critical making projects created and curated by english 429 spring 2015

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THE COURSE: Historical Imaginaries

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that “[a]ll history becomes subjective.” For Emerson, History with a capital H exists in each person’s present-tense imagination, not as objective fact. “Every mind,” he writes, “must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know. What the former age has epitomized into a formula or rule for manipulator convenience, it will lose all the good of verifying for itself, by means of the wall of that rule. Somewhere, sometime, it will demand and find compensation for that loss, by doing the work itself.” In his biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James muses along similar lines that “it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature.” We grappled with these big-picture ideas throughout this course by studying cultural memory as we encounter it in historical literature: at two removes. All of the texts that we read dramatize earlier historical moments in America’s past. We discussed these texts as works of art, but we also studied the periods when they were published and set. Our project was to trace the complex historical imaginaries that unfold in American letters across what many critics now call “the long nineteenth century.”

We devoted most of our time to novels: Susanna Rowson’s Reuben and Rachel; or, A Tale of Old Times (published in 1798; the history of a family, one branch of Christopher Columbus’s tree, over ten generations); Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, The Scarlet Letter (published in 1850; set between 1642 and 1649); Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s, Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted (published in 1892; set during and immediately after the Civil War); Toni Morrison’s Beloved (published in 1987; set before and after the Civil War); Edith Wharton’s, The Age of Innocence (published 1920; set circa 1870s–1880s); and Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward: 2000–1887 (published in 1888; set in 2000). We grounded our studies in local literary history with chapters from what many dub the Gone with the Wind of Beaufort: Francis Griswold’s A Sea Island Lady (published in 1939; set in the Lowcountry between the Civil War and the Second World War). We contextualized this sequence with brief histories, short stories, essays, excerpts, and digital archives that take memory as their subject: from Washington Irving’s, “Rip Van Winkle” (published in 1819; set before and immediately after the Revolutionary War) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s, “A Reminiscence of Federalism” (published in 1835; set in the 1790s) to YouTube, where we discovered Stephen Colbert’s 2014 interview with Nobel-Prize Winning Toni Morrison.
THE ASSIGNMENT: Americana Retrospect

In lieu of a final examination, English 429 students created and curated an “Americana Retrospect” exhibit for our library. Inspired by a conversation between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska at the newly founded Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, our twenty-first century collection features artifacts that remember, represent, and remake significant objects that we’ve excavated from our studies of nineteenth-century historical imaginaries this semester. Students’ work was twofold: each person was asked to submit both a remediation project (the artifact itself) and a rationale (a discussion of the meaning of the artifact). In the process of making and writing these projects, each imagined the rationale as a label that spells out all the types of meanings that remain unspoken between Ellen and Newland when they read the label “Use Unknown” at the Metropolitan Museum in *The Age of Innocence*.

So much of our work in this course required us to think about the persons and things that we interpret, reinterpret, remember, misremember, disremember, represent, forget, or conjure afresh on our own when we read the past at two removes. These terms echo across our readings—from the pens of essayists and critics like Emerson and James to the mouths of characters like Sethe, Beloved, Baby Suggs, and Ellen Olenska (who seduces Newland Archer with her desire for “oblivion” during their very first conversation as adults). Both *The Age of Innocence* and *Beloved* won Pulitzer Prizes: Wharton’s novel in 1921 and Morrison’s in 1988.

English 429 students have had brilliant insights about how the authors we’ve studied—from Rowson to Hawthorne, from Harper and Griswold to Morrison, from Irving and Wharton to Bellamy—represent the past in order to critique the present or the future. Now, you can see these students do what some teacher-scholarship has termed “critical making”: they apply their interpretive eyes not only to *writing* but also to *making something* that shows how they interpret historical memories or imaginaries in each of the books we read together.
Avoiding the popular “Wolfe collection,” whose anecdotic canvases filled one of the main galleries of the queer wilderness of cast-iron and encaustic tiles known as the Metropolitan Museum, they had wandered down a passage to the room where the “Cesnola antiquities” mouldered in unvisited loneliness.

They had this melancholy retreat to themselves, and seated on the divan enclosing the central steam-radiator, they were staring silently at the glass cabinets mounted in ebonised wood which contained the recovered fragments of Ilium.

“It’s odd,” Madame Olenska said, “I never came here before.”

“Ah, well—. Some day, I suppose, it will be a great Museum.”

“Yes,” she assented absently.

She stood up and wandered across the room. Archer, remaining seated, watched the light movements of her figure, so girlish even under its heavy furs, the cleverly planted heron wing in her fur cap, and the way a dark curl lay like a flattened vine spiral on each cheek above the ear. His mind, as always when they first met, was wholly absorbed in the delicious details that made her herself and no other. Presently he rose and approached the case before which she stood. Its glass shelves were crowded with small broken objects—hardly recognisable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles—made of glass, of clay, of discoloured bronze and other time-blurred substances.

“It seems cruel,” she said, “that after a while nothing matters…any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: ‘Use unknown.’”

“Yes; but meanwhile—”

“Ah, meanwhile—”

As she stood there, in her long sealskin coat, her hands thrust in a small round muff, her veil drawn down like a transparent mask to the tip of her nose, and the bunch of violets he had brought her stirring with her quickly-taken breath, it seemed incredible that this pure harmony of line and colour should ever suffer the stupid law of change.

“Meanwhile everything matters—that concerns you,” he said.

She looked at him thoughtfully, and turned back to the divan. He sat down beside her and waited; but suddenly he heard a step echoing far off down the empty rooms, and felt the pressure of the minutes.

—Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence
Notice the mansion on the top left and the plan on the bottom left. Room A, “Cesnola Collection,” is where the conversation between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska takes place. It is the inspiration point for our course assignment. As Wharton scholars have long noted, there are many discontinuities, achronologies, anachronisms in The Age of Innocence. Many people have tried to pinpoint the exact year when the novel is set, and they often turn to the landmarks where the characters visit across Old New York, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to do this. Wharton’s specific reference to The Cesnola Room in the Douglas Mansion is one extremely important detail in this hybrid, modernist-realist text, since it dates the plot of the novel to a particular historical moment that in fact seems to clash with other references to other historical dates and details. In our course, I stressed the fact that this is just one of many examples revealing Wharton’s insistently and persistently non-linear fictional temporalties. Such seemingly conflicted timelines are not accidents. Rather, they are meaningful studies of narrative time that recursively ask us to reflect on our own historical imaginaries.