

2014

In Print

Todd Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/innovation>

Repository Citation

Peterson, Todd (2014) "In Print," *UNLV Innovation*: Vol. 7, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/innovation/vol7/iss1/10>

This In Print is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this In Print in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This In Print has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Innovation by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

In Print

Faculty authors explore our place in the universe, Gandhi and his mentors, a small city's civil rights struggle, and more.

By Todd Peterson



Cosmic Dawn: The Search for the First Stars and Galaxies

George Rhee

Springer, 2013

If George Rhee wasn't already a scientist, he could play one on TV.

With a shock of red-brown hair and no-nonsense glasses, Rhee certainly looks the part. He also speaks in the sort of deliberate, thoughtful tones one would expect from someone who thinks big thoughts about big subjects. In his case, it's the biggest subject of them all: the whole of the cosmos.

From his office in UNLV's Bigelow Physics Building, the astronomy and physics professor recently sat down to discuss his new book, *Cosmic Dawn*, a volume that serves as both a brief history of cosmology (the study of the

universe) and a primer on what he sees as coming advances in astronomy.

Cosmic Dawn, he says, has been a decade-long endeavor. The project, which he joined at a writing partner's behest, became a solo endeavor when his colleague abandoned the book. Rhee worked on the manuscript for a time, but ultimately set it aside. Ten years later, a chance meeting with a publishing professional convinced him that it was worth reviving.

As one might expect, Rhee found that cosmology had changed over the intervening years. Aside from some of the basic information he'd written, he found himself starting from square one. "I wouldn't even say it was a revision," Rhee says. "It was a whole new book."

The difficult job of reworking the manu-



George Rhee,
astronomy
and physics
professor



“It’s a unique story. We get to discover the history of the universe once. You don’t get to rediscover DNA. You get to do it once, and I think we are on the brink of that level of discovery in astronomy.”

script was further complicated by Rhee’s lofty goal for the project: He wanted his work to be accessible to general readers; “to convey,” he says, “a sense of wonder.”

To that end, *Cosmic Dawn* begins with a longer chapter, “Cosmology Through Its Past,” in which Rhee details science’s high points through the ages, from the ancient Greeks’ first probing questions, all the way to the contemporary thinking about the universe’s origins. In this chapter and elsewhere, Rhee says he has done his best to help general-interest readers navigate what he admits is complex subject matter. Still, he says, “it takes a determined reader to get through it.”

But the payoff is worth the effort. From mankind’s study of cosmology, Rhee moves on to reward readers with fascinating, approachable distillations of daunting topics, including the core elements of the Big Bang Theory, scientists’ observations of the lifecycle of stars, and the formation of galaxies — a subject with particular relevance to Rhee’s career.

Upon completing his doctorate in astronomy at Leiden University in 1989, Rhee spent three years teaching at New Mexico State University. There, he worked to broaden understanding of the true nature and scope of the cosmos. It’s work he continues at UNLV.

When he began his academic career, he says, astronomers had identified only one solar system — our own. Now, astronomers have identified a few thousand. “We think there are billions of solar systems in our galaxy alone,” Rhee says. “By studying the others, we can understand something about other planet formation.”

Knowledge about how planets, galaxies, and stars form is crucial to understanding life — and our future — on Earth.

“The more we study the universe, the more things seem interwoven and related. The elements in this room were formed inside stars,” Rhee says, sweeping his hands outward to show the space of his office and all its contents. “That’s a pretty visceral connection.”

In *Cosmic Dawn*’s final chapters, Rhee delves into one of his favorite subjects:

science’s exponential growth through technology. “I think we double the amount of known data every two years in astronomy,” Rhee says. “It’s staggering.”

In the book, he walks readers through projects such as the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, currently under construction in Chile. When complete, it will provide, in a single night, data equal to every word in the Library of Congress.

Rhee devotes an entire chapter to the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), the successor to the Hubble Telescope, which is scheduled for launch in 2018. The JWST will eventually operate one million miles from Earth (about four times as far away as the moon), and will be much too distant for astronauts to reach.

The JWST’s goals, Rhee explains, are mapping the evolution of galaxies, searching for planets that might support life, studying the formation of stars and planets, and searching for the formation of the first stars and galaxies.

This last endeavor, discovering the origin of the first stars and galaxies, particularly intrigues Rhee. It’s a subject he revisits throughout *Cosmic Dawn*. Identifying these formations will provide astronomers with a roadmap of the universe’s development following the Big Bang, he says.

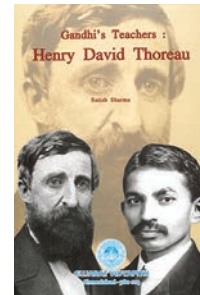
“It’s a unique story. We get to discover the history of the universe once,” Rhee says, comparing it to other landmark scientific advancements, such as the discovery of DNA. “You don’t get to rediscover DNA. You get to do it once, and I think we are on the brink of that level of discovery in astronomy.”

Rhee acknowledges his unabashed zeal for all things cosmological and hopes his readers share his sense of joy and wonder about the subject.

“I think it’s an exciting story,” he says. “We live in a world that is completely dominated by science and technology. With these advances, we can look back in time. We can see light that set out on its journey before the Earth existed. This is real. It’s not some Hollywood thing made up for entertainment. It’s such a fantastic age of discovery.”



Satish Sharma,
social work
professor



“Ultimately, the world is to be guided not by political leaders, but by visionaries. Ideas are much stronger than policies and planning. Ideas make the world go around. And only if they are peaceful ideas are they going to work.”

Gandhi's Teachers: Henry David Thoreau

Satish Sharma

Gujarat Vidyapith, 2013

Satish Sharma says some of his earliest memories are related to the idea of nonviolence.

“I have always favored pacifist tendencies and orientations, and *practiced them*,” says Sharma, a UNLV social work professor.

With this orientation, it was only a matter of time before he became interested in the life of Mohandas Gandhi, the father of Indian independence and a worldwide model for pacifism and nonviolent civil disobedience.

Sharma recently completed *Gandhi's Teachers: Henry David Thoreau*, the last of a four-volume series on thinkers who influenced Gandhi.

In his collected writings and speeches, Gandhi noted several modern thinkers who had influenced his ideas. They include Rajchandra Ravjibhai Mehta, an Indian philosopher; Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy; English intellectual John Ruskin; and American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau.

By drawing a straight line from Gandhi to these other men and showing how the Indian leader's philosophy developed, Sharma hopes to get people thinking about Gandhian principles.

"You have to pay attention to peace and pacifism," Sharma says. "You have to believe that without peace and pacifism your lives are going to be miserable, and nations' lives are going to be miserable, too."

We can see this on a daily basis, he says, as more people and nations take combative routes to end their differences.

"That may solve the problems partially in the short term," Sharma says. "But in the long run, those problems keep on emerging again and again." Real change comes through discussion, not through aggression, he says.

The *Gandhi's Teachers* series will add to this discussion. Although much has already been written about Gandhi and the other men individually, Sharma says there wasn't significant work connecting Gandhi's thinking to those who influenced him.

After obtaining degrees at Panjab University and later at the University of Iowa and Ohio State, Sharma continued studying Eastern and Western pacifists, which eventually led to this series.

He began the series in 1999. Of the four men, Sharma says, Mehta was the one most mentioned by Gandhi. Despite that fact, Sharma explains, he was the least known, both in India and among international scholars. That prompted Sharma to explore Mehta's influence in the first volume of the series.

After completing the Mehta volume, Sharma moved on to Tolstoy, then Ruskin and Thoreau. It has kept him busy for a decade and a half.

"You devote 15 years of your life only if you are totally committed to something," he says.

While his research on Thoreau didn't reveal any particular surprises, there were challenges reconciling Thoreau's embrace of direct action to end slavery with Gandhi's nonviolence, Sharma says. Thoreau, for example, was willing to accept violence in certain situations, specifically John Brown's bungled attempt to incite a slave insurgency in Virginia.

Sharma devotes an entire chapter to Thoreau's writing and statements about Brown, the abolitionist militant whose 1859 attack on a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry

dramatically heightened tensions in a nation already deeply divided by slavery. Thoreau wrote several essays defending Brown and his use of violence.

Gandhi found this troubling, as does Sharma. "[Thoreau's] subscription to violence under certain circumstances did disappoint me," Sharma says.

Still, he adds, Thoreau's admirable traits are legion. Sharma was "deeply impressed" by Thoreau's simplicity, humility, frugality, will power, and forbearance, all virtues that mirror Gandhi's fundamental values.

Elsewhere in *Thoreau*, Sharma details prominent aspects of the American writer's contributions, perhaps chief among them, Thoreau's 1849 essay "Resistance to Civil Government" (or "Civil Disobedience"). Gandhi encountered the essay in 1907, after launching the *Satyagraha*, "soul force," movement in South Africa on behalf of that country's Indian immigrants.

Sharma says exploring the ideas of Gandhi's spiritual and intellectual influences was not an obvious choice for scholarly attention. But exploring the antecedents of Gandhi's thinking is critical to fully appreciate the lasting influence of his ideas.

"Ultimately, the world is to be guided not by political leaders, but by visionaries. Ideas are much stronger than policies and planning," says Sharma. "Ideas make the world go around. And only if they are peaceful ideas are they going to work."

Pacifism is personal for Sharma. Even while excitedly discussing his latest project — Sharma is currently at work on a book-length study of Quakerism and its effects on Gandhian thought — he radiates calm and peacefulness. A similar peaceful capacity is available to all of us, he says. We simply need to learn how to use it.

Teachers such as Gandhi and Thoreau can help.

"People know how to obtain peace on a daily basis. They can do the same thing for the nation," Sharma says. "This series is more like awakening the conscience of the people. That is what I'm trying to do."

A City Within a City: The Black Freedom Struggle in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Todd E. Robinson

Temple University Press, 2013

Erreting out history's "truths" often requires looking beyond standard, accepted narratives and focusing instead on telling details that more fully represent the whole. Such is the case with Todd E. Robinson's *A City Within a City: The Black Freedom Struggle in Grand Rapids, Michigan*.

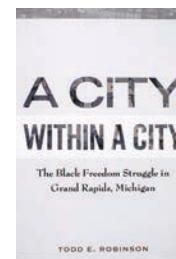
Robinson, an associate professor of history at UNLV, says he learned early on that few scholars were interested in how the civil-rights struggle played out in "second-tier" cities like Grand Rapids. "I observed that most of the narratives of the black freedom struggle focused on the experiences of blacks living in primary cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles," he says. Robinson worked to change that while a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, where his dissertation work eventually led to *A City Within a City*.

He says he decided on Grand Rapids for a couple reasons. First, there was the aforementioned dearth of information on midsized cities. Second, he says, the size and scope of Grand Rapids was similar to his hometown of Springfield, Mass. "I felt strongly that there was a rich narrative worthy of national attention which could add to the larger understanding," he says.

City Within a City begins by describing the influx of African-American migrant workers to Grand Rapids in the early 1900s up until World War II, a fascinating story of pride and perseverance among women and men determined to claim their share of the American dream. It then transitions into the main thrust of Robinson's work: How, after the war, black citizens' increasing demands for equality ran headlong into a white establishment determined to maintain a discriminatory status quo.

He identifies "managerial racism," as a

Todd Robinson, associate professor of history



“Analyzing the past of secondary cities will provide invaluable lessons for understanding the tragedy and triumphs of the black experience during that time period and even today.”



key component in impeding racial progress, a means by which Grand Rapids’ white city fathers, chiefly through business associations, succeeded in starving predominantly black neighborhoods of crucial economic development opportunities.

Robinson next describes how the black community organized to overcome this and other barriers. He details the formation of organizations such as the Grand Rapids National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (GRNAACP) and the Grand Rapids Urban League (GRUL); the struggle for employment and housing; and the hardships faced by black students. He enlivens these stories with first-person reporting and secondary sources which, when taken together, provide a picture of the black freedom struggle more nuanced — and complicated — than the popular narrative suggests.

“The traditional view of the civil rights

movement that circulates through American memory is hotly contested in academia,” Robinson says. “What most might consider the traditional civil rights movement — framed in the South between the years of 1954 to 1968, and presented from an organizational approach centered on the actions of men to win political rights — offers only a parochial understanding of the civil rights movement.”

While the familiar story of Martin Luther King Jr. may be readily accessible, he adds, “It conceals as much as it reveals,” he says. “Analyzing the past of secondary cities will provide invaluable lessons for understanding the tragedy and triumphs of the black experience during that time period and even today.”

Robinson adds that he would like to see his study blossom into research on other, similar cities that would “provide comparative insights, examine the place of managerial racism in other communities, and analyze



“If I had to say what the book was about, I’d say it’s about redemption. And in order to have something to redeem, it can’t just be something trite. It has to be the real deal.”

the complex intersection between schooling, housing, jobs, and race in these smaller locales,” he says.

This interest led him, in part, to Las Vegas. Part of our city’s attraction to him, Robinson says, is a scholarly interest in its African American community.

“The Las Vegas African American community remains virtually hidden in scholarly literature and certainly so within a comparative light,” he adds. “We do not know if the struggle for equality in Las Vegas resembles that of Los Angeles, Grand Rapids, or if it presents an entirely new set of issues.”

To that end, he’s working on several new works, including contributions to the “Nuclear Test Site Oral History Project” and “Documenting the African American Experience in Las Vegas Project,” the final manuscript of which will “use the narratives of black test-site workers to examine the intersection of the Cold War and civil rights history in Las Vegas.” He was also recently named director of the African American Studies Program at UNLV.

He hopes readers come away from reading a *City Within a City* with the understanding that the fight for civil rights and black equality did not take place within a vacuum, nor is it anywhere close to finished.

“Somewhere along the way it seems the history of racism was distilled from American memory,” Robinson says. “In fact, I woke up one morning and found out that apparently America was past racism — America had entered its post-racial era.”

But for anyone willing to examine and admit our history in late 2014, nothing could be further from the truth.

“The incidents in Benton Harbor, Mich., Sanford, Fla., Staten Island, N.Y., and Ferguson, Mo., not only provide us with individual examples of why race matters, but [show us] a system and a philosophy that continues to cause these situations to arise,” Robinson says. “To ignore the fact that racism is deeply engrained in the fabric and infrastructure of American society is dangerous, and it ensures that racial inequality will persist to divide America.”

The Book of Important Moments

Richard Wiley

Dzanc Books, 2013

Richard Wiley says a voice spoke to him as he composed his most recent novel, *The Book of Important Moments*.

Set in Nigeria beginning in the late 1990s, *Important Moments* is Wiley’s seventh novel. The narrative covers a period of nearly 35 years, though the author’s use of time shifts and flashbacks illuminate episodes in ways that considerably broaden its time span.

The novel is part mystery, part drama, part explosive action: Much of it is told through the voice in Wiley’s head, that of Babatunde Okorodudu, an albino Nigerian businessman.

Wiley describes Babatunde’s speech as “electric and frantic and frenetic,” an insistent voice that came to him quickly. It was so real, Wiley says, that the first draft of the novel was written entirely as Babatunde might have narrated it. That version, Wiley says, “was intense, to say the least.”

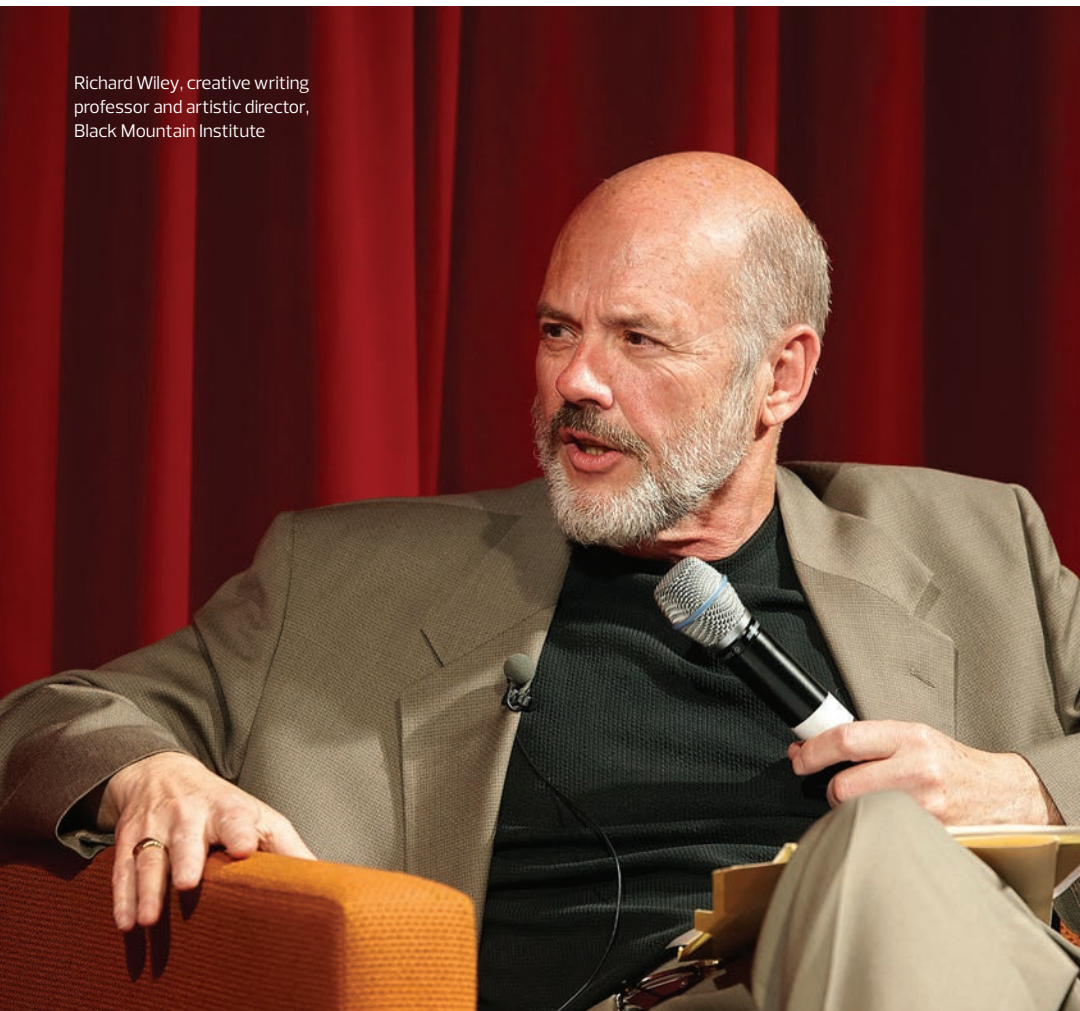
Wiley understands intense writing. His 1986 debut novel, *Soldiers in Hiding*, a wrenching account of the emotional devastation produced by war, won the esteemed 1987 PEN/Faulkner Award. Wiley joined the UNLV faculty two years later, helping to launch the school’s creative writing program.

In the 25 years since, he has written five more novels. He has also cofounded UNLV’s nationally respected creative writing MFA program and played a key role in founding the Black Mountain Institute, a “literary think tank,” in Wiley’s words, where writers and scholars meet to listen to speakers and discuss contemporary issues.

These accomplishments notwithstanding, Wiley still cites “writing well” as one of his primary motivations. For him, this means taking a hard look at even his own work. After reviewing the first draft of *Important Moments*, for example, Wiley knew he was trying to do too much. Reading it, he says, was like forcing readers to eat “a gallon of ice cream at one time.”

Given the forceful impact of the published version, it’s hard to imagine how much

Richard Wiley, creative writing professor and artistic director, Black Mountain Institute



more intense the rejected draft might have been. *Important Moments* opens with the equivalent of electroshock therapy: a graphic scene in which Babatunde sexually assaults an 18-year-old girl named Ruth.

It was a difficult scene to write, Wiley says, one that required numerous adjustments. He needed something that would shock readers, but not so much that they'd put down the book. It was all part of a larger goal, he adds.

"If I had to say what the book was about, I'd say it's about redemption. And in order to have something to redeem, it can't just be something trite. It has to be the real deal." In short, he says of Babatunde, "I wanted to make readers hate him."

Simply creating a despicable character, of course, wouldn't make for much of an interesting story. Instead, says Wiley, he wanted to build reader hatred and then tear it down.

"I wanted Babatunde to do something that was unforgivable, something really bad. And then I wanted readers to, despite themselves, lose the hate for him for a minute — and if not like him, at least be crazy about finding out what's going to happen to him, to be interested in him."

In that regard, Wiley succeeds and then some. Babatunde never quite becomes sympathetic, but his gripping story and personal traumas blunt his harder edges, making it a challenge not to feel at least the stirrings of

empathy. Other characters are equally well drawn, with Wiley deftly deploying dark humor to complicate readers' preconceptions about the nature of heartbreak and calamity. The book's narrative structure is inventive and propulsive. Readers who think they have latched on to the novel's direction may find themselves consistently surprised.

Like a play, Wiley's novel is divided into three acts, each building on the preceding action. But unlike traditional drama, the story's details unfold piecemeal, as readers uncover the stories within the story, along with characters' unique relationships to one another. In the first act, for example, Wiley moves from the harrowing opening scene to a few years in the future and then to the distant past. From that point, the story hopscotches across place and time, with multiple perspectives giving readers glimpses of how these characters — Babatunde, in particular — came to be the people they are.

When developing supporting members of *Important Moments*' cast, Wiley borrowed from one of his favorite sources: his own work. Lars Larsson — a man whose mother has just been murdered in a gas station parking lot — has, along with his father and his grandfather, previously appeared in a short stories Wiley has authored.

"I like sticking around characters and seeing who they are and what they do," he says.

Wiley adds that he's been carrying the seed of this story in his head for quite a while. During what he terms "the middle years of adulthood," he spent five years in Africa. Among other places, he spent time in Nigeria, where he developed a fascination with the role of albinos in Nigerian society.

"I'd always had it in my head that I would deal with [that relationship] fictionally, so this is how it came out," he says.

And what does he consider the most important moment in *Important Moments*? Wiley won't be pinned down.

"We always like to read the most important part of a book," he says. "So I thought, 'Why not make every part important?'"