

Fall 2023

## HSS 404 - 001: History Seminar: History Of Murder

Alison Lefkovitz

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# HSS 404: Murder in US History

Prof. Alison Lefkowitz

Fall 2023

Tuesday and Thursday 10:00-11:30am

Class Room: CKB 222

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<https://njit.webex.com/meet/alefkovi>

Office Hours: Tuesday 1:30-2:30 and

Thursday 12:30-2:30 or by appointment

Cullimore 327

Of all the crimes in human history, it seems that murder would be the most straightforward. It is nearly universally regarded as wrong, and societies across the world punish it. But even something as simple as murder has a history—how the law defines it, how the law punishes it, and which murders are seen as the most heinous has all changed over the course of US history. This class will use a series of case histories to examine how the law has treated different murders differently—and why. Then you yourself will select a case to examine and write up for your senior seminar paper using primary and secondary sources. The goal of the paper is not only to detail the circumstances of the murder but also to detail what this particular murder can teach us about life at that time in US history. For instance, how did race, class, gender, religion, or sexuality shape justice or its absence? Or what historical circumstances motivated someone to resort to murder? Alternatively, did historical actors and witnesses have the same understanding of the crime as we would today? How have legal changes shaped the reaction to this crime?

## **Code of Conduct:**

--I will be as understanding as I can be along the way with the sole exception of academic dishonesty (see below). If you have any trouble, confusion, or worry, please reach out. We can figure something out.

--Though we might disagree on many different issues, I expect you to treat the class, your fellow students, and me with respect at all times.

--Class Recordings: Class sessions may be recorded by the instructor. These recordings shall only be used as an educational resource and are not to be distributed or used outside of this class. Information on how to access recorded lectures will be made available by your instructor. Any recordings that contain identifiable information about students will not be used beyond this semester. Class Recording Etiquette: Students are expected to respect their fellow students' privacy and freedom to learn without disruption. Students are not allowed to capture or reproduce anyone's name, image, or voice without permission. They must be polite and respectful in the online chat. Informal chat is okay, but typing is restricted to things that one would say out loud in front of the entire class. Students must always conduct themselves on their webcam video as they would in person in a classroom.

-- *Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following the academic code of integrity policy that is found at:*

<http://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf>.

*Please note that it is my professional obligation and responsibility to report any academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. **Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university.** If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at [dos@njit.edu](mailto:dos@njit.edu)*  
--ChatGPT and other AI should only be used as approved by the instructor.  
--If you need support for any reason, please make use of our C-CAPS Staff at 973-596-3414.

### **Learning Outcomes:**

The Learning Outcomes for this course are as follows:

- a) track the changes and continuities in the American legal system related to murder in class discussion and written assignments
- b) identify how these changes came to pass in class discussion and written assignments
- c) demonstrate information literacy through the use of appropriate source material, original research, and the ability to cite properly. To excel in this course, you are expected to be able to locate and use web AND library resources effectively and cite them correctly. Our library has online research guides that you may find useful. Start here: [Research Guide for History](#).
- d) formulate an independent research question
- e) assess interpretive approaches and biases in secondary sources
- f) write a research essay with an original argument using primary and secondary sources

The following assignments will gauge students' success with these learning outcomes. The following scale will be used: A 90-100; B+ 87-89; B 80-86; C+ 77-79; C 70-76; D 60-69; F below 60:

--Faithful and active participation in class discussion. This includes discussing class readings and reflecting on your peers' work. You cannot actively participate if you are not present. (50 points)

--Previous class recap. You will sign up to recap aloud the previous class's main discussion and learning outcomes. This should be at most a 5-minute summary but allow a student who missed the previous class to gain some insights into the main discussion points. If you miss the day you are supposed to summarize or the day you are supposed to present, I will assign you a later date. Please do your best to avoid this and let me know in advance if it seems you'll have to miss class. (50 points)

--Discussion Board Posts. You will pick a significant quote from one of the assigned readings that week and explain its significance in 3-5 sentences on the class forum. Quotes and their explanations are due before class on Thursday. (150 points)

--Annotated bibliography worksheet. This bibliography should list different primary and secondary sources in the categories I designate. A short paragraph should describe each source. (150 points) **DUE OCTOBER 10**

--Prospectus. Prepare a 3-4 page prospectus of your project. Highlight your research problem/question, the type of evidence you will draw on as well as the methods you will use to analyze your data. Pay particular attention to the “so what” question or the relevance of your work. Explain how you plan to organize or structure your project. Include a revised version of your annotated bibliography. You should add at least one new source of your choosing (100 points) **DUE OCTOBER 19**

--Rough draft. This draft should be at least 12 pages to allow me to help you with the final version of your paper. It should include an introduction (based on your proposal, an argument (italicized in your introduction 25 points), at least 12 pages of your evidence (25 points), and footnotes in the Chicago Manual of Style formatting (25 points). It should be a word document (25 points). (100 points) **DUE NOVEMBER 16**

--Feedback on a classmate’s rough draft. I will assign you a partner, and you will provide the partner an oral and written assessment of their draft so far. I will provide a guide for you to follow for giving feedback. You will turn in the written version to both myself and your partner. (100 points) **DUE NOVEMBER 30**

--Poster and presentation at Poster Session. You will create a poster with images and written content to represent the main ideas of your final paper. The argument should be presented in red. You should also prepare a 2-3 minute summary to present when approached in the classroom by your peers or me. (50 points) **DUE DECEMBER 12**

--Final Paper. The purpose of the previous assignments is to prepare you to write the final research paper. The final paper should be 13-15 pages. All papers should make use of primary and secondary sources about a murder to make an argument about American history and law. (250 points) **DUE DECEMBER 17**

### **Assigned Text**

The readings will be available on **Canvas**.

*I reserve the right to make any changes to the syllabus that I deem necessary.*

### **Week 1: Murder and Human Nature**

Tue, Sep 5

--Introductions

Thu, Sep 7

--Karen Haltunnen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 2000), introduction.

--“Difference between First and Second Degree Murder?” Findlaw.com, June 2020, <https://www.findlaw.com/legalblogs/criminal-defense/difference-between-first-second-degree-murder/>

## **Week 2: Murder Rates and American Exceptionalism**

Tue, Sep 12

--Roger Lane, *Murder in America: A History* (Ohio State University Press, 1997), conclusion.

Thu, Sep 14

--Randall Roth, *American Homicide* (Harvard University Press, 2012), introduction.

**TOPICS DUE**

## **Week 3: What Counts as Murder? What Counts as Genocide?**

Tue, Sep 19

--Cornelia Hughes Dayton, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 48 (Jan. 1991), 19-49.

Thu, Sep 21

--Jeffrey Ostler, "'To Extirpate the Indians': An Indigenous Consciousness of Genocide in the Ohio Valley and Lower Great Lakes, 1750-1810," *William and Mary Quarterly* (October 2015), 587-622.

**DISCUSSION BOARD DUE**

## **Week 4: Murder and Vigilantism**

Tue, Sep 26

--Elizabeth Dale, "Getting Away with Murder," *American Historical Review* (February 2006), 95-103.

--Karlos K. Hill, "Black Vigilantism: The Rise and Decline of African American Lynch Mob Activity in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1883-1923," *The Journal of African American History* 95 (Winter 2010), 26-43.

Thu, Sep 28

--DANA LIBRARY VISIT

## **Week 5: The Insanity Defense and Slavery**

Tue, Oct 3

--Wilma King, "'Mad' Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts," *The Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007), 37-56.

Thu, Oct 5

--DANA LIBRARY VISIT

## **Week 6: Medical Expertise and Gender**

Tue, Oct 10

--Courtney E. Thompson, "The Curious Case of Chastine Cox: Murder, Race, and the Media in the Gilded Age," *Social History of Medicine* 32(2019), 481-501.

**ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE**

Thu, Oct 12

-- Lisa Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America," *Signs* (Summer 1993), 791-814.

## **Week 7: Murder and Race in the Progressive Era**

Tue, Oct 17

--Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery* (Princeton University Press, 2004), introduction and chapter 1.

Thu, Oct 19

--Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), chapter 2.

**PROPOSALS DUE**

### **Week 8: Murder and Race at Midcentury**

Tue, Oct 24

--Nancy MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism," *The Journal of American History* (December 1991), 917-948.

Thu, Oct 26

--Eduardo Obregon Pagan, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime LA* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Intro and chapter 1.

**DISCUSSION BOARD DUE**

### **Week 9: Individual Meetings**

Tue, Oct 31

Individual Meetings

Thu, Nov 2

Individual Meetings

**OUTLINE DUE**

### **Week 10: The Postwar Murder of Children and Civil Rights**

Tue, Nov 7

--Ruth Feldstein, "I Wanted the Whole World to See: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till," in *Not June Cleaver*.

Thu, Nov 9

--George Chauncey, "The Postwar Sex Crime Panic," in *True Stories of the American Past*, ed. William Graebner (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

**DISCUSSION BOARD DUE**

### **Week 11: Modern Medicine and Murder**

Tue, Nov 14

--Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Duke University Press, 2003), chapter 5.

Thu, Nov 16

--Sexing History podcast, episode 2 "Abortion on Trial"

**ROUGH DRAFT DUE TO CANVAS AND YOUR PARTNER**

### **Week 12: The State and Its Ability to Kill**

Tue, Nov 21

--Henry T. Nash, "The Bureaucratization of Homicide," *The Bulletin* (April 1980).

Thu, Nov 23

--Lauren Jae Gutterman, "Saving Jeannace June Freeman: Capital Punishment and the Lesbian as Victim in Oregon, 1961-1964," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (January 2018), 134-178.

**DISCUSSION BOARD DUE**

**Week 13: The 60s and Their Limitations**

Tue, Nov 28

--Jeffrey Melnick, *Charles Manson's Creepy Crawl: The Many Lives of America's Most Infamous Family* (Arcade Press, 2019), chapter 1.

Thu, Nov 30

--Edward J. Escobar, "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," *The Journal of American History* (March 1993), 1483-1514.

**PEER REVIEW DUE**

**Week 14: Modern Failures of Criminal Justice**

Tue, Dec 5

--Tera Agyepong, "In the Belly of the Beast: Black Policemen Combat Police Brutality in Chicago, 1968-1983," *Journal of African American History* 98 (Spring 2013), 253-276.

--Keisha N. Blain, "Ida B. Wells Offered the Solution to Police Violence more than 100 Years Ago," *Washington Post*, July 11, 2017.

Thu, Dec 7

--Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018), chapter 9.

**DISCUSSION BOARD DUE**

**Week 15: Presentations**

Tue, Dec 12

Poster Session

**Week 16**

**December 17**

Final Paper Due