The summer months afforded me with a number of unique opportunities to reflect on the power of history. In July I participated in one of the Detroit River Story Lab’s educational sails. Designed to connect young people from the Metro Detroit area with the river that has defined so much of the city’s history, these summer excursions feature talks and workshops on ecology and environmental sustainability, economic and cultural development, and—in my case—the history of the Underground Railroad, abolition, and freedom seeking along the “fluid frontier” between Detroit and Canada.

For the thousands of self-emancipated African Americans who made their way from slavery in the United States to freedom in Canada, and for the thousands of fellow Americans who conducted and supported them, Detroit—code-named “Midnight”—and the river were conduits to freedom, self-determination, and community building in new lands.

Talking about this history with high school students on a schooner in the middle of the Detroit River was a potent reminder of how exploration of the past can open up new ways of seeing, understanding, and in some circumstances navigating and enduring the present. We live in one of those moments when and where the practice of history—in all forms of our research and our pedagogy—feels more vital, urgent, and contested than ever. Our own Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies will tackle this issue head-on this year with its “Against History” theme (see page 20).

As a scholar I have always been drawn to public history, particularly when done in conjunction with community-based partners who are personally invested in how historical narratives are co-created and disseminated. This is swiftly becoming a hallmark of part of what we do at U-M History as we continue to excel across multiple domains. In this issue of History Matters, you can learn about Professor Stephen Berry’s efforts to document sundown towns (page 16) and Professor Deirdre de la Cruz’s leadership in addressing harmful aspects of U-M’s Philippine collections (page 6). And in June the College of LSA’s Meet the Moment Research Initiative announced a $2 million grant for the Carceral State Program (CSP), which counts U-M History faculty Heather Ann Thompson and Matthew Lassiter among its leadership. We are delighted that the CSP is among one of the four projects funded in this college-wide initiative.

My own involvement in the Detroit River Story Lab is part of our embrace of public history and public engagement, which I invite you to explore in more depth on our new U-M History Showcase website (see page 4). With the tagline “U-M History is engaged with the world,” this new addition to our History at Work footprint showcases the many ways in which our faculty and students—both graduate and undergraduate—are making an impact far beyond the classroom and campus by sharing cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research with audiences and partners across the globe.

We want to continue to engage the world as we reconnect with each other. The pandemic is far from over and we will likely dwell in the long tail of COVID for years to come. Mindful of the need to continue to care for vulnerable members of our community, we are planning for an in-person academic year and a re-engagement with the life of the campus and our department. This has already begun, with our first in-person commencement in two years. On April 29 we gathered together to celebrate the achievements of 125 graduating seniors (page 23) and six newly minted PhDs and to welcome them into our ever-expanding alumni network.

If your journeys carry you back to Ann Arbor I hope you’ll stop by our Tisch Hall offices. Wherever you are, I invite you to stay connected as we navigate the ebbs and flows of our world—and the myriad ways that history matters.

Warm Regards,

Angela D. Dillard
Department Chair
Richard A. Meisler Collegiate Professor of Afroamerican & African Studies, History, and in the Residential College
SNAPSHOTS

U-M History Welcomes New Faculty Members

Carina Ray joins U-M History as an associate professor and Bentlely Chair in African History. Ray specializes in West African and Black Atlantic history. Her book, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana* (Ohio University Press), won the AHA/ASALH Wesley-Logan Prize for African Diaspora History. She earned her PhD from Cornell University and previously taught at Brandeis University.

Yanay Israeli joins U-M History as assistant professor with a joint appointment in Judaic Studies. His work centers on the social and legal history of the Iberian world between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Israeli earned his PhD from the University of Michigan Department of History and previously taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Sanne Ravensbergen joins U-M History as assistant professor with a joint appointment in the International Institute. She studies the cultural history of law, and her current work focuses on colonial legal spaces in the nineteenth-century Dutch empire. Ravensbergen earned her PhD from Leiden University and previously taught at Leiden’s Institute for History.

Jason Young Co-Curates Met Exhibit on African American Potters

On September 9, 2022, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art will debut *Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina*. U-M History Professor Jason Young curated the project with Adrienne Spinozzi (Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Ethan Lasser (Museum of Fine Arts). *Hear Me Now* features approximately 50 ceramic objects that, according to the exhibition description, "testify to the lived experiences, artistic agency, and material knowledge of enslaved peoples." It will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston; March 6-July 9, 2023), the University of Michigan Museum of Art (August 26, 2023-January 7, 2024), and the High Museum of Art (Atlanta; February 16-May 12, 2024).

Carceral State Project Wins $2 Million Grant

The Carceral State Project—lead in part by U-M History faculty Heather Ann Thompson and Matthew Lassiter—received a $2 million grant as part of the College of LSA’s Meet the Moment initiative, a new program that “addresses today’s biggest challenges, including social justice and environmental issues, through liberal arts research and interdisciplinary collaboration.” Learn more about the project using the QR code (right) or at sites.lsa.umich.edu/dcc-project.

Department Launches U-M History Showcase

U-M History is making an impact beyond campus, and in May the department unveiled a new site for collecting, publicizing, and hosting the diverse public engagement activities pursued by its faculty and students. The project was developed in collaboration with LSA Technology Services and U-M Library. Visit the showcase and check out the department’s latest projects—from episodes of *Reverb Effect* to online exhibits—using the QR code (right) or at digitalscholarship.umich.edu/lsa-history.

Carceral State Project—lead in part by U-M History faculty Heather Ann Thompson and Matthew Lassiter—received a $2 million grant as part of the College of LSA’s Meet the Moment initiative, a new program that “addresses today’s biggest challenges, including social justice and environmental issues, through liberal arts research and interdisciplinary collaboration.” Learn more about the project using the QR code (right) or at sites.lsa.umich.edu/dcc-project.

Exhibit Explores Black Community Building in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor

Professor Jennifer Dominique Jones, graduate student Eshe Sherley, and five undergraduate fellows collaborated with the Bentley Historical Library to create the web exhibit, "Hold Me Up: Narrative Histories of Black Community Building in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, 1920s-1970s."

The undergraduate fellows—Krista Albertins, Isabella Buzynski, Paige Hodder, Miriam Saperstein, and Bennett Walling—each focused on an aspect of Black communal, institutional, and political life. Link to this latest iteration of the Michigan in the World program using the QR code (right) or at myumi.ch/e6jq3.
In May, three artists—two from Brooklyn, one from St. Louis—converged upon Ann Arbor to do what historians usually do. They spent time in the archives. Maia Cruz Palileo, Francis Estrada, and Janna Añonuevo Langholz were here for a two-week residency. But they weren’t here to do research in the traditional sense. They were here to interpret U-M’s extensive Philippine collections: thousands of mammal specimens, ethnographic objects, historic photographs, herbarium specimens, and even human remains collected by the university during the Philippine’s colonial era.

The artist residency came at the end of the first year of ReConnect/ReCollect, a project aiming to assess the scope of U-M’s Philippine collections, determine the harm caused, and develop a model for reparation while involving members of the Philippine diaspora in the endeavor.

Without a time machine, it’s impossible to fully fix this. But ReConnect/ReCollect is exploring what is possible. During their residency, artist Janna Añonuevo Langholz learned about a scale model of a Philippine house at U-M’s Museum of Anthropological Archaeology. And while at the Bentley Historical Library, they found a postcard of a nipa palm, the same material that would have been used to construct the house. They made a large print of the postcard, which they used as a backdrop to photograph the model house, along with animal figurines dating to 200 BCE. The resulting photo—with some artistic license—recontextualizes the house. It’s no longer disembodied from the environment in which it would have existed. The residency will fuel the artists’ work for the indefinite future.

“Bringing in artists—this work doesn’t stay here,” said Langholz at a public roundtable. “Our work is seen by the public.”

U-M’s Philippine collections are among the largest in North America, and they bolstered the reputation of the university’s museums, academic departments, and archives. But because they were collected in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Philippines was first a Spanish colony and later an American one, the process was unequal and extractive.

“Archival and museum collections don’t just magically materialize in an institution,” said Deirdre de la Cruz, co-director of ReConnect/ReCollect and an associate professor in the Departments of History and Asian Languages and Cultures. “From the moment a document, photograph, or artifact is acquired or produced, there is a process of filtering, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing that takes place in the effort to institutionally organize that item in a collection.”

At the university, most of the Philippine collections are listed first under the name of the faculty member who procured them and then by discipline.

“When it comes to colonial collections, this process inevitably results in the erasure of local or indigenous identities, meanings, languages and values—and most significantly, in the erasure of local and indigenous peoples themselves,” said de la Cruz. The result can be inaccurate or even offensive descriptions. It also obscures the mechanisms that made these collections possible in the first place: the colonial aspirations of the United States and U-M’s complicity in this imperial project.

De la Cruz and Ricky Punzalan, an associate professor in the School of Information, lead the ReConnect/ReCollect team, composed of nearly two dozen scholars, archivists, artists, and community activists. The multi-year program is supported by a $500,000 grant from U-M’s Humanities Collaboratory.

The project has been collaborative from the start. “The Filipino/Filipinx communities are our primary public,” said Punzalan. Last spring and summer the team convened a series of roundtables and listening sessions with stakeholders to help determine the shape of the two-year program. It was at one of those sessions—
Matthew Woodbury (PhD 2018) lives in New Zealand, where he is senior historian for the Te Arawhiti—also known as the Office for Māori Crown Relations. Elizabeth Collins caught up with him to talk about his path from Ann Arbor to Wellington.

What inspired you to go into a PhD program in history?
I've always loved learning about the past and talking about how we got to be where we are. In college, when I found out I also liked archival research, I saw the PhD as a pathway to becoming a professor.

Can you tell us a bit about your dissertation?
At the core of my project was a question about the ethics of government. My research looked at how colonial administrators in New Zealand thought about indigenous Māori communities in the mid-1800s. I wanted to show how changes in New Zealand's economic, political, and social circumstances made government programs targeted toward Māori—ones that were described as “humanitarian”—increasingly coercive and challenging.

What kind of work do you do on a day-to-day basis?
Over the course of a week I might meet with Māori communities to discuss their aspirations for how the Crown could acknowledge historic breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi, research the history of a contentious site that is being considered as redress for a breach, or draft a briefing to the government minister responsible for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations.

How have your PhD studies and research helped prepare you for this position?
At the core of my work is identifying, interpreting, and conveying complex information to very different audiences. The PhD allowed me to develop the research and communication skills I rely on everyday—knowing how to create and deliver a research program, comfort with synthesizing mountains of sources, and experience with presenting conclusions in a variety of forms. Your work involves a fair amount of public outreach. What types of challenges do you encounter as a historian engaging in current affairs?

Treaty settlements are a lightning rod for big questions about colonization. It can be hard to reduce history's complexity and contingency into bite-sized pieces that will fit in reports, speeches, or news briefings. As a public servant I also have to be mindful about how I refer to ongoing work as we are responsible to the government of the day. When thinking about thorny issues, my office has a saying—"What would that look like on the front page of the Dominion Post?"—which reminds us that public perception can be as important as the actual content of a decision. What advice would you give to history PhD students who might be interested in a career beyond academia?
I found it helpful to put some thought into what aspects of academia I found energizing—for me it was collaboration, evidence-based writing, and trying to make a positive change—and seek out opportunities to explore what those "likes" looked like in settings beyond the academy. PhD students are smart, committed, and capable people, and U-M has the resources to explore all kinds of pathways.

Matthew Woodbury at a wharenui (meeting house) in Mōiorea Marae, Taumarunui. (Matthew Woodbury)
How do historians work with journalists to provide essential context to current events?

By Elizabeth Collins

W
riting history takes time. But the work of journalists is, fundamentally, news; and therefore time-sensitive. Professor Ronald G. Suny took more than 30 years to complete his biography, Stalin: Passage to Revolution. When a news story breaks, a reporter may only have a matter of hours to gather their sources—including a soundbite from a historian.

"In several cases I've had journalists reach out, conduct an interview, and publish an article all within the space of 24 hours," Ian Shin, assistant professor of History, described. "The pace they work is vastly different from what we are generally used to as academics, and can feel quite disruptive to the ways we typically prepare to share our scholarship."

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Professor Pamela Ballinger has been interviewed by the Christian Science Monitor—explaining the legacy of the Iron Curtain. Professor Jeffrey Veidlinger has been interviewed by the Guardian and written an article for the Tablet on anti-Jewish massacres in the area. And Suny has written an article for the Conversation correcting misunderstandings about Ukrainian-Russian history that has been shared by PBS NewsHour.

U-M History faculty are regular contributors to all manner of local, national, and international news outlets—helping journalists create that first "draft" of history. Their insight not only contributes to the credibility of news outlets, but it makes their own work—typically bound in the ivory tower—more accessible to all.

But how does a historian prepare to translate their scholarship into news-for-the-masses?

Faculty schedules are already packed with research, teaching, and service. So when an email comes in from a journalist, they must first decide if a story is an appropriate match, and whether or not they have the time to participate.

When Professor Hitomi Tonomura was contacted by a writer for the Detroit News about a story on the re-branding of "Asian" carp, she quickly knew this was not a good fit. "I don't know a thing about 'Asian' carp, although I always thought it a bad name," she said. Another time, Tonomura recalled, the subject matter was more appropriate, "but they wanted the response within a few hours, and it was impossible for me because I was teaching a class during those few hours."

When it all works out and an interview is scheduled, however, preparation is important.

Kira Thurman, an associate professor in History and German, explained that how you prepare really depends on the nature of the interview. "If it's a live interview, I feel like I have to formulate my sentences very carefully, because there's no room for edits. If it's not a live interview then I can be a little bit more chatty and repeat things or come back to a question again."

Either way, Thurman said, she gives herself no more than an hour to review scholarship pertinent to the topic, including primary sources like memoirs, newspaper clippings, and photographs.

Shin does the same, and noted that he will have key statistics and facts ready so that he can cite them accurately. He added, "I also reflect on what takeaways I wish to convey about the topic I'm being asked to speak on, so that during the course of the interview I am able to steer the conversation back to those key points."

In any interview there's the potential for a disconnect between what the journalist has in mind for their story and what the historian knows and is willing to put forward.
On one occasion Tonomura, an expert in premodern Japan, was interviewed for a story on samurais. But she withdrew her appearance. "I just could not get them to see things outside of the stereotyped image of the samurai," she said. "They knew what they wanted but I wasn't giving it to them."

Professor Alexandra Minna Stern described the worst-case scenario: "A journalist will rely on the painstaking research of historians to spin a topic into a digestible form, land a big book appearance. "I just could not get them to see things outside of the stereotyped image of the samurai," she said. "They knew what they wanted but I wasn't giving it to them."

But these instances are rare. More often than not historians and journalists are positive. And in the wake of the 2018 election, this mutual trust is vital. "Many historians that I know felt a new sense of urgency to figure out how to explain our work to the public," Thurman said. "It wasn't that there was necessarily an uptick in historians working with journalists so much as historians in general wrestling with this question of how to explain our work to the public in such a way that it can have an impact."

One way that historians are able to reach a public audience without the direct aid of a journalist is through writing their own editorials. "Because then you can present historically informed research and ideas quickly and efficiently without watering down the content," Thurman said.

"The way historians practice job interviews when they go on the job market—it's a similar skill, but you just have to practice and practice and practice." It's worth the practice when the payoff is a better-informed public. In light of anti-Asian discrimination and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shin noted that journalists have been very eager to seek out historians and other academic experts to help contextualize the moment.

"I've also worked with staff from the Office of the Vice President for Communications to put together a 'Faculty Q&A' about anti-Asian hate and the COVID-19 pandemic, which their office then used to set up interviews with journalists writing about the topic." When the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in June 2022, Stern said, that "Gender and health historians have been providing absolutely critical context to trace shifting patterns of the criminalization and decriminalization of abortion.

By continuing to provide their perspectives through popular news outlets, U-M historians are proving every day that history matters. And while it might move a bit slow, the repercussions are as loud and relevant as ever.

The New York Times
WHEN CLASSICAL MUSIC WAS AN ALIBI
April 15, 2022

On April 8, the soprano Camilla Nylund performed the title role in Puccini's 'Madama Butterfly' in the New York City Opera's revival. The opera was first staged in 1910, and it is remembered for its love story, its music, and its depiction of Japanese culture.

But for some, it was also an Alibi. "We wanted to use the opera as a way to avoid the looming threat of a war," said Nylund. "It was a time when people were afraid of the Japanese, and they wanted something to take their mind off of it."

It's a story that's been told many times, but the New York Times was there to bring it to life. "We wanted to use this opportunity to tell the story of how the opera was used as a way to escape the reality of the war," said the paper's editorial page editor. "It's a story that's important to tell, even if it's not the most current news."
In the Field

Paige Newhouse
PhD candidate studying the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany. Her dissertation explores how understandings of migration in Germany change during and in the aftermath of reunification through the experiences of Vietnamese migrants.

Newhouse became engaged in the subject after working at the Women’s Center in Friedland, a refugee camp in Germany. She has conducted research in a number of archives primarily in Berlin. “My biggest challenge is gaining access to files because of privacy laws in Germany.”

She also stresses the importance of developing a consistent workflow. “I tried to upload all the photographs I’d take after every archive visit. Then I’d spend one day a week editing the photos and cataloging them in my computer. You have to remain organized or else it’s a total mess.”

Frank Espinosa
PhD candidate studying medieval Iberia (Valencia) and Christian-Muslim relations. His dissertation analyzes Muslim communities of the late-medieval Kingdom of Valencia living amidst the anti-Jewish riots of 1391.

Espinosa has been working in archives across Valencia and Catalonia. Traveling for research is not without its challenges. “Early in my research trip, I got sick and had to redo my research schedule. This forced me to be flexible and prioritize what I needed to see—and it paid off. During those final three days, I found some of the most exciting and foundational sources for my project.”

Armen Abkarian
PhD candidate studying premodern Armenia. His dissertation explores the various configurations of Cilician Armenian kingship as they are expressed in premodern literary sources.

Abkarian conducts most of his research at Yerevan’s Matenadaran—known officially as the Research Institute for Ancient Manuscripts. “A typical day of research is spent examining digital scans of premodern texts at the Matenadaran, with an eye for material details that do not appear in printed editions, such as ink color, ornamentation, or text formatting. Additionally, the lively atmosphere of the Matenadaran creates a welcoming environment for me to talk shop with my colleagues when we are not otherwise engaged in the reading hall.”

Saouda Nabukenya
PhD candidate studying twentieth-century East Africa. Her dissertation investigates the evolution of Uganda’s law and legal culture, focusing on the role of ordinary people.

In 2018, Nabukenya encountered a wealth of court records in Uganda that had been deemed unimportant and neglected. “In the basement repository of the court buildings, files were piled haphazardly on shelves, some scattered on the floors and covered in dust…. Some documents were stained, torn, marked with water damage, and insects and mold had destroyed others.” Nabukenya led a team of 15 students from U-M and Makerere University to clean, catalog, and preserve the Mengo Court Archive—resulting in the rescue of more than 145,000 court cases.
FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Small Towns, Big Histories

Professor Stephen A. Berrey works on the history of race and culture in the United States. He is the author of *Jim Crow Routines: Everyday Performances of Race and the End of Segregation in Mississippi* (University of North Carolina Press), which focused on changing conceptions of race in the dawn of the civil rights era.

Recently, he’s turned his attention to the history of race in small towns—and sundown towns in particular. Gregory Parker talked with him to learn more.

**What’s a sundown town?**
A sundown town is a town or suburb that is “all-white” on purpose. The phrase refers to some groups having to be out of town by sundown. Through ordinances, signs, sirens, policing, violent acts, or informal measures, people in these communities have intentionally excluded Black people, Native Americans, Latina/o people, Asian American people, and Jewish people. These practices emerged in the late-nineteenth century and some places continue to be sundown towns or suburbs in the present. These communities exist throughout the continental United States and have been especially prevalent outside the South.

**How did you get involved in the Sundown Towns Project?**
James Lim Looen (author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*) began this research, writing a book and creating a website documenting these places. In 2019, at the Organization of American Historians conference, Jim and I ended up on the same walking tour chatting about our shared research interests. We spent much of the tour asking each other what they knew about towns in our database or about towns that they believed should be in our database. I also met with community groups to show them how they can do this research, and we have resources for educators on the website. At the University of Michigan, I’ve been teaching an undergraduate HistoryLab course (History 491, “Race, Local History, and Sundown Towns”) in which students engage in this work. They also learn how to access and analyze census data, find local history archives, and conduct oral histories.

**What can small towns tell us about the history of race in America?**
In the present, we know that cities and small towns are radically different kinds of places, from their demographics to the ways people in these places think about politics, race, immigration, and various social issues. In many respects, this real and imagined rural-urban divide can be traced back to the early twentieth century and to the processes of urbanization, industrialization, internal migration, and immigration. Focusing on that period, I’ve been exploring how people in a few very white, small towns in Maine, Indiana, and Napa Valley, California, responded to these changes and how their responses shaped their racial world.

It’s a history of small towns often defined by exclusion, Ku Klux Klan activity, and white-centered local histories. It’s also a cultural history in which various practices, including amateur blackface minstrel shows (into the 1970s), historical pageants, Indian mascots, and even a 1920s dance party craze featuring music from China, shaped ideas about race. I’m uncovering this largely unknown past of small-town America. I also see an opportunity for this research to speak to our racial present. Toward that end, the book will consider ways people can grapple with this hard history and find hope, inspiration, and a path forward.

**Can you tell us about Singing Justice?**
Singing Justice is an investigative music collaborative combining research and performance. Organized through the Humanities Collaboratory at the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan, we are a diverse group of faculty, graduate students, and performers dedicated to centering music by Black people, including composers, performers, and audiences that have been marginalized and misrepresented in music history. Our work cuts across genres including spirituals, blues, jazz, Motown, and hip hop, as well as opera, country, and art song. We are staging seminar recitals in which we mix performance, historical context, and performer audience Q&A for a range of audiences in the United States and Europe. We are drawing on those recitals and additional research to write a book that will serve as a guide for talking about and teaching about Black song, and pitched to scholars, educators, and people interested in music.

**How do you approach collaborations with artists and fellow scholars?**
Collaboration was a challenge for me initially because I was trained to do scholarly work on my own and largely in isolation. But it’s been incredible and even magical what our Singing Justice group has already accomplished collectively. From my perspective our collaboration has worked for the following reasons: We truly listen to each other, hearing what each of us brings to the conversation and what each of us needs. We are generous and patient with each other. We’ve learned to trust each other, and we’ve created a compassionate and supportive community. It helps that each of us is invested in the work. At the end of the day, though, it is our care for each other that is helping us to do amazing work together, work that none of us could have produced on our own.

Visit the Sundown Towns project
justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns

Visit the Sundown Towns Project
Postcards and commemorative booklets from Old Town, Maine. (Old Town Public Library)
In 2021 Professor Brian Porter-Szűcs was on sabbatical in Poland, where his latest book became a bestseller. After interviews in the country’s leading newspapers and magazines, he found himself in a most unexpected place: onstage at a Warsaw comedy club.

By Brian Porter-Szűcs

A man sits down for a session with his therapist. “I just can’t function anymore,” he says. “My relationships are falling apart, I’m useless at work, and I can’t find the motivation to get up in the morning.” The therapist nods sagely, and asks some probing questions in an attempt to find what lies at the root of the man’s despair. “It’s all the failure,” he finally admits. “We lost the Uprising of 1863, we lost the Uprising of 1830, the country was partitioned in 1795, and on and on. How can anyone today be happy?”

Comedy never translates, so you’ll have to take my word for it that the audience at the Klub Komediowy (Comedy Club) in Warsaw was in stitches. The humor relied on the disconnect between the actual lives of Poles today and the way they are taught to remember their history.

On July 9, 2021, I had the most unusual experience of my professional career. I was invited to appear onstage with an improv comedy group for a show based on my newest book, Całkiem zwyczajny kraj: Historia Polski bez martyrologii (“A Perfectly Ordinary Country: A History of Poland without Martyrology”). I was asked to read excerpts from the book, which they then used as inspirations for their sketches. It might seem counterintuitive to mine a history book for laughs, but those brilliant comedians made it work.

The book itself was based on an earlier work of mine, Beyond Martyrdom: Poland in the Modern World (Wiley), but the Polish edition had been extensively rewritten to sharpen the argument and customize it for Polish readers. Apparently it hit a nerve, because to my astonishment it became a bestseller, and was even made into an audiobook (not to mention the success of a comedy show). I had expected harsh criticism (who, after all, wants to be told that they are “perfectly ordinary”?); but while the attacks certainly came, they were drowned out by the enthusiasm. I wish I could pretend that this reception was because of my great writing, but I’m not that delusional: it was a case of having the right message at the right moment.

Since 2015 Poland has been governed by an authoritarian, nationalist political party, and they have devoted enormous resources towards what they call “polityka historyczna” which translates as both “historical politics” and “historical policy.” Both senses are important, because the authorities exploit stories about historical injustices in order to rally their base, and they believe that it is the responsibility of the government to shape historical consciousness. As a historian who supports the ruling party once put it to me, “history should teach people without ambiguity who is good and who is evil.” The historical curriculum in schools, historical films and TV shows financed by government subsidies, elaborate ceremonies and celebrations—all these things are mobilized by the authorities to inculcate the idea that Poland (collectively) is always virtuous and innocent, and always persecuted by its implacably hostile neighbors. Because of this history, people are taught, respect for diversity, adherence to legal “technicilities,” and liberal democracy itself are luxuries that the country cannot afford.

This “historical politics” does not only encourage authoritarianism: it is flat-out wrong. To be sure, during World War II, Poland really was the site for unspeakable horrors. Not only did over 90 percent of the country’s Jews perish in the Holocaust, but over two-and-a-half million Christian Poles died as well (put together, about 16 percent of the prewar population). Every Polish city was left in ruins, and the scars (material and psychological) endured for decades. But the official narrative of Poland’s past treats that period as if it was a metaphor for the entirety of the country’s past. Even more importantly, it blames “foreigners” for all suffering and silences any pain that can’t be subsumed into a national framework. The centuries of unfree labor (serfdom) are not discussed, because in that case the “bad guys” were Polish-speaking Roman Catholics. We can’t learn about the nested prejudices, within which Poles were discriminated against in the nineteenth-century German and Russian Empires, even as the Poles themselves treated Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians with comparable bigotry. The history of women becomes marginalized—acceptable when describing how women sacrificed for the nation, unacceptable when exposing misogyny or sexism in Polish society. A historical narrative based entirely on a story of battles (usually defeats), political persecution, and celebrations—all these things are mobilized by the authorities to inculcate the idea that Poland (collectively) is always virtuous and innocent, and always persecuted by its implacably hostile neighbors.

That’s why the routine with which I started this essay was funny: it pointed out the cavernous gap between the grand tragedy of the national narrative and the experiences of Poles in the twenty-first century. The comedians also had a great time with a passage in which I pointed out that there were fewer women in the constitutional assembly of 1919 than there were men named “Feliks,” and another in which I contrasted the stoody leadership of the Polish People’s Republic with the way “commies” and “hippies” were typically lumped together in the United States during the Cold War. There really is a lot to laugh at in Polish history—or any country’s history. Of course we need to remember the injustices and tragedies of the past, because without understanding them we can’t prevent them in the future. We need to pay particular attention to the systems of injustice that extend from the past into our present. But we also need to avoid getting defined by suffering or martyrdom. Not only does that play into the hands of politicians who thrive on dividing the world into “us” and “them,” but it covers up the complexity, ambiguity, and diversity that allows the past to have meaning for us today.

Beyond all that, it makes the study of Poland’s past unemittingly serious and completely disconnected from life today. It becomes a story of battles (usually defeats), political persecution, and resistance (always heroics, and almost doomed). There is no space for the history of everyday life, popular culture, business and labor, fashion, food, sexuality, religious practices, and so much more. The official story gives you plenty to get depressed about, and plenty to get angry about, but almost nothing to relate to.

From top: Całkiem zwyczajny kraj on the bestseller table at a Warsaw train station. Brian Porter-Szűcs (top row, third from left) and the Klub Komediowy cast. Interview with Tomasz Lis, editor of Nowowiew Polska (Brian Porter-Szűcs)

Opposite: July 2017 protest in Poznan, Poland, against the judicial reform plans of the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) ruling party. (Sakuto, CC BY-NC 2.0)
Can We Really Be Against History?

By John Carson

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

—Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens’s oft-quoted words feel hollow at the moment, at least to me. In the face of one pandemic—COVID—that mutates and will not stop and a second—monkeypox—that threatens to spread further, Dickens suggests and historians so often confirm that marks the texture of the present and the past?

But we are seeing a climate of fear, isolation, and division in the world today. The question, consider, and conspire together. Come join us!

The 2022-23 Eisenberg Institute theme, “Against History,” is a reflection on and response to the sense that we are in a “season of darkness.” It is a kind of continuation of last year’s theme, “Recovery,” but from the perspective of history itself—as both a resource for holding individuals and institutions to account and a repository of practices and knowledges that have served to maintain and even exacerbate inequalities and erasures.

Contemporary attempts to rewrite history or challenge conventional methodologies and sources make this theme feel urgent. But the politics of history are and have always been present. They are evident when we tell stories about the past, whenever we invoke the past to support or challenge the status quo, whenever we construct public narratives justifying who should rule, and whenever we regulate the most private domestic and personal practices.

With “Against History,” we want to unpack the divergent meanings and practices of history. We aim to explore the ideologies involved in its construction and deployment as well as highlight the dangers of whitewashing the complexities of the past.

Our speakers, workshops, and symposia represent diverse attempts to think with and through the notion of being “Against History.” We anticipate thought-provoking presentations and lively discussions (while being careful to adhere to the university’s public health guidelines). We are also looking forward to moments of socializing, whether at the opening reception at the U-M Museum of Art, in the corridors of Haven Hall after talks, or in the Eisenberg suite at almost any time. We relish the opportunity to listen, think, question, consider, and conspire together. Come join us!

John Carson is an associate professor in History and director of the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies.
Krista Albertins (BA 2022) joined the Shaker Historical Society in Shaker Heights, Ohio, as education and outreach manager.

Michael Barera (BA 2012) moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to take the position of assistant archivist and digitization specialist at the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Elise Borelly (BA 2021) joined the U-M Department of History as student services assistant.

Timothy Chester (BA 1978) is currently vice-chair of the Michigan Historical Commission.

Claude Clegg (PhD 1995) is the Lyle V. Jones Distinguished Professor and chair of the Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His fourth book, *The Black President: Hope and Fury in the Age of Obama*, was recently published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Robyn d’Avignon (PhD 2016) is the Lyle V. Jones Distinguished Professor and chair of the Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His fourth book, *The Black President: Hope and Fury in the Age of Obama*, was recently published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hampton Dellinger (BA 1989) was confirmed by the US Senate in October 2021 to serve as an assistant attorney general in the US Department of Justice and head up the Office of Legal Policy. He recounts: “I loved my time at U-M, including taking many amazing history classes (with Rebecca Scott, Sidney Fine, and others) and writing a history thesis on Muhammad Ali and the Vietnam War.”

Cynthia Denny (BA 1980) reports that she’s started a “new career as a visiting judge in different counties in California. I am currently sitting by assignment as a visiting judge in different counties in California. This followed his work in private practice and as a prosecuting attorney. He now sits by assignment as a visiting judge in different counties in California.

Sara Fitzgerald (BA 1973) was interviewed in May about Title IX for the Remedial History Project’s eponymous podcast, and in August she spoke on “The Lure of Women’s History” for the organization’s summer retreat for educators.

Tracy Keith Flemming (2010 PhD), senior lecturer at the University of Environment and Sustainable Development, Ghana, announced publication of *Travel and the Pan African Imagination* (Lexington Books).

David Hatch (BA 1998) recently became managing partner of the Los Angeles branch of Hooper, Lundy, and Bookman, PC. He has four children (one of whom prepared this update), and he has shared his love and passion for history with his eldest daughter, who intends to pursue a history degree.

Tyrone Johnson (BA 1988) recently began work as disability examiner for the Social Security Administration. He was previously an elementary and middle school teacher in Denver and Aurora, Colorado.

Stephanie Leitzel (BA 2019), a PhD candidate in history at Harvard University, received the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome. After finishing up archival research and doing a fellowship at the Newberry Library, she will join the American Academy and finish her dissertation, “Economies of Color: Italian Capitalists, Dye Commerce, and the Making of a Global Economy (1450–1650).”

Mary Livesay (BA 2001) joined Homeboy Industries as manager of foundation relations in 2021. Located in Los Angeles, the organization is the world’s largest gang re-entry and rehabilitation program.

Mary Beth Norton (BA 1984), Mary Dorian Alger Professor of American History Emerita at Cornell University, won the Fraunces Tavern Museum award for American Revolution scholarship and the George Washington Prize for the best book on the American Revolution for *1774: The Long Year of Revolution (Knopf)*. In 2021 she received a lifetime achievement award from the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

Lisa Parisi (MA 2012) recently joined U-M’s Anthropology Department as graduate program coordinator. She reports that she’s “happy to have returned back to Michigan and the university in a position where I can give back to the student community.”

Timothy Scarnecchia (BA 1985, PhD 1994) published *Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe: The Cold War and Decolonization, 1965–1984* (Cambridge University Press). In 2022 he was promoted to full professor in Kent State University’s Department of History.


John A. Williams (PhD 1996) is co-editor and chapter author of *Conflict and Survival in Contemporary Western European Film* (Rowman and Littlefield).

On April 29, family, friends, faculty, and staff packed Auditorium 3 in the Modern Languages Building to celebrate 125 students graduating with bachelor’s degrees from U-M History. It was the first in-person ceremony since 2019. Dania Jaaamour and Manah Missetzis received the Undergraduate Award for Leadership and Service, and Professor Melanie Tanielian was presented with the Undergraduate Teaching Award. Professor Howard Brick (middle right) presented the keynote address, while Serena Bernal (top right) delivered the student remarks.

We’d love to know: What’s new with you?

[bit.ly/UMHistoryStayinTouch]
In 2022 Angell Hall’s lobby was reconceived as a “Living Room” for studying and relaxing. (Gregory Parker)