This study will elucidate a crucial, yet previously neglected, moving force behind Nabokov’s art: its covert investment in nature, manifest in the subtle deployment of trees throughout his works. Nabokov’s works conceal a reinvention of the nature-writing tradition of the Romantics, as he exploits the prominent invisibility of trees to smuggle in a latent commitment to nature as a grounding, value-laden stratum of existence. This project will mark a significant shift in Nabokov scholarship, which has tended to take instances of natural imagery—especially butterflies, but also trees, flowers, even water—as having only a local, context-dependent meaning. In addition to such meanings, however, Nabokovian references to nature also encompass a broader, universal significance.
Politics is frequently read in terms of issues, policies, and group interests. This book project focuses instead on how the scenes and conflicts of governance give pleasure and captivate, much like literature. It looks at artistic forms such as theater, allegory, caricature, or satire that shape our sense of the political. In this way, national affairs resemble aesthetic experiences, which citizens consume like spectators. It locates this account of politics in the British Romantic period (1780-1832), a revolutionary age that witnessed the “making of the English working class.” The book connects the political awakening of ordinary Britons to Romanticism’s emphasis on feeling, imagination, and aesthetic pleasure. Romantic poets, it argues, were not just self-involved nature-wanderers but also modeled citizenship through their absorption in the world and expressiveness about what they saw and felt.

This book project brings together previous work in normative ethical theory and scholarship on Kantian ethics. Immanuel Kant described human dignity as an “unconditional” and “absolute”
worth or status that is “above all price,” “without equivalent,” “incomparable” and equally shared among all human beings. Kant’s conception of human dignity has been enormously influential in contemporary moral and political thought, especially since the Second World War; it is inspiring to many but also has been disparaged as vague, abstract or even useless. This significant disagreement leads philosophers to question how to understand and apply Kant’s idea of human dignity to actual circumstances, especially in tragic situations in which the dignity of two or more people comes into apparent conflict. This project develops and defends a new kind of broadly Kantian moral framework that systematically interprets the notion of human dignity and applies that basic value to actual circumstances.

Margaret Lazarus Dean  
Associate Professor  
Department: English  
Project Title: Space to Ground One: a collection of creative nonfiction essays

This book, a collection of creative nonfiction essays, explores intersections of technology, risk, and culture. Building upon the author’s previous works about cultural and emotional components of technology, especially the technology of spaceflight, the collection will seek to find meaning and patterns among seemingly unrelated developments and events. Topics for the essays include the selection and treatment of the first women astronauts in 1978, the Columbia disaster of 2003, the predicted Y2K disaster of 2000, the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project of 1975, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, and the international cooperation to assemble the International Space Station from 1998-2011. The finished book will join a growing subgenre of creative nonfiction that engages with technical and scientific knowledge from personal perspectives.
The Christianization of classical cities is often limited to clergy, churches, and conversion and judged inevitable and rapid. This history of public performance re-assesses Christianization and challenges anachronistic arguments about papal authority. In Late Antiquity, traditional forms of public display dominated Rome, while a modest Christian public presence developed; however, this public presence was dispersed throughout the city and often existed outside of episcopal control. As the wars of the sixth century devastated Rome’s elite, the bishop finally began to exercise his authority in public and in practice, culminating in the stational liturgy. This project makes a case that by sheer ritual repetition, the bishop eventually claimed Rome as his own.

This book project examines the history of anti-institutionalism in the US from the post-Reconstruction moment to the present. It considers W.E.B. Du Bois as an exemplary figure in a counter-tradition that imagines the state and its institutions not as anathema to freedom but as
instrumental to its development and also as central to that most radical of all human experiments, democracy. Du Bois’s “radical institutionalism” offers a pragmatic, constructive, and affirmative mode of building and rebuilding institutional forms that protect and preserve the values of free inquiry, open discussion, and democratic process. This model can provide context for current social battles over public education, and it can help us develop a new language in which to defend the public good.

Graduates:

Tessa Evans  
Fifth-Year Doctoral Student (in 2019-20)  
Department: History  
Project Title: Atlantic Routes and Native Paths: Rival Social Landscapes in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Arkansas

Bridging Atlantic, Southern, and Native American history, this project studies the Arkansas Post, the first European settlement in the lower Mississippi River Valley in present-day Arkansas and a disputed landscape in early America. French, Spanish, and eventually Anglo-Americans worked to gain political power by controlling this landscape. These attempts were challenged and checked by other members of society, however, including Native Americans and people of African descent. This dissertation looks for instances in which marginalized people attempted to change the political landscape and make their own rival cultural landscapes. It untangles social and cultural interactions among the diverse residents in this particular space—borderland, colonial settlement, and native ground.
Eric Gubelman  
**Sixth-Year Doctoral Student (in 2019-20)**  
Department: History  
Project Title: *Slavery, Race, and the White Yeomen Republics of Missouri and Illinois, 1787-1837*

This project examines the politics of slavery in what became Illinois and Missouri in the period from about 1787 to 1827. The eventual separation of the two territories between slave state Missouri and free state Illinois obscures a common French colonial history of fur trapping, agriculture, and chattel slavery centered on the shores of the Mississippi River and depending upon bustling St. Louis. The traditional approach of cleaving the shared histories of Illinois and Missouri has fostered an obsession with the origins of sectional division that led to the Civil War. That traditional lens has led historians to construct a memory of a monolithic North or South that simply did not exist. This project contends that historians have seen Missouri and Illinois as estranged cousins, when they really were bickering, fraternal twins.

Emily Roberts  
**Seventh-Year Doctoral Student (in 2019-20)**  
Department: English  
Project Title: *Bathsheba in Early Modern English Literature*

In conversation with recent scholarship examining the influence of the Bible on early modern English drama, this project investigates the reception of the biblical figure of Bathsheba and allusions to her in works of English Renaissance literature. The biblical narrative of David and Bathsheba was central to the period, and frequent allusions to it raise numerous questions about how it was used and understood in early modern texts. This dissertation seeks to answer
such questions, but in doing so it also explores these texts’ negotiations with existing gender norms and power relations (including female consent and complicity and issues of secrecy and privacy) and speaks to greater concerns about female agency and bodily autonomy.

Laura Roesch
Fifth-Year Doctoral Student (in 2019-20)
Department: History
Project Title: “A Fine Spray of Blood”: Martyrdom, Violence, and Sacred Landscapes in the Late Antique Mediterranean

This project examines roles of memorialized violent martyrdom in the creation of sacred geographies in the fourth and fifth centuries. In this period, Christians grappled with the possibilities and the pitfalls of accession to positions of authority in the Roman world. Prominent among these were two concerns: how to translate inherited legacies of martyrdom into an era in which persecution was largely absent for most Christians, and how to approach and sanctify the material world around them. This project explores how late antique poets embedded narratives of martyrial torture, death, and commemoration in landscapes in order to foster the perpetual presence of sacred violence in the physical world. It argues that martyrial violence was central to processes of Christianizing landscapes, communal identities, and worldviews in an era marked by contention, experimentation, and imaginative potential.

Marco Haslam Dissertation Fellow
This dissertation examines how Northern French authors portrayed masculinity and spiritual reform following the First Crusade (1095-1099). Beginning in the first quarter of the twelfth century, historians used episodes of death, rape, pollution, grief, and vengeance to define morality for Frankish Christians. When monks read, copied, and shared these later accounts, they experienced the horrors and pleasures of crusading without leaving their monasteries. Crusade chroniclers calibrated their words to thrill and connect to their Frankish audiences. By appealing to their readers’ fears of “outsiders” and the abjection their enemies embodied, crusade historians became rhetoricians: individuals who incorporated evocative language that guided their readers away from Islam and towards salvation.