



HISTORY  
MAJORS'  
COMMITTEE

# GULLIVER

VASSAR COLLEGE

FALL  
2023



### About the Cover:

This semester the History Majors' Committee wanted to pay homage to our own history at Swift Hall. The top image, hanging in Swift 105, is from the Vassar College Library Special Collections. It depicts Professor Carl Degler teaching a class in Swift Hall, c. 1952-1955. The bottom image, taken December 1st, 2023, recreates this 70 year old photo, showing Professor Mita Choudhury, the current chair of the department, talking with this semester's History Majors' Committee.

Cover Image: Katherine Bamberg & Sara Shepherd

Photo Credit: Celeste Pozderec

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## The History Majors' Committee

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**If you are interested in getting involved in the History Majors' Committee, please contact the academic intern Aidan Chisamore ([achisamore@vassar.edu](mailto:achisamore@vassar.edu)) for more information!**

## The Legacy of His Words: An Interview with Professor Bisaha

Jaden Miller '25



On September 26, I had the privilege to chat with Professor Nancy Bisaha about the release of her new book. We discussed everything from her writing process and research to the major themes of the book and their potential implications in the modern world of political and historical discourse. Professor Bisaha's book, *From Christians to Europeans: Pope Pius II and the Concept of the Modern Western Identity* (Routledge, 2023), is now available for sale and at the Vassar library. Here are just a few highlights from the original interview. - Jaden Miller

**JM: Is there anything you can share about the journey of writing this book?**

**NB:** I planned to start writing this book in 2004 after my first book came out because I found Aeneas [the future Pope Pius] to be the most interesting figure that I encountered while working on my first book.

This project took a bit of a detour because the first thing I started doing was to read and translate Pius's *De Europa*. While doing that,

I asked Rob Brown in the Greek and Roman Studies department if he could help me with some questions, and it wasn't long before he proposed, to my delight, that we work together on it. And I thought, well, that would be fantastic because he's a wonderful Latinist, and I'd be able to focus on other parts like the extensive footnotes, the introduction, the timeline, and so on. So in the process of doing that, I learned a lot more about Pius' world and how he saw the idea of Europe, how he identified its boundaries and its qualities, and what sort of subtle messages he might be trying to send -- because it's not a work that screams a very strong agenda. You have to read between the lines.

Pius's *Europe* is a recent history of the countries of Europe and the islands attached to it, but I detected several threads that I thought were important. It gave me a good groundwork for the current book after it was completed.

*Europe* was published in 2013, so I guess I really started working on *From Christians to*

*Europeans* in earnest around then. It's been about 10 years, right? It's always a challenge to write when you're teaching.

I was chair of the department when I started, and then I was chair of Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Those were labors of love, and I really enjoyed them. But it can be hard to find large pockets of time to devote to research. So just little by little I had to keep working at it and reconnecting with it.

Our thesis students read this great article by Lynn Hunt where she says, "I have to write in order to discover what I think." And that is exactly what happened. As I tried to draft it, I realized certain things didn't work, like whole chapters!

It took me several tries to figure out what the right first chapter should be, for instance. Once I figured that out, the rest of it came a bit easier.

**JM: Working on the book in chunks through a long period, how did you feel it evolving?**

**NB:** I definitely did a lot of outlining, and I had to think about which pieces were going to fit where and how to divide the book up.

Once I figured out the overall structure, I just tried to attack it chapter by chapter.

I had this one chapter where I took a picture of what I ended up doing with sticky notes. I had all these post-its about the things I wanted to discuss, and I couldn't figure out the order to put them in or how they related

to each other. So, I just kept moving them around and creating a few new sticky notes. That was a really helpful way to map out the chapter. Because the book itself is an intellectual biography -- it's not just a straightforward life story.

The hardest one was chapter three, where I was looking at three major works he wrote in a short period of time when he was a cardinal. He wrote *Europe*, he wrote *On Germany*, and he wrote *The History of Bohemia* in less than one year. And they're all kind of interwoven on some level, right? There are things about them that bring them into dialogue with each other. The easiest thing would have been to treat them separately, but then there's a lot of overlap, and I wanted to be able to show the intersections. Trying to figure out how to do that fluidly and thematically was tricky.

You asked about my process. I developed a lot of strategies to establish a routine and stay focused.

When I had larger pockets of time, like say in the summer or over winter breaks, or when I was on leave -- one of the things I liked to do was have a certain rhythm to my day. I'd get up and have my coffee and breakfast, and I'd exercise or take the dogs for a walk whenever I could. Healthy mind, healthy body and all that!

I'd try to get to work fairly early and get a certain amount of work done before lunch, but I'd also try to set the tone for the day. I have my rituals that help me sit down and get to work.

**JM:** Now that you've spent so long reading Pius's works, do you feel like you've gotten to know him in a way?

**NB:** I kind of do! I feel like I lived with this man on the sort of level where he became this major person in my life. I like to refer to him as "my pope." And one of the reasons that I chose him is that I find him very engaging.

He tried to take care of people, and he had issues that mattered greatly to him. He really cared about the security of Europe. He was worried about the Ottoman Empire continuing to acquire more and more territory. That was something he wanted to put his energy toward.

But I take him to task for his rhetoric because it becomes extremely xenophobic and Orientalist. This happens long before colonialism and Edward Said. There are all these problematic things that I try to unpack. In his quest to build a common front against the Ottomans, he ends up creating a pretty exclusive notion of Europe. A notion that Europeans are people of a certain sort and some folks belong and others don't. It's largely determined along Christian lines, but he also sets a lot of parameters about what "civilization" is. What is acceptable and who are "the best people" in the world? Lo and behold, they're in Europe.

And so it's a real problem. The reason why I think Pius's writing is important is that many people have argued that this idea of Europe is something that really takes shape no earlier than the 18th century or the 19th century with the advent of colonialism, the Enlightenment,

and so forth. But I think that he was doing this during the Renaissance when Europeans were on the defensive.

When many people take pride in Europe or try to take pride in Western ideas, they don't realize how much of that is a defensive gesture, an exclusionary gesture, and how much of that pride is an attempt to put down other parts of the world.

So my relationship with Pius, as it were, is complicated. I would say, on the whole, that I admire him and understand why he felt the need to be as protective as he was. But I also think we have to reckon with the impact of his language because it far outlived the Ottoman threat, right?

It just kept going on, and people keep invoking these rhetorical truisms as if they are objective reality.

**JM:** Would you say that idea of Eurocentrism and that notion of a Europe that is exclusive, would you say that is a part of his legacy?

**NB:** Absolutely, 100%.

One of the things that I argue is that we can debate when the idea of Europe really takes shape. Some people say in ancient Greece, some people say the 19th century. Some scholars have called Pius "the father of Europe." All that is debatable. But what is clear to me, and I argue in this book, is that he is the father of Eurocentrism. This is because he goes from talking about Europe as

a place to talking about it as an identity and community with a personality.

And that, I think, is an important distinction that he ascribes a value system to it -- it goes beyond geography to something that can be both compelling and worrisome. In many ways, Pius invented a notion of Europe in order to exclude the Ottomans (and thereby other Muslim peoples) from it.

**JM:** Would you say that Pius's legacy as a unifier of Europe is in competition with him being this exclusifier (so to speak) of others? Or was that part and parcel of his mission?

**NB:** That's a great question. If you look at any moment in time, if you look at any war, people are going to use polemic and rhetoric in ways that help them cope and forge a sense of common resistance. To a certain degree, it's understandable.

What's important to remember is that the difference between his time and ours is significant. The Ottoman Empire was aggressive and expansionist. Several nations in Europe and Asia were definitely under threat.

At the same time, the Ottomans offered a rich culture, trade, a stable government, and protections.

They were not the barbarians that Pius and others often made them out to be. And many European writers knew that. They knew that this was just rhetoric on their part.

But, as I've said, if you understand the idea of Europe that he articulated and see the resonances that it has today, you also have to understand that this was a time of greater threat and defensiveness.

For that reason, people should not be using those terms in exactly the same way. They shouldn't be using those value judgments in the same way because our worlds are so different. Pius had many good ideas about Europe, but we have to be careful not to replicate his notions of superiority and exclusivity.

**JM:** Is there any reason that can help explain the influence of his words? Do you think there was a message that particularly hit home?

**NB:** Yeah. Despite the defensiveness of a lot of his writings, I think he tried to present a positive vision of Europe. And it was one that boosted people's egos, right?

It was an image they liked to see of themselves. One of the last things he wrote as Pope, his last call to arms -- a papal bull about the Crusade -- made it sound like Western Christians were taking the lead.

There's this notion of them as being like saviors of the Christian world – remember that this is still only 1464.

**JM:** Would you say that there was anything in particular you want to try to highlight for the reader to consider?

**NB:** I would love it if Pius becomes part of the conversation when people talk about the

identity of Europe and the West, and if they use him to help complicate it. But the people who should be reading this book are the ones who are probably not going to, right?! The people who are very serious right-wing ideologues like Steve Bannon, Tucker Carlson, and Viktor Orban. They don't realize how much of their cherished notion of Europe and the West was born in a time and place of deep insecurity.

There are, of course, other ways of thinking of Europe and the West that are much more cosmopolitan. Europe is a collective that can embrace many different people, and, at its finest, it does. It's an idea that still invites people from all over the world, accepts different ideas, and builds upon them.

When I teach about medieval Europe, I'm well aware of that. I always try to communicate how much Europeans borrowed from other cultures. I mean, you cannot talk about this purist sense of Europe as if it were some hermetically sealed environment where they invented everything.

In truth, Europeans got many of their best ideas from China, Africa, the Islamic world, and the Americas. Europeans may have built upon these things in productive ways, but that contribution from other parts of the world often gets erased. And right-wing ideologues also erase how many good ideas continue to come from other parts of the world. They just want to see everything as top-down, with European and Western countries as leaders.

## Intersectionality in Early America: Meet Professor Noel Smyth

Anjali Gahlaut '25 & Benjamin Savel '26



Professor Noel Smyth is the department's newly-appointed early American history professor. He previously taught at the University of California at Santa Cruz and has been involved in community-building efforts with the Natchez people in Oklahoma and South Carolina. His courses focus on Colonial America, Native American history, and the transatlantic slave trade. We sat down with Professor Smyth to discuss his experience as a historian and aspirations as a professor.

Professor Smyth first became interested in studying history in college. He initially focused on English literature, but soon realized that he wanted to better understand the time period that his 18th and 19th century authors lived in. He liked history because it was still centered around storytelling, he noted to us but was more grounded, in fact, than literature.

Smyth remarked how much he loved his history class, a Gen Ed requirement that covered European history of the last 300

years. His parents noted his excitement at the class and suggested that he continue following his passion for the subject.

In college, he double majored in literature and art and double minored in Native American and African American history. He enjoyed his learning experience but wanted to experience the real world before he returned to academia. He worked in construction for his cousin for several years. Smyth told us that having this experience outside of academia influenced his perspective as a historian, giving him a better viewpoint about the real lives of ordinary people. He said it gave him a “better sense of...people from the past, not judging them from a position of abstract privilege in an ivory tower.”

Now a historian of the Natchez people, Professor Smyth also told us that his undergraduate experience helped him refine his area of study. He first learned about the Natchez in a Native American history class.

He learned how the society was a powerful threat to the French in 1729 but nearly disappeared from the historical record after 1731. When he went to graduate school many years later, he decided to continue focusing on the Natchez, writing his dissertation on their postcolonial diasporic history.

His simple conversations with the Natchez eventually paved the way for major developments in his ability to record their history.

“I Googled them, I emailed them, I started talking to Natchez in Oklahoma and South Carolina and creating relationships with them, beginning to write a history of Native people that are still around but have no history books about them.”

Smyth mentioned that he was specifically attracted to American history to dispel many of the myths associated with it.

“The more I learned about the United States,” he told us, “the more I realized how much propaganda there was, how many lies there were around American history. I wanted to work against that.”

While his area of interest is United States history, he also noted the value of studying outside the United States. He learned French and studied abroad in France, which later helped him work with Native-French colonial documents.

When asked what the most unexpected thing he has learned in his journey of being a professor and a historian, Smyth emphasized

the importance of resources and access. He stated, “If you’re thinking about graduate school, particularly in history, you want to go to programs that are better funded because it’s easier to access archives.” However, he highlighted that through his career as both a professor and a student, he has developed the belief that the institution itself has little to do with your actual education. It depends more on the individual and how much work they are willing to put in.

Professor Smyth also had some words of advice for Vassar students and history majors. “Keep doing what you’re doing: be hard working, interested in learning, creative, and responsive to feedback. Being willing to keep pushing yourself to improve is a lifelong process.” He told us that maintaining a desire to push yourself to improve is an important lifelong process.

Next year, Smyth will be taking a year of leave to work on a postdoc at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History in Williamsburg, Virginia. He is excited to work on research for his book about the Natchez and start working on a second book project as well.

Smyth also discussed his goals as a teacher. “My aspiration is to continue to be the best teacher and mentor I can be. I want to continue to learn from my students. I also want to continue to do positive work for the Natchez community. My goal is to use my position as a historian to contribute to Native American causes — specifically the Natchez, but also Native students and faculty on campus as well.”

## Professor Joshua Schreier on His Sabbatical Research and Current Events in Gaza

Eli Hinerfeld '24 and Ben Goth '25



Professor Schreier specializes in Middle Eastern, Algerian, Jewish, and French histories. His research focuses on North African Jews in the first decades of the French occupation of Algeria. Since returning from Sabbatical, he has been teaching Colonialism, Nationalism, and Social Identities in the Modern Middle East, and he leads a thesis seminar. Next semester, he will teach a course called 'The Roots of the Palestine-Israel Conflict.' We talked to him about his sabbatical research and his thoughts on the campus response to the war in Gaza.

### **What were you working on during your sabbatical?**

**JS:** I worked on a project about a Muslim sheik named Abdelhamid Ben Badis. He lived in Algeria, was born in the late nineteenth century, and died in 1940. He was key to the development of Muslim reformism, or Salafiyya. It sought to reject the practices and beliefs that the Salafists thought had glommed on to Islam over the centuries and needed to be cast off in favor

of, in his mind, a movement that was more pure and authentic. I became interested in how he talked about Jews in Algeria during the period he was active, specifically in the early 1920s and 1930s, because this was just about when the British Mandate was becoming more violent. There was more oppression of Palestinian Arab resistance against the Balfour policy of the British.

But at the same time as this was going on in Palestine, the first step to an independence movement in Algeria was beginning. He was not a revolutionary by any means; he preached that Algerian Muslims should be faithful to France. But at the same time, he thought that Muslims should have their special personality, their own national identity that could exist within the context of the French empire. He was living in a circumstance where that probably didn't seem possible to that many people, not until closer to the end of his life. He was living under the reality of colonial censorship. Even if he believed it, he wouldn't have said it.

### **During your research, were there any major obstacles that you encountered and, if so, how did you overcome them?**

**JS:** Honestly, despite my training, it's always challenging working in Arabic. You're looking at the language itself but also how he expressed himself in that language during the 1920s and 1930s, and a lot of it is difficult. There's a printed journal I'm looking at, but the copies I have are not super clear all the

time, so it's smudgy. Those are historians' problems; it's getting through the language and the bad copies you've got. I've got plenty of colleagues I can always ask questions with, so there's always a way through. I have a coworking situation where I work with several other scholars. There are native speakers of Arabic among them, so I can always ask questions. But even with that, it's tough.

And when you're looking through this significant corpus of printed stuff, you're always scanning it for interesting things. If you were doing an extensive research project, you wouldn't read every book cover to cover; you'd look for interesting stuff. When dealing with old, printed matter trying to find it, it's harder to do. I don't know if my collection is complete because it's strangely organized. And then there's also the matter of life getting in the way, and I think that's a universal problem. We have families and a life to live, and it's very easy for things to get in the way of concentrated work. This sabbatical came during a hectic and intense couple of years of my life, so I needed some time to breathe for a little while.

**Was there one very specific detail or aspect of what you have learned that is really exciting to you?**

**JS:** A lot of my teaching passion has to do with Palestine and Israel. I love researching Algeria, but I love talking about and teaching the situation in Palestine right now. What's interesting is to see how these thinkers in 1930s Algeria also saw Palestine in these

very passionate terms. It helped them articulate their own stance towards colonialism, freedom, and independence from an established order. So it's interesting to see how Palestine became such an issue for other people in the Arab Muslim world. This isn't my discovery; other scholars have noticed this. Apart from the events in Palestine, Ben Badis also took an interest in the Jewish history of Algeria and saw North Africa as a place where Jewish culture had thrived in the past while coexisting with Muslim culture.

**How has your ongoing consideration of the sources and methodologies for this project affected the way you teach those approaches?**

**JS:** I've translated things in the past and given them to students to read, but mainly from French colonial sources. And in this project, there have been these incredible passages about how Ben Badis viewed Jewish history in Algeria that he wrote in Arabic. Sometimes, I see them in Arabic, but I notice from the sighting that they had originally appeared in some European language somewhere else. In at least one case I can think of, I'm reading these Arabic articles where the name under it is French, so it appeared somewhere in France at one point. I'm looking forward to translating that into English so students will know how these Muslim reformists understood Jewish history in the 1930s through local Arabic language sources. I can't help but think, 'Oh my God, I have to get these in front of students and get their reads on this because this is super interesting.' To what extent were they

glamorizing the past? To what extent do they seem inclusive? To what extent do they read as antisemitic, and if so, why? So, in a way, Ben Badis didn't have a religious interpretation; when he describes what's going on, he critiques the colonial order, who gets privilege and who doesn't, and I would love to see students tackle that.

**Does discourse on campus surrounding the war in Gaza concern you in any capacity?**

**JS:** When I talk to you about my concerns, I can only reflect on my own experience and the experience that students have shared with me, which has been very limited this year. I honestly believe that, given my knowledge of Vassar students and a lot of the faculty, we can effectively express our viewpoints and get the message across in a way that's not demeaning to each other. Most of the things that have actually offended other people are each other's aspirations and slogans, not because they're insulting a given religious or ethnic group. And I think that my biggest concern is when very conservative outside groups seek to mislabel anti-semitism and then get local students to join in. Rather than asking, "Why does what I say offend you? Why did what you just said offend me? What do you actually envision? What do you actually want?" they ask, "Do you feel unsafe? And if so, can we make a big deal out of it, if not a lawsuit?", which is incredibly damaging.

Obviously, every student on campus should feel safe; every student should feel free to associate ethnically, religiously, or racially

with who they are. But I think it's really, really important not to weaponize the protections that we all should enjoy to prevent certain kinds of political speech that would otherwise be protected.

**Do you have any advice for people at Vassar who may not know what to do or say in this environment?**

**JS:** I would say make sure people understand the slogans. I want to urge people to criticize systems of repression, not national or ethnic groups. Please talk to others. This is specifically for students. I want people at Vassar to be very careful, talk to faculty, and speak to people with some experience with this. And make sure that what they're saying is protected speech and that it's clear. In many cases, I think it's really important to emphasize what they want. Not to think or talk in memes.

**Do you feel like you have a responsibility to engage in conversations about this topic as one of the leading educators on this topic at Vassar?**

**JS:** Yes, I do feel that obligation. I feel it as an educator. I feel it as a Jewish person who grew up learning a lot about the Holocaust, and I'm probably not at all alone being very, very affected by it and feeling it as a part of a personal history. It is important for me to talk about ultranationalism, national ideologies that are exclusive and violent, forms of apartheid, and even genocide. On a personal identity level, I have a lot of energy when the opportunity arises to talk to more people about it and communicate with students.

Also, it is important to find ways for people who might be confused about the topic to understand that they have a right to say something. Just because you're Jewish or you're not Jewish, or just because you're Palestinian or you're not Palestinian or Arab or Muslim, that doesn't dictate what your

opinion has to be. There are ways of understanding this conflict and envisioning universal solutions that don't involve one side winning or the demonization or the lionization of one ethnic or national group over another. I feel that that's what I really have an obligation to talk to students about.

## A Conversation on Environmental History: Discussions with Professors Puglisi and Mendiola

Jazmine Williams '26

*The first time I was introduced to the environment was in my seventh grade science class. I was 12 and my teacher handed out a packet that broke down, hour by hour, what would happen in my community when the 300-year-overdue earthquake hit the Pacific Northwest. That was the first time I ever thought about a human connection with the environment. I was faced with the thought that it would be completely out of my control. That is what the environment was to me. So, when I learned that environmental history is an area of research within our department, I wanted to challenge my anxiety and learn about interactions between humans and the environment. Through my conversations with Professor Daniel Mendiola and Professor Allison Puglisi, I learned how this discipline brings together the environment and human community. These interviews illustrate a deeper connection to the environment, a relationship in which we both interact and survive. For the 12-year old version of myself, these nuanced understandings would mean everything. This article will present a selection of the parts of our conversations that I found especially salient.*

### What is environmental history?

**AP:** I think about it as the relationship for my own work between Black Americans and their built and natural surroundings. The practice of environmental racism and how people have contested that in their everyday lives. It's complicated, because I'm

sometimes frustrated with elements of the field that don't want to talk about people or the differences between people.

**DM:** For me, the way I think about environmental history is at a fundamental level. If you're centering the environment in what you're studying, you're by definition centering relationships. An environment isn't a single object by definition. An environment is created by different things interacting with each other. In a sense, you could argue that environmental history starts out with a different premise than other types of history.

**Has where you've grown up or the places you've lived influenced the way you research and approach your field?**

**AP:** Yes, I am from a place where there was very little water [Arizona] and wanted to study a place where water was everywhere [Louisiana]. Both those landscapes are deeply racialized, yet there is still hope because people are thinking creatively about navigating that world. Environmental racism is very real but it's never a totalizing phenomenon. It's never so all-consuming that it leaves no room for people to resist or to have joy.

**DM:** I grew up in a small town in East Texas. I knew my grandparents were Mexican and they spoke Spanish. I didn't have a lot of interaction with them when I was growing

up. I knew bits and pieces of their story. I decided to take a class on the Mexican revolution, knowing very little about it other than that was when my grandparents migrated to the US. Their families were displaced, and it was easier to cross the border in those days. They were from the north of Mexico in Tamaulipas, so they crossed over to Edinburg [Texas]. So, part of this was trying to make sense of my own history.

### **How does environmental history intersect with other parts of their scholarship?**

**DM:** In 18th century Latin America interactions with the physical landscape affected distance. They were used for satellite views, from an overhead view we can measure these distances and everything looks neat. If you're on the ground and you want to traverse 20 km or 50 km, that overheard view may not matter that much by how you're experiencing the space. What's going to matter more, is it going to take you five months or is this a nice open prairie you can cross quickly? What's built into the landscape of this sort intersect with travel is a fundamental part of actual distance. Distance in theory is this neat sort of euclidean space, distance in practice is this intersection between the person and this case. This is an example of the way environmental history centers really on the physicality of these intersections.

### **How does the climate crisis connect with environmental history?**

**AP:** So there is, on one hand, the need to be very frank about the reality of that racism. [referring to environmental factors that disproportionately affect Black people]. At the same time, while we're frank about that, we have to not cast those -isms as so totalizing that there is no room for people to experience joy or respite or activism. We kind of have to hold those two things together, and I think that's what I spend a lot of my time doing as a researcher and as a teacher. People in history have shown us ways of living through catastrophe and still managing to experience joy. I think an environmental history class can actually offer some strength, some reassurance, and some possibilities as we confront the climate crisis. Rather than just being a depressing or terrifying thing, we have to do both. I think that's what Black studies helps us do.

### **How does this affect your teaching? What do you want students to gain from your classes?**

**AP:** The way I start the Black ecologies class is by asking students: How would our understanding of Black history change if we thought about the environment as a key aspect of that experience? What things would we be able to see that we maybe haven't seen before? I learn new things each year from the students in terms of how they answer that question. That's the guiding question for my research and classes.

**DM:** I want each student to be presented with a curated set of materials and to engage with that set of materials to produce their own knowledge. To go through this practice of

reading something and engaging with a set of ideas, apply those in other situations, incorporate some, and qualify others. I want students to experience that in an empowering way because, at a fundamental level, when I think about history, history is a means to an end. [In] history, technically, we're studying the past, but what we're doing is providing examples for us to understand the world we live in today.

The first text that we read in my environmental history course is Eduardo Kohn's classic study *[How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human]*. Basically, the forest thinking is a core aspect of the text. It questions this idea of how we define what it means to think. Why do we assume humans are the only ones that can do that?

### **How is environmental history present in our lives or communities?**

**AP:** This mural is in New Orleans.

I love this mural so much. We think about water as being this threatening thing, this disaster often. Water can be disastrous, but it's also a place for joy. This mural is huge. It's close to where the Superdome is in New Orleans, so I think Black artists also play a big role in cultivating joy. But they sort of remind us that, yes, there is a lot of despair, but people find ways through it. When you ask about joy, I think about that mural. Sometimes, they're very small things, but they are very meaningful.



BMike Odums and Young Artist Movement, *Survive*, 2019.

*Before these conversations, I could not define environmental history beyond “the intersection of humans and nature.” What I’ve learned is that environmental history can allow us to recover our personal history and learn how people from our communities interact with their environment. From my discussions with Professor Mendiola and Professor Puglisi, this personal connection, intrinsic to each researcher, deeply impacted me. Without a personal connection, how could we begin to understand our engagement with the environment that we are surrounded by at every moment of our lives? I was able to move from my initial space of anxiety around the environment and learn about the experiences of people of color who interact with borders, water, homes, and so many other aspects of their environment in a way that is complicated but holds room for joy. I’m also left hopeful that these voices now get to be included in my own understanding of the Environment. That matters. It matters for the person I am today.*

## Considering the Morality of *Oppenheimer*: International Receptions to the Film

Natalie Buzzell '26 and Willa Jewitt '26

The highly-anticipated film *Oppenheimer* was released in American theaters on July 21, 2023. According to *Variety* magazine, by August 20, 2023, *Oppenheimer* had surpassed \$700 million globally and become “the highest-grossing R-rated film of the year.” The film follows the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, otherwise known as the “father of the atomic bomb.” It chronicles Oppenheimer’s work as the director of the Manhattan Project and offers a detailed glimpse into the mind and personal life of this influential figure. At three hours in length, the film successfully portrays the significance of the Manhattan Project to American involvement in World War II, however, it neglects to show the impact of the bombs used on Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This negligence has earned Director Christopher Nolan notable criticism, both in the U.S. and internationally.

In the film, Oppenheimer’s character grapples with the potential impact of his nuclear creation, but his guilt is not focused on the potential harm it may inflict on individual people or countries. Instead, he is concerned with the weapon’s potential to cause nuclear devastation on a global scale.

After a successful first test, Oppenheimer is greeted by a room full of cheering Americans. As they applaud Oppenheimer, they begin to disintegrate, having been struck by an atomic bomb. Oppenheimer imagines

the whole world being destroyed by his creation, beginning with America. This scene demonstrates Oppenheimer’s understanding of the weapon’s potential for destruction. However, it shows little concern about its use against Japan. Oppenheimer is terrified by the image of Americans being destroyed by his creation, but he seems to have no remorse for the Japanese people who would be its real targets.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Nolan intended the film to be a subjective view of “the world through Oppenheimer’s eyes.” However, many critics argued that the director has a responsibility to acknowledge the significance of the nuclear attack on Japan. The film perpetuates the understanding that nuclear weapons are a symbol of American victory, rather than an act of violence against the Japanese people. In response to these critics, Nolan said “I wanted to show somebody who is starting to gain a clearer picture of the unintended consequences of his actions. It was as much about what I don’t show as what I show.” According to Nolan, his erasure of the weapons’ impact on the Japanese people was an artistic choice, which demonstrated Oppenheimer’s ignorance of the weapons’ true intended use.

“Oppenheimer” has not yet been released in Japan, despite being “a financial success in China and other Asian markets,” according to the *Japan Times*. The *Japan Times* speculates

that “Universal is worried about the Japanese domestic market’s reaction to the film, including the prospect of protests.” The film was released in the U.S. in late July, which is less than a month before the anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It may be released to theaters in Japan at a later date; however, as of November 2023, there are no such plans.

Despite not yet being released in Japan, “Oppenheimer” has already sparked international controversy, specifically because of its connection to Greta Gerwig’s “Barbie.” These two films were released on the same day in American theaters, creating an American cultural phenomenon dubbed “Barbenheimer.” The hashtag #Barbenheimer trended online as American movie-goers shared their plans for seeing the two highly-anticipated films together. According to *The Asahi Shimbun*, a Japanese newspaper, a #NoBarbenheimer hashtag began trending in Japan “prompting Warner’s Japan division to issue a rare public criticism of its parent company.” Reports of the international reception show the association between the two films offended Japanese audiences, seeing the coupling as detracting from the topic’s seriousness. Therefore, while unreleased in Japan, the Japanese public reception was largely negative, highlighting American media’s carefree attitude.

When, and if, “Oppenheimer” is released in Japan, many writers think it will spark a public debate on Japan’s defense spending and the use of nuclear weapons in warfare. An article by the *Washington Post* discusses

how Japan publicly condemns the use of nuclear weapons but finds them necessary for survival, especially as tensions increase in surrounding countries. A recent report, released in English on July 28, claims that Japan will spend \$309.75 billion on defense between 2024-2028, which is an increase from \$122.48 billion for the years 2019-2023, according to *DefenseNews*. As the country moves to expand its defense capabilities, the prospect of building a nuclear arsenal will become a more public talking point.

While the U.S.-Japan alliance that was built after WWII maintains high popularity in Japan—90% expressed support for the alliance, according to the *Washington Post*—many Japanese citizens still condemn the use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A 2015 survey by NHK showed that 40% of Japanese people surveyed felt that the U.S. had no choice in dropping the bombs, but 50% said it was unforgivable. The complicated relationship between the current alliance and the prior use of nuclear weapons will affect the Japanese perception of “Oppenheimer,” but could lead to productive debates about how the country should move forward with its defense spending and military tactics. The film should be critically analyzed within these debates, taking into account both the historical context and treatment of the event itself. As Japanese-American May Niiya told *Today*, “...art always has politics behind it...if Christopher Nolan is just trying to create a piece of art that is apolitical, I don’t think that exists.”

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## Historic Sites in the Hudson Valley

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As Vassar campus is only a train ride away from New York City's museums and attractions, it can be easy to forget the countless historic sites right here in the Hudson Valley! Here is a curated list of local museums and historic sites, along with their admission/tour prices and further information. Their hours of operation often change seasonally, so be sure to check them out before visiting!

### Sites Close to Campus

- **Locust Grove Estate, Poughkeepsie** - Italianate villa built in 1852 for Samuel F. B. Morse
  - Tours \$15/person, lgny.org
- **Kimlin Cider Mill, Poughkeepsie** - Cider mill with a long history of serving the local community, including visits by Vassar students in the early twentieth century
  - Open during events and by special appointment, cidermillfriends.org
- **Hopewell Depot Museum, Hopewell Junction** - 150-year-old restored train depot sharing the transportation history of the Hopewell Junction/Dutchess County area
  - Free admission, hopewelldepotmuseum.org
- **Val-Kill, Haviland** - Part of the collection of Roosevelt historic sites in the area, the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site has a long history of hosting world leaders, activists, and LGBTQ+ political organizers
  - \$10/person, nps.gov/elro and valkill.org
- **Home of FDR National Historic Site and the FDR Presidential Library, Hyde Park** - Though on the same property, the two museums operate separately and have different focuses: the Springwood estate is focused on the life of the Roosevelts, and the Library is more concentrated on the National Archives of FDR's administration. The collection of local Roosevelt family sites also contains Top Cottage, known as "FDR's retreat."
  - Home of FDR: \$10/person, nps.gov/hofr/index.htm
  - FDR Presidential Library: \$10/person, fdrlibrary.org/home
  - For more information on Top Cottage: hudsonrivervalley.com/sites/Top-Cottage/details

- **Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site, Hyde Park** - A seasonal residence of the Vanderbilt family built at the end of the nineteenth century, the museum displays most of its original furnishings and overlooks Italian gardens and the Hudson River
  - \$10/person, [home.nps.gov/vama/index.htm](http://home.nps.gov/vama/index.htm)

### Sites Further Away

- **Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History, Kingston** - A former Jewish bakery sharing the story of the Reher family and other local immigrants' experiences
  - \$12.50 (student fee), [rehercenter.org](http://rehercenter.org)
- **Mount Gulian Historic Site, Beacon** - Reconstructed eighteenth-century homestead of the Verplanck family, and former residence of James F. Brown, a man who escaped from enslavement in Maryland in the early nineteenth century
  - \$10/person, [mountgulian.org/](http://mountgulian.org/)
- **Staatsburgh State Historic Site, Staatsburg** - Gilded-Age mansion of Ogden and Ruth Livingston Mills
  - \$8 (student fee), [parks.ny.gov/historic-sites/staatsburgh/details.aspx](http://parks.ny.gov/historic-sites/staatsburgh/details.aspx)
- **D & H Canal Museum, High Falls** - Museum focused on the story of the Delaware and Hudson Canal and those who worked on it
  - \$12/person suggested donation, [canalmuseum.org](http://canalmuseum.org)
- **Historic Huguenot Street, New Paltz** - National Historic Landmark District representing the lives of the Dutch, French, Munsee Lenape and enslaved African peoples who formed the early Hudson Valley
  - \$12 (student fee), [huguenotstreet.org](http://huguenotstreet.org)
- **Washington's Headquarters, Newburgh** - Despite being one of many places where George Washington spent time during the Revolutionary War, this site in Newburgh is where he spent the longest amount of time of all his headquarters
  - \$5 (student fee), [parks.ny.gov/historic-sites/17/details.aspx](http://parks.ny.gov/historic-sites/17/details.aspx)
- **Underground Railroad Education Center, Albany** - Museum centered in the Myers Residence, a headquarters for Underground Railroad activity and other forms of Black resistance in the 1850s
  - \$10/person, [undergroundrailroadhistory.org](http://undergroundrailroadhistory.org)

While most of these sites have museums and/or visitor centers, there are also plenty of relatively unmarked sites still worthy of a visit. Guides such as *Slavery, Antislavery and the Underground Railroad: A Dutchess County Guide* by the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project list many

notable sites nearby, and are invaluable resources for learning more about local history! Thank you to Professor Edwards for suggesting this guide and several of the above historic locations.

**History Courses, Spring 2024**

HIST-116: The Dark Ages (Professor Bisaha)

HIST-151: British History, James I to the Great War (Professor Murdoch)

HIST-170: Introduction to Native American History (Professor Smyth)

HIST-214: Roots of the Israel-Palestine Conflict (Professor Schreier)

HIST-224: Sex, Power, and Resistance in the Renaissance (Professor Choudhury)

HIST-227: Chinatowns (Professor Shih)

HIST-236: The Black Freedom Struggle (Professor Puglisi)

HIST-237: Gender and Sexuality in Black America (Professor Puglisi)

HIST-242: Russian Empire to 1812 (Professor Pohl)

HIST-257: Comics (Professor Pohl)

HIST-265: Cold War America (Professor Brigham)

HIST-272: Modern African History Since 1800 (Professor Rashid)

HIST-275: Revolutionary America, 1750-1830 (Professor Smyth)

HIST-340: Dave the Potter (Professor Puglisi)

HIST-354: History and Politics of Grief (Professor Murdoch)

HIST-357: The First World War (Professor Murdoch)

HIST-374: The African Diaspora (Professor Rashid)

HIST-380: Ukraine/Russia: War and Peace (Professor Pohl)