

LST737— Biography, Life History & Culture
Spring 2006

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES This course is about a particular kind of personal narrative—life stories. It is about how people tell their life stories, and write them; how culture and gender, among other variables, affect the telling; how social scientists collect, record, and write peoples' life stories. In particular we will focus on the "life history," the life story as told to another person who edits it and thus shapes it as text. We will consider how the life history has evolved in anthropology and oral history; the various forms that life histories take; the life history as a collaborative venture; issues in life history research such as memory, "truth," authenticity and ownership; and the ethics of life history research and publication.

This is primarily a hands-on course with a focus on methodology. Your main project for the course is a life history of another person. We will be discussing in class critical issues involved in such research: the selection of life history interviewees, how to do life history interviewing; the processing of life history interviews, their editing and presentation as narrative; analysis of life history materials. We will be also be seeing a selection of video material that deals with lives.

This course raises many questions, both about the life process as it affects us personally, and about the telling and use of life stories. Among the questions we will be considering throughout the semester are: How do we change as we grow older? What significant life stages can we identify as we try to understand life narratives? How do our perceptions of ourselves change as we move from one stage of life to the next. How does the life history allow us to know and understand another person, another culture, another period? What do we seek in life histories? What do we gain from them; of what use and interest are they? How do life histories apply to each of your particular fields of interest?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

(Guidelines for evaluation will be handed out for graded assignments)

YOUR GRADE WILL BE BASED ON BOTH WRITTEN AND ORAL MATERIALS, AS FOLLOWS.

- 1 a life history paper (approximately 25-35pp, presenting the life story of an individual, with your analysis and commentary. The paper is based on a series of tape-recorded interviews with an interviewee. The parameters of the paper will be discussed in detail in class **50%**
2. participation in class discussion and class sessions on interviewing and writing life histories **15%**
3. a journal (kept throughout your life history interviewing) comprising a record of the context/setting of each of the interviews and your reflections on the interviewing process—how you and your interviewee handled each interview, your developing relationship with the

interviewee, and your own triumphs and failures as an interviewer. (The format for this will be discussed in class) **15%**

4. a critical review of the life history book you selected to read (see required readings). **10%**
5. A class presentation of the life history you are researching (approximately 15-20 minutes). Because of time constraints, your presentation should be focused on some aspect of the life history—a chronological period of the individual's life (e.g. childhood), an event that has shaped the person's life (e.g. recovery from or coping with a major illness, divorce or death of spouse, returning to school to complete one's education after a hiatus, involvement in a particular public cause, some important self-discovery discovery, etc.), or a theme running through the person's life (e.g. introversion, determination, achievement orientation, etc.). The aim of this presentation is to acquaint class members with your research and with your interviewee as an individual. **10%**

ATTENDANCE This class depends upon your active participation; your regular attendance is essential to your successful completion of the assignments and life history project for this course. If you miss a class because of illness, emergency, or college sponsored event at which your attendance is required, please notify the instructor the day of your absence (by phone or e-mail). Missed classroom assignments will have to be made up. At the same time, because this is a seminar class with a lengthy final product, some class time will be spent independently at working on your final papers.

There is much to be covered each class period, so it is important that you arrive on time.

READINGS

Required Text

Ives, Edward

1995 *The Tape Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History* (2nd edition). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Required Readings on ANGEL

Atlas, James

1996 "The Age of the Literary Memoir is Now," *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (May 12, 1996):25-27.

Angrosino, Michael.

1989 "The Two Lives of Rebecca Levenstone: Symbolic Interaction in the Generation of the Life History," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 45(3):315-326.

Blackman, Margaret

1991 "The Individual and Beyond: Reflections on the Life History Process," *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 16(2):56-62.

- 1992 "Returning Home: Life Histories and the Native Community," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 2(1): 49-59.
- Bovenzi, Lisa
 2000 "The Life and History of James Alexander Tyrrell." Paper written for SSC 650, SUNY Brockport (46pp).
- Cheever, Susan
 1996 "Eating, Breathing, Drinking." *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (May 12, 1996):46-48.
- Ives, Peter M.
 1999 "The Whole Truth" From "Roundtable: Literal Versus Invented Truth in Memoir," *Fourth Genre* 1(1):147-156
- Kaufman, Sharon R.
 1986 Chapter 2: "Themes in the Life Story." *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Langness, L.L. and Gelya Frank
 1981 Chapter 2: "Methods." *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography*. Novato: Chandler and Sharp.
- McBeth, Sally
 1993 "Myths of Objectivity and the Collaborative Process in Life History Research. In *When They Read What We Write*, pp.144-62. Edited by Caroline B. Brettell. Westport: Bergin and Garvey.
- Minister, Kristina
 1991 "A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview." In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, pp.27-41. Edited by Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge.
- Mulligan, Mary C.
 1999 "A Gathering of Arms: A Life History by William J. Mulligan, Sr." Paper written for SSC 650, SUNY Brockport (60pp).
- Patai, Daphne
 1987 "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake." *International Journal of Oral History* 8(1):5-27.
- Rainer, Tristine
 1997 Chapter 10: "Portraying Others: Casting Your Story from Life," *Your Life as Story: Writing the New Autobiography* New York: G.P. Putnam Sons..
- Shostak, Marjorie
 1989 "'What the Wind Won't Take Away': The Genesis of *Nisa—The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. In *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory*

and Personal Narratives, pp. 228-240. Edited by The Personal Narratives Group. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

1992 "Nisa Revisited," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 2(1):19-28.

Singer, Louis

2000 "A Life History: Oscar W. Wiegell: From a Small Farm to Executive at the Eastman Kodak Company". Paper written for SSC 650, SUNY Brockport (56pp).

Stalker, Mary

2000 "Susan Lea Casey: 'A Struggle to Survive'". Paper written for SSC 650, SUNY Brockport (56pp).

Life Histories for Book Review Assignment (DON'T PANIC! YOU ONLY HAVE TO READ ONE OF THE FOLLOWING). THEY WILL BE AT THE CIRCULATION DESK AT DRAKE LIBRARY ON THE "HOLD" SHELF FOR YOU TO BROWSE THOUGH. WHEN YOU'VE SELECTED THE ONE YOU WANT TO READ, YOU CAN CHECK IT OUT.

Barnes, Virginia Lee and Janice Boddy

1994 *Aman: The Story of a Somali Girl..* New York: Vintage Books.

Behar, Ruth

1992 *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Blackman, Margaret

1992 *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Crapanzano, Vincent

1980 *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cruikshank, Julie

1990 *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Freeman, James

1979 *Untouchable: An Indian Life History.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Gmelch, Sharon

1986 *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Hughes, Charles

1974 *Eskimo Boyhood: An Autobiography in Psychosocial Perspective.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Kelley, Jane Holden

1978 *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Krech, Shepard

1981 *Praise the Bridge that Carries You Over: The Life of Joseph L. Sutton*. Cambridge: Schenkman.

Lewis, Oscar

1961 *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Random House.

Neihardt, John

1961 *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Shostak, Marjorie

1981 *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Tanaka, Michiko

1981 *Through Harsh Winters: The Life of a Japanese Immigrant Woman*. Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp.

Underhill, Ruth

1979 *Papago Woman*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

YOU ARE ALSO EXPECTED TO LOCATE READINGS ON YOUR OWN THAT WILL FACILITATE LEARNING ABOUT THE BACKGROUND OF YOUR LIFE HISTORY SUBJECT AND INTERPRETING THE LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE. A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF JOURNAL ARTICLES AND BOOKS THAT DEAL WITH VARIOUS ASPECTS OF LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH AND WRITING IS INCLUDED ON ANGEL. RELEVANT RESOURCES WILL BE DISCUSSED IN CLASS.

TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE

January 25

introduction to course and classmates

What's a life story? Life Histories, Memoir, Autobiography, Biography. Why read/write life stories?

READINGS: (carried over to next week) Shostak "What the Wind Won't Take Away"; Atlas, "The Age of the Literary Memoir is Now;" Cheever, "'Eating, Breathing, Drinking."

THINK ABOUT SELECTING A PERSON WHOSE LIFE HISTORY YOU WOULD LIKE TO RESEARCH

February 1

METHODS I: Introduction to tape recorders and life history interviewing. Finding the life story—the good and the not so good life history interviewee..

READINGS: Langness and Frank: II (Methods); Ives (Chapter 1)

February 8

Ethics in life history research
Workshop on interviewing I

FIRST MEETING WITH LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWEE TO EXPLAIN THE PROJECT; FIRST INTERVIEW

READINGS: Select a life history book from the library list above and begin reading.

February 15

Workshop on Interviewing II: life history topics, organizing the interview, eliciting descriptive answers, organizational strategies for interviewing (life cycle, etc.), asking followup questions, common problems in life history interviewing.

READINGS: Ives (Chapter 2).

SECOND INTERVIEW

February 22

Video: Hillary's Class.
Interviewing, cont.
Discussion and sharing of journals

READINGS: [Student papers from past classes.] Stalker, "Susan Lea Casey: 'A Struggle to Survive'"; Bovenzi, "The Life and History of James Alexander Tyrrell." Continue reading your life history book.

CONTINUE INTERVIEWING

March 1

Life narratives. Workshop exercises on written expressions of the self

Discussion of first interview; BRING TAPES TO CLASS.
Discussion of life history book review assignment

READINGS: Continue reading your life history. Rainer, "Portraying Others: Casting Your Story from Life"

March 8

Processing life history interviews. Tape catalogues, transcripts, and other devices for getting at oral data. How to complete a year's work in one semester. How to do background Research for your life history. Library resources on life history.

READINGS: Ives (Chapter 3)

ASSIGNMENT: Critical review of life history due

CATALOGUE TAPED INTERVIEWS; BEGIN TRANSCRIBING IMPORTANT SECTIONS.

March 15 spring break BEGIN PUTTING TOGETHER NARRATIVE FROM TRANSCRIPTS

March 22

What's in a life history? The life history as a western genre; telling life stories in other cultures. Life stories and the "problem" of memory; life history as performance

Discussion and sharing of journals

READINGS: Blackman, "The Individual and Beyond;" Angrosino, "The Two Lives of Rebecca Levenstone; Ives (Peter) "The Whole Truth" From "Roundtable: Literal Versus Invented Truth in Memoir,"

BRING YOUR TAPES, QUESTIONS, CONCERNS REGARDING TRANSCRIBING, EDITING TO CLASS

CONTINUE INTERVIEWING AND TRANSCRIBING TAPES

March 28

Gender and the telling of life stories

READINGS: Minister "A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview"; Singer, "A Life History: Oscar W. Wieggl: From a Small Farm to Executive at the Eastman Kodak Company"

Video: "Acting Our Age"

April 5

Life stages and life histories.

Video: "42 Up" (selected portions)

READINGS: Kaufman, "Themes in the Life Story."

NARRATIVE SHOULD BE ROUGHLY PUT TOGETHER; FURTHER INTERVIEWS TO FILL GAPS IN NARRATIVE

April 12

No class. Attend Scholars Day. Continue to work on projects

COMPLETE FOLLOWUP INTERVIEWS AND TRANSCRIPTION

April 19

Putting it all together; writing and analyzing the life history. Whose story is it and for whom is it written? The anthropologist as author, editor, commentator, significant other.

Discussion and sharing of journals

READINGS: McBeth, "Myths of Objectivity and the Collaborative Process in Life History Research. Mulligan, "A Gathering of Arms: A Life History by William J. Mulligan, Sr."

ASSIGNMENT: Interviewing journal due

CONTINUE WRITING THE LIFE HISTORY

April 26

The ethics of the life history process; bringing life histories to closure. The Afterlife of the life history—the end of the project and beyond, post-publication discourse

Discussion of journals.

READINGS: Patai, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives"; Blackman "Returning Home;" Shostak "Nisa Revisited"

ROUGH DRAFTS OF LIFE HISTORIES DUE (OPTIONAL)

May 3

CLASS PRESENTATIONS; ROUGH DRAFTS RETURNED

May 10

FINAL PAPER DUE