UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Department of History
Semester II, 2001-2002
Spring 2002

History 982: Oral History and Testimonio in Latin America

Florencia E. Mallon
263-1822
femallon@facstaff.wisc.edu

Course Description:

The recent controversy over Rigoberta Menchú's first testimonio has focused renewed attention on the nature of oral history, testimonio, and ethnography in Latin America. Traditionally, the genre of oral history tended to be the province mainly of anthropologists or politically engaged intellectuals and academics. With the rise of cultural studies, however, testimonio has also become a literary genre of sorts. Even in the case of testimonio as literature, however, its greatest strength has been its value as witnessing, as a form of denuncia concerning real events. As John Beverley put it, “It was the Real, the voice of the body in pain.”

So what happens when the subject of a testimonio doesn’t tell the truth? Does the subject of a testimonio ever tell the whole truth? What are the options available to researchers, readers, and writers of testimonio when it comes to issues of veracity or “authenticity”? What is the relationship between a single life story and an ethnography? What is the relationship between the author/subject of a testimonio or life story, and the editor who helps bring it to light? How different are these questions when they apply to oral history as one of several sources of documentation used to reconstruct local history and experience?

We will explore these questions by reading a broad variety, both temporally and methodologically, of works in the testimonio and oral history genres. Reading some of the classics as well as more innovative recent texts, we will revisit questions of veracity, authority and “authenticity” and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the genre, as well as the advantages, pitfalls and challenges of using oral history as a methodology.

Course Requirements:

1) Class participation. This is a reading and discussion course, and therefore participation is key to the success of the seminar. Taking the time and energy to contribute to class discussion, whether with a comment, question, doubt or criticism, is a crucial component of this. Active participation does not always mean speaking a lot, but it does mean listening to and engaging with other people’s ideas.
and comments, and being willing to risk asking a “stupid” question in order to move the discussion forward.

2) Reaction papers. At the beginning of the semester I will set up an email list through which I will send out questions for discussion ahead of our meetings. I will also expect everyone to email to the list a 1-2-page reaction paper on the week’s readings by noon of the day preceding our next meeting so that we can all come prepared with an idea of what reactions the readings have elicited. (Each student will be expected to email reactions to the list 10 out of 14 weeks, the others being “rest weeks” that should be planned according to the rest of your schedule. Please let me know the week before if you don’t plan to send a reaction paper to the list).

3) A final paper, ca. 20 pages, which can take one of the following three forms:
   a) A thesis chapter or other written piece that is part of a work that uses oral history as an important component of the research. With this option you also have the opportunity to participate as a presenter in the workshop we will be running in the last week of classes.
   b) A methodological/historiographical reflection on the uses of oral history, life history and/or testimonio for an upcoming, proposed research project. In this format you reflect on the value of particular texts concerning oral history for the proposed research, and explain how your own project will contribute to, and/or innovate in, the field.
   c) A state-of-the-field paper on oral history in a specific region or country of Latin America, which evaluates the nature of this specific literature in the context of the overall progress of the field more generally.

Please note that you will be expected to hand in a 2-page proposal detailing your choice among these options, with an attached tentative bibliography, by Friday, March 1. We will schedule an appointment in office hours to go over the topics and bibliographies by Friday, March 15.

4) Grading: Class participation, 30%; Reaction papers, 30%; Final paper, 40%

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS, READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

(Please Note: Books are on reserve at Helen C. White and available for purchase at Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman, 257-6050; Articles and chapters of books (see list on last page of the syllabus are part of a xerox packet available for purchase at the Humanities Copy Center, 1650 Humanities Bldg., and on reserve at Helen C. White)

1/25- Introduction
PART I- Testimonio, Ethnography and Oral History: Controversies and Contradictions

2/1- What Gets Said and What Doesn’t: Testimonio and Denuncia
(Reschedule due to meeting out of town)

2/8- Lies of Omission and of Commission: The Role of Fact in Testimonio

2/15- Testimonio in Postrevolutionary Times

2/22- What is Oral History, Anyway?

PART II- Some Uses of Oral History

3/1- The Seamless Approach
3/8- The Fictionalized Approach

3/15- Oral History as Historical Methodology
*Alessandro Portelli, “Research as an Experiment in Equality,” in The Death of Luigi Trastulli, pp. 29-44.

PART III- Life History vs. Testimonio

3/22- Anthropological Life History

***SPRING BREAK, March 23-31***

4/5- Political Life History

4/12- The Marketing of An Individual Life

4/19- The Tragedy of Success?
I'm Going to Have a Little House: The Second Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

4/26- A More Horizontal Experiment
*María Teresa Tula, *Hear My Testimony: María Teresa Tula, Human Rights

**CONFERENCE in Urbana**

5/3· Postmodern Reflections?
Daniel James, Doña María’s Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

5/10· Workshop/ Discussion: The Challenges, Difficulties and Rewards of Using Oral History

In preparation for the discussion, please read Alessandro Portelli, “Tryin' to Gather a Little Knowledge: Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Oral History,” in The Battle of Valle Giulia, pp. 55-71. Also, familiarize yourself with the following two websites that address Human Subjects Research at UW-Madison, paying special attention to the documents I have listed under each one:

www.ls.wisc.edu/research
* L&S Human Subjects Guidelines
* UW Human Subjects Training Module
* New Protocol Form

www.rsp.wisc.edu
* Definitions
* Human Subjects Committees
* UW Madison Policies

Final Papers Due Wednesday, May 15th, at 5:00 p.m.
History 982-Oral History and Testimonio in Latin America
Xerox Packet Readings


8) Alessandro Portelli, “Research as an Experiment in Equality,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 29-44.


