Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* makes several valuable contributions to the field of international history, not least of which is his provocative argument. As his title suggests, Westad has two projects: first, to explain the intricacies of an area of Cold War history that has been largely neglected; and second, to describe the emergence of the modern world and its attendant problems of terrorism, rogue states, and political instability.

Westad’s historical argument focuses on the ideology of policymaking elites. According to Westad, “The United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics.” Far before World War II, the United States sought to expand its vision of liberty to the wider world. The American elite saw its ideology as the way of the world, the definitive conclusion of natural historical processes. This fervor drove American foreign policy to its interventions in Cuba, the Philippines, Haiti, and World War I. In the postwar era, according to Westad’s narrative, a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the Soviet Union drove further interventions in order to secure America’s future alongside these concerns. On the other hand, the Soviet Union sought to establish an “empire of justice,” drawing on the spirit (if not the spirituality) of reformers in the late Russian Empire as well as Leninist theory. Like policymakers in the US, The Soviet elite shared the concern over security in the postwar era.

Both superpowers saw the Third World as a crucial battleground in the struggle for dominance. Westad goes so far as to suggest that they saw it as the crucial battleground, even as both American and Soviet ideology claimed to be anti-imperialist. “The most important aspects of the Cold War were neither military nor strategic, nor Europe-centered, but connected to political and social development in the Third World,” he claims. He catalogues a long train of abuses at the hands of American and Soviet policymakers, demonstrating how their sense of insecurity left the Third World in ruins and the First World facing grim prospects. Westad’s source base concerning both sets of policymakers is adequate to the task. A great deal of attention is given to official government documents, but also to unofficial memos, conversations, and interviews with the parties involved. His fluency in Russian is particularly useful here, as he explores several large archives that appear to be treasure troves of information. He also relies in great part on public documents: radio broadcasts, official speeches, and monographs written by the academic wing of the policy establishment. The geographic span of the work is impressive, taking us from the downfalls of Arbenz in Guatemala and Mossadeq in Iran to Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Somalia,
South Yemen, Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Nicaragua, and South Africa. His text is truly a work in “international history.”

Nonetheless, there are several serious problems with Westad’s methodology and perspective that taint this otherwise excellent book. The first is Westad’s broad claim. Westad’s focus on the Third World as the central battlefield of the Cold War overlooks events in Europe, which he seems to neglect. Also absent is serious attention to the agency of elites in countries that did not subscribe to either ideological pole, such as Charles De Gaulle’s government in France. Furthermore, little attention is paid to the populations of the countries subject to these interventions. These populations and their elites become little more than victims in Westad’s book, helpless human projectiles buffeted back and forth between a bipolar ideological world.

While this reviewer welcomes a discussion of elites and their ideologies, Westad fails to treat these groups with equal attention. Personal papers and correspondence appear to have been consulted to a far greater degree in the Soviet collections. This complicates his chapters when Soviet policymakers are under examination, but its lack is felt in the chapters covering the American elites, who Westad seems to conflate into a monolithic composite. Perhaps if he had taken greater care to examine the interests of these elites and the differences between personal, ideological, and bureaucratic rivals, his view of ideology’s role would have been complicated on the American side as well. These ideologies were hardly simple, and by relying on narrow segments of evidence his broadly conclusions are on somewhat shaky ground.

Indeed, these gaps in methodology may have been intended to buttress Westad’s broader political message—his commentary on contemporary American foreign policy. Westad makes no attempt to hide his personal views throughout the Acknowledgements, Introduction, and Conclusion. The last is particularly galling: “Seen from a Third World perspective, the results of America’s interventions are truly dismal. Instead of being a force for good—which they were no doubt intended to be—these incursions have devastated many societies and left them vulnerable to further disasters of their own making,” he writes. This is undeniable in many cases, but one wonders if Westad overstates his case. America’s direct and indirect military interventions in the Third World during the Cold War were rarely pleasant, but American foreign policy was not solely focused on military matters. The emergence of high-yield crops from American scientists as well as American and Soviet contributions to disease eradication were extremely helpful to the Third World.

Westad also rarely takes the Soviet Union to task. He might undoubtedly argue that this was because the U.S. was the victor of the Cold War, and to the victor go the spoils of history. Yet it is worth noting (and Westad does, to his credit) that American intervention in Afghanistan was key to sapping the Soviet Union’s strength, thus bringing down a brutally oppressive series of regimes across Asia and Europe. Whether or not this geopolitical calculus is moral or not is beyond the scope of this review, but it is certainly contested. Westad’s analysis of Islamic terrorism rising out of America’s interventions abroad is biting, but if it rings true, it is slightly off-key. America’s support for Israel and its role in overthrowing Mossadeq and installing the Shah were certainly important factors in the rise of Islamic terrorism. However, it is possible that the ideology espoused by Islamic fundamentalists was bound to conflict with the comparatively liberal culture of the United States, regardless of its interventions.
In fact, even if Islamic terrorism does stem in part from American interventions, it is worth noting that several of these—Afghanistan in the 1980s, Kuwait in 1991, Somalia in 1992, and Kosovo in the 1990s—were in defense of Muslims in the developing world. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that one of Osama bin Laden's reasons for declaring jihad against the United States stemmed from that mystical creature that Westad approves of so glowingly: multilateral intervention. When the United States used Saudi Arabia as a base in its U.N.-mandated intervention during Operation Desert Storm, bin Laden took his homeland to task for allowing infidels to share the same soil as the land of Mecca and Medina. Westad's mark may seem easy, but the story is far more complicated than he allows. It is unclear that he would have been satisfied with any of the option that United States undertook while weighted with the burden of superpower status.

Will Quinn
Cambridge, MA
2010

Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power
Reviewer: Christopher Olsen

It has been six years since the publication of the paperback edition of Niall Ferguson’s Empire, but its compelling conclusions, grounded in the story of an empire that controlled at one time roughly one-quarter of the world’s lands and its peoples, are no less worthy of consideration than they were in 2004. Empire is a historical work of tremendous scope: it considers half a millennium of some of the most momentous events in not only Western, but world history. Its tale is a necessarily a global one, and Mr. Ferguson needs expend little effort in convincing readers of the importance of studying a global power which played an indispensable role in the formation of the modern era. The unique voice with which Ferguson tells this story is difficult to describe. He treats his reader as a newcomer guest at the gala Empire, where he, as the knowledgeable and gregarious host, takes the reader by the hand and introduces her to the luminaries, the architects and inhabitants of empire, one-by-one. Indeed, while one expects Ferguson to excel where he discusses the financial history of the British Empire, and he does not disappoint in his traditional forte, he is unexpectedly gifted in tracing the history of Imperial Britain through the individuals who helped build it, define and redefine its purpose and conscience, and ultimately cope with its dismantlement. Ferguson’s tale is one not only of GDP growth rates and capital markets, but of the human capital, the individual enterprise that built the most powerful empire of its time, and arguably that the world has ever known.

Wherever possible, Ferguson forces a reconsideration of the popular modern concept of empire: one of pure exploitation, slavery, racism, and cultural extermination. This willingness to reconsider such a sensitive issue could perhaps provoke accusations that he is an apologist for imperialism, but in this, his crowning work on the topic, any such charge is wholly unfounded. Ferguson does not gloss over the negative consequences of Britain’s imperial past. He describes in
detail “the over-crowding, poor hygiene, lack of exercise, and inadequate diet,” of transported slaves, describes as “bogus disciplines” the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and eugenics which sought to establish and legitimize ideas of white racial superiority, and substantively discusses British concentration camps wherein thousands died following the Boer Wars. Instead of lamenting the tragedies of empire and then ceasing analysis, as it would be easy to do, Empire acknowledges tragedy, but then explains that the British Empire did so much more than spread suffering. The British Empire as described in this book was a self-doubting one, where its citizens constantly reevaluated their own role in the suffering of others. It was an empire of conscience, one which recognized its own folly in initiating the slave trade, and then made its cessation a central goal of its foreign policy, one which is notable for the degree to which it spread free market ideals, stable democratic governments, and modern communications and transportation technology, not for its cruelty. Indeed, the willingness with which Britain allowed its imperial holdings to slip away, which Empire argues was partially the result of a necessary and conscious sacrifice in order to prevent Nazi domination of Europe, sets Imperial Britain up as a nation willing to sacrifice its own identity for the far greater good.

Especially relevant to today’s reader are Empire’s conclusions about the current state and future of American empire. America, it would appear, is at a crossroads, where the two roads diverged in the wood are one of continuing informal empire and another where America shrugs off its traditional reluctance to rule over other peoples and accepts itself as heir of the British Imperial legacy. Ferguson does not argue in favor of either path, only explaining that both are possible future identities for an America in the midst of an era of self-reflection. Should Columbia at some point rule the land, the sky, or the paths of orbit around the Earth as Britannia once ruled the waves, then it should look to the British Empire for lessons in how to manage its new identity. The sense of enterprise and enthusiasm for spreading its way of life to foreign places that the peoples of Imperial Britain possessed are a central part of the American identity. It would be foolish for America to consider Imperial Britain only as a relic of the past, for if Ferguson is to be believed, what has been could in America’s future yet be again.

Empire’s most contentious argument, in essence that British Empire was not nearly as destructive to the peoples and ways of life in its colonies as its imperial competitors, is perhaps its greatest weakness. Although Ferguson does not use such a term, there is a certain implication that, if there were to be a “good empire,” it would be Imperial Britain. Ferguson does not make this point blindly; he relies on a solid grouping of sources to back up his claim. Ultimately, while a reader open to reinterpretation of the British Imperial legacy would very likely be swayed by the argument in Empire, one who believes resolutely in the evils of imperialism will likely remain unconvinced. Whether or not one accepts the portrait of the British Empire that Ferguson has created, it is impossible to dismiss Empire. It is an informative work, both entertaining and sobering, and well worth reading.

The Discovery of France: a Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War
Reviewed by Bliss Leonard
A number of works have described the explosion of unifications in the late nineteenth century—Germany, Italy, even post-bellum America—but Graham Robb’s *The Discovery of France* may be the first book to explore the unification of France. Well into the nineteenth century, no more than ten percent of the population spoke what we think of as French. Before the birth of the French nation state, there was no “France,” per se, but rather territory vaguely controlled by the “French” government; even the absolutism of Louis XIV loses its certitude when faced with Robb’s magnificent deconstruction of the creation of France. To assuage any semantic quibbles before the substance of the review, you will forgive this reviewer the use of the term “France” to mean the territory of the country currently known by that name.

Robb organizes his exploration of France into two roughly chronological parts. The first describes the various routines, attitudes, beliefs, and dialects that comprised the daily existence of most people living within the boundaries of what is now France. The second explains how the mapping—both literal surveying and mapping by Cesar-Francois Cassini in the late eighteenth century and figurative mapping by domestic and international tourists—of these “undiscovered” regions led to France’s eventual cohesion into a fairly close-knit modern nation-state. Robb employs the concept of “mapping” to describe both the actual act of cartography and the more figurative sense of knowing or understanding those disparate regions. Robb argues that our modern understanding of France is an amalgamated notion derived from Parisian conceptions of a homogeneous and mono-linguistic French society. The capital’s cultural and political prominence, Robb asserts, led to a veritable hegemony of homogeneity, as the language and culture specific to Paris became the defining aspects of France and the French.

Although the book is putatively about mapping, Robb argues that language is a truer indicator of a region’s political and cultural affiliations and practices than somewhat arbitrary borders drawn on a map. Language was both a cause of France’s original fractiousness as well as the key to its eventual cohesion. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, according to Robb’s narrative, not only did non-French languages such as Basque and Breton dominate the periphery of France, but dialects of French spoken in the heart of the country were so varied as to be incomprehensible, a veritable Tower of Babel. Each village had its own dialect nearly impenetrable to those more than five miles away. These invisible linguistic barriers, Robb argues, made political unity nearly impossible. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that various French regiments in World War I, unable to understand each other’s dialects, engaged in lengthy and futile skirmishes, killing their supposed countrymen. The creation of public education and subsequent imposition of French helped to spread the language throughout the land, diminishing the role of dialect. But Robb makes the interesting point that although many of these dialects have been “dying out” for over a hundred years, a good number remain alive and well.

Perhaps necessarily, Robb overtly sympathizes with the rural communities, rueing modernity’s erosion of their unique identities, lamenting the vast and efficient network of railways and highways that destroyed many of the small local networks of infrastructure. Robb’s sentiments are particularly evident when he discusses the growing influx of tourists; while Robb admits that this industry facilitated both the economic development and the political and economic integration of the village into the rest of France—often far bettering the quality of life for most villagers—he spends far more time explaining how the tourism industry irreparably damaged the
local life of the villages. Robb’s nostalgia for the seemingly idyllic pre-industrial era at times distracts from the fascinating and previously obscure material he is bringing to the foreground.

Robb’s engaging but dense narrative moves along the back roads of France at a fairly brisk pace, covering an immense amount of information. The incredible detail and specificity of much of Robb’s text must be attributed to his personal method of research; he actually biked 14,000 miles around France, stopping in every commune and canton. In his rural wanderings, Robb explores the odd gap between the creation of a technological innovation and its implementation. When one reads that the railways were first introduced to France in a certain year, one assumes that the entire country was swiftly connected by those narrow ties. Yet Robb explores the incongruity of a gradually industrializing society that still relied heavily on the mule for its commercial and personal transportation. When Eiffel was building his famous tower, some communes were still persecuting witches.

Yet instead of history, most of Robb’s work could be better described as a retrospective anthropology. The interdisciplinary nature of his work is inherent to Robb’s research; the sources that accurately describe France outside of Paris are generally folkloric, personal, and anthropological and Robb tends to provide dramatic and narrative reinterpretations of historically verifiable scenes. In the past decade, history has been liberalizing the use of sources and expanding the very definition of what history can mean. To be sure, the sum of Robb’s work seems less concrete due to its often conversational character, but there is no other way that he could have explicated this fascinating subject without using such evidence. Invoking his figurative understanding of “mapping,” Robb argues that much of modern France remains unmapped, using the example of the frequent violence that erupts in the outer suburbs of Paris, which are inhabited mainly by North African immigrants, a minority France has yet to integrate or understand. This anecdote demonstrates the utility of Robb’s model of mapping to other historians and, indeed, to other anthropologists. While Robb’s narrative strays at points from pure history, he offers a unique view of everyday dimensions of the French story that are so often ignored.

Interviews with Hoopes Prize Winners:

**Marino Auffant, “Preventing the Rise of a Second Cuba? The Cold War in the Dominican Republic, 1963-1973.”**

What is your topic and how did you choose it?

I wrote my thesis on the events surrounding the Dominican Revolution of 1965, in which a group of military officers led a popular rebellion to overthrow the governing Junta and reestablish constitutional rule in the country. Witnessing a revolution in Cuba’s neighbor, the United States perceived the threat of a “Second Cuba” in the Caribbean, and intervened to crush the uprising. I focused on both the local and global ramifications of the conflict, understanding the Soviet
reaction the US intervention, how this small Third World revolution became a Cold War crisis, how large sections of Dominican society radicalized to the far-Left during the conflict, and finally how the US intervention led to the rise of a new Che Guevara-like revolutionary figure in the Caribbean—Francisco Alberto Caamaño.

This topic came about in the most unexpected of manners. I randomly found a letter written by my grandfather to President John F. Kennedy, in which he claimed that if the US Congress passed a certain bill, the Dominican Republic would become a new base of international Communism in the Americas. This got me increasingly interested in the history of the Cold War in my home country.

What was the biggest challenge to completing your thesis?

My two biggest challenges were time constraints as well as being able to keep my research focused. My focus significantly shifted with time, and I repeatedly found new questions to answer, new bodies of sources, unexpected perspectives and so on. This made the research process very thrilling, but it also made it increasingly difficult to keep my project focused on a few main historical problems. As the deadlines approached, I had to face a series of trade-offs, and it became increasingly clear that I would need to write much more than a thesis to answer all these questions. This was frustrating, but it has given the inspiration to expand my work in the near future, hopefully, into a publishable book.

What was the coolest thing you discovered or best place you visited in the course of your research?

First, it was really exciting to explore the Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for materials regarding the Dominican Republic. I initially did not have very high expectations, but I became so thrilled when I found dozens of pages, memos and telegrams regarding the Soviet reaction to the Dominican Crisis. Thus, I was able to construct a historical narrative from scratch, and it was great to feel that I may have been the first person to read those documents with scholarly purposes. Also, I was able to conduct a series of interviews back home in Santo Domingo. This was extremely exciting, as I had to travel from governmental offices to the depths of the countryside in order to find the exact historical actors I was reading and writing about. Discovering that I was related to many of them in one way or another, it all became an introspective quest for the history of my country and family.

Do you have a favorite late night snack or source of caffeine?

Café Pamplona, definitely! Not only is their coffee great, but some of their paninis are just delicious.

What is the secret to winning a Hoopes?

I wish I knew. I am pretty sure that finding the right topic is one of the most important steps. You have to find a topic that you care about and feel personally involved with, all while it remains relevant for the world at large. It is also good to find a narrow topic from which you can derive some grand, eye-opening conclusions.
What are your plans for after graduation? How will you spend the prize money?

I plan to apply to Law School next fall, and take a gap year in the meantime. My plans for this year remain rather uncertain for the time being. I could well find myself in New York, Paris or Istanbul in the next couple of months. In any case, the prize money will definitely make any such travels possible! And I still harbor the wish to travel the Silk Road by land… Who knows?

Maria Carla Chicuén, “Our Men in Europe: Cuba's Commercial and Diplomatic Relations with Spain and Great Britain, 1959-1964.”

What is your topic and how did you choose it?

My thesis explored the puzzling development of Cuba’s commercial and diplomatic relations with Britain and Spain from 1959 to 1964. I wanted to understand why in the course of five years, a scenario in which Spain had almost broken relations with Cuba and in which Anglo-Cuban diplomacy was virtually nonexistent gave way to a strong and unprecedented relationship between the Caribbean island and the two European countries. Why would two U.S. allies dare to break the U.S. embargo to support an emerging regime on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean? Why would the Conservative British government, much less the right-wing Spanish dictatorship of Francisco Franco, support a socialist country already sheltered under the Soviet iron curtain? More broadly, my thesis highlights the role of small-power diplomacy during the Cold War, and rescues Cuba’s agency in this context. This topic was a gift from my thesis adviser, Professor Jorge Domínguez. During the spring semester of my junior year, I asked Professor Domínguez for suggestions regarding thesis topics that matched my interest in domestic Cuban politics and international and economic relations in general. I also wanted a topic that would take me abroad, and one that would require archival research. When he suggested I focus on Cuban-Spanish and Cuban-British rapprochement in the 1960s, I did some research on the subject, and realized it was a perfect fit.

What was the biggest challenge to completing your thesis?

The biggest technical challenge was to incorporate sufficient information from the Cuban press and the adequate secondary literature produced in Cuba to compensate for the large inaccessibility of official Cuban government documents, many of which remain classified or unavailable to most researchers from foreign academic institutions. What I found most difficult, however, was to look at my native country, Cuba, through a purely academic lens.

What was the coolest thing you discovered or best place you visited in the course of your research?

I was fortunate to receive enough funding from the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and the Real Colegio Complutense to conduct research in Madrid, London, Havana, and Boston. I had interesting and amusing experiences at the different archives and libraries I visited, but I particularly enjoyed the visits to old chalets where I would interview former Spanish and British ambassadors in Havana over tea or coffee. In terms of cool discoveries, going through hundreds of high-profile government official memos and letters was fascinating and at times
enjoyably distracting. One day at the British National Archives I found a report from the British Embassy in Havana that read something along the lines of: for the most part, Cuban books focus either on chess or sex; both activities seem to be very popular among Cubans.

*Do you have a favorite late night snack or source of caffeine?*

Wheat bagels with cream cheese and honey + *café con leche* at Mather House’s brain break were key during the writing process.

*What is the secret to winning a Hoopes?*

I don’t know if there is a secret to winning a Hoopes, but finishing the project successfully, growing intellectually in the process and enjoying every minute of it definitely requires falling in love with the thesis topic. Writing my thesis has been my biggest academic adventure, full of risks and surprises, and it would not have been so fulfilling without that element of passion.

*What are your plans for after graduation? How will you spend the prize money?*

Next year I will begin a Master’s program in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where I expect to build on my thesis research and write my dissertation about more recent developments in Cuban-Spanish and Cuban-British relations. In such an expensive city as London, the prize money will definitely come in handy!

**Julia Guren, “Tufunge Safari”: Identity Formation and Allegiances in the King’s African Rifles During the Age of British Decolonization, c. 1939-1964**

*What is your topic and how did you choose it?*

My thesis explored the King’s African Rifles (KAR), Britain’s colonial regiment in East Africa from 1902-1964, and the nuanced roles of the East Africans who served within this imperial military apparatus. African soldiers simultaneously belonged to a host of different, and seemingly contradictory, collectives. As intermediaries in the colonial regime, they blurred the traditional binary of resistance and collaboration. They were symbols of colonial force and the instigator of colonial order, yet at the same time they were a bastion of subversive sentiment and action. By highlighting the complex social ties and underground cultural processes developed within the Regiment, my thesis sought to explore the limitations of colonial authority and the persistence of African agency within the rigid military structure. At the same time, it uses the KAR to trace the history of identities, institutions, and power structures that have persisted into the post-colonial era.

I came to this topic in Professor Caroline Elkins’ research seminar on *British Colonial Violence in the 20th Century*, as I began questioning the bureaucracies and hierarchies of armed force. I was interested in the caveat that colonizing nations have often relied on local manpower within their colonies. After a semester of studying the King’s African Rifles, I had more provoking questions than I did answers. With a very small field of secondary literature on the regiment and even less
primary sources available to me in Cambridge, I saw the opportunity to expand my work into a unique and personally fulfilling overseas research project.

What was the biggest challenge to completing your thesis?

The greatest hurdle in my topic, but perhaps the most fruitful as well, was the difficulty in finding the African voice within the history of the KAR. While it was fairly common practice for British soldiers to keep diaries and write many letters, Africans did not have the same type of literary tradition. In fact, many askaris were illiterate or partially literate. The few published African sources in my thesis come from a small and highly educated African minority in the colonial armed forces, and thus rarely spoke for the experiences of the majority. Gaps in the archive made original research and atypical sourcework a necessary component of my thesis. The process became like detective work, as I got to creatively combine brief letters from the front, self-conducted interviews, and audiovisual material to develop my narrative. It ended up being a lot of fun, especially once I turned to translating KAR marching songs with the help of a Tanzanian student here at Harvard.

What was the coolest thing you discovered or best place you visited in the course of your research?

The best moment in my research was when I was sitting in Nyeri, Kenya, with eight former KAR soldiers. As they shared their memories and showed me old photographs and medals that they kept throughout their lives, I began to completely reassess my project as something endlessly more complex than I had previously thought. Researching in Kenya was the highlight of my thesis writing process, and after a semester of exploring the KAR in Widener, Nairobi reminded me about the continued relevance of Africa’s past and the importance of primary research. I loved the days I spent pouring over letters, memos, and propaganda in the archives. But above all else, my time in Kenya not only shed light on the story of the KAR, but it also solidified my personal investment in my project.

Do you have a favorite late night snack or source of caffeine?

Noch’s and Louie’s.

What is the secret to winning a Hoopes?

There is no secret, and I would advise any thesis writer not to worry about thesis prizes because that is not what the process is about. Pick a topic that you find personally meaningful and exciting, and that can sustain your interest for a year. Write something that you are proud of and use the process to develop meaningful relationships with faculty advisors along the way. I know it sounds corny, but my book those were my real lasting accomplishments, and the Hoopes was just icing on the cake.

What are your plans for after graduation? How will you spend the prize money?

This summer, I am returning to Kenya with some Harvard faculty and students to develop the history section of the Kenya National Museum. In the fall, I will be entering a one year Masters
in Art History at the Courtauld Institute in London, where I will be researching the role of art in contemporary global politics. I plan to use my prize money for further travel during my year abroad in Africa and the UK.


What is your topic and how did you choose it?

I wrote my thesis about a single political text, written in 1792 by Dr. William Drennan, named “An Address to the Volunteers of Ireland.” It was a propagandistic, somewhat inflammatory, 1500-word document, issued by a revolutionary society called the Dublin United Irishmen and addressed to a citizens militia called the Volunteers, encouraging the latter group to arm themselves on behalf of Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform. As part of a wider counter-revolutionary campaign, the government deemed the publication a “seditious libel” and prosecuted many of those responsible for it through the courts and by other means. My thesis tried to perform a “total history,” or “biography,” of this one address, from the tumultuous political context in which it was written, through its print, distribution, and circulation, and finally to the manifold consequences of its publication—which included sixteen arrests, three trials, two defections from the United Irishmen, one prison break, and a minor pamphlet war.

I got the idea for the topic while doing research on the address’s author, the poet and man of letters Dr. William Drennan, about whom I had initially intended to write a sort of intellectual biography for my thesis. Just as I was admitting to myself that such an undertaking would have been too large for an undergraduate thesis, I realized that there was a real density of information and documentation around one address Drennan had written in 1792, and that it would be possible to the history of this seemingly insignificant document, cradle to grave. So I did it.

What was the biggest challenge to completing your thesis?

The biggest challenge was easily the writing. I love writing, and get a lot of pleasure out of turning a nice phrase. But it was still rather torturous, trying to condense so much of my thinking and my research into a manageable length of prose.

What was the coolest thing you discovered or best place you visited in the course of your research?

Over the summer, when I still thought my thesis would be an intellectual biography with a much wider scope, I visited Dublin and Belfast and accomplished a great deal of research that never made its way into the final product. Still, the experience was well worth it. I particularly enjoyed my research in Dublin at the National Library of Ireland, which besides being an architectural marvel and an important repository of eighteenth-century pamphlet literature is also the site of a good deal of history itself. I distinctly remember once making photocopies in the librarian’s office when it occurred to me that I was standing exactly where the “Scylla and Charybdis” chapter in Joyce’s Ulysses takes place. Pretty cool.
The best part about the entire trip, however, was that the archives, in both cities, closed at five. After then, I had no choice but to go out drinking in pubs.

*Do you have a favorite late night snack or source of caffeine?*

Falafel Corner, open ‘till 3am.

*What is the secret to winning a Hoopes?*

I’ll never tell.

*What are your plans for after graduation? How will you spend the prize money?*

I plan to travel to China and join a program teaching English there to Chinese university students. My prize money will go towards making me feel less guilty about all the expensive Thai food my girlfriend and I ate over the course of my time at Harvard.

**Anna Shabalov, “Long Road in the Dunes: Latvia and the Soviet Historical Narrative.”**

*What is your topic and how did you choose it?*

I wrote about the creation, dissemination, and reception of the Soviet Latvian national historical narrative. I particularly focused on internal weaknesses and internal pressures on the narrative that might account for why it proved so ineffective and unconvincing, despite having the entire force of a propaganda state behind it.

I chose my general topic because I was interested in historical narrative, historical memory, and identity formation, thanks chiefly to the Eastern European Identities reading seminar I took with Professor Plokhii. I zeroed in on Latvia particularly because of an interest in my own and my family’s past. I was born in Riga, and had grown up hearing stories from all my relatives about life in the Soviet Union. This was my chance to go beyond these stories and try to craft for myself an understanding of one aspect of the experience that I found especially complex and problematic.

*What was the biggest challenge to completing your thesis?*

I was very worried about doing justice to all sides of the issue. I had to recognize my own biases, especially my family’s history as ethnic Russians in Latvia, which conditioned me to approach my question from probably a very different angle than an ethnic Latvian might have. Despite this, I was committed to offering as balanced of a picture of the issue as I could, because I think that so much of what could have been good historical scholarship on Soviet Latvia is hopelessly marred by emotional blind-spots and biases, and I did not want to fall into that trap. In the course of my writing, I would give chapters to family members to read, and I would get responses varying from
“you’re too hard on the Soviet Union” to “you’re too hard on Latvians.” I struggled to figure out if this meant that I was being unfair to everyone, or sufficiently and fairly critical to all. In the end though, I’m pretty happy with the result.

What was the coolest thing you discovered or best place you visited in the course of your research?

One of my favorite documents that I discovered in the Latvian State Archives was a guestbook from the Museum of the Revolution of the Latvian SSR from the late 1940s. Maybe it’s a nerdy historian thing, but there’s something really exciting about finding handwritten historical documents. Even more than that, it was really interesting to see what people ended up writing in a book they were compelled to write in. Most visitors came to the museum as part of an organized tour group and were forced to sign the book at the end of their visit. Despite the formulaic praise of the Revolution and the Soviet Union that everyone knew was expected of them, people managed to write a surprising number of variations on the theme, and even some completely off-topic asides that were subversive in a particularly Soviet way.

Do you have a favorite late night snack or source of caffeine?

Bawls energy drinks. Unfortunately I didn’t get to drink many in the course of writing my thesis, because they are hard to find and I don’t know of any place in the square that stocks them. But if you can locate them, they are well worth the effort, and not just for the name’s comedic value.

What is the secret to winning a Hoopes?

Passion about your thesis topic. That’s not even for winning a Hoopes, but just for writing a thesis. I can’t imagine not particularly caring about a topic, and being able to spend 9 months on it with your sanity still intact at the end. The process is much more doable if you care about what you’re writing on. As for the Hoopes, passion comes across in a person’s writing. Your investment comes across in the material you produce and that makes it much more compelling for readers as well.

What are your plans for after graduation? How will you spend the prize money?

Next year, I’m heading to Yale Law School. Consequently, this summer I am vegetating on my parents’ couch. Part of the prize money will go to a new laptop, as my current laptop’s screen can’t stand up on its own, and it makes some hilarious sounds every time it wakes up from sleep. The rest of it might also be used responsibly, or it may fund a trip to California to go to a rave festival. That remains to be seen.

Interview with Professor Annette Gordon-Reed

Could you give a brief background about being an academic and historian and what gave you the idea to start talking about Jefferson and Sally Hemings.
I came to this in a weird route. I have always wanted to be a writer growing up, and I always had an interest in history. Law seemed a career that would allow me to write not in the way that I had thought about writing--but it was a practical thing to do. It was also a way I thought of effecting social change, because lawyers are either defending the downtrodden or writing laws - lawyers play a role in society in a lot of different ways, so I went to law school instead of getting a PhD in history because I thought that Well, if you love history, you could read history. But at some point, I decided that I wanted to write history. And after I left the practice of law, I went into legal academia, and became a law professor.

With regards to Jefferson and Sally Hemings, I had always been interested in Monticello for a very long time, and I thought that the whole discussion about the fight over Jefferson and Hemings could be discussed in a way that law professors discuss cases with their students: looking at evidence, weighing different competing stories about what happened in the past, really picking apart and examining what the people were saying, to see who was more credible than the first book. So, this is what I talked about in the first book. Then, I wanted to answer some questions that have been raised about Hemings, and a year after my book came out, the DNA tests on Jefferson and Heming's descendants cooperated with what I had said, so I thought that this is something of a victory for my methodology, which really the purpose of doing it was to show how I thought that the words of black people were not credited even though what they were saying was credible, while the words of whites, even when they were saying things that were incredible or simply not credible, were treated with respect. So, it wasn't so much about whether Jefferson had an affair with Sally Hemings--that's interesting, but not it was about. It was about the way in which the words of disadvantaged people in history and those who were not powerful, were disregarded. It is not just a question of race, but one of class, too. When an upper-class person and lower-class person each say something, the tendency is that people would see the words of the higher class person as more credible. That maintains a particular social arrangement, but that shouldn't have anything to do with history. Historians should be able to weigh evidence and statements without giving points for being white or taking points away if you're black, or adding points if you're rich, or taking away ones in you're poor - it's what you say that counts. So, the DNA sort of supported what I said through the normal processes of looking at documents. You really didn't even need science, but science is helpful.

After that, while I was working on the book, I thought: wouldn't it be good to take this family, and tell their story? Jefferson kept a lot of records, and some members of the family were literate, and there are a lot of family stories to draw upon, and we don't have a saga of a slave family across four generations in one particular place. Also, people who had interesting lives. Some members of the Hemings family had travelled extensively, and Sally Hemings herself went to London and then Paris with James Hemings, and they lived there for over five years. Some members lived in Philadelphia and New York; Jefferson went to places, and they went to places with him, and he writes about them as they are in these various places. The Hemingses were unique in that way, but at the same time, the parts of their lives as enslaved people are ordinary. They are owned by another person; they have been "privileged," but they are still people who are until control of Jefferson and his family. So, you can tell as story about slavery, but you can also use it to illustrate the diversity of experiences, and I wanted somebody to read the book, the story of the Hemingses, and have a sense of the history of early America. So while it is the story of a family, I am also talking about the development of slavery and the development of American democracy.
If you are telling the story of Jefferson, you are also telling about the story of the America in the early Republic. And so, it is a family story, but it's a history of an era.

So would you say that you are using this family as a lens to talk about democracy?

Yes, exactly, a lens.

If you were trying to write a story about democracy from a viewpoint of slaves, how do you think that the audience would respond to the fact that you chose a very unique slave family rather than an ordinary one?

Well, one of the things that I make plain is that because there are so many members of the family--some of them, James Hemings, Sally Hemings, Robert Hemings, for example--lived extraordinary lives. But, they have cousins and relatives whom I talk about, who face the same problems that other enslaved families face. Sometimes, we were separated from family members, which was one of the worst things that happened in slavery. In fact, when Jefferson dies, some members of the family were auctioned off. So while they were a privileged family, I was still about to talk about people who have the more "typical" experiences of slavery. Some members are different, but there are other relatives just like the "other folks," and I tell their story as well.

So you mentioned before that you went to law school and used legal methodology to look at history. If you were approaching this history as a lawyer approaches a case, are you putting Jefferson on trial in any way?

No, not at all - I do not see myself as putting Jefferson on trial. I should actually pull back from this and say that the methodology I use is one that in the first book--the second book is more of a narrative--analytical mode is really critical thinking, and good historians do that as well. When I was dealing with in the first book in assessing the scholarship of Jefferson biographers is that (well, some people don't even think that biographers are historians because they feel that they are too connected to the subject, and I think that may have been the case with some of the people I wrote about in the first book. So, there are legal methodology, but legal methodology is really critical thinking--that skill is something that the best historians possess as well; it's just that because we do this all the time. For law professors, the cases cry out for constant criticism and constant analysis and taking things apart, is something we do more more naturally. There are some historians who do it because that is the way their minds work, but I do think that law professors try to teach all of their students how to do that; that's the point

So when you are weighing in your evidence for your books, and they you say that history gives credibility to non-discrete minorities, how much role do you think the sheer quantity of evidence has to do with the evidence? Are they unreliable per se, or is it just because we don't have that much writing coming from the slaves?

There were certainly more writing from white families if you are looking at this time period, but when you have writing from other people, you still have to weigh each individual document. Sure, quantity-wise, there were more from the white, but that doesn't mean that it's more truthful, and you still have to weigh credibility and each statement and document that is being produced. But yes, you are right--maybe it's the sense that people feel more comfortable with a family when you have lots of things with which a person is writing, but I just means you think you know them, but you may not. You still have to be skeptical of them. I mean, say you have 5 documents from one
person and one from the other person, you still have to look each of those 6 documents; quantity alone cannot establish credibility.

So how did you first become interested in Thomas Jefferson?

When I was in grade school and I read a child biography of Jefferson, that was my introduction to him, and it was also the first time I thought seriously about the fact that there were people were slaves and what the plantation life was like even though I had already known that slavery existed. Because it was a child's biography, it was age appropriate, but it was still talked about plantation life and slaves. And so, this has been an interest for a very long time.

What was your initial reaction when you hear about Sally Hemings?

I didn't hear about that until I was a teenager. It wasn't really puzzling to me because most African American families know that mixing between the races took place. If you go to a family reunion of black people, people could be of all different colors. For example, the grandmother could have very fair skin and blue eyes, and so the idea that slave owners had children with their slaves wasn't a big deal. I wouldn't say that I was shocked; I think that a lot of white Southerners pretend by this because there is a story how that didn't really happen that much, that it was only a handful of people. White northerners were probably shocked because they had no experience with plantation slavery, and you can't have people living together in close proximity without people "mixing." And that is just what happened. So I can't say that I was shocked by it and that it was something crazy.

But did it change your views about Jefferson?

It made his life seem more complicated. I started thing: what would it be like from the perspective of the children --to have your father also be the person who legally owns you not in the way that they have control over their kids, but here, if he had wanted to, he could have sold them--many masters did do that. It made me think about the nature of the slave system; it's not just people working and not getting paid. Rather, it's social life that grew up around it that made it really complex and tragic in a way.

You said that some white Southerners would say that it didn't happen.

No--they knew that it did happen, but the store was that it happened very rarely and that the only people who were involved in it were low-class and poor white. It was never a gentleman who was involved in all this. Of course, that was never true. I mean, if you look at African Americans today, there is no way to look at the range of skin colors and texture--even the skin color doesn't tell it. Henry Louis Gates has done studies involved in this--he has done DNA testing and a television special about this--but I have seen other accounts that suggest they have done "spot-checks" on African Americans males' Y-chromosomes, and almost 45%-50% of some communities have European white male chromosomes. That doesn't account for women. They think that at least 75% of African Americans have at least one white ancestor. I believe that in the Harvard Magazine a few months ago had an article about England: a population geneticist was talking the people he knew in Britain and how everybody assumed that the Celts and the Irish
people were very different from the English. While they had different stories and culture, they were genetically very much a like. In passing, they mentioned the high rates of mixture among the African American people, so this is a story that doesn't begin at the 20th century, but something that starts in Jefferson's day and slavery.

How would you respond to critics? Are there even critics after the DNA testing?

Oh absolutely--there are books that are written to deny my book. There are definitely people who do--a small number of them--who mainly are affiliated with Jefferson's legal white descendants. The people who own Monticello is not of Jefferson's family, but a separate organization--they have already accepted the story and if you go there, there is the Hemings family tree and the Jefferson family tree. Within the legal white family and descendants of his wife, there are some who do accept it and other who don't. Those who did not agree started a foundation called the Heritage Society who have sponsored books and studies that say that it wasn't Jefferson--it was one of his brothers or nephews. And so, I don't think it is something that will be resolved to everyone's satisfaction because there are just people who don't like that idea.

How do you respond to them?

There's nothing I could do about that--I just do my work and do the best scholarly work that I can do and present it. It has been well-received, and that's all I can do. I can't really get into a battle of the briefs over this with them; they are really of no interest to me, and I have better things to do. I mean, if they said something or present evidence that makes sense, then you have to deal with it, but they have yet to do that. I mean sure, it could have been this or that way and history is being revised all the time, but once somebody comes forth with credible evidence, only then will I deal with it.

It looks like population gene has been closely related to your work - do you think that your legal analysis of the world is on par with the credibility that people give to science?

No, people put a lot of credence in DNA, and as a historian, it is kind of annoying. Because very little of history is based on any scientific thing. It was nice to have scientific cooperation, but I think that we could have come to those conclusions without science, so this was really just icing on the cake. But science is powerful; we worship it, and we don't want to take anything away from that. But we have other ways to reach that conclusion. I mean, we don't have any genetic proof that Jefferson is the father of the children with his wife, but we accept it because that is the social fact of marriage--it's not scientific, but powerful. It strikes me as unfair that in slavery, blacks were shut out of making legal families that you use law and social convention to accept white families--that's the equivalent of science, but its not. Enslaved families are kept outside of that. I think what we are moving towards is the intersection of history, archaeology, and science--it has become an interdisciplinary approach to pulling together the lives of enslaved people. History has to be interdisciplinary--there is not one way to answer a question. My second book has really shown this. It uses law, archaeology; just because slave lives could not be conventionally told, it doesn't mean that they are not other ways to go at it. I have tried to use a lot of different tools to get at it.
Jefferson has a memorandum book that detailed all of his transactions from age 20 to 80 with a level of detail like, "Today I went to Starbucks and bought a three-dollar cappuccino." Daily. He mentions the Hemingses quite a bit, so you could reconstruct their lives from that. He wrote about 19,000 letters in his lifetime, and they appear in those letters, but that means to have to sift through a lot of that stuff. There is also his Farm Book, which is a detailed record all his enslaved people: date of birth, which plantation they were from, and all those sorts of things. Some of the Hemings family was literate, so we have writing from them, but also writings from other family histories that you could piece together from. There is a lot of stuff--not enough for any one person, but it's a family.

How did you get access to them? Did you get the material first-hand?

The memorandums and Farm Book are published. Jefferson's letters are being published, but a lot of them are sitting in the Library of Congress on microfilm waiting to be transcribed, but it's called the American memory project. I'm pretty good at his handwriting. I also went to Library of Virginia to look at his records and other people's letters, New York Public Library (where I basically wrote my entire first book there), and also the research library in Monticello. Also, the Massachusetts Historical Society was very helpful because Jefferson's granddaughter married a man from Boston, and the original Farm Book is there.

What's the biggest lesson you took away from this?

The big takeaway point is the importance of family to the Hemingses. They all name each other after their family; just think about what it would be like to keep your family together without a legal structure. When Jefferson died and the slaves were auctioned off, some of the free members would purchase relatives --people try to work together to maintain the family times, that it's not just about law. That structure and those kinds of ties create a legacy of family, perseverance, and endurance.

Was your book geared towards a particular audience?

No, I wanted to speak to everybody, a general public. I wanted it to be a scholarly and accessible to many people. It's too darn long to become accessible to that many people, but I didn't want it to be a book just to talk to other historians. I think that historians should be talking to both audiences. There are things you do for one another, but my thing is to engage as broad and high a level of people as I can. I am aiming for the person who likes history, might not pick up a book just about slavery, but would pick up a book to read about the development of American history as well as for people who might be interested just in slavery, but also learn something about an engagement about how the country itself developed. So there is something for both groups here in this one book.

What was the first thing you did when you won the Pulitzer Prize?
Well, it was at 5am in the morning in Australia. I was happy, and wanted to go back to sleep. I had a television show at 8:30am in Sydney, and I heard my publisher having a party in the background. I didn't have my family with me, so it was sort of muted and subdued, but it was absolutely wonderful.

*Do you think that your narrative fits into the contemporary times?*

I think that it does have some contemporary relevance because it's about the development of racial attitudes, and that is still a salient topic. People say, "Oh did you plan it for Obama?" but I started it 10 years ago, so it was totally serendipitous.

*Could you talk a little about what you are working on now and your future project?*

I am finishing up a short book about Andrew Johnson. "Times Books" has a series on the presidency, and it's 30-50,000 words. I'm going to take the Hemingses family into the 19th century; it won't be as long a book as this though. I'm also to do a biography of Jefferson.

*Can you just say a little about the class you are teaching now?*

The class is, "Politics, Social Life, and Law in Jeffersonian America." It's a course on the early American republic about 1780s up until Jackson. We talk about the institution of slavery, social life, some women's issues as well. It's a graduate seminar in the History Department. I also do one class in the law school of professional ethics.

**Interview with Professor Lili Kim**

*Lili Kim is a visiting associate professor of History who studies Asian American history, women's history and immigration history. An associate professor at Hampshire College, Professor Kim teaches in the Ethnic Studies Department at Harvard. This interview was conducted by Tempus staff member Ryan Rossner.*

*What got you interested in History and what inspired you to pursue it as a career?*

You probably had really good history teachers in high school, but mine were horrible. I mean, I hated history. It was all about the memorization of facts and dates and so that's what I knew history to be. But then, it all changed when I went to college and took this amazing course on the French Revolution and discovered that history is the interpretation of the past. That whole concept revolutionized the way I thought about history. I loved everything about dealing with humanity and human experience. I come from a family of engineers and so I went to college thinking I was going to be an engineer. I was pretty good at math, but I felt that science was just not for me, and then I got really turned on by this history course I took sophomore year. At that point, I wasn’t thinking about careers; I was really just interested in pursuing my intellectual passion, learning for the sake of learning. Of course, my father, being an engineer, would freak out about me declaring a history major, so I would periodically send him this little sheet about what you can do with a history major. They were really supportive, but my parents wondered about the practical aspects of it. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do with a history degree,
either. Like many history majors, I thought about law school a lot. I considered myself a late bloomer, and so I felt like I wasn’t done with formal education yet, and the thought of continuing to study history was more appealing than studying law. I mean, I didn’t think about careers. I had no idea how bad the academic job market was; had I known, I might not have gone to grad school. In retrospect I’m grateful I was so oblivious.

Related to that, how did you end up arriving upon migration history, gender history, and Asian American history?

Like I said, the French Revolution was my first entry into learning about what history was all about, but I thought I would focus on U.S. History. My undergraduate history thesis was on Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her feminism and I was very drawn to her idea of economic independence. In college, I really gained my feminist consciousness, so I was very interested in studying women’s history. Then, once I arrived at graduate school, I sat in on an undergraduate course about the history of the home front during World War II and learned about Japanese American internment for the first time and I was really surprised that it had happened and that I hadn’t really learned about it until that moment. Growing up, I had never had any courses on Asian American history, and I really started to gain my Asian American consciousness in grad school.

I began researching my project as a seminar paper on Korean American experience during World War II, because I was curious about how people who might have looked like Japanese fared at the time, particularly when there was such heightened racial hostility towards Japanese, and people perceived as being Japanese. I found out that there was almost nothing written on it and that there was a story to be told. It was about knowledge production and I thought that there was a gap in our understanding of WWII on the home front.

You talked about doing gender history, migration history, and Asian American history. What are some of the challenges of doing these types of histories that are not as present in the mainstream narrative?

Sources! These were not the most privileged people we are dealing with; they don’t have archives named after them. I was lucky in that Korean Americans did publish lots of community papers, both in English and Korean, which I read, and I use a lot of declassified FBI files, a lot of government documents, and ethnographies studies done by sociologists. I have also conducted oral histories and used oral histories done by other folks. I am a firm believer in oral history as a means of giving voice to marginalized peoples. In the past, I have also taught courses on Oral history as a way of uncovering and creating those sources.

What do you think is at stake with these histories, particularly as they often necessitate oral histories, which are dependent upon living survivors, and because these are often very politically charged histories?

That’s a really good question. I’ve interviewed Korean Americans who lived through WWII in Hawai’i and many of them have passed away. I also use a collection of interviews of picture brides—Korean women who came in the early 1900s as the future wives of Korean plantation laborers in Hawai’i—and all of them have passed away. So time is of the essence. In many ways, I feel regret that my work hasn’t been published before they passed away. But I’m thankful that I was able to record their experiences and use their voices.
Why do you feel migration and Asian American histories are such an important aspect of American history? And what are your thoughts about Ethnic studies at Harvard?

Well, we are the nation of many nations and so immigration history has such a foundational place in U.S. history. My approach to teaching Asian American history is to teach it as a part of U.S. history. And as for any sort of ethnic history or ethnic studies, I think back to when women’s history first became institutionalized and people complained that it was ghettoizing women’s experiences. But, had we not done that, I don’t think that women’s experiences would have found their way into curriculum. So, I do feel that there are places for having women’s history and ethnic studies. If you look at American studies as a field now, if you look at what papers are being presented at conferences, you really get a sense that there is a strong place for ethnicity and race in American studies as a whole.

And I’m really glad that this year marks the first year of officially having an Ethnic Studies program at Harvard. You know, I recently attended the first Harvard Asian Alumni summit. It was amazing, with all these amazing alumni doing amazing things and their main reason for being there was for really raising awareness about establishing Asian American studies at Harvard. They had alumni all the way from the 1970s to a current student and they all talked about their experiences being Asian American at Harvard. Obviously many things had changed in many ways, but in some ways, things hadn’t changed. One woman, who graduated in the 1980s, talked about her struggle for having an Asian American studies program on campus and then there was a current sophomore engaged in the same struggle. I thought that it was really striking, the ongoing effort to establish Asian American studies, in particular, and Ethnic studies, in general. It’s a long time coming and the fact that alumni are behind it is awesome.

What are some lessons to be learned or perspectives to be gained from these histories and narratives, particularly, those that were, for example, left out of your history textbook?

History is really a political project in many ways. I think, going back to knowledge production, there are still so many areas of ethnic and migration history that are under covered. And, in addition to filling in these gaps, methodologically, I don’t think we can ignore gender, ethnicity, race, or class as categories of historical analysis. And also, I’m a mother of a young biracial child — my partner is Puerto Rican — and I think about what history books he will be reading when he grows up. I hope that they will be vastly different. I mean, I didn’t have one single history course on Asian American history until I went to graduate school. But, now, there are just so many tenured professors that specialize in Asian American history and I think all of that is very encouraging. Also, scholars in Asian American history and in other ethnic history have begun to examine the history of alliances and overlapping diasporas among different communities of color, and that also bodes very well for the future directions in U.S. history. Such scholarship will challenge some of the old assumptions and give new meanings to some of the most entrenched categories in the history of the United States as part of the larger world.

Interview with Professor Louis Menand
You note in the Introduction to The Marketplace of Ideas that your career has had a “slightly askew relation” to academic life. You write for the New Yorker but have also written books on pragmatism and T.S. Eliot. How would you characterize what you do?

I think of myself as a writer. I write about things that are interesting to me, and I try to make them interesting to other people. It happens that a lot of the things I write about are of interest to academics, so I have an identity as a professor. But some things I write about are of interest to magazine readers, and I've always written for magazines as well. My approach is mostly historical. That’s kind of my tendency—to figure things out by looking at their history. But I think of myself as fundamentally a writer.

I was struck by the way war (The First World War, the Second World War) played a major role in many of the developments you talk about in higher education. How would you characterize the relationship between war and the university?

That’s a good question, and it’s quite true that wars have had a big impact on American higher education. I would include the Civil War, because it was after the Civil War that the modern research university came into being. Some of that was funded by the wartime Congress, in an Act passed in 1862. Wars are great engines of social transformation anyway, but higher education is one of the things that’s been affected by them.

In the case of the First World War and the Second World War, what I was interested in was the creation of General Education programs at places like Columbia and Harvard in response to the perception of faculty that the war raised issues that students needed to be able to think about and confront that they weren’t being educated for by the normal system requirements. General Education programs are often a response to some kind of external political or historical change, and the two World Wars are examples of that.

In the book, you talk about how, historically, General Education programs were a way to create a “binding experience”—a certain kind of common background for citizens. You were also involved in creating the new General Education program here at Harvard. Was that a motivation for the new curriculum?

That was not our motivation. At Columbia it definitely was. The idea behind the Literature Humanities requirement at Columbia, which is the freshman year Great Books course, was that every student would become familiar with and could talk about a common culture. Everybody at Columbia has read Don Quixote, everybody’s read the other works on the Columbia syllabus. We felt that, for lots of reasons, you couldn’t do that very effectively at Harvard. The Harvard program instead is modeled on the idea that General Education teaches students things that will be useful for them in their life after college—which was also the motivation behind the Contemporary Civilization piece of the Columbia Core, which is the sophomore year course. And it was part of the motivation behind the Harvard General Education program of 1945, the one outlined in General Education in a Free Society.

Later in the book you discuss what you call a “humanities revolution,” which in part involved traditional disciplines being called into question, either in an entirely anti-disciplinary sense, or in moves toward new fields that traditional
disciplines had largely ignored. You conclude that “eclecticism seems to be the fate of the academic humanities” but you don’t seem particularly worried about this development. Why not?

Well, I’m of the view, which I think is shared by a lot of people in the humanities, that the disciplines are factitious ways to organize inquiry. Nevertheless, we’re bureaucratically divided into these separate departments. The departments are identified either with a particular artistic medium, such as visual arts, or music, or literature, or with a nationality. That’s a retrograde way to think of the humanities, because art and ideas don’t really work that way in the world. So in the last thirty or so years, a great deal of skepticism developed about disciplinarity in the humanities division of the university, a skepticism that is not necessarily shared by colleagues in other divisions. I think they find their disciplinary distinctions more fruitful that we do. I think there’s probably no way of putting the toothpaste back in the disciplinary tube for us, and there’s also not a very realistic way of changing the bureaucratic structure of departments. I think ultimately that will happen, but that is a process that will take a long time. As a consequence, we’re in a position of spending a lot of time thinking about the conditions of knowledge production. That’s probably a good thing for the university—that people think about the limits of knowledge and the ways in which paradigms constrain what we think about and do.

Most of what we do in the humanities is hermeneutical; it’s not empirical. We don’t dig for data and then produce results of experiments that can be duplicated. We interpret things. And one of the things that we interpret is the data that empirical disciplines produce, and that’s a good thing for us to be doing. It does put us in a weird position of having difficulty legitimating ourselves in using the vocabulary that other disciplines use to legitimize their selves. We’ve struggled with that over the last couple of decades. That part’s a little less fortunate. I think we ought to be able to do a better job of explaining why we’re an important piece of the university.

You’re also skeptical of interdisciplinarity as it is conducted now. You argue that, given that professors are trained rigorously in a particular discipline, putting them in a room with another professor leads only to them talking past one another. Is your opposition to interdisciplinarity only if it takes place in this way, or to the idea in and of itself?

I’m for interdisciplinarity as an idea, if what that means is trying to find modes of teaching and doing scholarship that transcend or ignore disciplinary boundaries. I think we’re all more or less in favor of that. We don’t quite know what that would look like, and this is partly because of the way we’re trained. We’re training people to be specialists. Future professors spend six, eight, ten years in graduate school learning a particular subspecialty within a specialty within a field. Then they get jobs in which they are supposed to produce publications in that specialty, and which can be reviewed for tenure by other specialists in that specialty. Then after a fifteen-year process, they are free to write about whatever they want, and we expect them to be interdisciplinary. We haven’t trained them to do that! So if we’re serious about interdisciplinarity, it has to begin at home. It has to start with the way we train even undergraduates. We’re training them in an old-fashioned way and then we expect them to do some 21st century stuff when they get out the other end of the very, very long tunnel. Insofar as “interdisciplinary” just means putting one superspecialist in a room with another one, with the idea that the takeaway is that there are different perspectives depending on what discipline you’re in, that’s not very interdisciplinary.
This journal is directed toward History undergraduates. You note that only 2% of college graduates major in History. If you were a humanities undergraduate today interested in a career in academia, what would you do?

Well the difficulty from a career point of view is that the number of people who get bachelor’s degrees every year goes up. But the percentage of that number that get degrees in history or English gets smaller every year. It’s a shrinking sector in proportion to the whole. So even though you might think, Well, I’m training for a job in a field that is constantly expanding—higher education—actually our portion of the field, students in the liberal arts and sciences, is shrinking. It’s true of every—pretty much every liberal arts field except the life sciences.

On the other hand, if this is what interests you, you should pursue the degree. There certainly are some jobs available. Students will still take history courses. But they’re not going to major in the field. The same thing’s true of English, of math, and of a lot of these fields. Since you’re getting your PhD as a specialist, you’re probably never going to end up really teaching what you’ve been trained to so. You’re going to be teaching a much broader range of classes to a much more general kind of student population. That kind of teaching can be fun and it can be useful, but it’s not really what you’ve been trained to do. It’s just good to have an idea before you go down the road of graduate education of what the jobs are at the other end.

Do you think there are certain subfields that are more promising—say, transnational history or cultural history?

Definitely. In history, as in literature, everything’s going transnational. To the extent that you’re identified as a national historian—of France, of Russia, of the US, say—that’s going to be limiting, because people are going to look for people who can cross national boundaries. That’s part of why this departmental system in literature doesn’t really work, because nobody really respects it intellectually. On the other hand, the fact that more people are going to be going into transnational areas means those areas will be more competitive at the other end. But that’s just the way disciplines work.

What are you working on now?

I’ve been working on the Cold War period for quite a while. I teach a course in it. I’ve written a lot of chapter-length bits that might or might not make a book. So my hope this summer is to try to figure out the answer to that question.

Interview with Professor Jason Ur

Jason Ur is an associate professor of archaeology who studies urbanization in Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium B.C. He is known for his work with remote sensing, especially using declassified satellite imagery and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, and is the author of numerous articles as well as a forthcoming book on the development of cities in ancient Mesopotamia. The interview was conducted by Tempus staff members Brendan Maione-Downing and Anne Creighton.
How did you become interested in the applications of remote sensing to archaeology?

It stemmed from the questions that I wanted to ask, which required investigation on a certain scale. I was interested in communication and the formation of cities. You can’t dig up an entire city; you can’t dig up a network of communications. That’s where satellite imagery and remote sensing become particularly interesting. Actually having at least one data set that covers a large spatial area as opposed to digging in a very small hole and then trying to extrapolate about regional communication on that basis is very valuable.

Should all archaeologists be asking these broader spatial questions or is there still a place for archaeologists who don’t use these types of data in their work?

Absolutely. I’m a big advocate for taking a broad approach but you can look at cities and landscapes from space and this gives you one type of data set. You simply can’t draw broad conclusions without having at least some idea of what is actually under the ground. Just as I would be very critical of anybody who wrote the history of the world from one trench, I would be equally critical of somebody who just took satellite imagery and then proclaimed to know all of the answers to these questions. You really have to combine the two data sets, so yes; we should continue to dig holes.

Could you give a specific example of times when you’ve had to use both in your work?

A good example would be the patterns of pre-modern roads that I’ve been able to document. I’ve been using declassified spy satellite imagery from the 1960s to document this amazing pattern of roads from the early Bronze Age in Mesopotamia. My best guess is that these are the roads that farmers took to and from their fields, herders and animals took out into pasture, but they were very nucleated and I wanted to know why.

There are interpretations that think that there was a massive state apparatus that oversaw all of this and that products came into cities and were stored in huge silos by the state. You’ve got to dig up the site in order to find out. We excavated these places and didn’t find massive state level security, so I can look at these landscapes and see them as emergent. These are households making these decisions and I see this massive network as being an emergent product rather than a state imposing its will on these people and that is something that I couldn’t have said from the satellite imagery alone.

Your work tends to be in geopolitically sensitive areas, like Iraq. Does the availability of satellite imagery decrease the degree to which archaeologists are dependent on the political situation on the ground – on actually being able to visit sites – in these regions?

As I said, I come to these images because there is a question that’s driving me there. Satellite imagery often isn’t the best thing to answer some of the questions. Ideally, we’d have nice low-level aerial photographs, but in the Middle East that can be really problematic. Having access to satellite imagery without having to ask these governments’ permission to use it does definitely help out my work. I’m very conscious of these security issues and I obviously don’t want to be portrayed as a spy so I always make sure that the local antiquities services are aware that I am
using these sources, that they are declassified and that I don’t have connections with the CIA. I go out of my way to share these data sets with local antiquities services so they can also use them for identifying and protecting archaeological sites.

Another one of the tools that you work with is GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software. How do the spatial analysis tools offered by modern software allow you to draw new conclusions from archaeological data?

I am a big proponent of using GIS. What we can do with GIS tools is we can now quantify statements about the importance of space in ways that previously we could not do very easily. Instead of just saying that an archaeological site is bigger than what came before it, we can measure these sites and say that settlements grew by a certain percentage based on spatial analytical results. This may not seem like a big deal, but in reviewing some of the broad statements made in the past before we had the ability to measure human phenomena precisely on a geographic scale we can see in some instances that people were making claims in ways that we certainly wouldn’t do anymore. I could spend six months doing at my desk with a scale map and a ruler and a calculator doing certain calculations, or I could set my computer to do it overnight and save myself six months.

You’ve mentioned a lot of the strengths of GIS, but what are some of its limitations or weaknesses?

We have a tendency to put data into a computer application, click a few buttons and see the results as somehow definitive because they came out of a computer. Here the principle of garbage in, garbage out is one I really subscribe to; if you use bad, non-representative, data, your results are going to be bad. It’s also always important for us to recognize that while we use these GIS tools, which have a Cartesian view of the world, the people that we are studying, who would have moved through these landscapes, did not view the world like this. They lived in an entirely different kind of space. We can use these spatial analytical techniques, but before we assume that the results that seem significant to us were meaningful to people in the past, we need to recognize that they didn’t live in a world where they could see their planet from space.

How do you see the availability of new tools and methods of analysis changing the work of archaeologists and historians in the near future?

The wide use of programs like Google Maps and Google Earth means that almost everybody is just a little bit more comfortable with maps and vertical imagery. When I ask at the beginning of my classes how many people have used Google Earth, every year I see more and more hands go up. The kinds of questions I ask are more widely accepted as being of interest, particularly among rising generations of archaeologists and historians. The kinds of questions that historians might be interested in about communication where in the past you had points on a map can now be represented by spatial databases, and here I would encourage all readers of Tempus to look at the DARMC (Digital Atlas of Roman and Medieval Civilization) project.

One other thing regarding GIS and history that is of particular interest for me is that landscapes emerge not only because of the actions of the elites who tend to be literate and leave the records that we study for the most part as historians. Landscapes emerge because of the actions of everybody. Kings might build up city walls and they might dig canals, but the whole of the
landscape, which can be studied through satellite imagery is an emergent product. Using GIS and remote sensing allows you to put the actions of everyone back into our reconstructions of past societies.

*Do you see a narrowing of the traditional, or maybe stereotypical, divide between archaeologists and historians?*

I hope so. I think it is when I see people here at Harvard like Michael McCormick in history and Peter Bol in East Asian Languages and Civilizations. The kind of questions about space that we can ask now from a historical standpoint is massively expanded. The China Historical GIS database and DARMC make asking those questions so much easier than it was in the past.

*What are you currently working on – what’s next?*

I am in the early stages of writing a book on the origins and development of cities in Ancient Mesopotamia. This is a place where cities are commonly thought to have first emerged. It’s largely been studied through the lens of a few excavated places and historical inscriptions, particularly kings who made boasts about constructing these cities. My approach is going to be to look at cities as emergent products, not just from the actions of the kings who left these very propagandistic royal inscriptions, but also from the actions of the people who populated them and here is where remote sensing and GIS come into play. I am going to look at the landscapes, the total landscapes and not just the excavations of the great palaces that have informed our discussions of urbanism in the past.

*Is there anything else you’d like to address to the readers of Tempus?*

I’m enthusiastic about the increase we’ve seen in the interest in archaeology among Harvard undergrads, especially people coming from a classics and history background. There is an understanding that the material record can tell us things that the historical record may choose not to describe or may describe in a potentially misleading way. Bringing these sources together can create a fuller picture of the past than just hearing the words of literate people.