ENGL261: Recovering Oral Histories: Caribbean and Latin American Communities in the USA and Britain

Merle Collins

TuTh 9:30am - 10:45am

TWS 0221

Credit only granted for: ENGL261 or ENGL361. Additional information: A University of Maryland – University of Birmingham collaboration. Part of University of Maryland Global Classrooms Initiative.

Project-based course to record oral histories of Caribbean American and Latin American communities in the Washington area. Interview and oral history techniques; recording and videotaping oral histories; transcribing and writing stories as oral histories.

Course description

This is a project-based course, aimed at recording oral histories of Caribbean American and Latin American communities in the U.S. and Afro-Caribbean, Black British and Latin American communities in the U.K. On the practical level, alongside discussions about interview techniques and ways of knowing in oral history, participants will be required to record and videotape oral histories, transcribe these stories and, meeting synchronously in the video conferencing classroom, discuss interview techniques, the main ideas explored in stories collected and how a theme might be found for developing stories from the narrated material. With the permission of narrators, course material will eventually be posted on online media. After the course ends, with the possibility of copyright in their own stories as an incentive, students will be asked to work further on transcribed material and submit stories for consideration for print publication. Students will also meet asynchronously via Camtasia and other online media, and discuss terms such as African American (U.S.) Black British (U.K.) Caribbean-American (U.S.), Indo-Caribbean (U.K./U.S.), American (used to mean national of the United States), Latin-American, and the perspectives of Caribbean and Latin American communities on these designations. We will discuss generational differences and look, comparatively, at how perspectives might change from one generation to the other, considering whether these perspectives and shifts are expressed and experienced differently in the U.S. and U.K. Via lectures and video material embedded in Camtasia, and using Voicethread, students will be able to interact verbally with tutors and each other. In addition to writing oral histories, the course sets out, on the theoretical level, to interrogate the constantly shifting terms by which immigrant communities understand, stage and negotiate identities in major metropolitan societies such as the US and the UK. In the global classroom, students in the USA and UK will discuss these terms and their separate experiences and/or perceptions of race and migration. Working with concepts such as globalization, diaspora and super-diversity, the course seeks, through comparative analysis, to explore the dynamism and complexity of selected immigrant communities. We will study oral history techniques and theories advanced by researchers such as the British sociologist and anthropologist Paul Thompson, Mary Chamberlain, researcher on modern social history and pioneer of oral history who has published on Caribbean family life, and Dora Schwarzstein’s 1970’s work on Latin American oral histories. Drawing on the work of academics such as Walter Mignolo and Stephen Vertovec, the course will also engage students in recent intellectual debates in diaspora studies which consider migrant testimonies variously in terms of ‘contemporaneity’, ‘decolonial aesthetics’ and ‘super-diversity’. This interdisciplinary course will have a home in the departments of English (University of Maryland) and Hispanic Studies (Birmingham University). Some of the course sessions will meet collaboratively (with students in the UK and the US encountering each other synchronously in video conferencing classrooms). Some sessions will also be conducted asynchronously. For University of Maryland students, the effect will be a flipped or blended course.