

Interview with a Professor:

Dr. Guy Thompson

Constellations is pleased to present a new segment in the journal, “Interview with a Professor.” Our goal with this project is to connect professors and undergraduate students; many times undergraduates are unsure as to how to pursue their interests in history professionally and would like to learn from the experiences of their professors. In Constellations, we strive to make the journal meaningful and engaging for students and hope that this new section will allow students to learn from their professors’ personal experiences.

Section 1: Background and early history

What inspired you to study history professionally?

As an undergrad, I think the main motivation was that history seemed to offer the best means to try and figure out how the world worked and ended up the way it is. That’s still there, even if I think really figuring much of it out is impossible.

Deciding to pursue history as a profession came while I was working as a high school teacher in Zimbabwe for three years in the early 1990s. I really enjoyed teaching, but didn’t want to teach high school in Canada. This was also when the new social history really hit my field, and suddenly I started reading material that embodied all the rich complexities of people’s lives, which inspired me much more than the Marxist/structural analysis that dominated in the 1980s. Moreover, as I got to know more about my Zimbabwean colleagues’ lives, I realized the standard historiography really did not capture important dimensions of black Zimbabweans’ lives, and was dead wrong on important pieces.

What challenges did you face getting into the discipline?

Money as a grad student and the wonders of the job market, but to be reasonable, I was in a better position than most people.

How has the discipline changed since your experience as a student?

Computers have made a huge difference, as personal ones were slowly being adopted when I was an undergrad. In the classroom, the difference is huge, and I am glad to be able to display a wide range of images to illustrate and build on lecture or discussion. Academic databases are also a massive change, one that transformed how we do research – they first appeared when I was a PhD student, but only through computer stations in the library.

Conceptually the move from the structural history of the 1980s to social and cultural history is a massive shift, which has opened up new areas of research and exploration, fundamentally shifting how we think about the past.

Section 2: Current Professional Role

Please explain your area of specialization briefly.

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Geographically I focus on southern Africa during the colonial period, and my research concentrates on Zimbabwe between roughly 1925 and 1980. Conceptually, I am really interested in how common people experienced, understood and debated their lives. In articulating these ideas, I often move to more abstract categories of gender, race, and memory – among others – but I am particularly interested in how these categories intersect with people in the past’s understandings of their lives.

What is unique about your approach to history?

Unique is probably too strong, but I think I am unusual in that I really want to explore different ways of conceptualizing and encoding knowledge, as well as varied ways of explaining our experiences. In short I want to denaturalize modernist understandings, present alternative frameworks, and get people to engage with not just the experiences of the past, but different means of understanding.

Section 3: Research Interests and Primary Source Use

What sources do you rely on for your research?

In my older work, oral histories were the key source, although I certainly drew heavily on archival materials. Given the ongoing political crisis in Zimbabwe, I haven’t been able to do interviews for a number of years. Sadly this isn’t because of danger to me, as the Mugabe regime will still respect a Canadian passport, and would simply deport me. But it won’t respect the rights of its own citizens to be free from coercive investigations or torture, which is a very sad commentary on a party that said it was working to liberate Zimbabweans.

Has your research changed your worldview? How?

Yes, on two very important levels. Living in rural Zimbabwe and working with peasants made me realize that it is very possible for people to have rich, complex, and satisfying lives with very limited material resources. On a deeper level, these engagements also made me realize that our collective means of explaining the world are historically constructed, partial, and in no way superior to other ones.

Section 4: Advice to students

What is the message you try to convey to your students?

I think the core thing is engagement – engagement with ideas and with the world around us. I find apathy and detachment depressing, and try to guide people towards finding things that excite them.

How do you make history come alive and meaningful for students?

One strategy is to make them really uncomfortable. In my African survey, I talk about the history and construction of ideas about race and biological difference. Most Canadians are very uncomfortable with discussions of race, let alone a deeper exploration of how central ideas about race were to the emergence of modernist thought – and then it gets worse as we explore the legacies of racism in common ideas of cultural difference, the structures of knowledge, and how we collectively think about Africa.