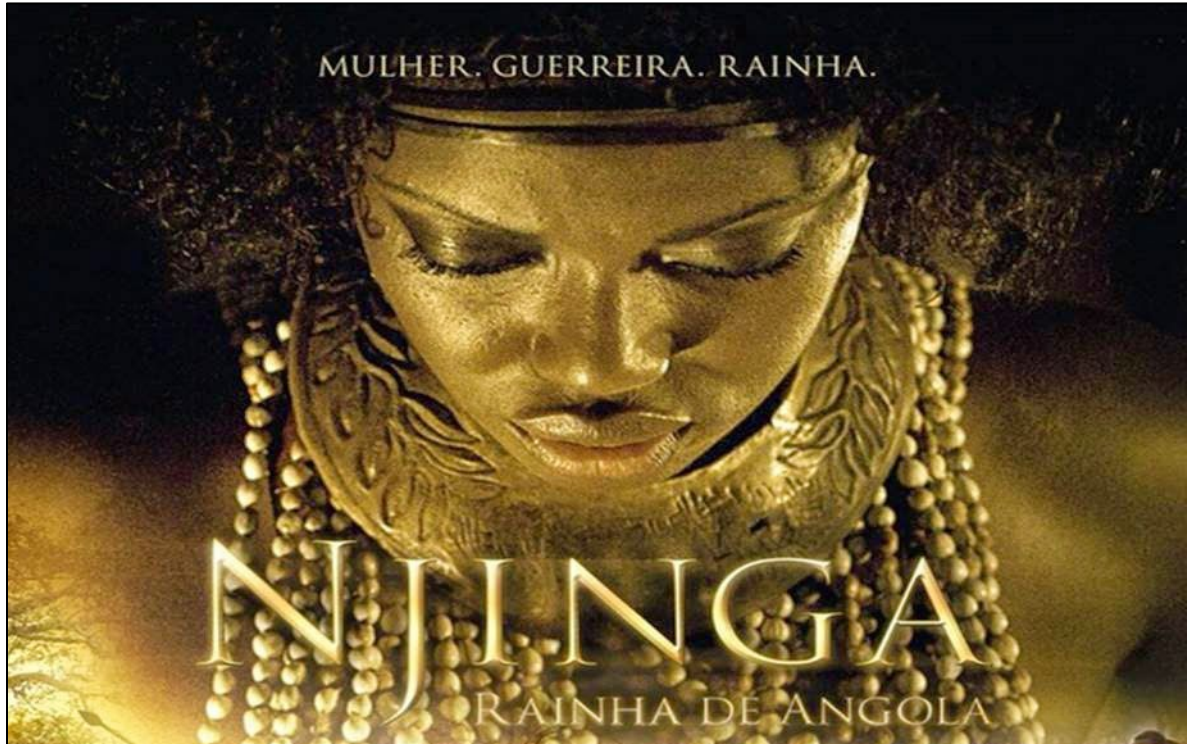


Reading Seminar in History: Biography—Methods, Ethics, and Theory
University of Wisconsin-Madison
HISTORY 500 (003): fall 2025, 3 credits



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 craft of narrating those choices in a person's life.

MEETINGS:

Wednesdays, 8:50-10:45 (5255 Humanities Building)

INSTRUCTOR:

Paul Grant - pgrant@wisc.edu 5212 Humanities - Office hours: Mondays, 11-1 and by appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Biography is a way of evaluating individual human lives. This course explores the genre through book-length case studies and methodological essays, examining the choices biographers have made and the ethical implications of those choices. We analyze the complex relationship between global forces, 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/470001>

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 history certificate, this 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 technical process of book proposals for academic publishers.
- 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.
- 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

- Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, 2nd edition (Bloomsbury, 2019).
- Cindy Schweich Handler, *A German Jew's Triumph: Fritz Oppenheimer and the Denazification of Germany* (McFarland & co, 2025).
- Linda M. Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Harvard, 2019).

Additionally:

- Percival Everett, *James* (Doubleday, 2024): the 2025 Go Big Read selection. Free vouchers available from Dr. Grant.

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

Workshops: 20%

Components (in-class assignments, no external prep needed):

Ten instances, each worth two points: 20%

Compositions: 50%

Components

Four compositions, each submitted as a three-page (750-1000 word) essay:

Review of Handler, *A German Jew's Triumph* (9/30): 5%

Linda Heywood's Methodology (10/21): 5%

Ethics in Biography (11/11): 5%

History and the Individual Life (12/9): 5%

Mock proposal, roughly 2,000 words, for a book-length biography

Research plan (due 10/14): 5%

First Draft (due 11/18): 5%

Final Version (due 12/12): 20%

Oral Communication: 30%

Components:

Weekly seminar attendance and thoughtful participation:

Thirteen instances, each worth 1%: 13%

Present your biographical research plan (week 7): 5%

Present your prospectus (week 14; week 15 as backup): 5%

Three required office hours visits, spread across the semester: 3%

Course Debriefing (group discussion): 1%

Exit interview (office hours, exam week): 3%

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS:

Reading

Your main task this semester is reading: three full biographies (two in common and one of your own selection), a methodological book, and several shorter texts. You will come to class prepared to discuss these texts.

Writing

You will write four short essays. The first is a book review (Take as a model Jennifer Szalai's *NYT* review of Tiya Miles's biography of Harriet Tubman: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/26/books/review/night-flyer-tiya-miles.html>); the other three are theoretical in nature.

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 generate conversation as we puzzle over methodological and ethical questions in biography.

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).
- Public speaking: each student will present multiple times before the class, including twice on your term research proposal.
- Research conferences: Three times during the semester, students will have individual conferences with Dr. Grant on their research plans. At the end of the term, each student will return for an exit interview, ascertaining next steps, whether in historical research or career.

ADDITIONAL COURSE GUIDELINES

Microsoft. Students are expected to use Microsoft Office (rather than Google), especially OneDrive, Word, and Teams. If you are not familiar with these professional tools, this is your opportunity to learn, but help is available upon request. Much of your written work will be shared through MS Office.

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. Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Microsoft CoPilot have, at best, only moderate value for the creation of historical knowledge. At worst, they impede its creation. Your task is to learn to tell the difference.

In this course, you will sharpen your skills as a researcher and writer, in particular by learning to pose compelling research questions and locate high-quality, reliable sources. By relying on AI tools too early in the research process, you short-circuit your ability to think creatively and expansively about which problems really interest you.

For these reasons, this course will adopt the following policy on generative AI:

- Distrust and Verify. Generative AI models are trained on whatever content we, humans, have posted on the internet. Thus, all AI-generated content is to be treated as worthless unless proven otherwise.

- Do the reading. This is hard work, and the rewards are not immediately apparent. The goal of these assignments is to build up your toolkit of research and analytical strategies, not to produce polished essays. Substituting AI for your own thinking would make these assignments superfluous.
- Revision. you are permitted to use AI tools such as Grammarly to polish your language after writing a draft. Please be aware that we will not deduct points for spelling or grammatical errors.

In the near future, the capacity for analytical thinking will separate leaders from followers. My purpose in setting these restrictions is to allow you the time and space to develop your own independent voice as a writer, making you a more discerning user of AI in the future.

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).

COURSE SCHEDULE

Dates indicate assignments due.

Week 1: Introduction to Biography

Meeting: September 3

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>.

Due dates:

9/10: Read Cindy Schweich Handler, *A German Jew’s Triumph*, part I

Week 2: How Books are Made

Meeting: September 10

Workshop 1: the first person voice into the third (Fritz Oppenheimer’s diaries).

Due dates:

9/16: Individual research conference #1 (5212 Humanities).

9/17: Read Cindy Schweich Handler, *A German Jew’s Triumph*, part II

Week 3: Biography and World History

Meeting: September 17

Workshop 2: The peer review process

Due dates:

9/24 Read Cindy Schweich Handler, *A German Jew's Triumph*, part III

Week 4: Autonomous Individuality

Meeting: September 24

Workshop 3: Big Men and Nobodies

Due dates:

9/30: Essay 1: Review of Handler, *A German Jew's Triumph* (Canvas).

10/1: Read Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola*, roughly first third

Week 5: Slavery and Biography

Meeting: October 1

Workshop 4: Life Stories from aggregate data (Slave Voyages Database)

Due dates:

10/7: Individual research conference #2 (5212 Humanities)

10/8: Read Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola*, roughly second third

Week 6: A Conversation with an Author

Meeting: October 8

Guest: Cindy Schweich Handler

Workshop 5: Comparing biographies in different media

Due dates:

10/14: Research Proposals Due (Canvas)

10/15: Read Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola*, roughly final third

Week 7: Imposing a Narrative

Meeting: October 15

Student presentations: your research proposals

Due dates:

10/21: Essay 2: Linda Heywood's methodology

10/22: Read open choice biography, roughly first third

10/22: Read 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>.

(This will form the foundation for next week's workshop).

Week 8: Biography and Emotion

Meeting: October 22

Workshop 6: The biographer's emotions and their subject.

Due dates:

10/29: Read open choice biography, roughly second third.

10/29: Read first paragraph of chapter one of Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (Canvas).

(This will form the foundation for next week's workshop.)

Week 9: Autobiography versus Biography

Meeting: October 29

Workshop 7: Did Equiano tell a lie?

Due dates:

11/4: Read first two chapters of Everett Percival, *James*.

(Will form the foundation for next week's workshop.)

11/4: Everett Percival lecture, Union South (7:00 p.m.);

Attend if possible; write Dr. Grant in advance if you cannot.

11/5: Read open choice biography, roughly final third.

Week 10: Truth and Imagination

Meeting: November 5

Workshop 8: imagination in biographical writing

Due dates:

11/11: Essay 3: Ethics in biography

11/11: Individual research conference #3 (5212 Humanities).

11/12: Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, chapters 1-2.

Week 11: Memory and Biography

Meeting: November 12

Workshop 9: Oral history

Due dates:

11/18: First draft of book proposal (OneDrive)

11/19: Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, chapters 3-4.

Week 12: The Problem of Saints and Heroes

Meeting: November 19

Workshop 10: Inspirational biography.

12/2: send 2-3 PowerPoint slides to Dr. Grant for final presentation.

12/3: read Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, chapters 5-6.

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No Meeting November 26 (Thanksgiving)

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Week 13: Student Presentations

Meeting: December 3

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

Due dates:

12/9: Essay 4: History and the Individual Life

Week 14: Translating a Life's Lessons

Meeting: December 10

In-class work: Group debriefing

Due dates:

12/12: Term paper: final draft due: (hard copy + digital copy in OneDrive)

EXAM WEEK (No exam)

Due dates:

12/17: Exit interviews (individually, with Dr. Grant)