

H-Diplo ESSAY 282

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

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Edging In

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Although history was one of my favorite classes in high school, I chalked that up to an outstanding teacher, John Smith, who first taught me in an elective world history class (which today would be considered more of a comparative cultures class, since the textbook did not pay much attention to crossings or interconnections). I then had the good fortune of taking his U.S. history class (focused on white male political elites, in preparation for the Advanced Placement [AP] exam), and an independent study political philosophy class, which freed up time in my academic schedule for student council, which Mr. Smith advised.

I recall various student council activities better than I recall any specific thing I learned in my high school history classes. One highlight was inviting the candidates for our district's congressional seat to speak to an assembly of seniors. The Libertarian—who advocated the reduction of the drinking age and the legalization of marijuana—read his audience well. The Democrat went with the flow, and the surly response of the conservative incumbent was priceless. This episode reminds me that Mr. Smith encouraged debate on contemporary issues. One of my classmates used to bait me on the Equal Rights Amendment, less from conviction on his part, I think, than to have a good dispute, and so we would go at it, with Mr. Smith's tacit approval, in both world and U.S. history. I did not do particularly well on my AP history exam, but I did go to college with some feminist principles, which I retained, and some experience with argumentation, which I lost for a while, being unduly intimidated by my classmates upon arrival at Yale in the fall of 1983.

I did not set out to become a historian. I had a slow academic start at college, which I sometimes chalked up to my public high school education but which should more accurately be attributed to my dedication to the crew team and the unseemly delight I took in playing, and then running, an assassin game in which each member of the circle was charged with wiping out a target via squirt gun until the circle dwindled down to a pair and then a victor. These energies later got channeled into leading a Girl Scout troop in the New Haven projects. I had no idea where I was heading but it was certainly not the professoriate.

Then several things happened. I gave up crew, being about a foot too short to have much of a future in the sport, no matter how hard I trained. Second, I acquired an early model desktop computer, which meant that I could write multiple drafts of papers instead of hammering them out on a typewriter in the hallucinatory wee hours of the morning. And third, I discovered Fred Strebeigh.

Strebeigh was a writing tutor attached to my residential college. I didn't make as many appointments with him as I should have, but I made enough to learn his editorial method: he had me walk through my drafts paragraph by paragraph, explaining the point of each one and how it advanced my thesis. If I couldn't explain my thesis, paraphrase my writing, or explain logical transitions, then I'd have to get my thoughts straight before fixing the words on the page. Writing still does not come easily to me, but Fred gave me the tools to do it better.

These three developments led to a marked improvement in my academic performance, just as I discovered women's history, taught by Cynthia Russett, and embarked on my junior seminar in American Studies, taught by Joel Pfister. Up to the midpoint of my junior year, I had focused mostly on literature as an American Studies major, but for my junior seminar paper I wrote on Carrie Chapman Catt and the National Committee on the Cause and Cure of War. This led to the greatest discovery of my undergraduate education: Nancy Cott, who supervised my senior thesis on the U.S. women's peace lobby in the interwar years.

My senior year I took the State Department exam and had made it through the medical and security checks when I decided to instead accept a job at a small consulting firm in Evanston, Illinois. My father, a Foreign Service Officer, had advised getting some work experience state-side before signing on, and my love interest (now husband of 27 years) was about to start graduate school in astrophysics, which made me reluctant to accept world-wide assignment. So after hitchhiking across Honduras to visit my sister at her Peace Corps post, I set to work designing sales-force territories for big pharma. The latter activity was such a terrible fit that it prompted me to fill out grad school applications and start again at Yale, this time as a Ph.D. student in History, advised by Nancy Cott. Ironically, I owe this turn to the rowing career that had distracted me from my coursework, for it was one of my teammates who planted the possibility in my mind. If she hadn't teased me for always reading on the bus to practice and proclaimed that I'd surely be a professor someday, I probably would have applied to law school from want of imagination.

I had a second slow start at Yale, in a dazzling cohort of brilliant classmates who were far better versed in historiography and could slice and dice the readings far more deftly. The most intense discussions I have ever been part of remain to this day the ones in Cott's seminar on women in the patriarchal family—some members of the class started meeting in advance for a pre-discussion so that we would be prepared to get a defensible word in during the allotted class time. I enjoyed John Demos's classes on colonial history so much that I nearly became an early Americanist. David Brion Davis's classes on the history of slavery and emancipation afforded me my first opportunity to do sustained research on masculinity, when Joan Scott's essay on gender as a useful category of historical analysis was still the latest thing.¹ And, in an unusual move for one of Cott's students before the cultures of U.S. imperialism, transnational, and global history turns, I took some classes with Paul Kennedy (international relations history) and TA'd for Robin Winks (imperial history) and Doron Ben-Atar (the first half of the U.S. foreign relations history survey).

Having majored in American Studies from a desire to better understand the United States (as well as to get credit for reading novels, watching films, and writing about stoves), I was becoming ever more curious about the place of the United States in the world for the same fundamental reason: somewhere deep at heart, I was still a State Department kid. Though mostly a creature of the Northern Virginia suburbs, I could not let go of my time in Laos, of hustling out of Savannakhet when the fighting got too close; of watching airplanes nearly graze the rooftop of our house in Vientiane during an attempted coup; of being chased through the streets by rock-throwing boys yelling at me to go home; of hopping onto military cargo planes to shop at the PX in Thailand; of helicoptering into the hills to visit Miao villagers; of bouncing on the ambassador's bed and causing consternation all around by telling Walter Cronkite he looked older in person than on television.

Even in subsequent years, I continued to be shaped by my parents' dinnertime discussions of refugee camps in the Khyber Pass, the night shift in the Operations Center, political rallies in Montevideo, culture shock, post security, and the politics of the human rights report. I went to graduate school to study U.S. women's history—then largely containerized by the nation state—but Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm were keeping me up at night and my mom was reporting from Colombia that she'd learned to shoot an Uzi from the hip in case attackers took down the embassy *escolta*.

¹ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91:5 (1986): 1053-1075. This led to my first publication—Kristin Hoganson, "Garrisonian Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Gender, 1850-1860," *American Quarterly* 45:4 (1993): 558-595.

My dissertation, later published in revised form as *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*, attempted to stitch together these disparate interests.² It landed me, at the eleventh and a half hour, a lecturer position at Harvard, for which I was extremely grateful because my husband had obtained a postdoc there. I later obtained an assistant professorship at Harvard (which I suspected I owed to Ernest May and Akira Iriye but never dared ask them about). This was both professionally and personally satisfying until my husband took up a postdoc in the UK, meaning that although we were both in Cambridge, I was in Massachusetts and he was in England during my first pregnancy. As I approached my due date, my husband secured an offer from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and I waddled to campus to plead my case for a dual career hire. Thanks to the efforts of then-chair Jim Barrett, I was invited back to campus for a job talk a month and a half after the delivery and was fortunate to obtain the position I still hold.

If I hadn't gotten the Illinois offer, I probably would have left the profession rather than to try to raise a child a thousand miles from my partner, so Illinois saved my career. But I did leave Harvard with some regret. I ate at more swank restaurants during that short stint than in all the other years of my life combined, due to a steady stream of searches, and I had access to so much research support—an awesome amount of research support—that my second book appeared in short order.³ I was sad to say goodbye to the other junior faculty whose offices abutted mine down in the basement of Robinson Hall and to the senior faculty who occasionally visited our warren. The hardest part of the move was letting go of women's history.

True, I taught some U.S. women's history classes upon my arrival in Illinois, but it was made quite clear to me at the moment of my hire that I had to offer U.S. foreign relations history classes, for the department already had an all-star cluster of U.S. women's historians, including Elizabeth Pleck and Leslie Reagan. So I developed a survey on U.S. Foreign Relations History from 1917 to the Present (thank goodness for *American Foreign Relations* and *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*) and some upper-level and grad classes on the U.S. in the world, the United States in an age of empire, and global history.⁴ By the time I filled out my tenure papers, which vehemently—probably too vehemently—insisted that I was, indeed, a U.S. foreign relations historian, I had actually become one. Not a conventional one, but one heartened by Michael Hogan's Presidential Address, which made a case for SHAFR as a big tent and the field as an open expanse.⁵ The peripheral perspectives that I had regarded as a liability—coming from my training in women's and cultural history—turned out to be a strength as well, for they helped me approach the field in novel ways.

² Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippines American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

³ Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁴ The Age of Empire class led to the publication of a teaching-centered volume, Kristin Hoganson, *American Empire at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's), 2017.

⁵ Michael J. Hogan, "The 'Next Big Thing': The Future of Diplomatic History in a Global Age," *Diplomatic History* 28:1 (2004): 1-21. Some of the other texts that influenced me greatly at this stage of my career include Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Frank Costigliola, "Unceasing Pressure for Penetration: Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," *Journal of American History* 83:4 (1997): 1309-39; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

By the time I filled out my next set of promotion papers, the foreign relations field had changed so much that it was easier to claim a place in it, despite my shift from policymaking to globavore consumer practice in my second book, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity*. The end of the Cold War and subsequent attentiveness to globalization as a topic of study opened up space for this analysis of buying into empire.

I should note that it did not take me long to realize just how lucky I was for landing at Illinois, which has the second largest academic library in the United States and a sparky, collegial, democratic, principled History department that nurtures junior faculty.⁶ The departmental culture fostered connections across junior/senior and geographic divides in ways that were new to me upon my arrival. My colleagues' commitments to the study of race, ethnicity, colonialism, Indigeneity, and global history also had a transformative impact on my scholarship.

My Ph.D. advisees have also expanded my horizons, broadening my understanding of topics such as the activities of the YWCA across different imperial spaces (Karen Phoenix), African colonization (Brandon Mills), connections between the United States and early Soviet Russia (David Greenstein), U.S.-Mexico border-making at the dawn of the Cold War (Andy Eisen), efforts to aestheticize Panama canal construction for imperialist ends (Sandra Henderson), unethical medical experimentation in Guatemala (Lydia Crafts), the settler-colonial politics of anti-leftist repression (Tariq Khan), maritime borderlands in the Bering Sea (Koji Ito), double-colonization and women's activism in Okinawa (Yuki Takachi), Japanese rice and the inter-imperial development of the Gulf Coast rice industry (Megan White), and race-making across Cuba and the United States (Taryn Vaughn).⁷

From sitting on additional thesis committees I have learned about a far wider range of subjects, including (to pick some topics that may be of particular interest to H-Diplo readers): Indian Wars and Midwestern identity, missionary education, civilizing ideologies as applied to children, colonial legal regimes, Native Americans' labor in the tourism industry, the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic, bookmobiles, diamonds, anticolonial beauty regimes, colonial intercourse, postcolonial agricultural education, the United Nations, deportation, transnational pro-democracy activism, dissident military personnel, food sovereignty, and the Caribbean cruise industry. My undergraduate students have likewise opened up unexpected vistas and kept me on my toes.

Living in a college town in the middle of the corn belt has also taught me new ways to look at the world. My third monograph, *The Heartland: An American History*, stemmed from the disjuncture between stereotypes of the rural Midwest as one of the last local places and the histories of colonial politics and global connection that I encountered upon arrival.⁸

This linear narrative of my professional development to date is far tidier than my scholarly progression seemed to me as it unfolded. This brief account does not account for some wild rides as a tour guide, mind-expanding stints as a visiting teacher and scholar, the perspectives gained through professional service (including on behalf of the Society for Historians of

⁶ Rohit Jammu, "UI holds title of second-largest research library," *The Daily Illini*, 21 November 2019, <https://dailyillini.com/features/2019/11/21/ui-holds-title-of-second-largest-research-library/>.

⁷ All of the dissertations that follow are University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign History PhD dissertations. Karen E. Phoenix, "'Not by Might, nor by Power, but by Spirit': The Global Reform Efforts of the Young Women's Christian Association of the United States, 1895-1939," (2010); Brandon Mills, *The World Colonization Made: The Racial Geography of Early American Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); David Greenstein, "Between Two Worlds: Americans and Soviets after the Bolshevik Revolution," (2015); Andrew A. Eisen, "Imperial Divides: Race, Nation, Security, and the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1940-1955," (2015); Sandra L. Henderson, "The Face of Empire: The Cultural Production of U.S. Imperialism in the Panama Canal Zone and California, 1904-1916," (2016); Lydia Crafts, "Mining Bodies: U.S. Medical Experimentation in Guatemala during the Twentieth Century," (2019). The remaining dissertations alluded to in this paragraph are still in progress, though with several pending defenses this year.

⁸ Kristin Hoganson, *The Heartland: An American History* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019).

the Gilded Age and Progressive Era and the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations), the joys of collaborating on edited volumes and becoming ever more enmeshed in wide-ranging intellectual communities, the persistent stresses and challenges of juggling multiple balls, and the many mistakes I have made.⁹ Nor does this brief narrative appropriately convey my indebtedness to care providers, a smart and supportive spouse, remarkably self-sufficient and independent children, and to parents, siblings, neighbors, and friends who have likewise kept me going.

Barring undesired developments, I am still somewhere in the mid-career range, which means that my efforts to learn the scholar's craft are still in progress. I had great ambitions of making steam on my fourth monograph this past summer, but my research plans came to a screeching halt as a result of the pedagogical, administrative, and personal challenges raised by COVID-19. On second thought, screeching halt is an exaggeration. Thanks to a generous alumnus, I recently gained greater access to research assistance, for which I am tremendously thankful. When time opens up again, my hope is to grapple more with environmental history, stemming from my concerns about climate change and sustainability.

I suppose that if there is a pattern to this account, it is that I have been driven from day one to write more inclusionary accounts of the past; to broaden our understandings of who and what has mattered to global affairs. Another thread that runs through my work is curiosity about colonialism and empire. Nearly all my scholarship has centered on these topics, approaching them from different angles in hopes of better understanding the workings of power and the making of the modern world. A main method to date has been to pursue leads that strike me as so strange that they holler for explanation, in hopes of figuring things out. We shall see if that approach works again. Stay tuned.

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⁹ The edited volumes referred to here are Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton, eds., *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); and Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton, eds., *The Cambridge History of America in the World*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), forthcoming.