YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE
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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2015 Volume III: History in Our Everyday Lives

Introduction

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We are surrounded by the history though we rarely take notice. In moments of national crisis, however, we often become painfully aware of our unresolved past. The volatile 2015 debates over the symbolism of the Confederate flag—as an enduring symbol of slavery and white supremacy or simply Southern heritage—quickly remind us of the importance of confronting the nation's past in our everyday landscapes.

This seminar aimed to explore the field of public history as a set of broader engagements between historians and the public about the documentation and interpretation of the past. By exploring a range of public history projects—podcasts, public art, exhibitions, websites, documentary films, etc., seminar participants discussed the ways in which teachers and students in k-12 grades might use their everyday surroundings and readily available materials to reinvigorate the study of local, state or national histories in the classroom.

Critical to the understanding of the power of public history is the potential for the public to intervene in the research and narration of its own history and not cede authority solely to academic historians. In the seminar we considered the importance of searching for alternative sources of information beyond the textbook and how the act of research and discovery empowers students to be historical researchers, thinkers, and writers. Particularly for teachers working in low-income and predominantly non-white or recent immigrant neighborhoods the methods of public history allow students to find ways to connect their own experiences to those they read in textbooks. Opportunities to touch the past in the form of visits to archival collections housed in libraries or historical societies or on walking tours of historic sites also allow students to come face to face with the past. These engagements also allow students to question the practice of historic preservation and public memory. Whose stories are saved and why? Why do others disappear from the historical record and our surrounding landscape? How might we find other ways to restore forgotten histories and voices to the public record?

The seminar also considered the different types of public history projects and how they create literary, aural, visual, and corporeal experiences that foster different forms of engagement with the past. While some public history projects such as historic exhibitions and documentary films allow for greater historical information to be presented to an audience, we noted the ways in which the historical fiction film or public art might create a more powerful emotional connection to the past. And we debated the merits of these public history projects not just for their historic accuracy—that is the ability to render every fact and detail accurately as we might expect from a work of academic history—but also for their artistic or experiential worth.

The rich discussions over the value of public history and the possibilities and limitations of different types of projects supported the growth and development of the ten curriculum units presented here. Collectively, they

range from explorations of the history of local parks situated in diverse urban communities, studies of school desegregation, work and labor, public art and commemoration, and the history of aviation. The units also discuss the ways that archival research, walking tours, museum visits, public art, and documentary filmmaking may offer alternative ways to engage with and speak back to academic history. While each of the units focus heavily on the local community history of the seminar participants' home cities, they offer models for any teacher hoping to enrich their teaching of local and national history through the tools of public history. The units demonstrate the potential for teachers to explore their own communities and empower their students to contribute to the writing of their own history.

Mary Lui