

# HIST 608: Microhistory

Prof. Brett Rushforth  
Office Hours: Thursdays 10am-12pm  
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## INTRODUCTION:

This course will focus on the historical method of microhistory, a form of historical writing that takes a single event and uses it to open a window onto broader historical questions. Often centered on ordinary, oppressed, or colonized people who left few or no first-hand accounts of their lives, microhistories rely on unusual events—a murder, a heresy trial, a natural disaster, a scandal, etc.—to offer unique insights into a society that we can often see in no other way.

## REQUIRED BOOKS:

Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* ([free access pdf @ Cornell University Press](#))

Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York*

Nicole Eustace, *Covered with Night: A Story of Murder and Indigenous Justice in Early America*

Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*

Bryna Goodman, *The Suicide of Miss Xi: Democracy and Disenchantment in the Chinese Republic*

Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*

Tiya Miles, *All that She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, A Black Family Keepsake*

Joshua Piker, *Four Deaths of Acorn Whistler: Telling Stories in Colonial America*

## ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

There are four components to my evaluation of your performance in this class: 1) Weekly preparation and class participation, including the timely submission of the required pre-class exercise. 2) A one-page précis summarizing the major themes, methods, and contributions of the Ginzburg book. 3) A formal book review of 1,000 to 1,200 words, written about either the Gordon or Piker book. 4) A final paper—you can choose between writing a straightforward historiography or producing a microhistorical article of your own.

### Weekly Preparation and Class Participation (40%):

Each week you must come to class having read, taken notes on, and thoughtfully considered the required book and article. Each student is expected to make substantive, thoughtful, and well-informed contributions to our class discussions \*every week\*, with no exceptions. The best comments will be concrete and clear and will reference specific

arguments/ideas/moments in the text under consideration. It is okay to disagree with an author, the professor, or another student. Debate over alternative interpretations moves scholarship forward in the profession, so it should be expected in our seminar. But to be productive our disagreements must be based on rational analysis and sound evidence. To prepare us all for discussion, you must submit to canvas—by 8am the day of class—each of the following: 1) one thing you found compelling about the book; 2) one question the book raised that you'd like to discuss; 3) one quotation from the book that captures one of the author's main insights. Each of these should be short, only 1 or 2 sentences long.

#### Précis (5%):

Write a one-page précis—or formal summary—of the Ginzburg book, due by the beginning of class in week 2. A précis is not a review and does not offer a critique of the book. It summarizes the book's major themes, methods, and contributions. It should be written so that someone who has never heard of the book could read and understand it.

#### Book Review (15%):

Write a formal, scholarly review of either Gordon's or Piker's book, between 1,000 and 1,200 words long. Model your review after those in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the *American Historical Review*, or the *Journal of American History*. Further instructions for writing a book review can be found on Canvas.

#### Final Essay (40%):

Option 1: In an essay of 4,000 to 6,000 words, discuss the various ways historians have approached a specific topic, using microhistories to illustrate your point. You could make the essay about the evolution of microhistory itself, or you could address a larger topic (Indigenous resistance to colonialism, for example) through a series of microhistorical treatments of the topic. Due Dec. 10 by 11:59pm.

Option 2: In an essay of 4,000 to 6,000 words, write an original piece of scholarship that takes a microhistorical approach to ask larger questions. Ideally this would be a piece of a thesis or dissertation chapter or a stand-alone article that could move your research forward. Due Dec. 10 by 11:59pm.

#### A Note on Grades:

To receive an A, you must do work that you and I agree is exceptionally insightful, thoughtful, original, and interesting. You must be able to say to yourself and to me that your work is truly superior. I will assign an A- to students who complete all assignments, work hard, engage consistently in class discussions, but lack the depth of engagement or spark of originality and insight that would warrant an A. I will assign a B+ to students whose work is casually or minimally done, whose contributions to class discussions are less frequent and less insightful than I would expect at this level, or whose overall approach to the course shows a lack of serious intent to master the material. I will assign a B to

students whose work is of insufficient quality, who lack engagement in class discussions, or who fail to respond to feedback.

### **POLICIES AND RESOURCES:**

I have a zero tolerance policy for [plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty](#). Anyone presenting work as their own that was actually done by another, or for which they have received credit in another class, will fail this class and be reported to the university. Details on the university's Student Conduct Code can be found [here](#).

Regarding [cell phones and laptops](#): It is unacceptable to use a cell phone for any reason during class. The use of laptops is a privilege that students must respect to retain. It is unacceptable to use the internet, check or send emails or instant messages, or conduct any other non-class related activity. These actions distract those around you and make it impossible for you to engage the intellectual content of the class.

The University of Oregon is working to create [inclusive learning environments](#). Please notify me if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or [uoaec@uoregon.edu](mailto:uoaec@uoregon.edu).

The UO is committed to providing [an environment free of all forms of prohibited discrimination and sexual harassment](#) (sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender or sex-based bullying and stalking). If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, know that help and support are available. UO has staff members trained to support survivors in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.

Please be aware that all UO employees, other than designated confidential resources (see <https://safe.uoregon.edu/services>) are required to report credible evidence of prohibited discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. This means that if you tell me about a situation of sexual harassment or sexual violence that may have violated university policy or state or federal law, I have to share the information with my supervisor or the University's Title IX Coordinator or the Office of Affirmative Action.

If you wish to speak to someone confidentially, you can call 541-346-SAFE, UO's 24-hour hotline to be connected to a confidential counselor to discuss your options, as confidential counselors are not required reporters. You can also visit the SAFE website at <https://safe.uoregon.edu/services> for more information. Each resource is clearly labeled as either "required reporter," "confidential UO employee," or "off-campus," to allow you to select your desired level of confidentiality.

## READING SCHEDULE

### Week 1 (Sept. 30): What Is Microhistory?

Listen:

- [“A Peasant vs the Inquisition: Cheese, Worms, and the Birth of Microhistory,”](#) CBC podcast

Read:

- John Brewer, “Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life” ([link](#))
- Marisa Fuentes, “Introduction,” in *Dispossessed Lives*
- John-Paul Ghobrial, “Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian” *Past and Present*
- Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things I know about It” *Critical Inquiry*
- Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much” *Journal of American History*
- Ed Muir, “Observing Trifles” in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* ([link](#))
- Sue Peabody, “Microhistory, Biography, Fiction” *Transatlantica*
- Walton, Brooks, and DeCorse, “Introduction,” in *Small Worlds*

### Week 2 (Oct. 7): Heresy

Common Reading:

- Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*.
- Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “A Muslim Prince in Counter-Reformation Goa,” in *Three Ways to Be Alien*, 23-72.

### Week 3 (Oct. 14): Murder

Common Reading:

- Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*.
- Jessica Marie Johnson, “Born of This Place: Kinship, Violence, and the Pinets’ Overlapping Diasporas,” in Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, 51-76.

### Week 4 (Oct. 21): Abduction

Common Reading:

- Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*.
- Monica Perales, “Fighting to Stay in Smelertown: Lead Contamination and Environmental Justice in a Mexican American Community,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 39 (spring 2008), 41-63.

### Week 5 (Oct. 28): Lies

Common Reading:

- Piker, *The Four Deaths of Acorn Whistler*.
- Cécile Vidal, “Fictions in the Archives: Jupiter alias Gamelle or the Tales of an Enslaved Peddler in the French New Orleans Court,” in White and Burnard, eds., *Hearing Enslaved Voices*, 40-57.

### Week 6 (Nov 4): Scandal

#### Common Reading:

- Agmon, *A Colonial Affair*.
- Christopher Hodson, "The Trials of Brother Chrétien: A Case of Ruin and Redemption in the French Atlantic," in Englebert and Wegman, eds., *French Connections*, 124-145.

### Week 7 (Nov. 11): Suicide

#### Common Reading:

- Goodman, *The Suicide of Miss Xi*.
- Donna Merwick, "The Suicide of a Notary: Language, Personal Identity, and Conquest in Colonial New York," in Hoffman, Sobel, and Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly*, 122-153.

### Week 8 (Nov. 18): Mementos

#### Common Reading:

- Miles, *All that She Carried*.
- Heather Andrea Williams, "Blue Glass Beads Tied in a Rag of Cotton Cloth: The Search for Family during Slavery," in Williams, *Help Me To Find My People*, 119-138.

### Week 9 (Nov. 25): No Class—Thanksgiving Holiday

### Week 10 (Dec. 2): Justice

#### Common Reading:

- Eustace, *Covered with Night*.
- John Smolenski, "The Death of Sawantaeny and the Problem of Justice on the Frontier," in Pencak and Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods*, 104-128, 291-298.

## ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Weekly (starting Oct. 7), no later than 8am the day of class:

- 1) One thing you found compelling about the book.
- 2) One question the book raised that you'd like to discuss.
- 3) One quotation from the book that captures one of the author's main insights.

Oct. 7:

- Précis of Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*.

Oct. 21 \*or\* 28:

- Book review of Gordon \*or\* Piker – due by the beginning of class on the day we will discuss the book you choose to review: Gordon on 10/21 or Piker on 10/28.

Dec. 10:

- Final essay due by 11:59pm.