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

By Jean Reid Norman

In Print

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, history professor Michelle Tusan traces historical developments that seem a world away from World War I conflicts in the Balkans 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 rules 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 America’s 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...
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 don’t care. 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 trust for this book to be simpler. The lines are almost sentences. I feel, ‘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 physicists 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.
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 that assumption.

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 at Simmons College in Boston as a “race skeptic.” He is described in a study being conducted by doctoral student Carlos Hoyt at Simmons College in Boston as a “race skeptic.” He is described in a study being conducted by doctoral student Carlos Hoyt at Simmons College in Boston as a “race skeptic.” He is described in a study being conducted by doctoral student Carlos Hoyt at Simmons College in Boston as a “race skeptic.”

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—Rainier Spencer

“...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.

“These categories only make sense if they have been endogenous through time and place, and only unmixed African ancestry can make sense. I think my arguments are right, and they seem 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.

Spencer also takes on those who argue that mixed race people have a special role in society. ‘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 its perspective seems to be a fad 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

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.

“The push-back from the civil rights movement and black people was, ‘No, those are solutions that were offered in the 1960s, during debates before the 2000 census on how the Office of Management and Budget should gather racial data. Those solutions were advocated by some mixed-race scholars who trumpeted the potential of ‘Generation Mix,’ the current generation of biracial children, to end race as an issue.

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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 brachial 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.

“Reproducing Race: The Paradox of Generation Mix”

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Rainier Spencer. African-American Studies professor and associate vice provost for academic affairs, questions perceptions of race and concludes that race is a myth, a false consciousness.
in willing to allow that fall 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 undoing 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.

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 chained in a feminist “you can have it all” message. Engstrom believes that instead of the relationships, 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 amnesties: 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.

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 most 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 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’.”

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