PAST AS PRELUDE: THINKING HISTORICALLY
New York University
Gallatin School of Individualized Study
IDSEM-UG 1611.001

Professor Alejandro Velasco
Spring 2013: Term
Office: 1 Washington Place, Rm. 506
Location: 1 Washington Pl, 527:
Off. Hours: T 3:30-5:30PM; W 10AM-2PM, or by appt
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Course Description

In a much-remarked 2008 speech on race relations, then-candidate Barack Obama drew on Faulkner to remind Americans of the continuing legacies of racism in the US: “the past is never dead,” he noted, “it’s not even past.” In doing so Obama called upon a familiar trope in critical thought – that history is just as dynamic and elusive as the present, each one (past and present) continuously shaping and informing the other. Which raises the question: what is history? What does it mean to think historically, to understand history not as an array of facts but as process, not as a field of study but as a sensibility, as a way to analyze the world around us? This course is designed for students seeking to add meaningful historical dimensions to their concentrations. We begin by surveying conventional approaches to historical analysis, from Herodotus to Hegel to Marx to Benjamin. Then we draw from Nietzsche, Foucault, Hayden White, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot to consider how history is constructed, used, and misused. We will then examine how jurists, anthropologists, novelists, sociologists, and human rights activists think historically to inform and deepen their craft, reading from Tolstoy, Justices Breyer and Scalia, Eric Wolf, Christopher Mele, and Daniel Wilkinson. We end with workshops that consider what it would mean to think historically about your own concentrations. What kinds of questions and materials would you include as you prepare for your IAPC, rationale, booklist, colloquium, and ultimately, life after NYU, armed with a sense of history?

Requirements/Grading

Weekly responses
Lower East Side Presentation
Lower East Side Paper
Annotated Bibliography
Annotoriographical Essay
Participation/Attendance

varies
10-15 mins
5-6pp
6-7 pp
10-12pp
throughout

15%
5%
15%
15%
20%
30%

Attendance/Participation (throughout; 30%)

Regular attendance, punctuality, and engagement with the readings are keys to being an active participant. As such I will expect you to be present and on time at each of our class sessions. For your benefit and mine, I will distribute attendance sheets at the beginning of each class. Should you need to miss a session, let me know ahead of class as I will not consider retroactive explanations and each unexcused absence will incur a five point reduction from your final grade.
(with a maximum of three). **After three unexcused absences, you will receive an “F” for participation/attendance.** More importantly, though, I will expect you to come to class prepared, which of course means that you have read/seen/heard the work assigned in advance of each class, and are ready to participate in discussions about the materials. Please don’t take this course if you think you will be unable to manage a reading load of about 100 pages a week.

**Weekly Responses (due by 10AM on day of class; 15%)**

To help you keep up with our readings, and to help me gauge where your areas of interest or concern lay, over the course of the semester, you will post at least seven weekly responses on the blackboard website by 10AM on the day of class (please post ONLY ONE PER WEEK). These responses should be around 150 words each (slightly shorter than this paragraph) and may address specific readings – either in general terms or focus on a particular section – or issues raised in the context of class discussion, issues that perhaps were left unexamined or that you want to explore further. Comments can be as specific or broad as you wish. Was something in the readings, lectures, or class discussion especially interesting? You should also feel free to use these responses to ask questions about the materials, if anything seemed unclear. Remember: if you have a question about something, chances are that one of your peers does too!

**Lower East Side Project**  
(10-15 min group presentation, 5-6pp paper, 28 and 31 March, 5% and and 15%)

This course is divided into two parts. The first half of the course will focus on theories of history: what it is, what its uses are, what its problems and possibilities entail, etc. The second half of the course will attempt to place these theoretical constructs in direct conversation with a variety of disciplines and professions that comprise our world, from jurisprudence to literature and others. To mark the transition from one part of the course to the next, we will consider how historical thinking may be deployed to analyze not just the world of ideas, but the physical world around us. To do so, we will explore how we may apply historical thinking to the city in which we live, and in particular to one of its storied neighborhoods: the Lower East Side. This project consists of three parts, for which you should plan accordingly:

**8-11 March (on your own):** In groups of four (which the instructor will assign or which you may select in advance of this date), you will do a self-guided walking tour of the Lower East Side (the instructor will assign you the tour). This walking tour will be among the ones drawn from popular tour guides of New York, the kind that tourists to the city routinely locate online. The purpose here will be to pay attention to the kinds of places and histories highlighted in your tour: what seem to be the major draws? How are they cast? How is the history of the neighborhood narrativized and represented? What kinds of silences speak in the crevices of the tour? What impressed you? What surprised you? What questions did you have as you did the tour?

**14 March (TBA):** As a class, we will visit the Tenement Museum (http://www.tenement.org/). Please allow for flexibility on this date so that we can arrange a class tour.
26 March (in class): We will discuss the first chapters of Christopher Mele’s *Selling the Lower East Side*.

28 March (in class): We will discuss the rest of Christopher Mele’s *Selling the Lower East Side*.

29 March – 1 April (on your own): Your group should arrange independently to meet and exchange impressions of the Tenement Museum tour in light of the Mele text and of the other tour you did independently, and more broadly of the various readings you have engaged over the course of the semester. The purpose here is to think about the tour based on the readings, discussions, and ideas that you have encountered, and then bring those perspectives into conversation. For instance, what echoes of Hegel or Marx did you find in your tours? Or of Nietzsche and Foucault? Or of Trouillot or White? Based on these reflections, your group should prepare a 10-15 minute presentation to share the product of your collaborative reflections with your peers.

2 April: Your group will offer 10-15 minute presentations to reflect your impressions of the Lower East Side tours.

7 April: Every student will be responsible for submitting a 5-6 page essay, the aim of which should be to conduct a historically informed analysis/critique of the walking tour you did on 8-11 March. To build your analysis, you should draw on your reflections and discussions of the Tenement Museum tour, as well as the second half of Christopher Mele’s *Selling the Lower East Side*, and theoretical readings from the course. How does the walking tour compare and contrast to the Tenement Museum and the Mele text? What is highlighted? What is silenced? Ultimately, then, you are addressing the question: how does thinking historically about the Lower East Side problematize conventional, contemporary approaches to the neighborhood?

*Annotated Bibliography and Historiographical Essay*

At some point in your academic career (and after!) you will likely confront a significant research project. This may be a thesis or a dissertation, a legal opinion or position paper, a report or an audit, etc. More immediately, however, before you graduate from Gallatin you will produce a rationale and booklist. The former is a succinct yet sophisticated summary of the major works and ideas that comprise your concentration. The latter, meanwhile, should constitute a well thought out collection of the major works that comprise the intellectual foundation of your major. In both cases, implied but central to the success of each document is a sense of history, of how your rationale (and by extension, your concentration) engages with the intellectual trajectory on which it builds. As such, the best rationales, booklists, and ultimately, colloquia, demonstrate a clear understanding that your concentrations are anchored in ideas that have long circulated, even as you are weaving and crafting something new and novel out of those ideas. In short: what is new will best emerge by engaging with what has come before, not on its own.

At the heart of any such project is an engagement with existing literature on your topic: what have others said about your project and how? How is what you’re proposing different or novel
from what others have said or written? Being able to identify this preceding body of work, and to conduct an effective, comprehensive review of this literature, may be the key to thinking historically, to have a sense of change over time, of what has come before and how that shapes what is currently transpiring or being proposed. Accordingly all students will undertake two independent but related assignments to help you hone this skill: an annotated bibliography and an historiographical essay.

Annotated Bibliography
(6-7 pp; 12-14 Mar/9-11 Apr/5 May; 15%)

10 March: Précis and preliminary bibliography due (email only av48@nyu.edu)
Your précis should be a succinct paragraph of no more than 150 words where you provide a concise description of your project/concentration. Address the following: what is your project? What major ideas are you engaging? What key questions are you asking? It may help to think about this as the opening paragraph of an essay, where you state your argument, introduce the questions you will address, and provide some indication of how you intend to proceed. The purpose of the seemingly and indeed deceptively small word count is to force you to distill your concentration or project into the core idea or ideas that comprise it. For your preliminary bibliography, compile a list of approximately 15-20 books (fiction and non-fiction), articles, artistic materials (music, films, plays, paintings, or sculptures), and primary sources that you have identified as germane to your project. This will involve some thought, time, and research, so please don’t simply slap together the first titles that pop up on amazon when you type your concentration. You will want to research through Bobst what the major secondary works are (books and articles) that address your project. Indeed, you are assembling a list of texts that you will read to develop command over a given literature, so identifying this literature is very important.

12-14 March: Meet with Prof. to review Précis and preliminary bibliography

7 April: Extended Précis/Working Bibliography due (email only av48@nyu.edu)
Your extended précis will revise and expand upon your previous project statement, to total around 300 words. It will add nuance, further develop ideas, identify key texts you intend to engage in your essay, introduce problems and counterfactuals, etc. Your working bibliography will pare your prior list to around 10-12 materials. In all cases, your working bibliographies should be fully cited, with the full reference information for each material included. Likewise, your materials should be arranged chronologically by date of original publication.

9-11 April: Meet with Prof. to review Extended Précis/Working Bibliography

5 May: Annotated Bibliographies due (email only av48@nyu.edu)
Your final annotated bibliography should be approximately 6-7 pages in length. It should provide an introduction that summarizes your project or concentration, based on the extended précis you developed earlier in the semester but revised to account for your reading of the full bibliography. This brief introduction should be followed by the annotated bibliography, which will list each material in full citation, followed by
summary: These annotations should briefly (no more than 100 words or so) answer the following questions:

a. What is the major argument or idea advanced by this reference?
b. How does this reference relate to your emerging concentration or project?
c. How does this reference relate to other materials in your bibliography?

What does it say in its own right? How does it relate to my project as I’ve articulated here? How does it relate to other texts/materials on my bibliography? Meanwhile, your bibliographies should include any replacements to your original working bibliography, again including full citations. This bibliography should comprise no more than 10-12 books, articles, artistic materials, or primary sources. If you are including artistic materials and/or primary sources, consult with the instructor to ascertain the proper balance between textual and non-textual references.

**Historiographical Essay**

* (10-12pp; 17 or 20 May; 20%)

At root, you might think of historiography as the history of a history. An historiographical essay, in turn, is an historical account of a particular literature or body of work, a history of how others have addressed a topic at hand. As such, your essay will build from the annotated bibliography you compiled. It will seek to convey the major strands of analysis around your concentration or project, paying particular attention to how ideas have changed over time, the context within which those changes have taken place, and ultimately how your own emerging concentration or grant proposal fits within this literature or body of work. We will discuss the particulars of writing an historiographical essay in class. However, please keep the following dates in mind (and please remember to email your papers, as I will not accept hard copies):

**Mon 13 May: Optional Rough Draft Due**

**Fri 17 May: Essay Due if Rough Draft NOT submitted**

**Mon 20 May: Essay Due if Rough Draft submitted**

**Readings**

The following books are required and available at the NYU Bookstore.


The following books are optional as we will be reading only several chapters from each. You may want to consider purchasing used copies online. They will also be on reserve at Bobst.


Additional required readings will be made available by the instructor, on the course website, or on E-Reserves.

*Academic Integrity*

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website ([www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html)) for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

*Late Submissions/Incompletes*

Students can ask for extensions and will receive them at the instructor’s discretion, though any late submission will incur a half grade drop unless the delay results from documented medical reasons or family emergencies. **Only requests made in advance of the deadline will be considered.** Assignments submitted late without previously alerting the instructor will not be graded. The last day to submit any pending work granted an extension is **21 May**. If you anticipate being unable to meet this deadline, you should contact the instructor immediately and request to receive an Incomplete, which will be granted at the instructor’s discretion and only with a previously approved plan to complete outstanding work.

*Class Schedule (subject to change)*

1. Tue 29 Jan: Course Introduction


2. Thu 31 Jan: Thinking Historically About Thinking Historically

   a. Course Syllabus


3. Tue 5 Feb: What is history?


4. Thu 7 Feb: What is History? (cont’d)


5. Tue 12 Feb: Between Teleology and Dialectics


6. Thu 14 Feb: Between Teleology and Dialectics (cont’d)


7. Tue 19 Feb: Does History Matter?


8. Thu 21 Feb: Does History Matter? (cont’d)


9. Tue 26 Feb: Meta-History


10. Thu 28 Feb: Meta-History (cont’d)

a. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987 (Chapters 1-3) (Copies available outside Rm 506)

b. EXTRA CREDIT: Trouillot Symposium (March 1)

11. Tue 5 Mar: Historical Silences

12. Thu 7 Mar: Historical Silences (cont’d)

13. Tue 12 Mar: The Art of the Historiographical Essay

14. Thu 14 Mar: Thinking Historically about Place
   a. Tenement Museum Tour

15. Tue 19 Mar: SPRING RECESS

16. Thu 21 Mar: SPRING RECESS

17. Tue 26 Mar: Thinking Historically about Place (cont’d)

18. Thu 28 Mar: Thinking Historically about Place (cont’d)

19. Tue 2 Apr: Thinking Historically about Place (cont’d)
a. Group Presentations

20. Thu 4 Apr: Thinking Historically about Culture

21. Tue 9 Apr: Thinking Historically about Culture (cont’d)
   a. Eric Wolf, Europe and the People without History. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982 (Part One, Chapters 1-2; 72pp)

22. Thu 11 Apr: Thinking Historically about Culture (cont’d)
   a. Eric Wolf, Europe and the People without History. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982 (Part One, Chapters 3-4 only; 54 pp)

23. Tue 16 Apr: Thinking Historically about Law

24. Thu 18 Apr: Thinking Historically about Law (cont’d)

25. Tue 23 Apr: Thinking Historically About Literature
26. Thu 25 Apr: Thinking Historically about Literature (cont’d)


27. Tue 30 Apr: Thinking Historically About Literature (cont’d)


28. Thu 2 May: Thinking Historically About Literature (cont’d)


29. Tue 7 May: Thinking Historically about Human Rights


30. Thu 9 May: Thinking Historically about Human Rights