

FYS Proposal

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FYS Title & Description:

Title: “Memorial Contentions”

Which memorials and historic sites should be remembered, preserved, honored, or removed? Historical monuments and heritage tourist sites (such as house museums and living history centers) have recently become flashpoints in contentious discussions of how we draw meaning from the past. These sites prompt reconsiderations of U.S. history and the responsibility we owe to the past and one another today. This proposed FYS course provides students with opportunities to learn about, analyze, and discuss the complex issues surrounding historical memory at these sites, locally and nationally.

Format:

The proposed course will be conducted as a hybrid seminar and research lab. I will provide students with readings – both scholarly and those intended for general audiences – that offer historical context and informed viewpoints concerning select monuments and heritage sites. Students will discuss these readings in a seminar setting and practice building evidence-based oral arguments. I will also provide students with local case studies to explore and assess on their own. Acting as a guide for this laboratory method, I will coordinate and join them on visits to local sites and special collections/archives and provide relevant historical materials for students to conduct their own exploration of the issues at stake. The guided site visits (the laboratory portion of the class) will compose roughly 40% of the class meeting times over the semester. Students will maintain a critical journal where they write reflections on each week’s theme(s), write a paper comparing interpretive practices at two heritage sites, and conduct independent research and virtually design their own monument.

Content:

Students will encounter two main units in this course: 1) Heritage sites and 2) monuments. Both units will be composed of relevant scholarly texts, popular reactions/op-ed newspaper articles, and site visits. For unit 1, students will read portions of Tiya Miles’s *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (history of a Cherokee plantation taken over by whites and made into a tourist destination) and Handler and Gable’s *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*. These works offer introductions to the complex issues of visitor expectation and funding, and the history of racial and classist ideologies built into the preservation movement (and the founding of house and living history museums). For the lab portion of the unit, the class will visit Old Salem (as a tour group) and listen to a “This American Life” podcast about the experience of an African American living history interpreter. Next students will get a “behind the scenes” view of the Hidden Town Project. They will meet with WFU student research interns and the director of the project for an alternative tour of the site that interprets spaces of enslavement. Readings for this portion of the class include Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Anthony Parent, “‘Home’ and ‘House’ in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2013).

The second site visit will tour the home and gardens of the Reynolda House Museum of American Art. I will lead students through a critical examination of the educational conceit of the “house museum” with readings such as M. Smith’s “Reynolda: A Rural Vision in an Industrializing South” (1988) and Gerald George’s “Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What’s Wrong” (2002). Reynolda staff can lead a tour and discuss interpretive challenges and issues with the students. I plan to ask Gigi Parent to present her oral history project on Five Points (the neighborhood built for African American employees of the estate) as well. Parent has agreed to guest lecture for several of my previous classes.

The third site visit will be a class visit to the Wake Forest Historical Museum. With the guidance of Sarah Soleim, Manager of Community and Academic Learning, and Terry Brock, Manager of Archaeology and Research, students will learn about new archaeological discoveries on the museum grounds and efforts to engage diverse stakeholders in community-based interpretation. To contextualize the issues at stake at the WF Historical Museum, readings will focus on a notorious case of a silenced descendant community at Monticello with Annette Gordon-Reed’s *Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* and Lois E. Horton’s “Avoiding History: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the Uncomfortable Public Conversation on Slavery” in *Slavery and Public History*. Students will also read a rubric of best practices established by the National Summit on Teaching Slavery entitled “Engaging Descendant Communities: An Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites” (2018).

The second unit focuses on controversies over statues and monuments. The best overview on the subject is Erica Doss’s *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, which helps students to think about memorials in the historical context of their creation. The first case study in this unit will allow for an exploration of the explosive conflicts surrounding Confederate monuments; I will assign recent newspaper articles and blogs alongside historians’ responses to the proposed removal (or re-interpretation) of statues in Virginia. I hope to also screen the documentary *The Neutral Ground* (Dir. C.J. Hunt, 2021) about the controversy surrounding the Lee monument in New Orleans. The next case studies will move beyond monuments to the Confederacy and into the realms of colonialism and white supremacy. I will assign collections of readings – scholarly historical context, newspapers and blog sources – concerning localized controversies over statues of Columbus, missionary Junipero Serra, and the Wampanoag leader Massasoit. Some scholarly sources include Christopher Schmidt-Nowara’s article “Spanish Origins of American Empire: Hispanism, History, and Commemoration, 1898-1915” (2008) and a chapter from Blee & O’Brien’s *Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit* (2019). In some cases, the protests of these statues sparked movements and wide-spread revisions of history that continue to shape local places.

Assignments and Evaluation of Students:

This course will have three main assignments and means of evaluating student learning. First, students will keep a critical journal (as a dynamic Google doc) for most class days. At the start of the class meeting, students will be asked to write a short response to the assigned readings. At the end of class discussion (or after class, in the case of site visits), students will add a short reflection on how their thinking changed or evolved on the issues at stake. The common prompt for the journal will be: Consider how the readings and site visit might tackle or engage with a common theme or problem of the unit. Does the reading illuminate something new about the site, or does the site challenge the argument

of the reading? This informal writing will help students track their ideas and build an evidence base for the more formal written assignments later in the course. I will provide feedback on the critical journals every two weeks to make sure students are staying on track. The critical journal will compose 25% of the overall course grade.

The second assignment is an analytical, argument-driven essay concerning the heritage sites we have studied and visited. At the conclusion of the first unit, students will use assigned readings and their observations on site visits to answer several comparative questions: How well do Old Salem and the Wake Forest Historical Museum utilize best practices in engaging descendant communities and balancing the interests of stakeholders? How might other museums serve as models for Reynolda House (and other house museums and plantations) for more expansive interpretations of their places and spaces? This assignment will compose 20% of the overall course grade.

The third assignment, which relates to the unit on monuments, is a project divided into four parts. The first task for each student is to locate and assess historical monuments in Winston-Salem, which they then present to their peers in class as a kind of virtual walking tour. This presentation is worth 5% of the overall course grade. The second part of the assignment – which is assessed based on participation and active engagement (10% of the course grade in total) – is to collectively create a rubric for assessing new monuments. For the third part of the assignment, students synthesize the readings and discussions and conduct independent research to design their own monument, which they will outline in written form and orally “pitch” to their peers in class. For these pitches, the student presenter must explain both the design of the memorial and the historical context of the event/person/place commemorated. The written portion and oral “pitch” will compose 20% of the overall course grade. Meanwhile, to prepare for the next part of the project, students in the audience take on the role of a committee from a granting agency that considers the merits of the proposed monuments. For the fourth part of the assignment, each student will write an essay that uses the collectively-authored rubric and assigned readings to determine which of the proposed monuments (not their own) to fund and why. This essay will compose 20% of the overall course grade.

Outcomes and Assessment:

1. Read increasingly sophisticated texts critically

The assigned readings encourage students to become more discerning and critical readers as the semester progresses. I start with scholarly works that introduce students to the central issues and offer models for using historical research to build informed arguments relevant to current controversies. Once students gain confidence in their content knowledge from scholarly sources, I will introduce popular texts such as newspaper articles and blogs. Students will then have the tools to assess and critically examine the claims put forth in such popular sources.

2. Pose and respond to complex ideas

The seminar discussion and the “lab” portion (that is, the site visits and monument “pitch” project) work together to encourage students to explore complex issues in heritage tourism and memorial culture. By writing a paper comparing museum practices, interpreting a local monument, and contributing to a rubric for assessing best practices in memorialization, students learn to collect and evaluate evidence. Finally, the task of designing and defending their own memorial – as well as explaining their choice to fund a proposed memorial – helps students to develop informed conclusions and judgements.

3. Identify, analyze, interpret and evaluate different points of view

The main written assignments in this course require that students explore a core issue in public history: how to weigh different viewpoints on the past and respond to the interests of different stakeholders in the present. Museum site visits will reveal that museums are dependent upon visitors and must consider visitors' expectations in their public interpretations. While collectively building an assessment rubric (for assignment #3), students will wrestle with ways to account for diverse perspectives on local historical issues such as slavery, segregation, urban development, and corporate power. Finally, a core element of the students' pitch for their own memorial will be an evaluation of diverse views; what or who's history should be memorialized?

4. Construct cogent arguments in both written and oral form

The critical journal assignment provides a low-stakes way for students to reflect on and evolve in their thinking on the issues surrounding national memory. All formal written assignments will likewise require students to construct cogent, evidence-based arguments. For example, what exhibit panel(s) did a student interpret as evidence of (or lack of) best practices? Why might a particular design make the most sense for a proposed memorial, given the historical event/person/place under consideration? Students will also have ample opportunity to develop oral presentation skills with numerous presentations, culminating in their final "pitch" for a proposed memorial.

Schedule:

I plan to offer the FYS in Fall 2022 with one section. My preference is to meet in a downtown WFU classroom once a week for a 2-1/2 hour block. The once-per-week option is necessary to complete unhurried site visits to regional museums and is best suited for the project assignment involving oral presentations. Furthermore, I want to employ campus and community resources such as ZSR Special Collections and the North Carolina Room in the Forsyth County Public Library to guide students through their research. In my experience, first year students can be intimidated by these research spaces and few will access them on their own. I will coordinate trips to research sites and look through students' archival materials with them. Making archival research a part of the lab portion of the course will introduce students to important campus resources and make them better researchers for their future classes at WFU.

Internal or External Support:

This course will require support to fund entry fees at Old Salem, transportation and photo reproduction costs at the public library, and transportation to the Wake Forest Historical Museum. The development of the course, because of the partnerships required with staff at local institutions, will also require some funds to offset transportation and the professor's time. I plan to apply for this support from the History Department, the College Course Enhancement Fund, and the FYS committee.

Synopsis for Dissemination:

Why have crowds gathered to tear down or defend Confederate statues? Why have museums renamed buildings and revised their interpretations? What should be remembered, preserved, honored, or erased from public space and consciousness? This course considers the issues involved in historical monuments and heritage sites as Americans seek to draw meaning from the past.

