

**Telling the Story:  
Redesigning a US History  
Survey for Deep Reading and  
Interpretive Narration**

Tom Okie, Associate Professor of History

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# Agenda

1. The Challenge
2. Attempted Interventions
3. Research Question
4. Intervention
5. Results
6. Implications

# The Challenge

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*A lot of stuff happened in between 1877 and 2018*

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*History is (supposedly) more about joining a conversation than memorizing facts and dates*

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*We have only fifteen weeks in a semester*

*(or ten days in a maymester!)*

# Attempted Interventions

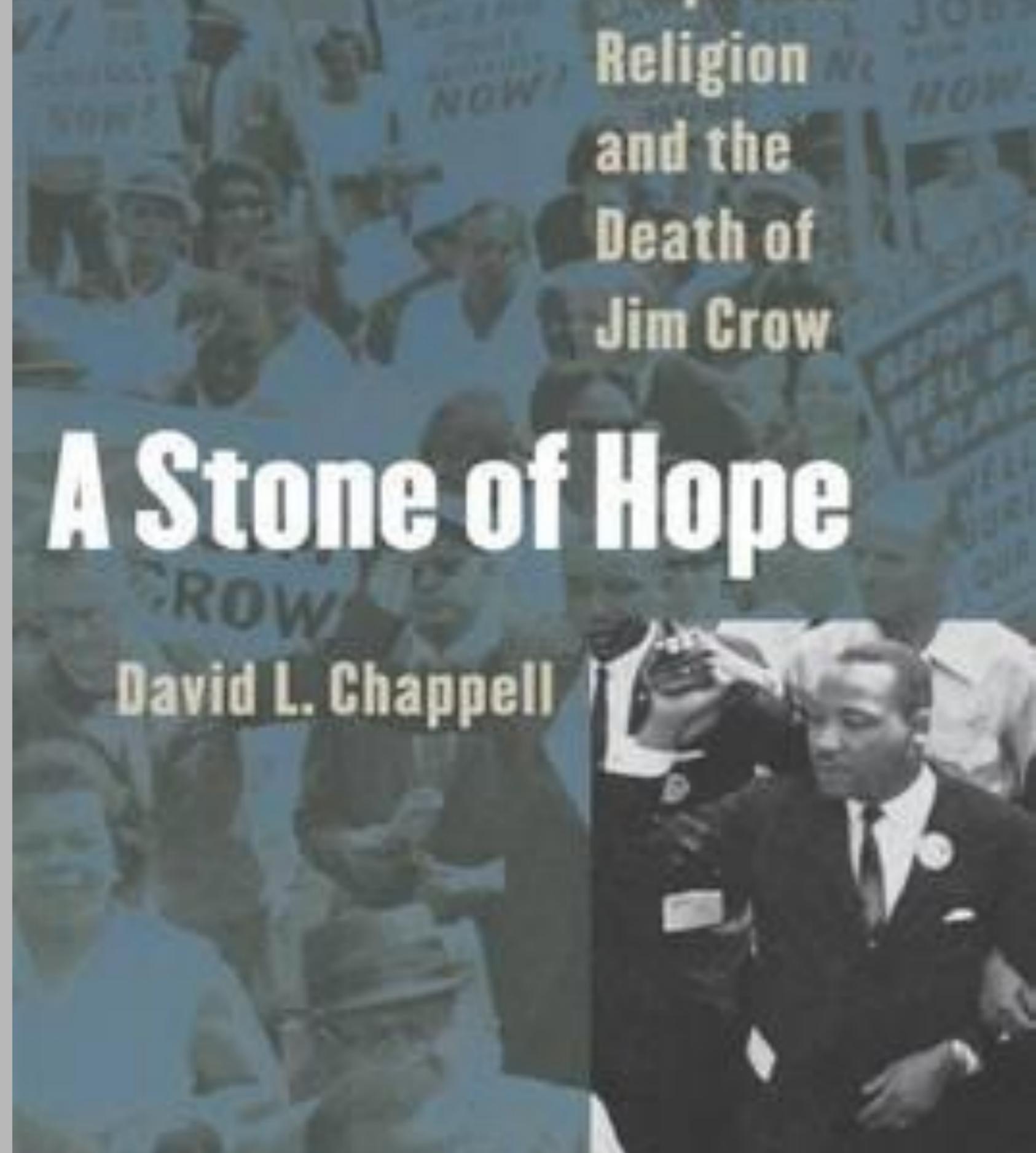
1.No textbook (primary sources only)

# Attempted Interventions

1. ~~No textbook (primary sources only)~~ *Lectures weren't quite enough to sustain the narrative.*
2. All textbook (quizzes, multiple choice exams)

# Attempted Interventions

1. ~~No textbook (primary sources only)~~ Lectures weren't quite enough to sustain the narrative.
2. ~~All textbook (quizzes, multiple choice exams)~~ If the historian in the room is bored . . . we have a problem.
3. Modest success with monographs (2012–2015)



# Research Question

Given that . . .

- College students *should* read books
- College students *can* read books, if properly equipped
- *Could structuring a history survey around reading books improve student engagement and performance?*

# The Intervention: Maymester 2018

1. Forty-five hours

2. Ten days

3. Eleven students

4. Three learning objectives:

1. narrate a story of US history since 1877, including major historical, political, social, and institutional developments

2. summarize, analyze, and interpret texts and artifacts (historical *traces*)

3. summarize, evaluate, and construct historical arguments and narratives (historical *accounts*)

# AMERICAN CRUCIBLE

RACE AND NATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Updated with a new chapter on the Age of Obama



## Maymester 2018: The Book

Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, revised edition (Princeton University Press, 2017).

# Maymester 2018: The Book

- A thematic interpretation of American history since 1890
- A theoretical basis: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*
- An argument: racial vs. civic nationalism the central tension in American history; the decisive role of war
- Evidence: synthetic, but with considerable analysis of primary sources (for instance, Frank Capra's movies)

# Maymester 2018: The Exams (40%)

## 1. Midterm and Final Exams

- Timeline
- IDs
- Document Interpretation
- Final Exam Essay: Racial vs. Civic Nationalism

Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *Between the World and Me* (2015):

*Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage. . . . the right to break the black body [is] the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has always given them meaning. . . . There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, tumble out of the Dream.*

Philosopher Jason D. Hill responded in "Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Dream is Real" in *Commentary* magazine:

*This is America, where chromosomal predestination must be challenged by individual achievement. This is America, where a third Founding (taking Lincoln's promise at Gettysburg as the second) was achieved in the civil-rights movement and the momentous passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The inclusive promise of We the People was finally delivered to all peoples in this country. America has always been a place of regeneration, renewal, and self-examination, a place where peoplehood is not a given or a smug achievement but, rather, a long and continuous aspiration.*

Which interpretation, Hill's or Coates's, of American history is more compelling to you? In other words, has racial nationalism or civic nationalism been more prevalent in American history since 1890? In your response:

- Begin by defining civic nationalism and racial nationalism
- State your stance on the question of which one has been more prevalent since 1890
- Use at least 1 episode from 1890–1945 and at least 1 episode from 1945–2001, both addressed by Gary Gerstle in *The American Crucible*, to support your argument. You may use additional episodes or information from our discussions or documents in addition, if you wish.
- Keep your response to *no more than* four (4) pages.

# Maymester 2018: Reading Response Essays (RREs) (40%)

- At least two essays, according to a pre-assigned schedule.
- Grading: Exceeds (100), Meets (85), Needs Improvement (70), Fails to Meet (50)
- Model Essay Posted to D2L

# RRE Specifications: Show You Read

- Summarize the chapter. Using your notes and underlines, briefly *summarize* the chapter in your own words, being careful to
  - 1) state the argument(s) of the chapter and explain how it fits with the book's argument,
  - 2) describe the body of evidence used to make that argument, and
  - 3) narrate the story of the chapter by pointing out major people, places, events and themes addressed in the chapter.
- Please note that *summary is harder than it looks*. Going line by line (First he says . . . then he says . . . ) can be excellent when note-taking, but not when writing. You have to determine what is most important.
- Use one or two well-chosen quotations as evidence (cited with page numbers) either parenthetically or with footnotes, but do NOT quote large sections of text (no block quotes).

# RRE Specifications: Show your thought by doing one or both of the following:

- *Evaluate* the chapter. How successful are the author's arguments and his/her use of evidence? Is the author ignoring anything important, and if so, how would including that change his/her argument or narrative?
- *Analyze* the chapter. Though "analyze" is a word we throw around a lot in education, it's *not* a synonym for "evaluate" or "describe." Webster's 1913 dictionary defines "analyze" as: "to resolve (anything complex) into its elements; to separate into the constituent parts, for the purpose of an examination of each separately; to examine in such a manner as to ascertain the elements or nature of the thing examined." Picture an ecologist determining what an animal ate by picking apart its stool. When you analyze a piece of writing, you pick it apart. You can do this either thematically or structurally. How does the piece's narrative or argument fit together? How does the author's evidence support the argument? To what extent do the sections of the chapter or book build on or contradict one another?

# Maymester 2018: Other Assignments

- Daily Sheets (10%) (end of class formative assessments)
  - term identifications (IDs)
  - document interpretations
  - a timeline
  - a self-assessment
- Attendance (10%)
- Extra Credit Cell Phone Policy (HT: Ivy Holliman Way) (2%)

*To encourage your attentiveness, I will offer up to 2% extra credit for simply leaving your phone at the front of the room during class. At the beginning of class, students who choose to participate will leave their phone at a designated table in the front of the room and initial a cell-phone sign-in sheet for that day. At the end of class, I will remind students to take their phones. In the event that a student does forget, I will bring it to the front desk secretary in the History Department (4th floor of Social Sciences building).*

# Results

1. Grades: 6 As, 2 Bs, 3 Cs

2. Engagement:

- "I've never experienced history in that way."
- A daily conversation about *interpretations* of the past: students, myself, and Gary.

3. Learning Objectives:

1. narrate a story of US history since 1877, including major historical, political, social, and institutional developments
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# Implications: Education as Invitation

*Until then, I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of a long centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors.*

—Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 286.

# Implications: Education as Invitation

*In any case, whether and how we educate people is still a direct reflection of the degree of freedom we expect them to have, or want them to have. . . . Americans are offered a future in which their particular interests, gifts, and values will have minimal likelihood of expression, since those interests, gifts, and values are not likely to suit the uses of whatever employment is on offer.\**

*. . . [T]here is a vast educational culture in this country, unlike anything else in the world. It emerged from a glorious sense of the possible and explored and enhanced the possible through the spread of learning. If it seems to be failing now, that may be because we have forgotten what the university is for, why the libraries are built like cathedrals and surrounded by meadows and flowers. They are a tribute and an invitation to the young, who can and should make the world new, out of the unmapped and unbounded resource of their minds.*

—Marilynne Robinson, “Save Our Public Universities,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Mar. 2016, 2–

# Implications: Education as Invitation

*We ought to school our children not only to enable them to perform their tasks in life but also to open up to them joys and delights and satisfactions that otherwise would be unavailable. . . . Schooling, well conducted, expands the range and depth of delight available to a human being.\**

—Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Task and Invitation," *Educating for Life: Reflections on Christian Teaching and Learning*, edited by Gloria Goris Stronks and Clarence W. Joldersma (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

# References

- On historical thinking, see: Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006): 1358–1370; Bruce VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- On reading books, see Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books: Essays* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012); Paul N. Edwards, "How to Read a Book, v5.0" <https://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtoread.pdf>.
- On educating for delight, see Marilynne Robinson, "Save Our Public Universities," *Harper's Magazine*, Mar. 2016, 2–11; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Task and Invitation," *Educating for Life: Reflections on Christian Teaching and Learning*, edited by Gloria Goris Stronks and Clarence W. Joldersma (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).