Engaging NYC: Oral History and Ethnography
ASRC 4310, 6310/AMST 4410, 6410/ANTR 4711, 7711
Spring 2017
Tuesdays 10:10am-12:35pm
ASRC B01

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Course Description:
This engaged-learning course will impart proficiency in the research methods used by feminist ethnographers and oral historians studying marginalized urban communities. Grounded in ethnographic and oral history methodology, the course will engage students with communities in New York City in order to integrate activism, theory, and research. We will address questions such as: What are the challenges and rewards of prioritizing the life stories of Black women and marginalized youth? What is feminist ethnography? What problems arise when we use oral history as a tool for feminist scholarship? How can we use anthropology and oral history to collaborate with community partners dedicated to representing immigrants? What sorts of methodological traditions shape urban ethnographic texts? What is the significance of the oral tradition for African American culture? To what degree can an “outsider” gain membership in another community? How do differences in positionality (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, age) between the interviewer and the interviewee affect the production of ethnography and oral history? What ethical issues come into play when interviewing vulnerable subjects? Our focus will be on members of the African diaspora and our exploration will be geared toward examining oral history’s promise for advancing revisionist histories. While methodological texts will be used, our investigation will also be informed by anthropological and historical studies covering redlining in Brooklyn, Caribbean immigration, youth culture and popular representations, African Americans and Latin@s in the Bronx, and broader theoretical and ethnographic treatments which we will apply to understanding New York City’s inhabitants.

Objectives:
As a community-engaged methods course, a primary objective will be to enable student researchers to collaborate with community partners. Students will work with a community partner in Brooklyn, N.Y., to help meet partner needs, and to uncover and record the life stories of Caribbean immigrants. Students will gain proficiency in research
methods including: designing a research agenda, maintaining a field journal, conducting an oral history interview, and effectively transcribing interviews. Each student will conduct fieldwork and intern with our community partner in order to 1) contribute necessary skills; and 2) become participant observers. By the end of the semester each student will have immersed her/himself in a community based organization, interned with that organization, conducted an extensive oral history interview with a community member, and successfully transcribed an interview. This oral history interview will inform a final research paper. Students will learn the methods used by oral historians, applied anthropologists and feminist ethnographers in order to earn trust, familiarize themselves with community needs and identify/analyze social justice issues which will be highlighted in their final research paper. Therefore, the academic learning objectives of the course will integrate participant observation and oral history methodology with community-engaged learning.

Engaged Component: An Overview
CaribBEING, a cultural organization in Brooklyn, will serve as our community partner this semester. You will learn more about this organization as the course progresses, starting with a visit from its founder on February 7th. You will work independently and remotely over the course of the semester on specific projects for CaribBEING. Your work will culminate in an immersion trip over Spring Break, and with a final oral history project, which we will hopefully showcase in New York City at the close of semester. Your specific collaborations with CaribBEING will depend on their needs, and on your skills and interests. Collaborative work may include but is not limited to:

- Assisting with events and installments at NYC Museums
- Developing programming for CaribBEING House
- Enhancing CaribBEING’s social media presence
- Identifying and addressing social justice issues relevant to Caribbean immigrants in New York City

Required Books:


Engaging NYC


Additional articles and shorter selections are marked “B” and are on Blackboard under “Course Documents.”

**Course Requirements:**
Up-to-date reading of required materials, class participation 15%
Community-Engaged Field Placement 25%
Field Journal Entries 20%
Transcribed Interview 10%
Research Paper Proposal 5%
Final Research Paper 25%
IRB Approval (Will not be graded but must be granted before interview)
Presentation (Will count towards final paper grade)

**Course policies:**
1. **Attendance:** Because this is a weekly seminar your attendance is required at every class meeting. Please be on time. I have factored time for your independent work into the course schedule. Students who are unavoidably absent from class due to religious observances, family emergency or illness will be excused from class provided that they speak with me promptly and provide a note from their dean. More than two unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your participation grade by one percentage point for each additional class missed. Frequent absences will detrimentally influence your command of the course’s materials and concepts, and will ultimately affect all aspects of your grade. Three late arrivals will equal one unexcused absence. It is disruptive to your classmates if you come to class late. If you have special circumstances that force you to arrive late, please speak with me. I will hand out a sign-in/attendance sheet at the start of every class. It is your responsibility to make sure that you sign in for every class that you attend.

2. **Class Participation:** Participation consists of being an active member of discussions during all class meetings; being prepared to speak in every class; composing questions to ask our guests; and being able to discuss your journal entries.

3. **Using computers and hand-held devices:** A number of our in-class exercises will encourage you to use your computer or iPad. However, these devices are only to be used for reading course materials, note-taking or for prompted exercises. You should not be texting, emailing, or going online while in class. If you violate this policy you will be marked absent for the day.

4. **Submitting written work:** All written assignments are to be submitted on the day that they are due, by the start of class (unless otherwise indicated). Late journal entries will not be accepted. Other late assignments may either be refused entirely
or marked down. Students who have experienced computer or printer problems should submit a draft of the paper by the stated deadline and turn in their final version as soon as possible in order to receive full credit for their work. Back up your work.

5. **Independent work/Community Placement:** This course requires you to work independently on community collaborations. You should approach this collaboration with maturity and respect. If, at any point, you are unable to honor your commitment to our community partner, you need to speak with Elena Guzman and/or with me immediately. Keep in mind, however, that not meeting the collaborative requirement will affect all aspects of your grade and an inability to honor this component signals that you may very well need to drop the course.

6. **Academic Honesty:** Anything you submit comes with your implicit pledge that the work is your own. I expect any request you make for an academic exception, given illness, family issues, personal problems, conflicting obligations, and the like, to be based on truth. In an academic institution, few offenses against the community and the integrity of the faculty-student relationship are as serious as academic dishonesty. Violations of academic integrity undermine trust and will be severely penalized. Because many people learn best when they learn together, of course you are encouraged to discuss the readings, concepts, and assignments with other members of the class. **But you are also expected to present your own original work.** Plagiarism, fabrication, cheating, and collusion are violations of academic integrity. If you have any questions at all regarding this, please ask me.

**Course Schedule:**

**Week 1: 1/31**  
Why Feminist Oral History? Why Feminist Ethnography?  
-Introductions.

**Week 2: 2/7**  
Meeting Our Community Partner  
-Read: Conduct independent online research on CaribBEING. What information can you find about this organization?  
-Visitor: Shelley V. Worrell, founder of CaribBEING will visit class.

**Week 3: 2/14**  
History and Oral History  
-Read: Chapter 1, “Introduction to the In-Depth Interview” in *Yow*.

**Week 4: 2/21**  
February Break
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Week 5: 2/28  An Ethnographic Approach to NYC
-Read: LaBennett, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5
-Submit: Journal Entry #1

Week 6: 3/7  Feminist Approaches to Oral History and Ethnography
-Read: Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6 in Davis and Craven.
Read: “A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview,” in Gluck.
-Listen to: Joan Morgan interview, Bronx African American History Project [B]
-Advance: Work independently

Week 7: 3/14  Ethics and Authority
-Read: “Ethical Issues in Oral History” and “Interpersonal Relations in the Interview” in Yow.
-Submit: Journal Entry #2, including overview of remote project

Week 8: 3/21  Broader Ethnographic Approaches
-Class will not meet today, instead you will attend Deborah A. Thomas’ lecture on 3/23 at 4:30pm in ASRC
-Advance: Work independently

Week 9: 3/28  What Does it Mean to do Oral History in New York City?
-Read: “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses” in Gluck.
-Read: “Preparation for the Interview Project” and “Interviewing Techniques” in Yow.
-Listen to: Caridad de La Luz, “La Bruja” interview [B].
-Submit: Journal Entry #3

Week 10: 4/4  Spring Break—Travel to NYC

Week 11: 4/11  Reflect on Fieldwork
-Class will not meet today, instead you will attend events for the On/By Black Women/Black Girls symposium, including a film screening on 4/22
-Advance: Work independently

Week 12: 4/18  Analyzing and Transcribing an Interview
- Read: “Analysis and Interpretation,” “Conclusion of the Project” in Yow.
- Read: Caridad de La Luz, a.k.a. “La Bruja” interview, Bronx African American History Project [B]
- Submit: Field Journal Entry #4 and transcribed interview

*Saturday, 4/22, Required Event: Broader Ethnographic Worlds
Attend: 1pm, Special Screening of Daughters of the Dust, Cornell Cinema, with discussion by Prof. Samantha Sheppard. There is a $5 charge for this film.

Week 13: 4/25 Workshop for Final Projects

Week 14: 5/2 Presentations

Week 15: 5/9 Presentations
- Submit: Transcribed Interview and Paper Proposal

Final Paper: Due Date TBA