Adventures in Interviewing: Oral History Theory and Practice

FRSEM-UA

Prof. Miriam Nyhan Grey

Spring 2020

Tuesdays: 2-4.30pm

Glucksman Ireland House NYU, 1 Washington Mews (TBC)

Office Hours: Mondays 12pm-1pm and by appointment

Course description: Oral history is a very important tool for a historian. It is compelling in its ability to bring forward the voices of those who were frequently excluded from more typical sources and it often leads to new interpretations of history. As a method, it presents challenges and rewards as the sources are not confined to the library or an archive. In the process of interviewing the historian is confronted by sources that speak, think, remember, forget and recount—human beings. This course will explore theories of memory, how memory is constructed and forgotten, and how historians contend with this type of source. Preparation for and conducting an oral history interview will be a significant portion of the load for this course. The goal is to uncover the richness of oral history in complicating our explanations of the past.

Instructor Biography: Miriam Nyhan Grey is Associate Director of New York University's Center for Irish and Irish-American Studies, where she is also Director of Graduate Studies for the Master of Arts in Irish and Irish-American Studies. With an interest in the intersections of migration, race and ethnicity, she focuses primarily on migrant experiences in comparative frameworks. Oral history is a central methodology in her research and she has served as a collaborator for the Archives of Irish America’s Oral History Collection since 2008. She has been on faculty at NYU since 2009, teaching an array of classes on Irish history and migration, oral history and comparative migration.

Required Texts:

- Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds.), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Temple University Press, 2008) [this book is available online via Bobst Library so it is NOT compulsory to purchase this text]
- Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2016) [this book is available online via Bobst Library so it is NOT compulsory to purchase this text]
Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edition (Oxford University Press, 2000) [this book is available online via Bobst Library so it is NOT compulsory to purchase this text]


Optional Texts (extracts of which will be made available on NYU classes):


Purpose:

Oral history, considered one of the most democratic ways of documenting the past, has become a popular research tool in the technological age. This class sets out to examine the power of interviews in historical research and the related methodological and ideological issues. Historians who work on the recent past often incorporate oral history into their research and we will learn about historical events and movements that engaged oral history as a documentation strategy. We will assess the power of oral history in shedding light on the past in ways that are more dynamic than written sources. We explore how we can use oral history most effectively, especially in tandem with more traditional documentary sources. We will survey the array of applications of oral history (in film, radio, exhibits and in community and institutional histories) and the legal, ethical and archival considerations of the method. Fieldwork includes conducting one interview as well as an analysis of the interview and of the process of interviewing.

Course Requirements:

Class meets once a week and attendance is mandatory. This class is designed to be a cooperative effort-- please do the assigned reading, viewing, and listening before coming to class each week. 10% of your final grade for the class is based on your thoughtful, text-based contributions to class discussion and active participation. **The use of laptops, phones or tablets is only allowed for note-taking. I expect all students to be actively engaged in our collective work, and these devices can be extremely distracting both to those using them and to others.**

Work is assigned on a regular basis and is outlined in the syllabus distributed at the start of the semester. All class submissions must be typed, double-spaced and meet the page/word count assigned for each project. Submissions will be graded on content, writing clarity, strength of argument, evidence and narrative cohesion.
Grade Distribution and Due Dates:

1. Statement of purpose: 10% (2/3 pages)

2. Book review of Richard White, *Remembering Ahangran*: 20% (5 pages)

3. Interview Proposal Paper: Background & Rationale: 20% (5 pages)

4. In-class oral presentation on interviews: 10%

5. Interview transcript excerpt, including a scope and content research paper: 30%, (10-20 pages) The paper should be composed of no more than 25% of transcription.

6. Attendance and Participation: 10%

**Week 1: Tuesday January 28**

Topic: Introduction to the course, instructor and peers. Discuss objectives. Review Principles and Best Practices for Oral History:

http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/

Discuss history, memory and oral history.

Discuss technology and uses in oral history.


1. Portelli: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEToq3T_LZQ

**Statement of purpose: (3/4 pages – 750-1,000 words)**

This paper should reflect on your motivations and objectives in taking this class and what you hope to achieve during the course of the semester. Think of it as a type of informal contract between yourself and your instructor. Outline any experience you have had with interviewing or oral history in a research or extracurricular setting.

**Week 2: Tuesday February 4**

Topic: Varieties of oral history and the oral history process.
Reading:


**Week 3: Tuesday February 11**

Topic: Dynamics of interviews. Oral history and memory.

**Reading:**

1. Via NYU Classes.

**Week 4: Tuesday February 18**

Topic: History and Memory.

**Reading:**

2. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (State University of New York Press, 1991), Chapters 1 and 4, pp. 1-26 and 59-76 (on NYU Classes)

**Week 5: Tuesday March 3**

Topic: Oral history and ethics. The Boston College/Belfast Project example.

**Reading:**

4. Listen to this podcast on memories of 9/11: [http://irelandhouse.fas.nyu.edu/object/podcast.memories9.11](http://irelandhouse.fas.nyu.edu/object/podcast.memories9.11)

**Book review: 20% (5 pages -- 1,250 words)**

**Week 6: Tuesday March 10**
Class visit to 9/11 Memorial and Museum: with special interest in the use of oral histories on the site.

**Reading:**

- Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Chapter 3, pp. 84-109 (on NYU Classes)
- Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, Chapter 7, pp. 222-245

**Week 7: Tuesday March 24**

Topic: Conducting an oral history: optimizing the encounter.

**Reading:**


Interviewee Background Paper: 20% (5 pages – 1,250 words)

**Week 8: Tuesday March 31**

Topic: How we listen and how interviewers can shape the interview. What are the “silences” in interviews.

**Reading:**

- Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Chapter 4, pp. 110-133
- Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, Chapter 8, pp. 246-308

**Week 9: Tuesday April 7**


**Reading:**

• Riki Van Boeschoten, “Public Memory as Arena of Contested Meanings: A Student Project on Migration” in Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds.), *Oral History and Public Memories*, pp. 211-229

**Interviews MUST be undertaken no later than X date**

**Week 10: Tuesday April 14**

In-class oral presentations on interview content and experience of undertaking an oral history.

**Reading:**

• Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Chapter 8, pp. 222-250
• Daniel Kerr, “We Know What the Problem is': Using Video and Radio Oral History to Develop Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, Chapter 40, pp. 636-635
• View “The Uprising of ‘34” (film by George Stoney et al. Available via the Bobst Library website).

**Week 11: Tuesday April 21**


• No Reading X date due submission of Interview Transcript (with scope and content): (10-20 pages, worth 30% of final grade)

**Week 12: Tuesday April 28**

Topic: Interviewers and scholars who have shaped oral history and the status of interviewing.

**Reading:**


• Consult this resource for the work of Studs Terkel: [http://studsterkel.matrix.msu.edu/htimes.php](http://studsterkel.matrix.msu.edu/htimes.php)

**Week 13: Tuesday May 5**

Topic: Using oral history in fiction writing.
• Excerpts of Jennifer Egan, *Manhattan Beach*.

**Week 14: Tuesday May 12:**

Conclusions and review