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The History Majors’ Committee

Yuxin Bella Deng
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Brandon Jones
Faith Northern
Benjamin Papa
Jeremy Sass
Brian Scannell
Emmaline Singer
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PROFESSORS ON LEAVE THIS YEAR

Prof. Nancy Bisaha (Fall Semester)

Prof. James Merrell (Spring Semester)

Prof. Lydia Murdoch (Spring Semester)

Prof. Ismail Rashid (Spring Semester)
Professor Bisaha’s Sabbatical Semester and Upcoming Book
Yuxin Bella Deng ’22

Nancy Bisaha is a professor of History and of Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Vassar College. She wrote the introduction and annotated a recent book, *Europe, c. 1400-1458*, a translation of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini’s *De Europa* (1458). She also shared her views on the origin of the idea of “Europe” and of anti-Islamic rhetoric on the podcast, *Mirror of Antiquity*. Let’s take a look at what Prof. Bisaha has to say about her sabbatical semester and her next book!

**What were you doing or working on during the sabbatical semester?**

NB: I was working on my upcoming new book, *From Christians to Europeans: Pope Pius II and the Concept of the Modern Western Identity*. I submitted proposals to a few publishers and ended up signing a contract with Routledge. The manuscript is now in its final stages.

**That’s exciting news! Why did you pick this topic? What’s the importance of this book?**

NB: The accessibility of sources on Pope Pius II and the abundance of scholarly articles allow me to do a close reading of the texts and develop the argument of the book. My previous work for *De Europa* has also prepared me for it. This book is not exactly a biography of Pope Pius II but includes biographical aspects. It is more of a deep dive into understanding why it was him rather than any other Renaissance humanists who latched onto this notion of Europe and why this concept of Europe matters not only to him and his contemporaries but also to the contemporary perceptions of Western civilization. Both Pope Pius II’s travel and the shock of the fall of Constantinople led him to reflect upon the world he lived in and develop the idea of Europe. His demarcation and use of "Europe" differs from how it is now defined by many. Yet there are some important similarities. In a positive way, he helped define Europe as a place of shared culture, ideas, and political destiny. But at the same time, I show how he also created a notion of Europe in order to exclude the Ottomans from it. The reverberations of this exclusion are still being felt today. This book contributes to enriching the current academic debates about the origin of the idea of Europe and the intellectual discourse about Western civilization in general.

**Do we know anything about the dissemination of Pope Pius II’s writings during his time?**

NB: Though Pope Pius II is not widely known as other Renaissance figures like Machiavelli nowadays, he was one of the most prominent authors at his time. The printing press was invented during his lifetime and it helped to spread his ideas and works. After his death, his writings were printed and widely circulated among the next generations, too. For example,
Christopher Columbus read about his ideas of Europe. So, this book reminds us of his contribution to both a general understanding of Europe and attests to the importance of his writings to the historical development of this idea.

**Have there been any obstacles during the research process?**

NB: Anxiety about Covid. And it’s sometimes hard to focus with so many distractions and worries about the state of our country. It’s been a rough time for all of us!

**Would you think about doing a seminar about Pope Pius II or a course on the conception of Europe in the future?**

NB: I would love to do that, but I wonder if students would dig him the way I do! What do you think?

**Lastly, is there anything interesting you would like to share with the students during this sabbatical year?**

NB: Just that I missed teaching them and seeing them on campus. I am really happy to be back this semester and to see their faces – well half of their faces, anyway! Teaching my Crusades seminar with so many talented students who are about to graduate has been wonderful, energizing, and bitter sweet. I’m always amazed at the level of work and critical thinking they do at this stage and sad to see them go, but so excited for their future plans. It’s nice to go on leave and to focus on your research and writing, and it’s nice to come home to the classroom.
Professor James Merrell’s Sabbatical
Jeremy Sass ’22

Professor James Merrell is the Professor of History on the Lucy Maynard Salmon Chair and has been at Vassar since 1984. He specializes in Early American history, particular Native Americans’ experiences. The working title of his current book is “The Land in Controversy: Natives, Colonists, and the War for the Hudson Valley.” On April 22, 2022, I had the opportunity to speak with Professor Merrell about the work he has been doing while on sabbatical this semester (the interview has been edited for clarity).

Can you give me a quick explanation of the project that you've been working on?

JM: The Hudson Valley land wars, especially in the 1760s. Indians, tenant farmers, and landlords—who got these huge patents on the east side of the Hudson River—were disputing whose land this was, where the boundaries lay, whether deeds were real or fake. The fight reached the point that literal and figurative war occurred here in Dutchess County in 1765-1766.

Why did you choose to take a sabbatical this semester in order to work on this project?

JM: I felt that I was in need of a larger block of time than I could get just in the summers. And if the pandemic had any benefits (and I’m not suggesting that it had many), one of them was that archives were much more difficult to get to, and so instead of taking the semester and going to yet more archives, it compelled me to sit down and spend my time writing instead of doing more and more research: as all Vassar history students know whether they're doing term papers or theses, the research is tempting and it can keep leading you down various pathways that are intriguing, and then you avoid the issue of, “Well, what am I gonna do with all this?” So, it's been an opportunity for me to really focus on the central events of the mid-1760s by trying to write it out. I’m hoping to finish very rough drafts of two chapters by the time the sabbatical is over, and to have a good idea of what the next two look like.

Can you tell me about what you hope to accomplish with your book and how it may contribute to the larger field of colonial American history?

JM: Ever since I got into the field decades ago, I have made an effort to bring the story of the Native experience in these centuries into the conversation, to weave it into the fabric of the larger early American experience. It has been a long struggle, and I and others have not been entirely successful in convincing people of this. I think the situation is better than it was when I started, but this project is an opportunity for me to
not only “talk the talk” about integrating Native Americans but to actually “walk the walk,” to show how the local Native Americans, the Wappinger people, are a central part of this particular chapter of early American history. Before, the story has always been told in two different historical discourses. One has been tenants’ and other poor farmers’ rebellions: with Shays’ Rebellion in Massachusetts after the Revolution, the so-called Whiskey Rebellion, all kinds of uprisings of the poor against the rich have been studied very deeply, including the tenant riots here in Dutchess County. At the same time, but on a separate track, the Wappingers’ land loss has also been a common story among scholars of Native American history in which the Indians had their lands taken from them.

The problem is that, here, the tenants’ rebellion and the Native Americans’ efforts to keep their lands are about the same land. And it is the same foe that they are fighting against, these big landlords, especially a man named Beverley Robinson, who was the principal actor for the landlord side. And one of the ways the tenants fought against Robinson was they started renting the land from the Natives, who claimed that, since they had never sold it, Robinson had no right to rent it out, it's Wappinger land. And so, the Wappingers start giving colonists leases. So you have Natives and colonists working together, side by side, sitting down, signing legal agreements that will stand up in colonial courts (they hope), making common cause against the colonial elite. The story in that configuration in which Indian and colonists are both at center stage and are getting along with each other well enough to understand each other, to trust each other, is one that hasn't been sufficiently explored. And that's what I'm trying to do here.

The irony is there's kind of a twist here. Ultimately, the courts and the governor side with the big landlords, no surprise. That leads the tenant farmers, in desperation, to riot and rebel and to get their guns and ultimately to face off in 1766 against British redcoats who have been sent here to hunt them down. Natives, seeing that aligning with poor colonial farmers is not going to get them what they want, choose a diplomatic course. They go over to England and meet with the senior level people in England—some say they even met with King George III—in order to get their lands back that way. You need to go over the heads of the local landlords and the provincial government to the Crown. So, you have this unity between colonists and Natives, and then a bifurcation, in which Wappingers are going to court and going to lobby the king, while the colonists are going on the proverbial war path.

What's a relatively minor point from your research that you personally find really interesting and would like to share?

JM: It's not whether I can think of anything, but whether I can select just one! Well, let me tell you what I've been writing this week, which is, the tenant farmers, aka “Mob Men.” In the spring of 1766, they are pretty much in charge of the eastern parts of the
county. The sheriff even calls those lands “the mob country.” They find a justice of the peace, a local magistrate, and they capture him. They drag him off his horse, throw him on the ground, then make him get back on his horse and take him over to a place over near Connecticut, near where Pawling is today. The next day, they build an outdoor courtroom, basically a corral, and put him on trial. Even though he's the King's sworn law enforcement officer, they set up their own judge and jury of twelve men to hear the case. Basically, they want him to stop interfering with them, and to promise not to punish them for what they're doing.

When he refuses, the leader says, “if any Person or persons offended us whom you call the Mob, but we call ourselves the Sons of Liberty, that we would take them to the first convenient Place of Mud & Water, and there duck them as long as we think proper, and from thence we would take them to a White Oak Tree, and there whip them as long as we think proper, and thence take them out of the County and there kick their Arses as long as we think fit.” Then he yells, “Drag him to the mud and water, boys!” and they do. What happens next? I’ll tell you another time….

Has your research been impacted by COVID, both during the sabbatical and beforehand?

JM: Yes, it has. I have been going to a number of archives for this project and had plans over the last two years plus to continue to make occasional trips to Albany and New York City, maybe Philadelphia; there's things in Boston I would like to look at. And those archival trips have been pretty much off the table for me.

I can also say that I’ve found it harder to concentrate even during the summers, during COVID. I could continue to do the research that I’d already accumulated and work on that, but the idea of creating something out of that research was elusive more often than not. I did manage to get a couple of draft chapters written, but a lot of it was simply the chronic—I’m sure that you and most of the readers of Gulliver will understand this—the constant distraction of what's coming next, both with the pandemic and with the wider world. And so that has been something that was a new experience for me, not being able to use work to tune other things out, however temporarily.

We can definitely all relate to that! What else have you been doing with your extra time this semester, while on sabbatical?

JM: You know, you see the books and journals up there [points to books and journals on shelf]: those are the ones that I've managed to read during this semester. I sort of made a pact with myself that I was going to read at the end of every day, about four o'clock to six o'clock or something like that. I’d read some of the books that I've been accumulating on scholarship, just on general early America, revolutionary America. I’ve done some reading, but it turns out that my engagement with the writing that I'm doing has been such that I
really haven't spent as much time at the end of the day, reading as widely. I tend to read what I need to read to write the next day.

Otherwise, as I tell my students, especially in the First-Year Writing Seminar when we're introducing ourselves, I lead a very boring life [chuckles]. And the pandemic and injuries have kept me off the squash courts, which was my only other pursuit of happiness besides teaching and scholarship. So, I haven't been doing very much! Haven't been traveling, even for personal reasons to see family, and it's been peaceful and pleasant enough, but it's been a different kind of sabbatical than I ordinarily have had. No talks, for example, another thing that a lot of us do when we're on sabbatical and we have a little more time, is to accept invitations to give talks here and there.

What have you missed about being a professor on campus, and what are you looking forward to when you come back next semester?

JM: Simple: My colleagues and my students. I really appreciate Vassar's generous leave policy and the time to really focus, but by the end of a leave, I find that I am spending too much time talking to myself and maybe to my dog [laughs]. And I miss the kinds of interactions that you have and the kinds of conversations that you have with fellow historians (students and faculty alike). All of this of course has been suppressed by the pandemic to begin with. Even if we're masking, there's not as much of the kind of interaction that we all know in Swift.

I used to take full-year leaves. I would wait, because if you teach six semesters you get a semester off, or you can teach six years and then you get a year off. I used to do the years off until about 10 years ago when I realized I don't do well with an entire year. That's too long, being away from my students and colleagues and the kind of fun things that go on in Swift Hall. So that's the biggest thing I’ve been missing, even with just this one-semester leave. And that's the thing I'm most looking forward to when the fall semester starts.
Lydia Murdoch is a professor of History and Global Nineteenth Century Studies. She specializes in nineteenth century British history, especially the experiences of women and children. For this interview, I got to sit down with her to talk about her thoughts on writing, researching, and combating Covid in her current spring-semester sabbatical.

To start, can you talk a little bit about the projects you’ve been working on while on leave?

LM: Sure, I’d be happy to. I have two shorter projects, and a larger one, so maybe I’ll talk about the shorter ones first, and then I can talk more about the book project I’m working on. One of the short pieces is an essay I co-wrote with Susan Zlotnick in the English Department for the inaugural issue of a new journal, Global Nineteenth Century Studies. The essay is detailing the work we, and so many people (faculty across the campus, including many in the History Department) have been doing to transform the Victorian Studies program into a Global Nineteenth-Century Studies program. It’s called “Leaving Victorian Studies Behind.” The essay gives a history of the Victorian Studies program at Vassar, shows how we drew inspiration from that multidisciplinary program created in the seventies, and then talks about the work we’ve been doing over the past five plus years to change the program. It’s really a project of fundamentally working to decolonize the curriculum and create this new program, which was voted on by the faculty and approved last spring. So that was a really fun piece. I’ve never written something like that, thinking so directly about the connections between our research, teaching, and administrative work. I’m looking forward to the essay coming out soon.

I actually remember when I took your Victorian Britain class as a sophomore, you were talking about the transition to the Global Nineteenth Century.

LM: [Laughs] So you can see, it’s been a long time in the making. I think we had the first meeting about this in 2016. And there’s a new introductory course -- I know you know about it -- HIST/GNCS 150 “Revolution, Evolution, and the Global Nineteenth Century” that Susan Zlotnick and I will be co-teaching again in the Fall. That course is the foundation of the new program. The goal is to explore modernization globally, looking beyond Britain and America, and even outside of empire. Guest lecturers bring in multidisciplinary connections, including with the sciences. Developing that course has been one of the most exciting parts about the new program.

The other smaller project is a chapter for the new Cambridge History of Britain about “Life Cycles” c. 1750-1900 (especially}
social customs surrounding birth and death) -- you’ve helped me with the research. In May, I’m going to turn full force to focusing on that.

The book I’m working on is tentatively titled, *What We Mourn: Child Death and the Politics of Grief in Modern Britain*. I’ve had a number of different titles over the years (laughs), but that’s where I am now. I’ve been working on this project for a long time, for the better part of a decade, on and off, with other projects. It’s really great to have this sabbatical to focus on it in a way I haven’t been able to.

It’s a history that’s looking at the interconnections of at least three main historiographies: the history of childhood, the history of emotions, and the history of the state and empire. The main question I’m asking is how, as childhood takes on new meanings and new definitions in the long nineteenth century, do moments of grief for child death take on new political and public significance. My focus expands from case studies in domestic Britain, to transatlantic case studies, and to imperial contexts within the British Empire. Thematically, there are chapters on factory child labor reform, slavery and abolition, imperial conflict, urban public health (including debates over compulsory smallpox vaccination), and then a final chapter on World War One and women’s campaigns for greater rights in that context. In all of those cases, I’m trying to look at the question of child death as it’s publicly mourned. My focus is not so much private grief (some really exciting work has been done on that in British history), but looking at the question of public mourning, and specifically politicized grief in those case studies – examples where it’s addressed, but also where it’s silenced.

It sounds very much like the Children and Childhood class that you teach.

LM: Yeah! Actually, I’m glad you said that. The chapter that I’m about to start writing is the last one, on World War One, and something we read from that class is the main case study I’m writing about: *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*. It’s this first amazing document where these women write letters giving accounts of miscarriages, of stillbirths, of abortions, and also child death, and talking about the effects of that, and from that place demanding not only women’s suffrage but also funding from the government for better health and working conditions. So it’s a real joy to be able to teach what we’re working on.

On that subject, it’s interesting to hear how the course material appears in your writing and your research, and I’m wondering if it goes the other way. Has your research and writing during your leave given you new ideas for your courses for when you come back?

LM: I think that certainly happened with the intensive that I taught for the first time last fall, which was on history and the politics of grief. The intensive was a new kind of opportunity to take our research and explore
it with students. I’m looking forward to continuing that, and the way the intensives are framed, I think that’s a class that could be different every time I teach it, depending on what the students want to explore.

**How has the time away from campus affected your work? Do you plan on traveling?**

LM: I’m not traveling for my research, given the pandemic and everything. I’m actually pretty thankful about where I am in my research right now. I’ve done the archival research. So I really just needed to make myself sit down and write. I’m on campus, but it’s just a profoundly different schedule and way of being. I feel very grateful for this profession, that we have these moments.

I got really sick at the beginning of sabbatical. I got Covid, and it took me a while to get through that, and hopefully I’m through it. Now, I’m on campus, and so I’m not really “away,” but I’m doing my best to just write. I’m going to the Library every day, which is one of my favorite spots on campus. I know you’re there, too [laughs], and I’m happy to see you there. I’m able to do so much more work by familiarizing myself with my sources every day. And I’m a slow writer, so it’s not like I’m cranking out the pages, but just not to forget where I was, and what my sources were, is a really great experience. I’m physically here, but in a different mental mode, which I’m grateful for.

That definitely makes sense, being able to get immersed in that. And of course I hope you’re feeling better after Covid.

LM: Thanks, I am. I got my smell back, and my taste back. It was scary. I was exhausted.

**Is there anything else that you wanted to add about your experience or about the projects?**

LM: Another thing that I took from teaching that I’m appreciating this sabbatical was from the thesis class: how to frame, and write, and organize a bigger project, and working on applying that to my own book manuscript. And that’s been fun, and a real joy, too.
Research and Reflections: An Interview with Ismail Rashid
Sashawna Isaacs ’23

Ismail Rashid is a historian of African history and specialist in the resistance against colonialism, and public health and security and conflict in contemporary Africa. Dr. Rashid has been at Vassar for over two decades, teaching topics such as the Modern African History, African Diaspora, Pan-Africanism, and introduction to international studies. He is currently on sabbatical while working on his newest research project and is set to return to Vassar in the Fall of 2022. He will be teaching and advising rising seniors on their future theses. Thankfully, he was able to sit down with me to share about his time away from Swift.

Can you talk about your current research project?

IR: This is a project that has been in the making for nearly three decades. It centers on Isaac Theophilus Akuna Wallace-Johnson who is a significant figure in the history of nationalism and decolonization in West Africa. I first encountered I.T.A. Johnson just before I started doing my Ph.D. at McGill University in the early 1990s. I actually wrote two newspaper articles on him. Since then, I have been thinking about doing scholarly research on his contribution to the history of the decolonization of West Africa. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, credited Johnson with energizing the nationalist movement in Ghana in the late 1930s. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria, also noted his influence in the development of nationalism in West Africa. Most importantly, in Sierra Leone, his home country, he is seen as a seminal figure in the anticolonial struggle and movement for independence. Wallace-Johnson is on Sierra Leone’s currency, the Leone. There is a statue and a major street named after him in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone. But, you know what’s interesting? There is no monograph on him. There is a dissertation written in 1977 by Dr. LaRay Denzer, and there are also a couple of articles on him. That’s it. Nearly all of the significant West African nationalist figures have at least two or three monographs written about them. I am hoping that this research is going to be the first published book of Wallace-Johnson, his contribution to the process of decolonization in West Africa.

What compelled you to undertake this project?

There are different things that have pulled me towards this project. Every historian wants to be engaged in a research project where their voice is one of the significant ones on a particular subject. When the book is written and published, it will be the first one on Wallace-Johnson. Second, nationalism and decolonization are back on the scholarly agenda, and the book provides an opportunity to revisit them in a fresh light. The third aspect is the Sierra Leone dimension of the project. As a Sierra Leonean, I.T.A Wallace-Johnson looms...
large in our national imagination, especially given his representation in the national symbols that I have mentioned earlier. People still talk about him and his contributions to the country. And, the final pull is teaching. Wallace-Johnson’s life and the themes that I want to explore - nationalism, decolonization, Pan-Africanism, socialism - are very part of my Modern African History class and the African Diaspora and Pan-Africanism seminar. So this is a project that is very well connected to my teaching interests at Vassar.

**Do you have an idea of when this project will be completed?**

IR: This is a big project. From the beginning of the research to the expected publication date, I am thinking that it will take between four to five years. I estimate that I am now in year two, still conducting archival research and secondary literature review. My research assistant, Oona Maloney, and I have completed archival research in a number of places. Oona conducted the archival research at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C a year or so ago. I did additional archival research at the National Archives in Freetown, Sierra Leone in June 2021. This February I have a week at the British National Archives collecting relevant documents. I am hoping to visit the National Archives in Accra, Ghana this summer. Once this is done, I think I would have completed a significant amount of the necessary archival work for the book. Then, I can focus on the oral interviews. There are still people alive who knew Wallace-Johnson in Sierra Leone and Ghana, and I know that he has family in the Congo. I hope that I will be able to do these interviews in the next year or so. After that, I can think about sitting down and essentially writing the book.

(picture of a newspaper source Professor Rashid found)

**How has the research process changed in the context of the Covid pandemic?**

IR: The pandemic has had a paradoxical effect on research. In some ways, it created some space and possibilities for research, especially ‘desk research’ since many archives made access to some of their materials available online. So, I did get some materials quickly online and via interlibrary loans. Unfortunately, a lot of Sierra Leonean archival materials are not actually digitized or accessible online. This meant that I had to be physically present at
some of the archives that I have already mentioned. And, this slowed down my research. When I was eventually able to visit the British National Archives this year, I was surprised about how much things have changed since I last visited - about five years ago! The procedures for accessing and using documents have changed radically, some for the better. The staff at the archives are now a lot more flexible, you can also take as many pictures of documents as you can, and you can access more documents in a much shorter period. In one week, I got a lot done than I did in a month five years ago, even with a disruptive tube (subway) strike and the unfriendly British weather. Finally, traveling to the archive was difficult and exhausting with all of the covid regulations on either side of the Atlantic ocean.

Has the pandemic had any impact on how you view your job as a historian?

IR: No. My sense is, as you go through this particular crisis, you definitely ask yourself, "what's the value of what I'm doing and am I still excited about what I'm doing?" We all do. Yet, the weeks of research in the Sierra Leone and British archives reminded me of why I chose to be a historian. I was excited to be in both archives and thrilled at looking at the various documents, trying to pull together different historical threads and fitting together complicated pieces of puzzles to reveal the bigger picture. I am also invigorated by the thrill of finding something unexpected but familiar in the archives. For example, I found petitions produced in the 1940s and 1950s in Sierra Leone with signatures of my relatives. They’ve all passed on but they left their marks on the sands of time. So, that captured for me the excitement of being in the archives, the past surprising you within these golden nuggets of knowledge. Joyful moments like these in the archives reinforced my passion for history, even amidst the pandemic!

Do you have any advice on conducting research for students writing their theses or in general?

IR: Being anxious about the most extensive piece of academic writing that you are going to do at this point of your academic journey is normal but you are going to do it. The history thesis always gets written by May. So, anxiety is a normal part of the process; don't let it overwhelm you. As much as you can, use it to motivate you and find strategies to manage it. You have great professors in the department who are going to be in your corner throughout the thesis journey. Also, it helps to think about and work on the thesis in small chunks rather than one big project that you can do quickly. Work on one aspect or step at a time, proposal, introduction, chapters, conclusion, literature review, collection of evidence. The History Department has put in place a very good process in place with the yearlong thesis conception, research and writing seminar. It supports students strongly in doing their individual thesis, and within a very supportive community. So, as a history major, think of the thesis journey not only as an individual intellectual journey but also one of a collective community experience.
that you are sharing with your peers in the department. Absolutely last advice, and a contradictory one! Once the thesis writing process starts, don't think about the thesis every minute of every day. Do not let it be all-consuming. But, at the same time, never put the thesis aside for a very long period of time. Get something done - no matter how small - on a weekly basis and you'll get there by May.

What has been your favorite part of your sabbatical so far?
IR: This is the point where I plead the fifth. On the advice of my future-to-be attorney, Sashi, I will not answer for fear that my colleagues and students may think I am having too much fun and deliberately avoiding my obligations at Swift! Okay, my favorite part of the sabbatical is having the time to read, research and reflect and catch up on family and friends. It’s good to think about new ideas, themes, and approaches that I want to try in the classroom once I return in the Fall.

What do you miss most about being at Vassar?
IR: Teaching and engagement with students. Listening to their different ideas, views, questions, keeping me quick on my toes, nimble in mind, and youthful at heart. And of course, the congeniality and buzz of the department. Especially the serendipitous meetings at the coffee makers, and the quick chats with colleagues about teaching, life, and happenings around the world.
NEW FACULTY MEMBER IN THE DEPARTMENT
New Beginnings: An Interview with Professor Daniel Mendiola
Emmaline Singer ’24

Professor Daniel Mendiola is our newest addition to the Vassar History Department. We are so happy to have Professor Mendiola on board, and his expertise in Latin American history has been very valuable to our department and history students. Born and raised in east Texas, he graduated with a B.A. and PhD in History from the University of Houston. After serving as a Faculty Fellow with the NYU Center for Latin American and Caribbean studies, he began teaching at Vassar last fall. For this interview, I sat down with him to reflect on his first full year at Vassar, discuss his research, and get some expert advice for current history students.

What made you want to study history?

DM: I was just so intellectually curious as an undergrad. I wanted to learn as many things as possible. I found that history was the broadest field. I mean technically, anything that has ever happened ever is history, right? So whatever questions you want to ask or however broad you want to go, history seems to be the place for that. For me, I think that’s why I found myself drawn towards history. My history classes were the ones I was enjoying the most, and there are just no limits to studying history.

Did you ever have a specific moment where you realized that you wanted to be a historian?

DM: There were a few different moments throughout my life. On one hand, I have always been drawn towards telling stories, especially the stories that don’t usually get told. This is pretty personal to me because I grew up in a very small town in east Texas. We were the only Hispanic family in town. I never felt like I was excluded from things, but at the same time, my family was never represented in my history textbooks. I knew that obviously there was more to the story, or I wouldn’t exist! Knowing the history of my grandparents and my own family and knowing that we have a story too made me want to tell that story. My impulse to study Latin American history started with this exploration of my own family history. Because of these experiences, I have always been drawn to trying to look beneath the surface and telling the stories that aren’t being told. One of the best quotes I have ever heard was from one of my mentors in Houston. I don’t think he invented this, but it was still pretty compelling. He told me that “no matter what you study, on some fundamental level, you are studying yourself.” I think it is a little more obvious in my case, but that was a big moment for me.

We know that you specialize in Latin American history, but do you have any particular research topics or interests within this field?
DM: My interests are pretty broad but research-wise, my main interests are grounded in Central America. Most of my articles and my book deal with Spanish indigenous relations and colonialism in Central America. My research now focuses more on migration and the construction of borders, but it is also situated in Central America.

Can you talk a little bit about your forthcoming book?

DM: The book is called *The Mosquito Federation*, and it is based on my dissertation research. It is very much in conversation with another book that was very big in the borderlands field called *The Comanche Empire*. It’s a great book! The argument of the book is in the title: it basically argues that the Comanche actually created their own empire. Even though we don’t list it in the history of empires, it did the same things. It was a clever, somewhat controversial argument, but it changed how people think about borderlands in the southwest United States. Going off this, I posed the question: does this argument apply to the Mosquitos, another indigenous group that was very powerful in central America? I have found lots of interesting things and a lot of differences with the Comanche in the US borderlands. I ended up writing the entire history of this confederation, and my book covers a whole century. So it ended up being a lot more than just answering my question.

I’m a little embarrassed – I’ve actually never heard of the Mosquitos!

DM: That’s another reason why I thought the book was a good idea! They are definitely less well known than the Comanche or some of the other groups in the plains in North America. They are still around today, though a lot of things changed in the nineteenth century. But in the eighteenth century, you could argue that they had their own empire. They covered a lot of territory and controlled it, similar to how empires do. And that’s what I’m arguing.

Does your research inform the classes that you teach at Vassar? How do you construct your classes and decide which topics to teach?

DM: That’s a good question. Yes… and no. Sometimes my classes come from the research I did as a graduate student and sometimes, my classes come from the things that I am publishing about. “Bordering the Americas,” my class about borders, is derived from the new research that I am doing on border construction in central America. We go from the colonial period, in which there is a kingdom of Guatemala and all of central America is united. Then, we get into nation states, where a lot of borders were constructed and the meaning of those borders changed. I built this class around the research questions that I was dealing with already. Environmental history, on the other hand, is a field that I have never published in, but it is one that I took very seriously on
my comprehensive exams and kept up with after I finished my PhD. I just really find the field fascinating and important. So sometimes, my classes speak to my broader curiosities. In general, I consider myself a specialist in some things, but a pretty well-rounded generalist as well.

Apart from teaching your “Bordering the Americas” seminar in the fall, you will also be advising Vassar thesis students for the first time. What is your approach to mentorship, and what are you most excited about?

DM: First time here at Vassar! I was teaching in a master’s program at NYU for a few years before I came here, so I was on a lot of thesis committees. It was one of my favorite things to do. I loved to mentor, brainstorm thesis topics, and try to figure out what was going to be feasible. I also did a lot of undergraduate theses at Houston. I’m excited to be here and get to be a thesis advisor. The quality of the Vassar students that I have worked with so far is very similar to the master’s students at NYU. I have taught four classes here so far, and in every class I have taught, the students were incredibly dedicated. I think this speaks to the curiosity I was talking about. This is a place where people have questions, and they want to get out there and answer them, so I try to cultivate that and nourish that as much as possible. But it is already there before students ever meet or find me, so it is really exciting to see that. The level here is very, very high, and it seems like I can approach the history theses here very similarly to how I was approaching the master theses, so I’m very excited about that.

What is your favorite thing about working in Vassar’s history department?

DM: One, there is a lot of freedom, especially since I am the only Latin Americanist. They really trust me to decide which courses matter the most and design them. I have a lot of support to teach whatever I want, which is pretty awesome. At the college in general, we have a shared understanding of values and what’s at stake. History isn’t just this theoretical game. We are talking about things that actually matter: real people and real lives. We have to take that part of our work seriously. I think that the entire department is in agreement on that, and it affects the decisions we make. A good example of this is that right before I got here, the department did a cluster hire to look at race and racism in America. They included hiring someone specifically to look at borders and migration, as a recognition that racism has all these different facets. That is something I really appreciate about this department and the college more broadly.

For the last part of the interview, I want to ask a couple of advice questions for our history majors and any other students who are interested in the department.

DM: Sure!

First of all, what study strategies would you recommend for someone taking a history class at Vassar?
DM: It really comes down to time management. It sounds cliché, but here’s what I mean: we are doing our best work when we are time-centric as opposed to being task-centric. When we were in high school, we rarely had an assignment that we couldn’t just knock out in a night. So, we get into a habit in which we don’t think about our time. We just think about the assignments we have to do. Being in college, you can’t do that. You are doing lots of projects, and even if the project hasn’t started yet, you are still processing lots of course material and being present in the lecture and discussion. You have to change the way you think. Instead of thinking about the tasks you have to do, you need to think about your time. You say, “I’m going to dedicate this many hours on this day to study, this many hours on this day to study, this many hours on this day to study, etc.” You just build a time schedule, and then you fill in the tasks. Make the tasks fit the time, not the other way around. When you do that, you’re so much more efficient. You’re also going to be much less stressed because if you’re planning your work time, you’re also implicitly planning your “not work” time. You are going to have a clearer division between when you’re working and when you’re relaxing. So, I always recommend that before you see any of your syllabi or know any of the assignments you will have to do, look at your calendar. Sit down and plan when you are going to study, and don’t wait until you have assignments to do. And then as you start getting assignments, you already have time allocated!

That’s a great strategy! Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Last question: why should students major in history?

DM: All learning on some level is intrinsically valuable. There is something about learning a topic that helps you connect with the world around you. Learning, at a fundamental level, can be empowering regardless of whether it helps you get a job or not or these other pragmatic reasons. There is a beauty to learning, and I think that beauty comes from breaking down barriers. History is in a unique position to do that because as a historian, you are trying to discover who other people in other times experienced the world. In that sense, it is similar to literature classes. The point of a poem or a short story or a novel is to experience something through someone else’s eyes. Essentially, that is what historians are doing. We use different methods, but it is still a humanist project of understanding the human experience. So, I could make a case for why history is useful for your career, but the main case I would make for history is that it is a way to feel connected to the world and feel empowered to understand how the world around you functions. There is value to trying to understand this big, complicated world we live in and how it ended up so big and complicated. It is an idealistic answer, but it is one that I believe in.
THE THESIS EXPERIENCE
Recipients of the Evalyn Clark Grant Share Their Experiences of Traveling to Do Research

Benjamin Papa ’22

The Evalyn Clark Memorial Travel Fellowship supports students who wish to travel for archival or other forms of historical research during school breaks. Upon the semi-annual call for proposals (issued near the beginning of each semester), interested history majors submit to the History Department office a short description of their project (e.g. archives, libraries, museums, or historical sites to be visited), an explanation of how it fits into a larger academic plan (e.g. pursuing interests inspired by a course, conducting research for a thesis, etc.), and a detailed budget that shows how the applicant intends to use the funds (i.e. travel, lodging, meals, photocopying, etc.). Due dates for proposals will be provided, but generally fall in October and March (https://www.vassar.edu/history/students/evalynclark/)

Ava Thompson

In a few sentences, can you explain your thesis topic?
AT: My thesis centers around Judge Irving Kaufman’s conduct during the Rosenberg Trial of 1951. I am focusing on his illegal activities before, during, and after the trial in order to create a historiographical narrative.

Where and when did you travel, and how did you decide to go there?
AT: With the Clark Grant, I traveled to Washington, D.C. for the Library of Congress’s archives. I went first, during study week before Winter Break and then again on a weekend in February. I decided to go to DC because many of the other collections in Presidential Libraries were not open to the public due to COVID. Moreso, the Library of Congress had Kaufman’s collection and I wanted to access those sources to identify his thoughts and opinions.

Did the pandemic present any challenges to your travel?
AT: The pandemic did not present any challenges itself, but I had a complication on my first visit to the archives. During my first visit, after confirming with a librarian that the Kaufman collection was in DC at the Library of Congress, I arrived to find that my entire collection had just two days before been moved to an off-site storage facility in Maryland. I could not access those documents until they were reshelved. This caused a major problem during my visit. In the end (hence the second trip), I recalled the boxes I needed from the off-site storage facility and was able to complete my research. I was able to use my remaining funding to finance my second trip.

Did the experience of traveling, and having access to different sources, change how you thought about your thesis?
AT: The experience of going into the Library of Congress and seeing Kaufman's archives made the thesis seem more real and more present. While my topic is not that old, it brought the trial back to life and made the verdict and testimonies more emotional. Traveling definitely added more excitement to the process and added that extra flare of having an impactful research feel.

Jeremy Sass

In a few sentences, can you explain your thesis topic?
JS: In the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, the first known queer youth organization in the U.S. was founded in 1965. Named Vanguard, it was active for a little over a year, met in a local church, and primarily served impoverished, queer, white youth, many of whom were runaways and sex workers. Most research has focused on Vanguard's public-facing activism, but I uncover the internal life of Vanguard, specifically the experiences of Vanguard's trans and/or gender nonconforming (TGNC) subpopulation. I argue that from August 1965 to late 1966, the Tenderloin’s queer youth created a community in Vanguard that, despite its significant failings, gave TGNC residents relative freedom from discrimination that pervaded their lives, allowing them to safely express their identities in supportive community spaces such as weekly meetings and dances.

Where and when did you travel, and how did you decide to go there?
JS: Over winter break, I traveled to San Francisco in order to visit the city that I'm writing about and do archival research. I'd never traveled further west than Alabama before this trip, so I knew that my conception of a city was affected by my experiences in NYC and Boston, impacting my understanding of Vanguard's history in subtle ways. And it felt ethically wrong to write about a vulnerable population without visiting the city where they lived. I also desperately needed to do archival research, as the primary and secondary sources I was working with all contradicted each other on basic facts of Vanguard's existence. Without them, my thesis would have been incomprehensible.

Did the pandemic present any challenges to your travel?
JS: Not directly. My travel plans were unaffected, and everywhere I wanted to visit was open with mask requirements. But I was traveling not long after Omicron started spreading, so that made things stressful. I avoided small indoor spaces (other than the archives), focused my trip on outside locations and spacious museums, and ate all my meals in my private Airbnb room or outside. I was worried about catching Covid through the whole trip, but through caution and luck, everything turned out fine.

Did the experience of traveling, and having access to different sources, change how you thought about your thesis?
JS: Absolutely! Beforehand, I didn't even know who founded Vanguard and when, as three different people have claimed credit for it. The archival work cleared up that
inconsistency, as well as many more. It also significantly changed the direction of my thesis. Before my trip, I planned to analyze a magazine published by Vanguard that was now digitally available. But I found tons of other material on Vanguard, such as letters, other organizations’ meeting minutes, retrospective essays, and newspaper articles. These illuminated Vanguard’s internal activities, and I shifted my focus towards that. Although I had some good ideas connected to the magazine that I regret being unable to use, my thesis was far stronger with the new, archivally-informed focus on community.

Chase Estes

*In a few sentences, can you explain your thesis topic?*

CE: I am investigating a State Department officer during the First World War. His name was James McNally, and he was based in Zurich, Switzerland. He is notable because he had a son-in-law who was a German naval officer, also based in Switzerland, and they were communicating with each other. McNally was communicating with Washington, DC, the son-in-law was communicating with Berlin, and they pushed the boundaries of what was allowed to try and craft their own peace deal, which did not end up happening, but there are a lot of records, written by McNally, and I’m investigating those.

**That’s interesting. So the sources are mostly letters?**

CE: They’re State Department telegrams that were sent either to his office in Zurich, or to the State Department headquarters in Bern, back to Washington, DC.

*In terms of the Clark Grant, where did you go, when did you go, and how did you decide to travel there?*

CE: I went to Washington, D.C., January 8-11, the goal being to visit the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, where the majority of State Department records are kept. The State Department has published some of his [McNally’s] reports already, but not all of them. I was hoping to see the ones that were not published. When I went, it was during a period when the archives were closing and opening. In the end, they happened to be closed when I went, so I didn’t actually get to visit the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, but I was still able to make the trip.

**Not being able to see those, did that have any effect on your project?**

CE: It did. I had to adapt and utilize the published reports more heavily. There was a large volume that was published, that I did have prior to the trip, so it wasn’t a horrible setback... but I had to change gears, not being able to use certain things.

**They were closed for the pandemic?**

CE: Yeah, they had a policy that related to the number of recent cases in that county, in Maryland, so it was constantly changing. It looked, right before I left, like it was totally going to be open... I checked, not long before I left for the trip, and it was closed.
Was your advisor able to help with that setback?
CE: My advisor really helped me find those sources that I was able to find, so I worked through that. I was always aware of the possibility that it would be closed, so I purposely prevented myself from relying on getting access to the documents in the archives. My thought at the time was that if I can find it, it’s a bonus.

Lucy Postal

In a few sentences, can you explain your thesis topic?
LP: I am writing about historical authenticity and accuracy at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. In the course of my studies, I have been specifically focusing on the Historical Interpretation Team, which is a group of staff members employed by the foundation who are the frontline workers who interact with visitors on a day-to-day basis. In the earlier part of the foundation’s history, they were kind of upper-class white hostesses, and that position evolved into more diverse, first-person character interpreters who act as specific historical figures, and are very immersive and interactive. I study how that immersion and interaction with visitors creates a sense of historical authenticity at the foundation.

Can you talk a little bit about your decisions on where to visit within Colonial Williamsburg?
LP: I traveled in mid-December, 2021 to Williamsburg. I decided that traveling would be important to my thesis because it’s kind of impossible to write about a living history museum unless you go visit it and experience what the interpreters were like. I made the decision to apply for funding in the hopes of being able to visit the museum as well as the archives. I traveled there for about six days in December. When I was there, I did two things. I spent a few days wandering throughout the museum, experiencing what a normal visitor would. Then I spent two days at the archives, looking through their primary source documents and general information about the foundation. I split my time between visitor stuff and stuff that is more important for scholars.

Were you able to do everything you had planned, given the pandemic?
LP: At the time, cases were going up, it was bad in New York but it wasn’t bad in Virginia yet, so honestly, it didn’t really impact the trip. The only issue was that two of the days were unseasonably cold and rainy, and we didn’t want to eat indoors, because of Covid. It was a little hard to find places to eat, because the weekend that we were there was one of their massive holiday weekends, so it was full of people. There were fewer historical sites that were open than usual, and those that were open were a bit more restricted. For the historical structures, they can’t properly sanitize them, because the State of Virginia requires them to sanitize the handrails on the stairs every hour or so, and you just can’t do that with the older buildings, so for a lot of the buildings I could only visit the first floor. So, it was restricted, but I wouldn’t say that
it impacted my ability to tour and visit and gain from the experience.

*Did the experience of traveling, and having access to different sources, change how you thought about your thesis?*

LP: Yes and no. I think that some of the sources that I encountered were definitely invaluable to the work I’ve been doing. There are things that I would not have been able to find otherwise that really explain the purpose of the institution, so in that sense, yes. I don’t think it changed my topic, but I think that it changed the focus a little. Earlier, I had been focusing on general historical authenticity. Traveling to Williamsburg made me want to home in on the interpretive staff, so in that sense, it focused it a little bit more but didn’t really change what I was talking about.