

Medical Geography and the COVID-19 Archive Project

For its final project in Spring 2021 (module 4), the Medical Geography class (GEOG-256) made a major contribution to the Macalester College Archive's [Place and Community in a COVID Landscape](#) collection. Students conducted a series of oral history interviews that documented personal experiences of the pandemic from approximately January 2020 to April 2021 (see Appendix A, for roster of students in the class). Entering what we hoped would be the waning days of the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided it was important to capture these experiences for posterity. We also drew inspiration from similar COVID-19 archive projects in the US and around the world. In a related activity, our students also collected photographs and other audiovisual artifacts of life during the last days of the pandemic, especially in public spaces in the Twin Cities (or wherever they might be living), and contributed them to the College's digital archives.

During April-May 2021, the 25 students in the class conducted around 80 oral history interviews; transcribed them, with the aid of software that streamlines this often-tedious process; shared the transcripts with the interviewees (narrators) for editing and approval, and with me, as the course instructor, just to make formal corrections and edits; and, as a final step, submitted the transcripts to the archives. Most of the oral histories come from current Macalester students, and the rest are from Macalester faculty and staff, family members and friends, and residents of the Twin Cities. We also submitted, collectively, around 80 images to the archive, to capture different aspects of life during the pandemic. Contributions from this class to the digital archive are denoted with the tag GEOG256-2021. (See Appendix B for original assignment for the project.)

In final reflection essays, which are not part of the College's digital archives, students discussed the value of the pandemic oral history project. First, they recognized that memories fade quickly, so it's important to record these stories for posterity now. While recollections of the first few weeks of the pandemic emergency in the US – around mid-March 2020, for most of us – tended to be sharp and full of specific details, the months that followed were hazy, as we settled into new routines. Second, students valued the ability to gain new perspectives on the pandemic experience, by talking to people outside of their immediate circle. Place strongly shaped experience, since the pandemic itself and policy responses varied so much, within and outside of the US. The oral histories we collected include experiences not only from Minnesota, but also New York, Illinois, South Dakota, Texas, and Alaska (to name just a few US states), and Costa Rica, Ecuador, Sweden, France, Singapore, and China. Third, many found the process cathartic, or therapeutic; although we've been immersed in pandemic life for more than a year now, few students had the opportunity, until now, to tell their own stories of this unusual and challenging time.

This semester's project, centered on oral history interviews, completes a cycle of pandemic-related projects in the Medical Geography course. In the Spring 2020 semester, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced Macalester to switch to all-online instruction, nineteen students in the class quickly shifted gears to create a "[Pandemic Time Capsule](#)," which was contributed to the College Archive. In the Fall 2020 semester (module 2), a new group of 27 students in the

course created a website, "[The COVID-19 Pandemic Through the Lens of Medical Geography](#)," with a set of analytic essays on such themes as the causes of the disease's emergence, educational impacts of pandemic closures, and reasons for vaccine hesitancy. This semester's work builds on these previous efforts.

To close, I want to acknowledge a few people, aside from the students themselves, who facilitated our contribution to the College Archives. First and foremost, the College Archivist, Ellen Holt-Werle, provided guidance on oral history interviewing, principles of archiving, and the logistics of submission to the archives. Sarah Beth Hobby, Zach Brintlinger-Conn, and Jack Duffy helped plan this assignment as students in the "History: Then and Now" course, Spring 2021 (module 3), taught by Prof. Ernie Capello. Our two teaching assistants, Aubrey Hagen and Andrew Fidal, were also helpful in advising students on the process and proofreading student work. Of course, very special thanks are due to individuals who agreed to sit and be recorded for their oral history interviews. We hope that you enjoyed sharing your stories of this complicated year, and we also hope that your testimonies will be useful to future scholars—including future Macalester students—who want to make sense of the personal and collective impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Appendix A. Students in GEOG-256, module 4, Spring 2021 semester

Lucia Amieva-Wang
Shane Anderson
Corgan Archuleta
Ella Behnke
Astrid Berger
Regan Brodine
Seth Buikema
Henry Bump
Symone Dill-White
Emma Eichenbaum
Ariana Flores
Augusta Fricke
Maggie Froh
Briana Jimenez
Anna Jones
Jonah Klein-Collins
Lian Lincoln
Maggie Morgan
Jack Muller
Dat Nguyen
Brooke Offenhauser
Marvellous Ogunsola
Mary Ossar
Ashley Rodriguez
Josh Wink

Appendix B. Original assignment for this project (links may or may not work)

GEOG-256
Medical Geography
Spring 2021

Final Project: COVID-19 Archive Project

Objectives:

Our class will be making a major contribution to the Macalester College Archive's "[Place and Community in a COVID Landscape](#)" project. Your main task will be to conduct a series of *oral history interviews* (with fellow students, family, friends, Macalester faculty and staff) that document personal experiences of the pandemic over the last 12-15 months. As we enter—hopefully—the waning days of the pandemic, it is important to capture these experiences for posterity. As an ancillary activity, I would also like you to collect photographs and other audiovisual artifacts of life during the last days of the pandemic, especially in public spaces in the Twin Cities (or wherever you might be living right now), and contribute them to the College's digital archives. There will be several components to the class project, graded separately.

Project stages:

I want to emphasize that this project is manageable if you stick to a schedule. By the end of the process, you will conduct about 3-4 hours of interviews; write several pages of transcription (though a lot of this process can be automated); contribute various items to the College Archive; and write a 2-3 page final report. This is not a huge volume of work, and there is very little research involved. Remember that the last few weeks of class are mostly set aside to work on the project. Here are the stages:

- *Planning.* The planning for the oral history interviews proceeds along three tracks.
 - (1) Familiarize yourself with some of the practices and techniques of oral history interviews. [This document](#) has a lot of detail about how to conduct oral histories, and it also has links to other resources.
 - (2) Think about some themes that you'd like to explore with your interviewees, related to the lived experience of the COVID pandemic. Take a look at other oral histories and testimonies of the pandemic ([links](#)) and project work from this class last year ([link](#)).
 - (3) Start making arrangements for the interviews --- find people who would want to talk to you about their experiences.
 - This planning phase will culminate in a short 1-2 page description of your plan for the interviews.

- *Interviews.* You are required to conduct 3 interviews, each lasting from 30-60 minutes. Interviews may be conducted face-to-face or remotely -- just observe safety precautions. Here are the specifications for the interviews:
 - (1) Interview one of your classmates in this class. You can work as partners, but each of you should take turns being the "interviewer" and the "interviewee" in separate conversations.
 - (2) Interview another member of the Macalester student body, faculty, or staff.
 - (3) Interview either another person from group (2), a family member, or someone else from your local community.

- *Transcriptions.* Each interview needs to be transcribed, following the transcription guidelines in [this document](#). Luckily, you can use free software (particularly Google Voice Typing) to make a first attempt at transcription, and correct the errors that the software will inevitably make. This will speed up the transcription process considerably.

- *Visual culture of the pandemic.* I would like you to make at least 3 contributions of other (audiovisual) material to the archive, especially images of life on campus or in your community during these months of the pandemic. [Here](#) are some examples of what has already gone into the archive. It's important that the submitted items have good "metadata" meaning that essential information like the time, place, authorship, subjects, etc. goes along with the images themselves (for posterity).

- *Submission to the archives.* The next-to-last step in the project, you will actually submit the interview transcripts to the archives, with the assistance of the College archivist. ([Oral History Agreement/Release Form](#))

- *Final report.* This will be a 2-3 page report, summarizing what you did and what you learned in the course of this project.

Project calendar:

Stage	Deliverable	Due Date	Point value	Criteria
Planning	1-2 page description of your plan for the interviews.	Tues., Apr. 6	5	Completed or not

Interview 1 -- with a classmate (list of partners here)	None, but you'll need to record an interview to make the transcription (next step).	By Friday, Apr. 16		
Transcription of interview 1	Written transcription, following the norms of oral history interviews.	Tuesday, April 20 (note extension from previous due date)	20	Quality of written work (here are some general comments)
Have interviews 2 and 3 scheduled		By Mon., Apr. 19		
Conduct interviews 2 and 3		By Thurs, Apr. 29		
Transcription of interview 2	Written transcription, following the norms of oral history interviews.	Tues., May 4	20	Quality of written work
Transcription of interview 3	Written transcription, following the norms of oral history interviews.	Tues., May 4	20	Quality of written work
Visual culture items	At least 3 separate items (e.g. images)	ongoing	5	Completed or not
Submission to the archives	Verified submission to the archives	Fri., May 7 (note extension from previous due date)	10	Completed or not
Final report	2-3 page paper, written individually	Fri., May 7	20	Quality of written work
TOTAL			100	

Other project documents:

- [General comments on first round of transcriptions](#)
- [FAQ page](#)
- [Submission checklist](#)

Acknowledgements:

Sarah Beth Hobby, Zach Brintlinger-Conn, and Jack Duffy helped plan this assignment as students in the "History: Then and Now" course, Spring 2021 (Prof. Capello). The College Archivist, Ellen Holt-Werle, is facilitating the logistics of submission to the archives.