

HIST 5305: Studies in United States History

The Writing of History

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Spring 2010
CRN# 26641
Thursdays 4:30-7:20pm
Class Location: LART 310

Course Description and Motivation

This is a course focused on the writing of history. It includes a bit of historiography, in this case the history-of-writing-history. It has more about the ideological stakes and rhetoric positions of those who write history, and the choices they make. Yet its primary focus is viewing history as a subgenre of creative nonfiction, and inspiring YOU to think carefully as you craft prose, and to take risks when you write history.

In this course we will read path-breaking historical works, but always ones you could have written – not memoirs, not eyewitness accounts, not historically minded journalism built on interviewing those involved, or (in the spirit of the new journalism) getting involved yourself. These books are based in traditional historical research, yet their authors chose to do something brave—to tell their stories in a new and different way, to write, rather than merely report, history.

Don't worry if the topics seem unfamiliar. Some are unfamiliar to me as well. But there will be no quiz: Our discussions and analysis will focus on *how* those histories were written, more than what they are written about.

If, taking a lead from John Demos, one of the thoughtful historians we will read in this course, we consider all work at the level of the *specific* (What is this book's topic? What is its argument? What sources were used to provide evidence? What is the chronology considered?), the *general* (What historical fields are addressed? What theoretical models are used? What established works in the field are referenced? How does the work alter how you understand, teach, or research the period discussed?), and the *generic* (What choices of genre, method, and rhetoric does the book employ? What do you particularly admire about the book's choices of structure, perspective, or style? What are its weaknesses?), this will be quite a generic class indeed. We will focus on the specific instances where the writerly instincts and skills of these authors are revealed.

Explanation of Participant Requirements

Each week, students should come to class prepared to discuss the readings, having thought about the course methods described above. They should also write a 1-2 page reaction to the writing of the history at hand. These journal entries are to be submitted online, the night before class, only to the professor. (Class Participation and Weekly Journals = 15% of final grade)

Once during the semester, each student will introduce discussion, having prepared a list of questions about the writing of history to guide the discussion. (Students should plan to have the professor check a draft of these questions at least 24 hours before class.) After class, the student will post a five-page paper to class website, summarizing our discussion and reflecting on what was and was not said. (Introduction = 15%)

Twice during the semester, students will use the course reading as the basis of a 5-page “research note” in the writing of history—once using the readings to explore the question “What is History?” and once to experiment with writing history of their own in a more innovative form. These will serve as preparation for the final paper. (Two Research Notes = 30% together, 15% each)

For a final assignment, students should select the one cumulative-assignment option below most appropriate for their program of study (Final Assignment = 40%):

Historiographic Essay: Students can write an essay of 10-20 pages exploring some aspect in the history-of-writing-history, with an aim toward using the writing of history as part of their portfolio-field preparations.

Experiment in Writing History: Students can craft a longer (10-to-15-page) innovative history, building on a research paper they have already written. They should also provide a companion rationale, reflecting on the books read on the course, the challenges faced, and prospects to continue such work. The sample and the rationale will count equally for the final grade in this option.

Main Texts:

- John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994). Paperback ISBN 0679759611
- Marie Theresa Hernández, *Cemeteries of Ambivalent Desire: Unearthing Deep South Narratives from a Texas Graveyard* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008). Paperback ISBN 1603440267
- Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005). Paperback ISBN: 1400032261
- Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Paperback ISBN: 0226518302
- Américo Paredes, *“With His Pistol In His Hand”: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958; any edition). Paperback ISBN: 0292701284
- Stephen J. Pyne, *Voice and Vision: A Guide to Writing History and Other Serious Nonfiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). ISBN: 0674033302
- Robert A. Rosenstone, *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Paperback ISBN: 067457642X
- Martha A. Sandweiss, *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* (New York: Penguin, 2009). ISBN: 1594202001
- Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Knopf, 1991; any edition). Paperback ISBN: 0679736131
- Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003). Paperback ISBN: 0142004103

Additional readings will be available online via databases or course reserves (marked *).

Course Policies

- Come to class prepared, having done the readings and advanced your research.
- Please arrive on time. If you foresee chronic lateness, contact me immediately.
- Students with special needs should contact me within the first two weeks of class.
- Many of you have families and/or work 40 hours a week—please do not fall behind.
- It is official UTEP policy that all suspected cases or acts of alleged scholastic dishonesty must be referred to the Dean of Students for investigation and appropriate disposition. Scholastic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to cheating, plagiarism, collusion, the submission for credit of any work or materials that are attributable in whole or in part to another person, taking an examination for another person, any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student or the attempt to commit such acts. Any student who commits an act of scholastic dishonesty is subject to discipline. Full policy: <http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=23785>
- Please treat all the opinions and views expressed here with respect.

Course Schedule

I. Why Write History?

Week One: Jan 21

Options, Introductions, and Motivations

These readings will be made available on January 14 to registered students.

*Aaron Sachs, “Letters to an Older Historian,” *Rethinking History* (forthcoming).

Marjorie Garber, “Why Can’t Young Scholars Write Their Second Books First?” in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 36.3 (2005), pp. 129-32 (originally published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 15, 2004).

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_scholarly.../v036/36.3garber.html

*Louis P. Masur, “What Will it Take to Turn Historians into Writers?” *The Chronicle Review* July 6, 2001, B10.

*Virginia Scharff, “What’s Love Got to Do with It? A New Turner Thesis” *Western Historical Quarterly* 40.1 (Spring 2009), 5-22.

James Goodman, “For the Love of Stories,” *Reviews in American History* 26 (March 1998), pp. 255-274. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/reviews_in_american_history/v026/26.1goodman.html

William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992), pp. 1347-1376. http://www.williamcronon.net/writing_downloads.htm

Week Two: Jan 28

Cautions

James West Davidson, "The New Narrative History: How New? How Narrative?" *Reviews in American History* 12 (September 1984), pp. 322-334. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2702239>

Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" [aka an earlier version of Chapter 1 of *The Content of the Form*] *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative. (Autumn, 1980), pp. 5-27. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28198023%297%3A1%3C5%3ATVONIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-F>

Hayden White, "Interpretation in History" [aka an earlier version of Chapter 2 of *Tropics of Discourse*] *New Literary History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, On Interpretation: II. (Winter, 1973), pp. 281-314. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0028-6087%28197324%294%3A2%3C281%3AIIH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>

In some sense ironic, White's highly influential explications of clear writing are quite complex, so I've found some commentaries and distillations worth considering--recommended (two come from an AHA panel on Hayden White, in which he was the commentator):

Nancy Partner, "Hayden White: The Form of the Content" *History and Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 2. (May, 1998), pp. 162-172. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0018-2656%28199805%2937%3A2%3C162%3AHWTFOT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>

F. R. Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians," *History and Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 2. (May, 1998), pp. 182-193. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0018-2656%28199805%2937%3A2%3C182%3AHWATTH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>

Vicki Rea, Summary of *Metahistory* <http://www.lehigh.edu/~ineng/syll/syll-metahistory.html>

Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," pp. 1-23 in *Limited, Inc* (1988). www.scribd.com/doc/19755436/Jacques-Derridas-Limited-Inc

Commentary/reaction to this essay (recommended):

http://www.michaelberube.com/index.php/weblog/jacques_derrida_requiescat_in_pace_and_may_his_work_trouble_us_all/

Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "The Task of the Historian" AHA Presidential Address *The American Historical Review*, 114.1 (February 2009), 1-15. <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.lib.utep.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=36863531&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

*Maureen Healy, "Dictator in a dumpster: Thoughts on History and Garbage" in *Experiments in Rethinking History* ed. Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (London: Routledge, 2004), 225-227.

Week Three: Feb 4 Toward a History of History

Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Week Four: Feb 8-12

A How-To Guide?

RESCHEDULED MEETING TIME _____

DUE: Research Note #1: What is History?

Stephen J. Pyne, *Voice and Vision: A Guide to Writing History and Other Serious Nonfiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Historically Speaking January 2010 special issue on Writing of History,
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/historically_speaking/

II. Writing the Borderlands: Exceptions?

Week Five: Feb 18

Lyricism

Américo Paredes, *"With His Pistol In His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958; any edition).

Week Six: Feb 25

Digging Beneath

Marie Theresa Hernández, *Cemeteries of Ambivalent Desire: Unearthing Deep South Narratives from a Texas Graveyard* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

III. Writing Innovative History

Week Seven: Mar 4

Imagining the Other

John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

John Demos, "Using Self, Using History..." *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002), pp. 37-42.
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/89.1/demos.html>

Week Eight: Mar 11

Mapping the Sources

Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

*Jill Lepore, A Critic at Large, "The Politics of Death," *The New Yorker*, November 30, 2009.

SPRING BREAK

Week Nine: Mar 25

Demonstrating Perspective

Robert A. Rosenstone, *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Week Ten: Apr 1 Connecting Perceptions

Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003).

Week Eleven: Apr 8 Taking Time to Risk Writing History

DUE at the end of the week: Research Note #2, to share with the class.

No readings, and no class. Take risks in your history.

Week Twelve: Apr 15 Writing History Workshop

Come prepared, having read and annotated the work of your colleagues.

Week Thirteen: Apr 22 The Mystery of Family, the Alchemy of Race

Martha A. Sandweiss, *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

IV. History and Fiction

Week Fourteen: Apr 29 Should Historians Write Fiction? Do They?

Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

*Gordon S. Wood, "Novel History," *The New York Review of Books*, June 27, 1991, pp. 12-16.

Week Fifteen: May 6 What Can Fiction Teach Historians?

*Margaret Atwood, "Death by Landscape," first published 1991.

Rick Moody, "Boys," first published 2001. <http://katey.schultz.googlepages.com/boys1.pdf>

*Alberto Méndez, "First Defeat (1939)," first published 2006.

*Robert Olen Butler, *Had a Good Time: Stories from American Postcards* (New York: Grove Atlantic Press, 2004), selections.

John Demos, "In Search of Reasons for Historians to Read Novels..." *American Historical Review* 103 (December 1998), pp. 1526-1529. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2649969>

*James Goodman, "Blackout," in *Experiments in Rethinking History* ed. Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (London: Routledge, 2004), 209-222.

*Rachel Cohen, *A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854-1967* (New York: Random House, 2004), selections.

Final papers due one week after final class.