

HIST 301 History of Mass Incarceration, Prisons and Policing
Instructor: Robert T. Chase
DUE: Oct14

Creating Your Research Trail, Part II

Asking Questions and Familiarizing Yourself with Secondary Literature and On-line Oral Histories

The following assignment requires you to follow each exercise and turn it back to me on a typewritten sheet the following week. This is the second of three total exercises, and it focuses on the creation of a “research question” and on your secondary reading material. It also introduces you to online and available oral histories. Taken together, these three “research trail” exercises will form your “research journal,” which is to be turned in along with your final paper. To do this assignment, you must get some secondary sources out of the library and begin to do oral histories via the Library Website for this class and/or History 401: Black Power.

EXERCISE 1: Form a Question: Historians often began their research by posing a series of questions. Forming a series of questions allows you to form an initial research base and organize your thinking and historical approach. Your research question will therefore help you to focus your research and sharpen your historical critique. If your topic, for instance, is on women and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, you could start by asking a broad question, such as: What was the role of women in the Montgomery bus boycott? You would need to sharpen your topic, however, with a series of narrower questions. So you might ask, for example, why did the media celebrate Martin Luther King’s arrival and why were women relegated to a lesser known role in the bus boycott, despite the fact that it was largely women’s groups and grass-roots organizers who organized the effort? Or, alternatively, you might ask: How did the bus boycott affect the women who participated in it, both at the time and after? How did it change their day-to-day lives?

A research question should pose a historical problem and encourage you to consider other questions in pursuit of a possible answer. Write down your first research question in the broadest terms (HELPFUL HINT: Your first question might derive from your initial interest in choosing your particular topic. What is it about your topic that interests you most, and what is it that you would like to understand about your topic?).

EXERCISE 2: Begin to read and familiarize yourself with your secondary literature.

Drawing from the five books and two research articles that you found last week, take some time to consider what has already been written on your topic. Begin to read the material written on your topic, starting with the introduction of each book. After you read the introduction of at least two of your books and read in its entirety one of your articles, write a summary sentence for each item that describes how the author approached your topic. Continue to read these books and consider if you want to continue with your chosen topic, and if so how you might want to reframe your research question to fit your growing knowledge of the secondary work on your topic. Write notes, ideas, and observations in your “research journal” about each work, noting particularly how the author approaches your topic and how your paper might differ with the author.

EXERCISE 3: Drawing from your broad research question and from the reading you have started in the secondary literature, develop two other questions that can help narrow your research. One of those questions should address the current literature and scholarship on your topic. You should think about a question that either offers a new interpretation or perspective on a topic already covered, or poses a question about a subject not yet covered by the work that you have seen so far.

EXERCISE 4. Finding and using On-line Oral Histories: Following the civil rights movement and the historical turn towards “bottom-up” methodologies, oral history increasingly gained acceptance among historians as an important and accepted tool for historical scholarship. Oral history has democratized history by allowing people that are often on the fringe of society to have their voice and story documented and interpreted with the same level of historical rigor that historians employ to consider the thoughts and lives of intellectuals, elites, and politicians. Unlike many written sources, oral history allows historians to consider historical actors and voices that are often overlooked by the written record, particularly: women, immigrants, laborers, racial and ethnic minorities, colonized people, gays and lesbians, and those on the fringe of society. Oral histories are thus particularly important for the study of the grass roots civil rights revolution.

This assignment requires you to go online to an oral history repository, pick an oral history that is interesting to you and relevant to your topic, and write a one-paragraph summary of the oral history’s content and how it might add to your paper topic. Please bring in your oral history to class so we can discuss it.

On-Line and Available Transcripts of Oral Histories-Library Website

Prison Public Memory Project

State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill (PA) Riot -- Oral Histories

Civil Rights in Black and Brown, Texas Christian University

Texas After Violence Project

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Center for History and New Media

Oral History Online

Description: This is the most comprehensive resource for oral histories online, which includes links to oral history repositories and on-line transcripts on a number of topics.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/online.html>

The Voices of Civil Rights

Description: The AARP, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), and the Library of Congress have made available online oral histories of civil rights participants.

<http://www.voicesofcivilrights.org/voices.html>

Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky Oral History Project

http://205.204.134.47/civil_rights_mvt/

Oral Histories of the American South

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/>

Description: "Oral Histories of the American South" is a three-year project to select, digitize and make available 500 oral history interviews gathered by the Southern Oral History Program (SOHP).

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Presidential Oral History Collection, Austin, Texas

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/biopage.asp>

Description: This oral history archive might allow you to look at the presidential efforts to gain passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Institute of Texan Cultures

Texan Cultures Research Library

<http://www.texancultures.utsa.edu/memories/htms/OralHisFrameset.htm>

- History of San Antonio since 1968—interviews with San Antonio community leaders
- The Civil Rights movement in Texas—interviews with participants of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s

Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive

McCain Library and Archive, University of Southern Mississippi

<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spscol/crda/>

Will the Circle be Unbroken: Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement, Southern Regional Council

<http://unbrokencircle.org/>

Other Research & Associational Links:

Oral History Association

Texas Oral History Association, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University

University of Connecticut Center for Oral History

Oral History Review

Institute of Oral History at University of Texas, El Paso

Oral History Program, Utah State University

Oral History Project, University of Alaska

Oral History Research Center, Indiana University

Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley

Oral History Discussion List:

Students may also sign-up for the semester to the Oral History Discussion list and follow and read the ongoing discussions. If you wish to submit a specific inquiry to Oral History-list to find a specific oral history, please let me know so I can help you craft the request. We will discuss the topics on this list in our next class meeting.

H-Oralhist is the oral history discussion list. To subscribe to the H-Oralhist send a message to: listserv@h-net.msu.edu with no subject and with the following text:

SUBSCRIBE H-ORALHIST firstname lastname affiliation