



Archiver la mémoire. De l'histoire orale au patrimoine immatériel

By Florence Descamps. Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2019. 216 pp. ISBN 9782713228056 (softbound) \$24.98.

Simon-Olivier Gagnon

To cite this article: Simon-Olivier Gagnon (2022) Archiver la mémoire. De l'histoire orale au patrimoine immatériel, *The Oral History Review*, 49:1, 150-151, DOI: [10.1080/00940798.2022.2030601](https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2022.2030601)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2022.2030601>



Published online: 28 Jan 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 42



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Archiver la mémoire. De l'histoire orale au patrimoine immatériel. By Florence Descamps. Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2019. 216 pp. ISBN 9782713228056 (softbound) \$24.98.

In just over 200 pages, Florence Descamps presents a succinct, up-to-date, historiographic roadmap of oral history in France. Published in French, *Archiver la mémoire. De l'histoire orale au patrimoine immatériel* (which can be translated as *Archiving Memory: From Oral History to Immaterial Heritage*) is not only a scholarly work; it also aims to offer practical advice for conducting oral history research.

Florence Descamps may not be well known to American oral historians, but she has been a powerful voice in French archival science for the past three decades, participating in the expansion of the oral archive movement and leading historical projects that include capturing and preserving oral testimonies. *Maitre de conférence* at the École Pratique des hautes études (EPHE) in Paris, and a specialist in oral history, Descamps is the editor of the journal *Sonorités* and president of the *Association française des archives sonores, orales et audiovisuelles* (AFAS). Committed to oral archives since 1987, Descamps has provided the French-speaking world major publications that trace the slow recognition of oral history in France. Among her contributions is the book *L'historien, l'archiviste et le magnétophone. De la constitution de la source orale à son exploitation*. Her current book is the culmination of her work since 2001, which also includes elements of what Pierre Nora termed *ego-histoire*, as Descamps is the heir of two founders of oral archives in France, Guy Thuillier and Dominique Schnapper.

The book consists of four chapters: “Oral Sources and History: A Secular Taming”; “Oral Archives or the Patrimonial Turn”; “Towards a Memorial Heritage”; and “An Oral History à la française?” After these chapters, Descamps concludes her book with a methodological guide for designing oral history projects, entitled “The Engineering of Oral Archives.” An extensive bibliography divided by theme makes it easy to find topics of interest and pursue further research. In her introduction, Descamps explains her overall vision and motivation for the book, writing that “I therefore propose to retrace the historiographic itinerary of the twentieth century, while revisiting, from this ‘small way’ of the oral source, the great trilogy of history, memory and heritage” (29-30).

The first chapter of the book, “Oral Sources and History: A Secular Taming,” opens with the statement, “This is well known by now. In French historiography, the oral source was disqualified at the end of the nineteenth century by the founding fathers of the first French historical school” (31). For the progressive reintegration of the oral source into the methodology of history, Florence Descamps looks at the 1980s, when French oral history benefited from the epistemological and institutional support of the *Institut d'histoire du temps présent* (IHTP). The creation of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) laboratory contributed to the appreciation of the use of testimony in the historical disciplines by producing specialized bulletins, bibliographies, roundtables, and research seminars. Descamps thus recounts the way in which the IHTP laboratory continued the work of the humanities movement by encouraging the emergence of a European and international oral history based on the French, Italian, German, and British experience.

Also in this chapter, Descamps outlines five distinct poles within which oral history renewed itself, sparking inter- and multidisciplinary dialogues in the humanities and social sciences. The first pole is linked to the History Committee of the Second World War and to the oral

testimonies of resistance fighters and veterans; the second pole, that of social history “from below,” is structured around an oral history of workers and actors in social movements; the third is about regional and living languages and languages in the process of disappearing; the fourth pole is the history of memory, also called ethnohistory, devoted to religious, cultural, linguistic, or ethnic communities; and finally, the fifth—the one in which Descamps has made her debut—is that of political history and institutions, which centers political witnesses and draws on political history, political science, and administrative science.

In the second chapter, “Oral Archives or the Patrimonial Turn,” Descamps describes how the wave of patrimonialization of the 1980s—surrounding the popularization of Pierre Nora’s expression “place of memory”—made oral archives “capital,” an “investment object” for a ministerial institution, company, or association (76). She also discusses the fact that current events in the media and politics, as well as the memorial context of the 1990s and 2000s, have a considerable impact on the research and production of oral archives.

The chapter “Towards a Memorial Heritage” includes sections on the process of patrimonialization of oral archives and the heritage-making of memory. A fascinating aspect of this chapter is the recognition of the diversity of actors who have an interest in orality, and how they assign value to oral testimony. “Narrative, recorded or filmed speech, are values rediscovered and used for their relational, emotional, imaginative, or interpretive richness and effectiveness. In this attribution of value, the militants, ‘mediators’, and experts of the oral source, though few, play a key role: be they researchers or curators, activists from community organizations or radio producers, members of erudite societies, teachers, collectors, artists-interpreters, sound technicians, scholars, or simply impassioned amateurs, they are above all practitioners of the oral source and familiar with the ‘field’” (94). Descamps embraces this diversity of actors and recognizes the unique place of each within the process of patrimonialization of oral archives.

The last chapter, “An Oral History *à la française?*,” provides an overview of the three major phases in the development of French oral history as well as indications of future work and prospects. Descamps breaks down this developmental period into the founding phase (1973-1983), the phase of epistemological legitimization and documentary accumulation (1984-2006), and, since the beginning of the 2000s, a more consensual phase in which a second and third generation continue the work and intuitions of the founders. Lastly, the methodological guide in the appendix of the book, “The Engineering of Oral Archives,” provides newcomers guidance for the creation and exploitation of oral archives.

This relatively short book surprisingly addresses the French historiographical tensions that influence the practice of oral history *à la française*. For those who wish to understand how the context of national historiography and memory define the discipline, Descamps’s work is an interesting entry point, explicating the dynamics of reciprocal influences. This book allows us to understand the French history of the discipline and the reasons why testimony has known a “long epistemological eclipse” (80). Lastly, Florence Decamps helps us understand radio producers as figures involved in assigning value to oral testimony, and thus points others towards studies to pursue regarding the articulation of oral history within archival and radio studies.

Simon-Olivier Gagnon
Université Laval, Québec
 sapiensog@gmail.com

© 2022 The Oral History Association
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2022.2030601>

