

This document includes two approved  
self-designed major plans  
on the pages that follow:  
"Asian Public History"  
and "Activist History"

## Self-Defined Major Proposal: Asian Public History

In 2017, CGTN—China’s official state-sponsored television network—broadcast *National Treasure*, an innovative 10-part program designed to promote China’s rich cultural heritage to the general public. The program was the first of its kind, collaborating with major museums around the country to showcase various ancient artifacts via a combination of reality TV, stage performance and documentary. It was an immediate hit, inspiring an unprecedented 14.2% increase in overall museum attendance and a 200% increase in the sales of museum “cultural products”. As a show and as a state project, *National Treasure* is an example of public history, and its resounding success demonstrates the rising significance of public history and heritage education in China. It joins a body of other public history works created recently in Asia, and I would like to define the study of this body as my thematic field: Asian Public History.

I would like to focus on Asian Public History for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have a strong affinity for Chinese and East Asian history, and I would like to specialize in it when I apply to graduate schools for a Ph.D. Secondly, I think studying the various ways in which public history is applied in Asia is very timely. Countries around the world, including those in Asia, are involving themselves deeper in the creation and promotion of nationalistic narratives, and the multimedia nature of public history is central to how these narratives are ingrained into the public psyche. Overt nationalism is creating a negative impact on the global capacity to collaborate on 21<sup>st</sup>-century issues (such as the environment and technology), so it’s important to dissect the ways in which its narratives affect us and foster better thinking. Thirdly, I think this field would combine effectively with my Art History minor, which will allow me to analyze the detailed contexts and processes of artistic expression being used in these projects. ART 149/Introduction to Visual Culture, 170/Art of the East I: China and 280/Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt are the courses I have taken in this field; along with giving me contextual knowledge on East Asian art practices (in the case of 170) they have all provided me with the training to write and think critically about art. As such, I will be able to critically examine how East Asian countries like China engage with issues of memory, identity, cultural heritage and nationalism via visual and interactive mediums. Incorporating an element of artistic and media study in my history major will help me embrace a wider variety of historical sources other than written ones, and show how multi-sensory productions are just as important to the project of making history as events and texts.

I believe an Asian Public History field would make me stand out in my applications to graduate school and other institutions. My main goal is to enter academia on the subject, but the area of expertise it covers (combined with my Art History credentials) can also allow me to seek employment as a historical consultant, film/media producer, media critic or museum professional. I may even start my own public history initiative.

I propose that two courses in Chinese history (HIST 274/The Great Tradition in China before 1840, HIST 275/The Rise of Modern China) and two public history courses constitute this self-defined field. HIST 274 and 275 will give me contextual knowledge for China, helping me understand what special values, structures, memories and materials are informing its modern traditions of nationalism and public history. One of the public history courses will be HIST 376/Public History, which will introduce me to the basic workings, tenets and methods of public history, enabling me to critically analyze Chinese public history projects and elucidate their

processes of narrative creation. I will work with my academic advisor to identify the second public history course.

## **The History of Activism and “Activist History”**

Proposing my thematic field for the history major

For my history major, I would like to propose a thematic emphasis both on the history of social movements in the U.S., as well as the ways that the field of history can serve as a tool for activism. While the ‘Public History’ and ‘Law & Social Justice’ fields both touch on my interests, I’m particularly interested in digging into the intersection between the history of activism and what I’m calling “Activist History.” So far, I’ve come to consider work in public history and the building of community-driven archives as not just academic pursuits, but as resources for social movements as well. I’m intrigued by intersections of theory and praxis in history that can turn our field into a powerful tool for social change. I’ve explained the three (so far) strands of my thinking further:

### **History of Activism**

This piece of my proposed study is straight forward. When faced with a world riddled with injustice and inequality it’s easy to feel paralyzed: what can I do? U.S. American history is rich, however, with answers. Studying the history of organizing and activism in the U.S. has taught me tactics of resistance, strategies for collaboration, the limits of solidarity, and a wealth of liberation theory. In my work for the Climate Justice Movement, for example, I draw on lessons from Professor Wells’ Environmental History course. Learning about the Principles of Environmental Justice, as well as the history and context that brought that manifesto forward, has guided my approach to organizing.<sup>i</sup> Learning to question the origins of the shift from demanding corporations to clean up pollution to emphasizing individual action, like changing light bulbs and recycling,<sup>ii</sup> has affirmed the strategies I gravitate towards: collective pressure on the companies driving climate chaos.

My experience has been that in U.S. American culture the history of social movements is not well understood. K12 textbooks emphasize the stories of “great men,” such as MLK, Aldo Leopold, or Harvey Milk, deterring individuals from believing they have agency in changemaking. High profile marches and collective actions, such as the March on Washington, Earth Day, or the 1967 march on the Pentagon are highlighted as the primary strategy of past activists, suppressing stories of civil disobedience, economic protest, art activism, and other tactics. The nuance of many movements becomes hidden, and their work becomes vilified or celebrated based on single moments or methods.

On the one hand these narratives probably reflect the knowledge produced by a particular era of scholars. On the other, one can see a certain logic in not teaching people the history of organizing and making trouble for a cause because if we did, people would be organized and making lots of trouble for causes! I'm interested, to begin, with studying the evolving scholarship in social justice history; history which is more intersectional, more complex, more rigorous. Then, I'm interested in researching and theorizing the ways that such scholarship can leave the academy. My hope is that, as has been my experience, people will become more empowered to join liberation struggles and be more equipped with tactics of resistance.

### **Public History**

A stronger public history of social movements constitutes one dimension of my "activist history." I began thinking about the need for public history in the study of social movements in Professor Moten's Civil Rights History class. She assigned unconventional writing assignments in that course (an op-ed, a persuasive letter, and a children's book.) Each assignment sparked rich discussions about how the history of liberation movements is taught, or not taught, outside of the academy, and how those narratives shape U.S. American society. Further, recent discussions in the department about public history, and those we've been having in History Then and Now, sparked a chain of questions for me. What is the relationship between the formal, academic study of history and the history of 'Everyman' which Carl Becker discusses in his seminal essay?<sup>iii</sup> If your average citizen is not reading scholarly monographs or routinely visiting museums, then how does history enter the public conscience? What have K12 curriculum and the Hollywood historical fiction-industrial complex taught us about the 20th century social movements? How could we disrupt the cultural myths that the Civil Rights struggle ended in the 60s, that indigeneity is a relic of the past, or that environmental organizing is about national parks not human rights? Should historians be writing for Wikipedia<sup>1</sup>, building public art installations, developing apps for travelers, consulting for Hollywood films, writing for the New York Times, developing public school curriculum, or, or, or?! Would a deeper understanding of the history of social movements empower citizens and guide them through

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<sup>1</sup> We did this for Professor Zarley's Cold War in Latin America course in the Fall of 2017. I was so compelled by the platform as a tool for making rigorous discussion of a topic more widely available that I wrote the Wikipedia page about the Line 3 pipeline, and its accompanying resistance movement. I hoped to write a neutral, informative document and drew extensively on sources from both sides. Although I need to update some specifics, the page provides a basic introduction to the topic to an average of 30 readers a day.

resisting oppressive forces? Most importantly, what's the praxis? How will I build a career in history with impact?

### **Critical Archive Studies**

Critical approaches to archives add complexity and richness to the history of social movements. From Foucault<sup>iv</sup> to Trouillot,<sup>v</sup> women's historians<sup>vi</sup> to postcolonial theorists,<sup>vii</sup> the way that power functions throughout time to "silence" stories of the subaltern in the archiving and writing of history has been well articulated and continues to evolve. Studying the methods developed by these scholars to illuminate stories that weren't privileged in preservation will help me write better history, particularly in the study of social movements. For example, in *Civil Rights with Professor Moten*, we read recent scholarship on key women in that movement who had long been left out the cannon.<sup>viii</sup> I'm also fascinated by the prospect of building better archives, particularly in the "born digital" era. How can we include more voices in our collections of the past? In the postmodern era, what qualifies as a text worth keeping?<sup>ix</sup> In our digital times, how can we sift through the immense quantity of content without suppressing any stories? To make sense of an event like the #NoDAPL struggle in twenty years, for example, historians will need strong documentation of online activity;<sup>x</sup> but how much is too much? Ought one save conflicting reports, even publications full of outright lies,<sup>xi</sup> knowing that those are part of the story?

As I've done more research, I've become compelled by the potential for community-driven archives to protect more stories of the past, as well as to serve as a tool for activism. A project like the East Side Freedom Library, for example, which established a permanent home for the Hmong collection, will open up further understanding of that community. The X̣wi7x̣wa Library at UBC in Vancouver is working with First Nations to develop an indigenous classification system to counter the relegation of any Native scholarship to the "history" section of a Dewey Decimal library.<sup>xii</sup> This will not only facilitate better scholarship, but will actively decolonize the organization of knowledge, sparking critical reevaluation of seemingly benign systems of thought for visitors. A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, conversely, was not established to serve research.<sup>xiii</sup> Rather, community organizers there are using a historian's tool to combat police brutality. Lawyers prosecuting violent cops and journalists hoping to illuminate the truth utilize their archive, not academics.

I'm eager to research, theorize, and practice further dimensions of "activist history." While I love the scholarship of the academy, I find myself craving practical applications for the theory I learn at school. Discovering the field of public history and reading about radical

community-driven archives has inspired me to learn more. What other tools of history could be refashioned to serve social movements? How can we share academic knowledge with society and what liberatory effects might that have? How can I ground whatever work I do in a pursuit of understanding that is multifaceted and centers narratives of the subaltern?

For this field, I imagine drawing on the following:

### **Civil Rights History - Professor Moten**

In this class I was taught to critique the history of social movements; to interrogate how they're taught (and not taught) in U.S. American society; to consider the need for public history in the field; to ask how the narratives of a movement we're familiar with might not represent a complete picture of the intersectionality, timescale, and geography of a struggle, and much more.

### **U.S. Environmental History - Professor Wells**

The last third of this class focuses on the shift from the Environmental movement, which centered on cleaning up pollution in white communities, to the Environmental Justice movement, which centers access to healthy living, employment, and recreation for all people, and introduces a focus on global climate change. I wrote my final paper for this class on the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization in West Chicago.<sup>2</sup> I researched that group's fight to shut down and clean up two toxic waste sites in their community, and the ways the city of Chicago has upheld, or not, the principles of Environmental Justice in response to community demands.

### **American Indian History since 1871 - Professor Phillips**

It is my understanding that this class explores the American Indian Movement and other indigenous liberation projects throughout the 20th century U.S. and up to today. Time and credits allowing, I hope to take the first half of this course as well.

### **ACM Newberry Seminar**

I've been accepted to study away in Chicago for the Fall 2019 semester through the ACM's "Newberry Seminar: Research in the Humanities." While at the library I will undertake a significant research project and write a paper which I anticipate expanding into an honors thesis

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<sup>2</sup> I'll happily provide the paper or my bibliography if it would be a helpful supplement to this proposal.

in my senior year. While we'll develop our specific research question as part of the program, I anticipate working in the Chicago and Midwest, or U.S. history collections to research within the history of a social movement. Depending on the sources I encounter, perhaps I will focus on some facet of environmental history in the city and the resulting environmental, conservation, or climate justice movement that arose. The Newberry is also home to the Midwest Dance Collection which I'm drawn to as a lifelong dancer. While I've learned of art activism through many other mediums, I don't know many stories of dance as part of social movements.

My time in Chicago will allow me to explore the "activist history" dimensions of my major. In addition to being a major research library, the Newberry is home to many public history events and collections. This will give me practical exposure to how a formal institution approaches questions of teaching history, and space to think about their successes and places for growth. Similarly, the Newberry will be an ideal place for me to consider the theoretical "archive" that I've referenced above. Who is represented in the collections? Who is missing? Who has access to the knowledge housed there? Are the archives thought of as a powerful tool for community education or a space for academics? Lastly, I'm working on an application to intern for LVEJO (the organization I wrote my final Environmental History paper about). Even if that internship doesn't bear credit for the major, I will consider it a study in how an academic can move from theory to praxis, from the classroom to community.

### **Macalester History**

For History: Then and Now with Professor Sturtz, I am working on an independent study proposal to spend a semester conducting research in, and likely outside of, the Macalester archives. I am compelled by the public history facet of Mac. I don't know much about the history of our institution and I get the impression that most students know even less. What do we know about Macalester's history? How did the images such as a young Kofi Annan walking around campus or Old Main alone in a field come to float through our collective memory? How do those tidbits shape our identity as students, faculty, administrators, or alumni? Initially, I intended to propose a research project on the history of activism at Macalester. For example, in the 1990s as the transition from Environmentalism to Environmental Justice was unfolding around the world, did student organizing on campus shift as well? Then, however, I attended a panel discussion facilitated by Professor Sircar in Political Science on the emerging field of Critical University Studies.<sup>xiv</sup> Loosely, this a group of scholars unified in questioning neoliberal and privatizing trends in higher education: adjunctification, tuition inflation, corporate and government financing, and general lack of financial and administrative transparency. From my



work with Fossil Free Macalester, I've experienced firsthand how little we know about Macalester's investments, finance structure, administrative strategy, etc. This discussion, taken together with the research I was doing on archive theory, gave me the idea for a more critical approach to my Macalester history project.

I'd like to spend a semester of independent study exploring not the narrative of Macalester that has been preserved intentionally, but considering potential gaps in our institutional memory or illuminating a history that would require reading against the grain. In the next few weeks I will clarify my plans, but I'm currently considering two separate approaches to this project. In the vein of critical archive studies, I could spend the semester gathering documents, oral histories, and more unconventional sources to fill a silence I find in my initial musings in the archive. For example, I've been told that several years ago the adjunct faculty attempted to unionize but were placated with the NTT review process. Has that struggle been documented? Archived? Do faculty members who were involved in that organizing have a different impression of the fallout than the official narrative?<sup>xv</sup> More on the public history side, I've been considering a William Cronon style environmental history<sup>3</sup> of Mac. Macalester recently adopted a land acknowledgement speaking to the displacement they caused the Dakota people. However, we still have Neill hall, named after a man who disrupted sacred Dakota burial sites, at the "park" we now call Indian Mounds, under the auspices of academic pursuit.<sup>xvi</sup> Mac has long been invested in timber and is invested in oil and natural gas today.<sup>xvii</sup> Where in the country, in the world, did that logging happened? Which ecosystems were forever transformed as a result? As pipelines across the country are being routed through tribal lands, who is Macalester displacing today while feigning regret over parallel historic violence? In addition to writing a concluding paper on these questions, I hope to build a public history installation, perhaps around campus, sharing their answers. Either track will serve the theoretical and practical elements of my proposed major.

### **Archive Internship**

An internship with a community-driven archive would supplement my academic study. Over the summer I'll be volunteering at the Rondo Community Archive, a project being led by organizers to uncover, assemble, and preserve the history of that neighborhood. I've also been in discussion with Peter Rachleff of the East Side Freedom Library about the Macalester history

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<sup>3</sup> I'm thinking of his monograph, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, which begins with a powerful history of the geography of Chicago, but mostly explores how building a major U.S. city impacted the geography of the entire nation through extraction and trade of natural resources.

project. A credit bearing internship with either of these organization would give me hands-on experience in building archives and wrestling with the questions I outlined above.

### **Future Plans**

This proposed field aligns with my future career and personal goals. I'm interested in working in the field of public history with an emphasis on illuminating the U.S. American social movements. I also aspire to spend my life organizing for social justice. As I mentioned above, I've already found my studies in the history department instructive to my work with the Climate Justice movement. I'm interested in finding ways to bring more "activist history" into that organizing.

### **Further Reading**

I've begun researching each of the ideas outline here, some more than others, and have a long list of further reading that I hope to draw on for future research, study abroad, and summer reading. If needed, I could compile an annotated bibliography reflecting my work.

### **Thoughts on the Process**

I grappled with two questions in drafting this document that I feel could be addressed in the prompt and which might warrant some discussion within the department. First, I was unsure of the desired length. I know mine is the first proposal of its kind so a precedent doesn't exist, and could imagine that each case might be so unique that a general word limit doesn't make sense. I personally felt a tension throughout between striving to write in a succinct manner and not wishing to simplify my ideas or fail to explain my thinking clearly. A suggested word count could be help students frame their thinking. A related question concerns the tone a student ought to strike in proposing their field. I debated whether to approach writing as though I had a clear idea of where I was going and what I hoped to find in my research, as one would in a paper or book proposal, and sharing my thought process up to a point and posing large, unanswered questions. In the end I landed somewhere in the middle, laying out dozens of research questions and avenues for further thinking, as well as doing my best to demonstrate the soundness of my reasoning and its basis in coursework and research. I feel that clarifying if a certain approach is desired would help students in writing.

Additionally, there's one simple phrasing consideration I'd like to bring up. In the prompt I was given, students are asked to list coursework both in and outside the department which they anticipate will count towards their field. I was initially unsure whether outside the

department referred to courses in other disciplines on campus, on study away, or both. I chose to discuss my plans for study away as well as a potential internship in response to that question, but would happily include an interdisciplinary option if something appropriate came up.

## Thank you!

I would be happy to speak further about the proposal process in a general sense, as well as the contents of my specific field as needed. Thank you for your consideration.

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- <sup>i</sup> Christopher Wells, *Environmental justice in postwar America: a documentary reader*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018) 180-182.
- <sup>ii</sup> Down to Earth SOMEWHERE
- <sup>iii</sup> Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932): 221.
- <sup>iv</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>v</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).
- <sup>vi</sup> Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A critical reader in history and theory, second edition* (North Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 262-288.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 320-354.
- <sup>viii</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle : African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001,) for example.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Houses*, 289-319.
- <sup>x</sup> Merrit Kennedy, "More Than 1 Million 'Check In' On Facebook To Support The Standing Rock Sioux," *NPR*, Nov 1, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/01/500268879/more-than-a-million-check-in-on-facebook-to-support-the-standing-rock-sioux>.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Indianz*, "Republican investigation links Russian trolls to #NoDAPL movement," Mar 1, 2018. <https://www.indianz.com/News/2018/03/01/republican-investigation-links-russian-t.asp>.
- <sup>xii</sup> Sydney Worth, "This Library Takes an Indigenous Approach to Categorizing Books," *YES Magazine*, Mar 22, 2019, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/decolonize-western-bias-indigenous-library-books-20190322>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Stacie M. Williams and Jarrett M. Drake, "Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland." *Special issue, Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no.2 (2017).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.)
- <sup>xv</sup> Emma Kerr, "The Battle Is Over. How Can Presidents and Faculty Members Mend Fences?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Battle-Is-Over-How-Can/242895>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Paul Nelson, "Indian Mounds Park, St. Paul," *MNopedia*, July 27, 2016. <http://www.mnopedia.org/place/indian-mounds-park-st-paul>.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Investment Office. "Investment Office: Asset Allocation," *Macalester College*. <https://www.macalester.edu/investmentoffice/process/allocation/>.