

Baristanet

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“Jersey: A Sense of Place” at MSU Focuses on the Garden State

A new year-long lecture free series entitled *Jersey: A Sense of Place* will debut today, November 14, at Montclair State University that will examine being from New Jersey and how the Garden State has been perceived in the past and present. Let’s face it, Jersey tends to get a bad rap.

I’m a born and bred Jersey girl. And while I have never lived anywhere else, and don’t plan to, it took me a long time to be proud of being from Jersey. Growing up in Jersey City, I pretended I was just a “City” kid. I spent most weekends in New York, as it was a quick ride on the PATH. If we did travel, when people asked where I was from, I would say the New York City area.

I hated the reputation Jersey had—bad accents, the mob (thanks to the Sopranos) and most of all, any of the “Jersey” reality shows that had become popular. I am not a Snooki fan. The thing is, I knew Jersey had more to offer than that. It bred Walt Whitman, George Segal, Paul Simon, Meryl Streep, Frank Sinatra, Buzz Aldrin... We should be proud.

Hurricane Sandy and what it did to the Shore stirred up my Jersey Pride. Last Sunday afternoon, I was driving and Springsteen’s *Jersey Girl* came on the radio. When The Boss sang the line, “Down the shore everything’s alright,” I started crying. This is my state, my Shore with childhood memories of Seaside Heights, it’s my place.

Arranged under the themes of “Dramatizing Jersey,” “Writing Jersey,” “Singing Jersey,” “Living Jersey,” and “Painting Jersey,” the *Jersey: A Sense of Place* series will provide perspectives from a distinguished group of speakers about the ways in which the state has been both celebrated by and inspirational to “high” culture and popular culture, past and present, in media as varied as literature, music, art, and TV drama!

Intriguingly entitled “Performing the Real on *Jersey Shore*,” the first lecture by Dr. Hugh Curnutt’s talk will take the stance that economic forces and financial considerations impacting modern TV production at least as strongly condition the show’s picture of New Jerseyans and their life at the New Jersey shore as does any “reality” to be found at Seaside Heights, NJ. Which begs the question: just how “real” is the “reality” we are offered here? Or does the show rather beget its own reality, as its followers prove the truth of the adage that life tends to imitate art?

In December, the series will turn to literary representations of an earlier and more urban New Jersey, with a joint presentation by Neil Baldwin, professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance and Director of the Creative Research Center at Montclair State, and

James Bloom, professor of English at Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania, on the role played by New Jersey in the poetry of William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and the novels of Philip Roth (1933-), authors raised in Rutherford and Newark, New Jersey, respectively.

In the Spring semester, Perdita Buchan, free lance writer, and Richard Veit, professor of Anthropology, Monmouth University, will provide a fascinating view of a little-known aspect of our state's history—namely, that it has served numerous times in the last two centuries as inspiration for a utopian life-style. Buchan will survey the traces of this “nearest Eden,” with glimpses of what remains of and what inspired utopian colonies in places as unimaginable (given their modern metamorphoses) as Englewood, Piscataway, and Berkeley Heights. Richard Veit will show us the relics of the North American Phalanx, a nineteenth-century utopian community in Colts Neck township, Monmouth County, and explain the ideas of the French philosopher, Charles Fourier, that underlay it.

A painter, George Inness (1825-1894), and a musician, Bruce Springsteen—very far apart in terms of time and appeal, but both equally inspired by their Jersey surroundings—will round out the series. Adrienne Baxter Bell of Marymount Manhattan College, an expert in the work of the nineteenth-century artist who painted bucolic scenes of Montclair and Bloomfield in the days when these towns were largely rural communities, will give a talk (April 4, 2013) in the surroundings of Montclair Art Museum which, with a gallery dedicated especially to an extensive collection of George Inness' work, is full of Inness' “poetry of place.” Louis P. Masur, professor of American Studies at Rutgers University, will (February 28, 2013), on the other hand, focus on a diametrically different vision of Jersey—and that of a century later—with a look at pop icon Bruce Springsteen's “dream!”

Jersey: A Sense of Place is free and open to the public. For more information, check [the Institute's website](#) or call 973.655.7516.

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