What if the Confederacy had won the US Civil War? Could it really have happened? And if so, how exactly? Since the nineteenth century, literature has been a place to ponder, speculate about, and reason through alternative courses of history, raising questions about the role of the individual, the extent of free will, and the nature of history itself. This course exposes students to the various ways that literature has imagined the historical counterfactual, and the various political and personal ends of these “roads not taken.”

We will trace the way that the concept of a historical crux emerged over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on some famous moments where multiple outcomes seemed possible—from Napoleon’s bungled Russian invasion, to the possibility of a Confederate victory, to Hitler’s long-threatened, never-actualized plan to invade England. We will examine the way that the historical crux is represented in a variety of texts, beginning with historical novels that seem both to entertain alternative possibilities and at the same time to close them off. Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) are each ambiguous in their stance toward the status quo, raising questions as to whether the defeat of the Highlanders and Confederates is being celebrated or mourned. By contrast, Emma Pérez’s, *Forgetting the Alamo, or, Blood Memory* (2009)—whose protagonist is a Chicana lesbian cowgirl in nineteenth-century Texas—uses historical fiction to depict viewpoints missing from the archive.

Whereas these historical novels can flirt with or long for an alternative history, in the latter half of the course we turn toward alternate-history novels that squarely depart from history as their premise. The newer genre of the alternate-history novel nevertheless raises similar questions to those that animate the historical novel, prompting readers to think probabilistically about the way history unfolds. Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004) examine the limits of individual agency within larger socioeconomic, demographic, and ideological shifts, while Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) registers anxieties about the present by imagining that the USA was swept up in the fascism that catalyzed World War II.

Frequent informal writing assignments throughout the course will culminate in a research paper on a topic of the student’s choice, which they will present orally at the end of the semester.

**Learning Goals**
1) To develop our analytical writing, research and communication skills through blog posts, formal essays, and a conference-style oral presentation at the end of the semester
2) to explore the ways literature has meditated on the counterfactual in history
3) to appreciate the uneasy relationship between (alternate-)historical fiction and the status quo
4) to extrapolate writers’ assumptions about the nature of history, the role of the individual, and the extent of free will from the way they imagine alternate histories
5) to think critically about our own project of studying the past by examining the way writers do it
Sample Assignments

On Historical Fiction:

- Using Georg Lukács’s definition of the genre in *The Historical Novel* (Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. London: Merlin Press, 1962), analyze a work of historical fiction that you are already familiar with from popular culture or your outside reading. Write a 3-page paper that discusses why the historical fiction you chose does or does not meet Lukács’s criteria for the genre. Hint: it probably doesn’t.

- Often, people who read historical fiction learn things about history that they wouldn’t otherwise know. Reading historical fiction when you don’t know the historical backdrop is a strange experience, one that writers may or may not anticipate. Have you ever read historical fiction as history? Write a 300-500-word blog post that discusses your experiences. What do you get from historical fiction that you don’t get from regular fiction? And what do you get from historical fiction that you don’t get from history writing?

- In your small group, craft a rebuttal to Carol Gluck’s article, “Infinite Mischief?: History and Literature Once Again” (*Representations* 124 (2013): 125-131). Gluck uses the scandal over three recent French historical novels about the Holocaust to meditate on the persistent anxieties about the relationship between history and literature, arguing that it would be unfair to hold historical novels to a higher standard of “truth” than we hold other novels. Prepare for an oral debate with another small group on the question: Does the historical novelist have a responsibility to the truth?

On Alternate-Historical Fiction:

- Alternate-history novels are always saying something about our present. But how exactly do they do this, and where does the parallel break down? Write a 5-page paper that examines one or two passages from Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, analyzing the way that novel signals that it is talking about the twenty-first century as well as the twentieth, but also the ways it seems to discourage our tendency to read with an eye toward the present.

- For your final assignment, write an 8-10-page research paper that uses Roger Ransom’s alternate-history *The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been* (New York: Norton, 2005) to analyze the 2004 mockumentary *CSA*. The film departs from the historical record at what Ransom would consider an unlikely crux. What does this point of departure allow the film to suggest about the processes of history? About individual agency within larger movements and trends? And about the way that history can be witnessed by the individuals living through it? What can fictional mockumentary accomplish that Ransom’s imaginative, but rigorously researched alternate-history cannot?