

September 2, 2008

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Thursday 4:55 – 7:35
KJCC Room 527

Professor R. Bernstein
Fall 2008

ORAL HISTORY (G57.2012)

When do historians of the 20th century need oral history to complete their research? How can recorded memories of participants provide critical source material? How do we understand and interpret this kind of historical evidence?

Students will address these questions as they develop interviewing and interpretive skills. Fieldwork for the class includes conducting a series of interviews and analyzing them in class and in written assignments; visiting exhibits which incorporate oral history; and developing a final project based on oral history interviews. Recorded interviews are only valuable if they are used at some point in time: therefore students will learn to produce archival quality interviews, and the final project will include some form of public presentation.

Reading includes theoretical and practical essays on oral history, and a variety of historical works based on oral sources. We will pay particular attention to the range of possible uses for oral history--from scholarly monographs to radio shows, films and videos, exhibits, multimedia computer programs and community and institutional histories--and to the historical interpretations in each of these presentations. Legal and ethical issues, and archival organization and storage are also addressed.

Required books:

Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History Third Edition (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Robert Perks, Alistair Thomson, The Oral History Reader Second Edition (Routledge, 2006)

Warren Goldstein, William Sloane Coffin, Jr.: A Holy Impatience (Yale University Press, 2006)

Melissa Fay Greene Praying for Sheetrock: A Work of Non Fiction (Perseus, 1991)

Alessandro Portelli, The Order Has Been Carried Out (SUNY Press, 1997)

Art Spiegelman, Maus, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History, (Random House, 1986)

Additional readings will be available through Blackboard and in the library.

Class participation: This class will be a cooperative effort – for it to work effectively you must do the assigned reading, viewing, and listening before class each week. You are expected to contribute ideas, and understandings and questions that help to clarify and advance the topics of the week. Quantity is not everything -- thoughtful, text-based comments are much appreciated. Approximately one third of your grade will be based on your contributions to class discussion and your weekly written comments on the readings.

Classroom etiquette requires that you arrive promptly, that cell phones be turned completely off and that you do not eat in class.

Assignments: Reading comments are to be submitted electronically by midnight the day before class in the Blackboard digital drop box. Other assignments are due on paper at the beginning of class. No extensions. No incompletes.

(1) September 4 Overview; introduction to life history interviewing.

ASSIGNMENT: half hour interview; NYU Human Subjects Tutorial

<http://www.nyu.edu/ucaihstutorial/>

(2) September 11 Varieties of oral history; university regulations, discussion of projects. Guest Nina Talbot

read: Thompson, Intro., chapters 1 - 3

AAUP, "Research on Human Subjects: Academic Freedom and the IRB," 2006. (<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/A/humansubs.htm>)

Gunsalus K.C. et al., "The Illinois White Paper - Improving the System for Protecting Human Subjects: Counteracting IRB Mission Creep"

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=902995

The IRB Initiative <http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/irb/index.php>

listen: "Voices from the Thirties: Life Histories From the Federal Writers' Project," an American Memory/Library of Congress presentation

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/exhome.html>

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: analysis of first practice interview; reading comment; tutorial certificate

(3) September 18 Life history interviewing techniques; discussion of fieldwork projects.

Guest from Judson Church oral history committee

read: Thompson, chapters 4, 6, 7

Perks and Thomson, Intros, chapters 9 -12
 Goldstein, Intros, Chapters 1-7

listen: four stories from the StoryCorps website <http://www.storycorps.net/listen/>

ASSIGNMENT DUE: reading comment; analysis of second practice interview

(4) September 25 History and memory.

read: Thompson, chapter 5

Perks and Thomson chapters 13 – 15, 17 -- 20

Goldstein, chapters 8 - 15

listen: TBA

ASSIGNMENT DUE: reading comment; field work proposal

(5) October 2 Constructing narratives; video workshop

read: Greene, Praying for Sheetrock

listen: TBA

ASSIGNMENT DUE: 8) reading comment;

(6) October 9 fieldwork (no class meeting)

read: Perks and Thompson, chapters 32 – 33

visit: with classmates if possible, a museum featuring exhibits based on oral history, such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, Ellis Island, Holocaust Museum

ASSIGNMENT DUE: exhibit report

(7) October 16 Different voices.

read: Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (1953), Intro.

Charles Morrissey, "John Hawkes on Tape: The Paradox of Self Identity in a Recorded Interview," International Journal of Oral History 6 (1985), 47-56.

Perks and Thompson, chapters 21 – 23, 35 - 37

listen: TBA

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: reading comment; first project interview CD with fieldnotes and index

(8) October 23 Legal and ethical obligations; transcribing and processing interviews.

read: Oral History Association, Oral History Evaluation Guidelines (2000)
 John Neuenschwander, Oral History and the Law (2002) excerpts
 Dennis Tedlock, "Oral History as Poetry," in Grele, Envelopes of Sound.
 Perks and Thomson, chapters 24 - 27

listen: TBA

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: reading comment; analysis of first project interview

(9) October 30 Oral history on film and video, with guest Pam Sporn

view: Pam Sporn, "Bronx Stories/Cuban Roots" AND one film in the Avery
 Fischer film collection that uses oral history creatively.

read: Robert Rosenstone, Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea
 of History (1995) excerpts
 Perks and Thompson, chapter 31

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: reading comment; ten minute transcript

(10) November 6 Oral history as evidence; constructing a narrative

read: Portelli, Intros, chapters 1 - 6
 Thompson chapters 8 – 9
 Perks and Thompson Intro, chapters 1 - 8

listen:

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: reading comment; two page analysis of a classmate's
 interview

(11) November 13 Oral history as evidence; constructing a narrative part 2

read: Perks and Thompson, chapters 28 – 29
 Spiegleman, Maus
 Portelli, chapters 7 – 10

listen:

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: reading comment; five page analysis of field work
 research and interview

(12) November 20 Project presentations

read: all student reports

listen: two student interviews referenced in reports

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: two-page comment on two reports/interviews

November 27 Thanksgiving

(13) December 4 project presentations

read: all student reports

listen: two student interviews referenced in reports

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: two page comment on two reports/interviews

(14) December 11 project presentations; evaluations, future plans

read: all student reports

listen: two student interviews referenced in reports

ASSIGNMENTS DUE: two page comment on two reports/interviews

FINAL PROJECTS DUE BEFORE NOON ON THURSDAY DECEMBER 18TH

Assignments and Fieldwork Project

NB *All written work must conform to university guidelines about plagiarism. If you use someone else's words you must put them in quotes, and when you quote or paraphrase you must give that person credit through proper citation.*

The short assignments you complete throughout the semester will build toward your final project, and portions of them may be incorporated in the project. Weekly reading responses; short analyses of your own and classmate's interviews; transcripts of key portions of your interview; an index of your interview; and short reports on your field work research will all contribute to the final project.

The final project has four components:

1. Two full length life history interviews, labeled, indexed and appropriately documented, ready for deposit in an archive. (audio or video)
2. An 8-10 page analysis of the fieldwork experience. (This will incorporate material from earlier assignments.) It should include a close reading of parts of the

interviews; your reflections on the construction of historical memory as evidenced in these interviews; and your assessment of the contribution your interviews can/cannot make to current historical debates. Critical, analytical use of both the interviews and the theoretical and historical readings is essential.

3. A presentation of your findings designed for a public audience. This presentation should be done in collaboration with other students working on similar topics if possible. It can take many forms: a web exhibit; a treatment for a short video; a chapter for a book; a script for a radio show; the text for a museum exhibit; or any other format, selected in consultation with the professor.

4. An oral report to the class about your project, featuring a segment of your recorded interview.

Grades

This course relies on the full participation of all members. Attendance is required, as is the timely preparation of weekly reading, viewing and writing assignments. Thoughtful, analytical, helpful comments -- based on careful reading and observation -- will be highly valued. (Participation --30%, Written assignments -- 30%, Final Project -- 40%)