Museum and Historic Site Interpretation: Principles and Practice
HIS 627/IAR627—Fall 2012
Wednesdays 3:30-6:20
MHRA 2210

Professor Benjamin Filene
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Credits: 3 hours
Prerequisites: none; open only to History and Interior Architecture graduate students pursuing concentrations in Museum Studies or Historic Preservation (required of Museum Studies concentrators).

Course Description
This seminar explores the relationship between history and public audiences, focusing on the theory and practice of telling stories through museums and historic sites. It introduces you to the tools that public historians use to interpret the past, explores key dilemmas in public interpretation and community collaboration, and examines contemporary models for how to reach audiences in ways that make history resonant and meaningful to them.

Student Learning Outcomes
Through a mix of classroom- and project-based work, you will gain a richer understanding of the role of history in public life and of how museums and historic sites interpret the past for—and with—public audiences. Successfully completing this course will build the skills that you will need to thrive in the workplace:

• **evaluating and analyzing primary and secondary sources** thoughtfully, with attention to argument and point of view
• **using a finely honed eye and ear to recognize rich stories**—in sound, image, object, or text—and their potential impact on diverse audiences
• **synthesizing multiple sources** and points of view into compelling, relevant, and historically sound public presentations
• **speaking** with passion, clarity, and respect
• **writing** clearly and persuasively
• **collaborating** with energy, sensitivity, and an awareness of how much you can learn from community members and your peers
• **experimenting** fearlessly to build your skills and find the best ways to reach audiences

Teaching Methods
This seminar depends on active and engaged discussions that allow you and your classmates, individually and collectively, to wrestle with what it means to become a practicing public historian. The classroom will be a setting for engagement with multiple voices—not only the professor’s but those of the students, community partners, and historical “informants” revealed through a range of sources. You are expected to complete reading assignments before every
class meeting and arrive ready to share personal opinions on the material. Class sessions will regularly involve informal full-group discussions, oral presentations, small-group conversations, and on-the-spot analyses of primary sources. As detailed below, class participation is a significant part of your grade. In addition, you will engage with the course content through formal and informal writing assignments that invite you to apply the approaches we are discussing to original material in your own voice.

The course’s core theoretical concepts you will try out in practice. This semester the class will participate in a multifaceted national initiative called the Guantánamo Public Memory Project (http://hrcolumbia.org/guantanamo/), which was launched by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. UNCG is one of a dozen public history programs nationwide that has been invited to contribute to a national traveling exhibition about the history of America’s relationship to Guantánamo, Cuba military base (known as “GTMO”) since the late nineteenth century and the complex contemporary issues it raises. UNCG will focus on the 1950s-’60s era at the base. Students will conduct original research, including recording oral interviews with former residents, will select images and write exhibition text and will collaborate with a professional exhibition designer in New York to create a large panel representing this Cold War-era story for public audiences. Students will travel to New York (funding permitting) and participate in the conference marking the exhibition’s opening. The exhibition will travel to Greensboro will open in the International Civil Rights Center and Museum downtown from December 2013-January 2014.

**Assignments, and Evaluation**

You will be evaluated on

Class participation—15%:
- attending class, doing the reading assignments, writing thoughtful and on-time weekly responses to the readings and “reflection journal” entries (see below),
- speaking up in discussions, representing the class and the school professionally in the wider community, and helping to foster a sense of shared exploration within the classroom

Weekly responses: Each week, short, informal reactions to that week's readings (roughly a couple of paragraphs) will be due. These must be posted on our class’s Blackboard Discussion Board by 8:00 a.m. each Wednesday.

Oral Interview Archival Package—10%:
oral interviews, indexed transcriptions, duplicate cds, and permission forms, delivered to community and institutional partners—due September 26

Blog Postings—20%:
thoughtful, honest, analytical reflections about your and your group’s work on the GTMO project, engaging students in the other participating institutions—due September 28 and October 10

Exhibition Review—25%:
an analytical assessment of a public exhibition—due December 5
Term Project—30%:
an original, historically accurate, thought-provoking, visually attractive, professional-quality exhibition component that helps public audiences see contemporary resonance in historical issues—*work substantially completed November 14; opens to the public December 13*

Grading scale:
A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; F=72 and below

If things go awry…
…it’s your responsibility to tell me—right away. If papers are late without direct, prior approval from me, I deduct ½ a letter grade per day—no exceptions.

If your project is dead-ending or peer collaboration imploding, I need to hear about it before it’s too late to resolve the issues.

**LATENESS POLICY:**
If a paper or project is turned in late, I will deduct ½ a letter grade per day (e.g., A to A) unless you and I have previously agreed upon an extension *in advance* or unless a dean’s excuse is provided.

**Academic Integrity Policy**
All students have a responsibility to uphold the standards of “Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, and Responsibility” detailed in the Academic Integrity Policy. Instances of cheating, plagiarism, misuse of academic resources, falsification of information, and facilitating of academic dishonesty are treated with utmost seriousness by the history department and dealt with severely by the University administration. The full policy appears in the Student Calendar/Handbook and at academicintegrity.uncg.edu. Per university policy, you will be asked to sign a copy of the Academic Integrity Pledge for each major assignment in this class.

**Special Needs**
If you require accommodations for special learning needs, please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Disability Services, located within the Elliot University Center (334-5770)—and please let me know!
**Books to Buy**


Lipman, Jana K.  *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (2009).


—*to be purchased directly from author via BF*


CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

SETTING THE STAGE
August 22: Introductions—Histories, Stories, Publics

Before first class:
Read about the National Council on Public History’s debate about “What Is Public History” (including Cathy Stanton’s summary) at the NCPH website: http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history

Read some of the actual Listserv postings about “What Is Public History” from May, June, and July 2007, archived here: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Public.

Assignment: Come to class with two comments that interested you.


Download and read the Guantánamo Public Memory Project’s “Blueprint,” available at http://hrcolumbia.org/guantanamo/blueprint.pdf

Explore the Guantánamo Public Memory Project’s website: http://hrcolumbia.org/guantanamo/


August 29: Whose History? Who’s History?
Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelen. The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (2000): Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and Afterthoughts (everything except Chapters 2-3).


September 5: Looking at and Learning from the Local: Hearing Stories


Lipman, Jana K. “‘We are Real Democrats’: Legal Debates and Cold War Unionism before Castro, 1940-1954.” In Guantánamo: 61-99.


[In class: evidence as stories; stories as evidence]

READING THE EVIDENCE
September 12: Oral History


Lipman, Jana K.. “Good Neighbors, Good Revolutionaries, 1940-1958.” In Guantánamo: 100-143.

September 19: Objects and Images [Note: Will re-schedule this class for earlier in the week]


Optional:


September 26:
TELLING THE STORY

October 3: The Power of Interpretation; Interpretation as Power

Sample selections (of your choice) in the GTMO “research packet”

Work session, including discussion of blogging, “story mining.”

Oral Interview Archival Package due

Friday, September 28: First blog posting completed

TELLING THE STORY

October 3: The Power of Interpretation; Interpretation as Power


October 10: Exhibiting History


**Second blog posting completed**

**October 17: Learning in the Museum**


**Optional:**

**Send outline of panel with main ideas for content to national project hub and advisory group**

**October 24: Exhibit Design**


“‘Experience’ vs. the ‘Big Idea,’” National Association of Museum Exhibition (NAME) ListServ discussion (August 2011): 4 pp. [BF will hand out]


October 31: Exhibit Evaluation—Class meets at Greensboro Historical Museum
[Note: Will try to re-schedule this class for earlier in the day]


No Blackboard postings this week
Assignment: After completing the above reading, fill out Serrell’s framework (42-45) for Greensboro Historical Museum’s Voices of a City

By November 5: Send full content to designer and project hub

November 7: Digital History


Parry, Ross and Nadia Arbach. “Localized, Personalized, and Constructivist: A Space for


Assignment: Identify a website that has attempted to link users/visitors and history. Instead of a regular posting, write on Blackboard a paragraph or two evaluating, in light of this week’s reading, what works and doesn’t on this site. Does it offer us any clues about what makes a history-based website work (or not)?

November 14: Looking at and Learning from the Local, part 2: Seeing Place
--CLASS MEETS ON ELM ST.


No Blackboard postings this week
Assignment: Walk Elm Street with “live eyes” and identify a story hidden in the built environment to share with your classmates.

By November 14, final exhibition revisions submitted

November 21: No class (Thanksgiving break)
November 28: Visitors as Co-Creators


Wednesday, December 5: Exhibition Review due

*December 12-14—Extra class sessions*: Exhibition opening and conference in New York City!