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A place for geography in oral history?

Over the last decade, and as part of the cultural turn in human geography, geographers have increased their engagement with and use of oral history as a research methodology. Studies adopting an oral history approach note the potential reciprocal benefits that would accrue to both disciplines through more sustained interdisciplinary discussion and cross-pollination, yet oral history, with a few key exceptions, remains almost resolutely aspatial. Just as situating oral testimony in its temporal context is key to our understanding, so too is spatial context. Everything occurs at a particular time, but also in a particular place and places are not simply empty spaces. Rather places are dynamic and complex, filled with meaning for us as individuals and for wider communities. Places have been shaped by our interaction with them, but they have also played a role in shaping us, in particular in relation to our 'sense of place', 'place identity' and feelings of being 'in' or 'out' of place in a particular setting or community. This paper seeks to illuminate the potential benefits for oral historians of engaging in a more comprehensive analysis and theoretical engagement with place in terms of its potential utility as a memory trigger, in how it is utilised by narrators in narrative construction, and its role in remembering and forgetting. These points will be illustrated with reference to the interviews conducted with members of the Irish national sporting organisation, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which is based on a geographic territorial framework and has long been associated with claims of promoting local and national place based identities in Ireland.

Ann-Charlotte /AC Palmgren

Åbo Akademi, Finland

Telling im/mobile stories of class, age, gender and place

I argue, that neighborhoods become meaningful through the memories that accumulate in or haunt places. The same neighborhood can cause experiences of feeling stuck or wanting to stay put, and the neighborhood where you grow up can stay within you even if you move away. In addition, neighborhoods are also filled with assumptions about the dwellers.

In this audiovisual presentation, in the form of a fifteen minute audiovisual poetic film, I explore questions connected to memory, place, class, gender and age. What happened when I, as a researcher, returned to the neighborhood I grew up in? When I saw the apartment I grew up in intertwined with the apartment I bought with a housing loan? When I started a research project on my old neighborhood? When I realized that I had returned to the neighborhood time and time again in creative writing?

Using voice, visual material and critical autoethnography I explore these questions and connect them to theoretical work on memory, place and im/mobility. In itself the film is an exploration of the above mentioned questions, but the film can also be used to discuss methodological applications of theories and practices.

MJ de Izaguirre

Asociación "Agora" Identidad, DDHH y Memoria canaria, Uruguay

"Los vagones" (The Wagons) The story construction

In a dialogical relationship, interviewer-interviewed built, step by step, the oral document that recovers memory, tool for the struggled against forgetting.

As part of a project to visualize and preserve a "Site of Memory", the oral archive of "Los Vagones" (The Wagons), is proposed based on the recovery of history "archived".

The "Site of Memory" according to declaration of the Institute of Public Policies of Human Rights of MERCOSUR(2012), requires to work in five lines: architectural, archaeological, community, patrimonial and testimonial preservation, with main sustenance in latter. It marks the beginning of the process and closes it by giving life of the Sites, filling them with stories and meanings.

"Los Vagones" (The Wagons) are two clandestine detention and torture centers. They operated in the capital of Canelones Department, Uruguay (¿1969-1977?). They were responding to the "Plan Cóndor" after 1975.

Methodologically thought in the three moments of narrative construction of oral history: oral exchanges within the community, construction of individual document and elaboration of collective history (1), our work is focuses on the second phase, production of the testimony-document from the interviewer-interviewed interaction.

"The culture of memory as a struggle against forgetting, is a strategy to help repair a silenced society"(2)

(1) Munoz Onofre, Darío "Construcción narrativa en la Historia Oral" IECO, Bogotá

(2) TEjada, José "Sitios de Memoria como herramientas de rehabilitación" Reflexión N°37, 2009, Chile.

Alex Primm

Oral History of the Ozarks Project, USA

Listening for a Living: Oral History in the Backwoods

After serving as a military correspondent and editor during the American War in Vietnam, I returned home to a career in journalism. The rural Ozark Mountains in the central United States attracted me.

While working on a small town daily newspaper I found myself fascinated by stories of older residents more than "hard news." In the early 1980s oral history as a methodology was developing a somewhat popular following. I learned the principles and goals of the new field.

My first oral history project was a series of interviews with rural residents on how rivers were used by local people. Regional newspapers published articles based on this fieldwork.

One farmer told of his method for managing riparian forests to prevent destructive flooding. His silvaculture practices were learned from his grandfather, an immigrant from Germany.

The resulting articles received special attention. The U.S. Geological Survey was beginning a large project to survey land use along the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Since few written records exist for agriculture, oral history became a large part of the project's database. The goal was to examine how these rivers in a national park have changed and are likely to change over time.

This project led to further interviews with other government agencies and a series of oral history videos on Ozark resources and people. All of my work has been done without academic affiliation.

Is there a role for the freelance community/oral historian in rural society? Does oral history have a role in community economic development? Excerpts of my videos will be available to help me explore these issues during the conference.

Treehouse an Ozark Story – YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsoTIHf0X30>

Anita Kay Westhues

Independent Folklorist, USA

Beliefs and Practices Related to Community Water Sources: "The Specialness of Springs"

The practice of gathering water from community springs in Kentucky (USA) constitutes a rich and complex research setting for the study of folklore beliefs and practices. Local knowledge construction, nostalgia as an evaluative process, contested views about purity and impurity, the protection and retention of a "public commons," and the crisis which ensues when infrastructure maintenance and the delivery of safe drinking water are no longer guaranteed to communities, are all relevant to this vernacular practice. My paper explores these topics, informed by fieldwork I conducted in nine Kentucky counties, which included formal and informal interviews with individuals who have used springs, as well as participant observation of spring sites.

Historically, community springs were utilized before public water systems were implemented, providing a critical source of water for travelers, or for those who did not have private access to a reliable water source. Yet today, even with the presence of municipal water systems, many people still gather water from springs. My paper integrates archival research, participant observation, and oral history narratives collected in 2016 as part of a Kentucky Oral History Commission Project Grant, in order to illuminate two fundamental research questions: Why do people prefer to get water from springs today? And what cultural meanings are constructed through the continued engagement with this tradition?

I examine the historical use of these resources, their relationship to the implementation of municipal water systems, and how localized knowledge about water purity is formed and put into practice in this region. I also explore the use of nostalgia, collective memory, and narrative for constructing place and landscape, as well as theorize on how springs function as public commons resources today. My research also utilizes photography to convey ethnographic knowledge distinct from the written word, providing sensory information about the spaces I studied.

Kathryn Newfont

University of Kentucky, USA

Into the Woods: Oral Histories of Forest Narratives as Environmental Protection Methodology

With deforestation among the leading contributors to global climate change, forest defense efforts have taken on new urgency—in fact have become one of the most important world-wide issues of our era. Local activism has long been crucial to these efforts, which have drawn on deep wells of local knowledge and attachment to place. Orality plays a key role in communicating and preserving place-based communal knowledge, including "Traditional Ecological Knowledges" (TEK). In other words, oral narratives can convey valuable ecological knowledge developed through multiple generations. That knowledge can, in turn, support local (as well as state, national, and even international) efforts to protect prized forests. These facts suggest that oral historians have a unique opportunity to support forest-focused environmental protection efforts—and fight climate change—by documenting local communities' woods-based memories and narratives. This presentation focuses on the possibilities and challenges this opportunity represents. It considers oral history as a still-emergent environmental protection methodology. Emphasizing forests, it draws on over two decades' research in eastern North America's Appalachian mountain range, home to the most biodiverse temperate forests on Earth. Activists have worked to protect these woods for well over a century, and their efforts continue today. Interviews with forest activists reveal ways they use memory and narrative to fuel their protectionist efforts. In addition, forest oral histories collected in activist communities have revitalized local forest-defense efforts by revealing patterns and linking oral testimonies to larger protectionist traditions. These U.S. Appalachian examples therefore suggest ways oral history may be used in other settings not only to document but also to support and further forest-defense efforts around the world. By going "into the woods" in search of memories and narratives, we oral historians may help heal the forests that sustain us all, as well as the planet that enables all our lives.