

Oral History Assignment
Immigrant States: Jersey's Global Routes

American Studies 050:271
Latino and Caribbean Studies 595:312

Overview

For this assignment, you will conduct, record, and analyze an oral history with a family member, friend, colleague, or other appropriate party, exploring that individual's im/migrant history.

Among the subjects that you might explore and examine in your oral history, and this is not an exhaustive list, are:

- food, music, and practices that represent an im/migrant's culture, and what migration had meant in relation to the retention or loss of culture (assimilation/distinction).
- race and ethnicity
- the migration experience itself: how did it come about; who was involved in its planning; what obstacles did your interviewee encounter; did your interviewee come via family reunification, as a student, to work, etc.
- what it means for NJ to be an immigrant state in 2022, and what this means to your interviewee; how the meanings of being an im/migrant in New Jersey have changed over time.

Failure to complete any of the assignment elements listed below will result in a deduction to your overall grade for the assignment.

Abstract – Due Monday, November 28 (250 words), by email

Your abstract should identify who you will be conducting your oral history with – your interviewee – why you have selected this individual, and what you hope to learn from them. To this end, you should also use your abstract to begin thinking about what specific subjects, themes, and topics you want to explore in your interview, and how you might analyze and interpret the responses you receive.

Note: If you are truly encountering difficulties finding an interviewee, please let me know and I can work with you to arrange someone.

Draft Oral History Questions – Due Monday, December 5, by email

Interviews focused on the past, or oral histories as they are called by scholars, provide crucial insights into how different people make sense of their lives, experiences, and surrounding worlds. As a method for learning about the past and present, oral histories emphasize that everyone is an expert when it comes to sharing stories and perspectives. Accordingly, oral history is considered a “bottom-up” research method in which the researcher is interested in sharing authority with the individual they are interviewing, and collaboratively producing knowledge about their subject.

Before the interview:

1. Perform basic background research on your interviewee and the topics they will be addressing. This will help you to know what questions are relevant to ask.
2. Check your recording equipment, and make sure it is working. You can use either Zoom or your smartphone to record your interview. Both are pretty self-explanatory as to how they work, but I will also do a brief tutorial in class if needed.
3. Ask yourself what your own biases are. What baggage do you bring with you to the interview? What do you hope or anticipate your interviewee will say? While an agenda here is not inherently a “bad” thing, you do not want to coerce your interviewee into responding in a certain way.
4. Avoid yes/no questions. For example:

Bad Questions:

Did you find that as a child you felt like an outsider?
Did you enjoy elementary school?

Better Questions:

Can you tell us about a time that you felt left out or excluded as a child?
What were the circumstances? How did that feel? How did you cope?
What kind of person and student were you in elementary school? How would you describe your school-aged self?

At the beginning of the interview:

1. Introduce yourself! Share relevant details about the course and this assignment, and your own interest in migration. The point is not necessarily to convey specific information, but rather to put your interviewee at ease.
2. Inform our interviewee that you will be taping the interview, as well as taking notes.
3. Inform the interview subject that they can refuse to answer any question asked, if they don't feel comfortable talking about a particular subject.

During the interview:

1. Be prepared to stray from your list of questions in order to ask follow-up questions relevant to what your respondent tells you. Examples: “Why did you feel that way?”; “I didn’t know that, can you tell me more?” etc.
2. Use special care when asking sensitive, yet useful questions. Remember to give the interviewee space to react emotionally, but do not dwell on painful memories. Try to be empathetic, especially when the interviewee expresses regret.

At the end of the interview:

1. Ask if there was any question that was not asked that your interviewee feels you should have asked, or if there is anything that they would like to add.
2. If the interview has prompted an emotional response, be sure to end it on a positive, reassuring note.

Essay and Interview– Due Wednesday, December 21 (submission instructions TBA)

You are required to either record or film the interview, for submission with the essay.

Your essay should be approximately 2000 words in length, and formatted in Times New Roman, 12pt font, double spaced.

In your essay, your aim is to analyze, interpret, and contextualize what your interviewee has shared in their oral history, and to make an argument about how their oral history contributes to our understanding of New Jersey as an im/migrant state.

For the essay, you will also want to incorporate at least three of the secondary readings that we have used during the semester, to help frame your analysis of your interviewees’ responses, and to connect what they are saying to various course themes we have been exploring this semester. You can use the same citing conventions that we used for the midterm exam.