GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS:

This course will advance your understanding of the literature in key fields of American history (the United States and antecedent colonies). We will read books that illustrate some of the major trends and topics in United States history alongside a collection of historiographical review essays that place many of these books in both historical and scholarly context. An undergraduate-level textbook in U.S. history is a good idea for someone who has studied very little of American history. Please ask the instructor for a loaner or for recommendations. It is very difficult to grasp debates about events without knowing about those events.

The course is reading intensive. Each class meeting is usually organized around a few essays and one full book. A "book statement" (guidelines below) is due at each class meeting. Preparation of this sort ensures that everyone comes to class prepared to engage in a lively discussion about the author's arguments, source base, method, and agenda. You may have one pass or "bye" on the book statement.

The final writing assignment is a 12-15 page historiographical essay on the topic of your choice. Each of the three components of the course (class participation; eleven book statements; final essay) will be weighted equally in the calculation of the final grade.

ASSIGNED BOOKS:

Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, editors, American History Now (2011)
Pekka Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire (2008)
Stephanie McCurry, Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South (2010)
Alice Kessler-Harris, In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America (2001)
Sarah T. Phillips, This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal (2007)
(Note: instructor can loan copies of this; no purchase required!)

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

It is your responsibility to read and understand the Boston University Academic Conduct Code (available at www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code) and to abide by its provisions. Any suspected cases of plagiarism or unethical academic behavior will be referred to the appropriate officials and a failing grade will be assigned.
**SCHEDULE:**

**Jan. 22**
Introductions/What's Hot Now

**Jan. 29**
Alan Taylor, "Squaring the Circles: The Reach of Colonial America" in AHN

**Feb. 5**
Woody Holton, "American Revolution and Early Republic" in AHN
Sven Beckert, "History of American Capitalism," in AHN

**Feb. 12**
Ned Blackhawk, "American Indians and the Study of U.S. History" in AHN
Stephen Aron, "Frontiers, Borderlands, Wests" in AHN

**Feb. 19:** no class/Monday schedule

**Feb. 26**
Seth Rockman, "Jacksonian America" in AHN
Adam Rothman, "Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction" in AHN

**Mar. 5**
Robert D. Johnston, "The Possibilities of Politics: Democracy in America, 1877 to 1917" in AHN

**(NOTE: choose just one of these books for the book statement)**

**Mar. 12:** no class/spring break

**Mar. 19**
Rebecca Edwards, "Women's and Gender History," in AHN

**Mar. 26**
Mae M. Ngai, "Immigration and Ethnic History," in AHN

**Apr. 2**
Lisa McGirr, "The Interwar Years" in AHN
Sarah T. Phillips, "Environmental History" in AHN
Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (2007)

**(NOTE: instructor can loan copies of this; no purchase required!**)
Apr. 9
Meg Jacobs, "The Uncertain Future of American Politics, 1940 to 1973" in AHN

Apr. 16
Kevin Gaines, "African-American History" in AHN

Apr. 23
Erez Manela, "The United States and the World" in AHN

Apr. 30
Kim Phillips-Fein, "1973 to the Present," in AHN
Lawrence B. Glickman, "The Cultural Turn," in AHN
John T. McGreevy, "American Religion" in AHN

Wed. May 8: Historiographical Essays due (in hard copy) in instructor's mailbox by 4pm.

BOOK STATEMENT GUIDELINES:

500-750 words, double-spaced

These book statements are not traditional book reviews, though you are encouraged to read several book reviews in the top-mast journals (JAH, RAH, AHR, journals of record for the sub-field, etc.) before writing them. They are intended to help you focus your reading and to develop memorable perspectives about topics that are most likely not in your own areas of interest or expertise.

The first paragraph of the statement does indeed begin like a traditional book review, but you are welcome to use more direct quotes than is typical in standard book reviews. In the first paragraph, you should introduce and explain the author's major questions and overarching arguments to someone who has not read the book. Introduce the title, author, subject, question/agenda, and general thesis in the first paragraph in a dynamic manner. Here is an example:

In The Most Southern Place on Earth, James Cobb writes that he had once believed the Mississippi Delta constituted “the distilled essence of the Deep South.” Actual research, however, unsteadied this assumption. While the region’s history still opened for Cobb a window on southern history, the Delta was not a place where “time stood still while southernness stood fast.” Rather, the Delta’s distinctive economic and racial structure took shape after the Civil War, and largely in the late nineteenth century. “The Delta’s white elite,” he contends, “entered the twentieth century presiding over a social order reminiscent of the Old South while adhering to an economic philosophy rooted firmly in the New.”

After the first paragraph, the statement now departs from the standard book review, which usually attempts to give the reader a sense of the book as a whole. This is not your task. Your task is now more interesting: pretend you have only a small amount of time to convey the book's contributions and importance to a smart, interested colleague. You would not summarize the whole thing; you would choose your examples more carefully and

---

strategically. In the remaining part of the statement, recount **two specific sections, sets of evidence, or narrative episodes** that you thought best supported the author's overarching set of arguments. Convey these choices to the reader concisely and persuasively.

Write formally and carefully, but have fun choosing what to say. The assignment is not asking you to summarize or synthesize all the information, only to present what you find to be a specific and memorable way of understanding the book’s overarching argument. Feel free to use direct quotations, but don’t overuse them, and don’t use long block quotes. Integrate quotations into your own sentences, the way the example paragraph does above above. Use Chicago-style footnotes only for direct quotes. The second time you cite the book, the citation can be shorter.²

**Avoid personal pronouns** (I, me, we, you, our).

Avoid overuse of weak verbs and passive voice, *i.e.*, do not use forms of the verb “to be” (is, are, was, were) any more than two times per paragraph. I’m serious. I count. Overuse of weak verbs is a sign you’re not trying hard enough to use interesting and forceful verbs, and passive voice means you’re not identifying the subject.

**Write in the past tense except when describing what a contemporary author argues or presents.**

- Historical events: past tense. “The Supreme Court *decided*...”
- Author as interpreter: present tense. “As Cobb *explores*, however, ...”

I certainly hope you have criticism of the book, but collect and save the criticism for class discussion. In this respect, the statement also departs from the standard book review.

---

² Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 103.