HIST 467/667: Oral History
Fall 2012 • EQB 200
5:30 pm - 8:00 pm Tuesdays

Professor: Dr. Daniel Kerr
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Office Hours: Tu 2:00 – 5:00 pm; W 10:30-11:30 am, and by appointment
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Course Description

In 1948 Alan Nevins established the first university sponsored oral history project at Columbia University, focusing his attention on white male elites. Interviews had been used as a source of historical evidence as far back as 3000 years ago when Chinese scribes collected sayings. However, among professional historians in the nineteenth century, interviews had fallen into disfavor. Since Nevins rehabilitated the interview the field has flourished and dramatically shifted attention towards documenting the experiences and perspectives of people who have largely been “hidden from history.” Not only have oral historians sought out the “voices from below,” they have also used interviews to document particular aspects of historical experience that have largely been left out of the written record (personal relations, domestic labor, family life, sexuality, etc.)

The active relationship between oral historians and their sources has challenged the discipline of history’s orthodoxies about evidence and objectivity and has raised questions regarding the connection between memory, narrative, and history. In participatory projects the interviewees themselves can become active historians as they offer their own interpretations of the past – a process that some argue democratizes the discipline of history. Furthermore, many practitioners of oral history have used their projects as an avenue of empowerment for social groups and individuals – emphasizing the value of the process of interviewing over the historical product. Throughout this course we will examine each of these themes in detail and also immerse ourselves in the nuts and bolts of oral history as students will conduct their own interviews.

Learning Objectives:

Students who complete the course will have a solid understanding of the theoretical and methodological issues that are central to the field of oral history. They will understand an array of interpretive approaches to oral sources. They will be capable of working with Institutional Review Boards, know how to design consent and legal release forms, and understand the ethical complexities of working with human subjects. They will be able to design and conduct their own oral history projects from the planning process through the archiving of the interviews. Students will have the skills to be accomplished interviewers; they will understand the process of transcription; and they will be aware of the wide variety of ways through which this material can be presented to a larger public. In preparing their final presentation, students will also learn how to use basic digital audio editing tools.
Requirements

Classroom Participation: (U: 22.5% -- G: 17.5%)

This course will be structured around student-led discussions. Students will be expected to come to each class having read the material assigned for the day and prepared to analyze it. In class, we will first develop a complex understanding of the author’s argument, then address the implications of this argument towards our larger understanding of history and the world around us, and finally evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. Informed participation can include summarizing core aspects of the argument, drawing attention to key passages in the text, asking for points of clarification, presenting questions and conclusions about the larger implications of the reading, and offering critiques of the author’s argument. You may also choose to summarize or refocus the classroom discussion. Informed participation not only demands you speak, but that you actively listen to the issues that your classmates raise. Uninformed speaking coupled with an inability to listen to your classmates will be graded just as harshly as if you choose not to speak at all. If you have problems speaking or listening in class, meet with Dr. Kerr as soon as possible to strategize about how you can effectively participate in discussions.

Before each class, students will need to post a motivated question based on the readings on Blackboard by 3 p.m. prior to class. A motivated question must take us beyond the author/s’ arguments and push us to consider the larger issues that are raised by the reading material; the question should have no simple answers and should help foster classroom debate. The question will be preceded by an introduction that indicates how the question is related to the reading and why the question is important.

Periodic quizzes will be administered to allow you to demonstrate your fluency with the reading material. The quizzes are primarily designed to reward those who have done the reading as well as those who have a harder time with public speaking. They also allow Dr. Kerr to gauge where you may have misunderstandings of the material.

Graduate Student Book Reviews (G: 17.5%)

For an additional three books, Graduate students will produce three two-page reviews. Students will work with Dr. Kerr as they select their books. The reviews must identify, synthesize and evaluate the book’s contents. They will be posted on Blackboard so that they are accessible to your fellow classmates. Graduate students will meet separately with Dr. Kerr three times during the semester to discuss these additional works.

Course Assignments: (U: 22.5% -- G: 10%)
Throughout the course of the semester there will be several assignments that students will be required to complete in order to develop their practical skills as oral historians. Detailed descriptions of the assignments will be given to you in advance.

The DC at the Margins Oral History Project: (All: 30%)

In the DC at the Margins Oral History Project (DCMOHP) students will plan, individually conduct and transcribe interviews with people from marginalized communities.* Undergraduate students will conduct at least two hours of interviews with two people. Graduate students will conduct at least three hours of interviews with two or three people. Prior to conducting the interviews, students will prepare and submit an interview guide for approval. An average typist should expect to spend approximately eight hours transcribing a one-hour interview. The transcriptions will each range between fifteen and twenty pages in length. Students will also maintain and turn in a background journal with their final materials. Transcripts will be delivered to the interviewees, and when possible students should obtain release forms. Assuming the interviews are of acceptable quality, the recordings, transcripts, background journals, interview guides, field notes, photographs and release forms should be deposited in an appropriate depository identified ahead of time. The transcripts will be uploaded to the course Blackboard discussion page so other students can have access to the transcripts. When release forms allow, recordings may be posted on the AU public history server or its equivalent in the future. More detailed guidelines will be presented throughout the semester.

* The term “marginalized” will be broadly construed and may be negotiated with Dr. Kerr. If you are interested, you may participate in an oral history project with Dr. Kerr that focuses on unhoused people in Washington, D.C. Choosing to do so will have no impact on your grade. If you are involved in a larger research project, you may petition Dr. Kerr to interview people who are not “marginalized.” In special circumstances he may grant a waiver of this requirement. The requirement does serve a pedagogical purpose, as we will be carefully thinking about the impact of inequality on the ethics of oral history and the substance of an interview throughout the course.

Class Presentation: (All: 5%)

Students will prepare visual presentations for the class that address their practical experiences conducting their own interviews. The presentations should include original recordings, photographs, an in-depth overview of the content of the interviews, and a discussion of the overall dynamics of the relationships established between the narrators and the interviewers. The presentations should critically reflect on the difficulties, weaknesses, shortcomings, and awkward aspects of the interviews as well as the strengths, meaning, and value of the project.

Final Project: (All: 20%)

Students will have a choice between different types of final projects. Each of the projects can draw upon the transcripts, photographs and actual recordings produced by any of the course’s participants or from the SVOHP website. (1) Students write a final paper (ten pages for
undergrads and twenty for grads). These papers can either address the substance of the interviews or address methodological issues related to the interview process. The papers must draw upon themes that are discussed in the course readings. (2) Students prepare a broadcast quality radio documentary (10 minutes for undergrads, 15-20 minutes for grads). The documentary must include a script, clips from the recorded interviews, interpretive narration, and appropriate background sounds and/or music. Be sure that you have the rights to use any of the materials included in the work. (3) Submit a proposal and get approval for an alternative final project – such as a play, website, audio walking tour, exhibit design, etc. Alternative projects will require a comparable amount of work.

**Grading Policy**

(A) means genuinely outstanding, mastery of the subject, near flawless exposition, and incisive interpretation. (B) means well above average achievements in mastery of the subject, exposition, and interpretation throughout the course. (C) means comprehension of the basic concepts, competent exposition, and interpretation. The grade of C indicates that the student has learned the subject at an appropriate university level. (D) means unsatisfactory but still barely passing. (F) means failure. These grades are earned by the student and reflect student performance.

**Required Readings, Blackboard and Course Webpage**

**Blackboard**

This course will have a Blackboard Page. The page will include a discussion board, access to the supplementary readings, a discussion board, and forums to submit your assignments, interview guides, background journals, transcripts, and final projects.

**Available at the Bookstore**

Ritchie, *Doing Oral History, Second Edition*
Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader, Second Edition*
Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History*
Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*

**History Department Learning Objectives**

This course will meet the following learning objectives of the History Department:

**Undergraduates Students:**
1. Critical Thinking: Students will learn to apply historical methods to critically evaluate the record of the past and how historians and other have interpreted it.
2. Research Skills: Students will acquire basic historical research skills, including (as appropriate) the effective use of libraries, archives, and databases.
3. Communication Skills: Students will learn to organize and express their thoughts clearly
and coherently both in writing and orally.

5. Writing & Intellectual: Students will demonstrate their mastery of the knowledge and skills
6. Integration: involved in historical practice by conceptualizing and executing a significant piece of original research.

Graduate Students:
1. Students will be able to deploy skills of critical analysis, including formulating persuasive arguments, evaluating evidence and critiquing claims in the literature, and interpreting a variety of primary sources.
2. Students will be able to conduct research that makes an original contribution to knowledge.

Academic Integrity Code

I take plagiarism and academic dishonesty very seriously, and I am required to report cases to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, whose policy is to fail students for the course. Please read the university's Academic Integrity Code closely, and be sure to ask me if you have any questions. The code is available online at http://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/code.cfm.

In writing papers, you must properly cite all sources (1) directly quoted, (2) paraphrased, or (3) consulted in any fashion. Sources include all printed material as well as the Internet. Proper citation means using a standard citation format: MLA, APA, or Chicago. The preferred format for this course is Chicago. It is also considered plagiarism if you merely rework source material, placing an author's thoughts in other words without contributing your own ideas. For that reason, you must include some kind of source note whenever drawing on someone else's interpretation. A source note can be a sentence or more in your paper, or it can be a footnote. A source note should clarify the extent to which your interpretation is indebted to your source, explaining both (1) what you use and (2) where you depart or differ from the source.

You may not submit a paper or part of a paper that you have written for a previous class. You may, with the instructor's permission, use your final paper for this course as a building block for a larger thesis project you are engaged in.

Please Note: The syllabus is subject to amendment or change at the discretion of the professor.
Course Plot

What is Oral History?

Week 1 (August 28th):

Perks and Thomson, The Oral History Reader, Chapters 2 & 3
Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, Handbook of Oral History, Chapter 1
Ritchie, Doing Oral History, Chapter 1

Review the websites for these professional organizations:
Oral History Association: http://www.oralhistory.org/
Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region: http://www.ohmar.org/
International Oral History Association: http://iohanet.org/
Oral History Society: http://www.oralhistory.org.uk/

Note: You should seriously consider joining them at the discounted student rates. Also, think seriously about proposing a paper, panel, or performance at either group’s annual meeting.

Lastly, enroll in the H-Oral Hist e-mail list <http://www.h-net.org/~oralhist/> and follow the discussions throughout the semester. We may discuss debates from that forum in class.

The Project and Interview: From Conception to Completion

Week 2 (September 4th):

DCMOHP: Define Marginalized Group to Interview; Submit Strategic Plan for Identifying Narrators

Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, Handbook of Oral History, Chapters 3, 5 & 6
Ritchie, Doing Oral History, Chapter 2, 3, 5
Perks and Thomson, The Oral History Reader, Chapters 21
Yow, “Preparation for the Interviewing Project” in Recording Oral History (BB)
Yow, “Interviewing Techniques,” in Recording Oral History (BB)

Oral History: Ethics and the Law

Week 3 (September 11th):

DCMOHP: Identify a Repository, Secure Release Forms
Assignment: Complete Forty-Five Minute Interview with Classmate

Neuenschwander, A Guide to Oral History and the Law
Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, Handbook of Oral History, Chapter 4
Portelli, “Tryin’ to Gather a Little Knowledge,” in the Battle of Valle Giulia (BB)
Review IRB Websites:
AU IRB: http://www.american.edu/irb/index.cfm

Review Website on Oral History and Creative Commons:

Questions of Power, Inequality and Social Position in the Interview

Week 4 (September 18th):

Assignment: Map Your Social Position

Perks and Thomson, The Oral History Reader, Chapters 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 16 & 25
Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, Handbook of Oral History, Chapter 9
Portelli, “Research as an Experiment in Equality” in The Death of Luigi Trastulli (BB)
Stacey, “Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?” in Women’s Words (BB)

Questions of Evidence: Memory and Interpretation

Week 5 (September 25th):

DCMOHP: Submit Interview Guides

Guest Speaker: Don Ritchie, Historian of the United States Senate

Perks and Thomson, The Oral History Reader, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24
Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, Handbook of Oral History, Chapter 8

Week 6 (October 2nd): No Class

Assignment: Evaluate Your Interview with Classmate

Week 7 (October 9th):

DCMOHP: Complete First Interview

Guest Speaker: Joan Ringelheim, former director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, Handbook of Oral History, Chapter 2, 9 & 12
Ritchie, Doing Oral History, Chapter 4
Thompson, “Evidence” in The Voice of the Past
Transcription and Preservation

Week 8 (October 16th):

Assignment: Transcribe Ten Minutes of First Interview; Edit Classmate's Transcription

Guest Speaker: Pamela Henson, Dir. Institutional History Division, Smithsonian Archives

Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History*, Chapters 6, 7, 13
Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, Chapters 26 & 27
Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Chapter 6
Frisch, "Preparing Interview Transcripts for Documentary Publication" in *A Shared Authority* (BB)


Review Website:
Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History: http://www.kentuckyoralhistory.org/

Uses of Oral History: The Monograph

Week 9 (October 23rd):

DCMOHP: Submit First Interview Materials
Assignment: Download and Familiarize Oneself with Audacity

Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, Chapters 1-8

Week 10 (October 30th):

Assignment: Prepare Clips from First Interview

Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, Chapters 9-15

Uses of Oral History: Documentaries, Performances, and Exhibits

Week 11 (November 6th):

Final Project: Submit Proposal for Your Final Project
Assignment: Evaluate Either Harlan County U.S.A. or Willie McGee and the Traveling Electric Chair

Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, Chapters 28, 29, 32, 33
Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History*, Chapters 14, 15, 16
Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Chapter 8

View: *Harlan County U.S.A.* or *The Stone Carvers* (on reserve)
Listen to: Willie McGee and the Traveling Electric Chair
http://www.radiodiaries.org/willie-mcgee-and-the-traveling-electric-chair/

Review Websites:

Densho Project: http://www.densho.org/
9/11 Memorial: http://www.911memorial.org/oral-histories-0
Tohoku Recovery: http://www.tohokurecovery.com/
Cleveland Historical: http://clevelandhistorical.org/

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**Uses of Oral History: Education, Empowerment and Social Justice**

**Week 12 (November 13th):**

**DCMOHP: Complete Second Interview**

Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, Chapters 28, 29, 32, 33, 37
Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Chapter 7
Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, Chapter 37
Kerr, “Countering Corporate Narratives from the Streets” in *Oral History and Public Memories* (BB)

Review Website:

**Week 13 (November 20th): No Class, Thanksgiving Break**

**Week 14 (November 27th):**

**DCMOHP: Submit Second Interview Materials**

Student Final Presentations

**Week 15 (December 4th):**

Student Final Presentations

**Final Projects Due:** December 11th by 5:30 pm. Papers and other electronic documents can be posted on Blackboard. Documentaries and other projects that require hard copies or large file sizes can be submitted directly to Dr. Kerr by appointment