
NCLC 101: NARRATIVES of IDENTITY
Field Trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum & Short Essay

Trip Date: August 31, 2011

Field Trip Paper Due Date: Friday, September 2nd at 5 PM, 10 points

On Wednesday, August 31st, we will visit the Holocaust Museum. Our main objective is to identify and examine the “narratives” that underlie various aspects of the museum. In so doing, we’ll:

1. Consider the idea that literary texts can take various forms, including architecture, exhibits, and artifacts.
2. Practice differentiating between *description* and *interpretation* of a text.
3. Write a brief (2-3 page) essay, drawing on literary concepts, about one or more aspects of the museum.

Prior to the Field Trip

One of the best ways to prepare for this visit to the Holocaust Museum—particularly considering the essay you will write after the visit—is to do a careful reading of the introduction chapters of *50 Essays* and *Rereading America*. Reflect on the ways in which the authors suggest you consume and respond to a text. Practice these processes with one or two of the pieces of literature contained in these chapters. The goal is to equip yourself with the tools—mental and otherwise—to dig beneath the surface, to notice the details and intricacies you previously might not have noticed.

During the Field Trip

Although you are expected to explore several exhibits, do not be afraid to stop and linger where you feel most intrigued. Perhaps you’re intrigued by the architecture before you even enter the building. Perhaps a particular exhibit draws you in. Perhaps you notice something about a tour guide that you find interesting. Keep in mind that you will choose one aspect of the museum experience about which to write, so a good place to start would be the aspect by which you feel most engaged.

A few hints to help you experience the museum through a literary lens and prepare you for writing the essay:

- (1) Take notes. Notice details, quirks, curiosities. Take notes about what you see but also about how you interpret what you see. Review the introduction to *Rereading America* for some ideas about how to do an “active reading” for some ideas about how to do this. (This, of course, will require you to bring a notebook with you.) These notes will help you, as well, with an assignment you will complete after next week’s visit to the National Museum of the American Indian.
- (2) Dig, dig, dig. Do not be satisfied with noticing only what is on the surface. Practice noticing that which you otherwise might not have noticed.
- (3) Take your time. The idea is not to get through the museum as quickly as possible, but instead to notice as much as possible about the museum while you are there. It’s OK if you do not make it all the way through.

The Essay

You will compose a 2-3 page essay (typed, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-pt font, one-inch margins) in which you describe and interpret some aspect of the museum. Begin by sharing, in a paragraph or so, what, in your experience, is the central narrative or story-line of the museum. What are its big, underlying messages? Based on your “read” of the museum, what are the intentions behind these messages?

After making this initial argument, provide further evidence of your claim by describing and interpreting some aspect of the museum—the architecture, a specific exhibit, a tour guide, or something else—in which this narrative and these intentions are particularly apparent. *Describe* the aspect you have chosen; tell the reader what you see, what you hear, where you are. Then *interpret* the aspect you have chosen; explain to the reader what it means, why it’s important, what role it plays in the narrative of the museum.

Be sure to include an introduction with a thesis statement describing your primary argument and a conclusion that synthesizes the most important points of your essay.

Essays should be turned in to your seminar leader by Friday, September 2, at 5 PM.

Getting There—Wednesday, August 31

Meet at 9:00 a.m.: Seminar leaders will meet you on the platform of the Vienna Metro station. If you live on campus, take the CUE bus OR Mason shuttle to the Vienna Metro station. From the metro station platform, we will take the **Orange line** from Vienna to the Smithsonian stop. We strongly encourage you to purchase a SMARTRIP card. On your return trip, be sure you get on the **ORANGE LINE** and *not the Blue Line*, which runs on the same track.

Use the Independence Ave. and 14th St. exit from the Smithsonian station. Follow signs one block to the museum.

Cost: You are responsible for transportation to and from the metro and round trip metro fare.

What to Bring: Bring this assignment, a notebook and pen to record your observations, money for metro fare, and a camera if you wish to take pictures. You can bring a bag lunch if you wish. Alternatively, there are several restaurants and street vendors in the area.

What to Remember: Plan to spend at least three hours at the museum. We suggest that you walk through the museum with at least two or three classmates so that you can discuss what you see.