

AMCV1903G
Oral History and Community Memory
Fall 2011

Course information:

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This class introduces a variety of means for documenting, presenting, and exploring community history and memories of place. The class will give students an opportunity to explore the theory and methods of community collecting. Using oral history and museum methods, students will help to build a collection of stories and objects related to Mashapaug Pond and nearby Elmwood and Reservoir neighborhoods, and will use these materials to create a temporary community museum at the site.

Mashapaug Pond, the largest body of fresh water in Providence, has been a sought-after site for settlement by different cultures for centuries. In 1890, the Gorham Silver Manufacturing Co. was built on its northeastern shore, operating until 1967 when Textron purchased it. Today the factory has been demolished but Gorham's legacy remains in memory and in environmental degradation of the site.

The class will begin by considering the field of oral history, community art, and local history, engaging some of the theoretical, interpretive, ethical, and practical debates confronted by scholars and practitioners. Then students will gain hands-on instruction to conduct life history interviews, to collect and display personal objects, and to develop an exhibit and public program. Finally, students will open a pop-up museum displaying the materials they collected, using them to engage local residents in historical and contemporary issues.

The class is taught by two instructors: Holly Ewald is a community artist and a visual artist with a particular interest in environmental issues. She has initiated numerous locally based projects in Rhode Island, working with other artists, scholars, and community residents to explore the multilayered history of place. In 2007, she began working with students near Mashapaug Pond to create visual signage and public education projects to warn residents of environmental risks in the area. In 2008, she founded the Urban Pond Procession, an annual event to call attention to health issues of Mashapaug Pond. Anne Valk is an oral historian and associate director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities. She has worked on community oral history projects in Rhode Island and elsewhere, building archival collections of personal

stories and presenting community histories through exhibits, documentaries, and other techniques.

Requirements: This is a collaborative, project-based class that will demand your time and attention in ways that differ from many other university classes. Primarily, oral history and community collection are social, and not solitary, pursuits that entail the development of personal and professional relationships between interviewers and collectors (you), interviewees, and the community groups with which you work. The parties involved in these relationships will have expectations of you in addition to those of your instructors. They expect that you will act in a sensitive, responsible and courteous manner; that you follow through on any promises and commitments; and that your work will contribute to the production of materials and programs that will have a public benefit. As a student in this class, you must take these obligations seriously and be committed to the goals of scholarship and community building entailed in the course. In addition, your classmates will depend on you to act considerately and cooperatively, since you will be working together to build a collection of materials and a museum. In more concrete ways, too, you will share equipment, information, and materials, an arrangement that will require you to be punctual, well organized, and responsible to each other. You will find the results make this collaboration worth while.

Attendance and participation are vital to the class success, along with the completion of assignments on time. Many of the class meetings and other activities will occur off-campus and in the area around Mashapaug Ponds. As a student in this class, you must be willing and able to travel to this location on a regular basis. [Note: the area near Mashapaug Pond is easily available by public transportation, free with your Brown ID. RIPTA bus routes #21 and #22 both travel from Kennedy Plaza in downtown Providence to Mashapaug Commons. See <http://www.ripta.com> for schedule information.]

Grades will be based on the quality of your engagement in the course work, including preparing for and participating in class, conducting interviews, and contributing to the final project. You should attend class prepared to discuss topics that emerge from the assigned readings as well as your ongoing work and the work of others (for example, by sharing portions of your transcripts and other materials, and providing updates of your research).

Please note that the syllabus may be revised as the class progresses in order to more accurately reflect project demands or other circumstances. Changes will be announced in class and posted to the class wiki at <http://wiki.brown.edu>

Assignments:

- **Attendance and participation** [20%]: because you will be working collaboratively and cooperatively to conduct interviews with members of Mashapaug Pond community, and to prepare final presentations, any absences will cause an

unwelcome inconvenience to your classmates. Therefore, attendance is mandatory at all scheduled class sessions. In addition, all students are expected to help staff the museum space during open hours, including talking to people who contribute objects and attending opening events and meetings.

- **Interviews [30%]:** each student must conduct a minimum of two interviews with former and current residents, business owners, and stake holders from the neighborhood. All interviews must be fully documented, with completed consent forms, written transcripts, and supporting materials in order to be used by other students in this class and archived at the end of the semester.
- **Interview critique [10%]:** students will read and listen to an interview conducted by one of their classmates. You will write an essay that focuses on methods and content, offering critiques to assist your classmate in improving their techniques and reflecting on what the interview adds to your knowledge of Mashapaug Pond.
- **Research projects [10%]:** each student will complete two short research assignments. One focuses on the history of the Mashapaug Pond area; the other focuses on public/community art projects. These projects will be shared with the class.
- **Final project [30%]:** students will work collaboratively to present the interviews and materials collected by the class through the production of a temporary museum exhibit. Completion of this project will require students to work in teams and meet regularly outside of class time. Team assignments will be determined in class on September 27th.

Graduate Students: In addition to completing the above requirements, graduate students will be expected to turn in a written final project – a proposal for further projects that might derive from this semester’s work. These proposals could entail additional research, programs, or public presentations based on the interviews and materials and connections that developed this semester. The final project should take the form of a proposal to the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities major grants program (<http://www.rihumanities.org/grants/>) or to one of the grants programs administered by the NEH or NEA. As closely as possible, students should follow the grant program guidelines, including submitting a project narrative, budget, and describing other aspects of the proposed project.

Readings:

The following books are required for this class:

- Donna M. DeBlasio, et al, *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History* (Brown University bookstore)
- Perks and Thompson, *Oral History Reader*, Second Edition (Brown University bookstore)

Also, assorted articles available on the class wiki (these readings are marked on the syllabus with an *) and hard copies are available for use in the JNBC library.

CLASS SCHEDULE

September 13: Introductions and an overview

September 20: Introduction to Mashapaug Pond, past and present

NOTE: Class will meet for a walking tour of the area around Mashapaug Pond. Students should assemble on-site at 4:00 to begin our exploration.

Read:

- Dolores Hayden, "Urban Landscape History"*
- Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place, chapters "Intimate Experiences of Place", "Attachment to Homeland"*
- Lucy Lippard, Lure of the Local, chapters "All Over the Place", "Death by Geography"*
- Andrew Hurley, "Making a Place for Nature"*

September 27: Oral history and memory

Read:

- *Oral History Reader* (hereafter OHR), chapters by: Paul Thompson (p. 25); Alessandro Portelli (p. 32); Ruth Finnegan (p. 177); Mark Roseman (p. 230); Jane Mace (p. 374)
- DeBlasio, et al., chapter 1-3

Receive research questions for 10/11

Present final project and discuss goals

October 4: Community and environmental art

Read:

- Holly Ewald and Michael Bell, *Languages of the Land* (JNBC library)
- Tom Finkelpearl, editor Dialogues in Public Art, chapters on: "Interview: Paulo Freire: Discussing Dialogue", "Interview: Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel on Mnemonics", "Interview: Mel Chin on Revival Field" *
- Claire Bishop, editor, Participation, chapter on "Nicolas Bourriaud Relational Aesthetics"*
- The Quiet in the Land, chapters on: "A Flower Does Not Talk" "Ann Hamilton, Meditation Boat"*
- Aisha Pasha, "Community Arts and Sustainability, Promoting Environmental Awareness and the Arts in Providence Communities" Brown University Thesis, May 2010*

October 11: Doing oral history

Read:

- Oral History Association Evaluation Guidelines at <http://www.oralhistory.org>
- DeBlasio, et al., chapters 4-8

- OHR, chapters by: Studs Terkel (p. 123); Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, "Learning to Listen," (p. 129); Hugo Slim, "Ways of Listening," (p. 143)
- Schrag, Zachary M. "Ethical Training for Oral Historians." *Perspectives Online* 45:3 (March 2007), at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2007/0703/index.cfm>

Due: Research Project #1: Research and write a 2-3 page essay on a topic (assigned) related to the history of Mashapaug Pond and vicinity. Topics will be distributed in class. Your paper should be well-researched and include a bibliography. Papers should be posted to the class wiki prior to class.

October 18: Becoming acquainted with Mashapaug Pond. Community members will visit the class to answer questions about the area.

Read:

- "Elmwood, Providence," Statewide Historic Preservation Report, P-P-3, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, at http://www.preservation.ri.gov/pdfs_downloads/survey_pdfs/prov_elmwood.pdf
- Gorham Silver 1831-1981, "Introduction"*
- "Reservoir Triangle 1994, Know Your Neighborhood Booklet"*
- <http://www.urbanpondprocession.org>
- <http://annaandupp.tumblr.com/>

Discuss final project materials: press release, flyer, visual design

October 25: Working with communities, working in communities.

Read:

- OHR, chapters by Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities," (p. 261); Daniel Kerr (p. 485)
- Paul De Bruyne & Pascal Gielen (eds.), Community Art, The Politics of Trespassing, "Introduction Between the Individual and the Common", "Mapping Community Art, "The Vernissage by the MarthA!tentatief, A Play about Untameable Life at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century"*
- One Place After Another, Miwon Kwon, "The Site of Community" and "The (Un)sitings of Community"*
- Lorraine Sitzia, "Making a Community Oral History Book," and Nick Osmond, "The Growth of a Community Oral History Archive," in *Oral History* (v. 26, 1998)*

November 1: Community collecting

Read:

- Denver Community Museum, <http://www.denvercommunitymuseum.org/>
- Nina Simon, The Participatory Museum, chapter 6, available at <http://www.participatorymuseum.org>
- First Person Museum, Philadelphia, <http://museum.firstpersonarts.org/>

Due: Interview #1

November 8: Curating a community museum – building a collection, writing labels, setting up an exhibit, and more

Read:

- Larry Borowsky, *Telling a Story in 100 Words: Effective Label Copy**
- <http://www.ind-x.org/talks/kathleen-mclean-talks-about-science-museum-exhibitions> (a 15-minute video about exhibit design and more)
- DeBlasio, et al., chapter 11
- OHR: Anna Green (p. 416); Toby Butler (p. 425)

Due: Research Project #2. Find and profile a community collection project that relates to the work of this class. Write a 2 page description that summarizes the project, assesses the forms of community engagement, and considers how this project is a useful model for our class. If applicable, include a link to information about that project on the class wiki. Come to class prepared to make a short (5 minute) presentation about that project, its applicability to this class, and what the class can learn from this other example.

November 15: Review and planning

Read/review: your classmates' interviews

Due: Interview critique

November 22: Exhibit preparation

November 29: Exhibit preparation

Due: Interview #2

December 6: Exhibit installation

December 9 (FRIDAY): Exhibit opening and community reception

December 13: Evaluation and reflection

December 19: Graduate students final projects due