

HIST 2302
Course Syllabus
Artists and the American Revolution:
History, Fiction, and Film

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As a working historian I once described myself as “nailed to the earth with footnotes and bibliographies.” Artists who are drawn to the past for their subject matter do not have such limitations. They are free to let their imaginations run. Except for documentary filmmakers, they can create characters who never existed, take liberties with characters who did exist, allow those characters to do things that clearly never happened (such as repeatedly bursting to song in *1776* or the current Broadway hit *Hamilton*), and create dialogue, plot and relationships. This course will look at how writers and artists have imagined the founding era of the American Republic. Emphatically, it will *not* be about whether a novelist or filmmaker or painter was “right.” Instead we will explore the conventions that lie behind different ways of “presenting the past,” and how the artists (along with historians) have worked within those conventions to make sense of the time of the American founding. Musicals (*1776* and *Hamilton*), feature-film costume dramas, written fiction and poetry, history painting, strict filmic recreations, and conventional documentaries all present specific “ways of knowing.” So, of course, does normal history-writing. I want to explore these different ways of knowing in terms of one specific subject, the founding time of the American Republic.

Although this is a brand-new course, I bring several strengths to it. I’ll list them:

- Most fundamentally, I’ve spent my entire professional lifetime trying to understand revolutionary America. I’m still doing so, with a major book underway. I’m not going to inflict that book on students in this course, but I’ll say without fear of being contradicted that the set of events which we call the American Revolution was huge and transformative and that all sorts of people involved themselves, far beyond the conventional image of “the Founding Fathers.” I’ll also say without fear of contradiction that I bring as full a knowledge of the Revolution’s events and its problems as any scholar now working.
- I’m by no means the only person to think that way. Every one of the novelists, poets, painters, musicians, and filmmakers at whom we’ll be looking at has asked exactly the

same questions I have asked. For our purposes the interest is how they have addressed them.

- I have a lot of experience dealing with the inter-disciplinary problem of artists interpreting the American past. Much of it comes from a dozen years of experience at my previous campus (Warwick, UK) teaching a very successful course on Westerns as History and Myth. Before I took that course on solo, I learned the conventions of film study through two years of collaborating with one of the founders of the whole subject of film studies, the late Robin Wood. Working with him amounted to adding a whole graduate field to my repertoire. I've co-written one book in the field (a study of the great Western "Shane" for the British Film Institute "Film Classics" series), been a contributing editor and author for *The BFI Companion to the Western*, and have published film articles on subject as remote from one another as the "pantheon director" John Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk* (which will feature in this course) to John Wayne's rise during the 1950s from truly awful 1930s films made on Hollywood's "Poverty Row" studios to top rank stardom.
- I have a lot of experience with the eight-day J-Term format. I know how to pitch the material within what our time frame allows. I also know how to make a course like this *fun* as well as intellectually serious. This syllabus is not a condensation of a full-semester course. I've designed it specially for the Jan Term format.
- Finally, this is a course in cultural history in relation to how people "know" about it. It is *not* about whether a novelist, writer, or filmmaker got it "right." Instead it is about how such artists have sought to explore how such creative artists have sought to understand the significance and meaning of the events that have formed their raw material.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students will demonstrate knowledge of more than one disciplinary practice.
2. Students will explain how bringing more than one practice to an examination of the course topic contributes to knowing about that topic.

Both SLOs will be met in the three writing assignments. In all cases, students will approach the relevant works of art from both the conventions of artistic genre and criticism, and from the recognition that like historians the artists in question are engaged in representing the past through the artistic means available to them.

For SLO 1 the prime assignment is the first short essay. The work of art in question is Lawrence Hill's television production "The Book of Negroes," published originally as a lengthy novel. The historical resources consist of primary and secondary sources in print and on-line. One is Edmund S. Morgan's short mid-twentieth century history of the Revolution, *The Birth of the Republic*, which does not address the slavery/race issue. The second is my own *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era*, which confronts that problem head on with five narrative/interpretive chapters and primary material. One possible approach will be novelist

and filmmaker Lawrence Hill's use of dramatic ways to know about the Revolution in relation to the more conventional historical ways advanced by Morgan and Bailyn (whom I will *not* set up as "fall guys.") Another, given that my own book is in harmony with Hill will be to contrast the means of argument to which a historian must adhere with Hill's freedom of narrative and character creativity. The final "historical" source is a series of interviews with senior historians of the Revolution (including myself) conducted by the History Channel at a major international held at the University of Pennsylvania in 2013.

SLO2 will be assessed in the second short essay, by considering Hill's *Book of Negroes*, feature films by John Ford ("Drums Along the Mohawk") Hugh Hudson ("Revolution"), Roland Emmerich ("The Patriot"), and Peter H. Hunt ("1776") in relation to Lin Manuel Miranda's phenomenally successful *Hamilton* as modern-day cultural productions whose basis is American history.

The respective artists deal with the same fundamental problem, which is race and slavery in revolutionary America. As a serious historical topic that question did not exist half a century ago; now it does and there is considerable discussion among historians about it. Hill and Miranda address the same issue with artistic freedom; their artistic means differ, however. Hill employs the literary device of an invented point-of-view character in order to craft a coherent narrative that follows her life-cycle from girlhood in Africa through enslavement, liberation during the revolutionary crisis, migration to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, and eventually to old-womanhood in London advising abolitionists. Miranda casts black performers as the well-known American founders and by using rap to carry much of the story. The issue I will ask the students to confront is not whether either of the artists is "right" in his artistic choices but how the artistic freedom available to them enhances understanding of the American founding era in ways that go beyond the normal range of historians' interpretive possibilities. The 'knowing more about the topic' consists in knowing more about the contemporary cultural significance of the American origin story, which is a legitimate historical and cultural concern. It is worth noting that despite its power, Hill's book and accompanying film have not had the massive impact of Miranda's play. There is ample on-line commentary available for students to explore this dimension within the time frame of a Jan Term course.

Meeting both SLOs will be necessary for the longer projects due at the end of the term, but possibilities are more open. The projects will be 8 to 10 pages in length. The default position for the long essay will turn primarily on the artistic representations of the Revolution that will be used in class, including "Hamilton." All of are surrounded by significant sources on how the respective artists have understood and used historical sources in their productions. The criterion for grading the essay will be to show how the artists in question have understood "history" and attempted to use their understanding within the frameworks, possibilities, and genres of the artistic genres in which they are working. However I am open to other possibilities that can meet the KNW requirements, based on student proposals.

Grading Criteria:

Class participation 20%
Short Essays 15% each

Projects 50%

Required Reading:

Edward Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era*

Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic*

All other readings will be on-line via Canvas

Recommended Reading

Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes*

Emily Ballew Neff and Kaylin H. Weber, *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World*

All recommended reading on Fondren Reserve

Required Listening Outside Class Time

Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton* (Original Broadway Cast Recording)

Required Reading Prior to Class:

Edmund S. Morgan, *Birth of the Republic*, all; Edward Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era*, all.

Required Viewing Prior to Class:

Historians and Understanding the Revolution: <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-03/lovell/#.WHKqPX2uC2o>

Schedule of Classes

May 17

Morning

Course Business, Questions to Ask about a Revolution, based on Morgan, *Birth of the Republic*

Afternoon: Artists, Writers and the Meaning of the Revolution, based on history paintings from Benjamin West to Grant Wood and on short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne (“My Kinsman, Major Molyneux”) and Washington Irving (“Rip Van Winkle”), on Canvas

May 18

Morning

Practicum: making a historical documentary; script on Canvas; possible phone visit with filmmaker Gilles Carter

Afternoon

Screening: “Revolution”

Saturday, May 19 First Essay Due at Midnight, based on Morgan, Countryman, and “Revolution” Film

May 21

Morning

Race and Revolution: Somerset’s Case, Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation, George Washington and the Problem of Slavery, sources on Canvas

Afternoon

Race and Revolution: The Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, on Canvas

May 22

Morning

Screening: “The Book of Negroes,” Episodes 1-3

Afternoon

Screening: “The Book of Negroes,” Episodes 4-6

May 23

Morning

Screening: “The Patriot”

Afternoon

Screening: “Drums Along the Mohawk”

Evening assignment on Canvas: Edward Countryman, “John Ford’s *Drums Along the Mohawk: The Making of an American Myth*” and Herman Melville, “The Metaphysics of Indian Hating”

May 24

Morning

Screening: Production Material from *The Book of Negroes* and *The Patriot*

Afternoon: Discussion, How Have Film Makers Portrayed History?

May 25

Morning and Afternoon: Individual Conferences for Long Papers

Over the Weekend: Pre-Class Historical Readings on the Problem of “the Founders” on Canvas by Pauline Maier, John P. Roche, Gordon S. Wood, and David Waldstreicher, and work on papers; listen *several times* to the soundtrack of “Hamilton” on CD or MP3

Saturday, May 26 Second Short Essays Due at Midnight

May 28 Memorial Day

May 29

Morning

Screening, “1776”

Afternoon

The Hamilton Phenomenon in the light of all we have done

May 30 and June 1, Writing Days; I will be available in my office both days

Long Papers Due June 1, Midnight

Modes of Grading and Assessment

Grading and Assessment will be based on all three written assignments.

Course Requirements:

1. Class attendance and participation policy:

Class attendance is compulsory. *Every* class counts. Do not miss any. Failure to attend on a regular basis will result in an administrative drop or a decrease in the final grade. All students are expected to carry out the assignments for each class and to participate in all discussions. Continuing failure to do so will result in an administrative drop. Absence from a class is not an excuse for not being familiar with the material from that class if it is relevant to your answers on the mid-term and final exam.

2. Writing and Grading: My policy is to look for and reward improvement over a teaching period. A bad early grade will not count if subsequent grades rise. For normal purposes, class participation will count fifteen percent, the three short writing assignments will count fifteen percent each, and the individual projects will count forty percent.

3. Required notices:

First, if you have special needs, please notify me and supply documentation. I will help you. Second, I call your attention to the University's policy on plagiarism, as stated in the Student Handbook. If you have not yet read it, please go to this URL: http://www.smu.edu/studentlife/PCL_05_HC.asp. I will enforce the code in cases of suspected cheating. If you are in trouble, tell me and I will work with you. But do not try to pass off as your own the work of anybody else. The result will be an automatic fail and a report to the Honor Council.

I want this course to challenge and interest you. Most of all, I hope you will find it fun.