

## History 850: American Historiography

Boston University  
Spring 2017  
Classroom: Room 110, 226 Bay State Road  
Wednesday 2:30-5:15

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### Goals

This course has two goals.

- (1) To advance understanding of the literature in key fields of American history (here, the United States and antecedent colonies).
- (2) To advance professional skills of historians.

We will meet these goals using a variety of means. First, we will read a book of review essays (edited by Foner and McGirr) to advance our understanding of trends in key fields of American history. Second, we will read recent books that illustrate trends. Third, we will write book reviews. Fourth, we will discuss books in class. Fifth, we will make oral reports on the authors of each book. Sixth, we will read a manual on professional development for graduate students in history.

### Professional Skills: Time Management and Efficient Reading

Two of the most important skills for professional historians are (1) time management, and (2) efficient reading (mastering the content of books and articles without reading every word). We will need these skills to master the readings in the time available for homework each week. The standard formula for course expectations is two hours of homework, plus one hour of class time, for each unit. This is a four-unit course, so we should aim to complete the homework in eight hours. In a typical week, we might devote five hours to the monograph, one hour to the review essay in Foner and McGirr, and two hours to the book review. In the three weeks before we give an oral report, we might devote four hours to the monograph and one hour to preparing the report each week (for a total of three hours of preparation for the oral report).

The graduate student guide describes techniques for efficient reading. We should have a good idea of the key ideas and arguments in a book after an hour. The additional three or four hours per book deepen our knowledge.

### Professional Skill: Book Reviews

Writing book reviews is an important professional skill for historians. Book reviews in journals notify historians of new work, evaluate merits of books, and become part of tenure and

promotion dossiers. Book reviews have an additional advantage for graduate students. They become study guides for exams.

Each week, please write a review of up to 500 words on the monograph of the week. This is a challenging but realistic assignment (500 words are a common limit in history journals). In the review, please:

- Identify the thesis of the reading
- Summarize the most important ideas and evidence that support the thesis
- Evaluate the argument. Does the author make a convincing case? Do the author's sources, methods, insights, or angle of approach stand out?
- Position the reading in the literature. Essays in Foner and McGirr will help us do this.

Please upload your book reviews to Blackboard twenty-four hours before class begins.

Book reviews takes the place of longer papers common in graduate history courses. They bring several advantages. They help develop the professional skill of reviewing others' work. They elevate class discussion (and discussion grades) by ensuring thoughtful engagement with the reading before class. They enable us to improve our writing (and writing grade) over the course of the semester by learning from earlier efforts. And they spread the work out over the whole term, rather than concentrating it at the end when other courses are making their greatest demands.

My comments will be brief to turn the papers around quickly. At the end of the term, I will convert the lowest two review grades to passes (that is, passes in a pass/fail grading system), rather than as letter grades, before calculating your overall review grade.

You may take one bye (that is, submit no review if you wish) over the course of the semester. If you do this, please send an email indicating that this is your plan. The bye counts as one of the pass/fail grades (so you get a pass for the bye). You must read and discuss the book in class every week.

### Professional Skill: Public speaking

One of the most important and least developed skills among historians is public speaking. We present papers at conferences, lecture to students, and get hired (or rejected) for positions based on job talks. In this course, we will take turns making presentations on the authors of the monographs we read.

### Credit

40% discussion

40% reviews

20% oral presentation

## Professional Skill: Integrity

Integrity is the bedrock of scholarship. Historians rely on each other to present findings honestly. My assumption is that all of us are honorable people and will not lie, cheat, or otherwise behave dishonestly. If confronted with evidence to the contrary, and if investigation convinces me that a student acted dishonestly, I will follow university procedures to address the problem.

**The biggest danger for integrity in a course like this is plagiarism (a form of cheating), so be sure to (1) cite a source for any idea not your own, (2) set off quotations using quotation marks, or indenting, and cite the source, and (3) use Chicago endnote style for documentation.** Carelessness, ignorance, and lack of time are unacceptable excuses for plagiarism. I am happy to clarify the rules for you. If you are uncertain how to do something properly, ask me **before** turning in an assignment.

If you do not know Chicago style, it would be a good idea to buy a style manual. The bible is the *Chicago Manual of Style*, but you can get most of the information you need from a cheaper manual (such as Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual*).

The citation conventions in book reviews differ from other publications.

- The publication information at the top of the page tells us the source of most information in the review, so **notes to the reviewed book** are not needed.
- Where the review **summarizes** arguments in the book, no page number is needed.
- Where the review **quotes** material from the book, insert page numbers at the end of the quotation. The method is to insert quotation mark, then a space, then the page(s) in parentheses, then the period without a space before it. For example, a sentence on page seven of the reviewed book might be quoted like this in your review:
  - RIGHT: "... before the revolution" (7).
  - WRONG: "...before the revolution." (7)
  - WRONG: "before the revolution"(7).
  - WRONG: "before the revolution (7)".
- If you use information from **a source other than the reviewed book** (e.g., Foner and McGirr), use Chicago style footnotes (including quotation marks where appropriate).

## Accommodations

My goal is for everyone to succeed in this class. If you find yourself struggling with your mental or physical health this semester, please feel free to approach me. I try to be flexible and accommodating.

## Books

Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (Penguin, 2001). ISBN-13: 978-0142002100 . (paper)

Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Oxford, 2003). ISBN-13: 978-0195158021 (paper)

Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (North Carolina, 2005). ISBN-13: 978-0807856161 (paper)

Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Harvard, 2016), ISBN-13: 978-0674970922 (paper)

Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (Basic, 2016). ISBN-13: 978-0465049660 (paper)

Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (eds.), *American History Now* (Temple, 2011). ISBN-13: 978-1439902448 (paper)

Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Harvard, 2014). ISBN-13: 978-0674283961 (paper)

Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (Vintage, 2008). ISBN-13: 978-0307277572 (paper)

Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2014). ISBN-13: 978-0691160825 (paper)

Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2007). ISBN-13: 978-0521703147 (paper)

Pekka Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire* (Yale, 2009). ISBN-13: 978-0300151176 (paper)

Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910* (Viking, 2016). ISBN-13: 978-0670024681 (hardcover)

Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Harvard, 2010). ISBN-13: 978-0674046917 (paper)

Edmund Russell, *Joining the History Profession: A Guide for Graduate Students* (distributed free by instructor).

Bring each book to class on the day discussed.

## Schedule

### Class 1

- January 25
- Taylor, *American Colonies*
- Come to class prepared to discuss Taylor. No book review due this week.

### Class 2

- February 1
- Bolster, *Mortal Sea*
- Woody Holton, *American Revolution and Early Republic*, in Foner and McGirr.
- First book review due 24 hours before class (and in every subsequent class). Post to Blackboard.

### Class 3

- February 8
- Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told*
- Adam Rothman, *Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction*, in Foner and McGirr.
- You may find it helpful to skim Beckert's essay on capitalism in Foner and McGirr, but you are not responsible for the Beckert essay until class 8 (below).
- Book review due before class.

### Class 4

- February 15

- Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire*
- Ned Blackhawk, *American Indians and the Study of U. S. History*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

#### Class 5

- February 22
- Hahn, *A Nation without Borders, 1830-1910*
- Seth Rockman, *Jacksonian America*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

#### Class 6

- March 1
- Richards, *California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*
- Stephen Aron, *Frontiers, Borderlands, Wests*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

[March 8— No class—spring break]

#### Class 7

- March 15
- Jones, *Routes of Power*
- Sarah T. Phillips, *Environmental History*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

#### Class 8

- March 22
- Andrews, *Killing for Coal*
- Sven Beckert, *History of American Capitalism*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

#### Class 9

- March 29
- Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*
- Rebecca Edwards, *Women's and Gender History*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

#### Class 10

- April 5
- Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*
- Kevin Gaines, *African-American History*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

#### Class 11

- April 12
- Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*
- Mae M. Ngai, *Immigration and Ethnic History*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

[April 19—no class—university follows Monday class schedule]

#### Class 12

- April 26

- Westad, *Global Cold War*
- Erez Manela, *The United States in the World*, in Foner and McGirr
- Book review due before class.

### Class 13

- May 3
- Russell, *Joining the History Profession: A Guide for Graduate Students*
- Book review due before class. The format this week diverges from others. To avoid creating the feeling that you need to please the professor or read books not on the syllabus, summarize the key ideas in the manual without evaluating strengths and weaknesses and without placing the guide in the broader literature.

Draft of January 18, 2017