ORAL HISTORY PROJECT GUIDELINES

“Only equality prepares us to accept difference in terms of other than hierarchy and subordination; on the other hand, without difference there is no equality—only sameness, which is a less worthwhile idea. Only equality makes the interview credible, but only difference makes it relevant.” -- Andrea Portelli

Assignment:

A major focus of this course has been about prioritizing and understanding the voices of women of color. The testimonies of women of color illuminate a range of perspectives and experiences reflecting the institutional and cultural forces of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion and other vectors of power and identity. Narratives by women of color reveal how the “personal is political” and power is experienced by individuals in everyday life.

Oral history is a method of research that focuses on the collection and analysis of people’s narratives about their lives and beliefs. Oral history allows researchers to understand how personal biographies, experiences, values, and observations are linked to larger social structures and historical transformations. The method provides intimate insight where formal studies in political, economic, legal or social institutions do not.

For a class that emphasizes the significance of the theories, politics, and experiences of ordinary people rather than elites (who usually dictate the metanarrative of history), oral histories of the less powerful (in this case women of color) provide a vital methodology for feminist inquiry committed to social justice.

For this assignment you are to conduct an oral history interview with a woman of color. You are to write an essay that provides an analytical framework for their story and situates their voice and experience within this framework.

You will not be able to write about their entire life story in the essay (or even hear it in the space of a short interview), so your task is to focus on one or two themes discussed by the interview subject and analyze their testimony based on the knowledge you have gained in the course (readings, lectures, films, and discussions).

For example, your informant may discuss many issues including her upbringing, educational or work history, sexual identity, and beliefs, but it is your task to guide the interview as well as choose specific aspects of her interview to analyze in your paper.

You may decide to focus on how this woman understands her sexual identity and the pressures, challenges, or parameters of her sexuality in relation to her life experiences and social location. How does her testimony relate to some of the themes we have discussed in relation to sexuality, such as repression/resistance, silence/speaking, invisibility/visibility, stereotypes/positive representations, or abuse/healing? Alternately, this woman may discuss experiencing racism or sexism in the workplace,
Your complete project, due in class Tuesday, March 3, will include the essay (5-7 pages), transcriptions of the complete interview, AND the signed Consent Form.

Guidelines:

• Your interview should be **30-60 minutes long**. Please do not do more than 60 minutes maximum.
• The “subject” should be a woman of color who’s lives in the U.S. You are encouraged to find someone of a **different** ethnicity, class, age, or social location than yourself, but this is not required. If you do not know a woman of color be proactive and creative in locating someone (many work on campus).
• Your subjects must sign the **Consent Form**, provided by the professor. You should also give your subjects a copy of the Consent Form for their records (print out two forms).
• You should attempt to record your interview with an audio or video recorder. Note-taking as a method should be your last resort if you have not been able to purchase or borrow a recording device. Obviously, a recording device will allow for greater detail in the narrative.
• You should locate an interview subject by **Tuesday, February 10**, and conduct the interview by **Tuesday, February 17**. This schedule will allow you time to prepare for the interview, transcribe the interview, and write a thoughtful essay by the deadline of **Tuesday, March 3**.
• Your essays should be 5-6 pages, double spaced, Times New Roman font (12), have a title and title page, and include MLA or Chicago Manuel Style citations and formatting. You should use **at least 2 readings from class** as secondary sources in the essay. Be sure your essay is thoughtful, cogent, and grammatically correct. As always, plagiarism is not tolerated, and neither are “fake interviews.”

Suggestions:

1. Locate an interview subject as soon as possible. Tell them about the idea behind this project and give them a sense of what issues you are interested in discussing before the interview, in order to gauge whether or not they will be comfortable with the interview.
2. Set a date, time and location for the interview, and confirm with the interviewee prior to this date. Choose a private and quiet location where you will not be interrupted, especially if you are using a recording device (think about ambient sound that might interfere with the recording).
3. Prepare for the interview by creating a list of questions, testing your recording equipment, making sure you have your Consent Forms, a pen and paper for notes. You might want to review your readings or class notes for ideas about what questions to ask.
4. Be aware that based on your identity or social location, the interviewee may be more or less comfortable with the process or certain questions. The best way to deal with this is to be respectful, a good listener, non-judgmental, and not push the interviewee on any questions she doesn’t want to answer. Above all, act ethically.
5. Be prompt to the interview. Do not be careless with your subject’s time.
6. Start the interview with an explanation of the purpose of this class project. Clarify what the interview will be used for (i.e. a class project, not a for-profit, publicly disseminated publication). Have the subject sign the Consent Form and give them a copy. Ask if the subject has any questions of you (repeat this at the end too).
7. Ask questions that are open ended rather than “yes” or “no” questions. Start with more general questions and ask more probing questions later in the interview. It is ok to ask follow up questions or rephrase questions for more clarification. Your questions might begin with having the subject talk about their cultural background, their family and where they grew up. Most oral histories begin this way, with
the informant speaking about their “life story.” Based on their story, you may decide to take the interview in different directions, such as to ask about how they view their experiences in relationship to larger societal issues, or what issues concern them now in relation to women of color (such as incarceration and policing, sexual violence, sexual identity, homophobia, reproductive rights, immigration laws, labor exploitation, state policy and services, educational access, etc.). It’s up to you.

8. Make sure the recording device is somewhat close to the person to pick up optimal sound.

9. Be an engaged and respectful listener. Use body language that shows you are listening intently rather than bored or disinterested. Allow the interviewee time to think and to respond without interruption. If they are going on tangents or off the question, gently insert a new question or transition. Try not to interrupt the interview by inserting your own views and opinions.

10. You may want to take notes while the person is speaking to remember certain points to follow up on, or specific gestures or emphasis that the subject gives in her testimony.

11. Write notes on the interview as soon as possible after you finish, while your thoughts are still fresh.

12. Remember that people’s memories are not always complete or concrete. In addition, there may be silences because the information is painful to them, buried deep inside, or they may not be comfortable sharing it with you. You may find gaps, contradictions or tensions in someone’s testimony. Try to think of these as productive spaces for analysis or at least to pose questions in your essay.

13. Transcribing a 30-60 minute interview may take several hours, so be prepared. Include emphasis, gestures, or emotions (laughing, crying) where possible in your transcription. I recommend keeping a time log during transcription for every 2 or 3 minutes, so that you can easily return to a section of your recorded tape.

14. In writing your essay, you should be self-reflexive, that is, you would consider your own social location, identity, and experience in relation to your oral history informant. In relation to the epigraph by Andrea Porcelli, how is the difference between yourself and your informant a productive space of analysis and understanding?

15. Follow-up after the interview with a Thank You note. The informant may appreciate receiving a copy of your final paper and transcription of the interview.

Feminist Oral History Research Resources:


Online Resources:
Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory:
http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/techniques.html
History Matters: Making Sense of Oral History:
http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/what.html
Step-By-Step Guide to Oral History:
http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html