

## University of British Columbia

### KNOWING THE PAST: PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORICAL SCIENCES

PHIL 469 / ANTH 495 / PHIL 560

Winter 2019 – Term 1

**Instructor:** Professor Alison Wylie

**Class meetings:** Tuesdays/Thursdays 2:00-3:30, BUCH B218

**Office hours:** Wednesdays 1:00-3:00, and by appointment: [alison.wylie@ubc.ca](mailto:alison.wylie@ubc.ca)

**Office:** Buchanan E-276, (604) 822-6574

**Canvas website:** <https://canvas.ubc.ca/courses/42749>

#### Course overview

How do we know what (we think) we know about the past? Do historians and historical scientists face unique challenges because they study the past – compared, say, to experimental scientists? Is our understanding of the human, cultural past really just a speculative construct, as some critics insist, and do these concerns extend to the non-human historical sciences of evolutionary biology, geology and paleontology?

These are the philosophical questions about the nature and status of historical inquiry we will explore in this course, taking as our point of departure Adrian Currie's *Rock, Bone and Ruin: An Optimist's Guide to the Historical Sciences* (2018). Currie rejects conventional skepticism about historical knowledge, offering instead a nuanced account of the strategies by which paleontologists, geologists and archaeologists address the methodological challenges they face. We then turn to questions about the nature of historical explanation and historical narrative that have been central to philosophy of history, framed in terms of newly urgent questions about the value and uses of history; the central texts here will be Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995) and essays selected from *Material Evidence* (2014). In the final weeks of the course we focus on current debate about the central role of oral traditions and Indigenous histories in community history and collaborative archaeology, and about the role of historical inquiry in processes of truth-telling and reconciliation.

#### Assigned texts

Available from the UBC bookstore

- Currie, *Rock, Bone, and Ruin: An Optimist's Guide to the Historical Sciences* (MIT 2018)
- Chapman & Wylie (eds.), *Material Evidence: Learning from Archaeological Practice* (Routledge 2015)
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon 1995/2015)

All other readings will be available through the course website and UBC library.

#### Course level learning objectives

When you have completed this course you should be able to:

1. Identify and apply key philosophical concepts, positions and theories related to the nature and practice of historical inquiry in scientific, social scientific, and humanistic contexts;
2. Critically analyze claims about the status of historical inquiry, historical evidence and inferential reasoning, and the objectivity and credibility of historical knowledge claims;
3. Describe, explain and assess the role of historical evidence, narratives, and explanations in debate about contemporary issues, in oral and written form.

## Course Requirements

This is an overview of requirements for PHIL 461 / ANTH 495; additional requirements for graduate enrolment (PHIL 560) will be finalized in the first week of the term. More detailed guidelines and advice for each assignment will be posted on Canvas.

**Consult early and often**, whenever questions arise!

### Seminar participation and in-class assignments: 50% of the final grade

**Reading and engagement:** this course is a reading-intensive seminar with the emphasis on discussion; it is crucial that you complete all the readings in advance of the seminar meetings for which they are assigned and come to class prepared with comments and questions.

- Active participation: **10% of the final grade**

**Discussion posts:** you are required to post a response to the assigned readings or to a discussion question on Canvas once each week, except in week 8 when an essay-writing workshop is scheduled.

Discussion posts should be brief (a paragraph or two), and in the case of reading responses, they should be analytic rather than descriptive, aimed at raising questions for discussion. Focus on a particular issue, concept, or argument that you find intriguing or problematic—in need of closer scrutiny. Wherever possible, introduce concrete examples that illustrate the issues you would like to discuss in class.

Several public lectures are listed in the syllabus; discussion posts on any of them are welcome and will count either for extra credit or in place of a regular reading response.

- Posts are due by **9:00 pm on the evening before the seminar in which they will be discussed**. A Canvas discussion board link is included with the readings listed for each week on the assignments page.
- **Read one another's posts** and come to class prepared to discuss them. Online comments are not required but are most welcome.
- Discussion posts: **40% of the final grade**

### Essay assignments: 50% of the final grade

**Essay I: 15% of the final grade**

- A short **expository essay: 2-3 pages** (500-750 words) in which you present a sharply focused analysis of a key concept, claim or position discussed in one of the readings assigned in the first section of the course on the status history and historical science.
- Due online by **midnight, Monday, October 7**.

**Essay II: 35% of the final grade**

- A **thesis-driven research essay: 10-12 pages** (2500-3000 words) in which you develop a carefully argued position of your own on one of the issues raised by the assigned readings and discussed in the later sections of the course on historical explanation and narrative, or truth-telling and objectivity in history. Mid-way through the term you are required to submit an abstract outlining your proposed paper topic for discussion in an essay planning workshop on October 22.
- A one-page abstract is due online by **9:00 pm, Monday, October 21 – 5% of the final grade**
- Your final essay is due online by **midnight, Monday, December 9 – 30% of the final grade**

### Course Policies and guidelines:

**See the attached summary of campus-wide policies and resources** for the specifics, but two general guidelines are especially important for this course:

- **Plagiarism will not be tolerated!** See the UBC definition of plagiarism and policies on academic integrity included in the summary of course policies and guidelines.
- **Late assignments** will be accepted only in cases covered by the UBC “academic concessions” policy: medical circumstances, compassionate grounds, and conflicting responsibilities. Please contact me and/or Arts Academic Advising as soon as you know that you may need to arrange an in-term concession.

## Course Schedule – updated September 12, 2019

- RBR = Currie, *Rock, Bone and Ruin* (2018)
- ME = Chapman & Wylie (eds.), *Material Evidence* (2015)
- SP = Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (1995/2015)

**Week 1:** September 5 – Introduction to the course

Note that September 3 is Imagine Day – afternoon classes are cancelled

### I. The status of history and the historical science

**Week 2:** September 10 and 12

- RBR: review the case studies outlined in the first two chapters and come to class with an example of your own
- RBR: “Traces,” “Over and Under,” and “Ripples”
- *Background:* a selection of sources cited by Currie – Turner, Cleland.

**Week 3:** September 17 and 19

- RBR: “Ripples” (revisit), and “The Main Business of Historical Science”
- Bokulich, “Calibration, Coherence, Consilience: Radiometric Measures of Geologic Time” (2019)
- Norton, “A Material Dissolution of the Problem of Induction” (2014)
- *Background:* Wylie: “Temporal Data that Travel: Radiocarbon Dating and Robustness Reasoning in Archaeology” (2019)

Public Lecture: Aviva Rathbone and Ginevra Toniello, “Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh Nations on First Nations Sovereignty of Cultural Heritage in an Urbanized Environment – Wednesday, September 18, 5:00-6:30 pm, Green College Coach House

**Week 4:** September 24 and 26

- RBR: “Parochialism and Analogy,” “Exquisite Corpse: Historicity and Analogy”
- Chapman & Wylie, “External Resources: Archaeology as a Trading Zone,” *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* (2016)
- *Background:* Wylie, “The Reaction Against Analogy,” in *Thinking From Things* (2002/1985)

**Week 5:** October 1 and 3

- RBR: “How to Build Sea Urchins and Manufacture Smoking Guns,” “Idealization and Historical Knowledge”
- Chang, “Keeping the Fixed Points Fixed,” in *Inventing Temperature* (2004)
- Book symposium on RBR: [Philosophy, Theory and Practice in Biology](#) (2019)
- *Background:* Wylie, “Representational and Experimental Modelling in Archaeology” (2018); ME, Bradley, “Repeating the Unrepeatable Experiment” and Bogaard “Methods of Elimination”

**October 7: Essay I due**

### II. Historical explanation and narrative

**Week 6:** October 8 and 10

- October 8: Skype with Adrian Currie: post questions!
- October 10: Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History” (1942/1965)  
Beatty, “Narrative Possibility and Narrative Explanation” (2017)

**Week 7:** October 15 and 17

- Collingwood, “The Logic of Question and Answer”
- Currie and Sterelny, “In Defense of Story Telling” (2017)
- Currie, “Against Simple Stories” ([Extinct!](#) blog, 2016)

**Week 8:** October 22

- **Essay planning workshop: abstracts due October 21**

Note that class on October 24 is cancelled

### III. Truth-telling and objectivity in history: bearing witness

**Week 9:** October 29 and 31

- SP: "The Power in the Story," "The Three Faces of Sans Souci," and "An Unthinkable History"
- Daston, *Things that Talk: "Speechless"* (2004)
- Novick, "Nailing Jelly to the Wall," *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (1988)

**Week 10:** November 5 and 7

- SP: "Good Day, Columbus," and "The Presence in the Past"

**Week 11:** November 12 and 14

- Henige, "Not Even Hearsay? Oral Narratives of the First Nations of British Columbia" (2019)
- Menzies and Martindale, "'I Was Surprised' – Reply to David Henige" (2019)
- Roy, "Who Were These Mysterious People: *Ćesna:m*, the Marpole Midden, and the Dispossession of Aboriginal Lands in British Columbia" (2006)
- MW: Nicholas & Markey, "Traditional Knowledge, Archaeological Evidence, and Other Ways of Knowing"

**Week 12:** November 19 and 21

- Raibmon, "Unmaking Native Space: A Genealogy of Indian Policy, Settler Practice, and the Microtechnologies of Dispossession" (2008)
  - Selection of essays from "A Global Dialogue on Collaborative Archaeology" (2019)
- Public Lecture: Margaret Bruchac, "Listening to Object Witnesses: Decolonizing Research in Museum Collections," Indigenous/Science series – Wednesday, November 27, 5:00-6:30 pm, Green College Coach House

**Week 13:** November 26 and 28

- Wylie, "Towards a Genealogy of Reconciliation in Canada" (2017)
- Glen Coulthard, "Seeing Red," *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014)

**December 9: Essay II due**