

American Cultural Memory

English 80513: Seminar in American Literature since 1900 | Spring 2018

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Course Overview

“Historical memory today is not what it used to be,” critical theorist Andreas Huyssen wrote in 2003. The West confronts “a fundamental disturbance not just of the relationship between history as objective and scientific, and memory as subjective and personal, but of history itself and its promises.” This seminar is about cultural memory, the location of that “disturbance,” where history and memory collide.

When a mourner leaves an old letter from a loved one at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, her personal memory enters the domain of cultural memory—others can see it and read it. When the National Park Service collects and archives the letter, it transforms from cultural memory to history—the government vests it with national meaning and makes it available to future generations of Americans as historical content.

Personal memory, cultural memory, history. This seminar is about the fluid boundaries between them, the cultural struggle to sustain, revise, enter, and dismantle history as we know it in the United States. From the early theories of Walter Benjamin and Maurice Halbwachs to the writing of Avery Gordon, Lisa Lowe, and Viet Nguyen, we will investigate how the nation comes to affirm some versions of the past and why it remain oblivious to others, what Lowe calls “the politics of our lack of knowledge.” (We will consider, for example, what kind of memory the Vietnam Veterans Memorial encourages and what kind of memory it inhibits.) If historical memory is not what it used to be, then this seminar asks what it is now.

Required Texts

Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. Columbia UP, 2004.

Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke UP, 2015.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Harvard UP, 2016.

Sturken, Marita. *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. Duke UP, 2007.

Zelizer, Barbie. *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*. Oxford UP, 2010.

Readings on Course Website

- Anderson, Benedict. "Cultural Roots." *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, pp. 9–38.
- . Introduction. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, pp. 1–8.
- Balibar, Étienne. "The Nation Form: History and Ideology." *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, edited by Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Verso, 1991, pp. 86–106.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1980.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken, 1968, pp. 253–64.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken, 1968, pp. 217–52.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*, edited by Bhabha, Routledge, 1990, pp. 291–322.
- Boym, Svetlana. "Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality and Collective Memory." *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic, 2001, pp. 49–56.
- . "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins." *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic, 2001, pp. 41–48.
- Connerton, Paul. "Social Memory." *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge UP, 1989, pp. 6–40.
- De Kosnik, Abigail. "Memory Machine Myth: The Memex, Media Archaeology, and Repertoires of Archiving." *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, MIT P, 2016, pp. 41–62.
- Doss, Erika. "Statue Mania to Memorial Mania: Scope of the Subject." *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, U of Chicago P, 2010, pp. 17–60.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon.'" *American Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2006, pp. 329–52.
- Ferguson, Margaret. "Negotiating Sites of Memory." *PMLA*, vol. 130, no. 3, 2015, pp. 546–65.
- Fleetwood, Nicole R. "'One Shot': Charles 'Teenie' Harris and the Photographic Practice of Non-Iconicity." *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, U of Chicago P, 2011, pp. 33–70.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Cornell UP, 1977, pp. 139–64.
- Gordon, Avery F. "Her Shape and His Hand." *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, U of Minnesota P, 1997, pp. 3–30.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. "Historical Memory and Collective Memory." *The Collective Memory*, Harper and Row, 1990, pp. 50–87.
- . "Individual Memory and Collective Memory." Harper and Row, 1990, pp. 22–49.

- Hamilton, Jack. "Darkness at the Break of Noon: Sam Cooke, Bob Dylan, and the Birth of Sixties Music." *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination*, Harvard UP, 2016, pp. 26–87.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Mourning and Postmemory." *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Harvard UP, 1997, pp. 17–40.
- . "Postmemory's Archival Turn." *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Columbia UP, 2012, pp. 227–50.
- Hong, Grace Kyungwon. "Fun with Death and Dismemberment: Irony, Farce, and Nationalist Memorialization." *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, U of Minnesota P, 2015, pp. 35–61.
- Huysen, Andreas. "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia." *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford UP, 2003, pp. 11–29.
- Klein, Kerwin Lee. "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse." *From History to Theory*, U of California P, 2011, pp. 112–37.
- Kozol, Wendy. "Battlefield Trophies: Soldiers' Archives and the Affective Politics of Recoil." *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing*, U of Minnesota P, 2014, pp. 127–64.
- Lipsitz, George. "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow." *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, U of Minnesota P, 1990, pp. 3–20.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." Translated by Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, no. 26, 1989, pp. 7–24.
- Renan, Ernest. "What Is a Nation?" *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, 1990, pp. 8–22.
- Rieff, David. "Footprints in the Sands of Time, and All That." *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, Yale UP, 2016, pp. 1–21.
- Savage, Kirk. "Freedom's Memorial." *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, Princeton UP, 1997, pp. 89–128.
- Schlund-Vials, Cathy J. "Lost Chapters and Invisible Wars: Hip-Hop and Cambodian American Critique." *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*, U of Minnesota P, 2012, pp. 149–80.
- Sturken, Marita. "The Wall and the Screen Memory: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial." *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, U of California P, 1997, pp. 44–84.
- Taylor, Diana. "Acts of Transfer." *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke UP, 2006, pp. 1–52.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, pp. 5–27.
- Winter, Jay. "The Setting: The Great War in the Memory Boom of the Twentieth Century." *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, Yale UP, 2006, pp. 17–51.
- Young, James E. Introduction. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale UP, 1993, pp. 1–16.

Assignments and Grading

Assignments:

Participation and Preparedness	20%
Discussion Lead	10%
Conference Paper	30%
Article Manuscript	40%

Grading Scale:

A	93–100%	C	73–76%
A-	90–92%	C-	70–72%
B+	87–89%	D+	67–69%
B	83–86%	D	63–66%
B-	80–82%	D-	60–62%
C+	77–79%	F	0–59%

Reading Schedule and Deadlines

Date	Readings	Deadlines
Week 1	What Is Cultural Memory?	
Wednesday, January 17	Syllabus Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”	Discussion lead assigned
Week 2	Foundations	
Wednesday, January 24	Halbwachs, “Individual Memory and Collective Memory” and “Historical Memory and Collective Memory” Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” Nora, “Between Memory and History” Connerton, “Social Memory”	
Week 3	National Memory	
Wednesday, January 31	Renan, “What Is a Nation?” Anderson, Introduction to <i>Imagined Communities</i> and “Cultural Roots” Bhabha, “DissemiNation” Balibar, “The Nation Form”	
Week 4	The Memory Boom	
Wednesday, February 7	Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory”	

	in Historical Discourse” Winter, “The Setting” Huysen, “Present Pasts” Boym, “Restorative Nostalgia” and “Reflective Nostalgia”	
Week 5	Memorials	
Wednesday, February 14	Savage, “Freedom’s Memorial” Young, Introduction to <i>The Texture of Memory</i> Sturken, “The Wall and the Screen Memory” Doss, “Statue Mania to Memorial Mania”	
Week 6		
Wednesday, February 21	Sturken, <i>Tourists of History</i>	
Week 7	Literature	
Wednesday, February 28	White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” Gordon, “Her Shape and His Hand” Hong, “Fun with Death and Dismemberment” Ferguson, “Negotiating Sites of Memory”	
Week 8		
Wednesday, March 7	Nguyen, <i>Nothing Ever Dies</i>	Conference paper due Friday, March 9 at 5 p.m.
Week 9		
Wednesday, March 14	No class (spring break)	
Week 10	Visual Culture	
Wednesday, March 21	Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Barthes, Excerpt from <i>Camera Lucida</i> Hirsch, “Mourning and Postmemory” Fleetwood, “One Shot”	
Week 11		
Wednesday, March 28	Landsberg, <i>Prosthetic Memory</i>	
Week 12	Archives	
Wednesday, April 4	Hirsch, “Postmemory’s Archival Turn” Taylor, “Acts of Transfer” Kozol, “Battlefield Trophies” De Kosnik, “Memory Machine Myth”	

Week 13		
Wednesday, April 11	Lowe, <i>The Intimacies of Four Continents</i>	
Week 14	Media	
Wednesday, April 18	Lipsitz, "Popular Culture" Hamilton, "Darkness at the Break of Noon" Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome" Schlund-Vials, "Lost Chapters and Invisible Wars"	
Week 15		
Wednesday, April 25	Zelizer, <i>About to Die</i>	
Week 16	Forgetting	
Wednesday, May 2	Reiff, "Footprints in the Sands of Time, and All That" Article manuscript mini-presentations SPOTs	Article manuscript due Friday, May 11 at 5 p.m.