**CALL FOR ABSTRACTS: What do we want from oral history today?**

Yearnings, questions, innovations from/about southern Africa

SAHS-Sponsored Workshop — 7-8 November 2025, Special Collections, University of Johannesburg (Doornfontein Campus)

Accounts of the southern African past are situated in millennia of oral and ‘entextual’ practices, which continue to inform historical understandings, memories, research approaches and public and scholarly debates. This workshop will bring together ‘seasoned’ and ‘younger’ generations of historians to reflect upon where oral history (widely defined) has come from and where it should go. It aims to raise pertinent questions, for example: What do we, in relation to current crises and opportunities, *want* from oral accounts of the past? Who is the ‘we’ in that question? Can oral history continue to draw/deliver on the expectations of its progressive power to help remedy injustice and historical silences? What do recent technologies offer to oral history methodologies, for producing new understandings and new useable pasts? In what ways can oral accounts enliven biographical writing that is focused on intersubjective and internal processes of *self-making*? Does a POPIA-driven litigious climate threaten to impose new forms of ‘silencing’, as university ethics boards grapple with balancing privacy and disclosure?

We invite paper proposals that promise to develop a clear, lively argument around any of these or similar burning questions for southern African history, rooted in empirical research and/or explored through a concrete topic/study. Theorized interventions around other themes are also welcome, including:

* Definitions and aims of ‘oral history’, ‘orality’, etc.
* Current stakes of ‘doing oral history’ in the light of specific urgent social challenges
* Fresh thinking about methodological promises and/or pitfalls
* Ethical, emotional, political or epistemic ‘burdens’ oral history, reassessed for new times
* Orality, subjectivity and biography
* Innovations and new technologies/triangulations for making use of oral histories
* Specific records of oral accounts and their dilemmas/potential
* Critical issues affecting archiving and archives of oral accounts

Abstracts of 300-400 words should be submitted as a word document **by 1 July.** Please include your full name, institutional affiliation, affiliate status, and contact details on the abstract document.

For accepted abstracts, full draft papers (6000-8000 words) will be **due 3 October *for pre-circulation to all participants.***

**NB:** submissions should be original, and not previously published (or billed to be published elsewhere). An aim of this workshop is to identify, and assist in developing, six to eight papers for a special issue of the *South African Historical Journal,* to beproduced in 2026.

NB: **Some travel and accommodation funding** is available for southern Africa-based post-graduates and junior-level university academics. Please enquire for instructions on how to apply.

Submissions / enquiries to Thembisa Waetjen at [twaetjen@uj.ac.za](mailto:twaetjen@uj.ac.za) with the subject heading “Oral History 2025”