English 8900 – Fall 2020 – Distinguished Professor David S. Reynolds

Minning the Archives, Reinterpreting the Past

Syllabus

This course provides training in how to probe and take notes on the vast archives of primary materials (newspapers, rare books, pamphlets, letters, etc.) that are now available on the internet. You’ll also be honing your skills in finding relevant secondary works (essays or books of criticism, history, or biography that deal with a certain topic). You will identify a specific research topic and do primary and secondary research into it, with the goal of producing a well-researched, original term paper that you’ll submit at the end of the semester. In a class presentation during the term, you will share with us information about websites you’ve found especially useful to yourself and to others in your field as well as secondary material you’d like to expand on or respond to. In the presentation, you’ll also show us the “iceberg” (research notes) you’ve accumulated to that date.

August 26  INTRODUCTION
Sept. 2
   Reading: Reynolds, “Some Useful Humanities Databases”; Reynolds, “Sample summary of class presentation”; Caro and MacArthur, “Carbon Footprint”
   Writing assignment: post your short academic bio on the Commons
   Sample class presentation by Prof. Reynolds:
      --cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
      --my dream physical archive(s) for my project
      --they say/I say/what’s left out
      --my iceberg

Sept. 9
   Reading: 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; 3 pp. from preface to Abe
   Class presentation:
      --cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
      --my dream physical archive(s) for my project
      --they say/I say/what’s left out
      --my iceberg

Sept. 16
   Reading: Reynolds, Abe, Preface and chap. 1
   Class presentation:
      --cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
      --my dream physical archive(s) for my project
      --they say/I say/what’s left out
      --my iceberg

Sept. 23
   Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 2-3
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
--they say/I say/what’s left out
--my iceberg

Sept. 30
Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 4-5
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
--they say/I say/what’s left out
--my iceberg

Oct. 7
Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 6-7
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
--they say/I say/what’s left out
--my iceberg

Oct. 14 NO CLASS SCHEDULED
Oct. 21
Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 8-9
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
--they say/I say/what’s left out
--my iceberg

Oct. 28
Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 10-11
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
--they say/I say/what’s left out
--my iceberg

Nov. 4
Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 12-13
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
--they say/I say/what’s left out
--my iceberg

Nov. 11
Reading: Reynolds, Abe, chaps. 14-15
Class presentation:
--cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
--my dream physical archive(s) for my project
Nov. 18

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

**Class presentation:**
- cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
- my dream physical archive(s) for my project
- they say/I say/what’s left out
- my iceberg

Nov. 25

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

**Class presentation:**
- cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
- my dream physical archive(s) for my project
- they say/I say/what’s left out
- my iceberg

Dec. 2

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

**Class presentation:**
- cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
- my dream physical archive(s) for my project
- they say/I say/what’s left out
- my iceberg

Dec. 9

**Reading:** Reynolds, Abe, chap. 22

**Class presentation:**
- cool websites for (a) my project and (b) others in my field
- my dream physical archive(s) for my project
- they say/I say/what’s left out
- my iceberg

**Course assignments:**

1. **Research and writing:**

   **Find a topic, do primary and secondary research on it, and write a paper on it:** Toward the beginning 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. You’ll devote much of the semester to exploring archives (mostly online) and taking notes on primary materials in these archives that illuminate your topic. At the same time, read and take notes on relevant secondary material—articles, books, or dissertations—that are directly relevant to your topic, so that you can find a “they say” 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. Take your notes in Microsoft Word files. Keep your Word files in a desktop folder. You should have at least two subfolders within your main folder: one for primary materials and the other for secondary materials. Within each of these two folders, you may want to create other folders, broken down by themes or subtopics. As you take notes, don’t be afraid
to riff on the primary or secondary material you’re reading. That is, you can write spontaneous paragraphs in your notes in which you respond to the material at hand by registering insights or impressions that may be useful later on. By Thanksgiving, the bulk of your research 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 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 your topic

--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) **at least two 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, 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 Covid, this is no longer a course requirement. If you feel like going to a particular archive and feel safe doing do, 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. List your work(s) in a bibliographical citation, identified by an abbreviation. Below that, 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.” If you can’t find secondary sources you want to challenge, at least discuss 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 Commons a summary of the 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 Commons. For weekly reading assignments, see the above syllabus. From Sept. 16 onward, the weekly readings will be from my new 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.