The following three pieces emerged from research on Peterborough working women, and they may reflect the times in which they were written, in the sense that I had moved, by the mid- to late 1980s, from writing about the hope of socialist opposition to writing about the reality of criminalization and class incorporation. They did, in a peculiar way, reflect my feelings about life in Peterborough: it might be a city, but it had a small-town feel to it; it might have been considered a ‘working-class town,’ but it exhibited residual strains of paternalism and conservatism. This small-town sensibility was signified for me in some of my interviews with retired working women, who worried that any and all information spread quickly in a small city, and who expressed as strong a feeling of commonality with managers as with other workers, as the former were their neighbours, living “just down the street.”

“The Softball Solution” grew out of my book on Peterborough, Earning Respect: The Lives of Women in Small-town Ontario, which was intended to be a case study but not a local study: using one city as my focus, I wanted to address broader debates in feminist history and sociology about the sexual division of labour, work culture, the unionization of women, and the interconnectedness of family and work relations. These topics may be seen now as more ‘traditional’ forms of labour history, in which the workplace, production, and unions take centre stage, and this is quite true. However, I would argue that there is still much to be written on these ‘traditional’ women’s labour history topics in Canada, and that they remain of critical importance, even though we might approach them quite differently in 2010. At the time, I was influenced by British studies on the factory life and the work process by Miriam Glucksmann, by Susan Porter Benson’s
and Louise Lamphere’s writing on work culture, by Ruth Milkman’s discussion of different union regimes, and by feminist theorists still interested in developing a materialist feminist analysis — the interviews, largely done in 1989, thus inevitably reflected these academic questions. Alice Kessler-Harris’s suggestion that historians needed to conceptualize gender as a process rather than a structure — as E.P. Thompson had described class — also influenced my thinking. By integrating gender into our analysis of all aspects of working class life, including home, community, union, and work, she argued, we can better understand the process of class formation, including the fractured nature of class consciousness, and working-class accommodation to capitalism.²

Both “The Softball Solution” and “Pardon Tales” drew on a range of sources, but each article looked more intensely at one in particular, oral history in the case of “The Softball Solution,” and the narratives proffered by women in court in “Pardon Tales.” I don’t think I would have been able to write “The Softball Solution” without those oral histories, and it was not only women’s words, but the feeling they conveyed when I talked to them that mattered. What the women told me in the interviews was sometimes a surprise: I did not expect the women who had worked at Westclox to be so (apparently) supportive of its paternalist management style, or the male managers to be so forthcoming about how a moralistic paternalism was cultivated. Nor did I expect to find so many women I interviewed urging me to “seek out the ballplayers.” Finding the unexpected in our research is often very productive, because it pushes us to rethink our initial assumptions, and sometimes shifts the focus of our inquiry: in the case of Westclox, I was led inevitably to new queries about working-class accommodation and consent to capitalist social relations. This necessitated an analysis of the deeply gendered culture of the paternalist workplace, in which masculinity and femininity were constructed and reconstructed over time — and not only in relation to the work process or division of labour, as I might have imagined. Of course, oral histories are no panacea for the silences of history, and the personal encounter may also inhibit discussions of violence, conflict, or divisions between women or within the working class.³ Were I to interview the same women now, I would pose some questions differently, and also probe more concertedly about ethnic and cultural identity, and
about the religious divisions of Catholic and Protestant, which were not explored in the book.

Understanding how working-class people are incorporated into capitalism, justifying rather than questioning it, is the flip side of understanding why they develop a critique of capitalism, as my earlier socialist and communist women did. Yet the two positions are not simply mirror opposites, with a more advanced versus a more naive political outlook facing off against one another. Both views may co-exist, overlap, or appear at different times, in a person or in a group; this seemed particularly true when I interviewed women about the 1937 strike, the focus of the “Telling Our Stories” article. Accommodation and resistance are both part of a complex ideological process, in which ideology is not a seamlessly unified and homogeneous system of beliefs, values, and practices, but rather is fragmented, uneven, and contradictory — and it may appear particularly meaningful and ‘real’ to working people precisely for these reasons.

Other sociologists had explored the ‘manufacturing of consent’ in the workplace, but Antonio Gramsci’s writing on hegemony, employed productively by a number of social historians at the time, seemed a particularly useful way of understanding the complex of social and cultural relations that governed working women’s lives both on and off the job. Hegemony — the way in which those with power are able to secure support for the prevailing social order, their social order — involved both consent and coercion (though in some writing the former only is discussed), which in the workplace meant the blunt threat of no job at all, as well as the more subtle practices, values, and traditions that legitimated unequal and hierarchical social relations. Hegemony encompassed a broad cultural process on the one hand, but on the other hand, it also seemed to explain, at a more micro level, the ‘internalization’ of capitalist values by individuals. Yet these individuals were not merely passively imbibing ideologies not in their interest — with ideology a mere “bad dream of the infrastructure” — for ideology became ‘common sense’ precisely because it was woven into the fabric of daily life and social practices.

The concept of hegemony also allowed for negotiation and resistance, for there was always the possibility of oppositional, subaltern, emergent
ideologies as well as dominant ones. In both articles, I wanted to give readers a sense of women’s agency, whether it was the Westclox ballplayers taking advantage of their status to secure better working conditions, or the more impoverished women in court trying to escape a criminal charge levied against them. In the latter case, I had never intended to write on crime, but faced with so little archival material on Peterborough labour, I decided to comb every possible primary source I could, from School Board minutes and Mothers Allowance files to local prison registers and court columns in the newspaper. The latter were such an unbelievably rich source that I was hooked on them, and after sharing the material with a friend who was an actress and playwright, we collaborated with a musician to produce a piece of musical theatre, Under the Law, about two women from the rural ‘Badlands’ of Peterborough — one an accused murderer and the other an accused moonshiner — who became entangled in the criminal justice system.

While women’s courtroom stories are analyzed in “Pardon Tales” as constructed narratives, I do not see them only as constructions or discursive strategies, for there often seemed to be some small ‘kernel of truth’ about their lives that was uncovered or revealed in their testimony. Women’s stories were thus shaped by the dominant ideologies of the time, but they could not be disconnected from the material and social context that made them possible, and indeed, perhaps made them probable. This was one reason to show the quantitative results of my prison register research in the article as well, for these charts and graphs visibly reinforced the argument that criminality could not be considered apart from class as well as gender relations.

The use of oral histories was well established in labour and women’s history by the time I wrote “Telling Our Stories.” In the 1970s and 1980s, interviews were seen as an important source that might counter the lack of documentary and archival records about the lives of those with less power in society, less likely to leave detailed written records. Some labour oral history and autobiography projects in Canada were done with the double objective of creating new scholarship and contributing to the labour movement.7 Similarly, women’s historians saw their research as a scholarly and feminist enterprise that would counter the dominant ‘malestream’ history, encouraging a reappraisal of women’s experiences,
roles, contributions, and struggles in Canadian history. It is true that there was more inclination in the 1970s and early 1980s to assume we could recreate women’s experiences from listening to their words, but looking back, I don’t think we should overemphasize a sharp disjuncture between an earlier period in which oral history was marginal, unreflective, and celebratory versus a later, more sophisticated discussion of oral history, something my article too easily suggests in its opening pages, and a claim made more bluntly in a recent essay by Steve High. His suggestions that oral history was initially “greeted with anger and sarcasm” by the profession and that the New Social History framing early oral history practice “did not change our relationship to the past or the public,” but made us “more inward looking than ever” seem rather dubious.

Also, queries about the construction of memory were introduced in some early scholarly pieces, although it is undeniable that this conversation proliferated and intensified considerably as the method of oral history was interrogated critically, and with the advent of poststructuralism.

“Telling Our Stories” and “Pardon Tales” thus both reflected some of the shift taking place in feminist theory by the mid-1990s. When I did the research for *Earning Respect*, there was still some interest in materialist and Marxist feminisms, but by the early to mid-1990s, poststructuralism was transforming historical thinking and debate. This may seem rather ‘late’ in terms of international debates, especially those circulating in literary theory; Joan Scott, after all, published her manifesto on discourse analysis and working-class history in 1987. The linguistic turn, however, did take time to trickle through the profession: in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many books in Canadian women’s history either had not absorbed, or did not reflect this ‘turn.’ (Nor were those feminists sympathetic to poststructuralism simply followers of Scott.) Despite the trickle-down effect, I sometimes felt as if I was just getting through my reading list on one theoretical debate when it was already surpassed by another.

By the mid-1990s, the challenges posed by poststructuralism to women’s and labour history had to be considered. “Telling Our Stories” thus engaged with poststructuralist writing on oral history that challenged positivist assumptions about this methodology, questioned its
‘authenticity’ as a more direct means of understanding women’s experience, and called for a decenring of the power of the interviewer. While some of these works gave me new ideas about the construction of women’s memories, I did not see this construction as infinitely variable. Rather, women’s memories were shaped not only by their individual stories, but also by the dominant ideologies of the time and the productive and reproductive relations framing their lives. In the cases of both women’s memories and their courtroom tales, it was important to try and understand how and why certain discourses came to dominate, while others remained alternative and marginal. The notion, embraced by some feminists, that one could really ‘share authority’ with an interviewee also seemed problematic, an idealization that ran the risk of masking our influential role in shaping the interview and our academic investment in it.

Notes


2 Alice Kessler-Harris, Gendering Labor History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 131.

3 Although I found women reluctant to talk about this, other historians have sensitively uncovered the history of violence in other contexts. See, for example, Marlene Epp, “The Memory of Violence: Soviet and Eastern European Refugees and Rape in the Second World War,” Journal of Women’s History 9, no. 1 (1997): 58–88.


7 For example, the oral histories and autobiographies published by the Canadian Committee on Labour History were intended to appeal to the labour movement as well as academics. See, for instance, Bryan Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985* (St. John’s: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988). Other oral histories and working-class remembrances were produced in accessible, pamphlet form for the labour movement, such as Wayne Roberts, *Where Angels Fear to Tread: Eileen Tallman and the Labor Movement* (Hamilton: McMaster University Labour Studies Programme, 1981); *A Miner’s Life: Bob Miner and Union Organizing in Timmins, Kirkland Lake and Sudbury* (Hamilton: McMaster University Labour Studies Programme, 1979); *Organizing Westinghouse: Alf Ready’s Story* (Hamilton: McMaster University Labour Studies Programme, 1979).


9 This is clear when you look over all the early articles in the *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, now available online through its new incarnation, *Oral History Forum*, http://www.canoha.ca/.

10 One might question the whig claims-making in this article. High writes that the “cultural turn . . . has challenged all of us to take a more explicitly political and critical perspective,” adding that this turn “tends to unite younger researchers in opposition to an older generation of social historians.” I am not so sure that generational writing is that ‘united,’ and the idea that critique and politics were made more explicit by the cultural turn is questionable. See “Sharing Authority in the Writing of Canadian History: The Case of Oral History,” in *Contesting Clio’s Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*, ed. Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009), 22–23.

11 For an early positive article on oral history from a Canadian political historian, see Bernard Ostry, “The Illusion of Understanding: Making the Ambiguous Intelligible,” *Oral History Review* 5 (1977): 7–16. Issues of power imbalances and power sharing were especially evident in the feminist literature by the 1990s. See Susan Geiger, “What’s So Feminist About Women’s Oral History?” *Journal of


14 For example, Mariana Valverde, “Poststructuralist Gender Historians: Are We These Names?” Labour/Le Travail 25 (Spring 1990): 227–36.