



Kathryn Meyer Olivarius

Associate Professor of History

Bio

BIO

I am an historian of the nineteenth-century United States, interested in the antebellum South, Greater Caribbean, slavery, capitalism, and disease. I am a 2024 recipient of the Dan David Prize, the world's largest prize for practitioners studying the human past.

My first book, *Necropolis: Disease, Power, and Capitalism in the Cotton Kingdom* (Harvard University Press, Belknap imprint, 2022) concerns yellow fever, immunity, and inequality. It received numerous awards, including the 2023 Frederick Jackson Turner Award for the Best First Book in American History from the Organization of American Historians, the 2023 Prize in American History from the American Historical Association (formerly the Dunning Prize), awarded biennially for the best first or second book in US history, and the 2023 Humanities Book of the Year Award from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

I am also interested in historical notions of consent (sexual or otherwise); syphilis and shame in the American Civil War and Gilded Age; slave revolts in the United States and the Caribbean; anti- and pro-slavery thought; class and ethnicity in antebellum America; the history of life insurance and environmental risk; comparative slave systems; technology and slavery; the Haitian Revolution; and boosterism in the American West.

Born and raised in New York, Washington D.C., and London, I earned my BA in history (cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa) from Yale University in 2011. I received an MSt in US History (with distinction) in 2013 and a DPhil in History in 2017 from the University of Oxford. Before joining the Stanford faculty, I was a Past and Present postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London.

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

- Associate Professor, History

PROGRAM AFFILIATIONS

- American Studies
- Program in History & Philosophy of Science

LINKS

- My website: kathrynoolivarius.com

Research & Scholarship

CURRENT RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY INTERESTS

I am an historian of nineteenth-century America, interested primarily in the antebellum South, Greater Caribbean, slavery, and disease. My research seeks to understand how epidemic yellow fever disrupted Deep Southern society. Nearly every summer, this mosquito-borne virus killed up to ten percent of the urban population. But it also generated culture and social norms in its fatal wake. Beyond the rigid structures of race and unfreedom in Deep Southern society, I argue there was alternate, if invisible, hierarchy at work, with “acclimated” (immune) people at the top and a great mass of “unacclimated” (non-immune) people awaiting their brush with yellow fever languishing in social and professional purgatory. About half of all people died in the acclimating process.

In New Orleans, alleged-imperviousness or vulnerability to epidemic disease evolved into an explanatory tool for success or failure in commodity capitalism, and a justification for a race- and ethnicity-based social hierarchy where certain people were decidedly less equal than others. Disease justified highly asymmetrical social and labor relations, produced politicians apathetic about the welfare of their poor or recently-immigrated constituents, and accentuated the population’s xenophobic, racist, pro-slavery, and individualist proclivities. Alongside skin color, acclimation-status, I argue, played a major role in determining a person’s position, success, and sense of belonging in antebellum New Orleans.

Most of all, disease provided the tacit justification for who did what work during cotton and sugar production, becoming the essence of an increasingly elaborate and tortuous justification for widespread and permanent black slavery. In the Deep Southern view, only enslaved black people could survive work like cane cutting, swamp clearing, and cotton picking. In fact, proslavery theorists argued, black slavery was positively natural, even humanitarian, for it protected the health of whites—and thus the nation writ large—insulating them from diseased-labor and spaces that would kill them.

By fusing health with capitalism in my forthcoming book *Necropolis*, I will present a new model—beyond the toxic fusion of white supremacy with the flows of global capitalism—for how power operated in Atlantic society.

I am also interested in historical notions of consent (sexual or otherwise); slave revolts in the United States and the Caribbean; anti- and pro-slavery thought; class and ethnicity in antebellum America; the history of life insurance and environmental risk; comparative slave systems; technology and slavery; the Haitian Revolution; and boosterism in the American West.

Teaching

COURSES

2025-26

- Core in American History, Part IV: HISTORY 351D (Win)
- Doing the History of Death and Disease: AMSTUD 200DE, HISTORY 200DE (Spr)
- Nineteenth Century America: AFRICAAM 150B (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: AFRICAAM 50B (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: AMSTUD 150B, CSRE 150S (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: CSRE 50S (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: HISTORY 150B (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: HISTORY 50B (Win)
- Pox, Plague, and Pestilence: A Germ's Eye View of World History: COLLEGE 122 (Spr)

2024-25

- Doing the History of Death and Disease: HISTORY 200DE (Win)
- Graduate Research Seminar in U.S. History: HISTORY 468B (Spr)
- Graduate Research Seminar: U.S. History in the 19th Century, Part I: HISTORY 468A (Win)
- The Age of Revolution: America, France, and Haiti: AMSTUD 205K, HISTORY 205K, HISTORY 305K (Aut)
- The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1830 to 1877: AMSTUD 155F, AMSTUD 55F, HISTORY 155F, HISTORY 55F (Aut)

2023-24

- The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1830 to 1877: AFRICAAM 55F, AMSTUD 155F, AMSTUD 55F, HISTORY 155F, HISTORY 55F (Aut)

2022-23

- Core in American History, Part IV: HISTORY 351D (Win)
- Graduate Research Seminar: U.S. History in the 20th Century Part II: HISTORY 468B (Spr)
- Nineteenth Century America: AFRICAAM 150B (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: AFRICAAM 50B (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: AMSTUD 150B, CSRE 150S (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: CSRE 50S (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: HISTORY 150B (Win)
- Nineteenth Century America: HISTORY 50B (Win)
- The History of 2022: HISTORY 1 (Aut)

STANFORD ADVISEES

Doctoral Dissertation Reader (AC)

Johanna Mueller, Serena Shah, Magdalene Zier

Orals Evaluator

Mariana Calvo, Marina Cassio, Jennifer Depew, Aliyah Dunn-Salahuddin, Serena Shah, Magdalene Zier

Doctoral Dissertation Advisor (AC)

Marina Cassio

Doctoral (Program)

Marina Cassio, Ayesha Pasha

Publications

PUBLICATIONS

- **Necropolis: Disease, Power, and Capitalism in the Cotton Kingdom**
Olivarius, K.
Harvard University Press.2022
- **Immunity, Capital, and Power in Antebellum New Orleans** *American Historical Review*
Olivarius, K.
2019; 124 (2): 425-455
- **A City Without Care: 300 Years of Racism, Health Disparities, and Health Care Activism in New Orleans (Book Review)** *REVIEWS IN AMERICAN HISTORY*
Book Review Authored by: Olivarius, K.

2025; 53 (4)

- **<i>Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South</i> (Book Review) *AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW*
Book Review Authored by: Olivarius, K.
2024; 129 (3): 1282-1283**
- **How We Died: Public and Private Health in Early America** *WILLIAM AND MARY QUARTERLY*
Olivarius, K.
2024; 81 (1)
- **An Environmental History of the Civil War (Book Review)** *AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW*
Book Review Authored by: Olivarius, K.
2022; 127 (3): 1510-1511
- **The influence of vector-borne disease on human history: socio-ecological mechanisms.** *Ecology letters*
Athni, T. S., Shocket, M. S., Couper, L. I., Nova, N., Caldwell, I. R., Caldwell, J. M., Childress, J. N., Childs, M. L., De Leo, G. A., Kirk, D. G., MacDonald, A. J., Olivarius, K., Pickel, et al
2021
- **Fugitivism: Escaping Slavery in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1820-1860 (Book Review)** *ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY*
Book Review Authored by: Olivarius, K.
2020; 25 (2): 393–95
- **History from the Bottom Up and the Inside Out: Ethnicity, Race, and Identity in Working-Class History. (Book Review)** *CANADIAN JOURNAL OF HISTORY-ANNALES CANADIENNES D HISTOIRE*
Book Review Authored by: Olivarius, K.
2019; 54 (1-2): 273–74
- **Making a Slave State: Political Development in Early South Carolina. (Book Review)** *JOURNAL OF SOUTHERN HISTORY*
Book Review Authored by: Olivarius, K.
2019; 85 (2): 416–18