

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

Robin Nagle

New York University

PURPOSE & GOALS

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 and with people connected to Staten Island's Freshkills Park, 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 that reveal a dynamic, culturally rich, and often unseen community.

Sanitation and Fresh Kills (along with Freshkills – I'll explain) are ideal themes for oral history. Both are fundamental to the city's well-being, but both are ignored in most formal histories of the region. By hearing directly from individuals whose lives have been structured around labors of waste and labors of reclamation, 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.

Oral history, both as a discipline and as a practice, serves many functions. It can be a documentary technique, a fact-finding strategy, a tool of investigation, a casual practice, or a personal reflection. Methods of oral history are 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, these many understandings and uses of oral history are considered through a variety of theoretical frameworks that ask questions about truth (who claims it, who contests it), perspective (whose voice is heard, whose is 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.

At the same time, we will give equal attention to practicalities, including interview skills, research techniques, project design, equipment choices, archiving systems, finding aids, and transcription software and protocols.

The final interviews and edited transcripts that you'll create this semester will become part of the DSNY/FreshKills Oral History Archive. These will eventually be two separate but overlapping collections, one housed within the Department of Sanitation and the other part of Freshkills Park.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Come to 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.

2. Reading

Texts 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 will work with theoretical and thematic literature that best fits your project.

3. Discussion

We'll have questions and ideas posted to our NYU Classes portal. Sometimes you'll be asked to contribute a précis of the reading we've done for class, but it will be a venue for more casual communication as well.

4. Interview a source connected to the DSNY and/or to Freshkills. The interview must be recorded, fully transcribed, edited to deposit standards, cleared by your narrator, uploaded to our data storage site and uploaded to our website. This may be collaborative. A tip: Setting up and doing the interview will take more time than you think.

5. Writing

a. An interview critique. You'll listen to, read, and comment on the work of your predecessors.

b. A project design for your interview goal(s). You may develop this alone, or you may collaborate with a classmate.

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 12- 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.

Whichever format you choose, it must focus on questions we have explored during the semester, though it certainly may range farther than we have gone in our class explorations.

d. A final public presentation. The form and content will be developed during the semester. This will be collaborative.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 | September 4 | Introductions

Introductions; semester overview; class themes and structure; mutual expectations

Week 2 | September 11 | The Basics: The DSNY, Fresh Kills, Freshkills

Nagle, Robin. 2013. *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Chasing Sanitation website -- <http://www.chasingsanitation.com/>

Freshkills Park website and blog

-- <http://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/freshkills-park>

-- <https://freshkillspark.wordpress.com/>

§ Bring questions inspired by your readings. Based on these sources, what themes might you explore in your oral history project?

Week 3 | September 18 | Marking & Recalcitrance, or How to See and Hear the Subtle and Hidden

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

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

Sharpless, Rebecca. 2008. The History of Oral History. In *Handbook of Oral History*, T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, and R. Sharpless, eds. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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

§ Peruse the DSNY Oral History Archive -- <http://www.dsnyoralthistoryarchive.org/>. Choose an interview; go through the audio and the transcript. Write a critique, considering the following questions: What should we ask of this audio and text record? What do you learn? What about the interview works well? What doesn't work so well? What's your sense of the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator? If it were possible to have a do-over, what suggestions might you make?

§ Post your thoughts to our Portal, share your thoughts with the class, and hand in your essay. Aim for about 500 words or more if you like, but not more than 1000.

Week 4 | September 25 | Project Design Preparation

You'll get your interview assignments today.

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.

Confino, Alon. 1997. Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method. *The American Historical Review* 102:5.

Friedlander, Peter. 1998. Theory, Method and Oral History. In *The Oral History Reader*, R. Perks and A. Thomson, eds. New York: Routledge.

Henige, David. 1982. *Before the Field: Approaching Oral Data*. *Oral Historiography*. London: Longman.

Lance, David. 1984. Oral History Project Design. In *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, D.K. Dunaway and W.K. Baum, eds. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Olson, Karen and Shopes, Linda. 1991. Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Doing Oral History Among Working-Class Women and Men. In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, S. Gluck and D. Patai, eds. New York: Routledge.

§ Post to our Classes portal six questions that you want to explore through the oral history interview you'll do. These will form the basis of your project design, but for now they're provisional. Reference the readings for today. How have these sources helped you articulate your goals?

EXTRA! | September 29 (Sunday) | Freshkills Sneak Peak -- Oral History on the Go

Join me on Staten Island for a day of Freshkills Stories. Celebrate the city's most ambitious park project in 150 years. Walk land made of garbage that has become some of the most beautiful acreage in New York.

Week 5 | October 2 | Technicalities; Thinking about the Interview

We use the recording equipment for the first time.

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

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.

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

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

§ Download ExpressScribe, a free transcription software

§ Look at our consent form and be ready to discuss it.

§ Draft a project design that articulates a clear goal. Aim for total text of 1500-2000 words (six to eight pages). Post it to our Classes portal and bring a copy to class to hand in. This is a *draft*.

Week 6 | October 9 | Transcripts & Editing

Guest speaker: A member of the Superstorm Research Lab will discuss strategies for, and reasons to use, collaborative research.

These readings may change

di Leonardo, Micaela. 1987. Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter. *Oral History Review* 15:1-20.

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.

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.

Week 7 | October 16 | Power

Patai, Daphne. 1987. Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake. In *The International Journal of Oral History*, 8(1).

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

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

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.

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

§ Bring to class (to hand in) and post to our Portal the finished draft of your project design.

§ Post the results of your efforts to contact your narrator.

§ Bring examples of two or three oral history websites and/or online collections that you feel are especially well organized, well designed, and effective. Be prepared to explain your choices.

Week 8 | October 23 | Memory

Daniel Bertaux. 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.

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

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

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.

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

§ Post to our Portal: how's it going? Equipment issues? Scheduling? Transcribing? Don't hold back!

Week 9 | October 30 | Narrative

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

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

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).

Week 10 | November 6 | Putting it all together and deciding what to do with it

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

Brettell, Caroline, ed. 1996. Excerpts from *When They Read What We Write*. New York: Praeger.

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

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

Week 11 | November 13 | Ethics

Guest speaker: Montana Miller, ethnographer, folklorist, author (*readings TK*)

Week 12 | November 20 | How to Share? Archives, Exhibitions, Podcasts, Websites, etc.

Patel, Manjula et al. 2005. Metadata Requirements for Digital Museums. *International Journal of Digital Libraries* 5:179-192.

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

Daniel, Carol. 2009. Providing Online Access to Oral Histories: A Case Study. *International Journal of Digital Libraries* 25(3):175-185.

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

§ Post ideas for shaping an oral history archive that lets the interviews be accessible and lively. What are considerations that must be taken into account? What are potential obstacles? If you were building such a thing from scratch and had no constraints, what would it look like?

Week 13 | November 27 | Thanksgiving Eve – No Class

Week 14 | December 4 | Final Presentations

Week 15 | December 11 | Public Presentations / Oral History Celebration with Narrators

DUE Friday, December 20:

Final transcripts and audio posted to the DSNY Oral History Archive; your final project