

Instructional Syllabus (Spring 2025)
HIST 251: The Politics of History
Colgate University

Time and Place: TR 1:20 – 2:35 PM (110 Alumni)
Instructor: Xan Karn
Office Hours: T 9:30 – 11:00 AM; R 2:45 – 4:00 PM; or by appointment
Office Location: 327 Alumni
Telephone: X-7514
E-mail: akarn@colgate.edu

I. Course Description

While students often approach the discipline of history as a collection of static, uncontroversial facts, the past is constantly re-interpreted and re-written to suit the needs of those living in the present. Far from being an apolitical exercise or value-neutral investigation, history is routinely hijacked and contested by individuals and groups who use it to advance their interests and promote their agendas. The past is not only subject to intense public debate, it also frequently appears at the center of intra- and inter-group conflicts. Through close readings of key texts and engagement with a range of case studies, this course aims to give students an introduction to the politics of history. The methodological approach is multi-disciplinary, spanning such fields as: history, political science, public and international affairs, memory studies, museum studies, and peace and conflict studies.

Among the questions we will take up this semester are the following: How and why does history become politicized? What is “partisan” history, and what can be done to mitigate its impact? How do subjectivity and ideology enter into empirically grounded historical narratives? What happens when groups remember the same events differently? How and on what basis can we responsibly navigate/adjudicate such interpretive differences?

To explore these broad, thematic questions, students will engage with a variety of case studies. Because each case study requires students to ground their thinking in a specific socio-cultural context, answers to the questions posed above may vary from case to case. Although it can sometimes be difficult to sort out who is right and who is wrong in debates over how to interpret the past, history, as a social scientific discipline, also provides us with a set of tools and values that suggest not everything is “up for grabs.”

II. Graded Assignments

To deepen your understanding of the course materials, it is essential that you attend class and complete your assigned readings according to the schedule below.

Your grade for the course will be based on the following items:

Class Participation	10%
Rolling Exam	15%
Reflection Essay #1	25%
Reflection Essay #2	25%
<u>Reflection Essay #3</u>	<u>25%</u>
TOTAL	100%

CLASS PARTICIPATION (10%)

The quality and consistency of your class participation is a graded component of the course. This means coming to class prepared, e.g., by completing and taking notes on assigned readings, and actively engaging in classroom discussions and other in-class activities. The caliber of your participation can boost your course grade, lower it, or do neither.

ROLLING EXAM (15%)

There are no midterm or final exams in this course. Instead, you will take six “pop” quizzes throughout the semester. These will consist of brief (~15-20 mins.) written responses to the assigned readings, which students will complete at the beginning of class. At the end of the semester, the instructor will drop your lowest quiz score and tabulate your grade for this component based on the remaining five quizzes. Except in the case of an excused absence, which is cleared with the instructor ahead of time, there are no make-ups offered for missed quizzes.

REFLECTION ESSAYS (3 X 25%)

You will write three short (5-6 pps.) essays for this course. These are reflection exercises, based on our assigned readings and in-class discussions. You are not expected to do any independent research for these essay assignments, nor will you need to consult “outside” sources. I will circulate prompts and guidelines ahead of the deadlines for these essays. Due dates are February 20 (Essay #1); April 17 (Essay #2); and May 8 (Essay #3).

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Grades for all assignments will be based on the following scale: A: 90-100%; B: 80-89%; C: 70-79%; D: 60-69%; F: 0-59%. A plus/minus (+/-) system will be used to differentiate student progress further.

III. Expectations

ATTENDANCE AND ILLNESS

All students are expected to abide by the class absence guidelines published in the Colgate catalog. You may accrue two absences during the semester without penalty. Subsequent absences will negatively affect your participation grade. There is no need to contact the instructor, if you are experiencing a short-lived illness. If you think your absence will extend beyond 2-3 days, please contact your administrative dean, who can let me know what to expect. Student-athletes and others with co-curricular commitments should communicate with the instructor as soon as possible regarding any anticipated conflicts/absences.

MAKE-UPS AND EXTENSIONS

There are no-makes offered for our pop quizzes. If you miss a quiz because of illness or travel, that will be the one you drop. For essays #1 and #2, students may petition for an extension, but they must do so at least 48 hours before the deadline. Late papers (i.e., submitted after the deadline without an arranged extension) will receive a one letter-grade deduction. Papers submitted after the one-week extension has passed will receive a grade of zero. There are no extensions for essay #3, which you will write in lieu of a final. If you cannot submit essay #3 ahead of the deadline (May 8), you should contact your administrative dean about possibilities for an incomplete.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Please be sure that your phone is silenced and remains out of view during class. Laptops and/or tablet devices will be helpful for some of our classroom exercises, but they should not distract from our work. If the use of these devices negatively impacts the learning environment, the instructor may prohibit their use in the classroom.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who require an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately, as soon as possible, to discuss specific needs. If you have not done so, please also contact Evelyn Lester (elester@colgate.edu) at the Office of Academic Support and Disability Services so that reasonable and appropriate accommodations can be clearly defined.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The instructor will enforce all aspects of Colgate's Academic Honor Code. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will be adjudicated in accordance with the Code. Note on Artificial Intelligence: Students in HIST 251 are not permitted to take assistance from ChatGPT or any other generative AI tool. The writing you submit for this course should be 100% your own from start to finish.

IV. Required Texts

There is one required text available for purchase (see below). All other assigned readings can be accessed through the Moodle course site. Students should bring these readings to the corresponding class sessions so that we can discuss them together.

Required text:

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press. ISBN: 978-080704311.

V. Course Outline and Assignment Schedule

Week 1 History and Memory

Jan. 20 Overview

Jan. 21 Historical Memory

READ: Mukherjee, “How Do We Remember Our National Past?”

Jan. 23 The Contested Past

READ: MacMillan, “History and Identity”

Week 2 Power and the Production of History

Jan. 28 Power and Historical Representation

READ: Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, pps. 1-30

Jan. 30 The Case of Christopher Columbus

READ: Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, pps. 108-140

Week 3 Monumental History (I)

Feb. 4 History and the Masses

READ: Jordanova, “Public History”

Feb. 6 National Origins (Greenough’s Washington)

READ: Thompson, “Chain of Being”

Week 4	Monumental History (II)
Feb. 11	Confederate Monuments READ: Thompson, “Shafts”
Feb. 13	The National Mall (Lincoln Memorial) READ: Sandage, “A Marble House Divided”
Week 5	Monumental Histories
Feb. 18	Germany and the Holocaust READ: Smith, “Monuments to the Unthinkable”
Feb. 20	Subversive Memory [ESSAY #1 PROMPT] READ: Ware, “Anti-Memorials”
Week 6	Museums and Musealization (I)
Feb. 25	Museum Controversies READ: Wallace, “Culture War, History Front”
Feb. 27	The 9/11 Museum READ: Dawson, “The Good War”
Week 7	Museums and Musealization (II)
Mar. 4	Slavery at Monticello READ: Smith, “Monticello”
Mar. 6	ESSAY #1 DUE
Week 8	Museums and Musealization (III)
Mar. 11	The Legacy Museum READ: Sodaro, “Shine the Light of Truth”

Mar. 13	Smithsonian American Art Museum READ: Showdown at the West as America Exhibition”
Week 9	SPRING RECESS
Week 10	History Education (I)
Mar. 25	Myth-History READ: Trouillot, <i>Silencing the Past</i> , pps. 31-69
Mar. 27	Unthinkable History READ: Trouillot, <i>Silencing the Past</i> , pps. 70-107
Week 11	History Education (II)
Apr. 1	Curricular Debates READ: Nash et al., “In the Matter of History”
Apr. 3	History Textbooks [ESSAY #2 PROMPT] READ: Goldstein, “Two American Stories”
Week 12	History in Political Discourse
Apr. 8	Oval Office Historians READ: Cotlar and Ellis, “Introduction” to <i>Historian-In-Chief</i>
Apr. 10	Patriotic History Read: “1776 Commission Report”
Week 13	Campus Histories
Apr. 15	Emory U. READ: Auslander, “The Other Side of Paradise”
Apr. 17	ESSAY #2 DUE

Week 14 Historical Dialogue

Apr. 22 Negotiating History

READ: Pingel, “History Textbook Revision as a Means to Reconciliation”

Apr. 24 Mediating the Past

READ: Karn, “Museums and Monuments as Sites of Dialogue”

Week 15 The Road Ahead

Apr. 29 Erasing History

READ: Stanley, “How to Create an Autocracy”

May 1 Sanitizing History [Essay #3 PROMPT]

READ: “National Archives Put a Rosy Spin on US History” (WSJ)

Final Essay #3 Due May 8 by 5 PM