INTELLECTUAL AGENDA AND GUIDE TO THE PORTFOLIO

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, No. 4, v.)

The verse above from T.S. Eliot moves me to think of my intellectual development as a series of endpoints that, unbeknownst to me at the time, helped to catalyze subsequent revelations. I have realized in reflecting on my portfolio and prospectus that each temporary endpoint in my intellectual pursuits has ended up a starting point for another useful discovery. With Eliot’s point taken, I begin with the end, my dissertation prospectus. The themes of my dissertation topic—the long black freedom struggle, visual culture, political imaginaries, and transnational flows of knowledge—were predictable at the beginning of my graduate work. Each of these themes also directly represents one of my four preliminary exam fields. The first two of these broad themes, civil rights and visual culture, were reflected in my undergraduate thesis, entitled “Black Space, White Value: African-Americans in Civil Rights Era Advertising, 1954-68.” In my thesis, I analyzed whether producers of consumer culture embraced the social changes brought about by civil rights legislation and judicial decisions in their advertisements. In other words, were advertisers more interested in ushering black consumers into an integrated middle class marketplace, or were they content to keep the status quo by continuing to portray ideal consumers of their products as white? As is often the case when framing a research question with a narrow “either-or” phrase, the answer lay somewhere in the middle.

Through an examination of print advertisements in the magazines *Life* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* from the same period, I discovered that advertisers did integrate their ads, but that the
interaction between blacks and whites in these ads belied the supposed end to segregation. Advertisements featured blacks side-by-side with whites, but portrayed relationships between these figures either as ones of black subservience or did not show black-white interaction at all. I argued that advertisers carried out “representational integration,” which allowed them to draw in black consumers without alienating their established white consumer base.

The other two themes in this dissertation, political imaginaries and transnational flows of knowledge, evolved through four years spent teaching U.S. politics and history at a secondary school in England before graduate school. I questioned why many people with whom I interacted abroad seemed to have an image of race relations in the United States already concrete in their minds. This question led me to focus my extant interests in culture and civil rights on an examination of foreign perceptions of American race relations in the post-War era. Through graduate coursework in Black Popular Culture, U.S. History in a Global Perspective, and Race and Photography, I narrowed this question further to think about the ways in which images, media messages, and objects of material culture in particular fueled international understandings of racial formations in America.

I visited the Public Record Office in London in July 2006 with Dudziak’s findings in mind. I examined Foreign Office records that revealed an intense discourse about the Black Freedom Struggle. I found that U.K. diplomats working in the U.S. kept close watch on both Black Power and civil rights. As I searched for other files on Black Power, I discovered the starting point for my dissertation—London Metropolitan Police files about altercations between British Black Panthers and city police between 1968 and 1972. Through these files and subsequent research into other sources, I examined the group of West Indian and West African immigrants who formed the British Black Panther Movement in 1967 in an article entitled, “The
Black Panthers in London, 1967-72: A Diasporic Struggle Navigates the Black Atlantic,” which appears in my major field.¹

**Global History**

My reading in my minor field of global history began my first semester of graduate school with a course taught by Michael Hunt and Jerma Jackson at UNC entitled “U.S. History in a Global Perspective.” The reading I did that semester forced me to reconsider some preconceived notions about U.S. history and motivated me to use a transnational lens in my dissertation. Through the course, I began to explore what happens to the state, communication networks, and social movements when we cease to view the nation as a historically-bounded entity. Thomas Bender’s edited collection *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* fascinated me with its array of possible approaches. I was struck by how a transnational lens can shift not only the places where historians do research and the questions that we ask, but also the ways in which we periodize history. The first essay in this field “What Do Memories Do? European Constructions of Race in America” reviews the literature of that course and demonstrates some of the issues that I faced in organizing my thoughts on the debates over race, modernity, and oppositional identities.

By the end of first year, I was intent on doing transnational work in my dissertation. I became interested in debates about the periodization of globalization in history and its development in historiography. I read texts that helped develop my thinking about the transnational flows of popular culture in Mark Anthony Neal’s “Critical Readings in Black Popular Culture” colloquium and the readings portion of Sarah Deutsch’s “Comparative Research in Racial Formations” seminar. I was struck by the way in which racial formations are

¹ This article is in press with the *Radical History Review* #103 (2009). The issue is entitled “Reconceptualizations of the African Diaspora.”
shaped in tandem with the movement of cultural objects, such as music, films, and images. It is
often within these cultural objects that historians find efforts by everyday people to grapple with
the social constructions of race, or in other global sites of encounter, to adapt the meanings of
cultural objects in order to suit their own interests.

I examine these transnational formations of identity in my review of Jennifer L. Morgan’s
Laboring Women (2004). This review reflects a step in my ability to engage with scholarly
writing. I assess the innovation of Morgan’s sociocultural approach to economic sources and
think about its wider applicability to other time periods, but fail to fully understand its place in
the historiography of slavery in the New World. Her approach to the sources opened me to new
ways of thinking about how we limit the potential of narratives by focusing on sources that fit
neatly into our various cultural, social, or economic approaches. As a student of history with a
penchant for interpretive work, this way of thinking about the uses of particular archives inspired
me.

My grant proposal for research on the Mizrahi Panthers demonstrates a clear
development in my long-term thinking about how to do transnational history. In this proposal, I
acknowledge the need for an understanding of local frameworks and am able to start thinking
about the potential interventions of my research. One unresolved question for me in this
proposal is how to deal with the historiographies of the various countries that become the sites of
research for a transnational study. I present an intervention into U.S. historiography in this grant
proposal but fail to adequately solidify my project’s place in Israeli historiography. A recent
conversation with Dominic Sachsenmaier taught me that not all case studies need to be treated
equally in order to write a transnational history. If one case presents a more compelling

\[2\] Review of Jennifer L. Morgan, Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery, in
argument than others, it may be focused on with the other examples providing support for key points. I suspect that I will continue to grapple with these issues of balance between cases and sites of historiographical intervention as I embark on my dissertation research.

**U.S. Intellectual and Cultural History, Colonial Period to the Present**

In retrospect, my minor field in U.S. Intellectual and Cultural History could also have been a major field as I found this reading list the most difficult to narrow. This indicates my strong interest in the intertwining of politics and cultural forms. I initially came to graduate school to study history because I valued art and literature equally as historical sources and thought that the study of history would allow me to ground both in contextual and material frameworks. Another reason this reading list proved expansive is that the body of works that claim American culture as their focus is simply voluminous, perhaps because a definition of the term “culture” is rarely defined in the literature. In an effort not to take my understanding of “culture” as given, I dealt directly with this issue in my theoretical piece on Geertz’s “Thick Description” methodology. This essay is the oldest in the portfolio, but also in my opinion one of the most tightly written. I grappled with how to use cultural symbols to study change over time. With Geertz, I concluded that material gains and losses drive changes in the meaning of cultural symbols, that culture becomes the precipitate of political and material change. This brought me to think carefully about the methodological differences between cultural history and cultural studies, a point that I developed as a section of my reading list for the field.

The two syllabi I wrote for this field reflect several approaches I plan to take in my history teaching. In the early U.S. intellectual history survey, I assign only primary source readings in order to build student skills in provenance and close reading. I organized the course around the development of the nation in an effort to have students think critically about
nationhood as a concept and to think reflexively about their own assumptions of the U.S. nation. From their first readings on pre-Columbian contact to selections from Emerson and Thoreau that seek to define democracy and the role of religion within it, I ask students to deal with central questions in the field about who has defined the nation and how origin stories of the United States have been mythologized in an effort to bring selected traditions to bear on the political issues of the day. The seminar syllabus on American cities again demonstrates my pedagogical interest in source analysis but takes a thematic approach. I ask students to examine three U.S. cities at specific historical moments as well as a regional challenge to the concept of cities, a choice that underscores my desire to dissect cities as a thematic concept. The readings reflect my regard for thinking about cities as both concrete spaces and imaginary designs. I believe that this thematic approach to cities will encourage students to theorize about cities and to think associatively about history.

My readings course on “Memory, Identity, and Politics” with sociologist Larry Griffin at UNC had a strong impact on my intellectual development, as I wrestle with memory studies in two of the essays that I selected for inclusion in the portfolio. In my research paper on the Black Panthers’ fortieth anniversary written for Sarah Deutsch’s research seminar, I examined how collective memory authoritatively marks the boundaries of communities. Questions of black authenticity proved crucial in defining the Panther community. I decided that there is little distinction to be made between academic history and popular memory when dealing with a politically contentious topic such as the Black Panthers. Both history and popular memory make claims to authority, to having the “real” story, and both have political and ideological designs.

This essay also marked the beginning of some reflexive examinations about how my research will fit into an already politically-charged discourse. How might my claims to
understanding the Panthers be challenged on the basis of my own background? I faced such a challenge as I first presented my work publicly, when several members of the Nation of Islam came to my talk and asked my opinion on whether blacks in America should return to Africa. This was a challenging situation to be put in, and it prompted me to think more critically about how I might approach similar issues both in my research and in its public presentation.

In “Slumming Streets/Sacred Streets,” I interrogated the question of origins that I ask my students to address in the intellectual history survey course. I examined three studies of ethnic neighborhoods that deal explicitly with memory in order to excavate their conceptions of and arguments about memory. I found two concepts about material culture particularly useful, Irwin-Zarecka’s notion of “shared resources” and Sturken’s notion of “memory objects.” These concepts helped me to perceive cultural objects as a means to an end: as a way of learning about lived experience that, although challenging to interpret at times, is indispensable to my understanding of history and of theory.

**Race, Representation, and Visual Culture**

My outside field in Race, Representation, and Visual Culture synthesizes several of my main points of interest from my global and intellectual/cultural history fields. I constructed an exhaustive reading list for this field that provided me with a wide knowledge of approaches to race and visual culture. I imagine that I will draw on this list in years to come. The readings in this field put my global history interests in nationhood, citizenship, and empire in conversation with my cultural history interests in transmission, visuality, and memory. As I read selections from my exhaustive list, I sensed three major debates in this field. The first was in the manner of reading images, and included arguments for a formalist approach to images, a reductionist approach, and a middle way that incorporates elements of both approaches. Another argument
involved how historians view images: as agents themselves or as constitutive of the agency of producers and consumers of these images? Also, scholars debated the extent to which images stand as knowledge on their own or as further proof for textual knowledge, with some degree of prior understanding needed in order to interpret them. As a whole, the field represents my commitment to challenging a false binary between politics and aesthetics that I believe is sometimes present in historiography.

My course in “Race-Photography-Archive” with Tina Campt helped me to reconceive of the archive as an ideological boundary. The seminar also provided me with several useful ways of thinking about the relationship among photography, hierarchies of vision, and race. In the conference paper I developed out of this course and revised for the portfolio entitled “An Intimate Radicalism: Countermemory and Stephen Shames’s *The Black Panthers* (2006),” I examined a book of documentary photographs published by a fine art publisher also on occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Panthers. In the paper, I developed a concept of “countermemory” that is similar to but not derivative of the term that Foucault described in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* in 1977. I used the term countermemory to characterize the destabilization of a photographic archive that takes place when images intervene in segmented memory narratives. The essay brought me to think about how to operationalize affect and emotion in historical writing. I argued that the intimacy portrayed in these particular images of the Panthers interpolated viewers, creating affective bonds between viewers and photographs.

In the syllabus that I developed for this field, I asked students to wrestle with a concept that I think could be better emphasized in undergraduate teaching: a discussion of the practice of studying history. The readings that I have assigned ask students to understand race as a social construction and to think widely about what constitutes visual culture and in what ways these
sources are useful to historians. A series of skill exercises prepare students for a primary-source research paper at the end of the seminar, in which students who perform well will articulate the place of their image-archives within the debates of this emerging field.

**United States History, 1877 to the Present**

The line I have drawn from my chosen dissertation topic through global history, cultural history, and visual culture brings me to my major field, which provides an historiographical foundation and historical context for understanding each of the other fields. I came to Duke knowing that I wanted to study the twentieth century United States and I have kept that focus through my efforts to define a transnational dissertation project. In the second semester of my first year, I completed courses in African-American Activism with Charles Payne and 20th Century Social Movements in the U.S. with Bill Chafe. The readings for these courses allowed me to grasp the complexity of assessing social movements. The rank-and-file of these movements are people with both public and private lives who can practice resistance even in the most quotidian ways, as Robin D.G. Kelley argues for black workers in *Race Rebels*. I devised the reading list for this field with works that attempt to provide a bottom-up perspective on these social movements and, as with my interest in transnational flows of people and culture, with migration in mind.

Two pieces in the portfolio reflect a secondary interest in the second-wave feminist movement that I developed through relevant readings in the 20th Century Social Movements course. Work on this movement responds to a long-standing lacuna in the historiography of civil rights: the role of women in civil rights organizing, particularly demonstrated in the work of Sara Evans. Throughout my reading on the civil rights movement, I had wondered about the specific roles that women played and why women were not more present in these narratives. This
hierarchy of acceptable roles and male-dominated leadership was also to be found in literature on the New Left, which provided a starting point for Evans’s work. In my historiographical review of definitions of feminism, I grappled with the tensions inherent in attempts to characterize the term. I argued that, despite differences in the achievements of their respective movements, historians of both first- and second-wave feminism encountered similar tensions in defining the term, namely, equality and difference, individualism and collectivism, and public and private feminisms. I used my interests in second-wave feminism and psychiatry to write a grant proposal that questioned whether radical women’s political concerns were labeled as “crazy” in political cartoons in an effort to limit their efficacy in the public sphere. I found the historiography on this topic fascinating as it brought together work on social movements, science, and popular culture. Together this work laid out a social milieu of middle class women who were bounded by norms—social scientific, cultural, and scientific.

My forthcoming article on the Black Panthers in London, first developed in Claudia Koonz’s research seminar on Politics, Public Life, and the State, shows how black Britons challenged the state and questioned the legitimacy of American hegemony. I analyzed the ways that the British Black Panthers engaged in a struggle with the London Metropolitan Police over issues of immigration, blackness, violence, anti-imperialism, and social space. I argued that the U.K. Panthers represented an initial step in the U.S. Panthers’ goal of inculcating a global anti-imperialist struggle that would give race equal attention with class. Although the major narrative activities of this research take place outside of the U.S., they fit into my major field because they examine the dispensation of American state power and popular culture abroad.
Prospectus and Long-Term Intellectual Goals

My prospectus of the planned dissertation project, “The Wide Black Power Movement: The Black Panthers of the United Kingdom and Israel, 1967-75” draws on all four of my fields, though I see my global history field becoming increasingly important to my approach. Global history provides cutting-edge processes and mechanisms that allow me to understand the Panthers among a web of other international organizations and social movements. Global history engages with the state, which I am determining will become a critical part of my project. Through the lens of the state, we look at the everyday lives of all the people with which it concerns itself. In my work in the four fields above I have been challenged to think about how ideas of visuality, race, the nation, the state, violence, intimacy, and memory come to pass in the quotidian interactions of Panthers’ lives. In my efforts to grapple with identity formations and knowledge transmission, I do not want to forget the real material concerns of the Panthers or their day-to-day struggles to achieve revolution.

This brings me to two long-term intellectual aims. Primarily, I want to continue to interrogate a perceived separation of materiality and discourse. It seems that historians have to justify, as I have done here, their interest in culture by examining its effects in measurable material terms. This reduction of culture has profound implications outside the academy for the creative industries, cultural and museum policy, and public diplomacy. I wish to think about new ways to appreciate culture that do not rely on a one-to-one correlation with aims achieved. I am reminded once again of Kelley’s argument that ideology resides within representations of style, and that zoot suit wearers can express resistance simply by going about their daily lives.

My other long-term goal is to remain committed to the project of transnational history. I will spend the next fourteen months studying the Arabic language and Middle Eastern culture
intensively. I am very much looking forward to this opportunity to enter the archives with relevant language skills in tow. I truly enjoy the process of acquiring new bodies of knowledge about different areas of the world, and hope to be able to think across historiographies in my career. I recognize that this puts me at the risk of denying my own roots as a U.S. historian, but I believe that a long-term interest in foreign perceptions of the United States is a worthwhile inquiry that is well-timed within contemporary historiography.

As I have looked back on my portfolio and at professors’ comments on my writing, I see several areas for improvement that I would like to work on in my dissertation. I enjoy engaging with new and challenging theoretical frameworks and applying them to historical sources and cases. In the process of putting these theories into my written work, however, I have a tendency to define my terms either too lengthily or not at all. This has the effect of sometimes making my arguments seem dense to readers. A larger problem lies in parsing out the specific implications of my arguments in written work. I have worked carefully at this and believe that I have grown considerably in my powers of written expression since coming to Duke, but I still yearn to have more elegant, sophisticated prose that gives respect to the subjects of my historical inquiries. I also see a tension between narrative and thematic exposition in my written work that I would like to more critically consider. My tendency is to build themes out of the strands of different episodes, as I enjoy the process of integration there. But sometimes it might be more lucid and powerful to let the stories speak for themselves, and I wish to try this kind of writing more as I prepare my dissertation. Finally, I struggle with presenting assessments of bodies of historiography that allow for a clear intervention, without collapsing authors’ arguments into an oversimplified comparison. I wish to more easily choose works with which I should engage and to see more clearly my points of potential investment in those historiographies.