

*The*  
*FOOTNOTE*

THE MELLON-MAYS FELLOWSHIP  
AT  
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS  
2010-2011

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# Letter from the Editor

This semester in Mellon, our discussions have largely found their way back to one topic: inspiration. It takes passion and inspiration to conduct a long-term research project, and as the 2010-2011 cohort of the Mellon-Mays Fellowship at WUSTL, we are grateful to say that our inspirations are clear. In this newsletter, you will find a compilation of these diverse sources of enthusiasm. The topics range from sociolinguistics to political history to speculative fiction and beyond, but they all have one thing in common: passion, dedication, and, of course, inspiration.

Enjoy,  
*Liz Jordan, Junior Fellow, Editor*

# 2010-2011 Cohort

## SENIORS

*Kim Daily  
Monica Smith  
Thomas Hernandez  
Maria Santos  
Naia Ferguson*

## JUNIORS

*Parsa Bastani  
Caleb Bess  
Liz Jordan  
Marcia McIntosh  
Mariana Oliver*



## *New Cohort:*

**Jessica Page  
Joelle Julian  
Yasmin Boakye  
Kemi Arogungade  
Sophia Nunez**

# FIELDWORK IS FUN WORK

*by Thomas Hernandez*

As a scholar in training, I get excited about those moments of creative epiphany, those “a-ha” moments that make you go, “quick I need a pen and paper before I forget it!” Sitting in the library, those rarely happen. While buried in books other brilliant academics’ profound thoughts seem to dwarf my own. However, with the help of the Mellon Mays Foundation I was able to do work abroad that gave me the agency to begin thinking profound thoughts of my own.

While interviewing in Azerbaijan’s capital of Baku last summer I got the first taste of what fieldwork is like, and boy did I like it! Those small but powerful creative bursts came while pacing my small apartment after a day’s work. Those moments came when walking home in the evening, seeing huge gatherings of city dwellers crowd Baku’s small parks for no reason but to stroll with friends. Those moments came while eating dinner with new-found friends.

Now looking back, not all of the thoughts were profound but it did feel good to begin producing knowledge instead of consuming it. It was also rewarding to be amongst people who could teach not through lectures or books, but through their life experiences, their thoughts and aspirations, and their questions of me. Before I felt like my work was important, but after the research experience abroad I feel more invested in my work, in my regional and topical interests, and my desire to pursue a higher academic path.



Picture taken by Thomas in the field

# WHY I LOVE WHAT I DO

*by Mariana Oliver*

Every idea has some inspiration, some story behind it. For me, my family background was an important factor in helping me determine what kind of research project I wanted to undertake. Every year I visit family in Uruguay, a small country of roughly 3 million people located in the southern part of South America. While on vacation there last year, I noticed that several people, including relatives, mentioned the subject of cooperatives in various conversations. I'm not sure why the word struck a chord with me, but I think mostly it was because my only concept of what a cooperative looked like was the one at WashU, where it housed around thirty students who chose to live more "alternative" lifestyles. I began asking around for further information on these coops, and found that they had nothing to do with what I thought a cooperative was.

It's amazing how the curiosity factor can act as such a strong motivating force. For me, my project arose out of what were preconceived notions on a subject that I wanted to learn more about, simply because I had no idea what to expect. Of course, this is not to say that I chose my topic on a total whim. Urban studies have long interested me, and the question of housing is one that I have seen come up in many a class time and time again.

What I love about my project is how interdisciplinary it has become, and the many directions it has the capacity to take me. I started out using only secondary sources, for that was all that was available to me, and found very little literature on the specific topic in English. My Spanish abilities were really put to the test as I had no choice but to read scholarly articles in Spanish. This forced me to really understand what I was reading, as I was having to translate from Spanish to English when I was writing my notes. Through secondary literature, I was able to get a firm grasp on the background to the housing cooperative movement, and at least a broad understanding of how the movement itself was organized and functioned. It was after I completed this preliminary research that I was able to begin posing some questions of my own as to why I thought my topic was of importance and what about the housing cooperative movement specifically drew my attention.

While Uruguay may be a small country, the problem of affordable housing that many of the people face is one that is universal. The housing cooperative movement is made up of mostly middle to lower-middle class people, who have opted for a collective, alternative lifestyle, one which promotes solidarity as a way of acquiring affordable, decent living conditions for themselves and their families. In light of the recent housing market crash in the United States, and the growing number of people in debt due to housing mortgages and loans, this issue of affordable housing has become increasingly important for me.

Currently, I am studying abroad in Chile, but will also be conducting research for the first time in both Uruguay and Argentina. The field research will consist of interviews with both actual cooperative members as well as those who are involved in the cooperative movement in various other capacities. I hope to gain a better understanding of the type of housing culture that exists in culture and what it is about the culture that promotes a cooperative style of living. I am excited to finally be able to use all the knowledge I have gained from secondary research and apply it to the information I will gain from listening and dialoguing with those who have lived the cooperative experience themselves.

# EGYPT: A REVOLUTION

*by Parsa Bastani*

My phone starts to ring--the kitschy-tone barely rising above the heavy Egyptian supermarket clamor. I look down to my caller-ID and see the name of my Residential Program Director. My fingers brush over the green answer button several times, unsure of whether to answer or not. At that point, we were in a rush to stock up on food before government-mandated curfew began at 4 PM. It was 3:35. After several seconds, I impulsively answered the phone. She informed me that we needed to evacuate our dormitory before curfew and grab any extremely important belongings to take with us. That was when the courageous protests that eventually led to Housni Mubarak's departure from the government turned into a nightmare.

The protests all started on Police Day, January 25, with unprecedented masses of people pouring into the streets all over the country but most strongly in the cities of Cairo, Suez, and Alexandria. At this point, I had only settled into Alexandria for 18 days. None of my Egyptian dorm-mates had expected the Tunisian example to actually infuriate the Egyptian people enough to risk their lives for a new government. They soon realized that they were wrong.

Two days after Policy Day, a friend and I decided to go outside and witness the revolution for ourselves. We walked from our dormitory (which was clutched between a leafy, middle-upper class, urban suburb and a very traditional, less well-off area) to the center of the city. It was quite easy to find where to go. We just followed the smoke. We reached the main thoroughfare, which I had traveled across every day in order to reach my school, to make-out a crowd of over 10,000 people yelling and shouting in an opaque screen of hazy smoke. To the left of the crowd there was a government building in the process of being torched. Periodically, the crowd would run away from the building as teargas was fired at them to disperse their activities. Much to the police's dismay, they could not do anything to stop the protestors. That Thursday I witnessed for the first time what passion, conviction, and anger meant. I was not watching "people," but rather an emotional history of state-mandated oppression.

However, alongside this overwhelming sobering energy were criminals taking advantage of the situation. This was the nightmare that became my life on January 28. After leaving the grocery store, packing a few essentials, and running to a friend's apartment, I thought our group of 10 guys would be safe from any sort of danger. That night, we slept through shouting, yelling, the rolling of tanks, and gunshots. Crooks willing to kill for loot constantly tried to enter our neighborhood. If it wasn't for the neighbors who stood tirelessly all night with clubs, pipes, and rifles guarding our street, our safety may have been compromised. Amidst all this chaos, there was an overriding sense of community. Even though fright had taken over my thoughts, these neighborhood dads, brothers, grandfathers, and sons all instilled in me a sense of security and hope. Hope not just for my safety, but for the safety, security, and future of the nation.

# WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM MELLON

*by Monica Smith*

Trying to pinpoint motivation is often difficult, as our reasons for being excited about something can easily fade or morph in a short period of time. My experience with the Mellon Mays program seems to defy this trend of human thought, as it is easy for me to identify my motivation for joining this program despite the two years that have elapsed since my initial application. My primary motivation for joining the Mellon program was to pursue research I was passionate about within the context of a supportive program that would teach me how to conduct research in the social sciences. Indeed, my curiosity about issues of veterans' affairs and my desire to work with a cohort of scholars encouraged me to join the Mellon Mays program.

Since the spring of my sophomore year, I have devoted Mellon seminar time, summers, and free time during the school year to pursuing my intellectual passions. In examining how a single piece of allegedly colorblind legislation could produce widely varying outcomes for individuals of different races, I learned more about the American political system, veterans' affairs, and have been able to place my grandfather's experiences in a particular sociopolitical context that allows me to understand more about my family's history. Looking back on my initial haphazard research efforts, I am proud to say that the Mellon program has taught me how to conduct a research project in the social sciences that makes a significant contribution to the current scholarly conversation regarding the experiences of Black World War II veterans.

The Mellon program is unique in that it offers an extensive network within which I was able to present my work to an interdisciplinary audience, work closely with an esteemed professor as my mentor, receive critical feedback from my peers, and work through obstacles that threatened to halt my research efforts. With the support of the Mellon Mays coordinators, the professors that lead the seminar, my Mellon Mays mentor, and my Mellon cohort, I have cultivated my interest in veterans' affairs, and produced a senior thesis through the Political Science Department and an article for Washington University's annual Mellon Mays publication. More importantly, I have gained a better understanding of the experiences of black veterans after World War II through my study of access to higher education under the GI Bill of 1944. The study I developed under the guidance of the Mellon Mays program demonstrates the outcomes of state level implementation of federal legislation within the context of a racially charged political climate. My work demonstrates the need for greater cohesion between the federal government and state level agencies, particularly with regard to social welfare legislation in which there is potential for discrimination against a certain population.

Over the course of my college career, the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship program has challenged me to fully explore my academic and personal interests through a rigorous study. The program has also taught me how to convey my conclusions to people from many different walks of life. Though I was concerned that historical social science research would not be relevant to the problems within the world today, I have learned from my Mellon family that social science research is not conducted in a vacuum, but rather, that examining issues of the past can help alleviate the problems of today, and help to prevent them in the future. In addition to being able to contribute to the scholarly community concerned with the state of veterans' affairs, I am now able to better understand the process for conducting social science research and making it relevant to current issues.

# JOLTS OF INTEREST

*by Marcia McIntosh*

My interest in black speculative fiction literature—a term that encompasses the many genres of fantasy, science fiction, horror, futuristic, erotica, dystopian, and alternate history—did not occur all at once. It came in phases and not all from books. First there was a play (it was *Sleeping Beauty*, actually). I was cast as the short, brown, and stately Queen. My King was chubby cheeked and white. Our theoretical daughter was freckled with bright red hair. We were quite the image of the fourth grade family. I realized back stage one day during rehearsal that this scenario would have never occurred in any of the books I read.

The next big jolt came when I discovered Gillian Bradshaw's *The Land of Gold* book about a kidnapped Nubian princess, her Egyptian saviors, and their Dragon saving Nubia from an evil Dragon's-blood-hungry sorcerer. I remember feeling like I could actually connect with the main character, her hair all braided on the cover with little orange beads at the end. I searched desperately for the prequel of the book, and did not find it. I remembering being very disappointed but eventually moving on to the long list books that I also wanted to read and were available to me at either my school or public library.

The moment that sowed my deeper curiosity in black speculative fiction occurred when I discovered two characters: Daja in Tamora's Pierce's Circle Series' and Nasuada in Christopher Poalini's the Inheritance Series. Both were very capable, heroic, competent black girls in made-up fantasy world. From the moment I read about these characters I knew I wanted to read more books with blacks in fantastical situations.

My little niche of interest has developed into many questions, not all of which I have yet been able to answer. Having been in the Mellon fellowship for a year, I have learned that there are not only fantasy and speculative fiction books with black main characters, there are even Black speculative fiction writers who want to do the same thing I wanted for years: read about themselves doing fantastic things. My plan is to investigate what these writers, particularly veteran writer Steven Barnes, are speculating about in terms of setting and society creation.

# MY JOURNEY TOWARDS PASSION

*by Naia Ferguson*

When most people discuss their passions, they have a clear linear path. Unfortunately for me (or fortunately, depending on how you think about it), my passions have been shifting for the last few years. Up until about the ninth grade, I was sure that I wanted to be a veterinarian. I knew that I loved animals and I figured that it was the best, the most productive, and the most lucrative career out there that I could pick to align with my interests. Alas, I realized that I wasn't really interested in becoming a medical practitioner and dropped that completely. Immediately afterwards, I started thinking of becoming of an author. I loved to write and I thought that, while considerably less lucrative, I could make a decent living writing. That fell through when I realized that I probably wasn't prolific enough of a writer to make it (in under two decades, I had started countless stories, but only finished two... one of which was a one page story I wrote when I was three about a porcupine). When I got to college, psychology became the answer. I liked learning about the importance of the brain and I thought I'd fare well as a therapist, so it all seemed to click.

While none of these are "illegitimate" passions by any stretch of the imagination, I consider my true passion to be words. In addition to being a poet, I love language and pronunciation--the way that words can be played with and manipulated--how slang is proof of the plasticity of definition. I love all of it so wholly that I'm not sure if I can describe it. It took me a while to realize that I had this interest. My project on the use of the word "nigga" in the animated series *The Boondocks* really brought it to my attention after working with my mentor, Dr. Rose Wilkerson. I had never even considered sociolinguistics, but it helped to answer the questions that I had about my project that other disciplines couldn't address in a way that satisfied me. For example, what exactly did this word mean if it wasn't strictly adhering to the "popular" definitions? Why was it so important that this show used "nigga" uncensored? What was so important about using "nigga", a word with more shades of gray in its definition, than "nigger", a word with more rigid understandings of its history and meaning? Sociolinguistics gave me what I really wanted – a modern, real-time, applicable way to study the language in show I already loved.

A few months ago, one of my friends posted in his status that if anyone could read the following words, they were truly his friends: "weeneemwurrbodit", "d'aineem coolough", and "fshoillbeightdough". While I know plenty of people saw it as complete gibberish, my heart was full at the sight of people even acknowledging the fact that different pronunciations create different understandings and connotations of words. My passions might shift again, but I highly doubt it. I ain't eem wurrbodit.

# *Views From Abroad*



*Junior Fellow Parsa Bastani studied in Egypt this semester!*



*A housing cooperative in Chile, taken by Junior Fellow Mariana Oliver during her semester abroad!*