In fall, 2020, our senior thesis group will meet together, via zoom. There are two directions to our seminar in the fall. The first is designed to help each other find strong, interesting, and workable senior thesis topics, and, by the second month of the semester, to begin researching and writing on these topics. The second is to introduce, a selection of articles (detailed below), in 8 of the 14 weeks of the fall semester, covering a range of historical areas, periods, and styles. The goal is to reveal the scope of good historical writing, along with the considerations and practices that inform it. Previous experience has shown that analysis and evaluation of the historical writings listed below will help to improve skills in critical reading, analytical writing, and the development of research strategies.

Rather than describe this project further here, I ask you to examine the syllabus below. In 8 of the 14 weeks of the semester, you will be asked to read an assigned article or book chapter, to answer the questions posed of this work in a few written paragraphs, and to send in your written responses to our Discussion List in Canvas. We will then spend a part of these 8 seminars discussing the historical questions that the pieces raise, and the historical thinking and methods that the pieces exhibit. I have found in the past that this exercise is a great help to students in conceptualizing and composing a meaningful thesis topic. I think you will find the same.

Our Discussion Group on Courseworks/Canvas will keep a continuous record of all contributions. I ask only that you take this aspect of our semester together seriously.

At the same time that we work together on reading and analyzing these historical pieces, we will also be working together on the preparation of your topics; on research strategies applicable to each topic; and on the process of your writing itself. 5 full weeks of the fall semester will be devoted solely to these tasks, as well as parts of those classes during which we also discuss our readings.

The entire spring semester of this senior thesis seminar will be devoted solely to the writing of your theses.

Seminars will take place on Zoom: I will be available for personal Zoom sessions throughout the two semesters.
Our one suggested text for fall semester is a Course Reader, consisting of xeroxed pieces of the assigned historical writings. The Course Reader is available at Columbia Copies, East side of B'way, between 108th and 109th Street. (Please call ahead to order: 865-1212).

The assigned readings will also be available on Canvas/Courseworks under “Files.”

In the syllabus, (R) after a work means that you will find it in the Xeroxed Course Reader.

For those weeks in which you respond to the class readings by writing in to the class discussion group on Columbia Courseworks/Canvas, you will often find two or three questions to focus your weekly writing. At other times, I will simply ask for your impressions of a given reading. Since it is important for all of us to read what our fellow students have written before class, all comments must be mailed to the Discussion list NO LATER THAN THE TUESDAY before our Wednesday class. I read these comments carefully; I often comment on them and turn them back to you; and I save them as a record of your class participation.

WEEK 1. (Organizational)

Broad discussion of the requirements of the senior thesis project; Introduction of everyone to everyone; Getting a general sense of the range of historical interests in the class; Hearing from those who may already have an idea for their thesis.
(As you think about your potential topic, I think you will find it helpful to look at Appendices A and B at the conclusion of this syllabus.)

WEEK 2. Who owns History?

Reading Assignment for this week: E.T. Linenthal, "The Anatomy of a Controversy."

Canvas/Courseworks Discussion list -- question for this week:
(Please answer either question A or B in ½ to 1 page of writing:}
A. From reading the Linenthal: Does the trained historian “know” history in a way that the untrained person cannot or does not? Can the historian “know” history better than one who lived through it? Should history be the property of trained historians?

B. Did Linenthal convince you of his assessment of the situation? If so, what was it about his reporting that helped convince you. If not, what led you to question his account?

***PLEASE SEE THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR WEEK 5***

As you prepare your assignment, I suggest you consult Appendices A and B at the end of this syllabus.

WEEK 3.  History and Identity


Courseworks Writing for This Week: To be sent in before midnight of the night before class. Please respond to one or two of the following questions:

A. I wonder, as you read the Said, if it makes you realize that you too may be guilty of accepting quite questionable historical narratives, definitions, and categories without having questioned them. Examples?

B. Another possibility: I would like your thoughts as an historian on either the Said or Chakrabarty articles--strengths, memorable points, debatable points, problems, etc.

Class Discussion Question: What points from the Said and Chakrabarty readings strike you as most meaningful?

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****OPTIONAL PAPER TOPIC: (Due in Week 6 or after) (Please consider writing this 4-6 page paper, which will not be graded: Students have found this exercise in self-history both instructive and helpful for the thesis project.)

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History is not merely an abstract subject taught in the classroom--it is alive and moving, pulling and pushing us in ways of which we are often unaware. The purpose of this optional paper is to heighten your sense that you exist in history, or better, that your personal history is being moved by and within other, larger histories. The best papers will convey this sense.

It is 50 years from now and you are writing your autobiography. In this short segment, you are attempting to put your life into historical perspective.

Looking back on your past, which historical context(s) have been most important to your development? Which have most influenced the direction your life has taken and the choices with which you have been confronted? Which best explain who you have become?

Some possibilities to choose from: the history of your gender (or gender itself)? your generation? your class? your place in the world? economic history? the history of education? the history of technology? other histories of your own definition?

Choose what you think are the 1 or 2 “histories” most important to the direction your life has taken, and write a brief (4-6 page) essay supporting your decision. You may want to refer to our readings from weeks 2-5 in your essay.

One question to consider: Do any problems arise from situating yourself in more than one history at the same time?

Rather than writing an imaginary tale about the future, take this paper in the direction of a serious attempt to look back at your present situation and to set it in historical perspective.

[A former student wrote the following in regard to this assignment: “Nameable events and the people closest to me (my family) have had the most recognizable impact on my life. At the same time, there are other historical forces so deeply entrenched in my way of thinking and way of life that I most often don’t recognize them. For that reason, because of their pervasive yet invisible hold on our lives, they’re arguably more powerful than particular events or people I’ve known.”

Although the history of your family (for example) might seem most pressing to you at first, and you are free to write on this if you care to, please try to see through to these deeper forces and histories.]

Courseworks/Canvas Discussion: As you jot down your preliminary thoughts (full sentences aren't necessary), feel free to send them to our
common class discussion list on Courseworks. You can enter material at any time something occurs to you.

**WEEK 4. Can History be Objective?**

Reading Assignment: Novick, *That Noble Dream*, "Historians on the Home Front (ch.5) (R); Appleby, *Telling the Truth*, Introduction.

**Courseworks Writing for This Week:** Please respond to both A and B.

A. An analysis of the use of footnotes. An extraordinary range of information can (and should) be contained in proper footnotes. Look carefully at Novick’s footnotes to see the different uses he makes of them. Find 3 footnotes that contain different kinds of information. Provide the number of each, and then briefly describe the information they contain. Discuss at least one footnote that contains substantive (rather than strictly bibliographical) information.

B. What do you think of Novick’s use of (long) direct quotations? Do you find them an effective tool for the telling of his story? Why or why not?

**Class Discussion:** Does the story Novick tells undermine belief in the possibility of historical accuracy. If so, how does he convince us that his history is believable and meaningful?

**Debate in Class:** Question: Can the historian overcome problems introduced by the recognition of bias, relativity, and revisionism?

What do you make of Appleby’s suggested redefinition of “objectivity”? (p.10)

***PLEASE SEE THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK (WEEK 5)***

**WEEK 5.** Class focused on your thesis progress, development of your topics; questions about research.

**ASSIGNMENT DUE FOR THIS WEEK: PRELIMINARY THESIS PROPOSAL**

A one paragraph to one page outline of your history thesis topic. For guidance on selecting your thesis topic, see Appendix A and B to this syllabus.
I will be happy to “speak” directly to anyone who wishes to this week, either by phone or by Zoom. Please let me know if you think you would find this helpful, and I will set up an appointment.

WEEK 6. Narrative History: Reading Primary Documents:

Reading Assignment: Robert Darnton, “The Great Cat Massacre” (R).

Coursework Writing for this Week: (on one or more of the following questions)

The short primary text on which Darnton bases this study is given at the back of the article. Please read the primary source first, and then examine how Darnton proceeds to “read” it.

A: How does Darnton exploit the disjunctions in his narrative and his text? How does he set up the reality of disjunction from the beginning?

B: Note how Darnton consistently works against expectations. Does this make for powerful/revealing history? What connections can be made between the comedian and the historian?

Class Discussion: Continuation of the above.


Reading assignment for this week: F. Braudel, The Mediterranean, selections.

Courseworks Writing for This Week:

Please send in whatever comments you choose on the Braudel reading.

Class Discussion Topic:

Time is the medium of history, and history might be described as “motion through time.” How does Braudel’s treatment of time make us re-think it as an historical category? How does Braudel’s treatment of space do the same?

Due for Next Week (WEEK 8) in Class: An outline of your thesis proposal, with preliminary chapter headings and preliminary bibliography. 2 copies: one to me and one to a peer reviewer. We will discuss these in seminar next week.
WEEK 8. Class focused on your thesis progress, development of your topics; questions about research, thinking about chapter headings, beginning writing.  
Suggested: Zoom meetings with Barnard Librarians.

Due in Class:  
A serious outline of your thesis proposal, with preliminary chapter headings and preliminary bibliography.  
2 copies: one to me and one to a peer reviewer. We will discuss these in seminar this week.

ARCHIVE ANALYSIS:

Many of you will be using online archives in your research. They are a great research source and can be hugely helpful, but it is important to recognize that they have their limitations. I think you will find the following sources quite helpful in thinking about what they can and cannot provide. They are available to be read at your own pace and according to your own interest. (My thanks to Thai Jones for his suggestions on this matter.)

1) William Cronon has created an excellent website that walks students through the experience of historical archival research. He discusses asking good questions, being flexible, taking notes, leaving room for serendipity, etc. The website is:  
http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/

2) In Courseworks "Files and Resources" for Week 5, you will find: Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," Archivaria 43 (Spring 1997). This will alert you to the reality that archives are themselves historical creations with specific and historically rooted structures, silences, and biases.

3) Available as an EBook: "Contested Archives, Contested Sources," Chapter 8 in Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, Processing the past: contesting authority in history and the archives. This chapter summarizes the idea of reading against the archival grain.

WEEK 9. The History of Ideas. Continuation of our discussion on your thesis progress from the previous Week 8.
Reading Assignment: Joel Kaye Introduction to *A History of Balance, 1250-1375.*

I think it will be helpful for you to get a personal view of what it is like to plan and execute a large historical research and writing project -- in this case, a book that I planned and wrote. I invite you to read the Introduction, which lays out the plan of the book, and then to question me directly about the plan I developed and the problems I faced in writing my book on the history of balance – a subject that had never been previously attempted.

**Coursework Writing for this Week, and Class Discussion Topic:**

Please write in to our Discussion group, and also bring to class, 2 questions on any aspect of the planning, or writing, or research, or hopes involved in writing my book.

**WEEK 10. Thesis Related Discussions.**

**WEEK 11. Reading Primary Sources: Mentalités: Intellectual/Cultural History:**

Reading Assignment; Caroline Bynum, "The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women" (R).

**Courseworks Writing:**

A. Do you find Bynum’s writing strong? And if so, what makes it so? What do you find noteworthy about the way she presents her material and her argument? How does she play the present off against the past to illuminate her subject? As a reader, do you find yourself being led along by the logic of her presentation? How does she do this?

**Class Discussion:**

Here we focus on the craft of constructing an historical argument. Compare the way Bynum and Darnton use their primary sources and place them in social and intellectual contexts. Are there similarities in the way they structure their narrative? How does "reversal" (in roles, in meanings,) figure in their historical reading and writing? Do they use “reversal” in similar ways? How do they exploit disjunctions in their presentation and understanding of history? Does it work?
WEEK 12. Reading Primary Sources: Revising Myths

Reading Assignment: Nell Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known” (R)

Courseworks Writing Assignment:
At the conclusion of the Painter article you will find the 2 primary sources on which she based her historical argument. Please read the appendix containing these two sources first. Get a sense of what you, as an historian, would have made of them. Then read the Painter article.

To the class list: (either A or B, as you choose)
A: In our first reading by Linenthal, we saw that critical history often attacks and destroys myths – sometimes myths that serve genuine social and psychological needs. With Painter we have another historian attacking myths. By doing so, does she enhance or threaten the historical figure of Sojourner Truth?
B: Did you find Painter’s article to be an example of good history? If so why, if not why not. (You may want to use our list of “good history elements” in your response.)


Week 14. Open.

APPENDIX A:

INFORMATION GUIDE ON THE WRITING UP OF YOUR THESIS RESEARCH PROPOSAL.

PART I: A description of a workable history research topic on a subject of your choice that contains your initial strategy for constructing a serious research paper on this topic.

Footnotes should be included in this section (at least 3) referring to works you cite in your bibliography (see below). All footnotes must
follow the form outlined below in this syllabus. Please pay close attention to the forms you find there—they are simple but perfectly adequate. As Novick did, you can and should use your footnotes to convey information beyond the strictly bibliographical.

Suggested Elements:

1. State your topic (or question) of primary concern as clearly and concisely as possible. After stating your thesis subject, you should be able to answer: why should the reader care about this topic? Why is it interesting/important to investigate?

2. Describe the primary source or sources on which you will base your thesis. Where will/can these sources be found? How did you come upon them and recognize their importance?

3. Strategize how you might divide up your thesis. --Imagine your thesis divided into 4-6 chapters and devise provisional headings for each chapter.

4. Discuss what related issues and information you might have to consider in conjunction with your topic.

5. Define the historical problems you are likely to confront in framing and answering your question.

What we are looking for is 1) how well you can articulate a focused topic (or a focused thesis question) that is proportional to a forty or fifty page paper; 2) how well you have imagined your research strategy (i.e., how likely your sources are to open up and illuminate your topic); 3), how well you have thought through the strategy of your presentation; and 4) how conscious you are of the problems that must be overcome to bring your topic to fruition.

The most common problem in the thesis research proposals I have received in the past is a failure to conceptualize a focused topic. You need to distinguish between the background information that will be necessary to set up your topic and the topic itself. Make this distinction clear in the way you structure your paper proposal. I understand your desire to tell the “whole story” of whatever aspect of history you choose to discuss. But resist this temptation. It is necessary for you to learn the general history of your subject in order to do your work, but it is not your task to recapitulate this information. You need to choose one limited aspect of the story on which to focus—one focused area in which to make a real contribution to the subject through your particular reading of available
primary sources. The most successful papers work from the particular to the general—from the small to the large. Think of yourself as a contributor to a much larger project. You are responsible for illuminating your piece of the puzzle and for getting it right so that others coming after you can use and build upon your work.

Obviously, in order to know where to focus, you will have to have some idea of the work already done on your subject. For this reason, I require that, once you have chosen a general area to work in, you read at least one book or article on your subject every week. List the books and articles that you have actively consulted in a special section within your annotated bibliography.

A hint on finding a topic: Follow your curiosity. Conceiving your topic in the form of a question often helps. Work continually to focus your question. Once you have your topic, begin to recognize its parts and to break it down into manageable pieces. Visualize how it can be divided into chapters and what the headings of the chapters might be. It is almost always easier to work on a topic part by part than to attack the whole directly.

If they are read carefully, the works we have read by Novick, Bynum, Darnton, Painter, etc., can give you a sense of how you might shape your own research topic. What techniques employed by these historians might work for you? I would hope that the answer to this question turns up in some form in your thesis proposal.

Finally, keep in mind that History is motion over time. When you construct your topic, be thinking of what kind of motion (transforming, evolving, splitting, disintegrating, incorporating, substituting, etc.) you, as historian, want to reveal. In order to speak about motion, you need to have a recognizable (if arbitrary) beginning and end, and "recognizable" means that you will need to give shape to the abstract. Motion and shape: how will you reveal these through your topics?

PART 2: Separate your bibliography into separate headings for primary and secondary sources.

Sample categories for your bibliographies: general reference works (Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, Printed Bibliographies and subject
bibliographies found on the web); clio; the Humanities and Social Science Indexes for books and articles; JStor and other bibliographic data bases on the Clio web page; bibliographic citations you have found by looking through footnotes in other books on the general subject.

APPENDIX B:

SHAPING A TOPIC--SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Most of the time, topics (questions) are made, not born. You begin with a fuzzy notion of something that seems worth investigating, and you proceed from there. But how? How do you get from something broad and general and incoherent to something defined and doable?

Your question needs to be one that can be asked and answered historically. What this means, of course, is that it has to involve the "past" in some form or other. The "past" comes in all shapes and sizes. As we will see this semester, the practice of history in the last few decades has expanded to include a large number of new subjects and areas previously excluded, so that almost any aspect of human experience is now fair game (provided, of course, that there are primary sources with which to get at it). It helps, for all sorts of reasons, if you locate your subject in a period that has, in some sense, "closed," so that what you are writing about is not completely open-ended and absent of form. In fact, "form" and "shape" is something you should be thinking about when constructing your topic.

Historians are generally less concerned with discovering universal truths and constructing seamless systems than they are with investigating disjunctions--pieces that don't seem to fit (see the Darnton and Bynum articles); evidence that raises questions; beliefs and actions that have a certain strangeness to them and thereby indicate shifts in social, political, and cultural life over time.

Historians are not lawyers. Our job is not to construct an air tight brief or to discount and devalue evidence that does not fit. Our job is more difficult: to capture the richness and complexity of the past while at the same time working to isolate and clarify particular aspects of a particular historical subject. Once we have isolated and clarified, we are in a position to suggest how the pieces originally fit together or worked together in
their historical context. Good history proposes and tests hypotheses—it makes a case for the answers it provides—but it does not presuppose that there is only one "right" answer, or only one way to read the pieces, or only one way to reconstruct the way they worked together in the past.

It is likely that the full outline of your topic will emerge only after you have had a chance to familiarize yourself with the primary sources. The more you do this, the more you are likely to see what it is that requires further examination and explication. This recognition, in turn, helps you to sharpen and focus the questions you are asking. You start out with a question, a problem, an issue, on a subject that you're interested in, and then proceed to refine it by working dialectically—you approach your sources, the sources in some sense talk back to you, and the process continues until you sense that you have arrived at a question that is working for you and leading you into interesting territory.

Some general considerations of a practical nature need to be taken into account from the outset. If you are planning to use primary sources (and all of us will for the senior thesis project) ask yourself whether they are available and accessible (in a language you can read). What about the secondary literature? Is it available and accessible? And, of course, how much do you know about the subject? Is it something you are going to have to learn from the ground up? If so, do you have the time to learn enough of the basics before you proceed to the more sophisticated aspects of the topic? Or is it something you already know about in some detail (perhaps something you've studied in an introductory course) and can approach from a position of less than total ignorance?

The best history papers always give the reader a general idea about the body of the sources available (and the sources actually consulted) on the subject chosen. This can be done either in a series of footnotes as each particular primary source is introduced, or in a general discussion within the text itself, often in the opening chapter, or both. What are the particular questions this body of sources raise? Which sources are most trustworthy, which have to be approached with extreme caution? Through what lens(es) should the modern reader look at them, and why? It is good to begin thinking about these questions right from the start of your project.
At some point, and it is better if this happens sooner rather than later, you will come to the realization that you cannot afford to reinvent the wheel. You do not have all the time in the world, and you need to find an efficient and economical way of getting at your subject. Don't spend your time and energy simply recapitulating the information you have gotten through reading secondary sources. Rather, look for openings, questions, points that have not been considered to your satisfaction, problems that have been raised by the information you have found in the primary and secondary sources. Often your reader will need some broad, preliminary information in order to understand where you are heading, and the providing of contextual information may be necessary at various points in your paper, but get to the meat of your topic and your interpretation as soon as and whenever possible.

Again, think of yourself as making a finite, limited, yet trustworthy contribution to the larger history of your subject.

You will not be able to exhaust your subject if it is a good one. Selection is the key: pick a topic that is defined enough so that you can say something about it in detail (the history of women in the 19th century, or the history of the city in the 13th century, are good examples of bad topics in this sense); consider it in relation to the length of the paper you are going to write; and don't worry too much if the finished product is not quite what you had in mind when you began.

The question you ask may not be resolved in any ultimate sense; your conclusions may be fairly tentative. Historians must often use language that can seem maddeningly evasive--"on the whole," "nevertheless," "for the most part," and so on. That is not to say that you should avoid taking positions but rather that all positions are provisional, and it is appropriate to recognize this and be fairly upfront about it.

If you have done things correctly, you will find that not all your research can be used. Do not regard this as a mistake; it is a normal part of the process. Trying to stuff everything you've found into a paper can lead to real problems--too much detail on some aspects, not enough (by comparison) on others.

It should be apparent by now, that the rules in this game are not hard and fast (every third word seems to be a qualifier). Many of the
considerations outlined here are practical rather than theoretical. You have enormous latitude within which to maneuver--perhaps in your minds too much latitude. Remember that this is a process. Persevere and you will see your topic gradually take shape around your interest, your sources, and your understanding.

APPENDIX C:

PROPER FORMATTING FOR FOOTNOTE REFERENCES:

The first time you use any source, cite it in full. You need to use a full citation only the first time you cite any work. Every time thereafter you should use the abbreviated short title form (see the section under this heading below).

EXAMPLES OF FULL CITATIONS FOR BOOKS:
(Please pay careful attention to the form)

Author: The first time an author's name appears it should be written in full. For footnotes, place the first name first and the last name last. (Only in the Bibliography should you place the last name first.)


All book titles must either be placed in Italics or underlined (choose one or the other and then be consistent throughout).

Note Well: There must be a comma after the authors name, a comma between the place and date of publication, a comma after the parenthesis containing the publication place and date (but no comma before this or any other parenthesis), and a period at the conclusion of every footnote.

Editors and Translators: The names of editors and translators appear after the title, unless that person had primary responsibility for preparing the book for publication:


**Multivolume Works:** Works of more than one volume should be identified in footnotes by the number of volumes in the work and the number of the volume from which a quote has been taken.


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**FULL CITATION FORM FOR ALL ARTICLES:**
(To be used **only** the first time a work is cited. Every time thereafter, use the **Short Title** citation form as outlined below.

**Article in a Scholarly Journal:**

(If you are citing the work itself rather than a particular page, give the page range:  (1993), 622-59.

**Note Well:** **First name first; comma** after the author’s name; **comma** after the title of the article (should be placed inside the quotation marks); the name of the periodical must be placed **either** in Italics or underlined (choose one but be consistent); **comma** after the name of the periodical; **comma** after the date of the periodical in parentheses; **period** at the conclusion of the footnote.

**Chapter in a Book:**

For its first citation:

Or:

Or:


If you are citing the work itself rather than a particular page, give only the page range it occupies within the book: e.g., Patricia O’Brien ….. etc. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 12-55.

You may use any one of the above 3 forms, but whichever you choose, you must remain consistent.

**Citing Dissertations:**


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**SHORT TITLE CITATIONS**: 

After the first reference to a particular source of whatever kind, all subsequent references should be shortened.

The shortened reference to a **book** should include only:

- Last name of the author
- Shortened title of the book (underlined or in italics)
- Page number of the reference.

Example:

For the first citation of any book use the **Book, Full Title**:


For all succeeding citations use the **Book, Short Title**:

**SHORT TITLE CITATIONS FOR ALL ARTICLES:**

The shortened reference to an article should include only:
Last name of the author; Short title of the article; Page numbers of the reference.

Example:

**Article, Full Title Citation: (First time used)**

**Article, Short Title Citation:**