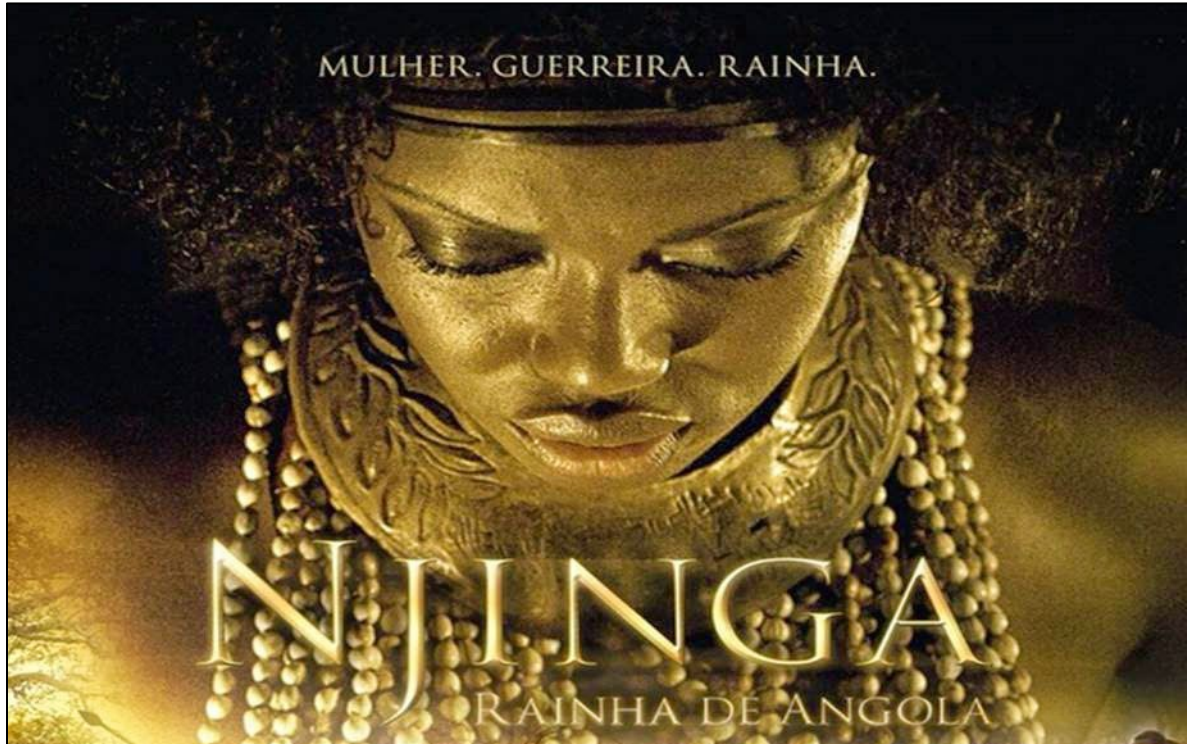


**Reading Seminar in History: Life Stories of the Undefeated**  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
HISTORY 500 (003): fall 2024, 3 credits



*Movie Poster about Queen Njinga of Angola, 1582-1663. Njinga reinvented herself repeatedly—and yet there were also real external limits on her individual autonomy. This is the story of the human condition: we have choices, we have limits, we live, and we die. Biography is the study of those choices, limits, life, and death.*

**MEETINGS:**

Wednesdays, 8:50-10:45 (5257 Humanities Building)

**INSTRUCTOR:**

Paul Grant - [pgrant@wisc.edu](mailto:pgrant@wisc.edu) 5212 Humanities - Office hours: Tuesdays, 9-11 and by appointment.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Biography is a way of evaluating individual human lives. This course explores the genre through books on early modern African elite individuals in their contexts, examining the choices biographers have made and the ethical implications of those choices. We analyze the complex relationship between global forces (European expansionism), local dynamics (contemporary politics), and individual particularities (character strengths and weaknesses). By studying life stories in this way, you will grow better at understanding human experience in its global, historical contexts, interpreting contemporary events and assumptions in light of the past, and learning how to understand others, despite differences.

Your main project will be to write a proposal for a hypothetical multi-year biographical research project.

**Canvas Course URL:** <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/414821>

### **This course in UW-Madison context:**

**Catalog Description.** Advanced exploration of selected topics, featuring small group discussion and intensive engagement with historical materials.

**Requisites.** *History 201 or Junior Standing*

**Course Designations and Attributes.** *Gen Ed - Communication Part B; Breadth – Humanities; Level – Advanced; L&S Credit - Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S.*

**Instructional Modality.** Live in classroom. Attendance required.

**Credits.** This is a 3-credit course. The credit standard is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled instruction, student meeting times during my office hours, reading, writing, library excursions, and other student work as described in the syllabus.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

As the capstone course for the certificate in history, this advanced reading seminar aims to develop you as a future public intellectual—to send you out into the world competent to apply the historian's craft to your public life.

Content Knowledge:

- The genres of biography—how authors plan and develop their books; understanding how authorial intent shapes biography.
- The ethics of biography—what values are implied in the genre.
- Early modern Africa at the onset of European expansionism.
- Relationship between global forces and local particularities in all of the above.

Skills:

- Research planning for book-length, multi-year historical projects.
- Reading at multiple scales (the narrative, the sources, the author's and translators' decisions).
- Orally communicating assessments of complex texts.
- Assessing complex texts in writing.

### **REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS**

- Linda M. Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Harvard, 2019)
- John K. Thornton, *Afonso I, Mvemba A Nzinga, King of Kongo: His Life and Correspondence* (Hackett Publishing, 2023)
- Wendy Laura Belcher, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* (Princeton, 2015)
- Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Georgia, 2022)
- Additionally: we will read part one of Equiano's autobiography. Many versions are available, both online and in the library. Carretta's book is cross-referenced with Penguin's 2003 version.

### **ASSIGNMENTS and GRADING SCALE**

Grades are assigned on the basis of accumulation of points over the course of the term (up to 100; see below). In theory, each student could get an A (or could fail).

### Grading scale:

Fewer than 60 points = F; 60-70 = D; 70-77 = C; 78-82 = BC; 83-87 = B; 88-92 = AB; 93 or greater = A

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Workshops:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | 20%                   |
| <u>Components</u> (in-class assignments, no external prep needed):<br>Ten instances, each worth two points:                                                                                                                                                   | 20%                   |
| <b>Compositions:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 30%                   |
| <u>Components</u><br>Two essays, each submitted as a three-page comparative book review:<br>Queen Njinga and King Afonso (week 6)<br>Walatta-Petros and Olaudah Equiano (week 12)<br>Prospectus, roughly 2,000 words, for a book-length biography (due 12/15) | 10%<br>10%<br>10%     |
| <b>Oral Communication:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 30%                   |
| <u>Components:</u><br>Lead discussion once during semester—instructions in class<br>Present a biographical subject (week 7)<br>Present your prospectus (week 13; week 14 as backup)                                                                           | 10%<br>10%<br>10%     |
| <b>Participation:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | 20%                   |
| <u>Components:</u><br>Weekly seminar attendance and thoughtful participation:<br>Three required office hours visits, spread across the semester<br>Course Debriefing (group discussion)<br>Exit interview (office hours, exam week)                           | 12%<br>3%<br>2%<br>3% |

### ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS:

#### Reading

Your main task this semester is reading: four full biographies and several shorter texts. You will come to class prepared to discuss these texts.

#### Writing

You will write two 1,000 word essays, each in the format of a comparative book review. Take as a model Jennifer Szalai's *New York Times* review of Tiya Miles's biography of Harriet Tubman:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/26/books/review/night-flyer-tiya-miles.html>.

#### Research Planning

You will write a professional-level proposal for a hypothetical book-length biographical research project: a synopsis of your subject's life, description of the archival sources and how to get there, and a justification for the effort.

### **Workshops**

You will work over historiographical problems via ten in-class workshops. These are intended to

### **Discussion**

You will regularly articulate your ideas in front of others:

- Group process: part of your grade comes from your work at thoughtful interaction with your classmates, both written (peer reviews) and spoken (including thoughtful listening).
- You will take turns leading the conversation on the week's assigned readings.
- Public speaking: each student will present multiple times before the class, including twice on your term research proposal.
- Exit interviews. At the end of the term, each student will have an individual conversation with the instructor, ascertaining next steps, whether in historical research or career.

## **ADDITIONAL COURSE GUIDELINES**

**Microsoft.** Students are expected to use Microsoft Office (rather than Google or Apple), especially Word, and Teams. If you are not familiar with these professional tools, this is your opportunity to learn, but help is available upon request.

**Canvas.** Many, but not all, assignments are disseminated and graded in Canvas (see URL above). Do not plan your work according to the due dates in Canvas; most assignments will require offline work (such as library visits).

**Classroom Technology.** You should bring a computer to class. If you do not have one, you should check out a loaner from the library. At the same time, computers of any variety should remain closed unless we are working together. That is: take notes on paper.

**Attendance.** Aside from the unpredictable, students are expected to commit to full attendance and participation. To miss a single session is to miss an entire week.

**Generative Artificial Intelligence.** I expect open conversation about AI: with more practice and experience, the better our collective insights will become. Major breakthroughs in AI put an increased premium on user judgment. Artificial intelligence is potentially useful but is not without its risks, especially in its struggles with misleading information. In a nutshell: tell me what you are learning, how you are using AI, and what you observe as useful or not. Let us learn together.

**History Lab.** The History Lab is the Department of History's in-house writing center. Our graduate student staff offer expert, one-on-one advising on your History projects, both in-person and virtually. No matter your stage in the writing process—choosing a topic, conducting research, composing a thesis, outlining your argument, or revising your drafts—the History Lab staff will help you sharpen your skills and become a more successful writer. Visit our [website](#) to schedule an appointment with a Lab TA, or to find tips, guides, and other resources for all of your writing assignments.

**Academic Integrity.** By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the

integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary [sanctions](#) include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

**Late Work.** All assignments are due on the day indicated below (sometimes on paper, and sometimes online). All work submitted late without prior arrangement will receive a five-point grade reduction each day (e.g., an 85% grade would become an 80% after one day late).

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## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Week 1: The Big Picture**

Meeting: September 4

#### In-Class Work:

Distributed and discussed in class: Jennifer Szalai, “Who Was Harriet Tubman? A Historian Sifts the Clues,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2024:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/26/books/review/night-flyer-tiya-miles.html>.

#### Read (before next meeting):

Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola*, roughly first half.

### **Week 2: Biography and World History**

Meeting: September 11

#### Read (before next meeting):

Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola*, roughly second half.

#### Due (before next meeting):

Individual research conference #1 (Grant’s office, 5212 Humanities).

### **Week 3: Gender and the Biographical Subject**

Meeting: September 18

#### In-Class Work:

Workshop 1: Biography and creative nonfiction.

#### Read (before next meeting):

John Thornton, *Afonso*, first half of the biographical section

Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography.” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 129–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674921>.

### **Week 4: Biography and Emotion**

Meeting: September 25

#### In-class work:

Workshop 2: The biographer’s feelings about their subject.

Read (before next meeting):

John Thornton, *Afonso*, second half of the biographical section, plus Luis Madureira's preface to the translations.

### **Week 5: Pre-Planning Your Term Projects**

**No meeting Oct. 2**

Due (before next meeting):

Individual research conference #2 (Grant's office, 5212 Humanities)

### **Week 6: The Logic of Autonomous Individuality**

Meeting: October 9

In-class work:

Workshop 3: Individual Lives.

Due (in Canvas, by end of week):

Book Review 1 (Queen Njinga and King Afonso).

Read (before next meeting):

Wendy Belcher, *The Life of Walatta-Petros*, roughly first half.

### **Week 7: The Problem of Saints and Heroes**

Meeting: October 16

In-class work:

Present a Biographical Subject (details in Canvas)

Workshop 4: Inspirational Biography as History.

Read (before next meeting):

Wendy Belcher, *The Life of Walatta-Petros*, roughly second half.

### **Week 8: Changes in Moral Values**

Meeting: October 23

In-Class Work:

Workshop 5: Walatta-Petros and the Question of Sexuality.

Read (before next meeting):

Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, part one.

### **Week 9: Autobiography versus Biography**

Meeting: October 30

In-class work:

Workshop 6: The *Slave Voyages* database as source for biography.

Read (before next meeting):

Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African*, roughly first half.

### **Week 10: When the Evidence is Unclear**

Meeting: November 6

In-class work:

Workshop 7: Equiano's Origins

Due (before next meeting):

Individual research conference #3 (Grant's office, 5212 Humanities)

Read (before next meeting):

Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African*, roughly second half.

### **Week 11: Biography as Counter-Narrative to Rupture**

Meeting: November 13

In-class work:

Workshop 8: Social death and biography.

Read (for next meeting):

Free choice: work on your biographical subject.

### **Week 12: The Effervescence of Individual Life**

Meeting: November 20

In-class work:

Workshop 9: The peer review process.

Read (for next meeting):

Free choice: work on your biographical subject.

Due (in Canvas, by end of week):

Book Review 2 (Walatta-Petros and Olaudah Equiano)

Prepare: final research presentations in two weeks (after Thanksgiving recess); send 2-3 PowerPoint slides to Dr. Grant by 12/3.

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No Meeting November 27 (Thanksgiving)

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### **Week 13: Presentations**

Meeting: December 4

In-class work:

Final research presentations, including PowerPoint (2-3 slides).

Read:

Free choice: work on your biographical subject.

Write:

Term paper: final draft due end of next week: (hard copy + digital copy in Canvas)

**Week 14: Biography beyond Academia**

Meeting: December 11

Term paper: final draft due 12/15 in Dr. Grant's mailbox: (hard copy + digital copy in Canvas)

In-Class Work:

Workshop 10: Undergraduate Research at UW  
Group debriefing

**EXAM WEEK (No exam)**

Exit Interviews (individually, with Dr. Grant) (graded)