

**SST 334/534**  
**STUDIES IN FIELD WORK**  
SPRING 2008  
WEDNESDAY, 4-6:30, 105 BARNARD OBSERVATORY

Instructor: David Wharton (with expert assistance from Andy Harper and the staff at The Center for Documentary Projects)

Office Hours: Wednesday, 10-12 & 1-3 (also by appointment)

Office: 217 Barnard Observatory

Contact Info: [dwharton@olemiss.edu](mailto:dwharton@olemiss.edu), 915-5993

**Course Objectives:** This course will provide students an opportunity to undertake documentary fieldwork projects in a self-aware and self-critical manner. It will have two points of emphasis: 1) for students to come to grips with the intellectual, emotional, ethical, and practical processes by which fieldworkers try to make their first-person field experiences meaningful to others; and 2) for students to complete a meaningful fieldwork project of their own.

**Course Description:** Class sessions will include discussions of the fieldworker as oral historian, participant observer, cultural analyst/critic, recorder of visual data, and writer. The course will pay special attention to the individual fieldworker's relationship with the subject(s) of his/her study. Students will complete a pair of short oral history assignments early in the semester. For the remainder of the term, class meetings will consist of discussing various documentary projects about the American South and introductory workshops in film-making techniques, while students work on a final fieldwork project (a short film, in most cases) outside of class.

**Required Texts:**

James Agee & Walker Evans: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Robert Coles: Doing Documentary Work

Edward D. Ives: The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History (photocopies – no need to purchase)

Hortense Powdermaker: Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist

Rodger Brown: Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit: The Culture of Festivals in the American South

Dennis Covington: Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia

**Required Materials:**

Students will need access to a portable audio recorder in good working order. This should be a standard cassette tape recorder or, preferably, a digital recorder capable of recording to its own hard drive or to a flash card. It should **NOT** be micro- or mini-tape recorder; nor should it be a digital recorder intended primarily as a dictation device.

**Required Work:**

Oral Histories: Students will complete two sets of interviews—one with another member of the class, the with someone who is not associated with the University—along with transcriptions and/or tape logs of those interviews.

Fieldwork Journals: Students will keep an ongoing journal about their fieldwork experiences. These journals should include 1) notes taken during (or shortly after) field contact and 2) your

thoughts about your field experiences after you've had some time to reflect upon them. Typed versions of these journals will be due at the end of the semester.

Final Projects: Final fieldwork projects will be due at the end of the semester. Most students will be expected to work in small teams (3-4 people) who will produce a short film that the rest of the class will view during our final exam slot in May. Students who would prefer to work individually on another type of project will need to confer with the instructor as early in the semester as possible.

**Grading Criteria & Philosophy:**

- 20% - oral history projects (2)
- 20% - attendance and class participation
- 40% - final project
- 20% - fieldwork journal

- A = excellent work
- B = good work
- C = adequate work
- D = inadequate work, but all assignments completed
- F = coursework not completed

I do not give incompletes except in the most extreme of circumstances.

**Class Meetings:** Since we meet only once a week, it is imperative that students attend class. Some class sessions will include technical instruction in various fieldwork techniques. Most will be conducted as seminars. I expect students to be prepared and to participate. Attendance will be taken every week and, along with the student's participation in class discussions, factored into the calculation of final grades. I suppose it should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: **It will be very difficult to do well in this course without attending class; more than one unexcused absence will result in a lower course grade.**

**Tentative Calendar** (subject to change):

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| 1/16 | introduction<br>- go over syllabus<br>- expectations<br>- texts & reasons for each<br>- teaching team – David Wharton, Andy Harper, various members of the staff at The Center for Documentary Projects<br><br><b>ASSIGNMENT:</b> read <u>Doing Documentary Work</u> and <u>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</u> for 1/30 (two weeks from now) |
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| 1/23 | <p>lecture/discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what is “fieldwork”?</li> <li>- what is “documentary”?</li> <li>- methods: oral history, visual recording, participant observation</li> <li>- intellectual issues</li> <li>- ethical issues</li> <li>- shaping a finished product</li> <li>- why bother? (the “so-what question”)</li> </ul> <p>options for audio recording – cassette or digital?</p> <p>view “Hands on a Hard Body”</p> <p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) read <u>Doing Documentary Work</u> and <u>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</u></li> <li>2) write a 4-5 page essay that explains the reason(s) for making a film like “Hands on a Hard Body”? What’s the point of such films?</li> </ol> |
| 1/30 | <p>discuss student essays</p> <p>discuss <u>Doing Documentary Work</u> and <u>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reasons for doing documentary work</li> <li>- varieties of documentary work</li> <li>- the value of first-hand experience (an American cultural assumption)</li> <li>- the role of the fieldworker</li> <li>- the “myth of transparency” (vs. the appearance of transparency)</li> <li>- ethical dilemmas</li> <li>- frustrations</li> </ul> <p>talk &amp; tell exercise</p> <p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b> 1) read <u>The Tape Recorded Interview</u>, Chapters 2 &amp; 3 (photocopied handout);<br/>2) bring recording equipment to class; make sure it’s working right and that you know how to use it.</p>    |
| 2/6  | <p>doing oral histories (focusing on content)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how-to lecture/discussion</li> <li>- demonstration</li> <li>- making transcripts</li> </ul> <p>pair up with a classmate; do a 10-15 minute introductory interview, in which you record basic biographical information</p> <p><b>ASSIGNMENT:</b> do a full 45-minute interview with the same classmate focused on his/her childhood. A complete (word-for-word) transcript is due by <b>noon on Tuesday, February 12.</b></p> <p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b> bring recording equipment to class</p>   |

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| 2/13 | <p>students' oral histories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- discuss students' first interviews &amp; transcripts</li> <li>- annotated transcripts/logs</li> </ul> <p>doing oral histories for broadcast (focusing on quality)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- digital vs. analog</li> <li>- getting good sound</li> <li>- doing oral histories with a video camera</li> </ul> <p><b>SHORT-TERM ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT:</b> do a follow-up interview with classmate – an annotated transcript of <u>all three</u> interviews is due by <b>noon on Tuesday, February 19.</b></p> <p><b>LONGER-TERM ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT:</b> do two interviews (a primary interview and a follow-up) with someone who is not associated with the University – an annotated transcript of both interviews and a word-for-word transcript of the five most important passages is due <b>March 5.</b></p> <p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b> read <u>Stranger and Friend</u></p> |
| 2/20 | <p>go over interviews &amp; annotated transcripts</p> <p>do mock video interviews in class</p> <p>discuss <u>Stranger and Friend</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- participant observation</li> <li>- balancing opposites</li> <li>- the personal connection – good or bad?</li> </ul> <p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b> 1) read “Writing Ethnographic Field Notes” (photocopied handout)<br/> 2) do field note exercise (assignment to follow) – due at <b>noon on Tuesday, February 26</b><br/> 3) read <u>Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit</u></p>   |
| 2/27 | <p>fieldworkers' assumptions, attitudes, and ethics &amp; the relationship between the three</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- view “Dead Birds” – what would Powdermaker say?</li> <li>- Rodger Brown's attitude &amp; approach</li> </ul> <p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b> 1) Oral history projects due<br/> 2) read <u>Salvation on Sand Mountain</u></p>   |
| 3/5  | <p>more on attitudes and ethics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- view “Vernon, Florida”</li> <li>- view portions of “Searching for the One-Eyed Jesus”</li> <li>- methods, media, attitudes</li> </ul> <p>continue discussion of <u>Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit</u></p> <p>discuss <u>Salvation on Sand Mountain</u></p> <p><b>ASSIGNMENT:</b> have a happy, safe spring break; be ready to start working on your films when you get back</p>  |
| 3/12 | SPRING BREAK  |

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| 3/19            | view "Stranger with a Camera"<br>discuss the filmmaker's responsibilities to his/her subjects |
| 3/26            | workshops in audio, lighting, and videography   |
| 4/2             | workshop in editing   |
| 4/9             | review of student films in progress   |
| 4/16            | review of student films in progress   |
| 4/23            | review of student films in progress   |
| 4/30            | review of student films in progress   |
| final exam slot | view finished films   |