

Field School “Remembrance as Reconciliation: the Dark Histories of Canada and Germany”

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”, the Spanish Philosopher George Santayana famously wrote – a potent directive to remember especially those parts of our national histories that offer no cause for celebration. In Germany, the time period of National Socialism, the so-called Third Reich, with its genocide of Europe’s Jewish population is one of those dark chapters. While the immediate response after World War II was characterized by silencing and denial, since the late 1960s this history is prominently confronted on many levels – in education, but also in the public spaces through memorials or remembrance days, and of course in cultural production. Its constant presence powerfully affects German identity, stifling overt displays of patriotism (outside sports, the one area where this is permissible) and continuing to determine what can or cannot be said or done. Canada as a nation has much more recently started to confront the legacies of its residential school system, the ethnocidal educational policy to eradicate First Nation, Inuit, and Métis cultures, which still affects survivors, their families and cultures. While the discoveries of countless graves on the grounds of former residential schools dominate the news cycle and social media, institutional remembrance is still in the process of taking shape.

This field school – co-taught by Profs. Jade Ferguson and Eva Gruber – brings together students from the University of Guelph and the University of Konstanz in Germany’s South in order to enable dialogue and discussion about forms, functions, aims, and effects of national remembrance in the respective context. Against the backdrop of German forms of remembrance, we will analyze cultural productions from Canada which engage with the residential school system, its history and legacy. Questions to be asked include: How can/do we remember in ways that do not downplay the extent of the trauma caused, but also do not reduce survivors to victims? How can/do we remember so that those affected are not simply “spoken about” but have a voice of their own? How can/do we remember in ways that, through awareness of past mistakes, affects our current actions, attitudes, and policies? How can we look at the past in ways that open a path into the future that allows for true reconciliation?

We will explore short fiction, graphic novels, dance performances, art, short films, survivors’ testimonies, short plays, and poetry to see how they narrativize and/or visualize the residential school experience and its long-term effects. Our discussions will be framed by theoretical texts on trauma narratives and cultural memory, and documents such as the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The program will include visits to the Memorial Site of Dachau (near Munich), where one of the first concentration camps was located, and Konstanz City Museum’s permanent exhibition on Konstanz during National Socialism.