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## Syllabus for S ST 560 Introduction to Oral History, Documenting LGBTQ Histories in Mississippi

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**SST 560: Introduction to Oral History**  
**Documenting LGBTQ Histories in Mississippi**

Monday, 1-3:30 pm, Barnard

Professor Jessica Wilkerson

[jcwilker@olemiss.edu](mailto:jcwilker@olemiss.edu)

Office: Bishop Hall 318

Office Hours by appointment

Some words are open  
Like a diamond on glass windows  
Singing out within the crash of passing sun  
Then there are words like stapled wagers  
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—  
And come whatever wills all chances  
The stub remains  
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.  
Some words live in my throat  
Breeding like adders. Others know sun  
Seeking like gypsies over my tongue  
To explode through my lips  
Like young sparrows bursting from shell.  
Some words  
Bedevil me.

Audre Lorde, excerpt from “Coal”

“Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”

Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different”

## Course Description and Objectives

In 1997, historian John Howard noted in the introduction to the path-breaking edited volume *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* that southern archivists actively worked to “thwart us, to exclude us from the fold.” At the same time, a “bicoastal bias” pervaded American lesbian and gay history. Gay and lesbian southerners did not fit easily into a master narrative, nor did they constitute a cohesive group in the South. Since Howard’s call for more robust histories, a growing, interdisciplinary body of scholarship has begun to deepen the archive and expand the analysis of LGBTQ history in the South. In this seminar you will build on this scholarship by adding to the archive of southern queer histories, primarily through the method of oral history interviewing.

In the past several years, LGBTQ organizations have sprung up in Oxford, on the University of Mississippi campus, and across Mississippi, and in 2016 Oxford held its first gay pride parade. Many in LGBTQ communities and their allies celebrated in 2015 as the Supreme Court validated same-sex marriage as a right of citizenship. They also organized in the face of backlash as new state laws sanctioned discrimination and as old challenges remained. These present-day movements built on the legacies of antiracist, feminist, and gay rights movements that arose across the South in the 1970s and 1980s. This course will focus on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and/or queer people in the region of Oxford and North Mississippi and on the campus of the University of Mississippi. Some of you may focus on more recent history, while others may seek to chart lost or buried histories. Together we will work on a collaborative oral history and documentary project that highlights the current political climate with an historical perspective. In doing so, students will conduct historical research and develop intersectional analyses that underscore the relationship between LGBTQ rights, economic fairness, racial justice, and gender justice.

### **Course Goals:**

- \*Become familiar with interdisciplinary scholarship in LGBTQ and oral history
- \*Develop archival research skills
- \*Practice oral history methodology and ethical interview techniques
- \*Work in teams to create a documentary project that will be exhibited in April 2018

In **Part I** of the course, we will familiarize ourselves with southern LGBTQ histories, including monographs that effectively use oral history sources. We will also read selections from interdisciplinary literature on oral history, discuss the ethical responsibilities of interviewees, survey interviews in various archives, and practice our interviewing skills. At this time you will narrow down your contribution to the oral history project, thinking also about how it will fit into the final documentary project. *Early in the semester the Center will host an Allies training workshop, and you are highly encouraged to attend it or another occurring on campus. See the Center for Inclusion and Cross-Cultural Engagement for scheduled trainings if you are not able to attend the departmental workshop.*

In **Part II**, you will put what you learn in Part I into practice. You will learn to design an oral history project, conduct and transcribe oral history interviews, interpret oral history evidence, assess that evidence in relationship to published and archival records, and use and contribute to a university archive or community history project. This process will demand and strengthen a wide range of skills: active listening, close reading, analytic thinking, self-

awareness, and teamwork. Beyond that, it will ask you to develop responsible, respectful, and mutually productive relationships with people outside the campus and to conduct your work in such a way that it will be of value to other scholars and to the people who share their stories with you.

In **Part III**, you will work in teams to develop a final exhibit that will be part of the “Radical South” conference. Here we will draw upon the practice of public history, or interpreting the past for and with a public audience. Possibilities may include photography, film, ethno-poetry, and performance, all of which we will discuss in class. Some may choose to write individually or collaboratively a story for the Center’s online project *Mississippi Stories*. Whatever the final project, it must engage with history and place the person or event within broader historical context.

### **Required Texts:**

Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility* (New York: New York University Press, 2009)

John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

All other reading materials can be found on Blackboard or through the library server. Documents with a # are on Blackboard.

### Recommended reading:

There are several oral history guides that you might find useful throughout the semester. I will post the Southern Oral History Program field guide to Blackboard. See also Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* and online guides via the Oral History Association’s website.

### **Assignments and Course Policies**

Response Paper 1 (10%)

Response Paper 2 (10%)

Response Paper 3 (10%)

Interview Critique (10%)

Research Proposal (5%)

Oral History Interview and accompanying documents (20%)

Presentation (10%)

Final Paper/Project (25%)

*Participation in class is expected, and failure to participate may lead to a drop in your grade.*

Response Papers (due January 29, February 5, and February 12): Your papers should reflect on the readings in 2-3 pages.

Interview Critique (due February 19): One of the best ways to sharpen your interview skills is to listen to the interviews of other people and critique them. I will provide you lists of interviews/interview collections, and you will need to choose an interview, listen to it, and write a 2 page critique of the interview, considering the following: What works well in the interview? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the interviewee’s approach? What do

you notice about the interviewers' questions, how they are phrased or what they focus on? Are there things about the interview that the interviewee simply could not alter? What questions does the interview raise for you? Are there moments in the interview that stood out to you, and, if so, why?

Research Proposal (due March 5): The research proposal should include a brief description of your proposed project: What questions do you hope to address? Do you have ideas about who to interview, or how to find a person to interview? What primary and secondary sources will you use? (Your proposal should include a one-page bibliography.) *Prior to or during the week of March 5, you need to schedule a meeting to discuss your project with the instructor.*

Oral History Interview (due March 30 at 5pm, at my office, Bishop 318): It is critical that you begin to choose a topic and contact potential interviewees as early in the semester as possible. You'll want to begin by thinking carefully about the readings as well as what local or university archives you can access. Once you settle on a theme or question that interests you, you will need to identify relevant written and oral sources and begin contacting potential interviewees. Remember that interviewing *requires a great deal of lead time*. It can take weeks to set up an interview. Your first choices may not pan out; interviewees may cancel at the last minute. You must be both proactive and flexible, trusting that each step you take will open up new pathways and possibilities.

Each student will conduct at least one interview of one-two hours in length. The interview will take the form of life histories with an emphasis on the individual's involvement in a social movement, their relationship to a particular place, and/or their experience of recent political and social changes. Each interview should be informed by background reading in secondary sources and, when possible, written primary sources such as organizational records, personal papers, and newspapers. The clippings files in the University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections are especially helpful, and your interviewees may be willing to share scrapbooks, photographs, letters, etc.

Interviews must be accompanied by the following. Upload all files (except for consent forms) to the Google drive account that will be provided and turn in hard copies at my office, Bishop 318:

- 1) Recording
- 2) Field notes (describe what you noticed/experienced before, during, and after the interview)
- 3) A transcript of a key moment in the interview (around 6-10 pages)
- 4) Sound recording log (unnecessary if you end up transcribing the entire interview)
- 5) All forms necessary for possible deposit in University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections
- 6) Reflections on the interview experience and the meaning and significance of what you learned. (If possible, also try to get a photograph—historical, recent, or of you and the interviewee.)

*Samples of many of these documents, as well as a consent form, will be provided on Blackboard.*

Before turning in your final projects at the end of the course, most students will need to revise their transcripts and supporting materials and provide further contextualization and

analysis in response to my comments and those of their peers. *I will not post a grade for you until I have received hard copies of all interview release forms* (unless you have worked out with me that the interview will not be archived).

Throughout the course, you should keep a fieldwork journal or research dossier, on paper or as an electronic file. Keep track of appointments. Create a bibliography. Take research notes. As soon as you finish conducting an interview, spend 15-20 minutes writing down your impressions. Remember that you cannot know in advance what is important and that you will inevitably forget much of the experience if you do not record your observations. Describe the interviewee and the setting. Notice details. Be alert to nonverbal communication and to your own feelings and behavior. Reflect on the questions you asked and didn't ask. Also use this journal/dossier to reflect on the readings and class discussions and put them into dialogue with your interviews. You will be able to draw on these notes directly in your final papers and when you write more formal field notes which, unlike your journal/dossier entries, will be carefully edited for public consumption and will serve as introductions to your interviews.

Final Papers (due Friday, May 11, by 5pm at my office, Bishop 318): Papers should be 17-20 pages (Times New Roman, 12-point font, 1-inch margins) for graduate students, and 7-10 pages for undergraduate students. These papers can take a variety of forms, but they should include the following elements to a greater or lesser degree: a close reading of the interview narratives, exploring their complex and layered meanings; reflections on the dynamics of the interview experience and what you learned from these encounters; an analysis or interpretive account of the historical events or developments you studied, drawing on your interviews, interviews in other collections, and on secondary and written primary sources; thoughts about how your research relates to historical concepts and questions we have considered throughout the semester. Questions to consider: How has your research affected your own preconceptions? How does it relate to our readings and discussions? How might it challenge or deepen existing popular and scholarly narratives? How might it be used by individuals and communities confronting contemporary challenges and/or seeking to forward social change? For models, look to the examples we have read, especially chapters from *Bodies of Evidence* or articles from *The Oral History Review*.

\*Students in the MFA in documentary studies program may work out an alternate final project with the professor. These may take the form of documentary film, audio documentary, an online photography/oral history project (think *Mississippi Stories*) or other, similar projects that incorporate and process "raw" oral history interviews. A 3-4 page paper reflecting on the process will be required as well.

Final Presentations: We will discuss the format and structure of your presentations throughout the semester.

Participation: This course relies heavily on student-generated discussion, necessitating that students are always familiar with the text(s) under discussion, come to class prepared to ask questions or share ideas, respect the opinions and ideas of others in the class, listen deeply to classmates, and offer insightful questions or ideas. Quality (i.e. relevance and insightfulness) is more important than quantity, and listening is also a necessary component of participation.

If you feel nervous about participation or speaking up in class, come see me and we will strategize.

**Grading Scale:** I will grade all assignments on an A-F (+/-) scale. See <http://www.olemiss.edu/info/grading.html> for more details.

\*Late assignments will only be accepted with the prior approval of the instructor, and a grade penalty may apply.

**Attendance:** I expect students to attend all classes unless they are experiencing illness or some other emergency that has been communicated to the instructor. Students unable to attend class should email me before class begins to let me know why they will not be in attendance. More than one unexcused absence will result in a letter grade value deduction from the final grade for each absence.

**Plagiarism** will not be tolerated and will result in dismissal from the course.

## Part 1

Week One, January 22—Introductions

- 1) Josh Burford, [“Making Queer History Visible in North Carolina”](#)
- 2) Jonathan Ned Katz, [“Homophobia in Mississippi, 1958,”](#) in *Outhistory.org*
- 3) Chenault, Ditzler, Orr, “Discursive Memorials: Queer Histories in Atlanta’s Public Spaces,” in [Southern Spaces](#)

Week Two, January 29—Southern Queer Histories

- 1) John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*  
**Response Paper 1 (email by 10am and bring a hard copy to class)**

Week Three, February 5—Youth and Queer Desire in the Rural South

- 1) E. Patrick Johnson, Chapter One, “Some Bitter and Some Sweet: Growing Up Black and Gay in the South,” *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, An Oral History* (available as an ebook through the library catalogue)
- 2) Mary L. Gray, *Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*  
**Response Paper 2 (email by 10am and bring a hard copy to class)**

Week Four, February 12—Queer Oral History

- 1) Boyd and Ramírez, “Introduction: Close Encounters,” in *Bodies of Evidence*
- 2) From *Bodies of Evidence*:
  - Ch. 3, Daniel Rivers, “Queer Family Stories: Learning from Oral Histories with Lesbian Mothers and Gay Father from the Pre-Stonewall Era”
  - Ch. 5, Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Talking About Sex: Cheryl Gonzales and Rikki Streicher Tell Their Stories”
  - Ch. 6, Jason Ruiz, “Private Lives and Public History: On Excavating the Sexual Past in Queer Oral History Practice”
  - Ch. 8, Michael David Frankin, “Friendship, Institutions, Oral History”

- Ch. 10, Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, “Sharing Queer Authorities: Collaborating for Transgender Latina and Gay Latino Historical Meanings”
  - Ch. 13, Steve Estes, “Don’t Ask: Discussing Sexuality in the American Military and the Media”
  - Afterword, John D’Emilio, “If I Knew Then”
- 3) Jaime Cantrell, co-editor of *Out of the Closet, Into the Archive: Researching Sexual Histories* and LGBTQ Program Coordinator at the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, will visit class.

**Response Paper 3 (email by 10am and bring a hard copy to class)**

Week Five, February 19—Imagining a Project

- 1) T. Evan Faulkenbury and Aaron Hayworth, “The Carolina Gay Association, Oral History, and Coming Out at the University of North Carolina,” in *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 115-137.
- 2) Chesnut, Gable, and Anderson, “Atlanta’s Charis Books and More: Histories of a Feminist Space,” in *Southern Spaces*.
- 3) Listen to at least one interview from the list provided and write up an interview critique.

**Interview Critique (bring a hard copy to class)**

*Be prepared to discuss potential interviewees or areas of research interest.*

Part 2

Week Six, February 26—From Planning to Interviewing

Part 1

Nuts and Bolts of Research with Cecelia Parks. *For the first hour of class we will meet in the J. D. Williams Library, room 106 E.*

Part 2

Oral history workshop, I

- 1) Oral History Association, [“Principles and Best Practices”](#)
- 2) Southern Oral History Program, [“A Practical Guide to Oral History,”](#) pp. 5-9.
- 3) Charles T. Morrissey, “The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork,” *The Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 43-53.
- 4) Plan a meeting with Dr. Wilkerson to discuss your project.

Week Seven, March 5—Oral History Interviews as Research Process

Oral history workshop, II

Part 1

High-Quality Sound Recordings: A Tutorial with Andy Harper

Part 2

- 1) #Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Essays: Form and Meaning in Oral History*.
  - 2) “What Makes Queer Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1-24.
  - 3) #Patricia Leavy, Introduction in *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*
- Research Proposal Due in Class** (Be prepared to discuss it with the class.)

Spring Break, March 12

Week Eight, March 20—Politics, Activism, and Oral History

- 1) Anne Balay, “Surprised by Activism: The Effects of One Oral History on Its Queer Steel-Working Narrators,” *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 69-80.
- 2) Catherine Fosl and Lara Kelland, “‘Bring Your Whole Self to the Work’: Identity and Intersectional Politics in the Louisville LGBTQ Movement,” *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 138-152.
- 3) Stephen Vider and David S. Byers, “Queer Homeless Youth, Queer Activism in Transition,” in *Slate* (December 10, 2015).

Week Nine, March 26—Storytelling and Oral History in a Digital Age

- 1) “‘Confessing Animals,’ Redux: A Conversation Between Alexander Freund and Erin Jesse,” *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 314-324.
- 2) Alexander Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age,” *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (2015): 96-132.
- 3) Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, “Slowing Down to Listen in the Digital Age: How New Technology is Changing Oral History Practice,” *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 1 (2017): 94-112.
- 4) Explore the [Southwest Virginia LBBTQ+ History Project](#)

*Recommended Reading:* Alexander Freund, “Confessing Animals: Toward a Long Durée History of the Oral History Interview,” *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 1 (2014): 1-26.

**Friday March 30—Interviews Due. Upload files (except for consent forms) to Google Drive, and turn in hard copies of all materials at my office, Bishop 318, by 5pm.**

Week Ten, April 2— Interpreting Oral History Interviews

- 1) #Katharine Borland, “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (1998), pp. 320-32.
- 2) Kathleen Blee, “Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (Sep., 1993): 596-606.
- 3) Ch. Two, Karen Krahulik, “Remembering Provincetown: Oral History and Narrativity at Land’s End,” in *Bodies of Evidence*.
- 4) Interview Reflections
  - a) Listen to your partner’s interview and take notes; be prepared to share feedback in class
  - b) Be prepared to share part of your own interview—you can bring an audio clip with you, or you can read a segment of your interview, or “listen out loud”
- 5) In-class discussion of final presentation ideas. If you choose to work with a group or partner, you need to meet before class on April 9 and solidify your plans.

### Part 3

Week Eleven, April 9

Oral History and Performance

- 1) Della Pollock, "Telling the Told: Performing *Like a Family*," *The Oral History Review* 18 (Autumn 1990): 1-36.
- 2) #Natalie M. Fousekis, "Experiencing History: A Journey from Oral History to Performance," in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, ed. Della Pollock (2005), pp. 167-86.
- 3) Sarah McNamara and Viridiana Martínez, "[I Speak Inglés](#)"  
*Come to class prepared to discuss final presentations/exhibit ideas.*

Week Twelve, April 16

Planning for Presentations

Week Thirteen, April 23—Presentations/Exhibit

Week Fourteen, April 30—Reflections

**Final Interview Materials Due (Bring hard copies and upload files to Google Drive)**

Oxford Pride, May 3-5

Week of Final Exams

Final papers/projects due Friday, May 11, by 5pm at my office, Bishop 318.