

**HI 200 Fall 2007**  
Critical Reading in History

Wednesday 3-6  
270 Bay State Rd. #416

Prof. J. McCann  
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Readings (available in B.U. Bookstore)

Paul Boyer and Stephan Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974.

William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

Alfred Crosby. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*.  
New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*. New York:  
Vintage, 1994.

Carlos Ginzburg, *Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

John Thornton. *Africa and Africans and the Making of the Atlantic World*. New York:  
Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Laurel Ulrich, *A Midwives' Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

The purpose of this seminar is to examine and explore the craft of the historian. It differs from other courses in history in that it is less concerned studying the events and processes of past time than with examining how historians practice their arts of description, research, and analysis. We will also see the writing of history as a process which begins with the framing of questions and research strategies and continues with

constructing a narrative in the form of a book. Historiography also includes responses, from other historians, scholars, and the public to the work once it is published. Through our reading of the books themselves, reviews, and discussions of historiographic context we will examine a number of specific aspects of what makes effective historical writing. These issues include:

- sources
- scale of analysis (local, regional, global, biographical)
- narrative devices for "telling the story": elements of style, organization, direct voice, images, personification, etc.
- the ethics and possibility of objectivity versus the historian as advocate
- historiographic lineages and "schools" of history

### **Course Theme**

As we unpack how historians pursue their profession we will also practice critical reading of a number of historical *monographs* (as distinct from articles or edited collections). Our reading will range from tried and true classics (Cronon) to more controversial historical writing (Demos), and two national prize winners (Ulrich and Soluri); we will also include a major book by a product of Boston University Ph.D. (Alfred Crosby).

The principles of historiography introduced in this course apply, in general, to all types of history, but the organizing theme for my choice of readings is a range of geographical and temporal settings (New England, northeast Italy, Central America) and a newer configuration, the Atlantic world.

### **Methods of Analysis**

For each of the monographs we read, there will be an explicit discussion of a set of issues for which students should be prepared:

- Thesis (the book's fundamental argument about its topic)
- Units of analysis (community, nation, biography, ecosystem, family, etc)
- Sources (primary and secondary)
- Narrative style (elements of grammar, use of imagery, methods of persuasion)
- Historiographic context (influences, reception by profession)
- Historical social science versus narrative history

### **Evaluation**

Students will receive course grades based on their performance on the basis of an "Evaluation Folder" consisting of weekly written assignments, seminar participation, attendance (see below), and a final written project to be developed in consultation with the instructor. The final review essay will constitute 50% of the final grade, weekly précis will count for a total of 25%, and 25% will consist of class participation/preparedness.

Weekly assignments: Each seminar participant will turn in a one-page abstract for each monographs assigned and two review assignments (see below) chosen from among the seminar readings.

Review Assignments: Each review assignment should consist of at least two reviews, one from a general history journal and one from a specialized periodical (examples below), photocopies of the reviews with full citations, and a one-page summary. Students should not count insubstantive or very short reviews as one of the two. Students will be asked to summarize and evaluate the reviews in class as well as describe the career of the author.

#### Sources for Reviews

General	Specialized
<i>American Historical Review</i>	<i>Journal of American History</i>
<i>Times Literary Supplement (TLS)</i>	<i>Environmental History Review</i>
<i>New York Review of Books</i>	<i>Journal of African History</i>
<i>Journal of Interdisciplinary History</i>	<i>Forest and Conservation History</i>
<i>New York Times Review of Books</i>	

Final Project: The Context of History The final project for this course will be a 10-15 page review article which analyzes the content and context of an important monograph of a single historian. The paper will take the form of a review article (examples of which can be found in any major historical journal) and should analyze the book and its thesis, the background and motivations of the historian, the reception by the profession and public. You may choose from a list of historians provided by the instructor or submit a proposal for a historian and monograph of your own.

#### Attendance

Attendance is not optional at Boston University, nor is it optional in the seminar. Students are expected to be present and prepared for each seminar meeting. If a student will miss a seminar he/she must inform the instructor beforehand. In the case of illness, the student must inform the instructor. Students absent from more than one session must produce a note from the Student Health Service.

#### Other Issues

Since the seminar lasts 2 1/2 hours there will be a short break after the first hour and half or so. As per University regulations, students will not be allowed to consume food or drink during class sessions.

### Course Schedule

#### **September 5 Introduction to Historiography**

Seminar goals  
"Reading" a historical monograph

#### **September 12 Making of a Monograph**

The Making of a Book (A Historical Odyssey): *Maize and Grace*

Reading: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, pp. vii-158  
 Preparation: thesis, sources, units of analysis  
 Assignment: turn in thesis statements

**September 19 America: New England**

Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, pp. 159-236  
 Preparation: review assignments, style, objectivity/advocacy

**September 26 Ecological History: A Global Scale**

Reading: Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, pp. xii-131  
 Preparation: thesis, sources, units of analysis  
 Assignment: Turn in thesis statements

**October 3 Ecological Imperialism (cont.)**

Reading: Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, pp. 132-311  
 Preparation: review assignments, narrative style (20 metaphors) Reading:

**October 10** (Monday schedule of classes)

**October 17 America: The New Social History**

Reading: Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*  
 Preparation: thesis, review assignments, units of analysis, objectivity/advocacy  
 Assignment: turn in thesis statements, review assignments

**October 24 America: Cultural History and Imagination vs. Evidence**

Reading: Demos, *Unredeemed Captive*  
 Preparation: thesis, review assignments, units of analysis, objectivity/advocacy  
 Assignment: turn in thesis statements, review assignments

**November 7 The Atlantic System: African Migration and the Atlantic Scale**

Reading: Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, pp. vii-125  
 Preparation: thesis, sources, units of analysis, objectivity/advocacy  
 Assignment: turn in thesis statements

**November 14-21 Scheduled Individual Meetings**

**November 14 Mentalité and the Annales School**

Reading: Ginzburg, *Night Battles*  
 Preparation: thesis, sources, subjectivity, style  
 Assignments: Turn in thesis statements, review assignments

**November 21 No session Thanksgiving Break**

**November 28 History and the Quotidian**

Reading: Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*  
Preparation: thesis, sources, subjectivity, style  
Assignments: Turn in thesis statements, review assignments

**December 5**

Reading: Soluri, *Banana Cultures*  
Preparation: thesis, sources, narrative style, integration of environment and biography  
Assignments: Turn in thesis statements, review assignments

**December 9 Final Project Presentations**

Be prepared to discuss your final projects (justify your choice of historian, monograph, and approach to your final review article writing project). Presentations must be clear and concise (5 minutes) to describe your chosen historian and approach to the review essay.