In Print

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History professor Michelle Tusan began unraveling Britain's role in creating the Balkan States and the Middle East using maps drawn in the second half of the 19th century.

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Faculty authors explore mass media and weddings, race as a false consciousness, the birth of the Middle East, and more.

By Jean Reid Norman

R. MARSH STARKS

Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide, and the Birth of the Middle East

By Michelle Tusan
University of California Press

In her 2012 book *Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide, and the Birth of the Middle East*, UNLV history professor Michelle Tusan traces historical developments that seem a world away: post-World War I conflicts in the Balkan states, humanitarian concerns for minority Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire, and British foreign policy.

Tusan suggests, however, that these seemingly distant historical developments have striking pertinence to Americans today, as they led to the rise of the modern-day Middle East.

"I was trained as a British historian at Berkeley, and I didn't think I was going to write about the Middle East at all," Tusan says. "But I kept being led to these stories of maps and people in the Middle East, and I realized this is an important history that hasn't been told before. It occurred to me that Americans really need to know more about the Middle East as a place and what the West's involvement there has been."

Tusan started unraveling Britain's role in creating the Balkans and the Middle East through maps drawn in the second half of the 19th century. The maps reveal that the British defined the geography of the region on the basis of religious orientation: Europe and the Near East (as the Balkans were then known), was identified as Christian; areas east of that location, now known as the Middle East, were identified as Muslim. Those boundaries were constantly shifting on the map, as Britain had a strong interest in keeping territories on the route between Europe and India – its biggest colony – within its control.

That entire area, of course, was ruled by the Ottoman Empire during that time, however, and the treatment of the minority Christians by the Ottoman rulers was constantly at issue as a humanitarian concern for both Britain and other European nations.

This is where humanitarian concern and geopolitics began to collide in history, Tusan says, and the world is still living with the results today.

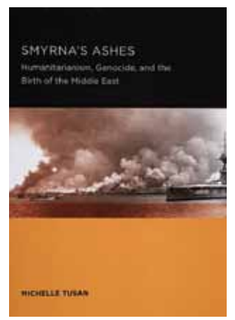
"That Muslim-Christian divide is really solidified during World War I," she says. "It goes back to the 19th century, in part, because of this map-making."

She explains that as World War I ended, world leaders drew the map of Eastern Europe and the Middle East along sectarian religious lines in response to both geopolitical and humanitarian concerns. The massacre of minority Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire during the war sparked a massive humanitarian response to what is today called the Armenian Genocide.

The book details one scene from the aftermath of that genocide – the burning of the ancient city of Smyrna, occupied by Greece at the time and now located in the Republic of Turkey. Tusan explains that the term "crimes against humanity" was coined by the international community to describe the genocide.

Unfortunately, Britain and its allies left the prosecution of the war criminals to the Ottomans, and little was done. Tusan believes this prosecutorial inaction later emboldened Hitler.

"Hitler famously says, 'Who remembers the Armenians?'" she notes. "He clearly remembered them. He was saying essentially, 'No one's going to care what we do to the Jews.'"



Tusan points out, however, a difference in context between the aftermaths of the first and second World Wars. After World War I, the West was still trying to figure out how to deal with such atrocities, she says; by the end of World War II, they got it right with the Nuremberg trials.

But the tension between humanitarian concerns and geopolitics has continued in recent decades, she says, citing Rwanda, Bosnia, and now Syria. Today, instead of Britain, the United States has taken over the mantle of world leadership, however, and seems to be in charge of monitoring humanitarian causes, Tusan says.

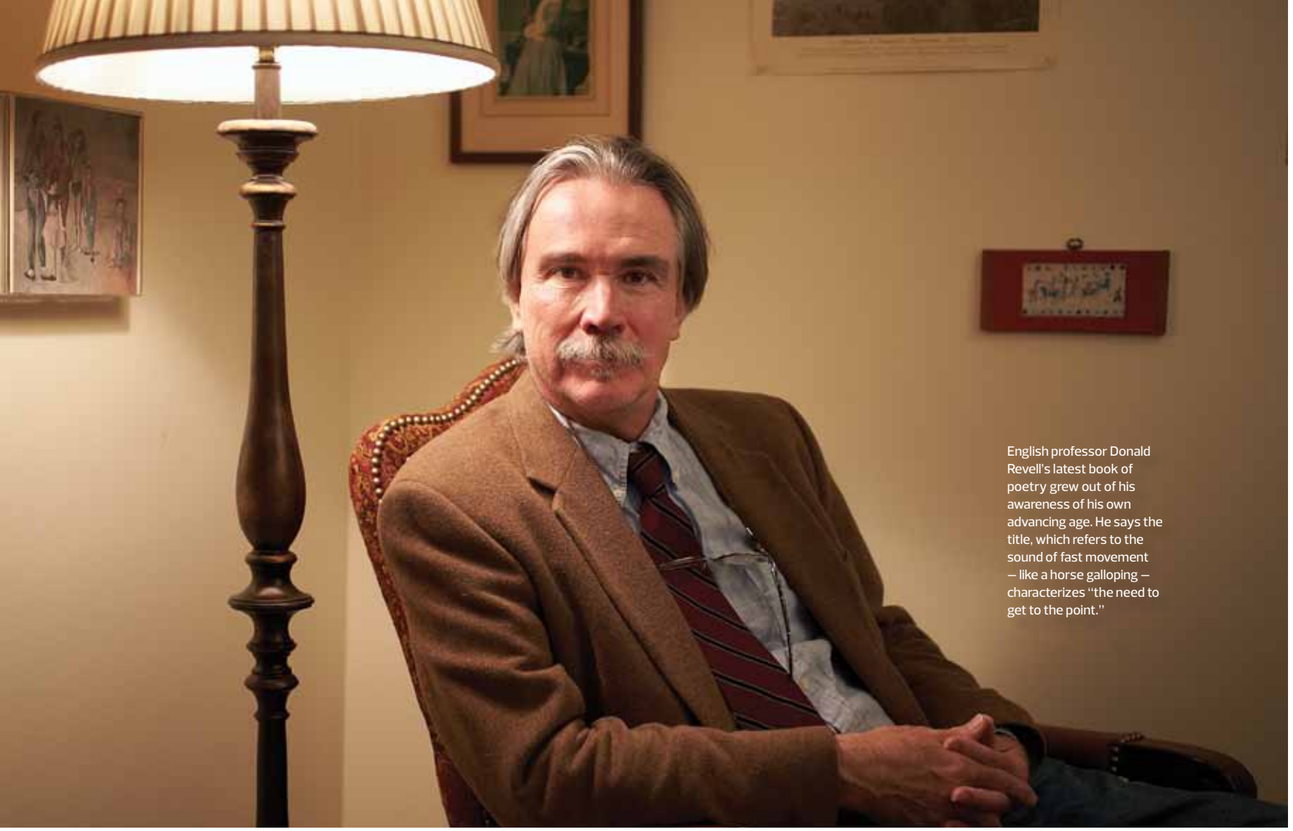
"There's a way in which we think about foreign policy as having a conscience, that what we do in the world matters," she says, "not just because we're advancing our interests, but because we are good stewards in our role as a global leader. It's part of Americans' DNA, inherited from the British."

There is always talk of protecting minorities, Tusan says.

"But the problem is when you talk about protecting minorities as a foreign policy, how far are you willing to go to protect those minorities? There are a hundred ways you can think about how you protect, and most of these involve some sort of cost, including war."

Historically determined divisions make it hard to know when and how to intervene, she adds. For example, sectarian conflict in the modern Middle East that often pits Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities against one another resulted in part from the divide-and-rule strategy employed after World War I by the British and the French. Some of the violence seen in Syria today comes out of the destabilizing effects of a policy that used the doctrine of minority protection to further geopolitical ends.

"People don't wear black and white hats in this story, right?" she says. "The tensions that were caused



English professor Donald Revell's latest book of poetry grew out of his awareness of his own advancing age. He says the title, which refers to the sound of fast movement — like a horse galloping — characterizes "the need to get to the point."

by creating these nations in moments of conflict after World War I exacerbated conditions under which those hatreds thrived."

Tusan herself knows firsthand the effect of those deep hatreds. Her grandmother and great-grandmother survived the Armenian Genocide.

Her great-grandfather, an Armenian barber, was warned and had enough time to immigrate to the United States and establish himself in Portland, Maine. But by the time he sent for his wife and child, the massacres had begun, and the pair had to find a way through France and across the sea to Ellis Island.

"That was a story that was always there, but we never talked about it very much," Tusan says.

Writing about the genocide that her family survived will be her next project, one that she knows will be hard to write.

"But I'm a historian. I tell stories about the past," she says. "It's a compelling story, both professionally and personally."

Tantivy
By Donald Revell
Alice James Books

Donald Revell's family knows when he's working on a new book of poetry.

They hear giggling through the study door at home.

"I'm always happy when I'm writing," says the English professor and poet. "My children on more than one occasion have had to explain why their father is behind a closed door giggling. But that's just how it comes to me."

In his latest book of poetry, *Tantivy*, Revell says he is more direct than in past volumes. His more straightforward approach grew out of his own awareness of his advancing age, he says. The title, which is the sound of fast movement, like a horse galloping or a flock of birds taking flight, characterizes the need to move along, to get to the point.

"I think everyone has so much to say, and then they're done," he says. "And for me, personally, I feel the end is in sight, in terms of what I've been given to write, what I can do. I have a sense it's time to hurry up, cut to the chase.

"I tried for this book to be simpler. The lines are almost sentences. I felt, 'Say what you have to say; don't worry about finding metaphors. Use the things that your life actually handed you.'" For instance, one poem – "Birds small enough..." – offers an accessible metaphor:

Birds small enough to nest in our young cypress
Are physicians to us

They burst from the tree exactly
Where the mind ends and the eye sees

Revell describes his writing process as something of a search.

"It's a rummaging around inside of the language, looking for different ways to make sounds that make sense," Revell says.

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"One of the fundamental things that draws folks to poetry is that the words not only make sense, they also make sounds. There's a sort of physical relationship with the language in a poem that you may not have when you're reading a page of prose, a page of fiction, or history. There's immediately a sense of play."

Despite his perception that this collection is a bit more direct than past ones, Revell notes that reviewers found the poems in *Tantivy* a bit inaccessible. That doesn't trouble him.

"I don't think that's anything you can worry about," he says. "My audience is the poem. It says, 'OK, Don, whatcha gonna do now?' I feel that I'm talking to the poem, and that once the poem is acceptable to me and the poem, we're good."

Revell says the public reaction to his poems can vary widely.

Other poets may find that in a volume of 30 or 35 poems, a few rise to the top as widely acclaimed. Not Revell.

"The poor little poems, my heart goes out to them," he says. "Some people will love a poem, and there are other people who will detest that exact same poem. So really, I would go crazy if I paid any attention at all."

Either way, he doesn't take the comments personally. The poems are not an extension of him. They have their own life.

"I think of them like baby chicks at Easter. 'Hello poems! How are you today? How do you want to arrange yourselves?'" he says.

His poems, like the books on his shelves, are "dear companions," a relationship that extends into his classroom. When he teaches, he feels like he's introducing old friends to a new crowd.

"Hey, you room full of young strangers. I'd like you to meet my friend, and I love this person, and I'm going to tell you why. And if you don't love them, I'm sorry, but I do," he says. "It's more testimony than argument. I'm a character witness for the poems."

He might never have made it to the front of a classroom if he had followed his mother's wishes. She was devastated when she learned her teenage son wanted to be a poet. In fact, she chewed out Revell's English teacher for ruining his life. She hoped he would to become a lawyer and then run for mayor of New York City, where he grew up.

So Revell made her a promise to become a full professor by the age of 40. He made it at 39.

"I barely made it under the wire, and my mother grudgingly accepted my life choice," he says.

Revell was the first in his family to complete a college degree. His mother was a high school graduate, and his father, a brilliant mechanic, never learned to read. Both of them planned from his birth that Revell would go to college, to the point that they would not allow him to learn practical skills, such as ironing.

His experience as a first-generation college student gives him an affinity for his UNLV students.

"I feel like I'm talking to kin," he says.

A good portion of that talking is about poetry, which has been his passion since the age of 14. Once he fell for poetry, there was no looking back, he says.

His wooing and wedding to his English department colleague professor Claudia Keelan was the same. They met 23 years ago when she invited him to speak at Murray State University in Kentucky. They went to dinner.

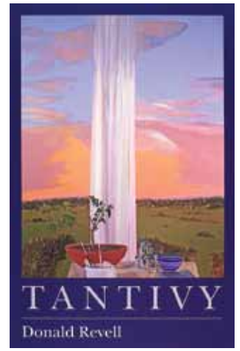
"This is the very, very first time we had met and seen each other, and by the time dinner was over, I had asked her to marry me," he says. "And she said yes. So by the time we actually got to my poetry reading, we could announce our engagement."

They were married two weeks later.

"And it's worked out," he says.

All of his life has been that way, he adds.

"In my case, it's just one lucky circumstance after another," he says. "And maybe that's why writing that book was just trust. I've never found my trust to be misplaced, and that's what I'm trying to say in the poems."



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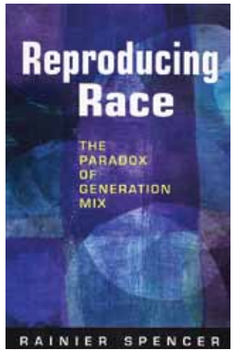
–Donald Revell



"I think there needs to be either a national 'Ah-ha' moment, or there needs to be millions of 'Ah-ha' moments over time. I don't know what it will take. Clearly, it will not happen in my lifetime, but I hope this contributes to the eroding of that false consciousness."
–Rainier Spencer

Reproducing Race: The Paradox of Generation Mix

By Rainier Spencer
Lynne Rienner Publishers

With his father an African-American soldier in post-World War II Germany and his mother a white German national, Rainier Spencer grew up in New York City thinking of himself as black.

That changed for him when, as an adult, he studied philosophy during pursuit of his master's degree at Columbia University, where he began examining the nature of race and reconsidering his perceptions of his own family.

His brother, he recalls, had the same mother but a different father, also a black U.S. soldier.

"I had always considered my brother white, and that's because of his socialization, his interests, and the way he existed as a person in my childhood," Spencer says.

However, his studies at Columbia shook that assumption.

"When I came to the notion of critical consciousness, it didn't make sense. How can my brother be white, and I am black?" he says. This realization led him to question perceptions of race and to conclude that race is a myth, a false consciousness.

He later developed this realization into a dissertation at Emory University, and three books on the subject have followed, helping to establish Spencer as a founder of critical mixed-race theory. His most recent book, *Reproducing Race: The Paradox of Generation Mix*, was released in 2011.

Spencer describes himself as a "race skeptic." He is described in a study being conducted by doctoral student Carlos Hoyt of Simmons College in Boston as a "race transcender," a term Spencer easily adopts.

"I live it," says Spencer, founder of UNLV's Afro-American Studies Program and associate vice provost for academic affairs at UNLV. "Biological race doesn't exist. You can't divide people into three, five, seven, or 17 or even 50 categories of biology that make sense because people won't fit."

In *Reproducing Race*, Spencer proposes a thought experiment involving three cousins. One appears black but has a white ancestor. One appears white but has a black ancestor. The third appears biracial and has ancestors of both races. None of them has "pure" lineage, so how does one determine which race to classify each cousin?

It's not logically possible, Spencer says.

"These categories only make sense if they have been endogenous through infinity," he says. "It's impossible to take any one African-American and go backwards through time and find only unmixed African ancestry."

Even if it could be done, Spencer says, the notion that West African slaves were unmixed is another serious problem.

Race does not exist, he says. However, belief in race? That's the real issue, he maintains.

He likens race to witchcraft and flat-earth theory. All are false, but they also carry real consequences.

When populations believed in witchcraft, women accused of it were often killed. When explorers believed the earth was flat, they were careful not to go too far.

When people believe in race, discrimination – and much worse – happens. The solution, Spencer says, is "that everyone realizes at some point, 'This is wrong; this is silly.'"

The answer is not, he argues, getting rid of the check boxes on various government forms asking for racial identity. Nor is the answer creating a new category, "multiracial."

These are solutions that were offered in the 1990s, during debates before the 2000 census on how the Office of Management and Budget should gather racial data. These are solutions still advocated by some mixed-race scholars who trumpet the potential of "Generation Mix," the current generation of biracial children, to end race as an issue.

"The push-back from the civil rights movement and black people was, 'No, those of you who are part black are just black, so

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Rainier Spencer, Afro-American studies professor and associate vice provost for academic affairs, questions perceptions of race and concludes that race is a myth, a false consciousness.

get over it,'" Spencer says.

Spencer disagrees with both arguments. If the government wanted racial categories that made sense, it would need 316 million, one for each resident of the nation. Creating a new category, "multiracial," just reaffirms the existing categories.

But he agrees the government should continue to ask the question.

"It's important to put people into the categories that racists think they are discriminating against," he says. "That's important because we need to knock out that discrimination."

In the end the OMB decided to allow people to mark as many boxes as they wanted. On the back end, the statisticians classify people into their non-white groups.

It's a compromise that satisfied no one, but it seems to be working, Spencer says.

In his current book, Spencer opposes the argument that race is socially or culturally based. This reasoning makes no more sense than biological race does, he says.

"There are far more differences amongst blacks than there are between blacks and whites," he says. For instance, he has more in common with white professors than he does with a black man his age from the inner city.

Spencer also takes on those who argue that mixed race people have a special role in society.

Because we are all mixed race to some degree, the notion is silly, he says. Those making the argument contradict themselves; they say they want their own category and that their movement will bring a post-racial society. How can they end racial categories when they are asking for one, he asks.

"They say they are challenging the paradigm but what they really want is to fit into it," he says.

At this point, the debate over his perspective seems to be at a lull, he says, as no substantive counterargument in the scholarly world has emerged.

"I think my arguments are right, and people don't want to deal with them," he says, noting the exception of Hoyt, the previously mentioned scholar from Simmons College and a few others. For now, Spencer

Communication studies professor Erika Engstrom finds that media that cover the wedding industry tend to support traditional gender roles cloaked in a feminist "you-can-have-it-all message."

is willing to allow that lull to continue, as he has other responsibilities to address in his current administrative post.

Though it may have to wait a few years, Spencer maintains he has more to say – and write – on the subject of race as a false consciousness.

"I think there needs to be either a national 'Ah-ha' moment, or there needs to be millions of 'Ah-ha' moments over time," he says. "I don't know what it will take. Clearly, it will not happen in my lifetime, but I hope this contributes to the eroding of that false consciousness.... I think we want to live in a world where exterior physical differences have no impact on how we see or treat each other."

The Bride Factory: Mass Media Portrayals of Women and Weddings

By Erika Engstrom
Peter Lang Publishing

Communication studies professor Erika Engstrom and her husband spent $300 to get married, so it's hard for her to fathom why anyone would spend $30,000, the average cost of a wedding, on what boils down to a fancy party.

"That's a significant portion of a college education. That's a car, or a down payment on a house," she says. "You could buy half a house for that today."

Her disbelief at the extravagant price some are willing to pay for weddings led her to dissect the role the media play in supporting the bridal industry in her book, *The Bride Factory: Mass Media Portrayals of Women and Weddings.*

In it, she examines a wide range of wedding components – from announcements to gown selection to cakes – depicted in various media, including reality shows and bridal magazines.

She finds that the media, for the most part, support traditional gender roles cloaked in a feminist "you can have it all" message. According to Engstrom, they set unfair and unrealistic expectations for women.

Engstrom describes herself as a reality TV fan, and her interest in the bridal media began in 1998 with one, "A Wedding Story," on the Learning Channel.

She noted a common phenomenon: While the women were doing all of the planning, the men were unengaged in the process, usually participating in some completely unrelated outside activity, like playing touch football. On the big day, while the women were primping, tending to their hair and nails, and putting on makeup, the men seemed unconcerned about their looks and were still, oddly enough, playing touch football. Such obvious reinforcement of stereotypes struck her as worth further exploration.

About the same time, she was engaged and looked casually at some bridal magazines.

She said to herself, "This is not for me. I can't afford to buy a dress like this."

Instead of spending money on a wedding, she built a research agenda around the trappings of the bridal industry and the role of the media in perpetuating it. She wrote papers first on a few reality shows, then moved on to bridal magazines and websites, media coverage of royal and celebrity weddings, and newspaper wedding announcements.

Then one day over lunch, she and her mentor, Martha Watson, sketched out the book's outline on a placemat.

Between teaching, serving as associate dean, and completing her other work, Engstrom began the lengthy process of writing the book.

Her analysis of wedding media found the same patterns, whether it was a royal wedding, a low-budget affair, a gay wedding, or a televised one. They all portray the roles: the bride putting in enormous amounts of time on preparation – both on the event and on herself – and the groom is in the shadows, buying a diamond, maybe helping a little, but ultimately playing football right before the ceremony.

She says gay weddings may differ from straight weddings in terms of division of labor, but they still include many of the same elements – fancy clothing, the cake, the reception.

"It still goes back to, 'We want a wedding,' which assumes certain values," she says. "It's perpetuating the wedding as a show."

Her research indicates that the big wedding is a relatively new phenomenon. In the early 20th century and before in the United States, a wedding was generally a low-key affair at home, with a few days of planning and the bride wearing the nicest dress in her closet.

This stands in contrast to the current media message, which is that a woman can be a feminist and still want the big wedding, a message that Engstrom says creates undue pressure and diverts attention from where it should be.

"People put a lot of emphasis on the objects instead of the relationships," she says. "If the bridal magazines actually had a checklist for what is real love or compatibility, people might say, 'No, I don't think we're compatible' ... which would put them out of business."

She hopes that when people read her book, they don't come away thinking, "She hates weddings, she hates love, she hates men, she hates ... the world," she says, adding that she's not anti-marriage, or even anti-wedding.

"I'm married. I believe in marriage," she says. "It's just that you don't have to have the big wedding if you don't want to."

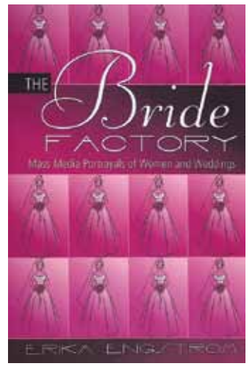
She hopes people think carefully about what they observe in the wedding media.

"Basically, I suggest they question what they're seeing," she says.

If anything should be celebrated, Engstrom says, it should be anniversaries: proof that the relationship was right from the start. But don't expect an invitation to Engstrom's anniversary party.

"It's not that I'm not fun. I just don't have the time," she laughs.

She is busy continuing her research, turning her attention to other subjects. She has written two other books with co-authors, one on the CW network show "The Supernatural" and its depiction of religion, and the other on the portrayal of women on the AMC show "Mad Men." Both are due out next year.



"People put a lot of emphasis on the objects instead of the relationships." –Erika Engstrom

ENGSTROM: GERI KODEY