

Mining the Archives, Reinterpreting the Past

English 89000 - Fall 2021 – Distinguished Professor David S. Reynolds

Wed. 2-4

Prof. Reynolds’ office hours: by appointment, on Zoom

Zoom link:

August 25 INTRODUCTION

Sept. 1

-Reading (on the CUNY Academic Commons): Reynolds, “Some Useful Humanities Databases”; “Sample of student academic bios from ‘Mining the Archives’ - Fall 2020”; “Sample advance class presentation by Reynolds”; Caro and MacArthur, “Carbon Footprint”

--Watch Youtube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS7_aaLqaAg (I explain my approach to doing research and writing)

-Writing assignment: post your short academic bio on the CUNY Commons

- Class presentation: sample presentation by Professor Reynolds

Sept. 8 NO CLASS SCHEDULED

Sept. 15 NO CLASS SCHEDULED

Sept. 22

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, Preface and ch. 1 (The pdf of *Abe* is on the Commons site; the book is also available in the original cloth edition and as an e-book or audiobook. The paperback edition of *Abe* appears on September 29, 2021.); Benjamin Moser, “In the Sontag Archives”: Reynolds, “Some Elements of Academic Writing”; Reynolds, three short writing samples: 2 pp. from “Dickinson and Popular Culture”; 3 pp. from the introduction to *Beneath the American Renaissance*; and the Introduction to *Mightier than the Sword*.

Sept. 29

Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 2-3

Oct. 6

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 4-5

-Class presentation:

Oct. 13

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 6-7

-Class presentation:

Oct. 20

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 8-9

-Class presentation:

Oct. 27

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 10-11

-Class presentation:

Nov. 3

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 12-13

-Class presentation:

Nov. 10

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 14-15

-Class presentation:

Nov. 17

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 16-17

-Class presentation:

Nov. 24

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 18-19

-Class presentation:

Dec. 1

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, chs. 20-21

-Class presentation:

Dec. 8

-Reading: Reynolds, *Abe*, ch. 22.

-Class presentation:

Course assignments:**1. Research and writing:**

Find a topic, do primary and secondary research on it, and write a paper on it: In the opening weeks of the term, decide on a topic for which you would like to pursue primary and secondary research, with the goal of writing a 15-20-page term paper that you will submit to Prof. Reynolds by December 16. Devote the bulk of the semester to exploring archives (mostly online) and taking notes on materials in these archives that illuminate your topic. At the same time, read relevant secondary material—articles, books, or dissertations—that are directly relevant to your topic, so that you can find a “they say” or a “what’s left out” that you’ll challenge with an “I say” in your paper.

Building your iceberg: What I’m calling your iceberg consists of the files of notes you take as you do your research. I find the following approach to note-taking very useful: I take my notes in Microsoft Word files that I keep in a folder on my computer. I have at least two subfolders within my main folder: one for primary materials and the other for secondary material. Within each of these folders, I create other folders, broken down by themes or subtopics. As I take notes, I riff on the primary or secondary material I’m reading. Sometimes I write spontaneous paragraphs in my notes in which I respond to the material at hand by registering insights or impressions that could be useful later on. At the very least, for each archival entry (say, a newspaper article from 1863), I summarize the content of the entry in an introductory sentence. I bold the font of my introductory summary and of passages in the archival entry that are especially noteworthy.

By Thanksgiving, much of your note-taking should be done, and you should begin writing a draft of your paper. Keep in mind that your aim is to produce a paper that advances an original thesis based on the fresh archival material you’ve unearthed.

2. In-class presentations:

Each registered course participant will choose a class session to **identify and describe a topic** and present what I'm calling (1) **cool websites** (a) for my project and (b) for others in my field; (2) **my dream physical archive(s)** for my project; (3) **they say/I say/what's left out**; and (4) my **iceberg**.

Here's an explanation of each:

--identify and describe your topic: What is the subject that attracts your attention? Why does it appeal to you as a topic of research? What sorts of archives do you expect to find especially useful (e.g., books of a certain type or period, newspapers, letters, music archives, or diaries,...whatever).

--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field:

As the presenter on a particular day, you'll share your screen with us on Zoom and show us (a) **online sites featuring primary materials** that are especially useful for your current research project and (b) **at least one online site of either primary or secondary materials** that could be especially useful to **others in your field**. Among the possible sites for primary materials are massive databases (e.g., for historical newspapers, political documents, religious writings, music archives, etc.), or specialized websites dedicated to a particular figure or text (e.g., The Walt Whitman Archive, The Mark Twain Project, Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture, etc.) Databases for secondary material include JSTOR, MLA, Project Muse, and their ilk.

--my dream physical archive(s) for my project:

The original plan was for each class member visit a physical archive (e.g., the Schomburg Center, the New-York Historical Society, the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, etc.) and then report on that archive. Due to the ongoing concern with Covid, this is no longer a course requirement. If you feel like going to a particular archive and feel safe doing so, you may go. Otherwise, check on Archive Grid and other sites—or ask around among scholars in your field—to identify a physical archive that would be particularly relevant to your topic. If possible, visit that archive's website and share it with the class as part of your class presentation.

--they say/I say/what's left out: Find at least one article or book on your topic that you aim to respond to in your term paper. Describe how you plan to challenge, qualify, or expand on what another critic or historian has written. Your ultimate goal will be to find a "they say" that will set you up for your "I say." Try to give a sense of what you believe has been left out of the scholarly discussion of your topic.

--my iceberg: Show the class your iceberg (that is your notes on your research) as of the date of your presentation. Share your process of taking notes and organizing them.

3. Advance summary of class presentation:

A day or so before your class presentation, post on the CUNY Commons a summary of your topic description, websites, and other material you'll be presenting that Wednesday. Try to post your advance summary by 7 p.m. of the Monday immediately before the class meeting in which you are presenting.

3. Course readings:

All the readings are uploaded on the CUNY Commons. For weekly reading assignments, see the above syllabus. From Sept. 29 onward, the weekly readings will be from my most recent book, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*. Because this book, like my previous ones, stems from archival research, I thought it would be useful for you to see how I move from my iceberg of notes to publishable prose.

4. Term paper:

Write a 15–20-page paper (c. 5,000-6,500 words) based on your research this term. Email the paper to Prof. Reynolds by Dec. 16 at the latest.