“What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.”

-Alice Walker

“We desperately need to hear and tell.”

-Tricia Rose

Background
An oral history interview collects qualitative data about the past, rooted in the subject’s memory of past experiences, shaped by the present moment. As Dr. Barbara Truesdell notes:

Oral history collects information about the past from observers and participants in that past. It gathers data not available in written records about events, people, decisions, and processes. Oral history interviews are grounded in memory and memory is a subjective instrument for recording the past, always shaped by the present moment and individual psyche. Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.3

Historically, the narratives of Black women’s experiences, especially in the United States, have been silenced, overlooked, and marginalized. When documented, Black women’s life histories oftentimes are written by others, adapted, edited, revised, and/or distorted to suit the writer’s purposes. In other instances, when we hear the stories of Black women, they are often biographies of famous, celebrated, internationally recognized or award-winning Black women.

The goal of the “Digitizing Black Women’s Narratives Oral History Project” is to fill in the gaps to document and honor the diversity of Black women’s experiences. Thus, each AFRS 324 student will interview an “unsung” elder Black woman as she “bears witness” to her life. She may be African, African-American, Caribbean, Afro-Latina, or any other woman of the African Diaspora who self-identifies as Black. You may wish to organize your interview questions around a theme such as motherhood, family relationships, historical movements, education, political or civic engagement, ideas of beauty, sexuality, community involvement, and professional experiences, for example.

Guidelines and Suggestions: Before, During, and After Oral History Interview

1. After selecting an interviewee and obtaining her agreement to participate, schedule a convenient time for the interview. Allow the interviewee to choose the location.

2. Build trust with your interviewee by establishing a rapport before the interview begins. Explain the goals of the AFRS 324 Oral History Project, and create a “safe space” during the interview. You may wish to submit your questions in advance to give the interviewee an opportunity to think deeply about the questions. Your conversation may steer you in new directions and you can ask follow up questions as you proceed with the interview, especially if the interviewee gives verbal clues that she would like to elaborate.

3. Explain the two Informed Consent forms and obtain the interviewee’s signature on each form.

4. With the interviewee’s permission, use a digital audio recording device (i.e. recording feature on computer or cell phone) to ensure accurate record of the interviewee’s responses for transcription.

5. After the interview, take the time to thank your interviewee, talk briefly about the process, and arrange to provide them a copy of the final product.

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Digitizing Black Women’s Narratives - Oral History Project
Due: February 26, 2015

**Suggested Interview Questions**

Choose from among these sample interview questions. You might select questions to fit around a particular theme. If supplementing this list with your own questions, write “open-ended” questions rather than those that can be answered with a “yes” or “no.”

1. What is your name? What is our relationship, if any?
2. What are the first three words that come to mind to describe yourself?
3. When and where were you born?
4. Where did you grow up?
5. How long have you lived in ______?
6. How has this place changed over time?
7. Do you have a nickname and how did you get it?
8. Describe your childhood.
9. What would you do for fun as a child?
10. Who were your parents and what were they like?
11. Did you have any siblings? What were they like growing up?
12. What is the most memorable moment from your childhood?
13. Do you have any family traditions or interesting family stories?
14. Do you have a family heirloom that reminds you of this time?
15. Who were your favorite relatives?
16. Who were your best friends?
17. What were they like?
18. Describe your educational experiences.
19. Who was your favorite teacher and what did you learn from her or him?
20. Are you a member of a sorority? If so, which one and how did you choose it?
21. What do you do for a living?
22. As a young girl, what did you want to be when you grew up?
23. If you could do anything now, what would it be and why?
24. What is your favorite source of artistic expression (music, art, dance, etc.)?
25. What role does it play in your life?
26. How did you meet your husband/spouse/partner?
27. Do you have any children?
28. If so, how did motherhood change you?
29. Were you in the military? If so, how did this experience change you?
30. Do you consider yourself politically engaged? Why or why not?
31. What current event most directly affected your life? In what ways?
32. What are you most proud of in your life?
33. What was the greatest challenge in life that you have overcome?
34. Have stereotypes about Black women affected you? How so?
35. What advice do you have for the younger generation of Black women?
36. Is there anything we didn’t talk about that you’d like to add?

**Required Project Format: Submit Paper to Moodle Drop Box + Turn in Hard Copy of Consent Forms**

A. Interview Q&A transcription (word count range: 500-1000 words)
B. Analysis (word count minimum: 250 words)
C. Photograph (you may take one of the interviewe on the day of the interview or she may provide one to you)
D. (2) Signed Informed Consent forms (hard copies must be submitted)