

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Department of History  
Semester II, 2001-2002  
Spring 2002

History 982- Oral History and *Testimonio* in Latin America

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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*  
\*Rigoberta Menchú, I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (New York and London: Verso Books, 1987)  
\*V́ctor Montejo, Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village, trans. V́ctor Perera (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1987).  
**(Reschedule due to meeting out of town)**
- 2/8- Lies of Omission and of Commission: The Role of Fact in *Testimonio*  
\*David Stoll, Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000)  
\*Arturo Arias (ed.), The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- 2/15- *Testimonio* in Postrevolutionary Times  
Rosa Isolde Reuque Paillalef, When a Flower is Reborn: The Life and Times of a Mapuche Feminist, ed. and trans. Florencia E. Mallon (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming fall 2002, ms.).
- 2/22- What **is** Oral History, Anyway?  
\*Ronald J. Grele, Envelopes of Sound (New York: Praeger Publishers, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed., 2001)  
\*Alessandro Portelli, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: The Memory and the Event" and "What Makes Oral History Different," in The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories : Form and Meaning in Oral History (Buffalo: State Univ of New York Press, 1990), pp.1-26; and 45-58, respectively.  
\*Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre" and "There's Gonna Always Be a Line: History-Telling as a Multivocal Art," in The Battle of Valle Giulia : The Art of Dialogue in Oral History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 3-23 and 24-39, respectively.

**PART II- Some Uses of Oral History**

- 3/1- The Seamless Approach  
\*Oscar Lewis, Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty (New York: Basic Books, 1975).  
\*John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (1989)," in Georg M. Gugelberger (ed.), The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 23-41.

3/8- The Fictionalized Approach

\*Elena Poniatowska, Here's to you, Jesusa, trans. Deanna Heikkinen (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001).

\*Elzbieta Sklodowska, "Spanish American Testimonial Novel: Some Afterthoughts," in Gugelberger (ed.), The Real Thing, pp. 84-100.

3/15- Oral History as Historical Methodology

\*Jeffrey Gould, To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

\*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

\*Sidney Mintz, Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History, Reprint Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974).

\*Sidney W. Mintz, "The Sensation of Moving, While Standing Still," in American Ethnologist, 1989, vol. 16, pp. 786-796

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

4/5- Political Life History

\*Roque Dalton, Miguel Mármol: A Testimony, trans. Richard Schaaf, Reprint Edition (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1988).

\*Barbara Harlow, "*Testimonio* and Survival: Roque Dalton's *Miguel Marmol*," in Gugelberger, The Real Thing, pp. 70-83.

4/12- The Marketing of An Individual Life

Carolina Maria de Jesus, Child of the Dark, Reissue Edition (New York: New American Library, 1983)

Robert M. Levine et al., The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

4/19- The Tragedy of Success?

Bitita's Diary: The Childhood Memoirs of Carolina Maria de Jesus (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998)

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

Activist of El Salvador, ed. and trans. Lynn Stephen (Boston: South End Press, 1994).

\*Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 111-119.

\*Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" in Gluck and Patai, Women's Words, pp. 137-153.  
**(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 15<sup>th</sup>, at 5:00 p.m.**

## **History 982-Oral History and *Testimonio* in Latin America Xerox Packet Readings**

- 1) Rosa Isolde Reuque Paillalef, When a Flower is Reborn: The Life and Times of a Mapuche Feminist, ed. and trans. Florencia E. Mallon (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming fall 2002, ms.).
- 2) Alessandro Portelli, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli: The Memory and the Event," in The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories : Form and Meaning in Oral History (Buffalo: State Univ. of New York Press, 1990), pp.1-26
- 3) Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in The Death of Luigi Trastulli, pp. 45-58.
- 4) Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in The Battle of Valle Giulia : The Art of Dialogue in Oral History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 3-23.
- 5) Alessandro Portelli, "There's Gonna Always Be a Line: History-Telling as a Multivocal Art," in The Battle of Valle Giulia, pp. 24-39.
- 6) John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (1989)," in Georg M. Gugelberger (ed.), The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 23-41.
- 7) Elzbieta Sklodowska, "Spanish American Testimonial Novel: Some Afterthoughts," in Gugelberger (ed.), The Real Thing, pp. 84-100.
- 8) Alessandro Portelli, "Research as an Experiment in Equality," in The Death of Luigi Trastulli, pp. 29-44.
- 9) Sidney W. Mintz, "The Sensation of Moving, While Standing Still," in American Ethnologist, 1989, vol. 16, pp. 786-796.
- 10) Barbara Harlow, "*Testimonio* and Survival: Roque Dalton's *Miguel Marmol*," in Gugelberger, The Real Thing, pp. 70-83.
- 11) Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 111-119.
- 12) Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" in Gluck and Patai, Women's Words, pp. 137-153.
- 13) 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.