

CURATING DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE:

Engaging with the aftermath of violence through public displays, memorials, and sites of conscience

History 485/670/870 and Anthropology 498B: Public History Workshop

Winter 2011, Thursdays 3:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.

History Department seminar room (LB-1014)

Concordia University

Instructor: Erica Lehrer

Curatorial Research Associate: Monica Patterson

curate: From Latin. *curare* "to take care of."

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If we tell a single, static story of what happened in the past and force visitors to accept a single moral from it, then we do nothing more than reinforce conflicts taking place in the present.

– Liz Sevcenko*



COURSE DESCRIPTION

What unique challenges arise in attempts to deploy memories and documents of violence for public display? And what innovations in exhibition, museology, public cultural interventions and the activation of memorial sites might these challenges inspire? In this course, we will grapple with these questions in theory and practice. Course participants will engage in original curatorial experiments based on documentation collected in post-conflict communities through the history department's CURA project "Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and other Human Rights Violations."

All aspects of "curation" and its products may be considered in an attempt to reveal assumptions, boundary negotiations, competing declarations of meaning, and divergent modes of expression - all typically unseen in final, "monovocal" displays. In our curatorial practice, we will experiment with less authoritative modes of presentation, revealing the many, often divergent understandings that exist within communities regarding their "shared" histories, as well as among different public audiences.

Given the sensitive subject matter we will be entrusted to curate, we will pay special attention to balancing the more prosaic meaning of the curation process ("to select, organize, and look after the items in (a collection or exhibition)") with its deeper mandate "to take care of"). The goal of our curations will be to create fresh social space in which new possibilities for thought and action can occur.

Required Book: (available at the University bookstore and on reserve at Webster library).

- Williams, Paul. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Berg, 2007.

Other Required Readings: The other course readings are listed in the syllabus (beginning on page 8, below). They are available through the library's electronic reserves system, by instructor name or course number. Visit: <http://clues.concordia.ca/search/r>

CONTACTING THE INSTRUCTOR & COURSE MEDIA CONSULTANT

I am happy to meet with students to discuss matters related to the theme, content, or structure of the course. If you have any concerns about the course or your participation in it, please let me know as soon as possible – I am here to help everyone make the most out of this experience. If you have basic logistical questions, please contact another student in the class.

Instructor: Erica Lehrer

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Phone: (514) 848-2424, ex. 5463

Email: elehrer@concordia.ca

Office Hours: Thursdays 2:00-3:00 p.m. and 5:30-6:30 p.m., or by appointment on Friday afternoons.

You can also contact me Monday-Friday via email – I will do my best to respond within 24 hours.

Curatorial Research Associate: Monica Patterson

Office: LB-684

Phone: (514) 848-2424, ex. 2015

Email: mepatter@umich.edu

Office Hours: by appointment

COURSE STRUCTURE & GOALS

This course is an advanced seminar. At a minimum, all participants are expected to: attend all seminar meetings; have read the assignments for that meeting; be prepared to thoughtfully discuss those readings and their broader implications; be prepared to present any assigned work. The success of the seminar will hinge on participants' thorough preparation and willingness to engage in open and respectful discussion grounded in the texts and their practical explorations. Through these discussions, each person refines her/his own understanding of the material, helps others think through issues, and practices valuable analytic and communication skills. We will work together as a community of scholars engaged in a common academic endeavor. Our goal in the classroom is collaboration and the exchange of ideas.

This course is also a workshop. This means that in addition to exploring the readings, you will be expected to work individually and with your group on an original semester-long project. Please make yourself available to your group and contribute as an enthusiastic, responsible team member.

ASSIGNMENTS

There will be 5 categories of assignment: weekly one-page response papers; (co-)leading a class discussion (one time); 3 testimony assignments; group curatorial project and presentation; final reflection paper (7-10 pages).

Response Papers (10)

A list of the readings, by week, begins on page 9, below.

With a few exceptions you will submit a weekly set of “talking points” that will help direct our conversations about the readings. These papers should be approximately 400 words in length, but in any case ***not longer than one page*** (single spaced). They should focus on what you found useful or problematic in the readings, what the readings suggest for your own or others' work, and/or how the readings correspond with issues and ideas you have encountered elsewhere. These should be ***posted on the course Moodle site*** and should arrive ***no later than 5pm the Wednesday evening before*** the Thursday seminar session in which the readings will be discussed. I may occasionally request an alternate format for the weekly response paper. On the day you help lead the discussion you will not be required to submit a response paper.

Leading Discussion

Each week, a pair or trio of students lead the class discussion of the readings. This will entail a certain degree of forethought and preparation; discussion co-leaders should meet together at least several days before the class in order to plan the session, and meet with or send an e-mail to the instructor outlining their plans. Following a concise initial presentation of the material in which they identify broad themes and linkages, the designated leaders will be expected to help engage others and shape the discussion as it develops. I encourage discussion leaders to be creative. You may want to create a brief exercise, organize a debate, prepare handouts or use digital media or some other form of show-and-tell to distill key points and contextualize the work. It needn't be a highly polished presentation. Rather, the point of the discussion leader assignments is to take turns sketching out a landscape of particular issues, then draw us into discussing them. I may be in touch with discussion leaders if there are particular points or materials I think might be helpful to include. ***On the day you help lead the discussion you will not be required to submit a response paper.***

Testimony Assignments (3)

Details begin on page 5, below.

Group Curatorial Project

Details begin on page 7, below.

Final Reflection Paper

Every student will write her/his own 7-10 page paper reflecting on the group curatorial project, and her/his particular process of contributing to it. ***Due Thursday 21 April.***

This is your opportunity to reflect on your group's curatorial project and your contribution to it. It is not meant to be only an opinion piece but should grow out of insights and analyses developed in your response papers and testimony assignments, engaging with key theoretical issues raised in the seminar, and make appropriate reference to course readings. It should be ***approximately 1750-2500 words in length (7-10 pages).***

Your paper should include:

- Reference to theoretical materials from the course (at least 3 readings)
- The goals & audience for your curation, and your assessments of the final product's strengths & weaknesses.
- Problems/tensions you experienced working in the group setting.
- Reflection on at least 5 of the "Thinking Tool" questions here: <http://cerv.concordia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Thinking-tool.jpg>

Note about papers in French: Students may write any assignment in French. I do not read French at the level at which I expect your papers to be written, so one of my colleagues will read any such papers and consult with me. This may cause some delay in my ability to consider and return them.

EVALUATION

Course grades will be calculated as follows:

Response Papers – 20 %

Testimony Assignments – 30% (10% x 3 assignments)

Leading Discussion – 10 % (each leader will be graded individually)

Group Curatorial Project & Presentation – 20% (each entire group will receive the same grade)

Final Reflection Paper – 20%

Grading Scheme

Because this is an advanced seminar the grading scheme differs slightly from History Department norms.

A = Superior (It's clear you did the readings substantially, digested them, considered them in relation to each other and to your curatorial project, then formed some interesting questions arising from them and/or criticisms of them. Your work is well organized and synthetic. At my discretion, doing something else particularly impressive may override other concerns.)

B = Competent (It appears that you did most of the reading and understood key points, and may have developed a useful question to consider. You express yourself clearly.)

C or below = Insufficient (It is unclear whether you did much of the reading, and you have not shown the ability to glean much insight or ask thoughtful questions about it. Your work may seem disorganized, hasty, or incomplete.)

Late Work: I do not accept late work, except in the case of illness or a death in the family. Please do not hesitate to contact me for special consideration if you find yourself in one of these exceptional circumstances.

CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

I hope students will feel comfortable participating in wide-ranging discussions on any topic related to the course theme and materials. You may find some of the subject matter in this course sensitive or disturbing. Some participants may have a closer personal connection to some of the topics or events than others. Please be respectful of differing perspectives.

Please be on time to class.

If you must eat or drink during class, please do so discreetly.

Academic Integrity

At this level I assume you are familiar with and avoid any kind of plagiarism or cheating. If you have questions about what this means, please ask me or visit: <http://www.concordia.ca/info/students/integrity>.

TESTIMONY ASSIGNMENTS

You will be given a DVD containing recorded testimony of a Holocaust survivor who lives in Montreal.

The following three assignments are intended to function as building blocks for your group curatorial project. They will help you develop your own relationship with the testimony materials and enable you to move toward negotiating a group vision for your curation project.

Testimony assignment #1

Regarding the Pain of Others: Looking Inward/Assessing Subjectivity:

(due Thursday, January 27, uploaded to Moodle before class)

Question: What do different viewers bring to the experience of watching testimony?

Goal: Begin to familiarize yourself with your testimony.

Step 1: View your testimony straight through, in roughly 5-10 minute chunks. While paused, write down your reactions. How you are feeling? What thoughts or associations or questions have come to you? What details do you notice? Do this like free-writing or journaling, without stopping to think. Preferably do it by hand and save those handwritten notes for possible scanning and inclusion in your curation.

If you are technologically inclined, you might want to video yourself watching the DVD for the first time, speak your reactions into an audio recorder, photograph yourself before/during/after, or document objects or surroundings that seem relevant to what you are seeing. You may choose to watch the testimony with someone else and include that person's responses in your documentation.

Step 2: Cull material from your free-writing notes to answer these questions ***in no more than one single-spaced page***: In what ways is the story told in your video testimony familiar? In what ways does it seem distant or foreign? Which parts seem especially strong: sad, happy, irritating, confusing, clichéd, missing, angering, or other emotions you experience? Which parts of it seem most important to you? Which parts "move" you? What frustrates you? What questions arise? Which aspects of the video seem likely to be most "useful" for your curatorial project? Does this person's story implicate you in any way? With whom in the story do you identify, if anyone?

Be as specific as possible. Developing a couple of key examples is far preferable to making many vague, sweeping statements.

Testimony assignment #2

Finding Frames, Analyzing Content: Transcription & Contextual analysis

(due Thursday, Feb. 10, uploaded to Moodle before class)

Step 1: Consider these questions:

What seems to be the purpose or motivation behind this interview (For the interviewee? For the interviewer?) Which questions are made to seem important? How? What goes *unasked*, and why? What seems to be taken for granted? What is missed, or perhaps avoided? Why? What key themes emerge? (Key for the speaker? For the interviewer? Key for you?)

Where does the interview take place, in what environment, against what background? What is the role of the interviewer, the videographer? Who appears in the frame, who doesn't, and how does this matter? How might the interview have been done otherwise (and how might you curate it otherwise)?

What is the most frightening or uncomfortable question you could ask of this testimony?

Step 2: Select at least two excerpts from your testimony that seem particularly interesting to you in relation to some of the above questions and ***transcribe them***, word for word. Indicate silences, relevant-seeming character of speech (particularly soft or loud, emphasized, interrupted, etc.), and visible gestures or expressions of emotion that seem potentially significant.

Step 3: ***Hand in your transcriptions*** of the excerpts, ***plus not more than one single-spaced page analysis of one excerpt***, examined in relation to the questions raised in Step 1.

Testimony Assignment #3

Creating Contexts & Formulating Frames

(due Thursday, March 10, uploaded to Moodle before class)

These four tasks are to be negotiated and divided among the members of each group.

Each person will hand in a ***one single-spaced page summary*** of what she/he accomplished.

Task 3A) Supplementary Interview (*must submit ethics application at least week in advance!*)

Record an interview with someone of your choosing about your testimony, and/or the Holocaust more generally. You may ask someone to watch your video testimony (or part of it) and respond to it. You may do "man on the street" interviews asking people what the Holocaust means to them. With advance notice it may be possible to visit the original interviewees or their children or grandchildren for follow-up interviews and/or to photograph personal objects, etc.). Please let me know as far in advance as possible if you would like to pursue this.

Task 3B) Researching Connections

What can you find out about the people, places, events mentioned in your interview, both historically and in the present day? These online resources may help you:

USHMM Holocaust Encyclopaedia:
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/>

JewishGen
<http://www.jewishgen.org/>

Jewish Virtual Library:
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/search.html>

Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre
<http://www.mhmc.ca/>

Task 3C) Integrating images/objects

Find images or objects, text, and/or sounds that might be made relevant to your curation, and consider how you might integrate them into your project. These could include personal objects (or images of these objects) belonging to interviewees or group members, “everyday life” ephemera (i.e. the billboard advertising the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre currently on display in several Metro station), news events, historical photographs or documents, etc.

USHMM photo archive:

http://www.ushmm.org/research/collections/search/ph_catalog.php

[you can search over 17,500 images by keyword – to the left you’ll see links to their other collections]

Task 3D) Genre-specific annotated bibliography

Create an annotated bibliography of 4 or 5 sources that address the specific genre in which your group is working (installation, audio, performance, web, video etc.). The goal is to ensure that you have done some theoretical thinking around your chosen medium.

Task 3E) Representing the “third voice”

Draft a strategy to present to the public your group’s self-consciousness of your final curated document as a “third voice:” that is, an amalgam of the original subject’s voice and your own (group’s) curatorial voice. How do you define and characterize the voice/perspective/story that you are presenting?

Task 3F) Other tasks

You may think of another sub-project that would contribute useful context and framing for using your testimony in your curatorial project. Please contact me with a proposal.

GROUP CURATORIAL PROJECT

The class will be divided into 4 or 5 working groups. Based on the assigned video testimony, each group will design and produce a unique curatorial project. It may be a physical exhibit/installation; a public intervention/performance/ceremony/happening; a digital document (using video, audio and/or the web); or some other genre.

You may manipulate the testimonies in any way you see fit: i.e. edit them, incorporate other media, do a voiceover narration or subtitle excerpts, transcribe them and use the written text in some creative way, etc. The curation should be envisioned for a specific site/venue, audience, and time. Your project should have an evocative title.

The overall agenda is this: How can you render such testimony relevant to present day audiences? How can you “open it up” to reveal some of the invisible elements that have shaped it? How can you “stretch” it to connect with present-day places/people/themes? And how can you do this in an ethical manner, one that acknowledges both the sacredness of these stories to particular individuals and communities, and the complicated ways stories of suffering are implicated in larger local, national, and international power relations? Your group curation should attempt to incorporate and represent important differences in perspective or tensions among the group members who produced it.

Themes you might consider addressing (many of the course readings touch on these ideas):

- Representing absence
- Creating empathy

- Creating contemporary/conspatialary relevance
- Producing action
- Allowing for mourning
- Creating new, pluralistic identifications
- Suggesting the interconnection of superficially unrelated events
- Guarding against the perpetuation of trauma, xenophobia, or hate
- Representing the limits of representation
- Dealing with the problems of authenticity, evidence, and denial
- Signaling the constructed nature of the representation, indicating traces of who made representational choices and how
- Engaging audiences, getting them to participate
- Guarding against boredom, compassion fatigue, spectacle
- Leaving room for multiple perspectives

Starting February 10, we will end the class discussion 30 minutes early to provide time to meet with your group to think collectively about how the week's reading and assignments relate to your group project. You will be expected to organize other meetings outside of class time, as necessary, to continue your group project work.

PRESENTATION

Each group will do a 20-minute presentation of its curation project during the last class meeting. All group members should participate in the presentation (this will be a factor in your evaluation.)

CREATIVE AND TECH SUPPORT

I do not expect prior technical or media knowledge for this course, and your final projects do not have to display "high production value." Indeed, your group may decide to do a project that is very low-tech. But I encourage you to consider experimenting with audio, video, web, projection, 3D space, etc. The History Department's Center for Oral History & Digital Storytelling is willing make available some of their digital video cameras, still cameras, and audio recorders, as well as their post-production facilities. And the Department's CEREV centre has a new lab space, Lab 6 1/2, on the 6th floor of the library building, which you may book time to work in, as well as siting your final project there. With advance notice, we will try to get you any technical support you may need if you'd like to experiment in a format that is unfamiliar.

Please do your best to document your projects, in process and in their final states, so we can archive them. Indeed, you may find that documenting your group's discussions, your testimony exercises, and/or the world around you as the course progresses, may prove useful in your final project and beyond.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS:

Texts are listed under the class session in which they are scheduled to be discussed

Thursday January 6: Introductions/Housekeeping
Thursday January 13 Topic: Testimony I: Tellers, Listeners, Witnessing In-class activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Finalize working groups for semester projects & pass out testimony DVDs• Child Holocaust survivor, author, and oral historian Yehudi Lindeman visit Reading: Greenspan, Preface, Intro., Ch. 1, Ch. 8 (89 pgs.) Young, "Holocaust Video and Cinemagraphic Testimony" (16 pgs.) Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening" (5 pgs.) <u>Recommended:</u> Sheftel & Zembrzycki, "Only Human" (17 pgs.) Work due: Response #1
Thursday January 20 Topic: Testimony II: Media, Framings & Publics In-class activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen to: <i>Before It Had A Name – Act I: Mr. Boder Vanishes</i> Readings: Stier, Ch.3 "Framing Memory" (42 pgs.) Wolf, "Holocaust Testimony: Producing Post-memories, Producing Identities" (20 pgs) Wiewiorka, "The Era of Witness" (48 pgs.) <u>Recommended:</u> Shenker, "Embodied Memory: the institutional mediation of survivor testimony in the USHMM." (18 pgs.) Work due: Response #2
Thursday January 27 Topic: Kinship & Memory: Transmission, Identification, Ownership Readings: Hirsch, "The Generation of Post-Memory" (23 pgs) Lehrer, "Bearing False Witness?" (20 pgs.) Bernstein, "Promiscuous Reading" (18 pgs.) Bauman, "The Holocaust's Life as a Ghost" (10 pgs.)

Documentary criteria sheet (1 pg.)
“Thinking Tool” (1 pg.)

Work Due: Response #3 AND Testimony Assignment #1

Thursday February 3

Topic: The Ethics & Politics of Memory

Readings:

Patterson, Monica Eileen. “Childhood, Memory, and Gap: Reflections from an Anthrohistorian on George Perec’s *W or the Memory of Childhood*,” *Anthrohistory: Unsettling Knowledge and Questioning Discipline*, edited by David William Cohen, Chandra Bhimull, Fernando Coronil, Edward Murphy, Monica Eileen Patterson, and Julie Skurski. [forthcoming from University of Michigan Press, 2011].
Todorov, “The Uses and Abuses of Memory” (11 pgs.)
Hartman, “The Time of Slavery” (18 pgs.)

Recommended:

Huysen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia” (18 pgs)

Work Due: Response #4

Thursday February 10

Topic: The New Museology & Memorial Museums

Readings:

Williams, Ch. 1-3 (72 pgs.)
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett “The Museum as Catalyst” (17 pgs.)

Recommended:

Handler, “An Anthropological Definition of the Museum and its Purpose.” (3 pgs.)
Kurin, Museums and Intangible Heritage.” (3 pgs)
Silverman, “Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age.” (8 pgs.)

Work due: Response #5 AND Testimony Assignment #2

***Last 30 minutes of class meet with your group

Thursday February 17

VISIT TO MONTREAL HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL CENTRE 3:00-5:15PM

Meet in MHMC lobby for 3:00 PM start. Allow at least 30 minutes to get there from Guy Metro. Please be on time.

1 Carré Cummings Square
(5151, Côte Ste-Catherine Road)
Montréal, Québec H3W 1M6

Go to Metro Côte Ste-Catherine (orange line)
Then walk west on Côte-Ste-Catherine.
See MHMC website for map: <http://mhmc.ca/en/contact/>

Work Due: Response #6 – please post a response to the visit by Sunday, February 10th at midnight.

Thursday February 24

*****SEMESTER BREAK*****

Thursday March 3

Topic: Problems and Possibilities of “Authentic” Sites

Readings:

Williams, Ch. 4 & 5 (52 pgs.)

Sather-Wagstaff, Ch. 2 & 3 in “Heritage that Hurts” (44 pgs.)

Recommended:

Harrowitz, Nancy. “Primo Levi and Holocaust Tourism.” (12 pgs.)

Ryback, “Evidence of Evil” (11 pgs)

Sevcenko, Liz. “The Power of Place” (11 pgs.)

Film excerpt: KZ (Rex Bloomstein)

***Last 30 minutes of class meet with your group

Work due: Response #7

Thursday March 10

Topic: Violent Pasts in Public Places

Readings:

Lehrer, Milton, Patterson, *Curating Difficult Knowledge* manuscript, Intro + 2 chapters (~ 50 pgs.)

Work Due: Response #8 AND Testimony Assignment #3

Thursday March 17

Topic: Comparison, Connection & Other (Politicized) Relationships

Readings:

Michael Rothberg Intro (36 pgs.)

Partridge, “Holocaust Mahnmal (Memorial)” (30 pgs.)

Grunebaum-Ralph & Stier, “The Question (of) Remains” (10 pgs.)

Recommended:

Bar-On & Sarsar, “Bridging the Unbridgeable” (6 pages)

Gilroy, “The Black Atlantic” (5 pages)

Novick, “The Holocaust in American Life” (5 pages)

***Last 30 minutes of class meet with your group

Work Due: Response #9**Thursday March 24****Topic: Tolerance & Empathy****Readings:**

Williams, Ch. 6 (24 pgs.)

Boler, "The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze" (18 pgs.)

Brown, "Tolerance as a Museum Object" (42 pgs.)

Simon & Bonnell, "Difficult" Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters" (15 pgs.)

***Last 30 minutes of class meet with your group

Work Due: Response #10**Thursday March 31****Topic: Art & Witnessing: Performing Memorial Interventions****Guest speaker:** Cynthia Milton**Readings:**

Milton, "Images of Truth: art as a medium for recounting Peru's Internal War" (25 pgs.)

Lacy, "Medellin, Colombia: reinhabiting memory" (11 pgs.)

Weine, "Artists Witnessing 'Ethnic Cleansing'" (10 pgs)

Recommended reading/viewing:

Shimon Attie

[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A7648&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1)[criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A7648&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A7648&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1)

Stih & Schnock

<http://www.stih-schnock.de/>

("Places of Remembrance" and "Bus Stop")

Alfredo Jaar

<http://www.alfredojaar.net/>

***Last 30 minutes of class meet with your group

Work Due: Response #11**Thursday April 7** – No class. Rescheduled for Thursday April 14.

Thursday April 14

LAST DAY OF CLASS

Work Due: presentation of group curatorial projects

Thursday April 21

Work due: final reflection paper

* First page epigraph from: “The Power of Place: How Historic Sites can engage citizens in human rights issues.” N.p. 2004, Center for Victims of Torture/New Tactics in Human Rights Project, Minneapolis, MN