

ORAL HISTORY, LABORS OF WASTE, AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

CEH-GA 1012 | Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement | Spring 2021
Graduate School of Arts & Science | New York University
Wednesdays, 6:00-9:00 | 274 GCASL and on Zoom

Prof. Robin Nagle | robin.nagle@nyu.edu
Office hours: Mondays, 1:00-3:00 or/and by appointment

Disclaimer: This syllabus will evolve. Expect adjustments to the schedule.

OVERVIEW

Thematic Focus

This class uses oral history to consider the role of unappreciated labor and invisible knowledge in an urban setting. Working in collaboration with current and former members of New York City's Department of Sanitation, we will explore the dynamics of a historically significant work force to consider overlooked elements of the city's past, to become acquainted with the complexities of a vital but largely hidden infrastructure, and to uncover narratives about a dynamic, culturally rich, and often unseen community. The final interviews and edited transcripts will become part of the DSNY Oral History Archive.

Sanitation work is an ideal theme for oral history. Though fundamental to the city's well-being, it's ignored in most formal histories of the region. By hearing directly from individuals whose lives have been structured around labors of waste, we create the opportunity for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of how a global metropolis has been shaped, by whom, and at what cost.

Our work this spring has a specific and timely focus. September marks the 20th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center. Sanitation's response to that crisis was immediate, continuous, and essential, but they are poorly represented in accounts of the tragedy and its aftermath. Our efforts will concentrate on the role and narratives of DSNY personnel in that critical time.

Oral History

As an academic discipline and as a research methodology, oral history serves many functions. It can be a documentary technique, a fact-finding strategy, a tool of investigation, a casual practice, or a personal reflection. It is useful to historians, anthropologists, museum curators, educators, journalists, playwrights, and novelists, among others. Some who use oral history are quite self-conscious about the larger intellectual conversations in which it fits, while others simply find it a helpful way to learn details about particular events, individuals, or moments in time.

Within the academy, oral history is considered through a variety of theoretical frameworks that ask questions about truth (who claims it, who contests it), perspectives (whose voices are heard, whose are ignored, by whom, in what contexts), relevance (who cares? why or why not?), bias (of everyone involved), access (to the stories, to the people telling the stories) and power (woven through the entire enterprise, but not always easy to measure).

We will delve into these and related concerns throughout the semester, but we will give equal attention to practicalities such as project design, research techniques, interview skills, equipment choices, archiving systems, finding aids, and transcription software and protocols.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Attend class

If you must be absent or late, let me know ahead of time. You are responsible for connecting with your classmates to get any material you miss. Missing more than two classes can jeopardize your grade.

2. Reading/Listening/Watching

Material assigned each week will be a combination of history, theory, and practical concerns. As the semester progresses and you articulate your specific research focus, you'll work with theoretical and thematic literature that best fits your project. Many weeks have many readings, but they will be divided among the class.

3. Discussion

We'll have questions and ideas posted to our Brightspace site. You'll contribute précis of the reading you've been assigned, but it will also be a venue for more casual communication.

4. Interview a source connected to the DSNY

The interview must be recorded, fully transcribed, edited to deposit standards, cleared by your narrator, and uploaded to our data storage site. This may be collaborative. A word of caution: setting up, doing, and transcribing the interview will take more time than you think.

5. Analytic/Creative Work

- a. Write an interview critique. You'll listen to, read, and comment on the work of oral historians who have gone before you.
- b. Create a project design for your interview goal(s), within the context of Sanitation's response to September 11th. You may develop this alone or in collaboration with a classmate.
- c. Choose one:
 - Design a multimedia presentation and/or exhibition using your research and oral history collected for the class. This may be collaborative. [You're not actually putting up a formal exhibition – you're putting together a proposal for an exhibition.]
 - Write a research paper that blends theoretical concerns of your choosing with reflections on your experiences and insights from doing oral history. This will be crafted in consultation with me and with your classmates; it may be collaborative if you wish.

Whichever format you choose, include questions we have explored during the semester.

SCHEDULE

1. February 3 ~ Introductions

Semester overview; why we're here; class themes and structure; goals; bureaucracy

2. February 10 ~ The Basics: Labors of Waste and the Value of Knowledge

In which we explore some fundamentals about bureaucracy, history, status, and forms of knowledge.

READ:

Nagle, Robin. 2013. *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the New York City Department of Sanitation*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. [Don't buy it; I'll give you a copy]

3. February 17 ~ Marking & Recalcitrance

How do we notice what we notice? How do we discern what we don't notice? Why does that matter? And how do we understand communities and individuals whose lives may be quite different from our own?

EVERYONE READ

Terkel, Studs. 1975. Excerpts from *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. New York: Avon.

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

Goffman, Erving. 1997. The Recalcitrant Self. *The Goffman Reader*, Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman, eds.,. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

DELEGATED TEXTS

Larson, Mary. 2007. Research Design and Strategies. *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*. New York: AltaMira.

Portelli, Alessandro. 2010 (1979). What Makes Oral History Different. *The Oral History Reader*, R. Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. New York: Routledge.

Starecheski, Amy. 2014. Squatting History: The Power of Oral History as a History-Making Practice. *Oral History Review* 41(2):187-216.

Kerr, Daniel. 2016. Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather: The Roots of Radical Oral History Practice in the United States. *Oral History Review* 43(2):367-391.

Pleasant, Emma. 2019. Dirty Work: Cultural Iconography and Working-Class Pride in Industrial Apprenticeships. *British Journal of Sociology* 70(5): 2116-2132.

FIND

Look for and assess a few oral history collections. What's the theme of each? How is it organized? Is it searchable? If so, how? What does an audience learn from that collection? Is there anything about the organization or/and presentation of the collection that we might want to imitate or avoid?

WRITE

In our Discussions forum, share your take-away impressions from, thoughts about, reactions to the material we read for today. It needn't be lengthy writing – your task is to contribute jumping-off points for our conversation in class.

4. February 24 ~ September 11, Fresh Kills, and Aftermath

What questions will guide your approach to your interview? What themes are you most interested in exploring?

EVERYONE READ

Clark, Mary Marshall. 2011. Herodotus Reconsidered: An Oral History of September 11, 2001, in New York City. *Radical History Review* 111: Fall, p79-89.

Nagle, Robin. 2011. The History and Future of Fresh Kills. *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life*, N. Monem, ed. London: Profile Books Ltd.

Rauch, Noah. 2018. A Balancing Act: Interpreting Tragedy at the 9/11 Memorial Museum. *Journal of Museum Education* 43(1):16-21.

Melosi, Martin. 2020. 9/11. *Fresh Kills: A History of Consuming and Discarding in New York City*. New York: Columbia University Press.

DELEGATED TEXTS

Muller, Christine. 2017. Excerpts from *September 11, 2001 as a Cultural Trauma: A Case Study through Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave.

Jordan, Hannah, et. al. 2018. Mortality Among Rescue and Recovery Workers. *Environmental Research* 163, p270-279.

Smith, Erin, et al. 2019. The Physical and Mental Health Challenges Experienced by 9/11 First Responders and Recovery Workers: A Review of the Literature. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 34(6):1-7.

DePierro, Jonathan, et al. 2020. Mental Health Stigma and Barriers to Care in WTC Responders. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 64(3):208-216.

Miller-Archie, Sara, et al. 2020. Systemic Autoimmune Disease Among Adults Exposed to the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attack. *Arthritis & Rheumatology*, 72(5):849-859.

VISIT (online or in person)

[9/11 Memorial & Museum](#)

WRITE

Given what you've read so far about oral history, about the DSNY, and about September 11 (including your visit to the 9/11 Museum), what themes do you imagine will shape your interview? What questions do you want to be sure to ask?

5. March 3 ~ Technicalities: Thinking about the Interview

We play with the recording equipment and with online interview options, experiment with transcription software, and share ideas about best-practice interview possibilities.

EVERYONE READ

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

Starecheski, Amy. n.d. "A Brief Lesson on How to Do an Oral History Interview." Columbia University Oral History Office.

Morrissey, Charles. 1987. The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork. *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring):43-53.

McPhee, John. 2014. Elicitation. *The New Yorker*, April 7: 50-57.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1991. Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 81(4):684-696.

DELEGATED TEXTS

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

Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack. 2006. Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses. In *The Oral History Reader*, R. Perks and A. Thomson, eds. New York: Routledge.

Chagas, Viktor. 2012. Grassroots Journalists, Citizen Historians: The Interview as Journalistic Genre and History Methodology. *Oral History* 40(2):59-68.

Downey, Brant. 2014. The Looking Glass Self and Deliberation Bias in Qualitative Interviews. *Sociological Spectrum* 35(6):534-551.

6. March 10 ~ Um, Ah, and Er: Transcripts & Editing

Reflecting the integrity of spoken words in written text can be a surprising challenge.

EVERYONE READ

Shopes, Linda. n.d. "Some Notes on Preparing Oral History Interviews for Publication" and examples of raw and edited oral history transcripts. Columbia University Oral History Research Office.

DELEGATED TEXTS

Shopes, Linda. 1986. Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project. *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, S. P. Benson, S. Brier, and R. Rosenzweig, eds. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

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.

Maze, Elinor A. 2006. The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History. In *The Handbook of Oral History*, T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, and R. Sharpless, eds. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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

Freund, Alexander. 2017. From .wav to .txt: Why We Still Need Transcripts in the Digital Age. *Oral History* 45(1):33-42.

Woodbury, Anthony. 2019. He Suffocates Me: A Playful Dimension of Exact Transcription, and of being *Iluraq*. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29(2):155-160.

7. March 17 ~ Power

Who has what forms in what contexts toward what ends?

EVERYONE READ

Portelli, Alessandro. 1991. Research as an Experiment in Equality. In *The Death and Life of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Blee, Kathleen. 1993. Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan. *Journal of American History* 80(2):596-606.

Yow, Valerie. 1997. 'Do I Like Them Too Much?' Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa. In *Oral History Review*, 24(2):55-78.

Wilkerson, Isabel. 2010. Notes on Methodology. *The Warmth of Other Suns*. New York: Vintage. Also these reviews: [New Yorker](#), [New York Times](#)

DELEGATED TEXTS

Franco, Barbara. 1995. Doing History in Public: Balancing Historical Fact with Public Meaning. *Perspectives*, 33(5):1-10.

Ginsburg, Faye. 1996. The Case of Mistaken Identity: Problems in Representing Women on the Right. *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*. C. Brettell, ed. New York: Praeger.

Kerr, Daniel. 2003. "We Know What the Problem Is" – Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up. *Oral History Review* 30(1):27-45.

Janesick, Valerie. 2007. Oral History as a Social Justice Project: Issues for the Qualitative Researcher. *The Qualitative Report* 12(1):111-121.

Rogaly, Ben and Kaveri Qureshi. 2017. 'That's Where My Perception of It All Was Shattered': Oral Histories & Moral Geographies of Food Sector Workers. *Geoforum* 78:189-198.

WRITE

Write 15-20 potential interview questions; list words & phrases that you associate with September 11; find and be ready to discuss consent forms from other oral history projects

8. March 24 ~ Memory

How do memory and forgetting shape our understandings of “truth”? How does time erode or sharpen memories, and how does that change interpretations of them?

EVERYONE READ

Burke, Peter. 1997. History as Social Memory. In *Varieties of Cultural History*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.

Errante, Antoinette. 2000. But Sometimes You’re Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling. *Educational Researcher* 29(2):16-27.

DELEGATED TEXTS

Bertaux, Daniel. 1982. Stories as Clues to Sociological Understanding: The Bakers of Paris. In *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, P. Thompson, ed. London: Pluto Press.

Thompson, Paul. 1994. Believing it or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory. In *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, eds. J. Jeffrey and G. Edwall, eds. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Basso, Keith. 1996. Quoting the Ancestors. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Crane, Susan A. 1997. Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory. *The American Historical Review* 102(5):1372-1385.

Green, Anna. 2004. Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates. *Oral History* 32(2):35-44.

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

Emery, Jay. 2018. Belonging, Memory and History in the North Nottinghamshire Coalfield. *Journal of Historical Geography* 59:77-89.

9. March 31 ~ Narrative

The challenge of crafting stories is a story unto itself.

EVERYONE READ

Bamberg, Michael. 2006. Stories: Big or Small. *Narrative Inquiry* 16(1):139-147.

DELEGATED TEXTS

Allen, Barbara. 1992. Story in Oral History: Clues to Historical Consciousness. *Journal of American History* 79:606-611.

Filene, Ben. 1998. Afterthoughts: Everyone a Historian. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in Everyday Life*, R. Rosenzweig and D. Thelen; New York: Columbia University Press.

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

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

Stalker, L. Lynda Harling. 2009. A Tale of Two Narratives: Ontological and Epistemological Narratives. *Narrative Inquiry* 19:2(219-232).

Friedman, Jeff. 2014. Oral History, Hermeneutics, and Embodiment. *Oral History Review* 41(2):290-300.

McLaughlin, Janice. 2015. Family Ties in Genes and Stories: The Importance of Value and Recognition in the Narratives People Tell of Family. *Sociological Review* 63, p626-643.

10. April 7 ~ Ethics

We've collected sounds, words, voices, memories, stories. What responsibility do we carry?

DELEGATED TEXTS

Rickard, Wendy. 2003. Collaborating with Sex Workers in Oral History. *Oral History Review* 30(1):47-59.

Boyd, Doug. 2010. Achieving the Promise of Oral History in a Digital Age. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Donald Ritchie, ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jessee, Erin. 2011. The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings. *Oral History Review* 38(2):287-307.

Brown, Laura Clark & Nancy Kaiser. 2012. Opening Archives on the Recent American Past. *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History that Talks Back*. Claire Potter and Renee Romano, eds. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press; p59-82.

Meeker, Martin. 2012. The Berkeley Compromise: Oral History, Human Subjects, and the Meaning of 'Research.' *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History that Talks Back*. Claire Potter and Renee Romano, eds. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press; p115-138.

Hampshire, Kate, et al. 2014. The Interview as Narrative Ethnography: Seeking and Shaping Connections in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 17(3): 215-231.

Larson, John Lauritz. 2017. The Feedback Loop: Sharing the Process of Telling Stories. *The Future of History: Historians, Historical Organizations, and the Prospects for the Field*, C.E. Wright and K.P. Viens, eds., Massachusetts Historical Society.

11. April 14 ~ Archives, Exhibitions, Podcasts, Websites, etc.

What are the best media for sharing oral histories? How do we choose?

EVERYONE READ

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

Becker, Christoph, et al. 2009. Systematic Planning for Digital Preservation. *International Journal of Digital Libraries* 10(4):133-157.

Boyd, Doug. 2013. OHMS: Enhancing Access to Oral History for Free. *Oral History Review* 40(1):95-106.

Royles, Dan. 2016. Teaching Digital Humanities with Oral History: The *Staring Out to Sea* Oral History Project and OHMS in the DH Classroom. *Oral History Review* 43(2):408-420.

12. April 21 ~ Now what?

Putting it all together and deciding what to do with it

GUEST SPEAKER: Ed Grayson, Commissioner, DSNY

DELEGATED TEXTS

Stevens, Kimberly Weatherford and Bethany Latham. 2009. Giving Voice to the Past: Digitizing Oral History. *International Digital Library Perspectives* 25(3):212-220.

Wynne, Susan C. 2009. Cataloging Oral Histories. *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly*, 47(6):561- 582.

Tchen, Jack, and Liz Sevchenko. 2011. The 'Dialogic Museum' Revisited: A Collaborative Reflection. *Letting Go: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. B. Adair, B. Filene, and L. Koloski, eds., Pew Center for Arts and Heritage.

Bossen, Howard and Eric Freedman. 2012. "Molten Light: The Intertwined History of Steel and Photography" – The Roles of Oral Histories and Other First-Person Accounts. *Oral History Review* 39(1):1-14.

Tebeau, Mark. 2013. Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era. *Oral History Review* 40(1):25-35.

Petrobruno, Sheenagh. 2014. Between Narratives and Lists: Performing Digital Intangible Heritage through Global Media. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20(7-8): 742-759.

Frisch, Michael. 2016. Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked. *Australian Historical Studies* 47(1):92-107

13. April 28 ~ Presentation run-throughs14. May 5 ~ Public Presentations

Due May 14: final project, final transcripts and audio, narrator consent forms