

International History and Politics

Academic year 2021-2022

Oral History

HPI137 - Printemps - 6 ECTS

Tuesday 10h15 - 12h00

Course Description

This course will explore the history, methodology, and contemporary debates surrounding the use of oral history to recount the past. Students will read a variety of classic and more recent literature from the field, while also exploring examples of different oral history projects and approaches. The main assignment for the course will require students to plan, conduct, and transcribe an oral history to become part of a new IHEID archival collection on oral history.

> PROFESSOR

[Nicole Bourbonnais](#)

[Office hours](#)

Tuesdays, 14h-16h
MdP-P2-535

> ASSISTANT

Salomé Tulane

Mdp-P2-TA Area

[Office hours](#)

Syllabus

[Course Structure](#)

This course is organized to operate as a mixture between a discussion-based seminar and a workshop. Each week, we will read and discuss a common set of short readings exploring a different aspect of oral history (technique, ethics, memory, narrative...etc). We will also explore how the week's particular theme might play out in practice, through both preparatory assignments and in-class exercises. These may vary from mock interviews to group work and role play – so please only take this course if you are prepared to shed your inhibitions and dive in! The goal is to assist students in planning, conducting, transcribing, and interpreting oral histories, while also preparing for potential setbacks, issues, and dilemmas that may come up. Over the course of the semester, students will also write a mid-term paper and conduct an oral life history with a narrator of their choice, which will ideally be deposited in the Graduate Institute's archives as part of a new oral history collection.

[Course Requirements](#)

In-Class Participation and Short Exercises – 25%

Students are expected to complete the required readings and any assignments listed for each week, and to participate actively in class discussions and exercises, whether in-person or online (depending on Covid-19 measures at the time). Participation includes regular attendance: students should inform

the TA when unable to attend class and may be asked to complete supplementary work if several classes are missed. Participation also consists of active listening: phones should be put away at all times, and computers used only for note-taking.

**Midterm Paper – 30%, submitted through Moodle by April 12 at 10h
2000-2500 words (excluding bibliography, 12 pt Times New Roman font, double-spaced, Word document)**

For this paper, students will read a book of their choice that relies on oral history as a central method and use it to explore some of the themes discussed in the course to date. The paper should start by introducing the book: its author, approach, structure, and core claims/contribution. It should then select a few core themes that seem particularly relevant to the book, and discuss these in dialogue with the course readings. So, for example, if questions of ethics and memory come up a lot in the book, you might focus on the readings from Weeks 5-7, and consider questions such as: how/to what extent does the author openly discuss ethical dilemmas created by the study? What core theoretical concepts regarding memory are relevant to this story? How does the author apply these concepts in practice, or how might they have utilized them to enhance the analysis? What further questions/complications/issues are raised by the author's approach and findings? In other words, how does this particular case study enhance our broader understanding of these methodological/analytical questions in oral history?

A list of potential books for the midterm paper is provided at the end of this syllabus, but students should also feel free to select their own, provided it is a primarily oral history study (let us know as early as possible so we can order it from the library). In addition to the book, students should use at least 6 readings from the syllabus to date, and there should be no obvious gaps (for example, if you are discussing questions of indigenous oral history, a reference to Mahuika will be expected).

Final Assignment – Oral History Project

Over the course of the semester, students will be asked to plan, conduct, and report on an oral history project conducted with a narrator or set of narrators of their choice. This could take the form, for example, of a "life history" approach including approximately 2-4 hours' worth of interviews with one narrator, or a set of shorter "subject-oriented" interviews with multiple narrators, or a dialogue-based group interview. Students will be in charge of reaching out to the narrator(s), providing them with information on the project, arranging a pre-interview, gathering informed consent, conducting the interviews, producing a transcript and writing a short reflection paper on the process. The course readings taper off in the second half of the semester to allow time/space to dedicate to the interview itself and the transcript. We will regularly discuss the projects, their progress, and their challenges in class discussions, and written components will be submitted as follows:

Project Description – 5%, 1-2 pages, submitted through Moodle by March 11 at 10h

In this document, you will provide a short description of the project, including background on the subject you are interested in, details on the methodology and practicalities (type of interviews to be conducted, with whom, how they will be structured, amount of time estimated, desired outcome...etc). These details will be reviewed by the professor and the project description can then be used as a background document to provide to interviewees during the initial contact.

Transcript -15% submitted through Moodle by June 3 at 10h

Students will produce a transcript of their interview(s) and edit them to fit a common formatting style (a template will be provided). Although automated software can be used to produce the initial draft, students should be warned that editing transcripts is a very time-consuming process— anywhere from 4-8 hours per 1 hour of audio (ie., don't save this until the last minute!). The transcripts will be reviewed by myself and, ideally, deposited at the Institute archives, but the latter will depend on the negotiation with the narrator and what level of permission they grant for use of the oral history record.

Reflection Paper – 25%, submitted through Moodle by June 3 at 10h

1500-2000 words (excluding bibliography, 12 pt Times New Roman font, double-spaced, Word document)

In this short paper you will reflect on the process of conducting the interview and the final outcome. How did you go about the process and what challenges did you encounter? How did your subjectivity and relationship with the narrator influence the process? What techniques did you employ in the interview and how did they shape the result? What kind of information did you gather and how did they affect your understanding of the subject matter at hand? Overall, what do you see as the core contribution of the project? What would you have done differently and where could you go from here to develop this into a larger project?

Course Schedule

Week 1, Feb 22: Introduction

Required Reading:

- Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different" in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (3rd edition, Routledge 2015), p 48-58.

Week 2, March 1: Roots

Required Readings:

- Alex Haley, "Black history, oral history and genealogy," [1973] in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, p22-32.
- Excerpt from Sherna Gluck, "What's so Special About Women?: Women's Oral History," *Frontiers (Boulder)* 2.2 (1977): p3-5; and "Introduction," to *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., (Routledge 1991): p1-6.
- Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," [1978] in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, p33-39.
- Urvashi Butalia, "Beginnings," in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, (Penguin Books, 1998), p1-20.

Assignment:

- Start thinking about who you would want to interview for your project, and why. What do you want to know? Where does your interest in this subject/person come from? What is your objective for the interview? What might be some of the potential complications/issues you can foresee?

Week 3, March 8: Method

Required Readings:

- Mary A. Larson, "Research Design and Strategies," in Thomas L. Charlton, et al. eds. *Handbook of Oral History* (AltaMira Press, 2006), p105-134.
- Paul Thompson, "Appendix: Three Life Story Interview Guides," in *The Voice of the Past, 4th Edition*. (Oxford University Press, 2017), p393-403.
- Erna Brodber, "Oral History and the Other Perspective," *Caribbean quarterly* 59.1 (2013): p20-30.
- Nepia Mahuika, "Indigenous Oral History in Method and Practice," in *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p115-138.

Assignment:

- Read an oral history transcript or listen to an oral history recording, focusing not on the content itself but rather on the questions, structure and flow of the interview (see "[List of Oral History Project Websites](#)" to identify transcripts/recordings to analyze). What kinds of questions does the interviewer ask? How long/short are these? How often does the interviewer intervene? Are there moments where the exchanges get particularly curt or particularly expansive? What kinds of questions led to these shifting structures? Prepare a rough visual representation of

an excerpt from the interview to bring to class (for example, by using one color to represent questions and another to represent answers, to visually illustrate length and key points of conflict). We will compare the different structures/approaches/points of tension in small groups in class.

Project Proposal Due March 11 by 10h (see description under "Course Requirements")

Week 4, March 15: Technique

Required Readings:

- Valerie Yow, "Interviewing Techniques and Strategies," *The Oral History Reader, third edition*. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., (Routledge: London and New York, 2015), p153-178.
- Allan Wong, "Conversations for the real world: shared authority, self-reflexivity, and process in the oral history interview," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 43. 1 (Winter 2009): p239-58.
- Lenore Layman, "Reticence in Oral History Interviews," In *The Oral History Reader*, p234-252.

Assignment:

- Students will be grouped into pairs and sometime in the week before this class session, will conduct 1 recorded mock interview (ie. one student will serve as interviewer, the other as interviewee). Both interviewer and interviewee should come to class prepared to reflect on their experience. How did it feel to interview or be interviewed? Were there any moments that felt particularly valuable or awkward? How did the structure of the interview, the relationship between the interviewer/interviewee, and the physical space/recording setting shape the interaction? What would you do differently next time?

Week 5, March 22: Ethics

Required Readings:

- Alessandro Portelli, "Tryin' to Gather a Little Knowledge: Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Oral History," *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p55-71.
- Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Who's Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics," *The Oral History Review*, 43:2, p338-366.
- Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan," in *The Oral History Reader*, p424-433.
- Oral History Association (OHA) "Principles and Best Practices," (OHA, 2018).
- Graduate Institute Ethics Guidelines: <https://graduateinstitute.ch/research-support/research-ethics>
- Template for Informed Oral Consent [to be provided]

Assignment:

- Consider how the issues discussed in the readings might apply to your own planned oral history project. What ethical dilemmas might be raised by your interview? How might you respond to these in practice? Students should also have made contact with their proposed narrator(s) and set up a pre-interview by the end of this week.

Week 6, March 29: Memory and Narrative Part I

Required Reading:

- Lynn Abrams, "Memory" and "Narrative" in *Oral History Theory*, p78-129.

No Assignments this week (work on midterm paper, interview prep).

Week 7, April 5: Memory and Narrative Part II

Required Readings:

- Blanca Vazquez Erazo, "The Stories our Mothers Tell: Projections-of-Self in the Stories of Puerto Rican Garment Workers," *The Oral History Review*, 16.2 (Autumn 1988): p23-28.
- Alessandro Portelli, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event," *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, (SUNY Press, 1991), p1-26.

- Daniel James, "Tales Told Out on the Borderlands: Dona Maria's Story, Oral History, and Issues of Gender," in John D. French and Daniel James, eds. *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* John D. French and Daniel James, eds. (Duke University Press, 2006), p31-52.
- Luise White, "In Defense of the False," *Journal of African cultural studies*, 33.3 (July 2021), p.320-324.

No Assignments this week (work on midterm paper, interview prep).

Week 8, April 12: Midterm Paper Discussion

****Midterm Paper due April 12 at 10h**** (see Course Requirements for details)

April 19, No class – spring break.

Week 9, April 26: Transcription

- Required Readings: Francis Good, "Voice, Ear and Text: Words, meaning and transcription," in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, p458-469.
- Elinor Mazé, "The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History," in Charlton et al. eds, *Handbook of Oral History*, p162-184.
- [Baylor University Style Guide](#)
- [Columbia University Style Guide](#)

Assignment:

- Come to class prepared to discuss the process of your project and any problems, adjustments, or insights you've had thus far.

Week 10, May 3: Dialogue

Required Readings:

- Kathleen Borland, "That's Not What I Said": Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Sherna Berger Gluck, eds., (Routledge 1991), 14 pages.
- E.J. Algoa, "The Dialogue between Academic and Community History in Nigeria," in Luise S. White, Stephan F. Miescher and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Indiana University Press, 2001), p91-102.
- Daniel Kerr, "We Know what the Problem is': Using video and radio oral history to develop collaborative analysis of homelessness," *The Oral History Reader*, p626-635.

Assignment:

- Come to class prepared to discuss the content of the interview(s) conducted thus far and your relationship with the narrator. Have there been any moments of tension or conflicting views? How did you handle them? How might you approach them in an analysis of the interview?

Week 11, May 10: Presentation

Required Reading:

- Sarah Lowry and Alison Duke, "Foundling Voices: Placing oral history at the heart of an oral history exhibition," in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 14 pages.

Assignment:

- Explore the website of one of the websites on the "[List of Oral History Project Websites](#)" and come prepared to describe it to your classmates. How is it structured? What key points of information are contained? How/to what extent does it mix transcript, audio, and visuality? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the organization? Is there anything particularly interesting about the way the project/website was organized? Anything that could make it better?

Week 12, May 17: No class - Work on transcripts/final paper.

Week 13, May 24: Project Discussion

No Required Readings.

Assignment:

- Come to class prepared with a brief (5min maximum) overview of your project and key takeaways (ie. the core of your reflection paper) to discuss with your classmates.

Week 14, May 31: Conclusion

No Required Readings or Assignments. We will revisit the core themes of the course.

****Oral History Transcript and Paper due June 3 by 10h****

Course Policies

All written work must be submitted to the course Moodle page as a **Word document, double-spaced, 12 pt Times New Roman font, with standard 2.5cm (1") margins**. Students may choose to submit their work in either English or French. Late submissions of assignments will be penalized at a rate of -0.25 per day. Students seeking an extension due to illness or family emergency must contact the professor as soon as possible and provide documentation indicating the impacted time period.

Papers should use **footnotes in the Chicago citation style**. Please see Purdue OWL's [Chicago Manual of Style](#) and the sample paper provided on Moodle for guidelines on how to use this format and sample citations.

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. Cheating includes any action in disregard of the rules and standards governing evaluation or re-using, all or part, of coursework for which credits or a degree have already been obtained and presenting it as an original piece of work. Plagiarism includes appropriating the work of a third party and presenting it as one's own work, copying text, data, figures, images, etc. from external sources without citing the source or presenting ideas of other authors as original work. In the event that cheating or plagiarism are found to have occurred, a "0" grade will be attributed. Depending on the severity of the offence, the student may be excluded from the Institute. Please see the Institute's ["Internal Guidelines"](#) for further information.

List of potential books for midterm paper

Bird, S. Elizabeth and Fraser Ottanelli. *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory and the Nigerian Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Blee, Kathleen. *Women in the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. University of California Press, 1991.

Brown, Leslie and Anne Valk. *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Penguin Books, 1998.

Cruikshank, Julie, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Field, Sean. *Oral history, community, and displacement: Imagining memories in post-apartheid South Africa*. Springer, 2012.

Geiger, Susan. *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965*. Heinemann, 1997.

Hamilton, Carrie. *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

He, Rowena Xiaoqing. *Tiananmen Exiles: Voices of the Struggle for Democracy in China*. Palgrave, 2014.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"*. Amistad, 2018.

James, Daniel. *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Jessee, Erin. *Negotiating genocide in Rwanda: The politics of history*. Springer, 2017.

Kimball, Natalie. *An Open Secret: The History of Unwanted Pregnancy and Abortion in Modern Bolivia*. Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Langland, Victoria. *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Mallon, Florencia. *Courage Tastes of Blood: The Mapuche Community of Nicolás Aillío and the Chilean State, 1906–2001*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Passerini, Luisa. *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Peipei Qiu with Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei. *Chinese Comfort Women: Testimonies from Imperial Japan's Sex Slaves*. Oxford, 2013.

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

Raleigh, Donald J. *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk About Their Lives*. Indiana University Press, 2006.

Saikia, Yasmin. *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*. Duke, 2011.

Shostak, Marjorie. *Nisa: The life and words of a !Kung woman*. Routledge, 1981.

Shternshis Anna. *When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life Under Stalin*. Oxford University press, 2021.

Tinsman, Heidi. *Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950–1973*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

Vanek, Miroslav and Pavel Mücke. *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

van Onselen, Charles. *The seed is mine: The life of Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper 1894–1985*. Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1996.

White, Luise. *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

Wright, Marcia. *Strategies of slaves & women: life-stories from East/Central Africa*. New York; London: Lilian Barber Press, 1993.

List of Oral History Project Websites

Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project (accounts of individuals throughout the world who have made important contributions to the field, including advocates, communication specialists, lawyers, managers, physicians, researchers, social workers and others; addresses historical period 1965-2005): <https://libraries.smith.edu/special-collections/research-collections/resources-lists/oral-histories/population-reproductive-health>

Women's Learning Partnership Oral History Project (extensive interviews with prominent and grassroots women's rights activists from around the world who discuss formative events in their personal lives and their eye-witness accounts of history in the making): description: <https://learningpartnership.org/learning-center/learning-center-overview/about-oral-history-project> ; interviews: https://learningpartnership.org/learning-center?resource_type=135&language=All&field_countries_target_id=All&topic=All

The Quipu Project (interactive documentary project based on interviews with men and women sterilized in Peru in the 1990s) <https://interactive.quipu-project.com/#/en/quipu/intro>

1947 Partition Archive (selections from the larger project, which includes over 9,800 witness oral histories from 14 countries) <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/>

British Library Sound Archives (BL holdings of oral histories on subjects including disability, the 1980s, pioneering women...etc): <https://sounds.bl.uk/oral-history>

Living Archives (digital repository of life stories of Rwandan exiles and genocide survivors living in Canada) <https://storytelling.concordia.ca/projects-item/living-archives/>

World Bank Oral History Project (oral histories with the World Bank Group from Bretton Woods to the present): <https://oralhistory.worldbank.org/>

UN Oral History Archives (collection of audio recordings and transcripts of interviews with eminent persons who were witnesses or participants in various major events in the life of the organization during the period 1945 to 2005): <https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?f1=830&as=1&sf=title&so=a&rm=&m1=e&p1=UN%20Oral%20history%20project%20%28Series%29&ln=en>

Freedom Archive (multimedia archive of progressive Bay Area history including movements for liberation and social justice) <https://freedomarchives.org/>

Mott Haven Oral History Project (multimedia site about a South Bronx neighborhood that weaves oral histories with interactive maps) <http://mothavenhistory.org/home/>

New Roots/Nuevas Raíces: Improving Global Access of Latino Oral Histories <https://sohp.org/research-projects/current-projects/new-roots-nuevas-raices/>

Palestinian Oral History Archive (project to digitize, index, catalog, preserve, and provide access (through a searchable digital platform) to an archival collection of around 1,000 hours of testimonies with first generation Palestinians and other Palestinian communities in Lebanon): <https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/>

Civil Rights History Project at the Library of Congress (This is an ongoing oral history collection with relevance to the Civil Rights movement initiated in 2010 focusing on the African American community.) <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/about-this-collection/>

Southern Journey Oral History Collection (This is a collection of oral histories, completed from 1991 to 1994. It contains interviews of 119 individuals describing the activities and people involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the southern states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi.) <https://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane:dent>

Telling their stories, Oral History archive projects
(This is a collection of interviews of people who witnessed major historic events of the XXth century: Stories of the Civil Rights Era, Liberation and Witnesses to Genocide, Japanese American Internment, Holocaust Survivors and Refugees, etc.) <http://www.tellingstories.org/index.html>

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project oral histories, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History
(This is a collection of 63 oral histories from 1990 to 2014 focusing on organizing for women in the United States in the second half of the XXth century)
<https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/657>