

What Do Historians Do?

Interview with Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz: My name is Trevor Getz. I'm a professor of history at San Francisco State University, and my title is a professor of the history of Africa and the world, both of which are kind of ridiculous.

Shane Carter, ORIAS Interviewer: What would you say you're actually a professor of?

Trevor: It's a really good question. You know, there's a historian I really like, Tom McCaskie, who insisted, when he got a titled position, that he be called a professor of Asante studies because he said, "Why, in Africa, you know, we never say a local community, but you could be a professor of the history of the Netherlands, which is tiny, for example. I guess I am a world historian. I guess what I really am most interested in is being a professor of history education, but I'm only just learning about education now.

ORIAS: I want to know, first, how do you define history, and can you specifically talk about what kind of history you do?

Trevor: Yeah, sure. So how to define history, it's not an easy question, but I think there are a couple of ways that I think about it. The first is that, obviously there is a past, there are things that happened and we try to understand them, and very simply trying to understand the past is the study that we call history.

But then that also has certain rules, because you can understand the past, you can seek to understand the past through memory or through the practice of heritage or by celebrating tradition, and history obviously is sort of evidence-based and has this epistemology around it that's grown up over the years.

But I think for me, history really has two defining characteristics. It is an attempt to be authentic to the past, we have a responsibility to those we studied in the past to be as accurate to depict them in ways that they would recognize.

And it's a responsibility to the present as well. There's got to be some reason why, you know, universities pay historians and society hires historians, and it's because we have-- we try to make meaning of the past in ways that can help society to live in the present, maybe prepare for the future.

ORIAS: Do you love something about it? Do you love history, did it change your life at all?

Trevor: History absolutely changed my life. I was actually a history and anthropology undergrad, and I sometimes sort of mourn that I'm not an anthropologist, but the fact is that I just love history.

I first started to study history because I sat on my grandfather's knee while he told me stories of the war. It's kind of a very male story maybe, but I was entranced, and what I end up loving about history is the people and the stories we can tell about people, and the difference, you know, the past is, the past is different and by understanding the past on its own terms, you gain some insight to the present.

But really, I mean, I know historians who write histories that don't have a lot of people in them, I don't get it. For me, it's people lived in the past, they're really interesting, they had interesting experiences, they did incredible things, they lived everyday lives and it's beautiful, it's wonderful to learn about those things.

ORIAS: Have you ever had a student tell you that studying history changed their life?

Trevor: I have lots of-- I have a number of students who I think have since told me that studying history changed their lives, and some of them, it's a pretty conventional story. I have lots of students who started out at community colleges.

The great thing about teaching at San Francisco State is I get these students who are really tuned into history at community college, they're coming to me, they're interested. Most of them, you know, sort of didn't learn a lot in high school about these kinds of things, but their community college instructors have turned them on to it.

They come to me, I get to work with them, very often I get to do a master's with them and some of them go on to do a PhD then at some highfalutin research institution, and I think that watching the way in which they intellectually begin to engage the study of the past and learn about it in ways that are meaningful for them is pretty amazing.

There are kind of two moments that are great for me in the college journey of students. The first is when they discover theory and they suddenly realize that everything that they thought was solid is in fact amorphous.

And then the second is a few years later when they discovered the limits of theory and suddenly they say, "You know, there is actually some value to going where the evidence tells you you should go," and I say, "Ah, you're a historian, you're not a, you're not a social theorist or an anthropologist. If you like the evidence, you're probably a historian."

ORIAS: Even if it's not a student who told you that it changed their life, have you ever seen anyone have a, I don't know, a strong emotional response to learning about something in a way that you think is positive for them?

Trevor: Yeah, I think so. Many students still haven't encountered themselves in the history that they were told they had to study in middle school or high school, and when they encounter themselves and encounter something that's really meaningful for them, it can be pretty transformative, and I do see that in students' reactions to a lot of the readings that we have in upper division African history classes, in my case.

It's less frequent in the world history class. I think that's because I haven't designed my world history class well enough, I wish I had, and I'm working on it.

But students who recognize in some 17th century narrative or, you know, some 19th century novel by an African-- in Kobina Sekyi's "The Anglo-Fanti" or "The Blinkards," for example, recognize that feeling stuck between two worlds, feeling stuck between the colonized world, if you will, and the world of their home, and suddenly realize that this is not just their experience or just a modern experience,

I've had that happen several times with that particular book and it's really dramatic. I think it helps them to understand themselves, I think.

ORIAS: That's why I like it. I wanna know, what are one or two really interesting historical questions that you have wrestled with yourself working on?

Trevor: I don't think that there are any historical questions that have driven my work, because that's not how it's worked for me. As I said, you know, I started out wanting to be a military historian and quickly discovered sort of the social history of the military, and then quickly discovered that I wasn't really that interested in the military, that I was finding out intensely interesting things about everyday life around things like marriage, and then I discovered cultural history and this was really interesting.

And in every case, it was really the sources that were driving me to ask new questions to find out new things, but I think that a couple of things have now kind of coalesced around the historical work that I'm doing.

The first is this question of whether it is more important, significant, useful, accurate for us to conceive of colonialism as a sort of hegemonic universal system that shaped people this way and caused suffering, which it undoubtedly did, or whether we should see it as really kind of a weak system, despite what it did, in which people could manipulate it, could shape it, could fight back, could push back in certain ways, and really, everybody's exhibiting agency all the time.

I'm still unresolved as to which is the more useful way to see it, for us, and which is the more accurate way to see it, and I think that that question is a useful question for us. And it's a useful question because of the second question, which is, have we decolonized? Have we decolonized at all? Do we still live in a colonial world, and what does that mean?

And the fruits of this era, of all this sort of stuff, still affect us, and I think we can ask these questions in ways that tell us something about humanity and about ourselves, rather than just being political footballs.

ORIAS: So when you study something associated with that, when you're looking at the sources, can you describe in very concrete terms what sort of thing you do? And if you're going to utter the word archive, I want you to describe what it looks like and what it's like to go, and who's in there.

Trevor: Most of the records that are essential to what I do are sitting in a room in Ghana, and it's a room with some people working there and a lot of books that are finding aids that kind of tell you what the different files that are available are. And you ask for certain files and somebody goes back to get them for you, and then they bring out these books that are old, or these piles of papers or these boxes of papers that are falling apart in some cases, some of them are really quite old.

And then you open them and that world is there for you and you go in, hopefully, with some idea, some context, some sense of the world that you're studying. You know, for me that world is often a courtroom, that's what it is, and I have some sense of what's going on in that courtroom, what are the ideas in that courtroom, who's in charge in that courtroom? Who's performing for whom in that courtroom, who makes decisions?

And then you read the accounts and you have some sense of how those accounts came into being, who actually wrote them down? What language was the person speaking? Who translated them in most cases, what's getting left out? What happens in every court case, so you know what happened here most probably, even if it's not written down.

And then once you have that whole sense of these bigger issues, you try to read for what that court case says, what the people in that courtroom were saying, what they wanted people to hear, or what they were saying that they didn't necessarily want people to hear, but that was also important.

And you see them playing out their lives, custody battles, questions of who gets to live where, questions of whether people should stay married to each other, that nevertheless, you know, in my case, are related to issues of claims of having been false enslaved or falsely accused of slavery, but these are people's everyday lives.

And then you want to know, is this representative of something wider or is this just one person's experience? And how do I know if this is just one person's experience or if it's more more meaningful? And that takes a lot more research, and often what that takes is you go home at the end of the day from the archives and you talk to people, older people.

In my case, you know, I can talk to people who are alive 30 or 40 years after those court cases and say, "What does this mean?" "Why would somebody bring this up?" And you get some ideas, and sometimes they seem right and sometimes they seem wrong, but that's when you're moving beyond those paper archives and trying to understand these sorts of things.

And then you're reading proverbs to see how they converge, and sometimes you're going back to London and looking at those colonial archives as well to see how different they are from what's in the archive in Ghana.

And then in the end, you have a theory and you write that theory and you make it an article or you make it something else, and then somebody writes something and says you're wrong, and that's the best because that means that somebody's actually read what you wrote, which is-- which may be pretty rare in some cases, and that's the experience.

ORIAS: Thank you, that's great. That was what I wanted to hear because I think that it's very dry and like you see it in these-- you know, you see it in a textbook and someone has put aside or pulled aside some primary document and they're like, "This comes from this thing, and it says, 'blah blah blah,'" and they're using it for you in a textbook to help you illustrate something.

And I think it's just important to contemplate that the person who found it and initially translated it and put it into a book is probably some university student in their early 20s who's in a country that they don't really know very well, just like wandering into this library and trying to get some dude to give them a, you know, a box of stuff.

Trevor: Yeah, yeah, right, exactly, and I think one of the most important things is we're all very bad at this in the beginning. Some people get good faster than others, and the only ways you get good at it are doing it again and again, and reading a lot of other people doing it and seeing what they did, and eventually you get better. But even when you're really, really good at it, you can still be wrong and that's okay, right?

That's okay because you're still doing those two things, you're striving to be as accurate to the past, and you're striving to say something meaningful for our society. As long as you're doing that, as far as I'm concerned, you're doing history.

ORIAS: If you're not studying the history of only people who speak your native language or your first language, do you worry about translation errors yourself too, or like are you struggling through it?

Trevor: Yeah, there are always issues of interpretation and translation whenever you're working with sources, and you have to slowly develop an ethic of responsibility around what you're confident saying, what you're not, and also openness to consulting other people and asking questions, and I believe to making your sources available as much as possible to other people so they can see what you've done.

When I wrote my dissertation, I got it back from one reviewer with sort of 400 little red marks, and a lot of those just had to do with small issues that I had no idea I'd gotten wrong.

Sometimes there was a father and a son involved, they both had the same name, and I didn't realize they were two different people. And you make these mistakes and hopefully somebody helps you along the way, but you do have to develop that ethic of trying to get it as right as possible.

I mean, I read in several different languages. Most of the documents that I read are written in English or French, or in some cases some version of Dutch, because those are the colonial written documents of the period that I'm looking at.

But they're often using these terms that I know they're actually translating something that was said in Twi, for example, and sometimes that gets really confusing.

For example, you know, I'm looking at all these slavery documents and very often there's these words for free will, and I can go to these 19th century documents, these 19th century dictionaries, Anglo-Fante dictionaries that were written by missionaries, and look up, what are the Twi words for free will?

And there's nothing there, right, and so you try to figure out what was actually said and it can get quite complex. And there are tools to do this, and there's a lot of historical linguistics involved sometimes if you're really interested in that kind of thing, which I am, and you try your best to backwards engineer it.

And every time you're writing something, you're making a proposition anyway. That's all it is, it's a proposition, you're never writing something definitive.

ORIAS: So one of the challenges I find with world history, with those two words in combination, is that history is so text-based.

And I understand that world history is not supposed to be the individual histories of every single place on Earth, but what ways do you think are good and appropriate to kind of develop the narrative or your understanding of places for which we don't have a lot of written records, or where we have written records but they haven't yet been translated or any number of different things, so that the character, sort of, of the people engaged in the encounters are equally developed?

Trevor: You know, one of the things that the world history has not done well is to really bring forward and accept alternate ways of viewing the world and viewing the world's past that are not our historical ways of doing that.

So how can we do better? Well, I think one of the ways we can do better is by lowering the disciplinary boundaries so that we are more open to things like the findings of historical linguists and linguistics, and we do treat those things with some equal value.

And so I think we have to reevaluate and say there's a huge value-- even if we don't know that this king list is correct or that oral tradition is accurate in the way we can, there's a huge value to opening up and trying to find out what the messages in those are and bringing that to students, and that value outweighs the cost of lowering our disciplinary borders for a little bit.

ORIAS: Are there questions about the past that you think are not historical questions?

Trevor: I think that there are questions about the past that historians don't know how to ask well yet, but I'm not sure what I would take about the past and say that's not a historical question.

There are answers that are not historical, right? There are answers that are neither sort of rigorous attempts to accurately represent the past nor are they attempts to interpret the past meaningfully for the present.

But you know, ten years ago we would have said, there's no way you can do a history of emotion in pre-colonial Africa, and now people using historical linguists are doing exactly that, right?

They are proposing that the way that words have changed over time, the way their meanings have changed over time can be tracked through rigorous practice and by doing that tracking, we can see that the way in which people's emotional worlds have changed. It's astounding to think now that we can do that, and that kind of change keeps happening.

What you-- what you're really asking, I feel, is for us to know where the boundaries of history as a discipline are as opposed to it's doubles, it's alternates, other ways of thinking about the past, heritage ways of thinking about the past, you know, tradition, tradition ways of thinking about and celebrating the past.

And I think that, rather than there being questions that history asks and questions that history doesn't, I think there are approaches to questions about the past that are sometimes historical and sometimes purely celebratory, right?

And I'm fine with that, I want to celebrate the past as well. You know, there are times when it's more appropriate to think about your heritage and it's more appropriate to embrace a tradition, but there are times in which you ask things about that tradition that are historical.

I'll just tell you one that pisses off many members of my family. I celebrate Hanukkah, why not? It's fun, it's a family tradition, although it's a very recent tradition, of course, and things like that, you know, but I would not have been on the Maccabees side back back then, right? The Maccabees were religious zealots, frankly, and the Seleucids were cosmopolitans who wanted all kinds of religions in this area.

Does that mean I can't celebrate this holiday? No, I can celebrate with my family, it does mean that I'm going to bore them to death by reminding them that I would not have been on the Maccabees side and that that's-- that is not an accurate representation.

You can believe it, I do this, I do this. I also do it at Passover, I remind them that at Passover, what we're actually celebrating is like a genocide of Egyptian children. It's a horrible story and, you know, I'm not going to like embrace that, but I'll go to Passover, the chicken soup's really good.