

**HST4034Z**

**ORAL HISTORY:  
METHOD, PRACTISE AND THEORY**

**2009**

Dr. Sean Field, Centre for Popular Memory, Historical Studies Dept

## Introduction

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A spectre is haunting the halls of the academy: the spectre of oral history (Portelli 1998).

The telling of a life story is a *confirmation* (her emphasis) of that self that stands there telling the story. History, on the other hand, might offer the chance of denying it (Steedman 1992).

This option offers hands-on training in oral history research and interviewing skills. The central focus is on the relationship between a person telling oral stories and another eliciting and listening to those stories. There is no simple road map on how to do oral history interviewing. Rather, training in oral history methodology is a *learning process* of how to make a series of research decisions appropriate to specific social, cultural and historical contexts.

A guiding principle of the course is as follows: if interviewers expect to elicit information and stories from interviewees, then interviewers must learn to be open about them selves. It is therefore critical that participants get regular opportunities to experience what it feels like to be both interviewer and interviewee. As the workshops are inter-linked you are expected to attend all sessions. The success of these workshops, in part, will depend on the development of open, trusting and sharing relationships amongst participants. I hope this course will be an enjoyable learning experience for everyone.

This course will consist of 11, two to three-hour weekly seminars from 1.00 to 4.00 pm on Wednesdays in the Beattie building (room BG3). Evaluation will consist of a **research proposal**, an **interview guide**, an **interpretative essay** and a **research project** (including one full transcript, signed release forms and CDs/cassettes). Students are strongly encouraged to use the research project as a pilot study for their dissertation or thesis.

## Readings

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The course readers will be available in the first seminar. Note that the course reader is the **minimum of reading** required and you do have to do far more reading for evaluation purposes. For those of you with a long-term interest in oral history I would highly recommend buying the Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson book, The Oral History Reader (Routledge 1998; 2006). There is an additional reading list at the end of this course outline.

## Seminars/Workshops

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### 1: What is Oral History? (25 Feb)

This introductory session will include an overview lecture, which will define oral history by discussing different audio recordings; forms of oral history; and the 'tools' of the oral history interviewer such as listening, empathy, observation and ways of asking questions.

### 2: Oral Historiography (4 March)

This session will trace the changing use of oral history methods from the 1960s to the present. We will also compare and critique international and South African empirical works, which make use of oral history methods. Central themes to be discussed will be the conceptual tensions between 'the written word' and 'the spoken word', and between 'words' and 'images'.

### 3: Research Project Design (11 March)

How do you design an oral history project? How do you construct an interview guide? How do you negotiate access for an oral history interview? This session will explore these key questions and workshop the writing of interview guide questions. All participants must give a 5-minute oral presentation about their research interests and intended project focus.

### 4 + 5: Interviewing Skills: On Audio (18 + 25 March)

These two sessions will be practical workshops in doing oral history interviews. Participants will interview each other with an audio tape-recorder, and reflect on these experiences during the workshops. For these interviewing exercises to work, all participants need to be both self-reflective and sensitively critical. Bear in mind, the audience to the one-on-one interview exercises play a crucial part in observing, listening and evaluating the interviewers. We will also discuss the ethical obligation for oral historians to use either consent or copy-right release forms, as a form of legal agreement between interviewers and interviewees, and provide ethical guidelines to 'research with human subjects'. Furthermore, copy-right release forms will

be discussed, and blank release forms of the Centre for Popular Memory will be provided.

## **6 + 7. Interviewing Skills: On Video (1 + 15 April)**

In session 6 you will discuss film clips of interviewing examples from different film documentaries. This will be followed by a discussion of the different challenges that need to be confronted when interviewing on video. Before session 7, you must conduct longer and more in-depth interviews with each other, outside of the class, and on video-tape. Before session 7, participants must also view these video-taped interviews. In session 7, you must present video clips from these interviews and evaluate the interviews you conducted.

## **8. Emotions and Inter-subjective Relationships (22 April)** (Election Day, to shift or not to shift, the democratic choice is yours?)

All interviews have an emotional content, which is evoked within the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. We will discuss how to deal with the interviewee's and the interviewer's emotions in and beyond the interview situation. In addition, we will discuss whether oral historians can claim - like the TRC did - to 'heal' people?

## **9. Interpreting Oral History: Approaches to Memory (29 April)**

These will **not** be abstract discussions about theory rather the emphasis will be on applied theory, within the context of oral history research. I will provide practical recommendations for doing typed transcriptions of interviews and then introduce various ways of analyzing oral history ranging from empiricist and social scientific uses and other paradigms that draw on concepts such as memory, myth, identities and power relations.

## **10. Interpreting Oral History: Approaches to Stories (6 May)**

This session explores the 'narrative turn' in history, and oral history interpretation, more specifically. Moreover, we will discuss how post-traumatic legacies impact on the telling of stories, remembering of 'limit events' and interpreting and listening to memories of victims/survivors of violence. In addition, we will explore the challenges of empathizing with perpetrators of human rights abuse, and critique the 'victim/perpetrator' binary.

## **11: Archiving, Dissemination and your Projects! (13 May)**

Audio and audio-visual archiving is vital for conserving peoples' stories and increasing public access to oral history interviews. But the emergence of digital archiving and the Internet erodes conventional notions of archiving and ownership. Oral historians record peoples' stories about social change over time but should we, especially those based in the academy, contribute to change? Participants will critically consider the ways in which oral historians have made contributions to social change and forms of dissemination from

books, exhibitions, documentaries, performances and radio. Finally, I will discuss ways of structuring and writing-up your oral history research project.

## Course Evaluation

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The evaluation has 4 components:

- Write a **research proposal** for a pilot oral history project. Keep it short and to the point. No less than 1500 words and no more than 2000 words. **Due date: Wed 18 March 2009.** (20% weighting)
- Write-up your **interview guide**, of no less than 10 double-spaced pages of interview questions for your project interviews. **Due date: Wed 1 April 2009.** (10% weighting)
- Write an **interpretive paper**, which defines and applies conceptual tools to an oral history interview (transcript and audio) of an interview you conducted for your project or of an interview from one of the oral history collections located within the on-line archive of the Centre for Popular Memory, visit: [www.popularmemory.org.za](http://www.popularmemory.org.za). Your paper must be no less than 1500 words and no more than 2000 words. **Due date: Wed 13 May 2009.** (20% weighting)
- Write-up a **pilot oral history research project**. Conduct 2 - 4 oral history interviews (or sessions). In writing-up the project contextualize the topic and the interviews with secondary literature reading, describe your research experiences, present, interpret and analyze the key themes and issues that emerged in the interviews, and present a preliminary argument that connects the different threads of your project. You are encouraged to do a project, which contributes to your dissertation or thesis research. The final project must include:
  - A project of no less than 4000 words and no more than 5000 words.
  - One 60 minute transcript from your best interview.
  - Signed and completed release forms for all interviews.
  - Copies of all interview CDs/cassettes.**Due date: Wed 3 June 2009.** (50% weighting)

## Additional Readings

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Baum, W. 1991. Transcribing and Editing Oral History. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

Brink, E., Malungane, G., Lebelo, S., Ntshangase, D. and Krige, S. 2001. Soweto, 16 June 1976, It all started with a dog.... Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Brown, D. 1999. Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.

Bonner, P., Hofmeyr, I, James, D. and Lodge, T. (eds.) 1989. Holding their Ground, Class, Locality and Culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Bozzoli, B. 1987. Class, Community and Conflict, South African Perspectives. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

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Derrida, J. 1995. Archive Fever, a Freudian Impression. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dunaway, D. and Baum, W. (eds.) 1996. Oral History, an Interdisciplinary Anthology. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

Feldman, M., Bell, J. and Berger, M. 2003. Gaining Access, a Practical and Theoretical Guide for Qualitative Researchers. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

Field, S. 1998. From the Peaceful Past to the Violent Present: Memory, Myth and Identity in Guguletu. Norval, A. and Howarth, D. (eds.) South Africa in Transition. London: Macmillan Press.

Field, S. (ed.) 2001. Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town. Cape Town: David Philip.

Field, S. 2006. Beyond 'Healing': Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration. Oral History vol. 34, no. 1.

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Field, S. 2008. Turning-up the Volume: Dialogues about Memory Create Oral Histories, South African Historical Journal, Vol. 60 No. 2.

Finnegan, R. 2007. The Oral and Beyond, Doing Things with Words in Africa. Oxford: James Currey.

Foster, D., Haupt, P, and De Beer, M. 2005. The Theatre of Violence, Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict. Cape Town: HSRC Press

Fraser, R. 1984. In Search of a Past, the Manor House, Amnersfield, 1933 – 1945. London: Verso.

Frisch, M. 1990. A Shared Authority, Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History. New York: State University of New York Press.

Furniss, G. and Gunner, L. (eds.) 1995. Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grele, R. 1991. Envelopes of Sound, the Art of Oral History. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Gluck, S. and Patai, D. 1991. Women's Words, the Feminist Practice of Oral History. New York: Routledge.

Gobodo-Madikizela, P. 2003. A Human Being Died That Night, A Story of Forgiveness. Cape Town: David Philip.

Gordon, S. 1985. A Talent for Tomorrow, Life Stories of South African Servants. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Hamilton, C., Harris, V., Taylor, J. Pickover, M., Reid, G. and Saleh, R. (eds.) Refiguring the Archive. 2002. Cape Town: David Philip.

Harris, V. and Hatang, S. 2000. Archives, Identity and Place: A dialogue on what it (might) mean(s) to be an African archivist. Esarbica Journal. Vol. 19.

Harris, V. 2001. A shaft of darkness: Derrida in the archive. At: [www.umich.edu/~iinet/asc/Winter2001/papers/Harris.pdf](http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/asc/Winter2001/papers/Harris.pdf).

Henige, D. 1982. Oral Historiography. London: Longman.

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Hofmeyr, I. 1993. "We spend our years as a tale that is told". Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom. London: James Currey.

Jacobson, K. 1994. Embattled Selves, an Investigation into the nature of Identity through oral histories of Holocaust survivors. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Kaschula, R. 2001. African Oral Literature, Functions in Contemporary Contexts. Cape Town: New Africa Books.

La Capra, D. 2001. Writing History, Writing Trauma. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Levett, A., Kottler, A., Burman, E. and Parker, I. (eds.) 1997. Culture, Power and Difference, Discourse Analysis in South Africa. Cape Town: UCT Press.

Nuttall, S. and Coetzee, C. (eds.) 1998. Negotiating the Past, The Making of Memory in South Africa. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Perks, R. and Thomson, A. 1998; 2006 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) The Oral History Reader. London: Routledge.

Plummer, K. 2000. Documents of Life 2, an Invitation to a Critical Humanism, London: Sage Publishers.

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

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Portelli, A. 2003. The Order has been carried out, History, Memory, and the Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome. New York: Palgrave.

Lacy Rogers, K., Leydesdorff, S. and Dawson, G. (eds.) 1999. Trauma and Life Stories, International Perspectives. London: Routledge.

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Sereny, G. 1995. Albert Speer: His Battle with the Truth. London: Macmillan.

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Slim, H. and Thompson, P. 1993. Listening for Change, Oral History and Development. London: Panos Publications.

Soudien, C. and Jeppie, S. (eds.) 1990. The Struggle for District Six, Past and Present. Cape Town: Buchu Books.

Terkel, S. 1993. Race, How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession. New York: Anchor Books.

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Van Onselen, C. 1996. The Seed is Mine, The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894 – 1985. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.

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Yow, V. 1994. Recording Oral History, A Practical Guide for Social Scientists. London: Sage.

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