

Stanford



Kathryn Meyer Olivarius

Assistant Professor of History

Bio

BIO

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 my 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

- Assistant Professor, History

PROGRAM AFFILIATIONS

- American Studies

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

2021-22

- The History of 2021: HISTORY 21 (Aut)

2020-21

- Core in American History, Part IV: HISTORY 351D (Win)
- Doing the History of Race and Ethnicity: HISTORY 200C (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 Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1830 to 1877: AMSTUD 155F, HISTORY 155F, HISTORY 55F (Spr)

2019-20

- Doing the History of Race and Ethnicity: HISTORY 200C (Win)
- The Age of Revolution: America, France, and Haiti: AFRICAAM 205K, HISTORY 205K, HISTORY 305K (Win)
- The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1830 to 1877: AFRICAAM 55F, AMSTUD 155F, AMSTUD 55F, HISTORY 155F, HISTORY 55F (Spr)
- The Old South: Culture, Society, and Slavery: AFRICAAM 252C, CSRE 252C, HISTORY 252C (Spr)

2018-19

- Doing the History of Race and Ethnicity: HISTORY 200C (Aut)
- The Age of Revolution: America, France, and Haiti: AFRICAAM 205K, HISTORY 205K, HISTORY 305K (Win)
- The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1830 to 1877: HISTORY 155F, HISTORY 55F (Win)
- The Old South: Culture, Society, and Slavery: AFRICAAM 252C, CSRE 252C, HISTORY 252C (Aut)

STANFORD ADVISEES

Doctoral Dissertation Reader (AC)

Charlotte Hull, Carolyn Zola

Orals Evaluator

Charlotte Hull, Theresa Iker, Paul Nauert, Carolyn Zola

Doctoral Dissertation Co-Advisor (AC)

Tanner Allread, Jennifer Depew

Publications

PUBLICATIONS

- **Immunity, Capital, and Power in Antebellum New Orleans** *American Historical Review*
Olivarius, K.
2019; 124 (2): 425-455
- **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