

## His 524 -- Lives Across the Lines: Biography and Social Change UNCG Dept. History, Spring 2016

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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 United States since the 1850s. 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. As people experiences and witnessed injustices in their own and related communities, they drew upon an American language of rights, on international traditions of political struggle and organizing, and on pictures of society as it might become. We will examine individual and organized efforts to stretch beyond the boundaries of these inherited or socially dominant roles and norms. We will reckon with some inevitable limitations: powerful vested interests resisted change, and people confronted their own contradictions. Changing themselves and challenging society, sometimes they replicated some of the

worst features of what they were challenging. (As they sought to overturn 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. (Most of these books 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. Telling good stories with vivid characters and thematic continuity sometimes involves making inferences on limited evidence.

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 detailed questions in advance (when I've read the book before and when time permits, but don't always wait for me to discern the central issues and questions). Use these questions for your focus of discussion, writing, and refining questions for your 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 waded 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: evaluating the role nonviolence and violence played in strategies of change in different contexts; understanding the strategies and limits of changing segregation through law; exploring the dilemmas of advocacy and objectivity in photography; making the case for societal change 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**

Elliott Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.  
Reynolds, David S. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. Reprint edition. New York: Vintage, 2006.

Boyle, Kevin. *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. New York, N.Y.: Holt, 2005.

Gordon, Linda. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

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, 2007..

Packer, George. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

**NB:** Two hundred pages a week might seem daunting to some. But many of these are page turners. I selected for readability. There is a skill to reading narrative, too, 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. You can preview chapters, get the main idea, and decide what sections may be skimmed, and others read. I will try to give guidelines in this respect (for example in *The Unwinding*, Packer organizes his narrative by characters, so I will designate certain students with primary responsibility for ensuring we understand those characters fully). Book reviews and author interviews can alert us to major themes or episodes that capture an author’s approach (but should not prejudice too much what we get out of a book, and be careful with the temptation to copy others’ framework of ideas or even words).. 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.

### **Weighted Requirements:**

**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 professionals, 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 Canvas by at least 5:00 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. These must be on Canvas under Discussions, a very user friendly LMS.

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 summary sections embedded in chapters that clue you to main ideas or even why an author chose to write the book. Look at the footnotes for areas where an author cites a lot of other studies and trace back to those paragraphs! 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. Specify the best examples. Or highlight particular episodes or statements that embody the central points of the book. Be constructive and evaluate first whether the author achieved what they set out to do. Criticism of what an author *should* have looked at frequently obscures how they have interpreted what they *did* look at. Make

analytical points, and again, always illustrate with a concrete example and page citation. 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: 12-14 pp. Due exactly 17 days after we finish the book that sparked your research topic (that's a Saturday). 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 character in a book. (Separate or non-related topics will not be approved. Re-treads of papers done for other classes are also out of bounds).

**Method:** Delve deeper into the secondary scholarship and primary sources to help you focus and develop a question and answer. Papers will sometimes favor primary or secondary sources, but I'd like to see some of both, especially primary. You might write about a decision that your chosen leader or activist made (even something as focused 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 could be more historiographical, tracing how different authors changed their assessments over time of a major figure (Mother Jones' autobiography and biographies in different time periods come to mind, a kind of "public memory" piece mixed with historiography). You might want to research a social context in which the players acted, such as California's migratory labor situation in the 1930s, or de-industrialization in the Carolina Piedmont, or how the Northern newspapers, abolitionist and simply Republican, responded to John Brown's raid on Harpers' Ferry.

**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 did their social relationships either support or subvert their 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? *This is about social learning and "praxis."* 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**  
[Short supplemental readings and options for research will be  
posted on the relevant Canvas pages]

**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: Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*. Begin.**

**1/27: Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*. Finish.**

**2/3: Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*. Begin**

**2/10: Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*. Finish**

**2/17: Boyle, *Arc of Justice*.**

**2/24: Boyle, *Arc of Justice*.**

**3/2: Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*.**

**SPRING BREAK**

**3/16: Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*.**

**3/23: Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, Intro, 1-4**

**3/30: Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, ch. 5-9**

**4/6: Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 10-end.**

**4/13: Packer, George. *The Unwinding*, begin. Students will be responsible for following an agreed upon number of characters.**

**4/20: Packer, George. *The Unwinding*, finish.**

And if you liked these, the following are books I considered but rejected. Some I've read and are favorites! Others just very intriguing:

- Bird, Kai, and Martin J. Sherwin. *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*. Reprint edition. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. New York: Dial Press, 1999.
- Caro, Robert A. *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. New York: Knopf, 1974.
- Charron, Katherine Mellen. *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark*. Reprint edition. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Chernow, Ron. *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*, 1998.
- Culver, John C., and John Hyde. *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Eggers, Dave. *Zeitoun*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Egan, Timothy. *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis*. Reprint edition. Mariner Books, 2013.
- Goldsmith, Barbara. *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*. 1st edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999.
- Gwynne, S. C. *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History*. New York: Scribner, 2010.
- Hillenbrand, Laura. *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. Reprint edition. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014.
- King, Gilbert. *Devil In The Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*. Harper, 2012.
- Knight, Louise W. *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Lewis, John, and Michael D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement a Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Salvatore, Nick. *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- Satter, Beryl. *Family Properties: How the Struggle Over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America*. New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2010.
- Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. 1st Vintage Books ed edition. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Steel, Ronald. *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980.
- Wills, Garry. *Nixon Agonistes; the Crisis of the Self-Made Man*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.