

**Nonhuman History**  
**UWM Department of History, Spring 2021**

Course: History 600-203

Instructor: Nigel Rothfels, Department of History

Format: Online and Synchronous on Teams. Wednesdays 11:30am-1pm ([Click here to join the meeting](#))

(NB: The official timeslot for this course is 11:30am-2:10pm -- that is too long for a synchronous online discussion, so I am cutting it back and adding additional off-line work.)

Office Hours: By appointment and virtually. Just send me an email and we'll work out a time. I would enjoy meeting to discuss your work outside of normal class times.

Email: rothfels@uwm.edu

Course Description:

This senior research seminar is restricted to History majors and Broad Field Social Studies (History) Education majors. This is not a lecture course. We will meet as a group for 90 minutes, once a week, for an online synchronous discussion. In this course you will engage in sustained individual research leading to an extended essay. Most of you will not have had the opportunity to devote such a substantial amount of time and thought to a research project of your own design before, and at times, this course may feel more like an independent study than a typical content-driven history course. It can be an intimidating prospect to realize that this course is not primarily about what I will teach you, but about what you can find out for yourself, but that is the nature of this course. I hope that you will see this as an opportunity to make your own original research contribution and to share your interests with me, the other students, and people outside our course. From my perspective, this is where the real joy of studying history begins!

This is the highest-level class offered in UWM's undergraduate history program, and you should expect this course to be difficult and for me to be critical of your work. Students have sometimes misunderstood my relatively casual general manner: please know that I take this course very seriously and I will hold you to high standards when I evaluate your work. You should anticipate devoting about 10 hours/week to this course. Only a small portion of that will be you attending to assigned reading. For roughly the first half of the course, I will select weekly topics related to the overall theme of the course and provide readings (probably two articles/chapters) to start our group discussion. Each week, you will be expected to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and intriguing elements of the readings, and you will also be asked to bring to our meetings a primary source -- some kind of artifact like an image, a diary entry, a letter, a newspaper account -- that you think could be an interesting contribution to a paper related to the general theme of that week's discussion. We will consider these artifacts as a group and work out together what makes a good source and why. This is not a methodology course, but because the general theme of this course presents some interesting methodological problems, I anticipate that we will get into discussions about historical methods.

Near the end of February, you will submit an **abstract** of your project. Near the end of March, you will submit a public-facing **video** presentation of your research of about 5 minutes in length. These presentations will be included in both the campus-wide Undergraduate Research Symposium on April 16th and the History Department's Research Showcase (around April 22nd). Some of you will be anxious about presenting your work in video form and for it to be seen in these colloquia, but creating public-facing work in short form is a different and important kind of challenge. By now, you have all been exposed to all manner of video presentations of historical research -- you should think about what you like and don't like and come up with a presentation that illuminates your topic in a way you like. Doing this kind of work forces you into thinking more clearly about your argument and, I believe, improves longer-form writing. Your final paper of 5,000-6,000 words (excluding notes and bibliography) is the most important element of this course and will be due on May 10th.

This seminar focuses on the presence and significance of nonhuman entities and forces in human history. All kinds of living things like viruses, bacteria, birds, mammals, fish, and plants have had a profound presence in human history, but beyond them are forces (or what are sometimes called “hyperobjects”) like weather, climate, and tides that have shaped human history. Even rocks and sand (think of gold, salt, diamonds, and the sand mined in Wisconsin used in fracking) can play such huge roles in our lives and economies. I think that when most people ponder “history,” they imagine the roles that humans (especially famous ones) have played in shaping the worlds we live in today. In this seminar, I want us to think beyond human actors to the nonhuman presences in human history.

#### Workload Statement:

The campus credit-hour policy (UWM Faculty Document #2838) states: “Study leading to one semester credit represents an investment of time by the average student of not fewer than 48 hours for class contact in lectures, for laboratories, examinations, tutorials and recitations, and for preparation and study; or a demonstration by the student of learning equivalent to that established as the expected product of such a period of study.” This is a three-credit course and you can, therefore, anticipate spending at least 144 hours preparing for and participating in this course; let’s just call it 150 hours. There are 15 weeks in this semester, so that means about 10 hours/week.

#### Course Requirements:

This seminar emphasizes in-class discussion and formal writing. While I encourage (and personally engage) in all kinds of informal writing, there are no weekly posts required on Canvas or anything like that. This is a course where you must take responsibility for your participation and I will not require little tasks designed to help you be prepared for our discussions or the completion of the formal writing.

- Participation in class discussion, including presentations of research: 30%
- Paper Abstract (due February 24, 2021): 5%
- Video Presentation (due March 31, 2021): 20%
- Final Paper (due May 12, 2021): 45%

#### Readings:

All of the assigned readings for this course will be available to you through the course website on Canvas. The readings will be article or chapter-length. We will discuss them both for their content and their form. The form will be perhaps particularly important as you think about the formal qualities of your final papers. Here is an “initial list” of readings. I will change some of these as we go along, depending on our conversations.

- Ackroyd, Heather, and Dan Harvey. “Capitalism in the Corpse of a Whale.” In: *Energy: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond*. Ed. Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti. Morgantown: West Virginia UP, 2019. Pp. 107-114.
- Collingwood, R. G. Excerpt from “Epilegomena” (1936). In: *The Idea of History*. Ed. T. M. Knox. 1946; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956. Pp. 246-249.
- Despret, Vinciane. “From Secret Agents to Interagency.” *History and Theory* 52.4 (2013): 29-44.
- Few, Martha. “The Lives and Deaths of Caged Birds: Transatlantic Voyages of Wild Creatures from the Americas to Spain, 1740s-1790s.” *Ethnohistory* 67.3 (2020):481-501.
- Ghosh, Amitav. “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel.” In: *Incendiary Circumstances* (1992; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 138-51. Collected in: Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. 431-40.
- Green, Louise. “The Primitive Accumulation of Nature.” In: *Fragments from the History of Loss: The Nature Industry and the Postcolony*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2020. Pp. 74-102.

- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "The Council of Pecans." In: *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013. Pp. 11-21.
- Lien, Marianne Elisabeth. "Ducks into Houses: Domestication at the Margins." In: *Domestication Gone Wild: Politics and Practices of Multispecies Relations*. Ed. Heather Anne Swanson, Marianne Elisabeth Lien, and Gro B. Ween. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp. 117-137.
- Lurgio, Jeremy. "Saving the Whanganui." *The Guardian*. 29 Nov. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/30/saving-the-whanganui-can-personhood-rescue-a-river>
- Nye, David. "The Great White Way." In: *Electrifying America: Social Meaning of a New Technology*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990. Pp. 73-84. Collected in: Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. 71-80.
- Oppenheimer, Clive. "Climatic, Environmental, and Human Consequences of the Largest Known Historic Eruption: Tambora Volcano (Indonesia) 1815." *Progress in Physical Geography* 27.2 (2003): 230-259.
- Ritvo, Harriet. "Race, Breed, and Myths of Origin: Chillingham Cattle as Ancient Britons." *Representations* 39 (1992): 1-22. Reproduced in Harriet Ritvo, *Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras: Essays on Animals and History*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. Pp. 132-156.
- Sleigh, Charlotte. "Inside Out: The Unsettling Nature of Insects." In: *Insect Poetics*. Ed. Eric C. Brown. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Pp. 281-297.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. "Prologue." In: *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 1-9.
- Walker, Brett L. "Animals and the Intimacy of History." *History and Theory* 52.4 (2013): 45-67.

Draft Schedule (this will change)

	Week	Date	Topic	Readings
Part I	1	January 27, 2021	<b>Introductions and Orientation</b>	
	2	February 3, 2021	Pecans and Matsutakes	Kimmerer, Tsing
	3	February 10, 2021	Birds	Few, Lien
	4	February 17, 2021	History, Agency, and Intimacy	Collingwood, Despret, Walker
	5	February 24, 2021	<b>Abstract Due</b>	Lurgio
Part II	6	March 3, 2021	A Volcano	Oppenheimer
	7	March 10, 2021	Diamond Mining	Green
	8	March 17, 2021	Petrofiction, Electrification, Whales	Ghosh, Nye, Ackroyd/Harvey
	9	March 24, 2021	Spring Break	
	10	March 31, 2021	<b>Video Due</b>	
Part III	11	April 7, 2021	Mythic Cattle and Bugs	Ritvo, Sleigh
	12	April 14, 2021	TBD	TBD
		April 16, 2021	UWM Undergraduate Research Symposium	
	13	April 21, 2021	TBD	TBD
		April 22, 2021	History Department Showcase	
	14	April 28, 2021	TBD	TBD
	15	May 5, 2021	TBD	TBD
16	May 12, 2021	<b>Final Paper Due and Wrap-Up Discussion</b>		

### Canvas

Our Canvas site will be very simple. Initially, there will just be three modules:

1. Course Documents (syllabus, etc.)
2. Readings, where I will post the readings as we proceed
3. Assignments (essentially drop-boxes for the items you will submit over the course)

I may need to add additional modules later in the course and will do that as necessary. There will also be a couple of discussion forums. Rather than have a new one every week, these will be open for the entire semester and I will ask you to contribute on a regular basis.

### Attendance and Participation:

Your attendance and active participation in our online synchronous and asynchronous (Canvas) discussions is critical both to the success of this course for yourself and your peers and also for me! From the original development of the idea of “the seminar” in history, the discipline has been committed to learning through a thoughtful conversation and that is what I would like our meetings to be. While I anticipate us not meeting some weeks in order for you to have more time to meet with me individually or just do your own research, I absolutely expect you to come to all our synchronous discussions prepared and ready to engage. If you are not, I will notice. Our meetings will only be for 90 minutes and I do not want to be the only person talking, or for there to just be a few usual suspects. I also want you to have substantive things to say. Just “agreeing with what they said” is not really being engaged with the material.

### Cameras:

I will not require anyone to turn on their cameras for this course. There are all kinds of good reasons why people might not want to. But, with a couple of semesters of online teaching and meetings now under my belt, I can tell you that the quality of our discussions and your feelings of connections with each other and obligations to the course are almost always correlated with having your camera on. For some reason, having cameras on creates a different level of accountability and you will have noticed this by now, too. When possible, I would prefer that you have your cameras on, even if not all the time. I would especially appreciate it if you would turn them on while you are speaking, but if you would just leave them on in general that would help. I don't like speaking to a bunch of tiles. There will be fewer than 15 of us in this course, and I would like us to get to know each other a bit. Having cameras on just tends to facilitate that.

### Accommodations:

If you need any accommodation to meet the requirements of this course, please contact me within the first weeks. (If you become aware of the need for any accommodation after that date, just speak to me as quickly as possible so we can get you the resources you need.) You can find additional information on the web page of the Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) at <http://uwm.edu/arc/>. If you have not registered with the ARC and would prefer to discuss your situation with me directly, that is fine. I will work with you. All materials I scan for the course and have on the Canvas site, will be OCR'd.

### Other Campus Policies:

In accordance with the uniform syllabus policy, I will paraphrase the Supplement to UWM Faculty Document #1895R6: <https://uwm.edu/secu/wp-content/uploads/sites/122/2016/12/Syllabus-Links.pdf>

- If you have religious observances that will require you to not be part of an online discussion, etc. please let me know early in the semester. You can find out more about the campus policy on religious observances here: <https://apps.uwm.edu/secu-policies/storage/other/SAAP%201-2.%20Accommodation%20of%20Religious%20Beliefs.pdf>.
- If you are called to active military duty, please let me know as soon as possible. The campus policy on accommodation of students with military duties is located here: Students: <http://uwm.edu/active-duty-military/>

- An incomplete can only be given if you have been unable to complete the course “because of illness or other unusual and substantiated cause beyond a student’s control.” Please refer to the document: <https://apps.uwm.edu/secu-policies/storage/other/SAAP%201-13.%20Incomplete%20Grades.pdf>
- Discriminatory conduct does not belong in a university. It poisons the work and learning environment and threatens the careers, educational experience, and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Please note: <https://apps.uwm.edu/secu-policies/storage/other/SAAP%205-1.%20Discriminatory%20Conduct%20Policy.pdf>
- Title IX and Sexual Violence. Whether or not you want to make an official report of an incident of sex discrimination, sexual violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, relationship violence, or stalking, UWM’s Title IX coordinator ([titleix@uwm.edu](mailto:titleix@uwm.edu)) can connect you to appropriate resources at UWM. For more information, please consult: <https://uwm.edu/sexual-assault/>.
- Academic misconduct: “Cheating on exams or plagiarism are violations of the academic honor code and carry severe sanctions, including failing a course or even suspension or dismissal from the University.” <https://uwm.edu/deanofstudents/conduct/academic-misconduct/>.
- If you would like to make a complaint about this course, you may direct it to the Chair of the History Department, Professor Joseph Rodriguez ([joerod@uwm.edu](mailto:joerod@uwm.edu)).
- Grade appeal procedures: “A student may appeal a grade on the grounds that it is based on a capricious or arbitrary decision of the course instructor.” Appeal procedures can be obtained from the Chair of the History Department, Professor Joseph Rodriguez ([joerod@uwm.edu](mailto:joerod@uwm.edu)), or the Associate Dean of Social Sciences in the College of Letters and Science, Professor James Moyer ([jrmoyer@uwm.edu](mailto:jrmoyer@uwm.edu)). For further information, please consult: <https://apps.uwm.edu/secu-policies/storage/other/SAAP%201-10.%20Grade%20Appeals%20by%20Students.pdf>.
- If you would like to find resources to advance LGBT+ inclusivity in the learning environment, please consult: <http://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/>.