomy instead of deconstructing it (as we thought we were doing).

Luisa Passerini's classic article, published in 1979, is clearly situated in a different time, when oral history was not as established as today and had recently been involved in what she calls 'two major battles with the established tradition of historiography'.⁹ The battles are not yet won, but Passerini thinks that 'the direction of oral history research is clear, and the debate is well advanced'. However, despite this she also underlines that it is high time to redefine the aims of oral history scholarship, and she is very explicit, not to say provocative, when she talks about the risk of populism and 'constructing oral history as merely an alternative ghetto, where at last the oppressed may be allowed to speak'.¹⁰ Michael Frisch's ground-breaking collection of essays, published in 1990, includes no explicit reference to Passerini, but he also talks about the importance of not rejecting scholarship since there are powerful forces at play, not least 'the power of populist self-empowerment through public history [that] can be easily and romantically exaggerated'.¹¹ Both Passerini and Frisch are explicitly talking about the risks of falling into populist practices, and of course are reflecting both an ongoing discussion in the oral history field and the times and places their writings are originating from.¹² Now, I argue, it is high time to amplify this discussion again and make visible the place of oral history scholarship, especially in relation to the practices of shared/sharing authority, but also within oral history and in society. It might be considered pretentious, but oral history has high demands and rightly so.

How and why

I explore these questions through a critical reading of books and articles explaining oral history *and* shared/sharing authority. I recognise that this decision also means that there is a huge body of work that is not explicitly included in this article, but since there is so much literature that could be included in an analysis of how non-scholars and scholars do participatory work together, how different power structures are involved and affect the collaborations and what scholars bring to the table, it is both a pragmatic and logical choice for this article. Moreover, I will also use digital and analogue conversations with three academic historians who are fundamental in the Swedish field of oral history: Professor Emeritus Ulla Wikander, Stockholm University; Professor Mats Greiff, Malmö University; and Professor Malin Thor Tureby, Malmö University.¹³ These three scholars represent three generations of oral history in Sweden and also different disciplines within the field of history: economic history (Wikander) and history (Greiff and Thor Tureby). I chose to talk to Ulla

A photo from the exhibition 'Propaganda', Forum För Levande Historia (The Living History Forum). The headline says 'The Forum for ... Governmental Propaganda' and underlines that the museum Forum has been accused of spreading propaganda instead of research-based knowledge. Photo: Annika Olsson, November 2023.

Forum för... statlig propaganda?

En del kritiker har menat att Forum för levande historia är en megafon för statlig propaganda och styr den nationella historieforskningen. Genom åren har vissa forskare, politiker och opinionsbildare ansett att vår verksamhet är både skadlig och överflödig.

Forum för levande historia bedriver ingen egen forskning. Däremot vilar verksamheten på vetenskaplig grund. Att främja demokrati, tolerans och alla människors lika värde är ett uppdrag som myndigheten delar med skolan och övriga myndighetssverige.



"Regeringen gör historia till ideologiskt slagfält" Forum för ideologisk debatt
- Vi drar ut tänderna på kampanjmakeriet Forum
Politiserad historiebildning för statlig propaganda
Lägg ner statens historieskrivning i statens tjänst
propaganda-myndighet "Historia i statens tjänst"
Stockholm TT

Skydda forumet Vad är problemet - det är ju sant
Ska regeringen skriva historien?
Väldigt liv om historien Från propaganda till statskampanj
Propaganda i huvudsak sann



Wikander because she authored one of the first oral-history-based studies in Sweden, a study of the gender division of labour at the Swedish Gustavsberg porcelain factory. Published in 1988, it focussed on gender relations at work and how technology influenced changes in the gendered division of labour. I also read the study as an oral history of a working-class community, although Ulla Wikander does not agree with my interpretation of her study. Mats Greiff has been working with oral history, working-class history and history from below since the 1980s, focussing on office workers and workers within the horse-racing industry. Furthermore, he was responsible for one of the first university courses in oral history in Sweden (*Muntlig historia* [oral history], Malmö University, 1999) and has also supervised many PhD students doing oral history. Malin Thor Tureby has been working with oral history since she was a PhD student and defended her thesis in 2005. She is now one of the key scholars in both the Swedish and international oral history field, with expertise in ethics, digitalisation, cultural heritage and the Holocaust. Thor Tureby and I are also co-founders of the Swedish research network Oral History, initiated in 2012. I consider her a great friend and I am very grateful that she and the others agreed to be part of this project. Although we do not share authority, all contributors have given their approval, and read and been active in all revision of their sections of this article.

If it is easy to understand why I chose to deliberate with these three scholars, why then did I choose to exclusively communicate with Swedish scholars? First, as scholars we are always part of both a local and a global research community. In the words of social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, people have both roots and feet.¹⁴ My local community is Swedish, because this is where I live and where I work. Second, and most importantly, Sweden is also an interesting case study because its oral history tradition differs from that of many countries with very strong oral history traditions, for example the UK and the USA. Malin Thor Tureby and Kristin Wagrell go as far as to call Sweden 'a country without oral history'.¹⁵ They argue that professional historians in Sweden did not accept oral history as a scholarly method when it was taken up in other countries. Therefore, oral history as a field and as a practice came to be practised by others: 'This long absence of oral history as practice in Sweden has meant that other professions, disciplines and institutions have come to define the collection, archiving, and use of recorded and archived life stories'.¹⁶ Although I have chosen to have conversations with three historians in this article, which in a way contradicts the conclusion above, some of the most well-known practitioners of early Swedish oral history come from the fields of journalism and ethnology. For example, the introduction to the Swedish translation of the oral history classic *The Voice of the Past* (*Det förgångnas röst*, 1980) by Paul Thompson was written by the author Sven Lindqvist.

In addition to the texts and my conversations with

individual scholars, the discussions that have taken place within our Oral History in Sweden (OHIS) research network about the concepts of shared and sharing authority arguably also make up part of my empirical material. Even though I did not start out thinking about our seminars as conversations to be analysed, I must concede that they have influenced not only how I think about the place of scholarship within oral history, but also how I came to design this article. The article is also influenced by my being a member of the academic community and the gender equality community for more than thirty years. During all this time, I have had the privilege of being involved in different kinds of conversations regarding academic and other knowledge production with students and peers, as well as with people from other parts of society when working with questions related to democracy, gender and diversity mainstreaming. As I understand and try to practise the feminist concept of situated knowledges, *all* knowledge needs to be situated, not just traditional Western academic knowledge.¹⁷ Climbing the greased pole, as Donna Haraway puts it, means that reliable knowledge can be obtained by working with oral history as a feminist literary scholar.

Taking scholarship for granted: a critical reading of articles

Michael Frisch's *A Shared Authority*¹⁹ has inspired many texts that bear witness to the fact that different methods and practices of shared authority,²⁰ or practising sharing authority, not only help us create a new type of knowledge but also are fundamental in creating more democratic societies.²¹ The articles that explicitly discuss shared or sharing authority in oral history focus on three different issues: why oral history (and academic practices in general) needs to become more democratic, and how shared or sharing authority can contribute to this; how shared/sharing authority improves oral history, people involved in oral history and democratic societies; and the many challenges involved in practising shared/sharing authority. These articles are mostly published in journals such as *Oral History* and *Oral History Review*, or in readers and introductions to oral history.²²

Quite a few articles confront the often somewhat idealistic perception of shared/sharing authority (including Frisch himself).²³ Linda Shopes speaks of shared authority in oral history as 'a mantra for oral historians and others who engage non-scholars in their work, often under the rubric of public history'. She also notes that shared authority has been reframed as 'sharing authority' and is used to refer to collaborative research in which the historian negotiates some outcome (a museum exhibit, a walking tour, a local publication, a dramatic piece) among multiple stakeholders with differing agendas and points of view.²⁴ In another article, Shopes argues that the idea of shared/sharing authority is often 'misconstrued and oversimplified'.²⁵ She notes that it is hard to work out what sharing authority means and how it will affect both

the people involved and the oral history itself. Her conclusion is that there is 'always tension in our work between the content of an interview and its narrative form, between documenting for the archives and not ending with the recorded interview, between the lives of many of those we interview and our own relatively privileged lives'.²⁶ This conclusion is similar to Alan Wong's observation that most oral history conversations are not actually conversations between two equal participants, since usually it is only one person who is sharing their life experiences, while the other person is asking questions and taking notes.²⁷

However, a critical reading of texts discussing shared/sharing authority also reveals that almost no attention is paid to why scholarly practices and knowledge are important. Indeed, I have found very few exceptions to this. What I find instead in the texts engaging in a critical dialogue with scholarly traditions and practices is a tendency to take scholarly knowledge for granted.

As an author of one such text, I here use myself as an example of the prevailing take-scholarship-for-granted-attitude. Published in a Swedish reader on oral history (*Muntlig historia*, 2015, edited by Malin Thor Tureby and Lars Hansson), my article describes the positive changes that have taken place within academia and oral history when moving from a mantra of 'giving voice' to a practice of 'paving the way'.²⁸ Even if I underline that there are challenges and problems related to these new practices, as there are to the old ones, I do not pay any attention to why scholarly practices and knowledge are important. They are very much taken for granted. When I recognised this failing, and proceeded to analyse and understand why this was the case, it soon became obvious that the same tendency could be found in many of the conversations I have been involved in since I became a student at Uppsala University in the 1980s. Even though I was the first member of my family to go to university (classic working-class background, divorced parents, small-town upbringing and a mother who stated, 'Never marry, educate yourself!') and never took higher education or research for granted, not being the typical *homo academicus*, I have, nevertheless, taken for granted that scholarly knowledge, scholarship and universities should be there forever. This is, of course, both naïve and a bit silly since what history, and not least oral history, teaches us is that change is constant and that nothing ever lasts forever.

However, I find myself in good company. Richard Cándida Smith's article in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* entitled 'What is it that university-based oral history can do?' emphasises that university-based oral history requires academic rigour and scholars who are active as both teachers and researchers. The main reasons for this are to promote oral history as a scholarly field that is accepted by scholars in other related fields, and to provide several benefits for students learning how oral history contributes to the democratisation of history.²⁹ Cándida Smith suggests that regular

writing stimulates a deeper analytical process, although it is not clear if he is talking about academic writing or any writing. Furthermore, he underlines that university-based people have more opportunity to reflect on how oral sources can be used in several ways. However, he does not actually dwell upon the kinds of knowledge or skills that scholars have that benefit oral history. As in my text, scholarship and academic research is taken for granted.

As is the case with all texts, Cándida Smith's reflects the time and the place of its writing, and more specifically the academic status and role of oral history in the USA at the time. However, it is also clearly linked to what can be called an epistemology, ontology and identity of oral history that maintains that oral history *shall be* critical of and deconstruct/decolonise academic knowledge, at least knowledge that is labelled positivist, traditional, patriarchal, elite, Western. Even if the foundation of oral history consists of many different practices, not all of which are critical and political, the heritage from social and cultural history is strong. And as Steven High underlines, many are still greatly inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and participatory action research.³⁰ Shared and sharing authority, of course, resonates very well with this framework, as does focussing on collective and more equal processes aimed at changing academic practices and societies. Being explicit about why academic practices are important is not part of this critical tradition and discourse in the same way.

As Lynn Abrams makes clear in *Oral History Theory*, discussions about power and empowerment in relation to research and academic knowledge had been long ongoing within the feminist academic community when the concept of shared/sharing authority was introduced into the field of oral history.³¹ Indeed, one could argue that these discussions are the foundation of what is today labelled gender studies, but which started out as women's or feminist studies.³² So from that perspective, it is no surprise that shared and sharing authority have been and are practised by many feminist scholars (even if they do not use the concepts but focus on processes of democratisation and more ethical ways of doing research). It also makes perfect sense that this discussion continues to be very important within the oral history scholarly community and that shared and sharing authority are used by scholars working with decolonisation. For example, in a thematic issue focussing on oral history and decolonisation published by *Oral History Review*, Ioana Radu argues that shared authority is only one part of a larger decolonising work that needs to be done so that 'settler-academics' can 'learn how to listen, how to foreground the utility of inquiry to the benefit of the collaborating community, and thus how to decolonise research more broadly'.³⁴

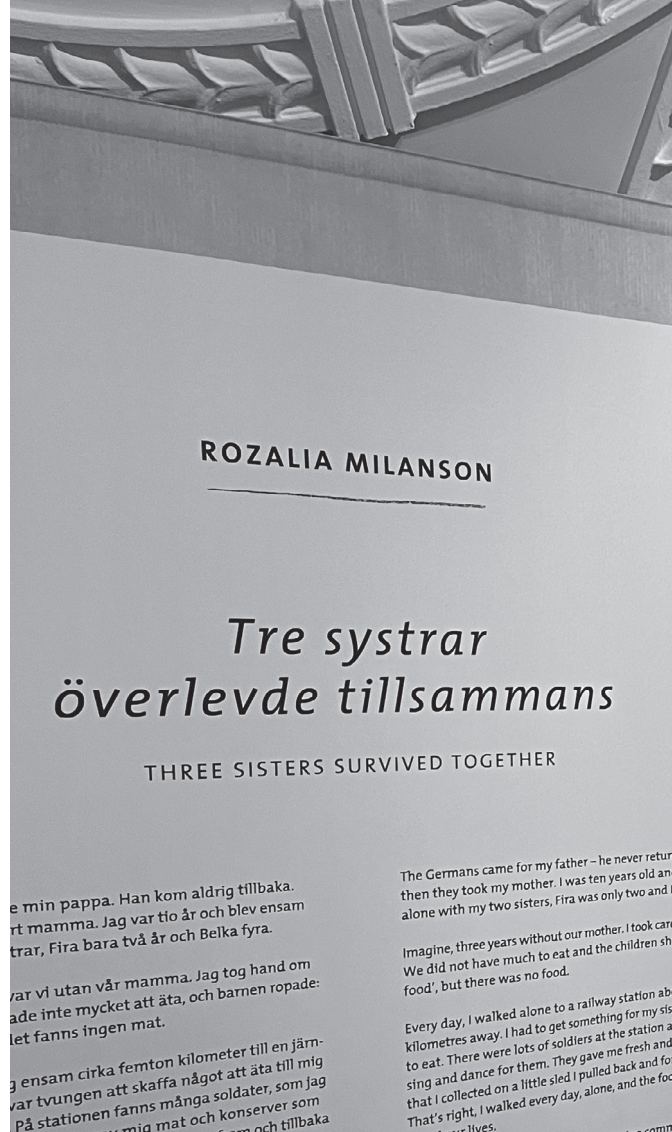
For myself, rooted in a feminist postcolonial tradition and the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Radu's use of the oral history mantra 'learning to listen' and her strong commitment to change are both very familiar, and something I sympathise and agree with.

This is what I have been arguing for my entire life as a scholar. I understand her call as a continuation of the discussion in Spivak's 'Can the subaltern speak?', where Spivak not only makes clear why poor people in the world have no voice (and especially women in the Global South), but also how academia and Western scholars are very much part of this problem. Another element in Spivak's article, as in most of her work, is a collection of strong arguments for scholarly knowledge and training, especially the knowledge that is produced within the humanities. She combines the perspectives of listening, 'unlearning' and practising 'our privilege as a loss' with arguments for scholarly training in the humanities and academic knowledge. She is as explicit about the value of scholarly knowledge – what it is that we learn and what we know and what we can do as trained scholars – as she is about what we do not learn at universities, what we do not know, and what we cannot and should not do. Spivak does not take scholarly knowledge for granted, as I seem to have been doing. She takes it seriously. And I believe it is high time that more of us did the same.³⁵

In a really important piece focussing on the challenges of practising shared/sharing authority, Lorraine Sitzia generously shares what happened when she, as a person and a historian, got 'lost' in this idealistic idea of shared/sharing authority. Sitzia reveals that she learned the hard way of the importance of setting up boundaries and certain rules when you do collaborative projects because everything is affected by the act of sharing, not least ownership of what is produced and interpretations of what is told.³⁶ By sharing her story of trying to practise shared authority, Sitzia challenges the concept, or at least her own interpretation of it. In her article, shared authority comes across as a somewhat idealised theoretical concept, rather than one grounded in years of practice, because it does not consider basic principles of how knowledge, stories, memory is produced nor that people involved in a project could have different views, interpretations and agendas. Sitzia is very clear about her losing authority during the process of trying to practise shared/sharing authority. However, she re-found it when she finally went to an oral history conference on her own and was among her peers. Using the words of Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, one could argue that Sitzia's story confirms their conclusion that oral history is guided by the fear of failing as a researcher by failing or doing harm to our narrators.³⁷ From one perspective, it seems more important to be seen as a good person than to be a good scholar – which could be the same things but are not always – and that this fear also influences oral history scholars and scholarship in a way that is destructive for both.³⁸

Take scholarship seriously: conversations with three generations of Swedish scholars

So, what does one find when one searches for articles or people who take scholarship seriously and who try to be explicit about what academic practices/scholar-



A photo from the exhibition 'Legacy of Silence', which focusses on Roma people and the Holocaust. It showcases a classic way of working with oral history in museums, based on personal testimony and black-and-white photographs. It is also vital that the public can trust the exhibition; that it is based on facts and builds on research. Photo: Annika Olsson, November 2023.

ship actually mean, and how they contribute to oral history and society at large? In her important analysis of the two different worlds of oral history, the academic Joanna Bornat underlines that academic oral history is more publicly critical and self-reflexive than community oral history.³⁹ In addition to analysis and detachment, public and critical reflection is one of the most important characteristics of academic oral history in comparison to community oral history.⁴⁰ Correcting errors or misunderstandings in stories so that oral history does not become a tool for misinformation has been proclaimed as important for academic oral historians. In another article, Linda Shopes makes clear that one of the most important tasks of the professional oral historian when producing an oral history is to make



sure that readers are made aware of errors or misrepresentations. She acknowledges that she uses footnotes to correct errors and when citing recent research.⁴¹ Both Bornat and Shopes are perfectly clear that there are particular expectations and demands placed on scholars and on their work. As scholars we are expected to be grounded in and working with scientific or scholarly theories and methods (which differ depending on the discipline and academic community). Further, we are expected to be knowledgeable about our field of research, to follow certain legal frameworks, ethical guidelines and practices, and to contribute to the research community and to society at large with our work.

When I asked the Swedish scholars about the knowledge scholarly oral historians bring to the table, they did not have a direct and clear answer. (There was no elevator pitch, so to speak, though this, incidentally, is what Chat GPT delivers if you pose the same question.) Consequently, I had to ask them to be more concrete and to elaborate on their answers. Ultimately, we had conversations where I sometimes asked ques-

tions and sometimes responded to what they said by trying to summarise their thoughts, but I also engaged in collective critical reflection. This could be an effect of the way I was framing the conversations, which Ulla Wikander wrote to me about. However, it could also be understood as an effect of years of not explicitly talking about these basic questions. That said, these scholars, in my opinion, had much to say about 'it'.⁴² All agreed that scholars made specific contributions, and that they also understood themselves to be scholars, historians, researchers, part of an academic community and bearers of academic values. All three were also very clear that scholarly knowledge is important to oral history, and that oral history scholars contribute something specific and other to what non-professional oral historians contribute. At the same time, there were also significant differences between how they talked about the different types of oral history, the academic and the non-academic oral history practised by different communities, journalists, museums and other kinds of governmental organisation in Sweden, and their role in society. Also, it is important to underline that I did not

focus on their interpretation or understanding of the concepts of shared/sharing authority when we met in person or during the digital conversations that took place. After the peer review of this article, I asked them if they wanted to say something explicit about the concepts, and about being a good person or a good scholar, since this was brought up in the anonymous commentaries that I received and I considered them to be valuable. Mats Greiff chose to add a few lines on being a good person, a good scholar. Ulla Wikander did not want to add anything. Malin Thor Tureby wanted to, and had planned to add something, but then 'life' decided something else: a vivid reminder of what working with oral history is all about. Human beings have lives and our job is not only to acknowledge this, but also to respect it. In the text I have used italics as well as shorter quotes to emphasise what I believe to be important to the interviewees. This was discussed with them and agreed upon, and Ulla Wikander chose to have no direct quotes in the text.

The first conversation I had was with Mats Greiff, who was adamant he does not see himself 'as a transmitter/amplifier/collector of stories/voices, but as an academic historian'. I interpret this as a clear signifier of taking scholarship seriously. Greiff values being a scholar and using scholarly methods and practices to create scholarly knowledge. This may come as a surprise to some in the Swedish research field, as Greiff is also active in the Swedish public debate advocating for research that influences societal change. Although he has worked with non-academics all his life and strongly believes that research needs to be made accessible to non-academics, Greiff stresses that there are important differences between scholarly oral history and community oral history. As a scholar, he *analyses, contextualises and problematises* stories and ensures they become part of the academic and general discourse that signifies 'our history' and forms the foundation of historical knowledge in contemporary society. Greiff emphasises the importance of specific analytical competence in which scholars are trained. This includes having certain academic knowledge and specific academic skills and academic competences. For Greiff, important skills scholarly historians need to have are to *make stories part* of a bigger picture, a longer history, a specific history, and to *explain* what they mean for different groups of people and for society at large. To do this, one needs to have *historical knowledge*, be *familiar with specific areas of research, theories and methodologies*, and to *know different languages* – be they national, sociological, academic or cultural – to understand and analyse what is being said. Moreover, one needs to be *able to frame* the stories one hears and finds different, depending on the kind of analysis one is conducting. A trained historian, a scholar, should be able to take both a micro- and macro-perspective and be able to *explain* what is truly difficult and complex so that as many as possible can understand it and that those who share their stories can understand their own position in society and how this position can be

changed. As a scholar and a professor, it is important for Greiff 'to raise awareness and to contribute to societal change', meaning it is essential for a scholar not only to *communicate* in different forms but also to *collaborate* with different people.

One can say that Greiff's understanding of what he does as an academic oral historian resonates with the description of oral history given by Linda Shopes: 'I believe it is an exceptionally powerful means of democratising the content, process, and audience for history'.⁴³ However, it is also possible to say that Greiff's understanding of oral history underlines the importance of scholarly knowledge and competences, and that oral history needs to continue to not only be part of the academic community but work with scholarly methods and use academic knowledge and practices if it is going to deliver the kind of knowledge that he thinks is important to society. He clearly states that scholarly oral history is not only something different but also something valuable that scholars need to be proud of, develop and protect. He does not think that you need to choose between being a good scholar and being a good person: 'To be a good person also means that you, as a researcher, are motivated by a passion of contributing to a better society'.

Malin Thor Tureby is also very clear that she identifies as a scholar and describes herself as a historian. She and I had a scheduled conversation about these issues a couple of months after I talked to Greiff. Since we are friends, we talk about these questions almost every time we meet. However, in this session, we did our best to focus and do our job as professionals.

Similar to Greiff, Thor Tureby referred to the many different skills that scholars acquire through education and training: skills that enable them to *analyse, problematise and contextualise* information. She underlined that researchers bring not only 'another *pre-understanding and a different theoretical perspective*, but also *different questions* to oral history processes' that involve different kinds of collaboration. This, of course, affects the final product – the oral history, the article, the presentation – but also makes it exciting and interesting for others involved in oral history to participate in a dialogue or project. In her experience, scholars can usually bring a *broader and deeper understanding* to a certain event, trauma or life story. She maintains that scholars usually do not have the lived experience of what is explored in a project or a conversation, although there are always exceptions to the rule. However, 'they know the research field and have listened to many other stories, they have the factual knowledge and the analytical competences to situate a person's story and experience and compare it' to other stories. She describes the possibilities that scholarly historians have, to *make visible what it means to be a human being* via scholarly knowledge, methods and empirical material, as mind-blowing. Thus Thor Tureby emphasises that the knowledge that scholars in the humanities have and bring to oral history is not only crucial for the field and for our democratic societies but is also existentially vital. To

some this might sound like a big claim, but I want to underline that being existentially important is at the core of the tradition of oral history in general: being able to share your story with somebody else, being able to be recognised and included in public history, being able to debate history and contribute to a better society must be considered of basic existential significance.⁴⁴ Malin Thor Tureby has also developed her thoughts on why oral history is existentially important in an article called ‘Oral history: more than a method’.⁴⁵ Influenced by Martin Buber, she stresses the dialogical and relational aspects of a meeting between two people in a conversation or interview, being recognised and seen as a human being (subject) by another human being (subject).

For Malin Thor Tureby, it is also important to differentiate between: first, what scholarly oral historians bring to the field of oral history; second, what they bring to the non-academics involved in the oral history process; third, what they bring to society at large. ‘Do people who share their stories and lived experience with me and the world really need the knowledge I have as a scholarly historian?’ asks Thor Tureby of herself repeatedly. She talks about people being excited by her questions and working with others, but she is unsure if she contributes anything valuable to their individual lives or if they even need her. The essential question of *why* people need an oral historian is a topic she has discussed with other oral historians. When invited to different communities to talk about something or be part of a process, *the* question she asks of others is why they need her. Her experience has been that ‘it is my position as a professor that is important to them, not my knowledge’. She cannot recall anyone ever discussing her academic knowledge and scholarly competence. In addition, her *position brings a specific authority* to a process when practising shared or sharing authority. This specific authority has the power to make previously unheard or unnoticed voices *academically interesting* and give them *scholarly relevance*. ‘As a professor, I can contribute to a shift in the position that certain stories/voices have’ in academia, and this, she emphasises, is truly important. This capability to contribute to a shift also means that stories that might have been told and shared in the public sphere for a long time now might acquire a different status, both among scholars and in society at large. This also means that these stories and voices can be included in different official histories and, hopefully, to a greater degree be heard and listened to. An important comment raised by reviewers of this article with regard to this point is that it is probably possible to detect a difference in the way different groups use or put the position of ‘a professor’ to work. Since we did not have the opportunity to discuss this further, I simply add here that I concur. Research shows us that elite groups are more inclined to use the system, so to speak, since they have more knowledge of it and usually more access, and consequently this means that we will probably find differences in this practice. But, of course, it is also important to

remember that elite groups are not the only ones that would like to, and have the capacity to, work the system, a point brought up by Ulla Wikander when she talks about people having different agendas (see below).

I had a third and final conversation with Ulla Wikander. Listening to the recording, it was clear that this conversation benefited from what was learned from the two that came before it. Using the words of Malin Thor Tureby, I entered the room with a different pre-understanding and was able to ask other kinds of follow-up questions than in the previous conversations. Wikander underlined that there were two questions that we needed to address: first, what we as scholars contribute to oral history, and second, why scholars should use oral history. Wikander’s interest in using oral history was inspired by her background as a film editor at Swedish Television before her university studies (SVT, 1963-1972). As an editor, she gained personal experience of how interviewing worked. Equally important for her choice to work with interviews rather than archival material was that she read *Oral History* and the work of Oscar Lewis, Paul Thompson and Sven Lindqvist. She followed the vivid academic discussion in the field of history for or against interviewing by scholars that was going on around 1980. Starting her second larger academic work, she realised that archival material and books were not enough. Oral history was necessary to gain the information that should make the work process explicable and comprehensible.

When discussing what scholars contribute to oral history, Wikander believes that journalists and non-academics might be better than scholars at doing the interviewing as such, that is, at getting people to talk about their lives. Indeed, scholars have a lot to learn from journalists when it comes to the craft of doing interviews: listening, following up and so on. However, academics have different aims from their counterparts, asserts Wikander: scholars are often raising *other kinds of questions*, they are *more historically well-read* and they know how to *analyse*. They have the *historical competence* that many journalists or other people conducting interviews lack. She maintains that scholars know basic historical facts; they know what has happened in society at large. Important scholarly skills are knowing how to *interpret* and *contextualise*. According to Wikander, academics are aware that history is written by people, that genres and formulas influence how we tell our lives, how and what we remember from and at different stages of life, and how memories are transformed by the accepted interpretations of others. In her experience, scholars need to be well-prepared and have ample pre-knowledge about the topic they are going to talk about to understand what might be hidden behind what the person they are interviewing tells them, what the person neglects to mention or even wants to hide. Scholars need to be able to *translate events/facts into words that are comprehensible* to people. They need the competence to *understand, interpret, re-ask and rewrite* (which also involves having good language skills on different levels) and to clarify without simplifying.

Moreover, scholars need *ethical awareness*. Wikander emphasises that there is often a difference between how the *interviews are later used* by scholars and by others using oral history.

One concrete example that Ulla Wikander brought up during our conversation is *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (1981) by Raphael Samuel, whose *use of footnotes*, where he *checks facts and contextualises* the interview, she found both inspiring and exemplary. As well as being supremely informative, the book is according to her a shining example of how *scholarly work* can be done without interfering with the informant's way of telling his story: to *check sources*, to *historicise* and to *validate* is basic to scholarly work. (Wikander brings up the same things that Joanna Bornat and Linda Shopes talk about.) When conducting her study of Gustavsberg, Wikander did not focus solely on the stories told by the workers. Instead, she mixed them with other sources and *cross-checked points* provided in the interviews. For instance, she verified whether certain machines existed or if certain events actually happened. Wikander emphasises that memory can be tricky: *people might have different agendas from what they say. Myths evolve and get exaggerated in organisations just as they do in families*, all of which scholars need to be aware of and take into account.

Wikander highlights the importance of scholars *accepting the results of the study*. When she conducted her study of Gustavsberg, which focussed on gender relations at work and how technology influenced changes in the gendered division of labour, she had a clear question and hoped for defined results, but her findings were not so clear cut. Scholars need to be able to accept, and re-interpret, what they find. Wikander underlines that scholars need to know what they are looking for (the aim of the study), but it might be that they do not come to the result they expected. While they might find something not so spectacular, that is also a result. When discussing the concepts of fake news and fact resilience in contemporary society, Wikander emphasises the importance of scholars telling the truth and standing by the notion that having different perspectives does not mean there are no solid facts. It is important to recognise that historians may reach different conclusions when asking different questions. Scholars may certainly obtain different stories depending on who they are interviewing and from what perspective they are looking at a situation. However, scholars have a responsibility to recognise and handle complexity, and to have the last word. While different perspectives can shape how history appears, there are facts that should not be obscured.

Concluding thoughts: the place of scholarship

What then is the place of scholarship within oral history? What have we learned from my critical reading of texts focussing on shared/sharing authority and my conversations with scholars? First, I argue that schol-

arship, academic oral history and research-based-knowledge have been somewhat taken for granted in many of the 'rooms' I have visited and revisited in this article, not only in oral history but also in gender studies and other research fields that are part of the same critical tradition. In a way, this also means that the place of scholarship in oral history is not only rendered invisible, but also unnecessary. For the past fifty years, scholars doing oral history, gender studies, social history and other fields have prioritised democratising, deconstructing and decolonising rather than developing and defending scholarship. We have been more focussed on being good people than good scholars. And even if we have had good reasons for doing this work, and still have, this attitude of taking scholarship for granted has also contributed to a situation where the different values and virtues of scholarship and academic research have been made invisible. We have not practised being explicit about what 'it' is that we as scholars contribute to collaborative processes. And we have not practised being explicit about what we contribute to our democratic societies at large. This also means that we have placed not only oral history but also the humanities and social sciences in our societies in a very vulnerable situation. As I indicated in the introduction, scholars should be explicit and straightforward about the specific and unique contributions of academic research and practice, in the same way that we have been explicit and straightforward concerning the problems as we see them in the current climate of fact-resistance, anti-gender movements and geopolitical turbulence.

Second, how do we make visible the place of scholarship not only in oral history but also in society? How do we train ourselves to be more explicit and vocal about what we know and what we can contribute? My suggestion is in no way revolutionary, but rather the opposite. I suggest we continue to cultivate our everyday practices by reading and rereading the work of our peers, discussing these texts with them, writing papers with them and talking to other scholars to learn from each other. What I have relearned from my critical reading and rereading, my conversations with the three scholars and my discussions with fellow peers within the network is not only specifics about scholarly knowledge (which is what I certainly got from my conversations with the three Swedish professors) but also how the hermeneutical process functions and how important it is for scholarly knowledge production. When engaging in a dialogue with a text or a scholar through reading, writing and speaking, one will not only get answers but also new questions.

In his article 'What makes oral history different?', Alessandro Portelli clearly states that oral history 'is not where the working classes speak for themselves [...] the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian'.⁴⁶ Portelli emphasises that historians play a crucial role in oral history interviews. They choose the people who should be interviewed, they shape the story by asking questions and responding to

what is told, and they give the oral history its published form. Even if historians might find themselves in a somewhat changed situation today, we can still learn a lot from this canonic article. Portelli underlines that oral history is about collaboration, dialogue and partnership between the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher takes on the role of stage director and organiser. His article is explicit about the following: first, the knowledge produced by oral history, second, the knowledge oral historians need in order to practise oral history, and third, the differences there are between people involved in oral history. As Portelli puts it, ‘Historians and “sources” are hardly ever on the same “side”. The confrontation of their different partialities – confrontation as “conflict”, and confrontation as “search for unity” – is one of the things that make oral history interesting’.⁴⁷ Linda Shopes notes that Portelli’s studies demonstrate skills and knowledge related to academic practices. Without the ability to triangulate stories, Portelli would not have been able to analyse and understand how people made sense of historical events

and created meaning through myths and ‘untrue’ stories.⁴⁸

Oral history readers and handbooks very clearly state that oral history is multidisciplinary and multifunctional as well as academic, community-based and part of artistic and journalistic expressions and traditions. Oral history is, and should be, ‘a big tent’, as Donald Ritchie calls it.⁴⁹ I am not arguing for a situation where oral history is exclusively practised by scholars, quite the opposite. Regardless of what the reasons are, if we want to maintain inclusive practices and collaborations between different actors and communities, we need to acknowledge and understand our different roles, and be more explicit about what scholarly knowledge contributes to oral history and shared/sharing authority, not just the other way around. If not, I argue, both academic oral historians and community/non-professional oral historians become part of the process of transforming the writing of history into a form a populism – the very problem that Luisa Passerini flagged as early as 1979.

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NOTES

1. Luisa Passerini, ‘Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism’, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp 53–62, quote from p 53.

2. Andrea Petö, ‘Gender studies: democracy’s canary’. Accessed online at <https://saii.no/english/article/2022/11/gender-studies-democracys-canary>, 13 December 2023.

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp 271–313; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999; Rosalind C Morris (ed), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

4. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority:*

Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990, p xii.

5. Alessandro Portelli is talking about lives and stories, and underlining that stories are part of lives. Alessandro Portelli, ‘The best trash-can wiper in town: the life and times of Valtero Peppoloni, worker’, *Oral History Review*, vol 16, no 1, 1988, pp 69–89.

6. Alberta Giorgi, Hande Eslan-Ziya and Andrea Petö, ‘Academic freedom, science, and right-wing politics: interview with Andrea Petö’, in Hande Eslan-Ziya and Alberta Giorgi (eds), *Populism and Science in Europe*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp 285–93; Andrea Petö, ‘Academic freedom and gender studies: an alliance forged in fire’, *Gender and Sexuality Journal*, vol 15, 2020.

7. Vetenskap och allmänhet, ‘Varför så dålig hum om humaniora?’ Accessed online at <https://v-a.se/2022/10/varfor-sa-dalig-hum-om-humaniora>, 13 December 2023.

8. See www.nobelprize.org/events/nobel-prize-summit/2023 [December 13 2023]

9. Passerini, 1998, p 53.

10. Passerini, 1998, p 53.

11. Frisch, 1990, p xii.

12. There are, of course, also other examples in the long history of oral history.

13. I had conversations with three Swedish scholars who have been, and are, committed to oral history, and who represent three different generations of

Swedish oral historians: Professor Mats Greiff, Malmö University (15 March 2022); Professor Malin Thor Tureby (2 June 2022), Malmö University; Professor Emeritus Ulla Wikander (19 August 2022), Stockholm University. I met Greiff at his office in Malmö University, Thor Tureby in a meeting room at Malmö University, and Wikander in her home in Stockholm. We also had digital conversations via email.

14. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Røtter og føtter: Rask og langsom tid i informasjonsalderen*, Oslo: Oslo Universitetsforlaget, 2004.

15. Malin Thor Tureby and Kristin Wagrell, ‘Crisis documentation and oral history: problematizing collecting and preserving practices in a digital world’, *Oral History Review*, vol 49, no 2, 2022, pp 346–76, quotation from p 348. Also see the ‘Author interview: Malin Thor Tureby on crisis documentation’, *Oral History Review*. Accessed online at <https://oralhistoryreview.org/ohr-authors/author-interview-malin-thor-tureby-on-crisis-documentation>, 13 December 2023.

16. Thor Tureby and Wagrell, 2022, p 348.

17. Donna Haraway, ‘Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of the partial perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, vol 14, no 3, 1988, pp 575–99.

18. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991, p 188. See also Caroline Ramazanoglu with Janet Holland, *Feminist*

Methodology: Challenges and Choices, London: Sage, 2005 (2002), p 62.

19. Frisch, 1990.

20. Frisch's distinction between the two concepts is very useful: 'sharing authority is an approach to doing oral history, while a shared authority is something we need to recognize in it'. Michael Frisch, 'Commentary: Sharing authority: oral history and the collaborative process', *Oral History Review*, vol 30, no 1, 2003, pp 111-13, quote from p 113.

21. See, for example, Lorraine Sitzia, 'Telling Arthur's story: oral history, relationships and shared authority', *Oral History*, vol 27, no 2, 1999, pp 58-67; Alicia J Rouverol and Cedric N Chatterley, "'I was content and not content": oral history and the collaborative process', *Oral History*, vol 28, no 2, 2000, pp 66-78; Wendy Rickard Nikita, Sarah Evans, Saskia Reeves and Gail Cameron, 'What are sex worker stories good for? User engagement with archived data', *Oral History*, vol 39, no 1, 2011, pp 91-103; Alistair Thomson, 'Moving stories, women's lives: sharing authority in oral history', *Oral History*, vol 39, no 2, 2011, pp 73-82; Anna Green, Joanna Bornat and Tom Hunter, 'Woodberry Down Housing Estate: community representation and advocacy in print and film', *Oral History*, vol 39, no 2, 2011, pp 107-16.

22. As for all other concepts, shared authority is also a concept that is used in research fields other than oral history. You can find it in studies of classrooms situations (who is in charge, who has knowledge), law (where is/who has the authority), academy/university as an organisation (how are decisions made, who is involved etc.).

23. Frisch, 2003, p 112; see also Michael Frisch, 'From A Shared Authority to the digital kitchen, and back', in Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski (eds), *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, Philadelphia: Pew Center for Art and Heritage, 2011, pp 127-28.

24. Linda Shopes, 'Insights and oversights: reflections on the documentary tradition and the theoretical turn in oral history', *Oral History Review*, vol 41, no 2, 2014, pp 257-68, quote from p 265.

25. Linda Shopes, 'After the interview ends: moving oral history out of the archives and into publication', *Oral History Review*, vol 42, no 2, 2015, pp 300-10, quote from p 308.

26. Shopes, 2015, p 309. See also

Linda Shopes, 'Commentary: Sharing authority', *Oral History Review*, vol 30, no 1, 2003, pp 103-10.

27. Alan Wong, 'Conversations for the real world: shared authority, self-reflexivity, and process in the oral history interview', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol 43, no 1, 2009, pp 239-58.

28. Annika Olsson, 'Från att ge röst till att ge och ta plats: oral history, retorik och intersektionalitet', in Malin Thor Tureby and Lars Hansson (eds), *Muntlig historia i teori och praktik*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2015, pp 41-57.

29. Richard Cándida Smith, 'Case study: what is it that university-based oral history can do? The Berkeley experience', in Donald A Ritchie (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp 417-26.

30. Steven High, 'Sharing authority: an introduction', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol 43, no 1, 2009, pp 12-34, quote from p 13.

31. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, p 166.

32. See, for example, Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and France Iacovetta (eds), *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.

33. According to Lynn Abrams, scholarly oral historians are, by default, engaged in an unequal relationship when studying and writing the life stories, memories, histories of people, because they do it for academic self-advancement. This is also why Abrams states: 'For academics at least, shared authority has limits', *Oral History Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, p 168.

34. Ioana Radu, 'Blurred boundaries, feminisms, and indigenisms: cocreating an indigenous oral history for decolonization', *Oral History Review*, vol 45, no 1, 2018, pp 29-47. The whole issue focusses on feminist oral history and decolonisation.

35. Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1999.

36. Sitzia, 1999, pp 99, 88.

37. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, 'Who's afraid of oral history? Fifty years of debates and anxiety about ethics', *Oral History Review*, vol 43, no 2, 2016, pp 338-66.

38. Almost a decade before Sheftel and Zembrzycki came to this conclusion, Carrie Hamilton questioned the very ideal within oral history that oral historians are people doing good things, changing the

world for the better: 'Ultimately, it is this quest for goodness that I want to question in the model of oral history that associates empathy with solidarity, and interviewing with witnessing – or at least an empathy that does not take into account the danger of the dagger – and a witnessing that does not adequately acknowledge its "darker side"'. See Carrie Hamilton, 'On being a "good" interviewer: empathy, ethics and the politics of oral history', *Oral History*, vol 36, no 2, 2008, p 42. See also Valerie Yow and her discussion of 'goodwill advocacy' in her article on ethics: Valerie Yow, 'Ethics and interpersonal relationships in oral history research author(s)', *Oral History Review*, vol 22, no 1, 1995, pp 51-66, quote from p 52.

39. Joanna Bornat, 'Two oral histories: valuing our differences', *Oral History Review*, vol 21, no 1, 1993, pp 73-95, quote from p 89.

40. Bornat, 1993, p 95.

41. Shopes, 2015, pp 300-10, quote from pp 302-303.

42. Frisch, 2003.

43. Shopes, 2014, p 258.

44. Even if the word existentialist is not used, it is clear in almost all readers and introductions to oral history that oral history is existentially important since it contributes many of the things that are existentially vital to people and societies. See, for example, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 'Introduction', in Perks and Thomson, 1998, pp ix-xiii, and Malin Thor Tureby, 'Oral history i en internationell kontext: en svensk historikers perspektiv', in Malin Thor Tureby and Lars Hansson (eds), *Muntlig historia i teori och praktik*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, pp 9-24. See also the section 'Advocacy and empowerment', in Perks and Thomson, 1998, pp 183-268, especially Joanna Bornat's article, 'Oral history as a social movement: reminiscence and older people', pp 189-205.

45. Malin Thor Tureby, 'Oral history mer än en metod', *Historisk tidskrift*, vol 121, no 3, 2001, pp 325-45.

46. Alessandra Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', in Perks and Thomson, 1998, pp 63-74, quote from pp 71-72.

47. Portelli, 1998, p 73.

48. Shopes, 2015, pp 302-303.

49. Donald A Ritchie, 'Introduction: the evolution of oral history', in Ritchie, 2011, pp 3-19, quote from p 11.

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