Tusan began unraveling Britain’s role in creating the Balkans and the Middle East. History professor Michelle Tusan, 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 day middle East.

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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 those 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..."
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 are 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 is a sort of sound of fast movement, a character: “He had to get to the poem.”

“Of 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 35 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 love a poem, and there are other people who would go crazy if I paid any attention at all.”

For Revell’s latest book, he didn’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 classrooms. 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.”

“Tantivy” by Donald Revell

Alice James Books

By Donald Revell

School of English

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Donald Revell
Reproducing Race: The Paradox of Generation Mix
By Rainier Spencer

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 socializa- tion, 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 2012.

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.

“Transcender,” a term Spencer easily adopts.

“Lynne Rienner Publishers

“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, discrimina- tion— 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, “multira- cial.”

These solutions are not popular, he argues, but they are important because we need to knock out that assumption. ‘We have to get over it,’” Spencer says.”

“I think my arguments are right, and I think 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 im- portant because we need to knock out that discrimination.”

In the end the OMB decided to allow people to mark as many boxes as they want. “On the back end, the statisticians clas- sify 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 cultur- ally based. This reasoning makes no more sense than biological race does, he says. “These 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 para- dox of Generation Mix, but what they really want is to fit into it,” he says. At this point, the debate over his per- spective seems to be a lost cause, he says, as no substantive counterargument in the scholar- 2013 research.unlv.edu

“I think there needs to be either a national ‘Af- ha’ moment, or there needs to be millions of ‘Afha’ 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
in willing to allow that hallmark 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 easing 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 $500 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 green 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.

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 worthy 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 and energy planning and the bride wearing the nicest dress in her closet.

She notes a common phenomenon: “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 least 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