In the midst of the so-called “Cultural Wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars in various fields, including History and American Studies, began to consider how multiculturalism changed the way scholars do research and the narratives they present for readers. Critiquing earlier scholarship for omissions and elisions was much easier than charting new narrative and conceptual ground in the field. The readings in this course provide examples of how scholars accepted the challenge of “re-imagining” American history. Their contributions range from experimenting with narrative form, incorporating multiple/interdisciplinary methodologies, employing a variety of theoretical frameworks, consulting relatively unused sources, and de-centering WASP perspectives or re-centering their analysis in innovative ways.

The purpose of this course is to study these texts for what they can teach us about how to go about introducing new ways of thinking about the American experience. We will consider how each writer conceptualized his/her project, with or against what kind of work they were writing, how formerly marginalized stories fundamentally change the overarching narrative, and how scholars make use of theories and methods in their own fields and other disciplines to shed new light on the past.

Required Readings are available at Von’s Book Shop or through on-line access to journals through the Purdue Libraries:
- Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*
- Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*
- Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity*
- Joanna Brooks, *Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America’s First Immigrants*
- Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*
- John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*
- Priscilla Wald, *Constituting America: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*
- John W. Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*
- Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*
- Lee Bebout, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies*
- Robin D. G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times*
- Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*
Seminar Schedule

Week 1

August 25


The first class period will be devoted partly to housekeeping matters—the syllabus, the objectives of the seminar, ground rules for weekly discussions, assignments, and selecting discussion leaders. Another portion of the seminar will be devoted to the origins of this course in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, we’ll discuss the article assigned for this week. This particular piece was extremely influential when it appeared in 1986—both as a call for pulling together the disparate strands of the American experience and as a seeming jab at the specialized work being completed in fields that were still at the margins of American experience.

Week 2

September 1

NO CLASS – LABOR DAY RECESS

Takaki’s *A Different Mirror* is a really long book—I strongly recommend that you begin reading it during your “week off.”

Week 3

September 8

Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*

Takaki’s effort to write a different narrative of American history first appeared in 1993—among the first books to attempt a more inclusive story of the American past. I have assigned the 2008 revised version, which is more readily available and appeared shortly before the author’s death. I actually prefer the 1993 version, which is significantly/substantively different from the later revised work. As you read this book and think about your 3-4-page response to it, consider what the title connotes. Consider as well the extent to which the narrative arc is affected by the organizing themes. What are Takaki’s strategies for “re-imagining” the history of America? What archives inform the book?

Week 4

September 15

Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*

Gabaccia was among the first U.S. historians to focus on food as a site for examining social and cultural history. The sub-title of this work is, in some ways, more intriguing than the main title—what is the thesis implied in the sub-title? How does this novelty study nevertheless re-think the unfolding of American history?

Week 5

September 22


Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity*

Steele’s article should serve as a possible jumping-off point for your consideration of Lepore’s and Brooks’s works on early American history. Steele’s article appeared in a special issue of *Reviews in American History* that included some excellent essays that pointed to new directions in a number of subfields within U.S. history (hint, hint—for those of you preparing for prelims in U.S. history, take a
look at the other essays in this particular volume of *RAH* to get a down-and-dirty introduction to important shifts underway in the 1990s and formative of current scholarship in those fields—
historiographical essays are great resources for preparing for exams.) Lepore’s book also appeared in 1998, but after Steele’s essay was in press. To what extent was Lepore responding to some of the same issues addressed by Steele? What are we to think of “American Identity” based on Lepore’s analysis? How is it the same as/different from other interpretations of American identity?

**Week 6**

**September 29**

Joanna Brooks, *Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America’s First Immigrants*

Brooks is a literary scholar of Early America, and in this, her most recent book, Brooks challenges many of the cherished myths of English migration to North America in the seventeenth century. In some respects, her work followed the important path breaking work of Edmund Morgan in *American Slavery/American Freedom*, but her purposes are slightly different. What is the nature of her archive? How does her analysis re-imagine the narrative of American history? Is she responding to some of the same issues raised by Steele and Lepore?

**Week 7**

**October 6**


Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*

One of the fields most dramatically affected by efforts to reimagine American history is that of Religious History. The Puritans figured prominently in many of the traditional narratives of American history, and Protestantism, more generally, has been placed at the foundation of American culture and values. The review essay by Leigh Eric Schmidt is a particularly helpful review of scholarship that has considered American “religion” especially in the twentieth-century and beyond. An important cultural historian of religion in his own right, Schmidt does a great job of situating two works that appeared in 1998 and in the process of doing so, he offers a view of the landscape within which Lofton’s innovative approach to “religion” must be viewed.

On October 8, a meeting of the society of U.S. Intellectual Historians opens in Indianapolis. Prof. Lofton is scheduled to be the keynote speaker on Friday, October 10, at 7:00 p.m. I urge you to attend if it is possible. Details forthcoming.

**Week 8**

**October 13**

**NO CLASS – OCTOBER BREAK**

We have a heavy reading schedule for the next several weeks—this might be a time to read ahead.

**Week 9**

**October 20**


John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*

This week’s readings examine two projects that attempt to “reconstruct” the experience of people who did not leave collections of papers or many archival traces of any kind. Their work reminds us of some of the outer limits of “re-imagining” a past that remains shrouded in mystery. What have these two historians done to overcome the limits of the archives?
Week 10  
October 27  
Dorothy Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty,”  
*American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995): 651-77.  
Priscilla Wald, *Constituting America: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*  

Priscilla Wald is an American Studies scholar who straddles the fields of literature and psychology. In this book, she focuses on a variety of canonical texts, which she reads through the lens of Lacanian psychology. By analyzing how the authors of such standard texts as U.S. Supreme Court decisions, political speeches, and laws express their opinions, she points to “ruptures” in the text, which she attributes to “cultural anxiety.” What does her reading strategy reveal about some of the mainstream writings of the nineteenth century? Does this work “re-constitute” American history? How might Wald respond to Ross’s analysis of the decline of the “grand narrative”? Whose needs are best served by “grand narratives”?  

Week 11  
November 3  
John W. Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*  

John Stauffer’s first book, *The Black Hearts of Men*, examined African American and white abolitionists who forged friendships before the Civil War. It was a first—an effort to consider instances when the seeming chasm separating the races was bridged. In this second major project, Stauffer writes an innovative parallel biography—what insights come from reading about Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass in tandem that might be missed if they are considered separately? In what sense might we see the two men as the “uncanny” of one another?  

Week 12  
November 10  
Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*  

A look at Denning’s table of contents might lead one to believe that this is an exhaustive history of the individuals or groups on the American Left during the 1930s—and in some respects it does a pretty good job of that. But the subtitle draws our attention to much larger ambitions; Denning argues that what happened in 1930s “popular front” culture resulted in a major shift in American cultural life through the rest of the twentieth century. How does this challenge the standard narrative of American culture in the twentieth century? How did Denning decide which sources to consult—who made up the “cultural front”?  

Week 13  
November 17  
Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies.”  
Lee Bebout, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies*  

Fishkin’s essay was first offered as a presidential address to the American Studies Association annual meeting in 2004. It offered the clearest articulation of why Americans need a greater appreciation of the meaning and imposition of American culture outside the boundaries of the United States. Do Bebout’s *Mythohistorical Interventions* and Kelley’s *Africa Speaks, America Answers* represent the kind of scholarship that can result from this “transnational turn”? How does a transnational analysis alter the way we think about race relations in this country? Where do our borders begin and end?
Week 14
November 24
Robin D. G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times*

Kelley’s first book, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, is a classic as a standard work of history that explored the role of communist activism in seeking to improve the lot of sharecroppers in the state. He excavated a history that was buried because of the politics and racial identification of the principal actors. In *Africa Speaks, America Answers*, Kelley turns to a subject about which tons of scholarship exists—modern jazz. Who does Kelley identify as crucial points of reference in this work? Who is he building upon and arguing against. In what sense is he trying to re-think the history of American cultural production?

Week 15
December 1
Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*

Early on in this book, the author recounts a conversation with a person in the audience who heard her present some of the early findings in her research. The comment went something like this: “I love your argument, but I hate your archive.” What is so repulsive or questionable about Berlant’s archive? This comment might well serve as a cue for your response to this book. Sexuality studies have taken off in many new and different directions since Berlant’s publication of this book in 1997. I include it in this seminar, because it was an important project that began the hard work of decentering heterosexuality.

Week 1
December 8
The Re-imagining Collective. This last meeting of the seminar is intended to give seminar members the opportunity to share the bibliographies they have been building over the course of the semester (see below in the assignment section). Instead of simply turning your lists into me, I thought it would be more useful for students to exchange their work and help each other build competencies in other fields. So bring your contribution in an electronic format that can be shared with the class.
Assignments
Seminars depend upon informed discussion of the assigned articles and books. Thus both preparation ahead of seminar and attendance/participation are crucial. Your final grade in the course will be based on the following:

Discussion Leader (20%)
In the first class period, each student will select a week in which s/he is responsible for leading the discussion of that work. This will require additional preparation beyond reading the book. I am asking that you make an initial presentation of about 20 minutes for the seminar about the author (is this the author’s first book? Does it represent a “new direction”?) Insofar as the author tells you, to what kind of scholarship is s/he reacting? But most importantly, you are responsible for generating a discussion among the members of the seminar. I will leave it to you to decide how to get this discussion going, but let me remind you that the idea in this seminar is not to “love” or “hate” the assigned reading. Rather, it is to talk about what the scholar did; what s/he did not do, or could have done. Consider the archive, the methodology, and the resulting narrative.

Written Work (60%)
For each reading, prepare a brief paper (3-4 typewritten, double-spaced pages) that identifies and discusses the work performed by each writer. Your paper should include a one-paragraph summary of the book and its purposes, a statement of the author’s main point or thesis, and a discussion of the approach (conceptual, theoretical, methodological, or narrative) that distinguishes the author’s attempt to tell a different kind of story/history. Consider what prompted them to employ particular practices or to focus on a particular event, group, person, or time/place. Perhaps the most challenging task in this assignment is to figure out how each scholar thinks the historical process unfolded—what, in other words, drives historical change? Finally, how might each of you make use of this author’s practices in the research you hope to conduct?

Contribution to the Reimagining Collective: In the course of reading the assigned book or article, you will find references in the text or in the footnotes that perhaps you recognize. Perhaps a particular book will remind you of a book or article you have read in another context that you think would be appropriate for building a bibliography of those who have purposely tried to reimagine some dimension of the American experience. Prepare entries for your contribution that include:

1) A full bibliographical citation
2) A brief (one paragraph) summary of this work

Your contribution need include no more than 5 entries. You will be sharing your work with classmates so you may want to focus your efforts on titles specifically in your area of concentration so that you will be helping others from a position of strength.

There is no final paper for this course.

Participation (20%)
A good discussion depends on you. The written work you will have done before class should have helped you collect your thoughts; the seminar provides an opportunity to share them. A few ground rules will be enforced. All exchanges must be conducted in a civil manner. Disagreements are fine—indeed, expected—but they should never cross the line into personal or political attacks.

I selected all of the books on this list, because I believe they give us lots to think about as scholars. I imagine some of you will like some and not others—frankly, I don’t care whether you like them or not. What I DO care about is that you think about what the author has attempted to do. What can you learn from this book? What worked? What didn’t work? Why? How might you be able to adapt some of the approaches to your own scholarship?