

History 063
Voices of the Past. Between Oral History and Memory

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Office Hours: Monday 4-5
Wednesday 4-5
Friday 11:30-12:30M
and by appointment

This course aims at examining the possibilities and limitations of oral history in the reconstruction of the past. In other words: How to deal with issues of subjectivity, personal memory and broader social, political and cultural processes. During the first half of the semester we will read about the history of the field, theories, techniques, and a selection of works where oral history organizes the historical narrative. In the second half of the semester the emphasis will be on practicing oral history. The central goal of this course will be to produce a well researched, professionally conducted, transcribed, and contextualized oral history interview.

During the first half of the semester, the course will take the form of class discussions based on common readings. Assigned readings of articles and books must be completed on time. Each meeting will begin with an individual presentation that should define the scenario for the collective discussion of the assigned readings. At least once in the semester you will lead the discussion. Needless to say, constructive criticism is crucial.

Two writing assignments are mandatory during the first half of the semester:

1. A weekly on/two-page reaction paper (you can chose the most convenient form, a narrative or a list of questions, issues or findings) focused on the assigned readings. These short papers should avoid descriptions or summaries of the readings; instead, emphasis should identify issues under discussion, interviewing styles and the role of the interviewer in the interviewing process, the kind of evidences used to articulate broader interpretations. Reaction papers are due every week. A thoroughly revised version of your reaction papers is due by April 5th. This final version should combine your initial notes on the readings and the weekly class discussions.

2. A 500/600 words review a book or media production (documentary, exhibit, website) of your choice in which oral history and/or the problem of memory are central in the historical narrative. As a reviewer you will have to

summarize the primary arguments in the book/media production and analyze the role, relevance and value of oral history in the narrative. For this assignment it is advisable to read Book Review Sections of any of the oral history journals available (such as *Oral History*; *Oral History Review*; *Words and Silences*.)

The second half of the semester focuses on practicing oral history. It entails three phases:

-) In the first phase you will identify an interview subject (individual or group); get informed about your subject; define your interviewing priorities, emphasis, and agenda. Your chosen subject could be whoever you consider relevant, from one of the cooks at the local pizzeria to those who take care of the campus beautiful landscape, your grandparents, Kenneth square mushrooms workers, a teacher in a Chester primary school, a Swarthmore graduate, two individuals –one involved in the 1960s civil rights movement in the US and the other not. These are only some possible subjects. Keep in mind that when used carefully and properly contextualized, oral history can be a promissory entry to the lives of ordinary people whose memories not always find room in broader historical narratives. The effort to find out your interview subject should start at the very beginning of the semester. Do not hesitate to contact me in the office if by the second or third week you are still trying to figure out what to do.

-) In the second phase you will conduct your interview and transcribe all or the most relevant portions of it. At this point you should produce a tentative guide to the transcript, dividing it into sections or themes -if applicable-, and identifying relevant issues, recurrent topics as well as silences and ostensible omissions.

-) In the third phase you will write a topic paper of at least 2,500/3,000 words in which you will use secondary and primary sources but the main source will be your already transcribed interview. This paper should include an introduction with a clear and well-supported statement of your approach to the interview (including comments on your preparation; relationship between interviewer and subject; description of the location where the interview took place; the personal characteristics of your subject; the general climate of the interview and the behavior of the subject.)

During the second half of the semester each student will present several advances of their work related to the interviewing process as well as preliminary versions of their research papers.

For those who are not familiar with modes of historical writing, writing conventions, and source documentation I recommend to read Richard Marius and Melvin Page, *A Short Guide to Writing about History*.

Students must complete all writing assignments to pass the course. Readings must be completed prior to class. You should come to every class, be prepared with questions and thoughts about the readings and participate fully in

the discussions. I strongly recommend writing a commentary, paragraph, several questions or a brief outline stating your initial reaction to the assigned reading in order to facilitate your participation in class discussions. Active participation is vital to receiving a good final grade. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade.

Hist 063 will meet once a week during the first half of the semester and on specific dates during the second half. As a research oriented course, an important portion of your work will be done on your own and you will have to schedule in advance frequent individual meetings with the instructor.

Course Schedule.

All required readings are available in Moddle and at McCabe library.

Week 1

January 21

Introduction

Thompson, "A Life-story Interview Guide"

Week 2

January 28

Shopes, "What is Oral History?"

Tosh, "History by Word of Mouth"

Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, chapters 2,3,5,9

Nora, "Between Memory and History. *Les Lieux de Mémoire*"

Le Goff, *History and Memory* (especially, Preface, 51-58, 81-99)

Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory"

-Have interview subject identified

-Contact him/her/them and begin to explore a time for an interview

-Begin to prepare a secondary bibliography on topics/times/issues relevant to contextualize your case study.

Week 3

February 4

Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, chapters 4, 6, 7, 8.

Making Sense of Oral History:

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question1.html>

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question2.html>

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question3.html>

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question4.html>

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question5.html>

-Discussion of tentative individual projects and interview subjects

Week 4**February 11**

Portelli, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event"

Dore, "Cuban's Life Stories. The Pains and Pleasures of living in a Communist Society"; "The Dispossessed Generation: Young Cubans and the Revolution"; "Cubans' Memories of the 1960s"

Panfichi and Vich, "Political and Social Fantasies in Peruvian Football: The Tragedy of Alianza Lima in 1987"

Week 5**February 18**

James, *Doña María's Story. Life, History, Memory and Political Identity*, "Prologue"; "Listening in the Cold: The Practice of Oral History in an Argentine Meatpacking Community"

Gay, *Lucia. Testimonies of a Brazilian Drug Dealer's Woman*

Week 6**February 25**

Leydesdorff et al., "Trauma and Life Stories"

Lorenz, "The Unending War. Social Myth, Individual Memory and the Malvinas"

Zur, "Remembering and Forgetting: Guatemalan War Widows' Forbidden Memories"

Beverly, "What Happens When the Subaltern Speaks. Rigoberta Menchú, Multiculturalism, and the Presumption of Equal Worth"

Stoll, "The Battle of Rigoberta"

Warren, "Telling Truths. Taking David Stoll and Rigoberta Menchú Exposé Seriously"

Carey-Webb, "Teaching, Testimony, and Truth. Rigoberta Menchú's Credibility in the North American Classroom"

Video resources:

Rigoberta Menchú: Broken Silence

<http://digital.films.com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/PortalViewVideo.aspx?xtid=4043&psid=0&sid=0&State=&title=Rigoberta%20Menchú:%20Broken%20Silence&IsSearch=N&parentSeriesID=>

Rigoberta Menchu: Cassandra and Crusader

<http://digital.films.com.proxy.swarthmore.edu/PortalViewVideo.aspx?xtid=29180&psid=0&sid=0&State=&title=Rigoberta%20Menchu:%20Cassandra%20and%20Crusader&IsSearch=N&parentSeriesID=>

Week 7

March 4

McCray Beier, *Health Culture in the Heartland, 1880–1980: An Oral History*, Introduction, Chapter 6; Conclusion

Elliot, “Everybody Did It’ –or Did They?: The Use of Oral History in Researching Women’s Experience of Smoking in Britain, 1930-1970”

Fong and Kahn, “An Educational Exchange: Teaching Oral History on the Post-Secondary Level”

Ruiz, “Situating Stories: The Surprising Consequences of Oral History”,

Grele, “Values and Methods in the Classroom Transformation of Oral History”

K’Meyers, “It’s Not Just Common Sense’: A Blueprint for Teaching Oral History”

Fletcher, *Recording Your Family History*.

Sturdevant, *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*

DeBartolo Carmack, "Interviewing Mom and Grandma: Oral History Tips,"
genealogy.com

February 15, Noon: Book Review Due (Leave it in my mailbox, Trotter 220)

Week 8**Break**

-Interview your subject

Week 9**March 18**

Gould, “The Word in the Woods”: Historical Analysis of the Documentary”

Skidmore, “Politics and Policy: El Salvador”

Binford, *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society and Community in El Salvador*

March 21

Oral History Workshop I

Mandatory screening and discussion with film director Jeffrey Gould

The Word in the Woods

Location: TBA (at Swarthmore)

March 22

Oral History Workshop II

Location: TBA (at UPenn)

Week 10**March 25**

-In-class presentations on:

1. Self-reflection on the interview done during break. Have ready a tentative guide to the transcript, dividing it into sections or themes, if applicable. Identify sections of special interest *vis a vis* your contextualization plan. Transcribe what you consider the “best” or “most interesting or informative” portion of your

interview.

2. Tentative list of topics to be contextualized in your final paper.

March 29

Week 11

April 1

-No class

-Individual meetings by appointment

April 5, Noon: Final Version of Compiled Reaction Papers Due (Leave it in my mailbox, Trotter 220)

Week 12

April 8

-In-class presentations: First draft of final paper.

Week 13

April 15

Professor invited to give talks overseas

-No class

-No individual meetings by appointment

Week 14

April 22

-No class

-Individual meetings by appointment

Week 15

April 29

-In-class presentation of the structure and content of your final paper.

Final Paper Due May 15. (Leave it in my mailbox, Trotter 220)