

# Myth, Memory, and History

Religion 397 / History 274 • Wesleyan University, Fall 2008

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Class Meetings:  
Tues & Thurs, 9:00 - 10:20  
in Butterfield A413

Office Hours: Wed 10 - 12,  
or other times by appointment

## Course Description

This course will explore theories of myth in religious studies and related fields, placing them in conversation with analyses of collective memory and historical consciousness. How, we will ask, do religious myths differ from other modes of writing—and living—history? And how, to the contrary, are ostensibly secular historical narratives imbued with the symbolic power of myth? How have such categories as “myth,” “memory,” and “history” been used to distinguish “tradition” from “modernity”? How do present day politics shape people’s perceptions of the past? And how, at the same time, do perceptions of the past shape the present and future? How, in short, do religious and secular narratives define the shape and direction of historical events, the rhythm of everyday social life, and the texture of time itself?

Students will address these questions by: reading theoretical and descriptive texts in religious studies, history, and related fields; discussing these texts in a seminar setting; writing short papers on the course readings; and writing a longer research paper on any topic of their choice related to the themes of the course.

## Required Readings

Eight texts will be available to purchase at Broad Street Books, and on reserve at Olin:

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*

Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*

Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*

Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*

Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*

A small packet of photocopied readings is also required, and will be available to purchase at Pip Printing (179 Main Street -- place orders in advance at pipmid.com). The reader will also be on reserve at Olin, and the readings will be available as pdfs on Blackboard. If you access the readings at Olin or on Blackboard you are required to copy them or print them out. Texts from the reader are marked with an (R) in the schedule of readings.

## Course Requirements

**Reading:** This is a reading intensive course, and some of the readings are very challenging theoretical texts. You will need to keep up with the schedule of readings on the syllabus, read carefully and critically, and come to every class with a solid grasp on the texts.

**Attendance and Participation:** Regular attendance and class participation are absolutely required. This is not the sort of course in which you can skip class then cram for the final. There is no final, and there is no way to grasp the themes of the course without active participation in class discussions. For this reason, I will take attendance in each class and structure the course to encourage your participation.

**Short Papers on the Readings:** Over the course of the semester, you will write three short papers on the course readings, of about 5 pages each. These will be due in class around the ends of major units, on September 25th, October 30th, and December 2nd. I will discuss my expectations for these papers in detail in class.

**Final Research Paper:** You will also write a 10 - 12 page research paper, due during finals week, on December 15th. This paper will require independent research into the various ways a specific mythical/historical event has been narrated or remembered. A research abstract for the final paper will be due in class on November 11th. I will discuss my expectations for this paper in detail in class.

**Final Grades:** Your grade in the course will be based on your three short papers (about 15% of the final grade each); your final research paper (about 30% of the final grade); and your attendance and class participation (about 25% of the final grade). This grading equation may not be precise, however, as I tend to grade assignments by an absolute standard, while determining final grades relative to the performance of the class.

**Fair Warnings:** You'll find that I am reasonably flexible about assignment deadlines when students face medical or personal issues, but I will penalize late papers if you don't communicate with me about these issues in a timely manner. I will only give incompletes to students facing medical or personal issues at the end of the semester. And finally, you should know that I am an anti-plagiarism fanatic. I will have *zero tolerance* for plagiarism, and will refer any intentional plagiarism to the Honor Board for disciplinary action.

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

### Unit 1: Myth and Narrative

- 9/2 Introduction to the Course. No reading.
- 9/4 William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives"  
Lauri Honko, "The Problem of Defining Myth"  
Bruce Lincoln, "Myth, Sentiment, and the Construction of Social Forms"

### Unit 2: The Shapes and Textures of Time

- 9/9 Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 3
- 9/11 Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, Chapters 4 - 5
- 9/16 Nurit Bird-David, "No Past, No Present: A Critical-Nayaka Perspective on Cultural Remembering" (R)  
Michael Lambek, "The Sakalava Poiesis of History: Realizing the Past Through Spirit Possession in Madagascar" (R)

### Unit 3: Myth and History, Take One

- 9/18 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Forward and Chapters 1 - 2
- 9/23 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Chapters 3 - 4
- 9/25 Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory" (R)

### *Paper # 1 Due in Class*

### Unit 4: Myth and History, Take Two

- 9/30 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, "Myth Today" pp. 109-131  
plus essays on pp. 15-25, 53-55, 58-64
- 10/2 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, "Myth Today" pp. 131-159  
plus essays on pp. 68-80, 88-90, 97-102

### Unit 5: History and Memory

- 10/7 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire" (R)  
Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia" (R)
- 10/9 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, Prologue and Chapters 1 - 2
- 10/14 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, Chapters 3 - 4 and Postscript

## **Unit 6: History, Memory, and Collective Identity**

- 10/16 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2
- 10/21 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, Chapters 3 - 8
- 10/23 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, Chapters 9 - 11 and Conclusion
- 10/30 Henry Goldschmidt, "The Voices of Jacob on the Streets of Brooklyn: Black and Jewish Israelites in and around Crown Heights" (R)

### ***Paper # 2 Due in Class***

## **Unit 7: Myth, History, and Trauma**

- 11/4 Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, Introduction and Chapters 1 - 2
- 11/6 Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, Chapters 3 - 5
- 11/11 Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, Chapter 6 and Postscript

### ***Research Abstracts Due in Class***

## **Unit 8: Myth, History, and Nostalgia, Take One**

- 11/13 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5  
Henry Goldschmidt, "City of Myth: Brooklyn Nostalgia as Enchanted History" (R)
- 11/18 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Chapters 7, 8, and 10  
Elliot Willensky, *When Brooklyn Was the World*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (R)
- 11/20 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Chapters 12, 16, 17, and Conclusion  
Peter Duffy, "Flatbush Memories in the Florida Sun" (R)

## **Unit 9: Myth, History, and Nostalgia, Take Two**

- 11/25 Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, Chapters 1, 2, 3
- 12/2 Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, Chapter 4

### ***Paper # 3 Due in Class***

- 12/4 Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, Chapters 5, 7

**12/15 *Final Papers Due by Email Attachment, 5 pm on Monday, December 15***