

CCNY College-wide Research Vision (CRV) Initiative Concept White Paper

Project Title: Contested Histories: How to Negotiate Competing Historical Narratives Toward a Safer and More Inclusive Future

Project Team

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Mikhal Dekel, 2021-22 Stuart Z. Katz Professor of Humanities & the Arts (English, Humanities and the Arts)

Other Key Personnel (Co-PIs)

Dr. Andrea Weiss, Professor (MCA/ Humanities & the Arts)

Dr. Marta Gutman, Professor & Interim Dean (Architecture)

Dr. Matthew Reilly, Assistant Professor (Anthropology/ Black Studies/ Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership)

Project Concept Description: (Maximum 2 pages)

Keywords: history, politics, narratives, information, media, commemoration, heritage, museums, monuments

Objective:

Competing or repressed historical narratives exist in nearly every country and every region in the world. Oftentimes they are fought over in a battle between official state-sponsored narratives and the narratives of minority or indigenous groups; at other times, they are clashes between narratives of different groups. While in each case, the competing or erased/suppressed narratives are rooted in individual histories of violence or racialization, the structure of this competition or erasure is very similar in countries and regions across the globe. The goal of our project, whose interdisciplinary members work in different regions, is to identify and characterize this structure and its consequences, offer possible solutions for assessing and arbitrating between competing historical claims, and unearth and commemorate unmarked histories that reverberate in the present. While giving voice to a diverse range of historical claims is important, eternal competition often leads to an erasure of one narrative in favor of another, or an eternal political paralysis in which each side is locked in its own historical truth. Our project seeks to create a paradigm to help move beyond this point.

Approach:

We bring in a range of disciplinary approaches, each assessing and/ or commemorating historical claims in a different way: Film and history (Weiss); anthropology and archaeology (Reilly); architecture and art history (Gutman); and cultural theory/ law (Dekel). We each also work on a different region: Germany (Weiss); United States (Gutman); Liberia (Reilly); and Poland/ Russia/ Israel (Dekel). Scholars working on memory studies tend to be sociologists and cultural historians. We wish to broaden the range of disciplines and compare regions that are not usually studied together.

Outcomes and Expected Products:

Prof. Weiss is working on *Flying Lessons* (working title), a feature documentary film. It begins with the story of Weiss's father, a cargo pilot who volunteered to fly the Berlin Airlift not long after losing family members in the Holocaust, simply because he felt it was "the right thing to do". Exploring the contested terrain of historical memory in Germany, the film provokes the viewer to consider the question, how can a nation deal with its traumatic past? With her father's story as its moral compass, Weiss' film weaves together personal and political history, ultimately asking, what is the responsibility of the individual in times of political crisis? The film, initially funded by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, will be supported in part by this initiative and completed by 2025.

Under the support of the CRV, Prof. Gutman will create a community based project titled *The Freedom Struggle in Harlem's Schools, 1930-1970*, which will bring together activists, community groups, and academics who wish to mark currently unmarked sites of racial struggle in Harlem. In her new book *Just Space: Modern Architecture, Race, and Public Schools in Postwar Urban America*, Prof. Gutman focuses on the freedom struggle that Black New Yorkers ignited in Harlem's schools, protesting the deleterious physical spaces that defined their children as social subjects with unequal citizenship rights. Harlem's schools were "just as Jim Crow" as southern schools, they charged. The Harlem sites where these struggles, including P.S. 89, the school cited as a cause of the 1935 uprising; P.S. 10, where inadequate toilets and absent playgrounds enraged Mae Mallory who with other mothers organized the Harlem 9 boycott in 1958; and many others, have not been landmarked, and not one of them is identified with a historical marker. The CRV initiative would make it possible for Prof. Gutman to work with community partners towards developing a comprehensive inventory of such sites in Harlem, using oral histories, archival research, and field work to learn more about them, and developing innovative, community-based strategies for place marking. The work will be completed in 2024.

With the CRV's funding, Prof. Reilly will head a collaborative archaeological research project, and oversee the making of a documentary film about Liberia, Africa's first Black Republic, where free African-Americans arrived in January of 1822. On the heels of years of Civil War (1989-2003), the project will put the past in conversation with the present by building an infrastructure for national heritage through community-engaged research and inclusive history making. In partnership with Liberian institutions and communities, Prof. Reilly's team will conduct archaeological research at important sites of Liberian heritage and collect oral histories from a wide spectrum of the Liberian public, some of which will be used in the documentary film. In addition to the film, Prof. Reilly will co-author publications, including a book, with international and Liberian colleagues.

CRV funding will support research for Prof. Dekel's book *The Browar Near the Skater's Pond*. Taking as her starting point research she had done in Poland for her book *Tehran Children*, Prof. Dekel will focus on the competition of memory between the Christian Polish and Jewish narrations of the events of WWII. The book will more generally focus on memory politics in Eastern and Central Europe, including the uncommemorated history of the gulag in Russia and the celebration of anti-Soviet war heroes, who were often Nazis, in Lithuania, the Ukraine and elsewhere. While at times these narratives of Christian suffering result in Holocaust distortion, Professor Dekel's book will ask whether it is possible to commemorate at least some of them, and more generally, is it possible to commemorate the unequal suffering of different groups? Is our only option a zero-sum competition between historical narratives that must necessarily cancel each other out? The book will be completed in 2024.

Merits:

The cumulative merit of our initiative lies in its comparative and multidisciplinary approach, which will enable us to develop new modes of talking about and commemorating unmarked or competing historical narratives. Looking, for example, at the Polish example might help those commemorating Liberia's past avoid falling into similar pitfalls. A comparative, transnational and multi-disciplinary approach, in which we move beyond national or even regional histories, will open ways of envisioning ways of narrating history beyond existing frameworks within those countries and regions.

Impact:

Our individual projects will help unearth, explain, mark and commemorate different historical narratives in different counties, whether those narratives have been silenced, neglected, understudied or erased by other narratives. More generally, the tools we will develop through our collaboration and collaboration with researchers, activists, community groups, museums, and others outside CCNY, will hopefully be generalizable to other parts of the world. Whether the goal is, as Prof. Reilly writes, to unearth past material culture and heritage sites that will inspire reflection on postwar Liberian identity in the present, or to inspire a historically accurate narration of WWII in Eastern Europe, our individual projects and shared initiative are ultimately, in the words of the architect Sergio Beltrán García, about "helping societies understand who they are and what they could become in the future."

Milestones:

Months 1-6: Co-PIs work on individual projects, including travel

Months 7-9: Co-PIs begin monthly meetings to share data and ideas

Months 9-12: Co-PIs host an international conference on historical memory; complete phase one of their individual projects

Contested Histories - Full Budget

CCNY College-wide Research Vision (CRV)

Description	Rate in \$US	Quantity	Duration	Total Cost
Initial Research and Development				
Books	\$500 ea.	4 people		\$ 2,000.00
Research Supplies	500 ea.	4 people		\$ 2,000.00
Team meetings	\$250/ea.	4 mtgs.		\$1,000
SUBTOTAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT:				\$ 5,000.00
Research and Travel (local and int'l)				
Airfare and visas to Liberia for Matthew Reilly + 4 students	\$1800/ea.	5 people		\$9,000
Airfare- Mikhal Dekel	\$1200/trip	1 person	3 trips	\$3,600
Airfare to Germany - Andrea Weiss + 1 student	\$1200/trip	2 people	2 trips	\$4,800
Hotels/lodging for Mikhal Dekel	\$150/day		10 days	\$1,500
Hotels/Lodging for Matthew Reilly + 4 students	\$40/night	5 people	28 days	\$ 4,900.00
Hotels/lodging for Andrea Weiss + 1 student (film crew)	\$150/day	2 people	10 days	\$ 3,000.00
Meals- Mikhal Dekel	150/day		10 days	\$ 1,500.00
Meals - Matthew Reilly + 4 students	35/day	5 people	28 days	\$ 4,500.00
Meals- Andrea Weiss + 1 student (film crew)	150/day	2 people	10 days	\$ 3,000.00
Car Rentals	150/day	3 people	20 days	\$ 9,000.00
Gas Parking Mileage Toll Taxis	allow	4 people		\$ 1,600.00
Permits	allow			\$1,500
Storage materials/maintenance fees, Nat'l Museum of Liberia	allow			\$7,000
Community Consultants - Marta Gutman	\$100/hour		20 hours	\$ 2,000.00
Interview transcriptions - Marta Gutman	60/hour		\$ 60.00	\$ 3,600.00
Archival Research assistance -Marta Gutman	25/hour		80 hours	\$ 2,000.00
Archival transfers and digitization	1000/ea.	4 people		\$4,000.00
Local translators/research assts. (abroad)	250/day	4 people	18 days	\$ 18,000.00
Student research assts. (locally)	\$2500/ea.	8 people	flat fee	\$ 10,000.00
Summer stipends for PI's	allow	4 people	1 mo. ea.	\$56,000
SUBTOTAL RESEARCH/TRAVEL:				\$150,500
Film and Photo Production				
Cinematographer incl camera	500/day	1	10 days	\$ 5,000.00
Sound Recording incl sound gear	300/day	1	10 days	\$ 3,000.00
Lighting gear and expendibles (batteries, SD cards)	allow	allow	allow	\$ 1,000.00

Contested Histories - Full Budget

Photography -Marta Gutman	250/day		4 days	\$	1,000.00
Archival reproductions - Marta Gutman	allow			\$	2,000.00
Digital Map - Marta Gutman	\$25/hour		80 hours	\$	2,000.00
Computer graphics Titles	allow			\$	5,000.00
Film Editor	2000/week		6 weeks	\$	12,000.00
SUBTOTAL PRODUCTION:				\$	31,000.00
Outreach and Dissemination					
Invited guests for contested memory conference	allow			\$	6,000.00
Design and printing of outreach materials	allow			\$	1,500.00
Shipping				\$	1,000.00
Website: Design and Maintenance	allow		24 months	\$	5,000.00
SUBTOTAL OUTREACH:				\$	13,500.00
PROJECT COSTS				\$	200,000.00