

Oral History, Labors of Waste, and the Value of Knowledge
G65.3003.002 | G57.3001.001 • Spring 2011 • Wednesdays, 6:20-8:20

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PURPOSE & GOALS

This class uses oral history to consider how urban space depends on specific forms of unappreciated labor, unloved geography, and invisible knowledge. Working in collaboration with current and former members of New York City's Department of Sanitation (DSNY) and with the city planners devoted to Freshkills Park on Staten Island, we will explore the dynamics of a historically significant work force to consider overlooked elements of the city's past and to recognize the complexities of an infrastructure that is vital to city life but that is largely unseen.

Sanitation and Fresh Kills are ideal themes for an oral history project because both are ignored in most formal histories of the region. By hearing directly from individuals whose lives have been influenced by the essential labors of waste, we create the opportunity for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of how a global metropolis has been shaped, by whom, at what cost.

After an introduction to the DSNY, to Freshkills Park, and to the larger tradition of oral history, the class will concentrate on logistics of project design, research, interview skills, and the practicalities of recording, transcribing, and editing. The practical considerations will include all-important organizational needs, like narrator permissions and releases, IRB clearance, equipment tracking, and data storage and access. Students will be comfortable designing and planning all elements of their own oral history research projects by the time we're through.

The semester will conclude with a formal public presentation of student work and a proposal for larger multimedia exhibition possibilities for the interviews and insights gained across the semester. The final interviews and edited transcripts will become part of two separate but overlapping Oral History Archives, one within the Department of Sanitation and one for Freshkills Park. In this way we will help build the protocols from which future DSNY and Freshkills oral history projects can grow.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Regular posts, comments, and additions to the class blog

Because the class meets only once a week, the dynamics of the semester will be greatly enhanced by regular participation in our class blog. It's where we will gather between class sessions, and where you'll find announcements, research resources, reflections on our readings and on the presentations by our guests. It's also where we can brainstorm various questions and problems, discuss interpretive approaches that may be helpful, share sources, and ponder larger conversations that connect to our work, among other musings.

2. Reading

Articles and texts will be assigned for each week and will be a combination of practical guidelines, relevant history, and theoretical works. As the semester progresses and you articulate your specific research focus, you will find theoretical and thematic literature that best fits your project.

3. Interview with a source connected to the DSNY and/or to Freshkills

It must be recorded, uploaded to our data storage site, fully transcribed, and edited to deposit standards. This may be collaborative.

4. Writing

- a. A project design for your interview goal(s). You may work on this alone, or you may collaborate with a classmate.
- b. One short essay (5 to 7 pages) in response to specific questions.
- c. Choose one:
 - A project design for a multimedia presentation and/or exhibition using your research and oral history collected for the class. This may be collaborative.
 - A 10- to 15-page paper that weaves together theoretical concerns of your choosing with reflections on your experiences and insights doing the oral history work for the class. This is not explicitly collaborative but it will be crafted in close consultation with me and with your fellow students.
- d. A final public presentation, in whatever form best suits you, describing your work, your findings, your reflections, and your ideas about how and in what directions the larger DSNY and Freshkills oral history projects might evolve. This can be collaborative. Our presentations will be part of the Freshkills Park Lecture Series.

CLASS SCHEDULE

PART I: OVERVIEW

We become acquainted with the three organizing elements of the semester: the city's Department of Sanitation, Fresh Kills landfill/Freshkills Park, and oral history as a set of practices and as a discipline.

Week 1 | January 26 | Introductions

Student introductions; class themes and structure

Who and what is the Department of Sanitation and why should you care?

Week 2 | February 2 | Fresh Kills landfill and Freshkills Park

Raj Kottamasu, programming and grants manager for Freshkills Park, introduces us to the history, present state, and future of this remarkable place.

To do

Take the Human Subjects test through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, found here: <https://www.citiprogram.org/Default.asp?>

Read

Goffman, Erving. 2000. "The Recalcitrant Self," in Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman, eds., *The Goffman Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Nagle, Robin. 2011. "The History and Future of Fresh Kills," in *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life*, Nadine Monem, ed. London: Profile Books/Wellcome Collection.

Week 3 | February 9 | What is oral history and how did it get this way?

Mary Marshall Clark, director of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, is our guest speaker.

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Based on the texts you'll read for this week, come to class with at least three questions you might ask Mary Marshall Clark.

Read

From the Oral History Association: Principles and Best Practices.

<http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/>

Grele, Ronald J. 2006. "Oral History as Evidence." *Handbook of Oral History*, Thomas L. Charlton et al., eds. New York: AltaMira Press.

Grele, Ronald J. 1991. "Movement without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History." *Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory, and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony*, 2d ed., Ronald J. Grele, ed. Westport: Praeger.

Portelli, Alessandro. 2006. "What Makes Oral History Different." *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. London; New York: Routledge.

Ritchie, Donald A. 2003. "An Oral History of Our Time." *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

PART II: INTERVIEWS – LISTEN & PLAN; DISCERN & ORGANIZE; SHAPE & REFINE

The focus moves to project design, interview skills and quandaries, our attentiveness (or lack thereof), and the all-important tasks of keeping track.

Week 4 | February 16 | Interviewing I: Methods, Techniques, Designs

We'll consider various ways to frame the goals of an oral history endeavor. We'll also consider different styles of and approaches to interviews. We'll share our project proposals, work together in class with the digital recorders that we'll use in the field, and do interviews with each other as practice.

Interview partnerships will be assigned today. There is a wealth of material to help you with research appropriate to your particular narrator. Some of it is on the blog under 'Resources,' but that list can't meet everyone's needs or answer everyone's questions. If you are at all uncertain about how to structure your research or where to find sources, please talk to me.

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Before you reach out to the person you'll interview, confirm with me that you have the necessary initial paperwork. It's a little out of order, since we'll go over this issue in detail next week, but you need to get started.

Read

Oral History Project Guidelines, Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Office.

Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack. 2006. "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses." *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. London; New York: Routledge.

Grele, Ronald J. n.d. "What is a 'Good' Interview?" Columbia University Oral History Research Office.

Roulston, Kathryn, et al. 2003. "Learning to Interview in the Social Sciences." *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(4):643-68.

Week 5 | February 23 | Interviewing II: The Unmarked and the HyperMarked

Charis Emily Shafer, Manager of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, is our guest.

How are everyday, unremarkable, and mundane features of everyday life made vivid in oral histories? Why is it important to attend to these?

In the first half of class we'll consider questions of focus and meaning. In the second half, Charis Shafer will teach us how to keep track of the many moving parts inherent to an oral history research project.

To do

Craft a project design that draws on the themes of the class and that articulates a clear goal. Aim for total text of 1500-2000 words (six to eight pages). More details are on our blog under 'Assignments.'

Read

Brekhus, Wayne. 1998. "A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus." *Sociological Theory* 16(1):34-51. March.

Corbett, Katharine T. and Howard Miller. 2006. "A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry." *The Public Historian* 28(1):15-38; Winter.

A set of forms and cataloguing documents from Charis Shafer.

Week 6 | March 2 | Interviewing III: Essential Technicalities

Once we have interviews recorded, what happens next?

To do

On the blog: give an update of your progress with your interviewee. If you're having trouble, which is not uncommon, don't be shy about sharing it. Also, add to our 'Resources' section any useful background material, websites, archives, or similar elements that you've discovered in your preparatory research.

Download Audacity, the free audio-editing software that we'll use for our sound files. Pull some excerpts from your interviews to share with the class, and be ready to explain why you chose those particular clips.

Download ExpressScribe, a free transcription software. Have a sample of part of a transcribed interview ready to share in class. Again, explain why you chose that sample.

Read

Frisch, Michael. 1990. "Preparing Interview Transcripts for Documentary Publication: A Line-by-Line Illustration of the Editing Process," in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Smith, Richard Candida. 2006. "Publishing Oral History: Oral Exchange and Print Culture," in *Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Thomas L. Charlton et al. New York: AltaMira.

PART III: CONTENTIOUS CLAIMS & PLAYFUL POSSIBILITIES

Week 7 | March 9 Interviewing IV: Editing, Indexing, Storing

Who are we to change even a breath of an interview by editing the transcript? But what use is the text if we don't edit? How do we make it searchable, in what kinds of databases? And where do the audio files and transcripts live once we've finished them?

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Brief reflection essay due today (no more than 1250 – 2000 words; you get no brownie points for long-windedness!). The questions you'll use to guide this writing will be posted to the blog.

Read

Berkes, Fikret and Nancy Turner. 2006. "Knowledge, Learning and the Evolution of Conservation Practice for Social-Ecological System Resilience." *Human Ecology* 34(4):479-94.

Goldman, Jerry, et al. 2005. "Accessing the Spoken Word." *International Journal on Digital Libraries* 5:287-98.

Kline, Carrie Nobel. 1996. "Giving It Back: Creating Conversations to Interpret Community Oral History." *Oral History Review* 23(1):19-39.

Orio, Nicola, et al. 2009. "Methodologies and Tools for Audio Digital Archives." *International Journal on Digital Libraries* 10:201-20.

Week 8 | March 16 | Spring Break – No Class

Week 9 | March 23 | Meaning & Memory

Debates about the "truth" of memory can open a range of interpretive possibility when dealing with historical data that started as oral narrative, but claims of validity sometimes collide with claims of relativity and superficiality. Whence our scholarly assertions within these tangles?

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Over the break, swap your project with one of your classmates. Share a complete copy of everything you have so far. By today, you and your classmate will have heard each other's interviews, read each other's transcripts, seen each other's edits. Be prepared to discuss the insights this has given you about your classmate's work and about your own. What pleases you? What do you wish you'd done differently?

Read

Hamilakis, Yannis and Jo Labanyi. 2008. "Time, Materiality, and the Work of Memory." *History and Memory* 20(2):5-17; Fall/Winter.

Berliner, David. 2005. "The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology." *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(1):197-211; Winter.

Week 10 | March 30 | Is it public history? or social history? or something else entirely?

Oral history was originally, if hesitantly, embraced as a subfield within the discipline of history, but what kind of history is it? What other disciplines claim it now? Why does this matter?

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Find three examples of oral history used effectively and creatively in a larger project. It can be a public history effort, a museum display, a film, an exhibition, a community archive, etc. Be prepared to share your findings, on the blog and in class, and be prepared to explain why you liked the examples you chose. One important condition: you may not duplicate any examples, sources, references, or sites already on the blog.

Read

Bendix, Regina. 2002. "The Uses of Disciplinary History." *Radical History Review* 84:110-14.

Kirby, R. Kenneth. 2008. "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History." *Oral History Review* 35(1):22-38.

Polkinghorne, Donald E. 2007. "Validity Issues in Narrative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(4):471-86. June.

*PART IV: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER*Week 11 | April 6

How does the current techno-digital moment change the possibility of oral history's role within the academy and within a larger universe? How might we use these new tools and approaches ourselves?

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Bring to class and prepare to share an overview of what's gone well and what you'd do differently. Also be prepared to discuss your thoughts about the shape and tone of your final presentation.

Read

“Interchange: The Promise of Digital History.” 2008. *Journal of American History*, September.

Levy, David. 2007. “No Time to Think: Reflections on Information Technology and Contemplative Scholarship.” *Ethics and Information Technology* 9:237-49.

Week 12 | April 13 | How to Share? Exhibitions, Podcasts, Websites, etc.

This American Life, StoryCorps, and various museums are among the many places using oral history or something like it. From here until the semester ends, we’ll focus on using our research and interviews to create our final presentations. At this point we’ll decide if we want one über-event in which we all have a part, or if we prefer to each present individually, or if we want something between those two options.

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Bring a detailed draft of your final presentation to discuss in class.

Read

Butler, Toby. 2007. “Memoryscape: How Audio Walks Can Deepen Our Sense of Place by Integrating Art, Oral History and Cultural Geography.” *Geography Compass* 1(3):360-72.

The *International Journal on Digital Libraries* has a plethora of helpful articles about using new media technologies to organize and present information; we’ll look at a few.

Week 13 | April 20 | Final Presentations, Part 1

Half the class does a troubleshooting/dress rehearsal run through

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Week 14 | April 27 | Final Presentations, Part 2

The other half of the class does a troubleshooting/dress rehearsal run through

To do

Contribute to the class blog.

Week 15 | May 4 | Public Presentations

Freshkills Park Talk: It’s us! Time to tell the world what we’ve been up to these past few months.

Friday, May 13: Final project design or research paper due in my office