

# HISTORY 221: BIOGRAPHY IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD DRAFT SYLLABUS

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Office Hours: TBA



John Singleton Copley, the greatest American painter of the eighteenth century, fled his Boston home for England during the American Revolution. Marie de l'Incarnation, a French nun, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1639 to evangelize American Indians in New France (present-day Canada). Njinga, a powerful African queen, waged war against Portuguese colonizers and their African allies in Angola during the seventeenth century, outmaneuvering male rivals to the throne and frustrating her enemies. This class will introduce you to the lives and times of these people, and of many others who inhabited the Atlantic world. It will also introduce you to the craft of writing history through biography.

## Course Description

This is a course about a certain type of historical writing: Biography. Biographers write histories of human lives. Because their works are narrative and often read like novels, biographers tend to enjoy a wide readership—and sometimes are disdained by scholars who consider biography to be at odds with the conventions of other kinds of historical writing. But biography is not fiction; biographers' standards of evidence are identical to those of the historian. As Virginia Woolf put it, "The novelist is free; the biographer is tied." In this class, we will learn the principles of life-writing and how the craft has changed over time. Together we will grapple with the kinds of questions that confront biographers: Which lives are worth writing? How do biographers effectively situate their subjects in context? By what means can scholars write life stories of people who have left few sources? What principles govern the relationship between biographers and those about whom they write?

This is also a course about a time and a place: The Atlantic world. “The Atlantic world” is the shorthand that historians use to describe the world created by the coming together of Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans from the sixteenth century—when European expansion into the Atlantic basin began in earnest—through the eighteenth century, when revolutions in the region signaled the beginning of the end of Europe’s imperial power in the Americas. We will learn about this vast region through the prism of individual lives, examining, for instance, a Native woman who played a crucial role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, a naturalist from Amsterdam who traveled with her daughter to the Americas on a scientific mission, and a West African man who arrived in Georgia enslaved but managed to escape to New England, where he became an anti-slavery activist.

Thinking about the craft of life-writing and considering the Atlantic context of the biographies we read will prepare you for the final third of the semester, in which you will research and write your own biographical paper on an Atlantic subject of your choosing.

### **Objectives:**

I have four main objectives for this course:

1. I want you to understand the history of biography and the special challenges that face historians who practice the craft of life-writing, as well as the advantages that come with writing in the genre.
2. I want to expose you to some of the most important themes of Atlantic history through the lives of the people we read about: themes such as migration, colonization, race, slavery, indigeneity, gender and family, labor and economy, religion, and politics.
3. I want you to practice doing what historians do—asking questions about the past and answering them using primary sources—as well as what biographers do: rendering lives for their readers.
4. Finally, I want you to become captivated by the past. I’ll do my best this semester to help you envision times and places so unfamiliar to you that you cultivate a deep fascination with worlds beyond your own. History should never be boring!

### **Format:**

This course will meet on Thursdays from 3:30 to 5:25 in Humanities 2611. Attendance is required. Since we have only one meeting each week, missing a seminar session is equivalent to missing an entire week of the class. Students who miss more than one seminar meeting over the course of the semester will see a reduction in their participation grade.

### **Reading:**

For the first two-thirds of the semester, your reading assignment each week will consist of approximately one book a week. You will not be able to fully grasp or appreciate these books if you speed through them, so you will need to plan your time accordingly.

We will read the following seven books in full:

Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*

Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*

Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*

Linda M. Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*

Jane Kamensky, *A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley*

Randy J. Sparks, *Africans in the Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives across the Atlantic World*

All other readings will be available in our course reader. Both the texts above and the course reader will be on reserve in College Library.

### **Computer Policy:**

I ask that you refrain from using computers during our seminar. The temptation to get distracted by things that are not related to class is simply too great. I promise that you'll get far more out of this course if you use just a pen and a pad of paper. Cell phones should be silenced and put away. (If you are a McBurney student who needs accommodation, please come talk to me.)

### **Disability Statement:**

UW-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. If you need accommodations, please let me know by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. I will work either directly with you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

### **Academic Integrity:**

UW-Madison takes academic integrity very seriously, and no academic misconduct will be tolerated in this course. Academic misconduct can assume many forms, so make sure you know what it is and how to avoid it. (See <https://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity/>)

### **Grading Scale:**

A (92.50+); AB (87.50-92.49); B (82.50-87.49); BC (77.50-82.49); C (69.50-77.49); D (60-69.49); F (Below 60)

## **Illness Policy:**

I get it—we all come down with something from time to time. But if you would like accommodations due to illness, you must have a note from a medical professional. So please remember to ask whomever treats you (nurse, doctor, etc.) for one.

## **Requirements:**

Course attendance and participation: 30%

Please come to class ready to engage with the material, your peers, and me. I expect you to read carefully, think through the assigned material prior to coming to class, and participate actively.

Discussion Leader: 5%

In addition to participating in all discussions, each student will help facilitate our discussion once during the “Reading Lives” portion of the semester. The week you lead discussion, you will be responsible for posting on the discussion board by Monday night a series of questions to guide our Thursday discussion. You will also open and direct our discussion on Thursday afternoon. (Depending on enrollment, you may co-lead seminar with a classmate or two.)

Discussion Board Contributions: 5%

For each of the “Reading Lives” weeks, you will respond to a question posted by the discussion leader on our discussion board. Your response should be a well-developed paragraph. If you think of a useful question that the discussion leader did not post, you are welcome to post the question and your answer to it.

Short Papers: 30%

You will write three five-page papers over the course of the semester. Each will be worth 10% of your final grade. These will be graded according to how deeply they engage with the sources at hand, how effectively they argue a central thesis, and how carefully they follow the conventions of English grammar.

Final Paper: 30%

Your final biographical paper should be about 15 pages long. It will be assessed based on its effectiveness as a biography and its polish as a piece of prose, as well as the depth of the research that went into it.

## **Course Schedule:**

### **PART I: INTRODUCTION**

*January 25: Welcome and Introduction to the Course*

*Readings: none*

*February 1: What is History?*

*Readings:*

*Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives**

**February 8: What is Biography?**

Readings:

Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*

**February 15: The Idea of Biography**

Readings:

Thomas Carlyle, "Essay on Biography," *Fraser's Magazine*, 1832.

Arnold Rampersad, "Design and Truth in Biography," *South Central Review* 9 (1992): 1-18.

Kenneth Silverman, "Biography and Pseudo-Biography," *Common-place*, January 2003.

Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography [1939]," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.

Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," *The Wound and the Bow*, 1941.

Louis Menand, "Imitation of Life," *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2014.

Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," *Journal of American History*, 2001.

\*Assignment: your first paper, which will discuss the idea of biography in the above essays, is due at the beginning of class.

**PART II: READING LIVES**

**February 22: Malintzin, c. 1496-c. 1529**

Readings:

Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*

\*Assignment: Your second paper will discuss the storytelling and evidentiary strategies in any one of the books assigned between February 15 and March 22. It is due, at the latest, at the beginning of class on March 22.

**March 1: Njinga, c. 1583-1663**

Readings:

Linda M. Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*

**March 8: Glikl bas Judah Leib, 1646-1724; Marie de l'Incarnation, 1599-1672; Maria Sibylla Merian, 1647-1717**

Readings:

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*

**March 15: John Singleton Copley, 1738-1815**

Readings:

Jane Kamensky, *A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley*

**March 22: Elizabeth Cleveland, the Holman Family, Robert Johnson, and Dimmock Charlton**

Readings:

Randy J. Sparks, *Africans in the Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives across the Atlantic World*

*Spring Recess: March 24-April 1*

**PART III: RESEARCHING LIVES**

*April 5: Workshop—laptops welcome today*

*\*Assignment: Please bring to seminar a brief statement of your topic, as well as a list of some sources you have located.*

*April 12: Workshop—laptops welcome today*

*\*Assignment: Please bring to seminar a 250-word statement of your topic, an annotated bibliography, and a sample primary source.*

*April 19: Seminar*

*\*Assignment: Your third paper, a historiography, will assess the existing biographical and historical literature on your subject. It is due at the start of seminar.*

**PART IV: WRITING LIVES**

*April 26: Seminar*

*\*Assignment: Please bring to class the first 500 words of your final paper and an outline of the whole.*

*May 3: Student Presentations*

**\*\*Your final paper is due via email on May 11 at 5pm\*\***