

## His 524 -- Lives Across the Lines: Biography and Social Change UNCG Dept. History, Spring 2015

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Dorthea Lange, Resettlement Administration photographer, in California,  
(b&w film copy neg. of print) cph 3c28944 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c28944>

This course examines how individuals experienced and sought to make dramatic social change in the twentieth century United States. We will trace many lines people crossed in pursuit of opportunity, justice, and survival. Color lines, regional lines, gender proscriptions, partisan and ideological lines, class and status hierarchies, boundaries etched by war and terrorism: in all these contexts, people challenged and crossed lines that limited and liberated their identities and communities. They did so in dense contexts of social support and coercive power. How did people maintain individual dignity and community security in the face of massive social change, and how did they organize to shape change? How did they survive economically in the process?

We will confront repeatedly the conundrums of choice and constraint, agency and structure. We will examine individual and organized efforts to stretch beyond the boundaries of inherited roles and norms. We will reckon with the inevitable limitations, as vested interests resisted change, and people confronted their own contradictions. Changing themselves and challenging society, people often replicated some of the worst features of what they were challenging. (As they sought to overturn hierarchies and proscriptions of race for example, activists often replicated hierarchies of gender; it worked the other way too).

One point of the course is to expose you to copiously researched, imaginatively written, award-winning history and literary non-fiction. (All but one won big awards in history and non-fiction). Another is to explore how narrative works as explanation, and how authors walk a fine line between rigorous historical method and imaginative non-fiction. Our books and articles will mix biography, collective biography, and contextual writing that is crafted to honor both scholarship and a search for wide readership. Reading, discussion, short papers, a targeted research assignment, and a synthetic take home final make up the course.

Each week I will endeavor to supply questions in advance (when time permits, so don't wait for me to discern the central issues and questions). Use these questions for your focus of discussion, writing, and research.

### **Learning Goals**

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Read strategically, with questions and a structural overview in hand *before* you wade into a biography.
2. Summarize and evaluate key developments and crucial turning points in narratives that encompass individual lives and large social changes.
3. Identify and explain the analytical problems embedded in biographical narratives. Discuss the strengths and limitations of narrative as a form of historical explanation.
4. Extract and deploy evidence from narratives to answer clear analytical problems, such as: the dilemmas ethnographers faced gaining access to and representing indigenous cultures; the strategies and limits of changing segregation through law; the dilemmas of advocacy and objectivity; the conundrums of understanding and changing society in an individualistic culture.
5. Define a focused research problem, locate and analyze secondary and primary sources, report findings coherently, concisely, and with thorough documentation.
6. Synthesize insights gained over a semester along the arc of a common problem defined in advance through brainstorming with peers and the professor.

### **Course Requirements:**

#### **Required Reading**

- Egan, Timothy. *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. [Bookstore bought the hard copy]
- Boyle, Kevin. *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. 1st edition. New York, N.Y.: Holt Paperbacks, 2005.
- Gordon, Linda. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- King, Gilbert. *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*. Reprint edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 2013.
- Jackson, Thomas F. *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Packer, George. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. Reprint edition. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

Satter, Beryl. *Family Properties: How the Struggle Over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America*. New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2010.

**NB:** Two hundred pages a week might seem daunting to some of you. There is a skill to reading narrative, where the “thesis” may not be readily available but the author’s point of view and social analysis is discernible. Turning points and life lessons are generally spelled out at some point. Book indexes show major and minor characters. Chronologies can be found or made. Reviews and author interviews can alert us to major themes or episodes that capture an author’s approach. That said, you might not want to know in advance how a life turns out, since the appeal and skill of a book often lies in drama, mystery, and ambiguous resolution.

**Preparation as Reflected in Class Participation. 40%.** The class will rise or fall on this. So much of functioning well as a historian is the ability to capture the gist of an argument, to be fair yet critical, and to be able to contribute to ongoing conversations in the field. So much time and work can be saved if you make this a group process. I ask each of you, as a professional, to stay on-topic, stay high-minded, limit anecdotes, and please refrain from “going negative” on a piece of scholarship, at least until we have a fair appreciation of an author's efforts and contributions. This is a colloquium, a collaborative enterprise. **Attendance:** You get one unexcused absence.

**“Main Themes-Response” Pieces. 20%.** These should be no longer than 300-400 words and posted on Blackboard by at least 4:30 p.m. each day of class, so I can read them and riff on them in class. You need not have finished the assignment to do this, and you can revise what you’ve written right up until the class. Please arrive at class having digested and *reflected* upon the material. I won’t read or count these if you submit them *after* class.

This assignment asks you to do two things: 1) In the first paragraph, paraphrase the author's major points or thesis, especially how *this* life reveals larger social movements or political dilemmas. History is a dialectic of particulars and contexts. Embedded in every narrative are issues of interpretation, analysis, authorial point of view, and historiography. You will often find historiographical footnotes or summary sections embedded in chapters that clue you into why an author chose to write the book. 2) In subsequent paragraphs, *respond* with your own critical evaluations. Don't *summarize* in detail. Rather, *assess* whether particular interpretations or points of emphasis are well supported. Or highlight particular episodes or statements that embody the central points of the book. Be more constructive than negative. Criticism of what an author *should* have looked at frequently obscures how they have interpreted what they *did* look at. Make analytical points, and always illustrate with a concrete example and page citation. Grand theorizing without reference to actual choices and experiences is discouraged. Grading scale: A, B, C and N/C (no credit).

**Research Paper (20%): Undergraduates: 8-10 pp. Graduates: 12-15 pp. Due exactly 17 days after we finish the book that sparked your research topic (that’s a Friday). A 1 pp. proposal with a working hypothesis and bibliography will be due 3 days after the reading that sparked the question. Start thinking and discussing with me now after I review the themes of each book during the first class.**

In consultation with me, *plan well in advance and heed suggestions*. Identify a specific problem or mystery pertaining to a principal or secondary character in a book. (Separate and non-related topics will not be approved). Delve deeper into the secondary scholarship and primary sources. Papers can rely

mainly on one or the other, but I'd like to see some of both. You might write about a decision that your chosen leader or activist made (such as whether Martin Luther King's acceptance of the Birmingham Agreement of May 10, 1963 was a "sell out" or a wise compromise). You might examine how events felt to contemporaries through news coverage and "framing" analysis (you could analyze the NAACP clippings file on the Ossian Sweet case, for example, which I have in digitized form from the NAACP Papers). You might choose to be more historiographical, tracing how different authors changed their assessments over time of a major figure. You might want to research a social context in which the players acted, such as the Southern criminal justice system after World War II, or California's migratory labor situation in the 1930s, or de-industrialization in the Carolina Piedmont, or how the Bureau of Indian Affairs suppressed of tribal rituals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Final Exam – Synthetic or Comparative Essay (20%): Undergraduates: 8-10 pp. Graduates: 12-15 pp. Due Tuesday, May 5 at 10 PM.**

Respond to a question that you and I agree upon in advance. The essay must be comparative and thematically coherent and draw on at least half the books. Examples: 1. The struggle for day-to-day survival lies in complex and unstable relationship with large plans for social change, or large projects of social representation. How have people balanced survival – their own and others' – with larger dreams? 2. Because of particular experiences, people redefine themselves against inherited expectations and assigned roles. How have their social relationships either supported or subverted these efforts at reinvention? 3. The world is rife with injustices that limit individual fulfillment and communal well-being. How do people learn about where injustice lies, challenge and change their understandings of how different injustices intersect, learn by trial and error about how to fight them? How did they struggle with being personally effective, while not losing focus, and without compromising personal relationships? 4. People grow through relationships, often of mentorship and inspiration, but come to question and even reject these models. What do they do when idols fall? 5. Everyone lives within a personal and shared ideology. But sometimes those values and pictures of the world clearly don't work. What do they do when old ways of doing things don't work?

I will schedule conferences with each of you 4 weeks before the end of the semester to make sure that your themes are coherent and that you are already collecting examples.

### **Schedule of Meetings and Due Dates**

**1/13: Introductions**

Optional but highly recommended: Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (Sep., 1998), pp. 439-465.

**1/20: Egan. *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher*, entire.**

In class assignment. ALL of Curtis' images have been digitized by the Library of Congress American Memory Project and Northwestern University Library.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/curthome.html>

Pick one to analyze in terms of its subject, social context of its production, and representational choices.

**1/27: Boyle. *Arc of Justice*, begin.**

**2/3: Boyle. *Arc of Justice*, finish.**

Remember, if you want to research some dimension of the Sweet case or Detroit in the 1920s or neighborhood conflict around segregation, you have 17 days from this day to hand in the paper.

**2/10: Gordon. *Dorothea Lange*, begin.**

Lange's Farm Security Administration photos are on line at the "Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog." <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/> Exercise TBA.

**2/17: Gordon. *Dorothea Lange*, finish.**

**2/24: King. *Devil in the Grove*, begin.**

**3/3: King. *Devil in the Grove*, finish.**

### **SPRING BREAK**

**3/17: Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, ch. 1-6.**

**3/24: Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, finish.**

**3/31: Satter. *Family Properties*, begin.**

**FYI:** To show how influential a piece of scholarship can be in re-framing a debate about race, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *Atlantic* (June 2014).

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

**4/7: Satter. *Family Properties*, finish.**

**4/14: Packer, George. *The Unwinding*, begin.**

**4/21: Packer, George. *The Unwinding*, finish.**