

## Current Faculty Research

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*The Alexandrian regularly features articles and book reviews from students along with news from the staff. This year, we wanted to include what the faculty was up to research-wise. Joshua Dawsey and Mykaila Baker interviewed faculty around the History and Philosophy Department, learning what our professors were currently researching in their fields.*

*We asked three questions: what project are you working on? Where did your interest in this topic stem from? Have you learned any lessons, whether methodological or personal?*

### **Dr. Buckner**

I'm working on a book project about a free man of color named William Johnson in Mississippi, who was a barber and a slaveholder and probably the second richest black man in the state until 1851.

It's mostly about how he uses masculine identities of this time to make connections to his communities. Even though he was free, there were limitations under Mississippi law because of his race: he couldn't vote, he couldn't hold office, serve on juries, etc. So, he's not equal to white men but is able to establish a reputation in town through his barbershop (a profession that serves white clients), but also through other activities that men valued: gambling, hunting, fishing, even civic engagement, and politics to a degree.

Eventually, he got into a dispute with his neighbor, a man with a nebulous racial background (sometimes he was considered white, other times he's thought of as black). While the courts handled the dispute, the neighbor took the loss as an assault on his reputation and murdered Johnson. He never offered a defense for the murder; instead, he claimed that he was white, meaning none of the evidence against him could be used in court. He escaped the murder charge and lived the rest of his life as a white man in Texas.

When I was an undergrad, what interested me the most about American History were the things that didn't fit cleanly into standard narratives. I did some work on Southern cities where free people of color interacted with whites and enslaved people. That carried over into my master's thesis. Some of this project grew out of some work I did in my dissertation and the book I published in 2011.

I'd say one of the things I've learned methodologically is that it is a much better time to do research now than twenty years ago. The ability to access information is so much greater; if you're patient, there's almost nothing you can't find.

### **Dr. Hoose**

I am currently working on an article about a group of heretics, or religious dissidents, known as the Children of the Holy Spirit in early fourteenth-century Milan. They venerated a deceased holy woman named Guglielma as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, and they recognized a nun named Maifreda as their pope. In early September 1300, after investigating the group, inquisitors ordered Guglielma's body to be disinterred and burnt, and they also handed over at least three of her devotees, including Maifreda, to the city government to be burnt at the stake. I'm especially looking

at the role that gender and social class played among the devotees. The Children of the Holy Spirit appeared to have reversed gender roles by worshipping the Divine Feminine and privileging a woman as their leader. At the same time, the intersection of social class with gender makes this role reversal more complicated. Maifreda was from a prominent noble family, while the devotees believed that Guglielma was a Bohemian or Czech princess, and other leading devotees were also women and even men of high social rank.

I wrote my dissertation on a topic related to heresy, orthodoxy, and sainthood in the Middle Ages, and I have published a few articles related to these topics. I became interested in the Children of the Holy Spirit as I explored the parallels between defining heresy and sainthood in the medieval period. When the medieval church examined a potential candidate for sainthood, they used methodological tools like those that inquisitors used to identify heretics. Though the inquisitors concluded that Guglielma was a heretic after her death, there were those, including monks in a monastery near Milan, who had venerated her as a Catholic saint.

My research into this topic has shaped the way I teach. Before I started this project, I didn't really focus that much on gender roles or the history of women or femininity or masculinity. But now, in my Western Civilization classes and my upper-division classes, I focus much more on issues related to gender and social class rather than only on political, religious, and intellectual developments.

### **Dr. Carlson**

I actually just finished a project, an edited volume of the proceedings of the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America. The book should be published within a year. There was an organization called the Southern Historical Society that began in 1866. It was organized by Confederate veterans for the purpose of controlling the narrative about the Civil War and the South's role in the war. They wanted to create an alternative version of Civil War history that made the South look better. That initiative lost momentum by the turn of the 20th century when real historians took leadership of the organization. Their first project was to go through period newspapers and transcribe any congressional minutes they could find. The actual congressional minutes were bare-bones; the newspapers gave much more detail. They transcribed all the minutes from 1862 through the end of the war, but they did not do the first year. This was because they looked at the newspapers in Virginia, where the capital was for most of the war. They completely skipped the year [1861] when the capital was Montgomery, so I went through newspapers from Montgomery, New Orleans, a couple from Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and gathered all the recordings of what happened during the first year of the Confederacy.

Truth? COVID. Looking for something to stay busy. I had used the previously published records before. In Civil War history, the top two main primary Civil War materials used are *The War of the Rebellion* [Confederate and Union military and governmental records collected by the US War Department after the end of the Civil War] and the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, which I described earlier. I was curious as to why the congressional minutes started in 1862 when the war started in 1861. So I did some digging and found that there were records available [just never published].

I gained a greater appreciation for what the Provisional Congress was doing during that first year. It was a government in its opening stages, not only trying to create a new country but having to

address the concern of citizens who last week looked to Washington D.C. for certain things. Now they're asking these citizens to refocus their loyalties to a new government. Examples such as patents and legal protections were interrupted by this shift. I also looked at how citizens engaged in the process of creating this new country and establishing their nationhood. It was something not just happening in Montgomery or Richmond, but people everywhere on the ground were involved.

### **Dr. Valentine**

In general, all of the research I do is largely historical regarding one subset of Tibetan Buddhism called the Northern Treasure Tradition. It was founded in the 14th century and continues to the present, but its peak was in the 17th century. When a great many Buddhists fled Tibet during the 1950s and 1960s and reestablished their religious organizations in India, Nepal, and the West, my focus group was not on its upswing, so it has not been researched much until recently. I work with a research group that is partially funded by the French government and studies various aspects of the Northern Treasure Tradition. I am, in particular, currently focused on the biography of the founder, named Rigzin Godem (14th c.). While it is on the rise to study this particular group, there is no English translation of his biography. Imagine the difficulty of trying to study the history of Protestantism, for example, without a biography of Martin Luther. I am translating the 15<sup>th</sup> century biography from Tibetan to English, but including footnotes, annotations, etc. from a range of Tibetan sources that were written between the 14th and 21st centuries.

I am also working on a second project, an autobiographical travel memoir of Pema Trinle (17th c.). He breaks away from his regular life and travels for approximately four or five months to go back to central Tibet in 1690. Pema Trinle was a "reincarnated lama," which means that his successive incarnations have acted as the patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition. His journey was in part motivated by his desire to return to the homeland of his most significant preincarnation, who happens to be Rigzin Godem, i.e., the individual whose biography I discuss above.

My academic direction came from taking a world religion class as an undergraduate. Growing up in a largely secular family but in a Catholic community, I always had the feeling that there was much more information out there regarding religion, the nature of reality, the meaning of life, etc. than what I got from my life experiences. I felt immediately intrigued and impressed by Buddhism in general, but was specifically drawn to Tibetan Buddhism because of the institutionalized elements of Tantric Buddhism that are not found anywhere else in the world.

Methodically, all the time I am finetuning how I find secondary sources. I am creating my own personal database and using this software called Docfinder which essentially treats your computer how Google treats the internet, helping you find information from your sources instantly.

At this stage of my career, I am also focusing on creating long-lasting research groups with broad research agendas and supporting these groups through grant writing. I have been pushed in this direction by the realization that the amount of work that needs to be done, even just with regards to my small focus group, is more than any individual or small group of scholars can accomplish in a single lifetime. Thus, I seek to establish an organization that can continue the work far into the future.

**Dr. Lim**

My main research focus is on the philosophy of human nature called personal identity and its related issues in ethics and religion. I am trying to answer the question: what is human nature and what are we made of? Another question I want to answer is how are we existing over time? Is it because you have the same soul or the same psychological function or biological continuity? Or are you really the same person over time?

I am also applying the philosophy of human nature to issues in ethics and religion. Personal identity is closely related to ethical issues. For example, your view of personhood can affect your view of the human fetus. Is it a person? Why or why not? Your answer then affects your view of abortion. The same goes for the patient in a PVS and the issues in euthanasia. I hope my research in the philosophy of human nature can clarify and answer these questions about moral problems. I am also using the philosophy of human nature to address religious issues, including the incarnation and life after death. For example, in the Christian tradition, the second person of the Trinity, the Son, became fully human while at the same time fully divine. What does it mean that Christ is fully human like you and me? Is it because Christ has a human soul or that he has a physical body like ours or something else? Depending on your metaphysical idea of human nature, you will have a different perspective on the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

These are some of the topics that I am working on in my research area.

I got my first interest in philosophy when I was in high school in South Korea. We were required to take philosophy in high school and as it continued, my interest was getting stronger and stronger. When I went to college, I majored in philosophy; I went on to do a graduate program. I met wonderful professors who were experts in this research area. I was also interested in what I am, what we are. This is the kind of permanent question we always ask, even though you do not study philosophy. Naturally, I was interested in working on the philosophy of human nature for my doctoral dissertation working with those wonderful professors. I got very lucky that I met those people for my career and my life. I have never regretted choosing this topic for my research area. After all, it is about us humans like you and me.

This may be from more than just my research, but studying philosophy in general. There are so many theories and arguments that I do not know about. When I study philosophy, I realize how much I don't know. That is a great intellectual lesson. If you realize you do not know so much, you can be intellectually humble and hungry. You will try to learn more and better. Applying this to my research motivates me to read more along with thinking harder and more carefully. This is important in my life in that we have to perform lifelong learning to learn more about human nature and society.

I also came to respect diverse opinions and thoughts. People have their own reasons to say why they are right and I am wrong. I cannot only say I am right because I have to listen to them. This is helpful in understanding more about human nature issues and more in my life. This came from not only my research, but philosophy as a whole.

**Dr. Puckett**

I am currently on my second book. It's looking at Nazi racism, WWII and the Holocaust, and how that affected perceptions of race in the Jim Crow South and African Americans' demands for civil rights. I am focusing on Alabama specifically, and how African-Americans within Alabama

perceive events in Europe: the antisemitism, the racism, and the claims of racial supremacy that was emanating from Germany. How did African Americans react to white southerners condemning Nazi Germany for their claims of racial supremacy and their persecution of the Jews?

White Alabamians/southerners exhibited profound dissonance when it came to their own treatment of African-Americans in the South. How did African-Americans respond to this? From what I'm finding it increased greater agitation for civil rights and greater organization, that's how I'm going to follow this. I am looking at it from the early 1930s to 1948 with the Dixiecrat revolt, just prior to what we view as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. I'm actually looking at the generation right before the war. You have to understand that to understand the 50s.

This project actually started in graduate school as a project originally assigned as a seminar paper that eventually turned into my dissertation topic. Originally, I focused on newspapers and the press. I had planned to use this as my first book, but what I did instead was focus on the Jewish community and the Jewish response, which was only a chapter or so of my initial proposal. That became my first book. I took a chapter/chapter and a half and turned it into a book. Since then I have reimagined what I am doing, and I am going to address the African-American response, which is much, much broader than what I began with. I would say back in graduate school it piqued my interest.

We all learn from History in some form or fashion. I don't believe History repeats itself. Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I don't believe history repeats itself, but there are lessons you can learn. It informs our understanding of the present.

### **Dr. Ross**

I'm currently working on a book project, which is about how American biomedical researchers defended animal research in the 1910s, '20s, and '30s. So you have institutions, such as universities and the Rockefeller Institute and other major organizations, that were doing biomedical research – not seeing patients, but doing lab experiments – and they are using a lot of mice, dogs, cats, guinea pigs, and monkeys. There was an anti-vivisection or animal rights movement (though that's not what it was called at the time) that was protesting the use of these animals in medical research. My research project is about how the scientists tried to defend their research to the public, in a time when they were not as well respected as they will be later. It is an interesting time period in which they're trying to establish their cultural authority.

Without regulations, they could do whatever they wanted in their labs (within the confines of the local and state anti-cruelty laws). There is this push back by these groups, who say "no, we want to see the animals and experiments." So, you have outsiders trying to regulate the laboratories of these universities and big institutions. The institutions do not want that; they want to regulate themselves. Today we do have regulations. They (the scientists) were wary of outsiders without training having a say in experimental methods and design. And they were also trying to build up their professional authority. They wanted to be the exclusive scientific authorities on health. And, suddenly, they find that they have to talk to the public and, in a sense, justify their methods.

I wrote my dissertation, a million years ago, on the rise of some of these institutions. I was interested in where the money for them came from and how they became these really important centers worldwide. I was very interested in particular in the Rockefeller Institute, now called Rockefeller University. I kept finding these really interesting tangents in the archives about anti-

vivisection meetings, discussions about the advisability of attending or defending animal experimentation, *et cetera*. And the questions about how to deal with what could potentially be an obstacle...the anti-vivisectionists. At the time I couldn't focus on that, I had to focus on my dissertation. So in 2015, I decided that my next project would be to look at those tangents and try to figure out what was really going on there.

Methodological, record keeping. This project has taught me the importance of really detailed record keeping. So every day when I would go to an archive, I would write the date and time I got there, and then they would bring you a box, and I would write down the box number, the file number, *all* the information. I took pictures of everything, and I took a lot of notes. I probably have 300-400 pages of just notes on these documents. Thousands of images of documents. You're basically drowning in documents. The only way you can make sense of them is with really good record keeping. I have spreadsheets with all the image numbers, who the letters are to and from, what the main topic is, the date, and all that. That makes it doable. Otherwise, I would be under a mountain of documents. I would be unable to see what to look at next.

***Some professors were unable to do interviews, but they sent us their answers instead so we could celebrate their work!***

### **Dr. Hagler**

I am working on two projects at once, although I just finished one of them. My first book, *The Echoes of Fitna: Accumulated Meaning and Performative Historiography in the First Muslim Civil War* was just recently accepted for publication by Brill. It is an exploration of how making the meaning of one particularly important event, from the standpoint of the Sunni-Shi'i split, became the focal point for certain medieval Arabic chroniclers from Syria and northern Iraq, and why. It's a project that is a long time in the making, and seeing it so close to publication is tremendously gratifying.

My current project, another book-length study, is an exploration of monotheistic responses to community-threatening catastrophe. *Owning Disaster* is the tentative title. In it, I explore a sequence of disasters that threatened to destroy the communities or theologies of premodern monotheists: the destruction of both Jewish Temples, the execution of Jesus, the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem and, later, Constantinople, the Crusader conquest of Sicily, and the Mongol conquest of, well, everything. In each case, monotheists, be they Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, blamed themselves (or others in their communities) and their own sins or improprieties, casting the conquerors or executioners as an instrument of God sent to punish them. I find that regardless of which tradition is at play, the mechanisms by which monotheists explain and contextualize disaster are very similar--and perhaps necessary. This owning or coopting of disaster may be a key strategy for explaining why bad things happen to God's favorite people, which allows those communities to survive them; no run of good luck lasts forever, after all!

I came across explanations of very different disasters--the loss of Sicily to the Crusaders and the destruction of the Second Temple--that seemed to have similarly bizarre explanations within historical narratives designed to explain them (the loss of Sicily being explained, in part, by the tendency to overindulge in alcohol of Ibn al-Thumna, the Emir of Syracuse, in the Arabic chronicle of Ibn Abi Dinar, and the Temple's destruction by the Romans being explained a misaddressed party invitation and the public shaming of a Jerusalemite notable named Bar Kamza in the

Babylonian Talmud). The similarity got me questioning why such monumental events would be explained as the result of such commonplace incidents. The more I looked, the more I found the same answer: whatever the catastrophe, its cause was "our own sin."

Personally, I've learned that people will go to great lengths to explain catastrophe, whether communal calamity or personal tragedy, by blaming themselves for it. This allows people to maintain the notion that the world is not chaotic and random, but that it is under the control of an all-powerful being. This notion is comforting, even in those moments when one might fear that that being's anger is directed squarely at one, because the alternative is to assume that nobody is in charge, and that thought can be terrifying! It is emotionally easier to assume that "x happened because I/we/you were wicked, and this is my/our/your natural divine consequence" than it is to conclude that there is no God whenever something bad happens--which it inevitably will.

Methodologically? I've learned that trying to write a book in which I must grapple with no fewer than eight different historiographical approaches (Biblical; Church Fathers; Talmudic/Rabbinic; Arabic biographical dictionary; synthetic, universal Arabic and Persian chronicle; Orthodox and Arabic apocalypses; Crusader chronicle; Russian historical chronicle), which must be read in seven different languages (Hebrew; Greek; Aramaic; Latin; Arabic; Persian; Russian), some of which I don't know....is inviting no small measure of exhaustion, and I should definitely only undertake such projects while on sabbatical. I am more grateful than you can imagine for those intrepid souls who translated the Greek and Latin stuff, otherwise I wouldn't be able to complete this project at all.

### **Dr. Merriman**

I currently am researching the Espionage and Seditious Acts in World War I. I want to position them in terms of the larger framework in the time period. These acts were labeled as acts to save America from domestic enemies, but their application told a different story.

It started out in my dissertation which looked at the same time period. I have also been continually interested in the First Amendment in all of its areas, but particularly the areas of the freedom of religion (and the freedom from religion) and the freedom of speech.

The main lesson I learned is the value of methodical research. Many of the most interesting things I've learned have been tucked away deep in the records.

I think that the biggest lesson is that it has shaped the way I teach now. Before I started this project, I didn't really focus that much on gender roles or the history of women or femininity or masculinity. But now, especially in my Western Civ. classes and my upper-division classes, I have a much deeper focus on the role of gender in understanding medieval society or societies in general.