Objectives

The major objectives of this seminar are (a) to introduce graduate students to some of the major recent problems and questions in the field of nineteenth-century American history; (b) to learn to identify the historiographical issues that recent works of scholarship address and connect their individual arguments to larger debates in the field.

The second goal is arguably more important than the first. It would be impossible in a semester-long course to provide an exhaustive survey of historiography on the nineteenth-century United States, so you should not consider the list of readings for this course comprehensive for this field. For example, the reading list this semester tilts away from the early republic towards the Civil War and its aftermath.

Instead of covering everything, my objective is to help you learn how to familiarize yourself with the historiography in a new field; there will always be new material to catch up with, so what you need are the skills to identify major questions and get a lay of the land, regardless of the specific topic.

Assignments

All seminar participants will be assigned two historiographical essays from the list provided at the end of this syllabus. On the days in the schedule marked for “Presentations,” you will give a presentation to the class about your article to help your fellow students get up to speed on the debates discussed therein.

You will also create a one-page handout (front-and-back) to distribute to your peers, which should include a short overview of debates in the field, including a summary of major authors and positions, and a list for further reading. A draft of these handouts is due to me 48 hours before
your presentation, so that I can suggest any changes. The week before the presentation, you will also have a chance to meet with me one on one to talk about the article and plan your handout.

We will devote more time in class to talking about these presentations. Below are some questions you should consider as you read your assigned article:

- What is the main historical question addressed?
- What have been the main answers that historians have given to that question in the past?
- What are the remaining “live” debates over the main historical question?
- What is the author’s own position on what needs to be done now, and why?
- What books or articles would someone most need to be read in order to get a handle on the major positions in those debates?
- Are there any new historical questions or methods arising from this field that need more attention?

For the remainder of the weeks on the schedule, we will all be reading a recent book on nineteenth-century American history and discussing it in class. The focus will be on positioning the work in relation to the debates you have presented on, as well as analyzing the book and seeing how its arguments, methods, and sources work. Before each of these weeks, you should send me an email with a brief (500 words) response to the book by noon on the day of class. We will be talking more in class about how to approach these assignments.

The final assignment for the semester is to write a more formal, 12-15 page (double spaced) historiographical essay. I’m open to different topics for these papers, but they should be in some way inspired by questions or readings that we’ve done this semester. The best approach might be to expand one of your presentation handouts into an argument-driven essay, using the articles you’ve read as a model for how to develop a historiographical argument.

Your grade will be based on a holistic evaluation of your work on all of the assignments. I will follow the grading guidelines provided in the official graduate handbook for the history department:

The grade of (A) indicates outstanding work; (A-) good work; (B+) work with potential that needs improvement; (B), work that, however competent, lacks originality or promise; (B-), unsatisfactory work which falls short of acceptable graduate standards; and (F) or (U) failure due to insufficient, incomplete, or late work.

**Schedule of Readings**

**August 23**

Please read these articles before coming to class:

- W. E. B. DuBois, “The Propaganda of History,” from *Black Reconstruction* (PDF provided)
August 30

NO GROUP MEETING: One-on-one meetings with Dr. McDaniel

September 6

Presentations

September 13


September 20


September 27

NO GROUP MEETING: One-on-one meetings with Dr. McDaniel

October 4

Presentations

October 11

Matt Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire* (Harvard, 2016)

October 18

Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause* (Yale, 2016)

October 25


November 1

November 8
Martha Jones, Birthright Citizens (Cambridge, 2018)

November 15
Stacey Smith, Freedom’s Frontier (UNC, 2015)

November 22 (NO CLASS)

November 29
Kelly Lytle Hernandez, City of Inmates (UNC, 2017)
You should also turn in a draft or outline of your final paper.

December 12
Final papers due by 5 p.m.

Article List


Seth Rockman, “What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?” *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2014), 439-466


