

AMST 381/THTR 249
PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN THE TIME OF TWO PANDEMICS:
A DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

W 3:00-5:40
Booker Hall 226
Fall 2021



On Saturday, May 30 this GRTC Pulse bus 2004 was set on fire during protests in downtown Richmond at the intersection of W. Broad Street and Belvidere Street.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Public Transportation in the Time of Two Pandemics” is a course team-taught by Laura Browder and Patricia Herrera with key collaborator and curator Alexandra Byrum. We will explore the impact of COVID and BLM on the GRTC: Greater Richmond Transit Company. During last summer’s protests a GRTC bus was torched, and a GRTC driver recently died of COVID. Moreover, GRTC passengers were among the Richmonders most heavily impacted by the pandemic.

As a class, we will create a community-based public history project that addresses why accessible public transportation is so important to a democratic society. We will be working in teams for the second half of the semester. Depending on your interests, students may 1) join the curatorial team to develop an exhibition at GRTC headquarters; with curator Alexandra Byrum; (2) create a digital exhibition and archive that will be accessible to scholars and community members, developed with digital designer Alex Fulton, who has worked on previous collaborative projects; or (3) serve as dramaturges working in concert with Alicia Diaz and the University Dancers, helping them create

This community-based public history project builds on Laura’s 2013 public art exhibition *Driving Richmond* as well as the transit museum her and Alexandra’s students created for GRTC headquarters in 2015. The GRTC invited us to create this exhibition, and as in the past, GRTC employees will be equal partners in co-creating the work. To create these exhibitions and performance pieces, we will be conducting “history harvests,” meeting with bus drivers and mechanics to learn more about their lives and work. GRTC employees will share their artifacts and photos—objects and images that speak to being on the front lines of public transit during dual epidemics, and that ultimately will become part of the exhibition. Tania del Carmen Fernández will be taking portraits of GRTC families--the many sons and mothers, spouses and siblings who work together at the GRTC.

What are GRTC drivers’ and passengers’ experiences with transportation? Who has access to transportation? What are the civil rights issues connected to public transit? Our goal with this public humanities project is to stress the resiliency and front-line community service of the GRTC by highlighting not just the stories of bus drivers, but also depicting the complex web of relationships between the drivers and their passengers--who in Richmond are predominantly African American.

LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Learning Assessments

Throughout the semester there will be a series of activities that will guide you through this learning process and measure your progress as you move toward a better understanding of public transit in Richmond. More detailed guidelines for the following assignments will be provided, explained in class, and posted on blackboard under the link “assignments.”

Active Participation and Attendance (15%)

Our class is conducted in a seminar style with a focus on collaboration, discussions and workshops. Its success relies on everyone preparing for class – reading and thoughtfully considering all assigned course materials, jotting down discussion questions, and completing assignments on time – and actively participating in discussions.

This also includes your thoughtful reflections on the experiences we undergo together. For instance, we will ask you on **September 1** to write 1-2 pages reflecting on your experiences with riding a GRTC bus as well as on the history harvest. These reflections are designed to feed into our class discussions; thus, we will ask you to come to class with three questions or observations based on your reflection.

Class participation can take many forms, including developing good questions for our guest speakers, checking in weekly with your community partners and making contributions in preparation for the oral history. When you work collaboratively, ask thoughtful questions, offer insightful comments, note relevant passages in texts, point out connections between ideas, listen with an open mind, and share personal experiences, you contribute to a healthy, productive discussion and strong relationships with your peers and community partners.

Information Panels (15%)

Drawing on the oral history interviews, archival materials, scholarship, newspaper sources, and conversations with community members thus far, produce a 200-word information panel about a key moment in the linked history of civil rights and public transit in Richmond. This assignment will be scaffolded in two parts. First, you will choose a decade and create, in bullet form, a list of key moments connected with public transportation and civil rights--nationally and locally (Richmond, VA), **due on September 8**. Each bullet will contextualize a local moment within a national development or connect it to a national event. For the second part of this assignment, based on your bullet points, choose a key local moment that you will focus on and write a 200-word information panel, once again providing national context for it, **due September 15**.

Family Stories in Context (20%)

For this assignment you will rely on information gleaned from guest speakers, past GRTC oral histories, other course materials, and our two History Harvests, where you will meet GRTC employees and their family members. Write a 3-5 page paper in which you place the personal story of a GRTC “family” in a historical context (labor history, civil rights history, etc.). How does the story of this individual or family connect to societal issues, such as segregation, urban renewal, strikes, and other developments that have shaped Richmond? These papers will become the basis of our exhibition text panels. Thus, some of you may wish to focus more on the biography of a family, while others will emphasize the context more. This assignment might be altered depending on the focus of your project.

Collaborative Process (15%)

You will be evaluated on your effectiveness as a team member engaged in the process of creating deliverables and translating the archive and personal stories for a public audience. What we want to see is your engagement and your commitment to the collaborative process. This includes attending all meetings, following-through on tasks, contributing to the project in any way, necessary, and demonstrating your ability to work well with others on your team to execute your community deliverable.

Project Deliverables (20%)

You will be assessed on the project your team produces--either the dramaturgical casebook for the University Dancers’ production, the GRTC headquarters exhibition, or the digital archive and exhibition. All of these community-based public history projects will involve the same amount of work and will include a series of tasks, including collecting material; fashioning it into a product that will educate your audience, and presenting your work. We do not expect you all to be experts coming into the class; what we are looking for is your engagement with the project and your willingness and commitment to working hard and collaboratively to make the project a meaningful intervention, educating the Richmond community about a facet of the GRTC that they might not have known about.

Learning Reflections (15%)

Twice throughout the semester, midpoint and final, we will be asking you to evaluate the active learning that you are doing in this course by addressing questions that we will provide you. This will give us insight into your progress as you move through the semester. By way of checking in with you, we will have individual sessions with everyone on October 13.

Week 1: August 25: What Is The GRTC?

Questions: How is it possible to visually represent the experiences of GRTC staff and to explain GRTC history?

Objectives: To meet our community partners and learn about the history of GRTC in Richmond.

Assignments: Visit [RIDE and Driving Richmond](#) (password: Grtc21!) and make sure you read all of the exhibition text panels.

In-class Activities:

Meet at the transit hub. We will have a tour of the GRTC Bridge with Carrie Rose Pace, Director of Communications, and Ashley Mason, Marketing and Public Relations Specialist.

Identify your bus riding partner.

Week 2: September 1: The Burning Of The Streetcar And Its Legacy

Questions: How and why did early public transit in Richmond develop the way it did? What were the financial and ideological reasons behind streetcar routes and streetcar segregation?

Objectives: To understand the emergence of the streetcar and its racialized impact on Richmond.

Assignments: Read Earl Ferdinand Glock, [“The Rise of Modern Richmond and the Fall of Electric Transit,”](#) Master of Arts Thesis, College of William and Mary, 2004. 1-66.

Ride the bus with a partner and write a one-two page reflection on your experience. What do you notice about where the bus goes and who is riding it?

In-class Activities:

Guest Speaker: Ryan Rinn, Economic Development and Business Services Manager, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities, City of Richmond.

Jillian Yates presentation

Choosing decades for Information Panel assignment.

Establish celebration date and time with Students and GRTC Participants.

Identify your Eco-corridor walking partner.

Week 3: September 8: Civil Rights And Transit in Richmond Then And Now

Questions: How do you connect what you have gleaned from your experience riding buses and the oral history text panels to what Ben Campbell writes about?

Objectives: To understand the evolution of civil rights issues connected to public transit in Richmond.

To plan our history harvest.

Assignments: Read Ben Campbell, “Developing Structures of Segregation 1865-1964,” and “Massive Resistance and Resegregation 1955-1972,” *Richmond’s Unhealed History*, 125-174.

View [Westham Burial Ground](#) video with Shelby Driscoll

Information Panel Part 1 due. Choose a decade from the 1950s and on and create, in bullet form, a list of at least ten key moments connected with transportation and civil rights. You can incorporate material from the oral histories or any other course material to help you understand the more recent decades.

With your partner, take a walk along the [eco-corridor](#)—the site of both old train tracks (to deliver coal to campus) and the now-vanished streetcar tracks. What do you notice? What do you hear? What about the eco-corridor resonates with you? You can use the following prompts as inspiration: I wonder...I hope...I believe...I am...I feel...I love...I don’t understand. While you are on your walk, record yourself or jot down notes responding to these questions or prompts. When you are done with your walk, write a paragraph incorporating your immediate response and any after thoughts.

In-class Activities:

Westham Burial Ground and Eco-Corridor walk.

Share your key moments for the decade you selected.

Guest Speaker, Lynda Kachurek, Head of Rare Books and Special Collections at Boatwright Memorial Library (Seminar Room 1)

History Harvest Brainstorming: What is a history harvest? How can we make this event a success? What role will you play at the harvest?

Introduce Family in Context assignment.

Week 4 : September 15 & 18: First History Harvest

Sept. 15

Questions: How has the COVID pandemic impacted the GRTC, and how do we put the current pandemic in the context of the flu pandemic of 1918?

How do you conduct an oral history interview? What do we want to learn from our community partners? How can the objects that people bring to this harvest help tell the story of Richmond's public transit to exhibition visitors?

Objectives: To learn how to conduct an oral history interview. To understand how to make your text panel better.

Assignments: Read articles about COVID and GRTC

["50th GRTC Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19," WTVR.](#)

["Vigil for GRTC Driver Who Died of COVID-19," NBC 12](#)

["GRTC Driver John Thrower Dies of COVID-19," Richmond Free Press.](#)

["Wife of GRTC COVID-19 Victim Urges Riders to Follow Health Guidelines," NBC-12.](#)

Select a person whose *Driving Richmond* panel you find intriguing. Read the entire oral history transcript and select a single sentence that you think says something that exhibition visitors need to see.

Information Panel Part II Due: Based on your bullet points, choose a key moment from your chosen decade and write a 200-word information panel about it.

In the wake of your first Eco-corridor walk and our walk with Luranett and Shelby, take another walk on your own. What are the contradictions in these spaces? How do you inhabit this space now as you consider the history of transit and labor in Richmond? How do you imagine this space a hundred years ago or more? What would it feel like, look like, sound like, to walk through this space during the streetcar era? What sounds do you hear now? And what sounds would you hear a hundred years ago or more? You can use the following prompts as inspiration: I wonder...I hope...I believe...I am...I feel...I love...I don't understand. While you are on your walk, record yourself or jot down notes responding to these questions or prompts. When you are done with your walk, write a paragraph incorporating your immediate response and any after thoughts.

In-class Activities:

Group critique of information panels.

Creating oral history questions and honing interview skills.

History Harvest planning.

Sept. 18: We will be meeting at the Transportation Hub at 9:30am. We will return to campus at 1:30pm.

Questions: What are the stories that GRTC employees share? What are the objects that GRTC employees bring? What do you notice about the relationships between GRTC employees?

Objectives: To gather objects and stories that can become part of our exhibition.

Assignments: To be completely present during the history harvest.

Week 5 : September 22 & 25: Deepening our GRTC Relationships

Sept. 22

Questions: How have women's roles and contributions at the GRTC changed throughout time?

Objectives: To learn about the experiences of women working at the GRTC.

Assignments:

Read the oral histories of all five of the GRTC women profiled in *Driving Richmond*.

Based on your reading, develop three questions for our panelists.

In-class Activities:

Panel at the GRTC with women drivers and other employees.

Sept. 25: Second History Harvest at GRTC. We will be meeting at the Transportation Hub at 1:30 and will return to campus at 5:30pm.

Questions: What are the stories that GRTC employees share? What are the objects that GRTC employees bring? What do you notice about the relationships between GRTC employees?

Objectives: To gather objects and stories that can become part of our exhibition.

Assignments: To be completely present during the history harvest.

Week 6: September 29: From History Harvest to Exhibition

Questions: What ideas, themes, images, stories, and objects have most resonated with you and why? How can we think about the GRTC family/families? Are there any stories that struck you? What are the stories that need to be shared with the public?

Objectives: To evaluate the history harvest material and determine key information and themes.

By the end of this class, we should have teams for the digital, dramaturgical, mapping, curatorial project.

Assignments:

Read articles and listen to stories on the Spanish Influenza Pandemic.

[“There Wasn’t a Lot of Comforts in Those Days:’ African Americans, Public Health, and the 1918 Influenza Epidemic,” NCIB.](#)

[“A Public Calamity,” VPM.](#)

[“In 1918 Calamity, Black Richmond Faced New Virus and Old Racism,” VPM.](#)

Assess material we have and discuss possible thematic categories to be included in the digital, dramaturgical, mapping, curatorial projects.

Of the four projects, what are you most interested in working on? Rank in order of preference, with 1 being your top category.

In-class Activities:

Discuss the history harvest material and develop possible thematic categories for digital, dramaturgical, mapping, curatorial projects.

Assigning project teams: digital, dramaturgical, mapping, curatorial

First Learning Assessment: Self-evaluate your participation, role and contributions to the class.

Brainstorm family/families as well as themes, topics, or historical moments you would be interested in writing about.

Guest speakers:

Curator to speak about their space: TBD.

Alex Fulton, Digital Designer, Founder & Creative Director of Alex Fulton Design

Lynda Kachurek, Head of Rare Books and Special Collections at Boatwright

Memorial Library

Week 7: October 6: Creating Our Road Maps

Questions: What do we mean by a GRTC family? How do we make this clear to the public?

How does Richmond fit into the larger landscape of public transit? How has COVID affected mass transit in Richmond, nationally, and globally?

Objectives: To identify the stories of GRTC families and contextualize them within Richmond history.

Assignments: Read [“After a Year of the Pandemic, Public Transit Around the World is Hanging by a Thread,”](#) *New York Times*.

Read [The Coronavirus Takes a Toll on Virginia’s Transit](#), *Greater Greater Washington*.

Read ["Ridership, Zero Fare"](#). *RVA Magazine*.

[“What Is the Future of Public Transit in the U.S.?”](#) *NPR*.

[“COVID-19 Has Been 'Apocalyptic' for Public Transit. Will Congress Offer More Help?”](#) *TIME*.

[“The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Transit Funding Needs in the U.S.”](#) *APTA*.

Family in Context due. For this assignment you will rely on information gleaned from guest speakers, past GRTC oral histories, other course materials, and our two History Harvests, where you will meet GRTC employees and their family members. Write a 3-5 page paper in which you place the personal story of a GRTC “family” in

a historical context (labor history, civil rights history, etc.). How does the story of this individual or family connect to societal issues, such as segregation, urban renewal, strikes, and other developments that have shaped Richmond? These papers will become the basis of our exhibition text panels. Thus, some of you may wish to focus more on the biography of a family, while others will emphasize the context more. For instance, if you are focusing on a female driver and her family, you may wish to focus more on her—or on the moment when women began joining the GRTC workforce. This assignment might be altered depending on the focus of your project.

In-class Activities:

Share about the family/families that you decided to focus on.

Create a week-to-week breakdown for digital, dramaturgical, mapping, curatorial planning

Week 8: October 13: Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Questions: Where are we in the semester and how are you/we feeling about your progress?

Objectives: To meet each student individually about their role and learning experience in the class.

Decide with students their text panel content.

Week 9: October 20: Exhibition Planning

Questions: How can we move from exhibition concept to exhibition reality? What is our exhibition title? What materials will we include and how will we organize them in the exhibition? What do we want to say in the intro panels, the text panels (to introduce each section of the exhibition), and in the labels for each photograph or object?

Objectives: To break down our tasks for the rest of the semester.

Assignments: Text panels and other content due.

In-class Activities:

Guest speaker: Stephen Duggins, Preparator, University Museums
Exhibition planning

Week 10: October 27:

Questions: What tasks need to be completed in order to make the exhibition, digital archive, mapping project, and dramaturgical casebook complete?

Objectives: To make progress on the exhibition, digital archive, mapping project, and dramaturgical project.

Assignments:

Drafts of the intro panel, text panels, and labels for GRTC headquarters exhibition.

In-class Activities:

Read our intro panel, text panels, and labels for GRTC headquarters exhibition together.

Week 11: November 3: Exhibition Teamwork

Questions: What tasks need to be completed in order to make the exhibition, digital archive, mapping project, and dramaturgical casebook complete?

Objectives: To advance our exhibition, digital archive, mapping project, and dramaturgical projects.

Assignments: Final content completed for GRTC headquarters exhibition, including intro panel, text panels, and labels, GRTC family albums, and any objects/uniform related to family, GRTC generations (1930s, 1940s, etc.), GRTC brotherhood, GRTC sisterhood.

Week 12: November 10: Exhibition Installation at GRTC

Questions: How can we all best help the exhibition team install the show?

Objectives: To install an exhibition.

Assignments: All hands on deck: Complete any task assigned to you by the exhibition team while we are together.

In-class Activities:

Installation at GRTC headquarters

Week 13: November 17: Exhibition Opening

Questions: How can we make the opening the most meaningful and fun experience possible?

Objectives: To be present and engaged with exhibition visitors, and to notice what people seem most drawn to and what they are talking about amongst themselves. What memories and reflections are you hearing from GRTC staff?

Assignments: Complete any task assigned to you by the exhibition team while we are together.

In-class Activities:

Attending the opening at GRTC headquarters, depart campus at 3 p.m. and return by 5:45 p.m.

Week 14: November 24: Thanksgiving Break

NO CLASS

Week 15: December 1: Reflecting on Our Journey

Questions What has this experience meant to you? How has your thinking about transportation and civil rights evolved? What has surprised you most over the course of the semester?

Objectives: To reflect as a class on our journey together with our community partners.

Assignments: Second Learning Assessment due.

In-class Activities:

Post-Event Reflection

Creating thank-you poster/letters for GRTC partners

Walking reflection in the Eco-corridor and Westham Burial Ground

Week 16: Celebration

December 6-14

Celebration with students and GRTC participants.