

Oral History, Labors of Waste, and the Value of Knowledge

G65.3003.002
Draper Program
Wednesdays, 6:20-8:20
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New York University
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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 that reveal a dynamic, culturally rich, and often unseen community.

Oral history, both as a discipline and as a practice, serves many functions. It can be an investigatory and documentary technique, a fact-finding strategy, a professional tool, 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, equipment choices, archiving systems, finding aids, and transcription software and protocols.

Students will complete two life-history interviews, including transcriptions finished to deposit standards. Assignments will include readings from journal articles, book excerpts, and examples of oral histories. Students will conduct research outside class that will be necessary preparation for the interviews and will write a series of reflective and analytical essays that explore theoretical and practical concerns. An integral part of the class includes integrating the interviews with the DSNY Oral History Archive website, an on-going project that the class helps build.

By the end of the semester, students will have learned basic oral history methods and theories, will have had considerable experience planning, preparing, conducting, and analyzing significant oral history interviews, and will be able to "read" the city with more nuance and insight. The interviews that the class gathers will become permanent records within the Sanitation Oral History Archive and the Freshkills Park Oral History Archive.