History 451/882—Oral History: Theories and Practices
Fall 2010

Instructor: Prof. Elise Chenier  Office hours: TBA
Email: echenier@gmail.com  Office: AQ 6017

As a conversation about the past, oral history has existed as long as people have shared and interpreted their individual and group memories through the spoken word. Within the academy, oral history has increasingly been embraced since the 1960s as a means of gaining insight into the experiences of non-literate and oral cultures, and those who have otherwise been marginalized from dominant narratives because of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and region.

This course introduces students to various theoretical debates, ethical issues, and methodological challenges that revolve around the field of oral history. We will examine the development of the academic field, from its original democratizing intent to its more recent theoretical discussions about the ‘shape’ of narrative forms and linkages between history, memory, and identity. We will explore ethical questions, such as power dynamics between interviewer and narrator, the subjectivity of the researcher, and the responsible representation of collected materials. We will deal with practical issues, from obtaining ethics clearances, recording, and transcribing to effectively interpreting multiple narratives of single issues or events. Students will understand how historians have represented oral history by engaging with a variety of historical applications, such as scholarly monographs, documentaries, exhibits, and web sites.

This course will be open to senior undergraduate and graduate students. Work expectations will vary accordingly. Prerequisite for undergraduates: 45 credit hours, including 9 hours of lower division history credits.

Format: One weekly seminar, including class discussions, workshops, presentations, and peer review.

Required Texts:
Additional readings on Internet or Reserves.

Undergraduate Evaluation:
Seminar participation 20%  Written responses to readings 15%
Written responses to readings 15%  Analysis of an oral history web site 15%
Analysis of an oral history web site 15%  Interview & Essay Project 50%

Graduate Evaluation:
Seminar participation 20%  Written responses to readings 15%
Written responses to readings 15%  Book Review 15%
Book Review 15%  Interview & Essay Project 50%