

History 900: Introduction to History for U.S. Historians

Fall 2025
Thursdays, 1:20-3:15
Mosse Humanities 5257

Instructor:

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Office hours: 1:30-3:30 Tuesdays, or by appointment

History 900 surveys the history and historiography of the United States from the pre-Revolutionary era through the recent past. This is not a comprehensive survey by any means, nor could it be in such a short period of time. Rather, my hope is that you will find in the readings that we do a sense of some major texts, debates, and groundbreaking work that has animated the professional study of U.S. history in a range of different subfields. Some of the texts we will read are considered classics in their respective fields; others are almost brand new. We will approach these texts with an eye toward not just evaluating the authors' content and arguments, but also their methods and how they frame their interventions into their respective subfields. You will hopefully find such evaluations useful from the practical standpoint of learning and sharpening your tools as a historian, and ideally will find pieces of intellectual inspiration along the way for your own work, too.

Speaking of sharpening the historians' tools, you will do a number of practical assignments this semester that will help you prepare for what lies ahead within and beyond the program. These include writing précis for some of the books we will read; familiarizing yourself with the art of the book review; co-leading a seminar session; and writing an essay at semester's end covering a selection of recent, important books within your own subfield that will hopefully serve as a springboard as you begin work on your master's theses and comprehensive exams.

The course is also an opportunity for you to familiarize yourself with some of the particulars of the U.S. History field and prepare you for success in it. Due to curricular changes, the professionalization aspect of this course is not as central as it used to be – History 701 is more the venue for that for all early-career graduate students in our department now. However, there are things about the U.S. field that are particular to it, and I am happy to give some space to discussions related to those particulars and/or other questions concerning professionalization. Please just ask if you do have such questions. I am happy to demystify anything that I can.

Learning Outcomes:

- Analyze and identify different theories, methods, and approaches in US/North American history
- Examine and contextualize the historiographical trends in US/North American history
- Evaluate and synthesize large bodies of scholarship
- Communicate complex ideas in a clear and understandable manner
- Recognize and apply established principles of ethical and professional conduct

Course Credit Information: The credit standard for this 3-credit course 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 or 9 hours per week), which include regularly scheduled meeting times (group seminar meetings of 115 minutes per week), reading, writing, individual consultations with the instructor, and other student work as described in the syllabus.

Class meeting format: This class meets weekly for 115 minutes. Barring anything unforeseen, all meetings are in-person with the exception of October 9. That day, we will meet via Zoom because I need to be in Los Angeles for the Urban History Association conference.

Requisites: There are no prerequisites for this course besides having graduate standing and having the instructor's consent to enroll.

Course Designations: Graduate Attribute

Grading:

- Seminar attendance and participation: 25%
- Seminar co-lead: 10%
- Précis: 25% (5x5% each)
- Book reviews: 10% (2x5% each)
- Review-of-the-reviews: 10%
- Final essay: 20%

Grading scale:

A: 90% or higher

AB: 80-89%

B: 79% or lower

Assessments:

Seminar attendance and participation: There is no more central aspect of a graduate seminar than discussions within the seminar space itself. Within these four walls, we as a group will work collectively to understand a given text's core arguments and interventions, assess the author's methodologies, and locate it within the larger sweep of the historiography of the United States and the subfields within which it sits. I want to emphasize here the importance of collaboration and non-competitiveness. This is not an intellectual battle royale but rather a place for constructive conversation. I also want to emphasize that this is not an instructor-centric exercise. My role is as resource, fellow participant, and moderator as needed, but I should not be the center around which our discussions revolve.

- After each seminar, I assess the quality of each students' participation for that day by asking myself who demonstrated mastery of the book's arguments, who offered the most insightful comments, who had thought clearly about the book's place within the larger sweep of the subfield of which it is part, who steered us back on course if things were getting off track, and who took intellectual risks by offering useful thoughts that may have cut against the way many other readers interpreted the book.

Seminar co-lead: On that note, and as an effort both to decenter myself but also help you sharpen your skills, each student will co-lead one of our seminar sessions. Your responsibilities as co-leader include the following:

- Meet with me by Noon on the Wednesday before our seminar meets to go over your plan for Thursday. You should arrive at that meeting having finished the book, made extensive notes about it, looked up information about the author, and formulated questions for discussion about the book. These meetings need not be long but they are important to make sure that we are on the same page. These meetings can happen during my Tuesday afternoon office hours, or outside of them if those don't work for you. (Outside of office hours may need to happen via Zoom.)
- By 6:00 PM the Wednesday evening before our seminar meets, email the class with a list of at least five questions that can help steer our discussion. Rarely should these be content questions. Rather, they should be questions about the broader approaches, arguments, methods, and interventions deployed by the author in the making of the book.
 - TO THOSE NOT CO-LEADING THAT WEEK: you will need to read these questions and take notes about your responses to them before our seminar meets on Thursday. These are your prompts to ensure a lively and prepared discussion.
- Co-lead will begin the Thursday session by offering the class an introduction to the author and where the book in question sits within the broader arc of their career. (Note that in some cases we are dealing with recent first books, and in some cases we are dealing with authors who have published multiple path-breaking works. It's going to vary.) Co-lead will then offer an overview of the book and introduce the first of their questions, going from there. I will jump in to offer further historiographical context as needed.
- When I think about assessing someone's job co-leading, I ask myself first and foremost how effectively they fostered conversation: were the questions they posed productive and insightful? Did they do an effective job limning the book and describing how they understand its significance?
 - I of course know that sometimes a seminar meeting can be anemic through no fault of the co-lead, and will use my subjective judgement in such cases.

Précis: Students will write précis for five books over the course of the semester. A précis is not the same as a book review. Whereas a book review asks you to make an evaluative judgement about a book, a précis is a precise summation of the book: what its thesis is, what its supporting claims are, what the author intends its intervention to be, and what primary evidence they base it all on. Précis should be no longer than 500 words and must not include block quotes or footnotes. You may decide which five books to do these précis for over the course of the semester. It may make strategic sense to choose the five books that you think would be most likely to eventually appear on lists for your comprehensive exams – in other words, those most closely aligned with fields of your interest. These will serve as handy reference tools for those exams and in general going forward so that you don't have to fully re-read a book in order to remember what it's about.

- You may NOT do a précis the same week you are co-leading.
- Précis will be due via Canvas by 9:00 PM the evening before seminar sessions.
- When I am assessing a précis, I ask myself if the student has evinced that they read the whole book and has understood the core arguments and contributions.

Book Reviews: Beyond those for which you are writing précis, students will write reviews of two more books from our readings list. The book review is related to the précis, but is a more fleshed-out and evaluative exercise. In addition to summarizing the book and its core arguments, a book review also considers the book's strengths and weaknesses. This is not a venue for doing extensive comparison between books; make sure you're assessing the book on its own merits. On that note and to take an example, bear in mind that our first book, Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, was published 50 years ago this year. Try to understand its contributions as they existed when the book arrived in 1975, not channeled through our 2025 lens. Book reviews should be roughly 800 words, and similarly not include block quotes or notes.

- You may NOT do a book review the same week you are co-leading.
- Reviews will be due via Canvas by 9:00 PM the evening before seminar sessions.
- You may NOT do your first book review until you've done at least two précis, as there is an element of scaffolded learning involved here.
- I **highly** encourage you to read some book reviews in journals like the *Journal of American History* or *American History Review* before you take your first stab at this exercise. Both of them are available digitally through UW Library.
- When I am assessing a book review, I ask myself some of the same questions I ask as when I'm reading a précis. I expand it, though, to gauge the rigor of evaluative assessment that the reviewer has applied to the task. Do the assessments carry muster, or do they evince a misunderstanding of the book? Are the critiques fair and constructive?

Review of the reviews: This is an exercise I have not done before but one that I am borrowing from my colleague, Professor April Haynes. Here is how Professor Haynes explains it (shared with her permission): "This essay surveys the reception of a book within a few years of its publication as a first step toward assessing its historiographical impact. Each student in the seminar will write and briefly present on the reviews of one of our assigned readings. The essay should be 3 pages long (800 words max) and cover three to five reviews published in significant scholarly journals. It should identify common themes and areas of disagreement across the reviews and indicate whether you think the book has been fairly treated, whether any ethical questions about the reviewing process seem evident, and offer any predictions you might be willing to hazard about the longevity of the book's influence.

- When considering a review of the reviews, I ask: Has this writer read and understood the book under discussion? Have they accurately summarized the reviewers' conclusions? Have they persuasively synthesized the book's reception? Have they engaged critically with the reviewers about the book's merits and shortcomings?"
- You may NOT do a review-of-the-reviews the same week you are co-leading.
- Review-of-the-reviews will be due via Canvas by 9:00 PM the evening before seminar sessions.
- You may NOT do your review-of-the-reviews until you've done at least one book review.

Final Essay: For your final essay, you will write an abbreviated state-of-the-field essay for your chosen field. Select four to five recently published books in your field and craft an essay that puts

them into conversation. (Do not include among the 4-5 any books that we have discussed in seminar.) By “put them into conversation” I don’t mean that every book is going to necessarily speak directly to one another, but rather that, taken together, they should help establish a sense of the recent intellectual trajectory of the field. You will need to combine elements of the skills built while doing the précis and review exercises as you do this, in that you will need to offer some summative and evaluative assessments of all the books as you also frame them as part of a larger conversation. Ask yourself such questions as: What are major emergent themes? Are there new directions that the authors claim to be taking the field? Are there major points of agreement or disagreement? Do you get a sense of new directions the field is heading based upon these recent books? Do you get a sense of new directions the field *should* head, or *could fruitfully* head?

- These essays should be 8-10 pages long (double-spaced, standard font and font size, standard margins).
- You may choose your own books for this exercise if you feel confident in doing so, but this is also an opportunity for you to consult with your advisor or other faculty members if you wish.
- When I assess these essays, I ask myself if the writer has shown a clear understanding of the books under discussion, and has placed them effectively within a larger historiographic conversation with one another. If someone unfamiliar with the field were to read the essay, would they come away with a sense of where the field sits? Would they understand the points of convergence and departure in terms of the topics of study, questions, and methods? Does the essay offer useful insights into potential future areas of study?
- Final essays are due by 11:59 PM on Monday, December 15.

Summary of work to be done: To put this all in one place, over the course of the semester and not including the final essay (which is due during finals week), you will write five précis, two book reviews, one review-of-the-reviews, and will co-lead one week. Because none of these may overlap, this means that you will be turning in (or planning a co-lead) for NINE of the eleven weeks beginning in week 2. As noted above, you must write at least two précis before you do your first book review, and you should not plan to do the review-of-the-reviews until you have written at least one of your own book reviews. Beyond that, you may choose your own workload adventure. Just make sure you’re meeting all the requirements.

You will note that as a matter of math, this means that you will have two weeks beginning in week 2 in which you do not need to either co-lead the discussion or turn in any written work. You are still expected to fully read that week’s text and contribute as normal to discussions during those weeks.

Statement on the use of AI: The use of artificial intelligence (AI) for any assignment in this class will be considered an act of academic dishonesty and will result in a) failure of the course and b) reporting to the Director of Graduate Studies and the student’s advisor.

Course Texts: The readings for the semester may be found in the course calendar below. You will note that almost all the texts are available online through UW Library if you’re OK reading on the computer. The exceptions (read: books you’ll need to acquire) are Morgan (Sep. 11), D’Emilio & Freedman (Oct. 30) and Ansfield (Nov. 20). Ansfield’s book just came out, so it’s possible that by November, we will have online access; we do not as of the time of me writing this syllabus.

Course Calendar

September 4: Introductory Matters

Readings:

- Sample historiography paper
- Walter Johnson, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice," *Boston Review*, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world/>
- Choose one of the responses to Johnson's article and read it. Which one you choose is up to you.

Questions to consider before class (no writing due):

- What makes the historiography I shared with you a model? In other words, what are its core strengths relative to how you understand what historiography is supposed to look like?
- What are Johnson's key arguments in his *Boston Review* article?
- What are the key points made by the author in the response you've selected, and how do they work in conversation, agreement, or tension with Johnson's?

September 11: The Founding

Reading:

- Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (Norton, 1975)
 - *Note that there are multiple versions of this book. It doesn't matter which you get.
- Précis (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 9/10 via Canvas.

September 18: Race and Citizenship

Reading:

- Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, 2018)
 - *Note: digital copies available online via UW Library
- Précis (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 9/17 via Canvas.

September 25: Gender, Race, and Material History

Reading:

- Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (Random House, 2021)
 - *Note: digital copies available online via UW Library
- Précis or book review (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 9/24 via Canvas.

October 2: Native History

Reading:

- Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Harvard, 2008)
 - *Note: digital copies available online via UW Library
- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 10/1 via Canvas.

October 9: Conquest and Carcerality

Reading:

- Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (UNC Press, 2017)

*Note: digital copies available online via UW Library

***OUR SESSION THIS WEEK WILL BE HELD VIA ZOOM**

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 10/8 via Canvas.

October 16: Borders and Illegality

Reading:

-Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004)

*Note: digital copies available online via UW Library

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 10/15 via Canvas.

October 23: NO CLASS MEETING

Take this week to identify, locate, and begin the books you are going to use for your final essay.

Please also note that the book for next week is pretty long if you want to get a head start.

October 30: Sex and Sexuality

Reading:

-John D'Emilio & Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Third Edition: Chicago, 2012)

*Note: please make sure you have the third edition, as it includes new chapters that update the original. UW Library does NOT have the third edition available digitally.

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 10/29 via Canvas.

November 6: Queer History

Reading:

-George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Basic, 1994)

*Note: digital copies available online via UW Library

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 11/5 via Canvas.

November 13: Urban History

Reading:

-Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996)

*Note: digital copies available online via UW Library

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 11/12 via Canvas.

November 20: Crisis and Capitalism

Reading:

-Bench Ansfeld, *Born in Flames: The Business of Arson and the Remaking of the American City* (Norton, 2025)

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 11/19 via Canvas.

November 27: Thanksgiving Break

December 4: The Rise of the Far Right

Reading:

-Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard, 2018)

*Note: digital copies available online via UW Library

- Précis, book review, or review-of-the-reviews (if doing) due by 6:00 PM on 12/4 via Canvas.

FINAL ESSAY DUE BY 11:59 PM ON MONDAY, 12/15