

Gail Hershatter

June 5, 2019 Comments to Graduating Students

Good afternoon to all of you. Seven years ago, we started this celebration for graduates in History, Classics, German Studies, and Jewish Studies. Many of us attend the graduation ceremonies for the Colleges, and they are important and moving occasions, but we are not guaranteed to see many of OUR students at any given College ceremony. We wanted a chance to honor you and to mark an important transformation in your lives and in ours, as you go forth from our classrooms and the university into work, study, travel, and exploration of all sorts. Over the years this has become one of our most cherished occasions. And before I go any further, let me stop and thank the people who have been particularly important in making this year's celebration happen: our chair, Matt O'Hara, Undergraduate Education Committee Chair Kate Jones, and above all the staff: Stephanie Hinkle, Rose Greenberg, Cindy Morris, and your tireless undergraduate coordinator, Stephanie Sawyer.

When Kate Jones asked me to give this year's faculty remarks, I did what all historians do when confronted with a new topic: I did some research. I read the comments made by faculty on this occasion over the last seven years, preserved on the History Department web page. I discovered an enormous amount of useful information in what they had to say: about why historical skills will be useful to you in whatever you do next, about how to go about the business of figuring out WHAT you do next, about why history matters more broadly. I commend their comments to you—they are full of great advice. I also discovered that several of my colleagues probably should have gone into stand-up comedy. That was intimidating. I don't promise to make you laugh today—at least not intentionally—but I do hope that what I have to say will make you think.

And although some of what I have to say is troubling, I also hope to convey to you that—armed with your ability to think historically about people in other times and places—you, and all of us together, will find ourselves equal to the challenges we face at this moment. Not because the generations that came before us faced exactly the same problems—they did not. But because understanding how people approached past dilemmas can help us reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what has shifted over time in the possibilities available to us. History is not a roadmap, or a GPS. But it is good to think with.

Let me start with a story about something that happened to me when I was first studying in China, long ago, in 1979, at Nankai University in the city of Tianjin. I was affiliated with the History department there and was assigned a Chinese roommate. History majors at Nankai had two options: they could study Chinese history, or World History. I had not been there long before the World History students started their unit on U.S. history. It was easy for me to track what they were doing any given week, because people would approach me in the university dining hall, or on the street, or even come to my dorm room (which took some doing because they had to register at the door and indicate which foreign student they were visiting). One week someone would appear and ask: “What do the American people think of George Washington?” The next week, “What do the American people think of Abraham Lincoln?” A bit later: “What do the American people think of FDR?” And so forth. I had a hard time explaining to people that “the American people” probably didn't have a unified opinion about any president except maybe George Washington, and that I doubted that many American people thought about past Presidents at all. I was very moved by their level of curiosity and willingness to try to understand a foreign society. After all, in the early 1980s, when I returned to the U.S., I never encountered American students coming up to Chinese students to ask them, “what do the

Chinese people think about the first Emperor of China? Or Mao Zedong? Or Deng Xiaoping?” These Chinese students had an awareness that the rest of the world was important; it seemed to me, then, that American students could use a bit more of that.

But what most struck me was the underlying assumption held by the Chinese students who asked me those questions, that the purpose of understanding history was to reach a clear shared public verdict. Two things struck me about this. First,, this assumption that doing History was about reaching stable verdicts had strong historical antecedents in classical times. For almost two thousand years, the official history of each dynasty was written by the next dynasty—that is, by the people who had overthrown it. For instance, Qing dynasty historians in the 17th and 18th century labored for almost 100 years to put together the history of the Ming dynasty that they had overthrown. The chief purpose of writing these histories was to catalogue, once and for all, the achievements of one’s predecessors, and the mistakes and shortcomings that had led to their decline.

The second thing that struck me was that at the very moment students were asking me these questions, Chinese society was engaged in a public national reassessment of its own recent past. Mao Zedong, the longtime chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, had died in 1976, and the Chinese leadership was in the midst of preparing a major historical document on his leadership. And ordinary people, too, were obsessed with discussing Mao, particularly his role in the Cultural Revolution.

The Party leadership finally issued its document in 1981, five years after Mao’s death. It concluded that although Mao had many glorious achievements to his credit—founding the Chinese Communist Party, leading the revolution that triumphed in 1949, facilitating socialist construction—he had also made mistakes, particularly in the last two decades of his life, that

caused disruption and tragedy for millions of people. (The details are too complicated to go into here—some of you know them already.) For the Party, the purpose of issuing this document was to declare an end to the Mao era, to reset the course of the Chinese nation, and also to acknowledge, for all the people who had been displaced or politically persecuted or worse because of Mao's decisions, that they had been wronged and that future policies would not target them again.

In other words, in both of these cases—the dynastic history case and the Mao case—the purpose of historical research was to assess praise and blame. A verdict disposes, but it also forecloses other possibilities of understanding the past. The intention of these verdicts was to put the past firmly in the past and move on.

In telling you this story about eagerness to arrive at a historical verdict and consign the past to the past, I do not mean to suggest that historians should not make judgments. We do that all the time. I am not saying that all points of view are equally valid, or equally partial and therefore invalid. As the historian Linda Gordon says, “Just because there is no single truth does not mean that there are no lies.” This is a statement well worth keeping in mind at our particular historical moment.

But I want to suggest that if we look at history as a set of stable unchanging facts, on which we can pass judgment and then move on, we are missing two important things about history. In the spirit of making judgments, I will say that one of these important things (in my opinion) is positive and the other one is negative. And we need to pay attention to both of them.

Here's the first important thing. We can never arrive at a complete, enclosed account of the past, because there is much we can never know, and also because our own questions, shaped by contemporary concerns, keep changing. For instance, until the latter part of the twentieth

century, no one thought it was particularly important to investigate the history of women in particular times and places. Women's history emerged as a rich subfield more or less in conjunction with the second wave of feminism, when political life in the 1960s and 1970s inspired people to raise the question, "Where were the women?" First, historians set about proving that "women were there too"—present at historical events we already knew were important, such as revolutions and wars. Then they began to look at ways that women's lived experiences might have differed from those of men, asking whether women had had a Renaissance, or whether women had experienced a Chinese revolution. Historians began to ask how adding women's history to the mix changed the whole picture, and to talk about gender history, and about gendering and the gendered division of labor and the symbolic uses of gender as important and changing features of history. They began to disaggregate the category of "women" by generation, age, ethnicity, region, and so forth. In short, they went back—we go back—to history again and again with new insights and new questions, often questioned stimulated by events in our own present.

Women's history is not the only example of what happens when we revisit the past with new questions. Historians have asked about the lived experience of slavery, and the central economic role that slavery played in building the New World. As well as about the circulation of goods, ideas, and peoples well before our current era of tightly linked globalization. Sometimes we encounter stubborn silences—not everyone left a written record, not all memories are reliable or complete, and many aspects of historical experience are unrecoverable. But every time we ask a new question—every time we approach the past by saying, as our colleague Jim Clifford puts it, "Not so fast. What else is there?"—we have the potential to learn something else important. Since our new questions are not formulated outside of history, they often reflect our

contemporary concerns and sensibilities. The rise of environmental history, in our era of accelerating climate change, is a good example. Asking how we got here, and how people in other times and places approached major challenges and threats, is more than an exercise in intellectual pleasure (or pain). It is a necessary piece of the work we must do to proceed responsibly in understanding our world, repairing it, and trying to leave it better than we found it.

So that's a positive thing about studying history. It means that even as we make judgments, we also need to recognize that all verdicts are provisional, open to new questions shaped by our own times and new information recoverable from other times. It is a storehouse of wisdom and lessons and mistakes and catastrophe—an incomparable resource, one you have learned to draw upon in your studies here

A second, more troubling thing about the power of history is that it is available as what I think of as the source of zombie events. "Zombie event" is not a technical or generally accepted category. I made it up, and someday I may disregard it as inadequate. But right now I find the notion of a "zombie event" useful to describe past events that refuse to stay put in the past, that suddenly heave themselves up from the supposedly inert past and roam around the landscape doing damage. Zombies were probably not what William Faulkner had in mind in 1951 when he made his famous statement that "The past is never dead. It's not even past." But zombie events take on a life of their own in the present.

I will give you an example from Chinese history. In 1644, the Manchus conquered China. It was a brutal conquest in which many men died and many women committed suicide in the belief that this was the only honorable way to avoid being raped. At the time, some people wrote memoirs that contained accounts of these events. But over the next few centuries the Manchus

settled in and ruled China, with lots of help from Chinese civilian officials and military personnel.

Then, in the late 19th century, foreign imperialism and simmering domestic problems began to destabilize Qing rule. And at that point, a whole range of political actors—including the leader of a peasant rebellion who thought he was the younger brother of Jesus, as well as a host of turn-of-the-century radicals—rediscovered the Manchu conquest, and began to talk about it as if it had happened last week, rather than many generations earlier—as if it had happened to them personally, and was a recent injury that must be avenged for China to survive. Clearly, the late 19th-century crisis incited people to remember that they were being ruled by conquerors, no matter how assimilated those conquerors were, and to declare that the conquerors must be expelled for China to return to its earlier greatness. Suddenly, the Manchus were denounced as an alien race—a concept that had not even existed when they first conquered China, but that definitely shaped the way late-19th-century people saw the world. In a revolution stimulated in no small part by this line of thinking, in 1911 the Manchus were overthrown.

To understand why the Manchu conquest regained its power to disturb after a relative quiescence of more than 200 years, we cannot just go back to the conquest itself. We have to look closely at what brought it back to life—not exactly as it was originally, but in zombie form. Those of you who study other histories can surely offer examples from your own areas of study—the Crusades, the fall of Constantinople, even Make America Great Again.

I am not a connoisseur of zombie literature, but in my limited encounters with the genre, when zombies are roaming around, they bear some resemblance to the humans they maybe once were, but they are not identical to the thing they used to be. They are generally powerful,

frightening, and up to no good. A zombie event is probably not something you want shaping your nation's sense of itself or its place in the world.

Last week one of my students, after a quarter studying zombie events in Chinese history, asked whether maybe we should talk about Frankenstein events, so we could ask with some precision, who is responsible for this coming-to-life? Who is the necromancer? But to me, the interesting and disturbing thing about zombie events is that there is seldom a single agent. We may be able to say that one individual coined the phrase Make America Great Again, but many people have shaped it into a powerful—and powerfully flawed—understanding of the American past. The causes are multiple, the agents are diffuse, and the need for analysis and argument is pressing in order to put the zombie—a reanimated but not-quite-realistic historical event—back where it belongs, in a fully contextualized past.

So we can go to the past as an ever-changing storehouse, and we must also cope with its destructive reanimation and redeployment in the present. Both of these are tasks are pressing. Both are tasks that you—with your training in historical research and analysis—are well-prepared to undertake.

And one more thing about you, your experience, and your skills. People often say that in graduating from university, people are leaving the ivory tower and going out into the real world. This dichotomy has always been a dubious one, but here, today, for graduates of UCSC, it is downright malarkey. Of course, the university is a privileged place, but a public university is not sealed off from the world around it. You have incurred debt to be here, or you know people who have. You have worked at paying jobs to make ends meet here, or you know people who have. You have dealt with being undocumented, or you know people who have. You have lived in an

environment where food precarity, access to affordable shelter, mental health, sexual violence and sexual harassment, and growing inequality are all live issues.

In short, the university is in and of society—it is a dense node of relationships and social contradictions shaped by the society around it. But it is also a place where people put their heads together to analyze, debate, argue, expose, articulate, and imagine—a place that commits itself to developing ways to make the world better. Take what you have learned with you. Keep thinking, talking, arguing, questioning about what is worth fighting to preserve, or restore, or create for the first time.

A last comment. As you leave campus, you will see colorful banners that say “be xxx (disciplined, open, etc.)—because actions speak louder than words.” Start your critical analysis by squinting hard at those banners before you go. Actions are surely important, but I propose that we retire the phrase “actions speak louder than words.” As majors in History, Classics, Jewish Studies, and German Studies, you know that we use words to imagine and inspire actions. That words sometimes are themselves actions. That when we stop to reflect on our actions, or enlarge our understanding, we do so in words. Use your actions—including your words—to make some headway on repairing this world of ours and helping it to flourish. You are not alone in facing that task—we are all there with you.

And finally—as one of those banners I just complained about also says—be celebrative. We celebrate you and applaud what you have done here. Graduates of the class of 2019, go forth with our congratulations and warm wishes, and remember that we are eager to hear news of you and your lives as they unfold.