

CURATING DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE:

VIOLENT PASTS IN PUBLIC PLACES

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

~

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 Sevckenko*



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.

Curatorial processes and their products will be considered in an attempt to reveal the myriad choices – based on cultural assumptions, political conflicts, stakeholder negotiations, community activism, and different forms of knowledge and communication - typically unseen in the resulting, usually “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 intellectual, psychological, and social space in which new possibilities for thought and action can occur.

Required Readings: The course readings are listed in the syllabus (beginning on page 7, 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 INSTRUCTORS & COURSE MEDIA CONSULTANT

I am happy to meet with students to discuss matters related to the theme, content, or structure of the course, as is Dr. Monica Patterson, CEREV postdoctoral fellow and co-facilitator of this course. If you have concerns about the course or your participation in it, please let me know asap – I am here to help everyone make the most out of this experience. Basic logistical questions should be directed to another student in the class. Lex Milton, the CEREV Media Facilitator, is available to help you with technical needs and ideas about how to make the most of your ideas vis-à-vis the media available in the CEREV Exhibition Workshop.

Instructor: Erica Lehrer

Office: LB-1029.03

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 Fridays. 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

Media Facilitator: Lex Milton

Office: CEREV Workshop, LB-671

Phone: (514) 848-2424, ex. 2406

Email: lexmilton@hotmail.com

Office Hours: by appointment

COURSE STRUCTURE & GOALS

This course is both an advanced seminar and a workshop.

As a seminar: at a minimum, all participants are expected to: attend all seminar meetings; read all assignments prior to each class meeting; be prepared to thoughtfully discuss the readings and their broader implications; be prepared to present any assigned work. The success of a seminar hinges 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.

As a workshop: in addition to exploring the readings, you will be expected to work on an original curatorial project over the course of the semester. Please begin work on developing your project in earnest from the beginning of the semester – it's not the kind of thing you can throw together at the end. The project will not be judged on its aesthetics but rather on the extent to which it demonstrates a keen understanding of "difficult knowledge," the challenges in curating such knowledge for diverse publics, and the legibility of your project's *argument*.

SEMESTER PROJECT & OTHER ASSIGNMENTS/COURSE WORK

1) Theoretical Response Paper (5%) DUE: your choice/in class

Choose one of the weekly discussion topics in class that seems particularly relevant to your curatorial project, and write a 500-word paper analyzing and assessing that week's assigned readings, and their potential relevance to your project. Post to Moodle.

2) Discussion Leading (10%) DUE: by sign-up

You will sign up to co-lead discussion together with another student once during the semester. Please do not write the above-mentioned response paper on this day's set of readings. See p.10 for more info on leading discussion.

3) Preparation and Participation in Class Discussion (5%)

All students are requested to do the relevant readings before the class meeting for which they are assigned, and to participate enthusiastically in class discussion, in a way that respects other students' perspectives and allows equal time for all to speak. The participation grade includes other occasional class exercises.

Semester Project: Your "Curatorial Dream"

For your semester project, you will need to choose a historical or cultural event or theme that has continued relevance in the present day. You will design a "Curatorial Dream" that engages this issue, developing the "Dream" throughout the semester in a series of assignments, culminating in the design, construction, and presentation of a module of the "Dream," and analytical essay at the end that builds on what you've learned. The final "Dream" may be a physical exhibit/installation; a public intervention/event; a digital document (using video, audio and/or the web); a heritage tour, or some other genre (as approved by the instructor).

Steps to the assignment:

4) **Summary of Issues and Annotated Bibliography** (10%) – DUE: 9/29

Create an exploratory document for your proposed “Curatorial Dream” including an annotated bibliography of 5-7 entries. Entries should address (1) key issues of dispute or difficulty and (2) any attempts to do public curatorial work on the issue. Hand in a one-page summary statement of the issues/attempts, plus the bibliography with annotations.

Hint 1: Here is an example of a brief summary & bibliography (although NOT annotated), to illustrate how much can be said in a short space. http://webapp.mcis.utoronto.ca/ai/pdfdoc/Shapiro_camb_1.pdf

Hint 2: Explore journals of history, anthropology, memory, tourism, heritage, cultural studies, museum studies, etc. Concordia librarians can help you in person, phone & chat: <http://library.concordia.ca/help/questions/>

Hint 3: An annotated bibliography not only lists sources, but offers a brief assessment of the value of each source and maps connections/divergences among them. On the genre, see: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/annotated-bibliography>

5) **Memo on Sources** (5%) – DUE: 10/13

Write a 250 word memo describing the key source material you will use in your curatorial project. This may take the form of audio- or video-recordings (e.g. interviews), text/documents, photographs, film, objects, or ephemera.

6) **“Curatorial Dream” Project Proposal** (15%) – DUE: 10/27

Write a 750-word proposal for your project, as if submitting the idea to an organization for funding. Choose an actually existing organization representing a key stakeholder group for your issue and address the proposal to them. Such writing requires you to be descriptive, analytical, and persuasive. Make sure to answer the following questions:

- a. What is the title of your “curatorial dream”?
- b. What is the organization you are approaching, and why that one?
- c. What is the primary source material for the project?
- d. What issues of interest to the public is the project addressing?
- e. What is the “difficult knowledge” your project will engage the public in considering?
- f. What is your project’s “argument”?
- g. Who is your intended audience for the project?
- h. When and where will it take place?
- i. What media forms do you propose to use, why, and what are the implications of this choice?
- j. In what way is your project innovative, going beyond what’s been done before?
- k. Why is your innovative approach important to try?
- l. Why should this organization support this project? (How does it serve their goals?)
- m. How will you address concerns about tackling your difficult subject matter in public?

Sample proposal: Lehrer “Please Respond” proposal. (see Moodle).

7) **Curatorial Statement** (10%)– DUE: 11/24

This is a 250 – 500 word document intended for a public audience; it will accompany your final curatorial project. You may write it in expository or more creative language. It should communicate the following:

- a. What question, problem, or issue does your curatorial project intervene in?
- b. What is the “difficult knowledge” your project will engage the public in considering?
- c. What is the “argument” of this “Curatorial Dream”?
- d. How are you personally implicated in the issue your project is addressing? What is your own subject position in relation to it? What are the stakes for you?

Sample statement: First page of “Drawing From What Berel Bokser Said.” (see Moodle)

8) **Construction and Presentation of “Curatorial Dream” Module** (20%) – DUE: Thursday, 12/8

Your final curatorial project should consist of a “module” of the fuller public project you envision. This might mean one or two “stations” in an exhibit, five minutes of a video or audio documentary, the basic framework of a website, etc. The point is to give a good illustration of the argument of the “Curatorial Dream,” and how the project would function. You will present the module of your “Dream” to the class and selected guests at the end of the semester.

9) **Final Paper** (20%) – DUE: Thursday, 12/8

You will write a 3,000 – 3,750 word final paper that analyzes your final curatorial project in the context of the issues it addresses, both substantively and theoretically, discussing any particular challenges you face. Please draw from and cite a minimum of 3 of the theoretical course readings in relation to your project.

* * *

Goals of “Curatorial Dreaming”:

The overall agenda is this: How can you render difficult histories relevant to present day audiences? How can your proposed intervention connect with present-day places/people/themes? How can you “open up” the received wisdom about the past to reveal some of the invisible elements that have shaped common understandings of it? 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 that public tellings of stories of suffering are implicated in larger local, national, and international power relations?

Curatorial approaches you might consider taking in relation to your subject matter in your curatorial project (many of the course readings touch on these ideas):

- Representing absence’s *presence* and the lingering effects of “past” events
- Creating contemporary relevance
- Making room for multiple perspectives
- Creating empathy
- Provoking dialogue or action
- Allowing for mourning
- Creating new, pluralistic identifications and solidarities
- 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
- Educating about the constructed nature of representation itself (i.e. indicating traces of who made representational choices and how)
- Engaging audiences, getting them to participate
- Guarding against distancing, compassion fatigue, voyeurism

EVALUATION

Grading Scheme

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

A = Superior (It's clear you read the assigned readings closely, considered them in relation to each other and to your curatorial project, and formed some questions arising from them and/or criticisms of them. Your work is well organized and synthetic. You attended every class session unless you let me know ahead of time you had an unavoidable conflict.)

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. You may have missed a class without explanation.)

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. You have missed multiple class sessions.)

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.

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.

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>.

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." But I encourage you to experiment with audio, video, web, projection, 3D space, etc. Both CEREV and the History Department's Center for Oral History & Digital Storytelling have digital video cameras, still cameras, and audio recorders, and post-production facilities available by reservation. You may book time to work in the CEREV "Incubator" or Digital Exhibition Workshop on the 6th floor of the Library Building, where your final project presentations will take place. Lex Milton, CEREV's media facilitator, is available to help you by appointment.

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 September 8: Introductions/Housekeeping

Thursday September 15

Topic: Curating Difficult Knowledge

Readings:

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

Thursday September 22

Topic: Testimony I: Tellers, Listeners, Witnessing

Readings:

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.)

Recommended:

Sheftel & Zembrzycki, "Only Human" (17 pgs.)

*****After class:** CEREV Workshop launch – please come! 6 – 8 p.m., snacks and drinks.

Thursday September 29

Topic: Testimony II: Media, Framings & Publics

In-class activities:

- Listen to: *Before It Had A Name – Act I: Mr. Boder Vanishes*

Readings:

Wolf, "Holocaust Testimony: Producing Post-memories, Producing Identities" (20 pgs)

Wiewiorka, "The Era of Witness" (48 pgs.)

Shenker, "Embodied Memory: the institutional mediation of survivor testimony in the USHMM." (18 pgs.)

Work due: Summary of Issues and Annotated Bibliography

Thursday October 6

Topic: The Ethics, Politics & History of Memory

Readings:

Todorov, "The Uses and Abuses of Memory" (11 pgs.)

Hartman, "The Time of Slavery" (18 pgs.)

Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia" (18 pgs.)

Williams, Ch. 7 "Looming Disaster: Memorial Museums and the Shaping of Historical Consciousness." (23 pgs.)

Thursday October 13

Topic: Kinship, Empathy & other Memory Pathways: Transmission, Identification, Ownership

Readings:

Hirsch, "The Generation of Post-Memory" (23 pgs)

Bernstein, "Promiscuous Reading" (18 pgs.)

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

Bauman, "The Holocaust's Life as a Ghost" (10 pgs.)

Recommended:

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

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

Lehrer, "Bearing False Witness?" (20 pgs.)

Work due: Memo on Sources

Thursday October 20

Topic: Critical Museology & Museum Controversies

Readings:

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.)

Butler, "The Politics of Exhibiting Culture." (13 pgs.)

Dubin, "Incivilities in Civil(-ized) Places."(16 pgs.)

Thursday October 27

NO REGULAR CLASS SESSION: Visit the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre.

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.

<http://mhmc.ca/en/contact/>

Work due: "Curatorial Dream" Project Proposal

****** Take observational notes for discussion next week – see handout.**

Thursday November 3

Topic: Memorial Museums & the Museum as “Experience” and “Catalyst”

Williams, *Memorial Museums*, Ch. 1-3 & 6 (95 pgs.)
Stier, “Mediating Memory.” (36 pgs.)
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Museum as Catalyst” (17 pgs.)

Recommended:

Shapiro, “Depicting Darfur” (31 pgs)
Silven, “The museum as forum and actor” (9 pgs).
Kimmelman, “Auschwitz Shifts from Memorializing to Teaching.” (4 pgs).
“Auschwitz in the 21st Century” (60 min. video):
http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/media3/crecs/10-11/cywinski_20101025/

Film excerpts: Objects & Memory (Fein & Danitz)

Thursday November 10

Topic: Tourism and the Mediation of “Authentic” Sites

Readings:

Williams, Ch. 4 “Rocks and Hard Places” (26 pgs.)
Sather-Wagstaff, Ch. 2 & 3, *Heritage that Hurts*” (44 pgs.)
Sturken, “Introduction,” *Tourists of History* (31 pgs.)
Young, “The Veneration of Ruins in the Landscape of Holocaust Memory.” (6 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 excerpts: *KZ* (Rex Bloomstein)

Thursday November 17

NO REGULAR CLASS SESSION:

Attend *Ethnographic Terminalia* exhibition vernissage at Eastern Bloc gallery and take notes on what you see (particularly the “Curating Difficult Knowledge” section). For discussion next week.

Thursday November 24

Topic: Comparison, Connection & Other (Politicized) Relationships

Readings:

Michael Rothberg Intro (36 pgs.)
Partridge, "Holocaust Mahnmahl (Memorial)" (30 pgs.)
Grunebaum-Ralph & Stier, "The Question (of) Remains" (10 pgs.)
Patterson, "Childhood, Memory and Gap" (16 pgs).

Recommended:

Bar-On & Sarsar, "Bridging the Unbridgeable" (6 pages)
Gilroy, "The Black Atlantic" (5 pages)
Novick, "The Holocaust in American Life" (5 pages)

Work due: Curatorial Statement

Thursday December 1

Topic: Art & Witnessing: Performing Memorial Interventions

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)
DiPaolantonio, "A Site of Struggle..." (16 pgs)

Recommended artists to consider:

Shimon Attie
Alfredo Jaar
Stih & Schnock (<http://www.stih-schnock.de/> "Places of Remembrance" and "Bus Stop")
Neery Melkonian ("Blind Dates")

Discussion leading

Each week, a pair or trio of students lead the class discussion of the readings. 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 at least 24 hours prior to class.

Following a concise initial presentation of the reading materials in which the designated discussion leaders identify broad themes and linkages, they will be expected to engage the other members of the seminar in discussion, and keep the conversation on track as it develops. Leaders may want to have a look at the "recommended" readings for your assigned week; if there is a film or audio piece listed, you'll want to view/listen to it to identify a potentially relevant excerpt to screen in class. I will be in touch with discussion leaders if there are particular points or materials I think might be helpful to include.

I encourage discussion leaders to be creative: you may 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.

All that said, discussion leaders are not expected to do highly polished presentation. Rather, the goal is to sketch out a landscape of issues, then draw the class into discussing them.

* 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