Dangerous and Intermingled: Subaltern New York
Spring 2012 (K20.1480 & V18.0380)
Wednesday, 4:55-7:35 pm, 20 Cooper Square, SCA, #471
(Always check emails / NING for weekly details re: assignments/walks/locations)

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Office hours: M. 3:30-5:00 pm @ SCA, 20 Cooper, #446
T. 4-6 pm @ A/P/A Institute, 41-51 E. 11th Street, #704
(pls make all appointments in advance, best to email ahead)
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This course challenges us to gain critical cross-cultural analytic skills and insights both in terms of rethinking what we know about NYC and decolonizing cultural work. My goal is for you to become critical, cross-cultural researchers.

Since power and knowledge of the city require understanding spatial relations, we’ll be spending much time developing a walking methodology – literally being in the places we are thinking and reading about.

In the world of political moralists, intermingled New York has and still represents the epitome of danger and evil about the American experiment—the public intermixture of classes, genders, races, sexualities, spiritualisms, often in the discourse of “shadows” and “darkness.” As elite Protestants created a refined European-affected “high brow” culture, they also created myriad “others”—a transgressive, lowly polyglot city of miscegenation, impurity, and mixed race peoples. The docks, the Bowery, The Five Points, Greenwich Village, LES/Loisaida, Chinatown, and Harlem were all forged against the repressed imaginings of the powerful and the distinguished. These power relations were played out onto the shared streetscape on the island of Manhattan, especially after the mapping out and actual laying out of the 1811 Commissioner’s Plan (“the grid”).

This peoples’ Gotham, this disdained underground culture, will be the focus of our research seminar. We’ll explore the intertwined underworld of music, slang, jokes, songs, stories, foodways, and marvels of people, from different cultures and subcultures, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, speaking/listening, and living amongst each other.

Seminar students will conduct original primary research of a particular subaltern New York case study of their choice. The end goal is to produce a polished project “essay.” To help sharpen your skills, the case study will be restricted to one “artifact” which embodies the experience. An artifact can be an eviction notice, a paint spattered sneaker, a story oft told, an unheralded corner, etc. It is not easy to formulate a really good essay—in whatever visual, oral/aural, or sensate medium it may be. It is a craft and art form we tend to under-acknowledge. Yet a great project can have a huge impact.
The essay can take any form (creative, social media, multimedia, performative, etc.) but needs to explore your artifact in depth and in complex ways. This course, building on prior research experience and writing, will require students to locate their artifact with primary sources and archives upon which their project (paper, media, or performance) will be researched, analyzed, drafted, and produced.

Whose Point of View?
I take a dialogue-driven & chronotopic approach towards learning. Active participation is the expectation. And, to become aware of how our points of view have been formulated and constitute our sense of knowing ourselves and our worlds, what feminists of color call our “subject position,” is foundational. In order to understand what we “choose” as an artifact, we also have to understand ourselves better in the dance of the self and other. While we explore the complexity of our fascination with your chosen artifact, we necessarily also need to explore our own subjective and objective selves. We need to explore those many “intersectional” layers and facets and consciousnesses of our positionality at home (wherever that may be), at NYU, at work, in societies, etc. How are we “hailed” into an identity by others, and how do we identify, counter-identify and dis-identify with normative ideology? We, as a research community will need to be reflexive about this dance of all those fascinating others and fascinating selves. Over the term we’ll be challenged by Maori critic/researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s philosophical and practical challenge to Eurocentric, colonialisit knowledge production. Her indigenous, feminist critique is useful, I believe, for all of our work.

Each of us actually represent composite selves, highly mixed and layered with influences by many "others." Our goal is to gain more critical awareness of these mixtures and layers as we also triangulate with NYC and our various artifacts. Individually and collaboratively we will gain more critical, rigorous perspectives about yourselves and our artifacts.

Talking across our differences, honest analysis, rethinking, and the process of re-searching buried artifacts and fragments are some of the tools we’ll be using to deconstruct and reconstruct, decode and recode a more critical knowledge. Method and form have to be flexible to effectively probe the phenomenon and origins of subaltern New York. Our re-search will be collaborative, dialogue driven, personal and political, reflexive and ongoing. I won’t provide “answers” for you to regurgitate. We’ll all be formulating provisional questions and provisional answers with the goal of improving our approximations of understanding what this phenomenon has and is about.

Let’s not take any meanings for granted. Typically, for example, we take measures of time and place as fixed and essential. But are they?!?

Time, contrary to Greenwich Mean Time scientism, is a cultural historical construct that has been infinitely meaningful and manipulated. What is the “Present”? "Past”? “Future”? at any given moment? Place, contrary to British imperial measures of longitude (also from Greenwich as point zero) and the earlier Western invention of
latitude, is also so constructed. What about topos? “Home,” a learned set of dispositions and relations to a place, what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls a form of “habitus” is part of the cultural cartography of here/there, insider/outsider, us/them, citizen/alien, etc.

Since the creation of the 1811 Commissioner’s Plan grid on Manhattan Island, real estate development paralleled the formation of a white Anglo-American Protestant political culture. The material, cultural, and political culture was literally and symbolically fixed into the flattened landscape. In the spaces created, there has been a constant contestation over defining the lives, values, and meanings each building, block, neighborhood, and streetscape, as they shift from era to era. Chrono-tope: Chronos or time and topos or place. A chronotope, therefore, is the culturally bound meanings we tie to a specific artifact and how it is located in time and place. The fragments and artifacts of subaltern New York will be examined as chronotopic case studies. You’ll be situating them in time and place from our vantage of the here and now of our seminar.

But the grid is not all-powerful.
What happening despite the grid?
Under the grid? Sideways from the grid?
And in the grid?

Expectations
I don’t believe in grades but am required to give them. I believe in effort, engagement, cultivating insights, and sustained work. Where did you start the term and how much did you learn by the end of the term? I believe in regular self-evaluations and giving feedback. And getting feedback from “others” is essential. So, attendance is important. So is working collaboratively. And honest engagement with each other, yourself, and yours truly is imperative. We are all en-culturated within various powerful culturally normative systems and our senses are habituated to find comfort and meaning within them. Yet, meaning cannot just be found in the “head” but must integrate “heart” and “soul,” smell, taste, touching with the Western “higher” senses of sight and sound, right and left, upper and lower, and in how we live our lives and practice our theories. This, to me, is what critical cross-cultural researchers are made of.

Practical stuff
In addition to weekly postings and comments on Grouply, you’ll be required to produce two tangible products as markers of what you’ve discovered: a reflective personal/political “positionality” essay and the artifact project essay. I’ll explain the former in the next couple of weeks. Typically the latter is in the form of a research essay paper, but depending on your passions and skills this could be any kind of original work—a performance, a series of poems, an activist project, an exhibition...whatever. Whatever the agreed upon final form, the essay will need to embody careful and thoughtful research, drafts, comments, and a final version by exam session. I’m more concerned about concision, quality, depth...not length.

Field Notebook.
Please keep all your notes and fieldnotes in one bound volume. Ideally, get a bound, hardcover 100 page or more composition-like notebook just for this project/class. If you have notes from somewhere else or a scribble on a piece of paper, just tape it into the notebook. When you read, write your notes into this. This will be the primary, low-tech research/field notebook.

Weekly assignments.
To build up to the project, you'll need to quickly identify some subaltern family of artifacts that you are fascinated with and fixated on. I'll assign a series of weekly decoding exercises to squeeze every bit of insight and historical context you can out of that chronotope. These assignments will contribute to the research and formulation of your project.

Research assistance.
Andrew Lee, Bobst history librarian extraordinaire, has agreed to help us formulate and pursue research questions and develop your artifact projects. You can meet with him directly and/or email him, he'll also have access to our Grouply site and make suggestions.

Events.
Here we are in NYC with so much going on all the time. I want to encourage you to attend and write short reviews of three plus activities related to your project. In the case of a more involved event like a film festival, you can pick one film and any discussion that related to it. This will count as extra credit work.

Group networking.
Grouply is a much better collaborative and social media site. It has robust interactivity and puts more choice in your fingertips than the top-down design of Grouply. You’ll be required to post your assignment each week and comment on fellow seminar-mates postings. We want to cultivate a collaborative learning community in seminar as on Grouply as an extended seminar space.

Resources.

Primary framing sources: *Pls purchase at Bluestockings*

*George Foster, New York by Gaslight and Other Urban Sketches (1850, republished 1990)*
*David Muggleton & Rupert Weinzierl, eds., The Post Subcultures Reader (2003)*
*Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies (1999)*
*Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, The Poetics and Politics of Transgression (1986)*
*Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1986)*

We're aware of how much $$ these books cost and will make PDFs available on Grouply. And there will be many additional PDFs.

Seminar Arc (15 weeks, including exam session)
Weeks 1-4 key concepts, power/subaltern, walking/sensing, pick artifact
Weeks 5-11 artifact research, ID'ing your intersectional subject position, plus historical case studies, walks
Weeks 12-14 panel presentations
Week 15 essay/project due, debriefing, self-evaluations

Artifact Project Production Schedule
Week 1-4 brainstorming for artifact project
Week 5 latest approval of artifact project
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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weeks 5-7</td>
<td>research like crazy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>project draft deadline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring break</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weeks 9-11</td>
<td>research more and reformulate</td>
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<td>Weeks 12-14</td>
<td>panel presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>positionality essay due, artifact projects due</td>
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*Important! You will be required to meet with working groups outside of class time. Plan on 90-120 minutes per week. Groups will start meeting the second week of classes. More details to come.*