

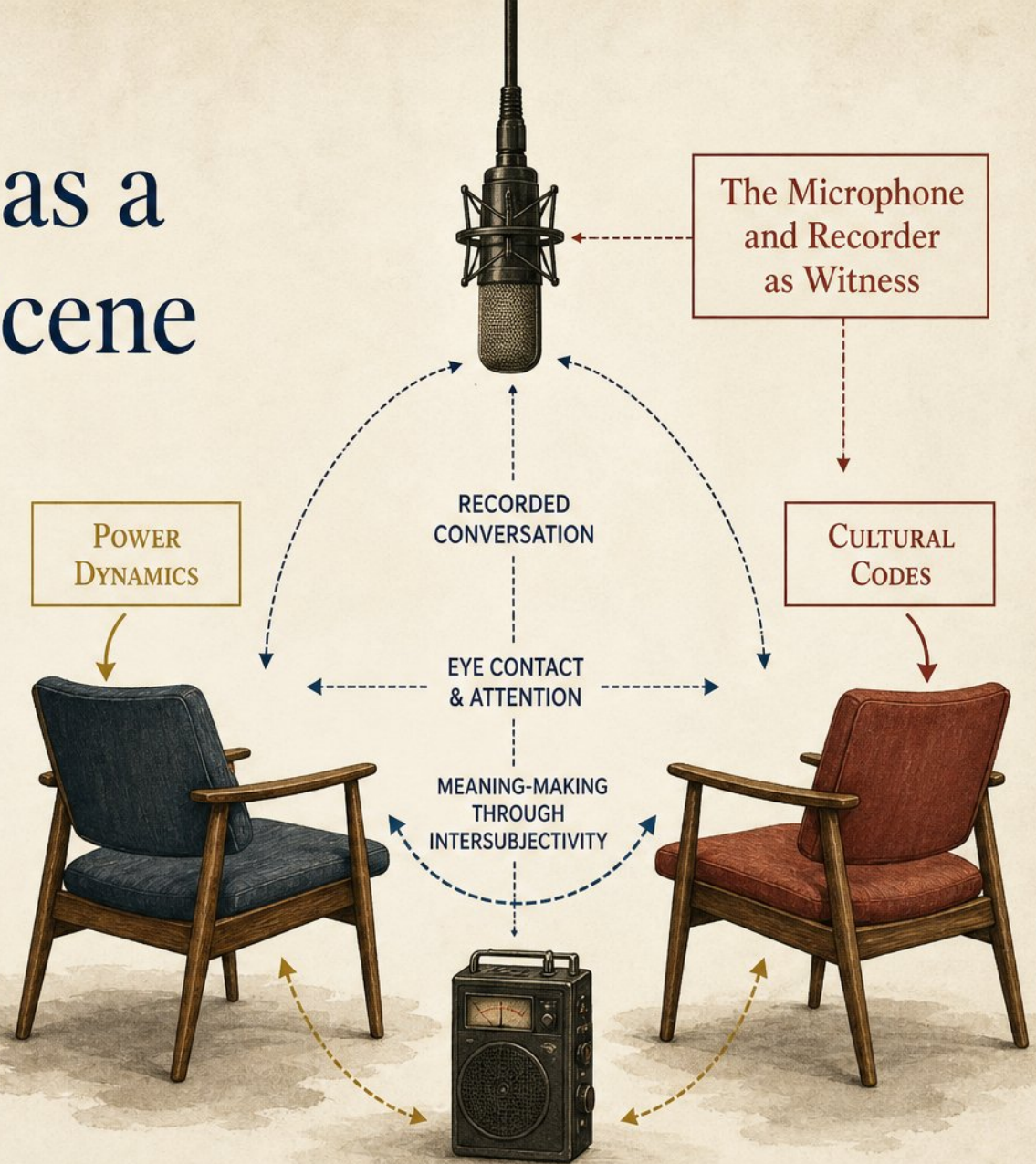
Introduction to Oral History: Memory, Questions, and Interpretation

- Oral history is both method (recorded interview) and product (archived narrative)
- Shift from interviews as "objective sources" to intersubjective, co-constructed narratives
- Memory, questioning technique, and interpretive framework are inseparable
- Same transcript yields different accounts depending on analytical lens



The Interview as a Constructed Scene

- The interview is a social interaction, not data extraction.
- Power dynamics, cultural codes, and recording technology shape the scene.
- Portelli: interviewer and narrator co-produce meaning through intersubjectivity.
- Analyze a transcript for narrative authority and interaction cues.



The interview is co-constructed in the moment and remembered in the record.

Memory as Meaning-Making, Not Retrieval

- Memory reconstructs the past actively, shaped by identity and present context
- Halbwachs: individuals remember within social frameworks (family, class, occupation)
- Portelli's Trastulli case: workers misdated a death, revealing symbolic collective memory
- Memory gaps and chronological errors are analytically productive, not weaknesses



Narrative Structure and Linguistic Choices as Historical Evidence

- Labov's six-part model: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, coda
- Form carries meaning: repetition, silence, metaphor, and genre reveal emotional and evaluative stances
- Divergence from chronology performs narrative work—compressing time or assigning moral weight
- Listen for evaluative clauses (negatives, futures, comparatives) that signal the story's point

Well, I want to tell you about the year when the river took the bottom land.

I was living with my parents down in the bottom, near the old mill. We had always had our garden there, and the land was good.

Then, that spring, the rains just kept coming. Day after day the water rose. Folks said it hadn't been like that in their time. We tried to save what we could—furniture, the animals—but the water was quicker.

I can still see my mother standing on the porch, watching it come. She just shook her head and said, "We'll lose it all if this keeps up." It was the worst I've ever seen.

After a week the water began to fall. We went back. There wasn't much left—just mud and broken boards. But we were thankful the family was safe.

That's the way I remember it.



ABSTRACT

Signals the topic and point



ORIENTATION

Sets the scene, time, and place



COMPLICATING ACTION

Sequence of events, problems, or disruptions



EVALUATION

Expresses feelings and judgments



RESOLUTION

Outcome or restored order



CODA

Closing remarks that return to the present

Question Design as Framing the Interpretive Horizon

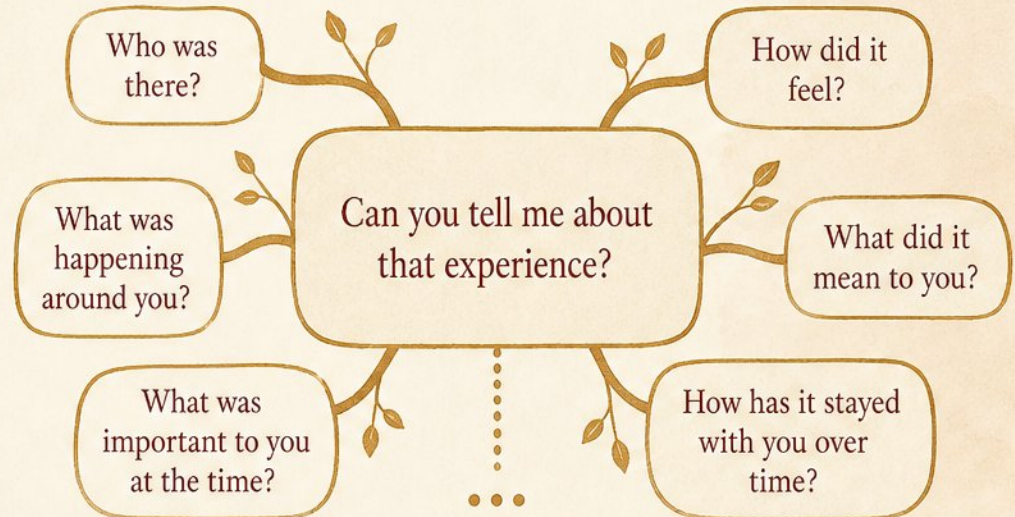
NARROW, CLOSED QUESTION

Limits what can be told.



OPEN, MEANING-ORIENTED QUESTIONS

Opens the horizon for narrative.



- ★ What a narrator tells us fundamentally depends on what and how we ask
- ★ Information retrieval: who, when, where vs. meaning-making: how did it feel, what did it mean
- ★ OHA best practices: open-ended guide, neutral phrasing, follow-up prompts, avoid leading questions
- ★ Workshop: rewrite closed/leading questions into open, meaning-oriented prompts

Silence, Omission, and the Ethics of Interpretation

- Train to hear what is not said: deliberate avoidance, abrupt topic shifts, or 'nothing happened' as a charged statement.
- Luisa Passerini found working-class silences on Fascism are a deep scar, not forgetting.
- Respect silence as an archival form: when should a researcher not interpret what a narrator refuses to say?
- Collective, traumatic, and strategic silences appear in post-conflict settings such as South Africa's TRC.

He said [REDACTED] about the past.
We [REDACTED] did not [REDACTED] speak of it.
It was [REDACTED] better [REDACTED] not to.
I remember [REDACTED] silences [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] at the table, [REDACTED]
a look [REDACTED] away, [REDACTED]
the door [REDACTED] closed.



Some things [REDACTED] were [REDACTED]
never [REDACTED] said [REDACTED]
but [REDACTED] they [REDACTED] remained.
We [REDACTED] still [REDACTED] carry
[REDACTED] what [REDACTED] cannot
be [REDACTED] spoken.



Positionality and Reflexive Reading of Oral Sources

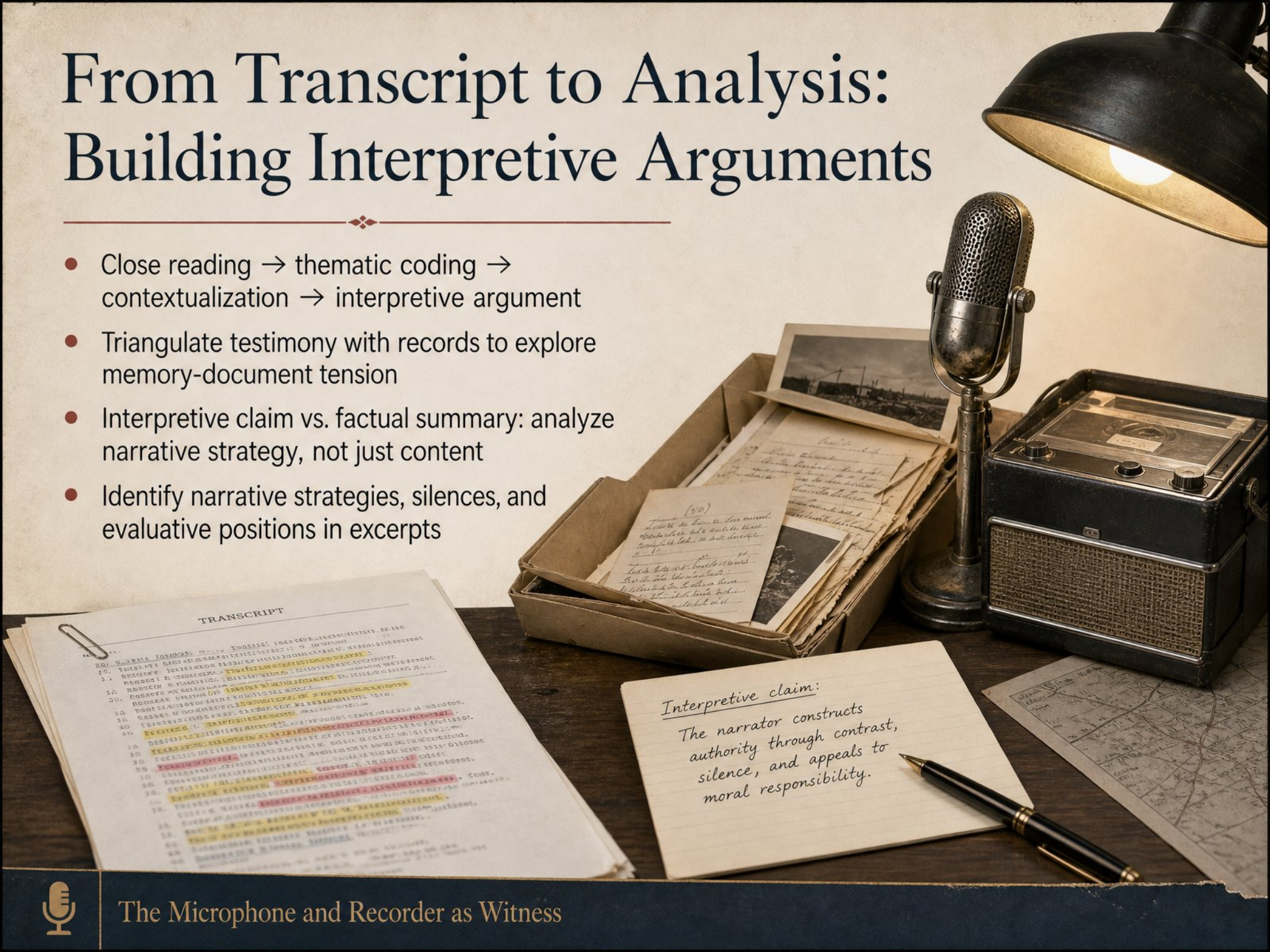
- Researcher identity, context, and commitments shape all interpretation
- Shared authority: meaning is co-produced, not extracted
- Interview as conversational narrative with ideological tension
- Different historiographical generations read testimony differently
- Self-check: Who am I to this narrator? What am I not hearing?



From Transcript to Analysis:

Building Interpretive Arguments

- Close reading → thematic coding → contextualization → interpretive argument
- Triangulate testimony with records to explore memory-document tension
- Interpretive claim vs. factual summary: analyze narrative strategy, not just content
- Identify narrative strategies, silences, and evaluative positions in excerpts



Applied Practicum: *Reading an Interview with Multiple Lenses*

- Analyze a curated transcript with paired archival and visual materials
- Identify memory work, narrative strategy, and question influence
- Map silences, evaluative stance, and positionality
- Propose 2–3 interpretive readings supported by textual and contextual evidence
- Debrief how professional backgrounds shape divergent interpretations

I remember my
mother saying
we would leave
before dawn.
The streets
were quiet,
but I could
feel everyone
waiting...

– Interview Fragment



Narrative Lens

How the story is told, structured, and shaped for meaning.



Critical Lens

Power, memory work, silences, and evaluative stance.



Positionality Lens

Whose perspective is present, whose is absent, and how position shapes meaning.

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