Imagining and Engaging the Public PUBHM-GA 1001 [abbreviated syllabus]
Spring 2021 (online)
Tuesday 3:30-6:10

Helga Tawil-Souri   helga@nyu.edu
Gabriela Basterra   gabriela.basterra@nyu.edu

COLLABORATIVE SYLLABUS

This live syllabus is labeled "collaborative" because it needs your involvement. We have designated some broad objectives for the course, and invite you to participate in articulating how the group would like to achieve them over the first few sessions. We lay out a series of potential questions and a proposed seminar schedule with thematic constellations which we invite you to refine and add to, and we have set out some responsibilities and tangibles for everyone taking part in the seminar. We request your input across the particulars of this syllabus such as what content you would like to address, what kind of assessments you prefer, what goals you find most inspiring. We hope that by semester's end, this document will comprehensively reflect the interests, aspirations, propensities, decisions, challenges, and achievements of this group.

What relationships constitute the public and from which standpoints do we conceive of these? What acts of invention and responsibility are involved in the ongoing collective cultivation of the public? What is our duty as scholars toward the public in its different manifestations and the endeavors that thrive in it?

These are three overarching questions that guide our approach to this seminar. We will take these and other questions we share with you as potential road maps of where we might forge ahead. **As we proceed, we invite you to propose other questions and to tweak, reformulate or critique these.**
- What are and where are the Public Humanities?
- Who has access to knowledge(s) and to critical thinking practices? How is knowledge produced and publicized?
- What is the public? What are different ways of conceiving the public?
- Where is the public? What kind of place is public? In what spaces does the public take place? What kind of physical / virtual presence does a public make?
- Who is the public? Who decides? Who is included/excluded?
- When is the public? Does the public emerge/diminish in times of crises, of change, of continuity?

- Which institutions are public? What is their role? How do they ensure, protect, represent, inform, and include the public? Does the public have the ability to repair them if they don't work?
- How does one engage, address, and negotiate with the public? How does one conduct research with public goals in mind? How does one include the public (such as participatory and community based action) in one's research?
- How does work in the humanities contribute to shaping or recreating artifacts, institutions, relationships, communities, conditions that enable daily life?

Our objectives are purposefully broad, so as to collaboratively (re)articulate them and think of ways we can achieve these together:
- Cultivate an intellectually vibrant, creative, collaborative, risk-taking, and networked learning community
- Develop understanding of some key issues, developments, and dynamics of how to conceptualize and engage with the public
- Develop skills in identifying research objectives and creating research plans that are public-facing/engage the public

Our expectations are that we would guide each other towards particular responsibilities and goals:
- Engaging with various issues related to the questions above – through reading, thinking, watching, listening, experimenting, etc. – and openly discussing these
- Willingness to explore collaborative learning and feedback, by developing knowledge and sharing it with others, by actively participating in class sessions, by asking difficult (but useful) questions of oneself and of others, by sharing the challenges we find along the way
- Creating and leading at least one thematic constellation for everyone in class to partake in
- Creating and collaborating on a bibliography that reflects our interests on topics related to this class
- Choosing, planning, and creating a project that is public facing, has aspects that can be undertaken in public, or has direct public repercussions, which you can incorporate into your portfolio/doctoral work; sharing and providing feedback to parts of this along the way

These line-up with **tangibles and frameworks** for evaluation:
- Contributing to and leading discussion, responding to readings and ideas, engaging in related activities outside class 33%
- Sharing work and responding to others' ideas and work, contributing to a live bibliography 33%
- Developing an issue/topic expertise towards a final project 33%

Your expectations are of equal importance. We invite you to think through what you expect and need, both from this class and from us. Please outline them here and share them openly in our discussions:

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Constellations

We propose to structure our discussions around constellations. Each constellation is conceived as a thematic/conceptual session revolving around a set of works (written and otherwise) all of us must become familiar with before class. A constellation will hopefully engender different but equally useful questions and answers pertaining to "conceptualizing and engaging the public," and we attempt to lay out at the outset what some of these questions may be. We will collectively decide in the first sessions which of these to pursue, and whether/how we want to change them. Each of you will also propose and manage at least one constellation over the course of the semester, based on your curiosities, interests and preferences. We will collectively decide whether you would prefer to undertake these individually or in teams of two. Proposed constellations need not be based on a topic you already know a lot about, and you may, if you choose, build on or borrow from any of these.

1. **New York Street Life and Soundscapes**

Much can be (and has been) said and written about city streets and those of New York's particularly as public spaces par excellence. What are some dynamic relations that develop within a city between private, public, and collective lives? How do the public and the private permeate each other in urban experiences? How does the space of the public take shape and change according to perspective, or according to what we pay attention to?

2. **Imagining, Making, Acting in Concert**

What is the role of the imagination in engaging the public? How does work in the humanities contribute to shaping artifacts that enable daily life? What is their contribution to imagining and making? How do the humanities help confer "reality" to the sciences, medicine, engineering, law? How can the humanities reacquaint us with the human powers of creation, and thus help us repair institutions when they no longer work? How can the imagination and deliberative action in concert diminish the willful infliction of injury on populations both within and beyond national borders? Sovereignty of the people: how do the people retain the power to validate the rule of law, even under governments of misrule? We will explore these questions engaging the works of Elaine Scarry.

3. **Separation Walls, Expressive Surfaces**

How do walls and similar surfaces across cities and spaces function simultaneously as lines of division and exclusion and as surfaces for expression? How do graffiti on city walls function as public scapes/canvases/echos? As means of public expression, negotiation, and resistance? Who is listening to and reading these walls? What do they suggest about a public's temporality?

4. **Recreating the Public**

How does a project incorporate or bring in (rather than just speak to) the public? How does a project speak the voice of the public or speak through the public's voice, thus creating the occasion to confront trauma as a community or to influence legislation? How does one give presence to a victim's absence without representing or supplanting the victim? What is the importance of an event taking place "in person," "here," and "now"?

5. **Spaces of Exclusion and 'Publicness'**

How is public space situated and lived? Is public space an assemblage; a liminal zone between inclusion and exclusion? What are some theoretical and conceptual developments in the research of public space? How are the notions of "publicity", "publicness" and "public domain" related to theorizations of public space? What might these terms, notions, and theorizations exclude and suppress?

6. **Public Libraries, Social Infrastructures**

Where and what kind of space is considered public? How are people brought together? What kinds of spaces and activities tie people together? Which ones of these may we deem successful (in enabling togetherness, community, democratic ideals, etc.)? What is the role of official institutions and of grassroots practices in creating and enabling such spaces? How can we think of social infrastructures as public spaces and practices?

7. **Memorials**

How does one materialize and situate public memory? How can we understand the relationship between the memorialization of individual life and collective memory; between grassroots and official efforts of these; between physical and virtual ones? What are the temporalities of public memory and memorialization? What conditions create (an)ethical time and space for documenting "history"? In light of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and present/ongoing attempts to memorialize those we have lost and continue to lose, this constellation revisits the AIDS Memorial Quilt and new(er) forms of AIDS memorialization through social media as points of comparison.

8. **Making information public: from AAARG to Wikileaks**

What kind of information is public? And what kind of information should/should not be; according to whom, to which logics, and why? Is there a responsibility to make information such as academic knowledge, political and diplomatic policies, practices and dealings public? What institutions and dynamics stand in the way of making certain information public? How can we(re)think certain examples of piracy, whistleblowing, filesharing, and the like, as in the service of the public? How do different forms of documentation and distribution result in varying and paradoxical outcomes (democracy, censorship, freedom, piracy, copyright infringement, sharing, surveillance, etc.)? What are "open information" and "open access"?

9. **The Public Internet?**

What is a/the public sphere? What is the value of the theory of the public sphere in our digital and networked world? Are the internet, the web, social media, media platforms, etc. public spheres, and in what ways? How do these challenge the way in which we conceive of the location, place and dynamics of the public? What is the relationship between our conception(s) of public sphere and the actuality/possibility of a public digital infrastructure?

Conversations

We include a few smaller conversation topics, if you are open and curious about these, in which we can discuss more practical matters.

A. **Challenging Academic Epistemologies**

What are some scholarly forms of producing knowledge beyond traditional academic writing? How do we challenge epistemologies which favor words over images? How do we tell a story? How do we understand our own limitations? How do we learn and create across disciplines?

B. **New York University, New York City**

Is academic work separate/different from public engagement? What is the role of academic institutions in promoting/hindering public engagement? Are the public humanities the same as publicly engaged scholarship and teaching? Do public engagement/public humanities projects require (all that much) funding? What are the range of possibilities within NYU and across the city?

C. **Activism**

How can you be an activist and a scholar? Where is the room for activism in (your) scholarship? How do you uphold and/or incorporate your political commitments in your academic and future work? What responsibilities do you assume?

D. **Digital Humanities**

What is digital humanities? What are some tools and resources for exploring the digital humanities? What is available at NYU? Relatedly, what digital tools are useful to help you organize your materials, to conduct and publicize your research?

E. **Career Paths and Self-Promotion**

Whatever career you may consider after your PhD, how do you best prepare yourself? What things should you be doing now? How do you decide how to best "promote" yourself? What tools should you use? How do you determine and choose who your communities and networks are? How do you engage with them?

Timeline

W 1   *Introductions*

W 2   *Beginnings: Planning Our Collaboration & Coming Together on Inauguration Day*

W 3   *"New York Street Life and Soundscapes"*

W 4   *"Imagining, Making, and Acting in Concert"*

W 5   *"Separation Walls, Expressive Surfaces"*

W 6   *"Recreating the Public"*

W 7   *"Spaces of Exclusion and Publicness"*

W 8   Constellation TBD led by 2 students

W 9   Constellation TBD led by 2 students

W 10   Constellation TBD led by 2 students

W 11   Constellation TBD led by 2 students

W 12   Constellation TBD led by 2 students

W 13   *"Making information public: from AAARG to Wikileaks"*

W 14   *Reflections and Conclusions*

Logistics

The live syllabus and live bibliography are accessible in Google Doc formats via the courses's Brightspace site. The Brightspace site also contains detailed session descriptions and all course materials.