

HIST 470D & HIST 656D

Fall-Winter 2012-3

History and the Politics of Voice: The Theory and Practice of Oral Historical Research

Time: Thursday 1:35-3:25

Place: Leacock 808

Instructor: Dr. Jon Soske

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Office hours: Thursday 11-1:30, or by appointment

This seminar will explore the multiple dimensions of “voice” in writing history, particularly history that makes use of oral evidence. In the first instance, we will be concerned with the methods of conducting interviews and the ethical, theoretical, and interpretative problems of their use in academic scholarship. But, as we will see, this issue opens up a number of questions regarding the production of historical knowledge. Who has the capacity to speak about the past in different institutional and political contexts? What does it mean for the historian to claim that he or she “gives voice” to others? What kind of historical evidence can be derived from personal and collective experience? How can historians make use of rumours and memories, or even memories of memories? How does historical writing negotiate between multiple different kinds of truth? What gives the historian's interpretations their authority?

During the first term, we will alternate between reading significant monographs based on oral historical research and selections of articles that speak to key issues related to oral history (authority, memory, gender, history from below, trauma and testimony, the nature of evidence). The selected readings introduce students to important theoretical concepts, significant debates in the field, and several different traditions of using oral evidence (American, British and Italian, South African). During the second term, we will focus on the more practical aspects of oral historical research: designing and conducting interviews, transcription, research ethics, etc. The course research paper will be based on interviews conducted by the student.

The following items will be available from Librairie Paragraphe (2220 McGill College Ave):

Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012)

Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000).

All other readings are available online. Most can be easily accessed through the McGill library website or Google scholar. A smaller number of readings (marked * on the syllabus) will be posted on the course website.

ASSESSMENT STRUCTURE

The course grade will be the sum of the following units:

First Term

Interview Analysis	25%	October 5
Paper Proposal :	20%	November 9
Ethics Review:	20%	December 7
Position Papers:	35%	Beginning of Seminar

Second Term

Interview Presentation	20%	TBA
Class Participation	20%	
Final Paper	60%	April 5

Interview Analysis: In this assignment, you will write a 10 page (2,500 word) analysis of an existing interview related to your field of interest. The central question is “How can this interview be used as a historical source?” However, in order to answer the question, you should analyse the interview through two lenses. First, you should discuss the source from the perspective of the person conducting the interview. What was their approach to the situation? What strategies did they use in formulating questions and responding to the informant? How did their own historical, political, or theoretical presuppositions shape their research practice? In other words, how did they understand—and help to shape—the interview as a source? Second, you should reflect on the interview's broader utility as a source from your own perspective. How can the interview as a whole be employed as a source for different kinds of historical research? What different kinds of evidence are contained within the interview? What ethical, political, or methodological concerns arise when using the source for research today? Pay close attention to the language of the interview as well as its overall development and context.

Paper Proposal: The paper proposal is designed to force you to do initial research. The proposal consists of the following elements: **1.** a brief paragraph defining the research question, **2.** a historiographical review (i.e. a discussion of the secondary literature available for consultation), and **3.** a description of possible people to interview, avenues through which to identify and approach particular sources (community organizations, family connections, political networks), and the aims and format of the interviews.

Ethics Review: All students in this class must successfully complete an ethics review through McGill's Research Ethics board. For historians and history students, this usually means undergoing the so-called “expedited review,” which still takes two to four weeks. **No interviews undertaken prior to the ethics review can be used.** Failure to complete the ethics review will result in a failing course grade.

Position papers (first term): At the beginning of each seminar, students will be required to submit a short position paper. During those weeks when books are assigned, the position paper should describe, and then critically evaluate, the book's use and presentation of oral research material. During weeks when articles are assigned, the position paper should evaluate and compare the ideas of each author regarding the theme of the week in question. Position papers are strictly limited to **600 words**. Late papers will never be accepted without a doctor's note.

Interview Presentation: Each student will pre-circulate the transcript of one interview conducted for the project. The seminar then will collectively discuss and analyse the interview and its potential uses.

Final Paper: The research paper is an *original piece of research*, based on secondary literature and the interviews conducted by the student. Depending on the topic, the paper can either be based on interviews

with a single or multiple subjects. Your paper should have a strong analytical element (WHY did something happen?); descriptions (WHAT happened) should be kept to the necessary minimum. The paper should also reflect critically on the ways in which you make use of oral materials, the conduct of the interviews, and the interpretative questions raised by the nature of oral sources. **Word limit:** 7,500 words (30 pages) for undergraduate students and 10,000 words (40 pages) for graduate students.

MYCOURSES

This course will use MyCourses for posting announcements, instructions on assignments, exam questions, lecture podcasts, lecture slides, discussion boards, and more. If you have technical problems with MyCourses, e-mail the MyCourses office at support.ist@mcgill.ca, with your McGill ID and the course number. Please remember that technical problems with MyCourses are not the responsibility of the professor or of the TAs.

LANGUAGE and PLAGIARISM

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures. / L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires.

<http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/assistance/plagiarism/>

<http://www.mcgill.ca/library->

COURSE SCHEDULE (*final version will be posted on myCourses by end of add/drop period*)

▲ = on course website

1. *Course Introduction* September 6

Read syllabus.

2. *The Politics of Hearing and Speaking* September 13

Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 82-125.*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 271-313.*

3. *Orality and the Discipline of History* September 20

LeRov Vail and Landeg White, "The Invention of Oral Man," in *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (London: James Currey, 1991), 1-39.*

Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 34. No 1

(2007): 49-70.

Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop* no. 12 (1981): 96-107.

II. MEMORY AND STORYTELLING

4. *History and the Poetics of Oral Narrative*

September 27

Isabel Hofmeyr, *'We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told': Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (London: James Currey, 1994).

5. *Social Memory and Postmemory*

October 4

Ronald Fraser, "Politics as Daily Life: Oral History and the Spanish Civil War," *New Left Review* 75 (May-June 2012): 61-7.

Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 24 (1998): 105-140.

Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103-128.

Recommended:

Leyla Neyzi, "'Wish the hadn't left': The Burden of Armenian Memory in Turkey," in *Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey* (DVV International: 2010), 13-74.*

III. MYTHOLOGY AND AUTHORITY

6. *Personal Myths*

October 11

Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (Bloomsbury, 2012).

7. *Whose Authority?*

October 18

Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138.

Elizabeth Tonkin, "The Teller of the Tell: Authors and their Authorizations," in *Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 38-49.*

Michael Frisch, "Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process," *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter - Spring 2003): 111-113.

Michael Frisch, "From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back" in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011), 126-37.*

Film (view before seminar):

People are Knowledge (dir. Achal Prabhla, 2011) at <http://vimeo.com/26469276>

IV. RUMORS

8. *What to do with vampire stories?*

October 25

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

V. WOMEN'S VOICES AND UNCOMFORTABLE MARGINS

9. *People's Lives Are History*

September 1

Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

10. *Oral History as a Radical Practice?*

November 8

Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method" in ed. Richard Johnson, *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).

Susan Geiger, "What's So Feminist About Women's Oral History?" *Journal of Women's History* 2, no. 1 (1990): 169-182.

Ciraj Rassool, "Power, Knowledge and the Politics of Public Pasts," *African Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010): 79-101.

VI. TRUTH

11. *Reality is a Montage*

November 15

Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

12. *Historical Trauma and Testimony*

November 22

Jean-François Lyotard, "Discussions or Phrasing After Auschwitz," in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 360-92.*

Dominick LaCapra, "Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim's Voice" in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 86-113.*

Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (Saint Paul: Paragon, 2010), 41-76 and 209-261.*

Film: *Shoah* (dir. Claude Lanzmann 1985).

13. *Sites of Truth/Sites of Experience*

November 29

Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" in Daniel Breazeale, ed., *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870s* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1971), 79-91.

Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop Journal* 8, no. 1. (1979): 82-108.

Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn, 1991): 79-92.