**Public History: Theory, Method, and Practice**

**Course Description**

The study of history is not confined solely to the classroom nor is it the exclusive property of academics. Interpretations of the past are produced by diverse individuals in a variety of different public settings, forms, and venues, and in an ever-growing range of digital mediums.

This course provides an introduction to the theory, methods, practice, and politics of “public history” and allows students to explore firsthand the greater possibilities and challenges of the production and dissemination of histories in nonacademic settings. Through readings, workshops conducted by professionals in the field, site visits, and course assignments, students will learn about how public history has developed as a field, and how it continues to change.

This class also emphasizes the ways in which historical knowledge may enhance community viability and civic engagement. Public history is a collaborative endeavor, where practitioners must balance their own research interests and agenda with the wishes of community, archival, and professional stakeholders. To this end, students will create their own projects and accompanying programming, working both with classmates, and with outside partners.

**Learning Goals Met By Course**

* Students will learn about the theories and methodologies that inform the practice and study of public history, and the specific issues associated with creating and disseminating historic narratives and interpretations that are intended for public audiences. In particular, the course will explore what it means to engage difficult, critical, and lesser-known histories, and what different publics stand to gain from exhibits and other forms of public scholarship that challenge audiences to consider topics from a critical vantage point.
* Students will learn about the tensions that exist between the production of history for commercial, civic, and entertainment purposes; the funding issues, politics, and market pressures that drive the creation of certain types of narratives; and, efforts to make the past “usable” in legal debates and social activism.
* Students will gain practical skills and experience in how to prepare for and conduct oral histories; how to engage in site visits and ethnographic field work; how to use archives for the purpose of public history; how to curate objects, images, video, audio, and texts from the past, whether in the form of a traditional exhibit or as part of a digital project; and, how to collaborate with partners and balance the interests of different stakeholders

**Units**

*Each of the thematic units listed below would cover approximately four weeks, leaving time for project construction, site visits, guest speakers, and collaboration with curatorial partners. The readings attached to each unit give representative examples of what will be covered, but can be switched out according to the instructor’s preferences.*

The Politics of Public Memory

*This unit would focus on the politics of public memory and history, and the various agents and institutions involved in promoting or downplaying certain historical narratives and interpretations of the past. How space is used to commemorate certain events, individuals, and collective memories would also be emphasized here.*

Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Lisa Knauer and Daniel Walkowitz, eds., *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation*(Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

Michel-RolphTrouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1997)

Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

**“**Lisa the Iconoclast,” *The Simpsons*, Season 7, Episode 16 (1996)

Producing History: A Civic and/or Commercial Enterprise

*This unit would consider the labor and funding issues that surround the production of public history, and how its “value” is consumed. This unit will examine the often conflicting missions that inform public history as a field that is meant to both entertain the public, yet also educate them civically and academically. It will also explore recent efforts to tie public history to the promotion of “tolerance,” to use it to encourage civic dialogues, and its role in truth and reconciliation movements.*

Wendy Brown, “Tolerance as Museum Object: The Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance” in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 107-48.

Amy Tyson, *The Wages of History*: *Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines* (UMASS, 2013).

Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Duke, 1997).

Seth Bruggeman, “The New Labor History Museum: A Status Report,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 9 (2012): 133-49.

Jennifer Tyburczy, “All Museums Are Sex Museums,” *Radical History Review* 113 (Spring 2012): 199-211.

Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (UMASS, 2006).

Stephanie Yuhl, “Sculpted Radicals: The Problem of Sacco and Vanzetti in Boston’s Public Memory,” *Public Historian* 32, no. 2 (2010): 9-30.

Scott Boehm, “Privatizing Public Memory: The Price of Patriotic Philanthropy and the Post-9/11 Politics of Display,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (Dec. 2006):1147-1166.

*Men of Reenaction,* Jessica Yu, dir. Aired on PBS, July 4, 1996

Public History Methodologies

*This unit will examine oral history, ethnographic fieldwork, the creation of walking tours, podcasts, and documentary films, museum and historic site administration, educational programming, and the other components that contribute methodologically to the production of public history. Students will also explore the ways public historians use different techniques when researching and presenting histories, deciding how to appeal to audiences, and their rationales in determining to present certain historical narratives and in deciding which sites are worthy of historic preservation. Finally, students will look at the role of public history in the world of digital humanities more broadly understood.*

Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*(Oxford University Press, 2010).

Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*(New York: The New Press, 1997).

Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,” The Journal of American History 93, no. 1 (2006): 117-46

Roy Rosenzweig, “The Road to Xanadu: Public and Private Pathways on the History Web,” *Journal of American History* (September 2001): 548-79.

Daniel J. Cohen, "From Babel to Knowledge: Data Mining Large Digital Collections," March 2006 (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/essays-on-history-new-media/essays/?essayid=40>)

Joshua Brown, “History and the Web, From the Illustrated Newspaper to Cyberspace: Visual Technologies and Interaction in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries,” <http://chnm.gmu.edu/essays-on-history-new-media/essays/?essayid=29>

Kevin Murphy, “Walking the Queer City,” *Radical History Review* (Spring 1995): 195-201.

Emily Thompson, “The Roaring 'Twenties: an interactive exploration of the historical soundscape of New York City,” *Vectors*, <http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=98>

John Bodnar, “Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker,” in *Memory and American History*, edited by David Thelen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 72-92.

**Collaborations, Group Work, & Projects**

Each semester, the course will include collaborative work with community or university partners and student group work oriented around a shared course thematic focus. The partnership of any given semester will determine in part what the project examines and what medium it takes. But the goal is to have students come away with a tangible project – whether in the form of an oral history collection, a series of walking tours and place mapping, a physical or digital exhibit, etc. – at the end of each semester.

The Humanities Action Lab, which Andy Urban collaborated with on the Guantánamo Public Memory Project (GPMP), is a partnership between eleven different universities and run out of the New School. It is in the midst of planning its next thematic project. The GPMP exhibit has now been seen by more than 500,000 visitors and will travel to Istanbul and then the United States Capitol in June, where Congressman Keith Ellison has invited to host it. Through this collaboration Rutgers students were able to contribute firsthand to the exhibit, curating content for two of the 13 panels. Continued involvement in this partnership will allow students’ work to get this type of wonderful exposure and to involve them in a real collaborative project, where they can comment on blog posts created by peers at other colleges and universities, attend conferences where they can meet practitioners and professionals in the field, and gain the opportunity to cite this work, with its national and international profile, as part of their portfolios and resumes.

Partnerships and collaborations can be more local as well, and can highlight history as a tool for community or civic engagement in more immediate contexts. Molly Rosner, for instance, has proposed a project that would combine oral histories, photography, and archival research, to explore the history of storefronts on George Street and what this tells us about patterns of consumerism and development in New Brunswick, and the changing demographic composition of the city.

Finally, depending on how much time the main project requires, students can also complete more standard public history assignments, such as:

* An exhibit review after a class trip to a museum or historic site
* An oral history assignment – often combined with the main project – where students would interview store owners on George Street, to use the above example, but also write an individual paper on what they learned from doing this work and what it reveals about oral history as a methodology.
* A reflection essay where students reflect on the readings from the course, and how the themes they raise influenced their own curatorial work in the group project.