

WINTER TERM GROUP PROJECT

History At The Museum

January 2020

StudiOC Conference Room

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This winter term group project, “History at the Museum,” offers students an opportunity to explore and interrogate the practice of communicating the past through the institutions of museums. Studies show that the American public consider museums to be one of the most trustworthy sources of historical information, but like any historical representation, the past as presented at museums is mediated and shaped by many factors, including the agenda of curators, the political goals of funders, and available historical materials and resources. This team-taught Winter Term project will introduce students to key themes and debates through readings and classroom discussions supplemented by several meetings with museum professionals and visits to five local history museums. This Winter Term project is designed to offer both in-depth academic engagement with public history, museums, visual analysis, historical memory and hands-on experience in the field of museum studies and exhibit design.

Topics we will cover include:

- The history and evolution of history museums in the United States;
- The nature and function of different kinds of historical museums such as house museums, thematic museums, and identity-based museums;
- The role of history museums in constructing community and national identity;
- The opportunities and challenges of communicating the past in a museum and how they differ from purely textual interpretations of history;
- The range of techniques that museum exhibits use to communicate the past visually, technologically, and emotionally;
- The challenges of portraying contested and politicized pasts in museums;
- The ethics and politics of representing trauma or violence in a museum setting;
- The administrative and financial logistics of running museums.

Assignments:

1) Attendance and Participation. Attendance is mandatory. If you must miss a session because of illness you need to notify us in advance and you will be required to make up the missed work. Please do the assigned readings in advance of class and come prepared to discuss them with your peers.

2) Three 2-page museum reviews: Drawing on the readings for the week, write a short review (two pages maximum) of the museum we visited on our field trip. For weeks in which we visit two museums, chose one to review. Reviews are due at the debrief class sessions held at the end of the week (the class sessions on 1/9, 1/16, and 1/23). Bring one hard copy to class.

3) Final Exhibit Project: In groups of four, students will design a section of an exhibit on women alumnae who were leaders in their fields for the centennial commemoration of the 19th Amendment. One to two groups per week will report on their progress. More details to follow.

Field Trip Guidelines: Our course will take five field trips, most involving off-campus travel. On days we go off-campus, we will meet in the parking lot of Mudd Library at either 8 or 9 am. Please BE ON TIME. Transportation costs and museum entry fees are included in the course, but we can't provide lunch, so please plan on either packing a lunch or bringing money to purchase food. There is often required reading on days with scheduled field trips. Please do the readings in advance; we will bring them into conversation at the different historic sites. The field trip schedule is:

January 7: Oberlin Heritage Center (Meet at Monroe House on Professor St by the Con parking lot) at **1:00pm**

January 8: Hayes Presidential Library and Museum (Meet at Mudd Parking Lot at **9am**)

January 15: Wright Museum in Detroit (Meet at Mudd Parking Lot at **8am**)

January 21: Maltz Museum (Meet at Mudd Parking Lot at **9am**)

January 22: Kent State May 4th Center (Meet at Mudd Parking Lot at **9am**)

CLASS SCHEDULE (Meetings take place in StudiOC seminar room unless otherwise noted)

UNIT I – The History of History Museums in the US

Jan 6 1-3 pm	History of History Museums Readings: Kulick, “Designing the Past”; Carson, “The End of History Museums”; Pubols, “Doing History at the Exhibit Hall”
Jan 7 1-3pm	Field Trip to Oberlin Heritage Center Readings: Purcell, “No Ivory Tower: Local History and the Small Museum”
Jan 8 9am-3pm	Field Trip – Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Museum Readings: West, “Of Babies and Bathwater—Birthplace ‘Shrines’ and the Future of the Historic House Museum”; Rymysza-Pawlowska, “Chapter 4: The Spaces of History”
Jan 9 10:30-noon 1:30-3pm	Debrief from Field Trips/Discussion of Final Projects Meet in Archives with Ken Grossi and Heath Patten

UNIT II – Identity Formations and Citizenship Claims at the Museum

Jan 13 1-3pm	Black Museum Movement and Identity Struggles Readings: Burns, <i>From Storefront to Monument</i> , Introduction and part of Chapter 1, pp. 1-33; Autrey, “Political Economy of Memory”
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- Jan 14 1-3pm Museums and Historical Reenactments
Reading: Agnew, “What is Reenactment?”; Rymza-Pawlowska, Chap. 5: Cultural Logics of Reenactment
- Jan 15 8am-6pm Field Trip – Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
Underground Railroad Reenactment, Detroit Michigan
- Jan 16 1-3 pm Debrief and group reports on connections with their projects
- Jan 17 10:30-12:45 *Special Optional Event: Why Museums?*
This program offers an open-ended conversation for students involved in Winter Term group projects that focus on museums or issues of display. We will explore why someone might want to work in museums, why museums exist, or why museums do what they do. Since each Winter Term project focuses on a different type of museum from a different disciplinary perspective, this conversation will allow students to understand and reflect on the differences between museums as well as their respective goals in relation to the communities and audiences they serve. Lunch is included. 45 student maximum. Interested students must register in advance at tinyurl.com/whymuseums. Organized by Hannah Kinney, Assistant Curator of Academic Programs, hkinney@oberlin.edu
- January 17 1-3pm Contested Histories
Readings: Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*, Chapter 1; Williams, *Memorial Museums*, Chapters 2: “The Surviving Object”
- Week III – Exploring the Politics of Representing Traumatic Pasts**
- Jan 20 No meeting—Martin Luther King Holiday
- Jan 21 9am-3pm Field Trip: The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Beachwood, Ohio
Readings: Conn, “Melting Pots, Salad Bowls, Ethnic Museums and American Identity”
- Jan 22 9am-2pm Field Trip: The May 4th Visitors Center at Kent State University
Readings: Sodaro, “Memorial Museums: Emergence of a New Form; Williams, *Memorial Museums*, Chapter 5: “Rocks and Hard Places: Location and Spatiality in Memorial Museums”
- Jan 23 1-3pm Debrief and group reports on connections with their projects
- WEEK IV– Presenting Your Exhibit**
- Jan 27 1-3pm Open Office Hours (Prof. Kozol’s office)/Group Project time
- Jan 28 10am-1pm Presentations and Celebration

Bibliography

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Rymsza-Pawlowska, M.J. *History comes alive: public history and popular culture in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

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