HIST 4123: Slander and Libel in Anglo-American History, 1500 to the Present
University of North Texas, Fall 2026
Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:10am–12:30pm
GATE 142

Instructor: Dr. Samuel Fullerton
samuel.fullerton@unt.edu
Wooten Hall 265
Office Hours: Mondays, 1:00pm-3:00pm, and by appointment

This course explores the history of name-calling in Anglo-American culture from the late medieval period to the beginning of the 21st century. As we will learn, in contrast to that familiar adage about "sticks and stones," personal insults have remained one of the most persistent concerns of legal, spiritual, and political authorities in Britain and North America since the beginning of the early modern era. Over the next fifteen weeks, we will examine how those attitudes have developed since 1500, paying close attention to the ways in which they relate to broader ideas about press censorship, free speech, and the law. In the process, we will also assess many ostensibly unrelated historical themes – from medieval antisemitism to the Civil Rights Movement – in a new light.

Our class meetings will feature a mixture of lectures and seminar-style discussions based on the day's assigned readings. Regular participation in those conversations, in addition to a strong performance on the additional assignments described in this syllabus, is essential to achieving a satisfactory grade in the course.

Learning Objectives

- Students will develop a historical understanding of written and oral defamation as a legal, cultural, and political phenomenon as it developed in two distinct but related national contexts.
- Students will practice reading, writing, and thinking like historians through a variety of short- and long-form writing assignments.
- Students will complete a lengthy research paper on a topic of their choosing.

Required Texts

During the next fifteen weeks, we will engage with a wide variety of primary sources relating to libelous language in England and the United States from 1500 to the present. All readings will be made available on Canvas; you do not need to purchase any books for this course. **However, please note that you will need to acquire access to the film *Denial* (2016) for viewing on your own time sometime prior to our meeting on Wednesday, 11/11.**

Course Assignments and Grading

Your final grade is calculated from the following categories. Please note that a significant percentage of your grade is drawn from the participation portion of the course. Students will also serve (as a part of a small group) as a discussion leader once during the semester and complete a large original research project. Final exams will take the form of a face-to-face oral exam conducted by the instructor, to be completed sometime during the final week of the semester.

Attendance and Participation (25% of your total course grade)
Per UNT's Student Attendance Policy, I expect you to attend class diligently, to read all assigned texts carefully, and to participate in class regularly. Persistent failure to appear in class and/or actively contribute to discussion will result in a significantly lower participation grade. Students who attend class regularly but do not routinely participate in our discussions should not expect to receive higher than a C on this course component, while students who do not appear in class at all should expect to receive a 0 (which, in this class, will automatically put you out of both the A and B range for your overall course grade). Please note that you will not have access to digital copies of our readings during in-class discussion, so if you need a reference in hand for those conversations, you will need to print them out in hard copy before class.

Discussion Leadership (15% of your total course grade)
During one week of the upcoming semester, you and at least one of your peers will be tasked with leading one of our Thursday discussion meetings; see the "Discussion Leadership Guide" for further details. In consultation with me, you will read the assigned texts carefully and put together a lesson plan. Your grade will be based on your familiarity with the material and preparedness for class as well as your completion of a short one-page reflection after the experience is over. A word of advice: the more you participate during someone else's discussion leadership day, the more likely they are to repay you in kind – so speak up!

Research Paper (40% of your total course grade – breakdown below)
The major writing assignment for this course will be an original, primary source-driven research project designed in consultation with me. It will take one of two forms: you will either select a historical libel of your choosing (and not already discussed in class) and then research, write, and revise a substantial (12-15 pages) paper on that topic; **OR** you will write a substantive analysis of how the history of defamation complicates or richens our understanding of a major historical event within the chronological and geographic bounds of our course. We will approach the research and writing process gradually and collaboratively: you will submit an initial proposal (**5%**) and then a rough draft (**10%**) for peer review (**5%**) before turning in the final, completed essay (**20%**) by midnight on **Wednesday, 12/9**. Details of each component of this assignment are available on Canvas.

Research Presentations (10% of your total course grade)
On Wednesday, 12/2, students will deliver a short (3-4 minutes) presentation on their research topic of choice. Your presentation should include a visual component (PowerPoint, Google Slides, etc.) and showcase the core components of your paper's contextual background, overarching argument, and primary-source evidence. Students should be prepared for Q&A.

Oral Comprehensive Exam (10% of your total course grade)
In lieu of a written final exam, your mastery of course content will be assessed during an in-person, twenty-minute oral exam conducted one-on-one with me sometime during exam week. I will provide you with a study guide listing possible questions well in advance of the examination period. If you can sufficiently demonstrate your mastery of course content during our conversation, you will receive full marks; conversely, failure to demonstrate your engagement with course material will result in a lower grade. Each student will have the opportunity for one practice round, my schedule permitting, prior to exam week. More information to follow.

Course Policies and Procedures

The following course policies apply both in and outside of the classroom. Please note that changes to the course calendar may occur, especially in the event of unforeseen campus closures (which will be communicated to you by Eagle Alert). Additionally, the instructor reserves the right to alter this syllabus at any time during the semester.

Academic Integrity:

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in any form in this class. If you are caught while engaging in academically dishonest activity (including unauthorized use of generative AI technology – see below), you will receive a failing grade for the course and you will be reported to the appropriate university authorities. If I suspect that you have submitted work for grading that is not wholly your own, I reserve the right to call you into my office for an in-person conversation about the work in question. Failure to demonstrate your mastery of the submitted material in those discussions will be taken as evidence of an integrity violation, and I will alter your grade accordingly. Students are responsible for learning to recognize what constitutes academic dishonesty; ignorance is not an excuse. For further information, see UNT's Academic Integrity Policy.

Accommodations:

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access). You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

Canvas Grade Reporting:

Canvas is a useful tool for sharing grade updates with you quickly and comprehensively, and we will use it in that fashion throughout the coming months. However, please be aware that the comprehensive (i.e. the "assignments" and "total" tabs) grades listed on Canvas **do not** represent your actual grade in the course. The primary reason for this is that I do not have the time to update your discussion scores for each class session multiple times per week in the LMS. If you want to know your grade at any point in the semester, come see me in office hours – I do not respond to grade requests via email, per FERPA's requirements – or do the math yourself using the percentages laid out in the preceding section.

Course Resources:
In order to make this class as accessible and enjoyable as possible, I will provide you with an array of additional resources through Canvas to aid in reviewing, essay-writing, and exam prep. They include a "Guide to Written Assignments," which offers a formatting guide, an introduction to Chicago-style citation, and a few helpful hints for writing argumentative historical essays, as well as a "Course Lecture Questions" document, updated daily, which collects all of our central lecture themes in one convenient place. Additionally, all lecture slides will be made available on Canvas, as will a variety of other important course and campus resources. Please note that these materials are intended to supplement our time together in class rather than to replace it; if you do not show up regularly, they will almost certainly not save you from a poor grade.

Late Assignments:
All overdue writing assignments will be penalized with a **25%** grade deduction per day late. Generally, I will not accept late submissions more than **three days** after the announced deadline except in cases of medical emergency and/or those falling under the approved categories identified in UNT's attendance policy. It is not possible to make up in-class quizzes or exams unless the absence falls under those same categories.

Statement on Generative AI:
Generative AI technology has made an outsized impact on the shape of higher education since its public debut in November 2022. Although this new toolset may well offer opportunities for doing good in the world, I also believe that it does not necessarily enhance your ability to achieve the course objectives laid out in this syllabus; in fact, if employed uncritically, it is much more likely to do the opposite by robbing you of the opportunity to do hard, meaningful analytical thinking on your own. Accordingly, while you may use GenAI tools for studying purposes, I expect that all graded work submitted for evaluation in this class will be conceived, sourced, and written entirely your own words. Any unauthorized use of GenAI in that context will be treated as an academic integrity violation.

Further information related to course content and other campus resources is available on Canvas.

Course Schedule and Weekly Readings

**indicates student-led discussion meeting.

Week One: What is a Libel?

Monday, 8/17: Course Introduction
Reading: None.

Wednesday, 8/19: Historicizing Libel
Reading: Fox, "Ballads, Libels, and Popular Ridicule"
"Libel" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*
Also due (for bonus): Initial course survey

Week Two: Laying the Groundwork

Monday, 8/24: Defamation as a Legal and Social Problem
Reading: *Scandalum Magnatum* (1275)
Muldrew, "Cultural Currency of Credit"

Wednesday, 8/26: Defamation as a Political and Religious Problem
Reading: "Sir Hugh, or the Jew's Daughter"
"The Martyrdom of William of Norwich"
Gregory X, "Against the Blood Libel"
Suggs, "Blood Libel: The Origins of a Conspiracy Theory"

Week Three: A Libelous Reformation

Monday, 8/31: Writing Workshop I: Choosing a Topic
Reading: Presnell, "Historians and the Research Process"

Wednesday, 9/2: England's Libelous Reformation
Reading: Matthew 18: 15-17
Keene, "Furnaces of all letcherousness"

Week Four: Defamation and Gender

Monday, 9/7: **Labor Day holiday. No class.**

Wednesday, 9/9: The *Querelle des Femmes***
Reading: Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult"
Swetnam, *The Araignment of…Women*
Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*

Week Five: A Changing Legal Landscape

Monday, 9/14: New Limits on Libel
Reading: Coke's report on *De Libellis Famosis*
Bacon, "Of Seditions and Troubles"

Wednesday, 9/16: From Underground Verse to Civil War
Reading: "Downe came grave autient Sir John Crooke…"
"Were itt nott a brutish crueltye…"
"From such a face whose Excellence..."
Bellany and Cogswell, "Murderer Most Eminent"
Worden, "As Bad As Poisoned"

Week Six: Licensing, Censorship, and Libel

Monday, 9/21: Writing Workshop: The Library, ft. Doug Campbell, UNT Libraries.
Reading: None.
Also due: A one-sentence description of a possible research question. Send to me via email before class begins: samuel.fullerton@unt.edu.

Wednesday, 9/23: Press Control and the "Golden Age of Satire"**
Reading: Defoe, "The Shortest-Way with Dissenters"
Pope, *The Dunciad*
Swift, "A Libel on Dr. Delany"

Week Seven: Crossing Lines

Monday, 9/28: The Press Contested in Early America
Reading: *Brief Narrative…*
Blackstone, "Of Offenses Against the Public Peace"

Wednesday, 9/30: The Ugliest Man in England
Reading: *North Briton No. 45*
Wilkes, *A Letter to His Grace*

Week Eight: Libel and Revolution

Monday, 10/5: A Libelous Revolution
Reading: Bailyn, "Power and Liberty"
"Vengeance on the Tories!"
The Declaration of His Majesty's American Loyalists

Wednesday, 10/7: Scandal and Slander in the Early Republic**
Reading: Hamilton, *The Reynolds Pamphlet*
Sedition Act of 1798

Week Nine: Libel and the Slave Trade

Monday, 10/12: Writing Workshop: Conceptualizing Your Project
Reading: None.
Also due: **Initial proposal** for research paper. Submit via Canvas.

Wednesday, 10/14: Abusing Abolitionism
Reading: Garrison, *A Brief Sketch of the Trial of William Lloyd Garrison*

Week Ten: Libel and the Body

Monday, 10/19: The Maharaj Case
Reading: Libel Act of 1843
Report of the Maharaj Libel Case

Wednesday, 10/21: The Travails of Oscar Wilde**
Reading: Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
Nast, *Oscar Wilde as Narcissus*
"Speech of Sir Edward Clarke"

Week Eleven: Libel, Industry, and the Press

Monday, 10/26: The Man with the Muckrake
Reading: Roosevelt, *Three Panama Messages*
"New York World Repeats Tale of Panama Graft"

Wednesday, 10/28: Automobiles and Antisemitism
Reading: Segel, *A Lie and A Libel*

Week Twelve: Libels Amid the Cold War

Monday, 11/2: The (Second) Red Scare
Reading: Lattimore, *Ordeal by Slander*

Wednesday, 11/4: The "Johannesburg of America"**
Reading: "Heed Their Rising Voices," *The New York Times*
US Senate, "Report…with Respect to Intelligence Activities"

Week Thirteen: Denying the Holocaust

Monday, 11/9: **Film viewing day**. **No class.**
Reading: Watch *Denial* (2016)

Wednesday, 11/11: History on Trial
Reading: Rosenbaum, "The Roots of Holocaust Denial"
Lyall, "London Trial Opens Dispute on Rewriting the Holocaust"
Freedland, "Court 73 – Where History is on Trial"
Dodd, "Irving: Rabid Racist or Vilified Victim?"
Freedland, "Let's Close the Book"

Week Fourteen: Libel Goes Mainstream

Monday, 11/16: Writing Workshop: Putting It All Together
Reading: None, but bring an **outline** and a **draft thesis statement** to class.

Wednesday, 11/18: The "McLibel"**
Reading: "What's Wrong with McDonalds?"
"Summary of the Judgement"

Week of 11/23 – 11/27: Fall break. No class.

Week Fifteen: The Future of Defamation

Monday, 11/30: Coda: A New Paradigm
Reading: Lewinsky, "Cyberbullying"
(watch) Lewinsky, "The Price of Shame"
Garfield, "The Death of Slander"
Also due: **Rough drafts** of research paper. Bring a hard copy to class for peer review.

Wednesday, 12/2: **Research presentations.**
Reading: None.

Final drafts of research papers due on **Wednesday, 12/9**; **oral exams** to be scheduled during exam week.