

Theory and Practice of Oral History
Spring 2016
T 5:30-8:00, Pafford 208

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Office hours: Center for Public History (ground floor of Ingram Library), Mon. 8-11 a.m.
TLC 3210, Tues. 2-4:30, Thurs. 8-11 a.m., by appt.

Course Description

The purposes of this course are twofold: to expose you to the theory, major conceptual themes, and methodologies that oral historians around the globe use to frame and implement their work, and to hone your skills as an oral history practitioner. Oral history has become especially common since the 1970s, when scholars who wanted to write “history from below” had trouble constructing those histories from traditional archival sources. Since then the field has exploded, from the growth of oral history collections around the world to popular forms of story collecting, such as StoryCorps. With the digital revolution of the 2000s, there are now even more ways to collect, preserve, and disseminate oral history interviews. The readings and assignments of this course will deepen your understanding of how the field has grown and changed, and how practitioners have reconceptualized and redefined oral history practice over time. More specifically, we will cover the following themes: the connection between memory, history, and narrative; ethics; oral tradition and oral history; interviewing across cultural, age, gender, and ethnic bounds; power in the oral history interview; advocacy and oral history; oral history and public history; the effect of digital humanities on oral history practice, and more. Most importantly, you will conduct, transcribe, and analyze an oral history interview, putting theory, in effect, to practice.

Learning outcomes:

Course-specific

1. Demonstrate knowledge of the major theoretical concepts within oral history scholarship
2. Demonstrate knowledge of the work of key scholars in the field of oral history
3. Demonstrate understanding of ethical complexities of working with human subjects
4. Demonstrate understanding of a variety of methods of interpreting oral sources
5. Demonstrate ability to plan for, conduct, transcribe, and analyze an oral history interview

History Department learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate knowledge and theory of the practice of public history

Required texts:

Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*, 3d ed. New York: Routledge, 2016. (hereafter referred to as OHR)

Donald A. Ritchie. *Doing Oral History*, 3d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, 20th anniv. ed. New York: Routledge, 2014

Alessandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Bruce Granville Miller. *Oral History on Trial: Recognizing Aboriginal Narratives in the Courts*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.

Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson, eds. *Oral History and the Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

*additional readings will be posted on CourseDen (hereafter CD)

*all books are on reserve at Ingram Library except for OHR

*a note on mental health: Many of you are in three 6000-level courses this semester and will be juggling a sizeable reading load. Below I've listed a few sites with tips that can help you get through the material:

- Miriam Sweeney, prof. at Univ. of Alabama, on "How to Read for Grad School": <http://miriamsweeney.net/2012/06/20/readforgradschool/>
- Larry Cebula, prof. at Eastern Washington U. and public historian, with advice that's a bit more irreverent: <http://northwesthistory.blogspot.com/2010/04/how-to-read-book-in-one-hour.html>

Evaluation

In-class participation:	25%
Listening exercises:	10%
Interview:	20%
Transcript:	15%
Final paper:	30%

Participation: 15%

The course will be conducted as a seminar in which everyone contributes to the conversation—you are thus expected to attend class weekly and be prepared to discuss readings. If you are sick or need to miss class for any reason, you should alert me in advance by e-mail or by phone. If an absence is deemed justifiable, you will be given an opportunity to make up the work by having a separate reading discussion with me during office hours. If you miss more than two classes without excuse, your final grade will be reduced by 5 points. The participation grade consists of two components:

In-class discussion: 10%

The course depends on the insights you bring from the readings and from your own experience with oral history fieldwork. I expect all voices to be present in the discussion, and also know that full participation leads to richer engagement with the material for us all.

Two sessions leading discussion: 15%

Twice during the semester you will lead discussion with another classmate. You will be graded on preparation, planning, and implementation of a plan. I can help you with this! Feel free to work with me on ideas for your course day. Also, see this helpful guide: <https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/history/resources/study/leaddiscussion/>

Listening exercises: 10%

The key skill to a good interview is critical listening. To help train your mind and ear, I've assigned listening exercises for the first seven weeks. Each prompts you to sit down with a partner of your choice (friend, lover, spouse, parent, coworker) and conduct a short interview, each time with a different focus. You should reflect on these exercises in 250-300 words in discussion threads I've created on CourseDen (the discussion threads, along with the listening exercise prompts, are located in folders on CourseDen).

Interview: 20%

You will conduct an oral history during the course of semester that relates to your research interests or projects you might be working. The interview--in mp3 or .wav form--is due by March 8, the week before spring break (I've given you the week off before that to help with scheduling). The interview should reflect an understanding of and engagement with best practices, critical listening, informed consent, and other ethical issues related to human subjects research. You will be expected to create your own consent form and biography form for your narrator, as well as to make explicit to me your research process. You'll also be expected to write up any associated field notes after the interview (I'll provide guidance on all of these components).

*A note on technology: for me, one of the best parts of oral history is how accessible of a practice it is. Smartphone apps, for example, are perfectly fine to use for recording an interview that you will use for research. But, if your interview may become part of a public project--radio or film documentary or exhibit, for example--you'll want to use higher-grade equipment. The Center for Public History has digital voice and film recorders you can check out for this purpose.

Transcript: 15%

Is it tedious? Yes. Is it still necessary to know how to create a useful transcript? Yes! Though we will encounter debates in the field that surround transcribing (if oral history is essentially oral, then what does it become once translated into written grammar?) it's still an important part of the way that researchers access and use oral histories. I'll give you guidelines for best practices in transcribing your interview.

Final paper: 30%

You will finally write a 12- to 15-page paper that provides analysis of and reflection upon your oral history interview. Though I will give you more a more detailed assignment in class, expect to be able to synthesize major theoretical debates and methodological approaches in your analysis.

Make-up policy: Assignments are due on the dates indicated in the course schedule. Failure to turn in assignments on time will result in a "0" for each missed assignment.

*****There is no extra credit assigned or accepted in this course.**

Grading scale	
90%-100%	A
80-89	B
70-79	C
60-69	D
0-59	F

Grades are based on student performance and capability. Simply turning in every assignment does not guarantee that a student will receive a “good grade.” To receive a higher grade, a student must demonstrate proficiency in the material. For different students, gaining that proficiency requires different levels of work, because not all students walk into the class with the same aptitude for history. I will give you a rubric for each assignment so that you have clear expectations for how grades are determined. Also, you must turn in every assignment to pass this course.

Course policies

University policies and academic support

Please carefully review the following Common Language for all university course syllabi at this link: [UWG’s Common Language for Course Syllabi](#)

It contains important material pertaining to university policies and responsibilities. Because these statements are updated as federal, state, university, and accreditation standards change, you should review the information each semester.

Academic honesty

***Any form of academic dishonesty (including but not limited to cheating and plagiarism) will result in a failing course grade as well as possible additional action. Definitions of academic dishonesty and plagiarism are defined in student handbook, so please be familiar with them. Here is a link to the student handbook: <http://www.westga.edu/handbook/>

Disability Act/accessibility for the course

Students with ADA-defined disabilities needing academic accommodation should; (1) register with and provide documentation to the [UWG Office of Accessibility Services](#); (2) bring a letter to the instructor indicating the need for accommodation and what type. This should be done during the first week of class. You can contact to the Office of Accessibility Services at 678-839-6428

Student Conduct

Students are obligated to abide by the guidelines detailed in the university catalog. Respect and courtesy are required of all students while in the classroom. The following is also mandatory:

1. No arriving late or leaving early for class meetings (unless you have checked with me in advance). Arriving late or leaving early will count as against your participation grade. Arriving late is defined as arriving after I have begun the course plan for the day. Leaving early is defined as leaving once class has started and is in process. If you habitually arrive late or leave early, you will be asked to leave. Any disruptive behavior will result in your expulsion from the room. If

disruptive behavior persists, you will receive a minimum of one grade-letter deduction from your overall grade (depending on the severity of your behavior), as well as possible action.

2. Cell phones, headphones, iPods, and all other electronic devices other than those you use to take notes must be turned off during lectures and individual/group activities. Continued use of these devices during inappropriate times will result in you being tossed from the class. Use of laptops is permissible, but if you are caught using laptops for non-class purposes, you will not be allowed to use a laptop for the remainder of the semester. Also, you may not record any portion of the class. If you have any documentation needs, please let me know.

Important note: I reserve the right to modify this syllabus at any time during the course of the term, particularly regarding the course schedule. If such a modification is substantial, I will reissue a revised syllabus.

Course Schedule

*subject to change—I'll announce any changes in class

Week/date	Subject	Reading and Assignments
1 January 12	Introductions	
2 January 19	Defining Oral History Discussion leaders: Mandy-Shea Kenny	Ritchie, chap. 1 Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Shifts in Oral History," <i>The Oral History Review</i> vol. 34, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2007), 49-70. (CD) Haley, "Black History, Oral History and Genealogy" (OHR) Frisch, "Oral History and <i>Hard Times</i> : A Review Essay" (OHR) Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different" (OHR) Sangster, "Politics and Praxis in Canadian Working-Class History" (OHR) Listen: Slave Narratives (interviews conducted in the 1930s by Federal Writers Project workers): https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/title.html Due: listening exercise

3 January 26	<p>Oral tradition and oral history</p> <p>Guest: Prof. Molly McCullers</p> <p>Discussion leaders: Christina Ramirez Christopher MP Chuhna</p>	<p>Molly McCullers, "Chapter 6: Paramount Chiefs and Potemkin Homelands, 1965-1973," in "Lines in the Sand: The Global Politics of Local Development in Apartheid Era Namibia, 1950-1980" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2012)</p> <p>McCullers field notes and images</p> <p>Selections from Jan Vansina, <i>Oral Tradition as History</i> (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1985) (CD)</p> <p>Ibrahim A. Abdullah, "The Birth of the Interview: The Thin and Fat of It," in <i>African Words, African Voices</i>, ed. Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 2001), 103-126 (CD)</p> <p>David William Cohen, "The Undefining of Oral Tradition," <i>Ethnohistory</i> vol. 36, no. 1 (Winter, 1989), 9-18. (CD)</p> <p>Tim Lloyd, "On the Differences Between Folklore Fieldwork and Oral History," <i>Oral History in the Digital Age</i>, http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/on-the-differences-between-folklore-fieldwork-and-oral-history/</p>
4 February 2	<p>Recovering histories</p> <p>Discussion leaders: Jennifer Sutton Hannah Givens</p>	<p>Kennedy and Davis, <i>Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold</i> (entire book, including preface to 20th anniversary ed.)</p> <p>Listen:</p> <p>Bonnie, interviewed by Madeline Davis, HerstoryArchives: http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/171</p>
5 February 9	<p>Oral history and ethics</p> <p>Guest: Prof. Michael de Nie</p>	<p>The Boston College/IRA case: Beth McMurtrie, "Secrets from Belfast," <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>, January 26,</p>

Discussion leaders:
Heather E. Rodriguez
Emma Murphy

2014,
<http://chronicle.com/interactives/belfast>
Kevin Cullen, "BC Exercise in Idealism
Opened Old Wounds," *Boston Globe*, July
6, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1s9CCNV>

Additional readings:

Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics:
Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan"
(OHR, 28)

Borland, "'That's Not What I Said':
Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative
Research" (OHR, 27)

Linda Shopes, "Oral History, Human
Subjects, and Institutional Review Boards,"
Oral History Association,
[http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-
history/oral-history-and-irb-review/](http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/oral-history-and-irb-review/)

Jack Dougherty and Candace Simpson,
"Who Owns Oral History? A Creative
Commons Solution," *Oral History in the
Digital Age*,
[http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/a-
creative-commons-solution/](http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/a-creative-commons-solution/).

"Information about IRBs," Oral History
Association,
[http://www.oralhistory.org/information-
about-irbs/](http://www.oralhistory.org/information-about-irbs/)

Due:

listening exercise

6 February 16	The Interview Discussion leaders: Christopher MP Chuhna Harvee White	Ritchie, chps. 2-5 Oral History Association, "Principles and Best Practices," http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles- and-practices/ Doug Boyd, "Designing an Oral History Project," <i>Oral History in the Digital Age</i> , http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/designi ng-an-oral-history-project/ Yow, "Interviewing Techniques and Strategies" (OHR)
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Anderson and Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses" (OHR)

Bozzoli, "Interviewing the Women of Phokeng: Consciousness and Gender, Insider and Outsider" (OHR)

Layman, "Reticence in Oral History Interviews," (OHR)

Due:

listening exercise

7 February 23	Oral history and memory Discussion leaders: Kaitlin Costley Heather E. Rodriguez	Selections from Daniel Schacter, <i>Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past</i> (New York: Basic Books, 1997) (CD) Alessandro Portelli, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli," (CD) Smith, "Remembering in Groups: Negotiating Between 'Individual' and 'Collective' Memories" (OHR) Roseman, "Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in the Holocaust Testimony" (OHR) Due: listening exercise
8 March 1	Interview week	No class
9 March 8	Oral history as community history Discussion leaders: Kaitlin Costley Melanie Sigman	Portelli, <i>They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History</i> (entire book) Due: Interview due (turn in via dropbox on CourseDen)
10 March 15		SPRING BREAK!
11 March 22	Oral history and the law Discussion leaders: Melanie Sigman Christina Ramirez	Miller, <i>Oral History on Trial</i> (entire book) Selections from John A. Neuenschwander, <i>Oral History and the Law</i> , 2d. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

12 March 29	Oral history and social justice Discussion leaders: Jennifer Sutton Harvee White	Part V of OHR, "Advocacy and Empowerment" Due: Transcription of interview (turn in via dropbox on CourseDen)
13 April 5	Oral history and the digital humanities Discussion leaders: Hannah Givens Emma Murphy	Boyd and Larson, <i>Oral History and the Digital Humanities</i> (entire book) Explore ATLMaps and Stadiumville https://atlmaps.com/projects/7/info Oral History in the Digital Age, http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/ Densho, http://www.densho.org/ Project Jukebox, http://jukebox.uaf.edu/site7/ Oral History Metadata Synchronizer, http://www.oralhistoryonline.org/ Stories Matter Software, http://storytelling.concordia.ca/toolbox/stories-matter-software
14 April 12	Preserving and presenting oral histories	Part IV of OHR, "Making Histories"
15 April 19	Writing week	No class
16 April 26	You as the oral historian	Presentations, final papers due