

What's Your Personal Lore?

Prof. Isabel Ortiz, ENG 2100
CUNY 1969 Project

lore /lôr/; noun; origin, early 19th century, from Latin *lorum* 'strap' meaning: a body of traditions and knowledge on a subject or held by a particular group, typically passed down person to person by word of mouth (Source: *Oxford Languages*)

Overview

As individuals, we all exist within a broader network of stories that make us who we are. Just as our personalities and goals are shaped by our family and community histories, our world is also a product of interconnected struggles that exceed our lifetimes. Your goal in this unit is to use your self as a tool through which to engage with CUNY 1969 archival materials. You will do this by researching your family or community history and contextualizing your personal lore within a collective inheritance of 1960s and '70s-era protest in the United States.

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman models using her self as a tool through which to engage with the archive of transatlantic chattel slavery when she writes, "I am a reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not yet over [...] And history is how the secular world attends to the dead." In the process of researching your personal lore, you will ask, how is history be a way of attending to the dead? In what ways do we each exist as "reminders" of social systems, processes, and structures that exceed our lifetimes? What unfinished struggles, questions, and problems for the present are revealed by looking to our past across generational, national, cultural, and ideological boundaries?

This assignment sequence will be broken up into three parts. First, you will read essays and manifestos from the 1960s and '70s that articulate different philosophies and ethics of protest. Second, you will choose a member of your family or someone who you consider family who has engaged in an act of protest or a form of political work/ collective care that you consider revolutionary. The collected interviews will be used to create a working archive of class lore. As we continue our reading and research on the CUNY 1969 project, we will refer back to your personal lore in order to contextualize and consider everyday revolutionary acts in relation to prominent thinkers' theories of justice and change.

Readings

Methodological Inspiration:

Lose Your Mother (2006), Saidiya Hartman, Introduction, pp. 1-18
"Addy Walker, American Girl" (2015), *The Paris Review*, Brit Bennett

Key Texts:

"Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963), Martin Luther King Jr.
"Letter to the Grassroots" (1963), Malcolm X

“A New Role for Psychology: Working with Disadvantaged Persons in a College Setting: A Position Paper” (1967), Leslie Berger

“Five Demands Document” (1969)

“13 Point Program and Platform of the Young Lords Organization” (1969)

Assignment 1: Using the Self as a Tool for Archival Research

Before class, read Hartman’s introduction to *Lose Your Mother* and Brit Bennett’s “Addy Walker, American Girl.” In the first part of the class, we will discuss methodology. How do these two writers use their experiences as tools for historical research? For each text, find a quotation or specific moment that shows “how” focusing on the self leads to a new insight. What unites both thinkers’ approaches? What’s distinct about their approaches? What are the risks of using the self as a tool for research? What are the affordances?

In the second part of class, students will watch the documentary, “The Five Demands,” and engage with the CUNY 1969 archive. (Class on this day might take place in the computer lab so that everyone has access to the site) The website is set up as a series of interconnected narratives. Click through the sequences featured and answer the following questions in your research journal. Find two speakers who are united by a common goal— what is the goal they have in common? How do their approaches to satisfying this goal differ? Find a figure with whom you instinctively agree and a figure with whom you instinctively disagree. Can you point to specific language or aspects of their thinking/ approach that support your instinct? Can you point to specific examples that might complicate or speak back to it?

After you have clicked through the whole website, take a moment to think holistically about the archive and history that you have just encountered. What are three adjectives that you would use to describe the overall “mood” of the CUNY 1969 encampments and movement? What’s one aspect of the conversation taking place that resonates with the way that we talk about social change today, or current student movements? What’s one aspect that’s different? Share your responses with a partner.

Assignment 2: Collecting Your Personal Lore

For this assignment, interview a member of your family or a member of your community who you consider family who was alive in 1969, and who has engaged in an act of protest or a form of political work or collective care that you would consider revolutionary. Before the assignment, you will work with a partner to help each other develop questions for a 30-45 minute audio-recorded interview (it can take place over the phone or in person) which you will then transcribe.

Some potential questions might include: What were the risks involved in your work? What aspects of your personal life, history, and/or political situation motivated you to act? What were the consequences of your actions within your lifetime? What did you learn from taking action?

With your partner, you can also discuss interview logistics. Would you prefer to have your interview in person or over the phone? Are you nervous about anything? Is there any way that your classmates or I, your professor, can support you? Exchange phone numbers with your partner and send them a voice note after debriefing on how it went!

Your interview will be due as a typed transcript. We will collect these transcripts as Google Docs in a Google Drive folder to be shared with the class. Please also upload a photo of your interview subject.

Assignment 3: Contextualizing Your Personal Lore

Over the next three weeks, as you and your classmates are collecting your interviews, you will read seminal political texts from the 1960s alongside materials from the CUNY 1969 project. In the first week, we will read and discuss “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) by Martin Luther King Jr. and “Letter to the Grassroots” (1963) by Malcolm X. In the second, we will discuss “A New Role for Psychology: Working with Disadvantaged Persons in a College Setting: A Position Paper” (1967) by Leslie Berger, the “Five Demands Document” (1969), and the “13 Point Program and Platform of the Young Lords Organization” (1969).

In your research journal, relate to the documents as you did to the characters on the website in Assignment 1. Which text do you find particularly resonant? Which one do you not resonate with? For the text you don’t resonate with, find at least one detail or aspect of the thinker’s approach that is still useful or generative for your thinking. For the text with which you resonate strongly, find at least one detail or aspect that could use further development. Share your findings with a partner.

At home, look through our collective archive of lore and relate it to the unit’s readings. Read through your interview transcript again and leave comments on the Google Doc indicating a potential connection between an idea that your interview subject expressed and a phrase, point, or quotation from the readings. Do the same for your partner and one person in the class with whom you haven’t yet worked.

In class, we will then play social justice “speed dating,” pairing each of the community members featured in our archive of personal lore with a thinker from our readings on the basis of them sharing a common vision or approach to social justice. Before class, I will print out the photos that students have submitted so that they can be taped on the board next to photos of Berger, MLK, Malcolm X, or the Young Lords. At the end of class, we will have created a visual diagram that archives connections between celebrated and everyday actors/ thinkers in movements for social change.