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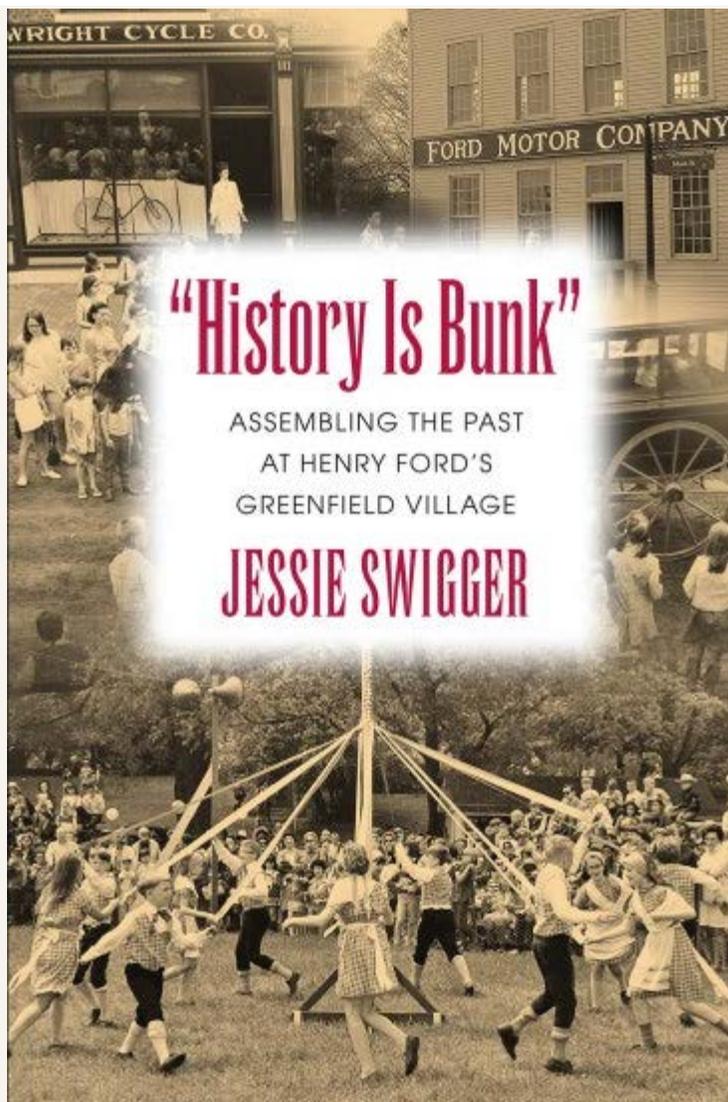
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Alumni Voices: Jessie Swigger, Associate Professor, Western Carolina University

by American Studies

AMS :: ATX is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.





Last summer, UT AMS alum Jessie Swigger put out a book called *History is Bunk* about the historical development of the Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. We recently spoke to Jessie, who is currently teaching at in the history department at Western Carolina University, about the book and her time at UT.

Can you tell us a little bit about your book, *History is Bunk*, and how you came to the project?

My interest in public history started when I took Steve Hoelscher’s Place and Memory



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course. My research paper in that course formed the basis of my Master's Report. After comps, I knew that I wanted to continue to work with Steve Hoelscher and to grapple with issues of place, memory, and history.

It was around this time that I took a trip to Detroit, where I visited Henry Ford's outdoor history museum Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. I had read about Ford's project and knew that it was one of America's first outdoor history museums, but was struck by what seemed to be its unique landscape. The village mixes replicas and preserved buildings from across the country. Among the many buildings, Henry Ford's birthplace, the Wright brothers' cycle shop, and a replica of Thomas Edison's Menlo Park laboratory populate the space along with two brick slave cabins from Georgia, a tenement farmer's house, and a Cotswold cottage from England; an eclectic group of structures, to be sure. I was also surprised that so many people were eager to visit a museum that celebrated Ford given Detroit's economic struggles. I wanted to understand the village and it became the focus of my dissertation.

Contrary to my initial reaction to the village, I found that in many ways Henry Ford's conception of preservation was not atypical. Instead, Ford's approach was similar to nineteenth century preservationists who defined the activity broadly. Preservation might mean, for

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example, creating a replica. The village's interpretation of the past was, however, clearly linked to Ford's own complex, and at times contradictory worldview. The village's history after Ford's death also proved fascinating. New administrators tried to maintain Ford's vision while continuing to attract new audiences. Throughout the village's history, administrators tracked visitor reactions to the site. Using journals written by guides, marketing surveys, and internal reports, I was able to consider how visitors encountered the village and how their responses informed the site's interpretive programming. Finally, the archives showed how the site's marketing approach and interpretation were entangled with the history of the Detroit metro area. My book is a substantial revision of my dissertation and uses the village as a case study to examine the many contexts that shape history museums.

How is the work that you're doing right now, as a scholar or a teacher or both, informed by the work that you did as a student in American Studies at UT?

My approach to teaching is influenced by the work I did at UT as an undergraduate and graduate student. As an undergraduate I took Main Currents with Mark Smith and as a graduate student I was a teaching assistant for Julia Mickenberg, Janet Davis, and Elizabeth Engelhardt. I still have my notes from all of these courses and have

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consulted them many, many times when writing my own lectures. We are also extraordinarily lucky that our program allows graduate students to design and teach their own courses. I still use much of the material that I developed during my time as an assistant instructor.

Do you have any words of wisdom or advice for students in our department about how to get the most out of their time here?

The AMS Department does a great job of offering graduate students professional development opportunities. Take advantage of these. Take time to talk to faculty about how they approach research, teaching, and service. These conversations may not help you the next day, but will prove invaluable as you start your career. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there professionally—attend talks, work on publications, present at conferences, and definitely attend all happy hours.

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