

History, Memory, and Identity: A Research Community

This research community comprises three faculty members and three students. Collectively, our proposed research projects explore themes pursuant to the interrelationship between history, memory, and identity. Our research engages the meta-questions about the nature of history as representation and narrative, the collective production of memory, and the interplay between identity, narrative, space, and community. At the same time, the projects interrogate sources as varied as fiction, cookbooks, and museum presentations, question the contrast between public and private discourse, and explore routine practices and community memberships as constitutive elements of identity formation.

The theme of resistance or “reading against the grain” resonates strongly throughout several of the projects. For example, Cindy Koenig Richards and Angela Leone will be examining traditional activities such as the creation and circulation of cookbooks and songs as windows into women’s evolving political identities. Lynn Makau and Rory O’Brien will focus on graphic portrayals of intimate transgressions in fictional accounts of domination. Cecily McCaffrey will explore areas of disjunction between public histories and private memoirs.

These projects also explore different manifestations of power. Examinations of community as both a collective and a place (for example, the research of Richards, Leone, McCaffrey, and Kimberly Hursh) highlight the power inherent in the construction of communal identities as well as the empowering force of a “space of their own” for underrepresented groups. Several of the projects also focus on recovering histories and memories that have been lost or suppressed in the dominant narrative, whether by exploring areas of “amnesia” in the written record or drawing attention to underutilized historical sources. These recovery efforts relate to the focus on resistance noted above in suggesting that we reinterpret moments of transgression and subversion as moments of power – as achieved through the articulations of alternate histories, contrary memories, and “counterculture” identities.

As a group, we find that our research methodologies are complementary. We represent the disciplines of History, English, Rhetoric, Gender Studies, and American Ethnic Studies. Much of our research will be focused on the examination of texts. Accordingly, our first meetings as a group will focus on method and “reading”; we intend to familiarize ourselves with each others’ projects and approaches and then share documents among ourselves and critically discuss how we “read” as specialists in specific disciplines. Thus we will begin our research sessions with a fuller understanding of how our individual projects might benefit from interdisciplinary inquiry and be better equipped to critique each others’ work in the progress report sessions that will follow. We also intend to take full advantage of the benefits of group critique in the “writing” stages of the individual projects and thus will use part of our meeting time to review drafts of work in progress as well as suggest comparisons across topics and disciplines. Our ultimate goal is twofold: first, to produce discrete works of scholarship ranging from preliminary treatments to finished chapters; second, to engage the spirit of interdisciplinary inquiry in present and future research projects.