

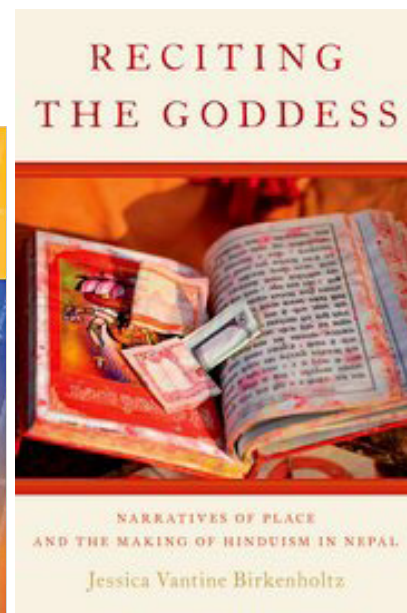
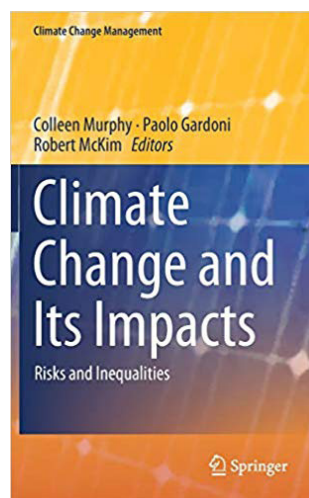
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

Welcome to the third issue of the Department of Religion Newsletter

The third issue of the newsletter brings news of two faculty publications: Professor Emeritus Robert McKim's co-edited volume, *Climate Change and Its Impacts*, and Professor Birkenholtz's book, *Reciting the Goddess*. A detailed report on Professor Birkenholtz's book appears on pages 4-6.

Professor Jonathan Ebel's project on the history of various faces of religion in New Deal California, awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 2017, is discussed on Page 3.

Our Monday Coffee Hours, from 12:30 PM to 1:30 PM remain popular among faculty, students and teaching assistants. If you are on campus on a Monday, stop by our library in Room 3014 for coffee, desserts and conversation.

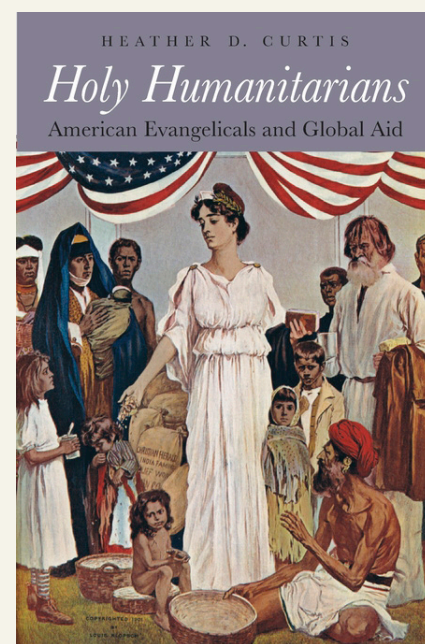


THULIN AND OTHER LECTURES

Professor Heather Curtis, Tufts University, was invited by the Department of Religion to visit the University of Illinois on October 25, 2018, to discuss her new book, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Harvard University Press, 2018) and the relationship of evangelicals, past and present, to global humanitarianism. Professor Curtis writes about how religion has shaped responses to humanitarian disasters, economic crises, and illness from the late-nineteenth century to the present. By exploring the ways American Christians of earlier generations endeavored to relieve suffering, she uncovers the seeds of today's heated debates about the practice of philanthropy, the politics of poverty relief, and the ethics of medicine.

The Department of Religion was the co-sponsor, with the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities (IPRH), of a lecture by Esra Özyurek, Associate Professor and Chair for Contemporary Turkish Studies at the London School of Economics' European Institute. The title of Professor Özyurek's lecture on September 20, 2018, was "Generation Allah: Democratizing Muslim Men and Holocaust Memory in Germany."

The Annual **Marjorie Hall Thulin Lecture** for 2019 will be held on Wednesday, March 6. The speaker is Professor David P. Gushee, Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics and Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. The title of his lecture will be "From Wilberforce to Malala: Assessing the Religious and Ethical Journeys of Transformative Leaders."





Message from the department head

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EDITOR

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta

The importance of religion in our world is evident. Religion has inspired great literature, informed cultural traditions, and impacts not only individuals, but global society and politics. We often hear about religion as a divisive element in society, but it also inspires humanitarian initiatives and movements for social justice. Professor Heather Curtis of Tufts University spoke on our campus in October about how religion has shaped American responses to humanitarian disasters, economic crises and illness. And this year's Marjorie Hall Thulin Scholar in Religion and Contemporary Culture will be David P. Gushee, Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics, Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University, and immediate past president of the American Academy of Religion. His lecture, "From Wilberforce to Malala: Assessing the Religious and Ethical Journeys of Transformative Leaders," will be delivered on Wednesday, March 6, 2019 at 7:30 pm in the Spurlock Museum, 606 S. Gregory Street, Urbana. Everyone is invited to attend.

In the past year the University of Illinois formally recognized "religion and spirituality" as a new focus area within the Division of Student Affairs. Noting the role of religion and spirituality in students' lives and identities, Vice Chancellor Danita M. B. Young invited members of the university community from various faith traditions to a discussion of what faith development and interfaith engagement could look like on our campus. Professor Bruce Rosenstock, who initiated and administers our department's undergraduate certificate in interfaith studies, participated in that meeting. In addition, he, Professor Emeritus Robert McKim and I have been meeting regularly with local interfaith leaders to plan a series of events to take place in October and November that will promote interfaith understanding on our campus and in the community. This is just one exciting dimension of our department's activities.

Our faculty continues to be very productive in scholarship, teaching and service to the university and beyond. My course, "Muslim Ethics in the Global Age," is being shared with the University of Michigan through the Mellon-funded Digital Islamic Studies Curriculum. Our faculty's research has been recognized around the world, as indicated by invitations to deliver lectures and conference papers in the U.S. and abroad. Our department is hosting two visiting scholars who came to work with members of our faculty: Muhammed Enes Topgül of Turkey, a scholar on hadith, is working with Professor Michael Dann, and Ardalan Zamani, a philosophy of religion doctoral student at the University of Tehran, is working with Robert McKim. This year Rini B. Mehta is a faculty fellow at both the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities and the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, working on two different projects, and a third project was recently awarded \$150,000 under the new University of Illinois Presidential Initiative to Celebrate the Impact of the Arts and the Humanities (see page 7). Michael Dann will also be a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study next year, and Jessica Birkenholtz will be a fellow at the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities (IPRH). As department head, I am grateful for the depth of my colleagues' commitment to excellence, as well as for the wonderful students whom we have the privilege of teaching.

Valerie J. Hoffman

Head, Department of Religion

GUGGENHEIM PROJECT

Professor Jonathan Ebel, Guggenheim Fellow (2017), is writing a book on religious formulations in New Deal California

The 1930s were difficult years for many Americans. They were devastating for men and women who drew their living from the land. The Great Depression compounded farmers' preexisting financial pain and accelerated environmental and economic trends that were already turning small-scale farmers into tenants, tenants into sharecroppers, and sharecroppers into migratory agricultural workers. Between 1932 and 1940, roughly 500,000 farm workers abandoned lives and land on the Great Plains and other parts east for hopes of a better future in California. In 1935, recognizing the depth and complexity of the agricultural crisis, the federal government launched the Resettlement Administration. The RA's goal, simply put, was to save American agriculture from itself. This involved a re-imagining of land use practices, the development of programs to keep small-scale farming viable, and direct interventions in the lives of America's poorest, most vulnerable agricultural workers. RA officials familiar with the particularities of California agriculture and its dependence on migratory labor proposed a system of camps to provide refuge and reeducation to the men, women, and children who survived by "following the harvest." Beginning with test camps in the California towns of Marysville and Arvin, the RA system grew to include fifteen fixed-site and three mobile camps. By late 1939 the camp system, now operated by the Farm Security Administration, accommodated roughly eighteen thousand agricultural migrants.

These federal spaces of refuge were conceived out of benevolence. RA/FSA officials insisted, often in the face of ferocious counterarguments from growers and townspeople, that the migrants were fully American and deserved government assistance. Yet always present in these pleas, as text and as subtext, was the belief that the agricultural refugees were not fully civilized and, without proper practical and spiritual guidance, would devolve into primitivism and savagery. Camp managers throughout California wrote repeatedly that before migrants could be reattached to the American civic and economic body, they had to wash off years of accumulated dirt, let go of antique worldviews and ecstatic worship practices, and embrace modernity.



Modernity is hardly a universal concept, much less a religiously or morally neutral one. Those who describe and adjudicate the modern, especially those who work to convert others to it, do so with normative stances and religious investments easily obscured by appeals to reason, science, and progress. The work of convincing a person to clean and maintain her body in a modern way begins with an effort to convince her that the old ways leave her physically and morally unclean; the modern reflex to consult a doctor when one is sick begins with the assumption, far from universal in Depression-era America, that healing is a matter of science, not faith. The RA/FSA migrant camp program was thus committed to a deeply normative civilizational catechesis and actions that had clear religious implications and real consequences for families who chose to move out of rural slums and into government-sponsored communities.



Goergie Nunn, a migrant woman and a Pentecostal evangelist. She lived in the federal migrant camp in Arvin, California and worked as the housekeeper for Tom Collins, manager of the camp.

Professor Jon Ebel's new book, tentatively titled *Reforming Religion: New Deal California and the Redemption of America* will be a study of the cultural and spiritual dynamics of the decade-long encounter between white agricultural migrants and New Deal officials in rural California. Ebel demonstrates the essential emptiness of two key concepts for the modern imagination: "the religious" and "the secular." The encounter between an ascendant liberal state and downwardly mobile, displaced agricultural workers found New Deal officials-- self-proclaimed secular actors-- preaching faith in America, in capitalism, and in modernity; it found Dust Bowl migrants -- men and women immersed in the culture of biblical literalism and ecstatic worship-- ordering and affirming their lives through work, recreation, and the maintenance of domestic spaces. This study lays bare the ubiquity of appeals to faith, reliance on ritual, and concerns for individual and communal purity across New Deal California, and the complexity of modern American world-ordering practices.

FEATURE ARTICLE



Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal

For eleven months each year, the goddess Svasthānī is wrapped cozily in red cloth and safely stored in the homes of Nepal’s Hindus, locked away in closets or cabinets or sometimes even stashed away under the bed. Svasthānī, whose name literally translates as the ‘Goddess of One’s Own Place,’ is a local Nepali goddess. She is an intriguing figure because of the ways in which she defies easy identification. Her name, for instance, is unique insofar as it offers little tangible information about who she is or her personal history, unlike others in her divine cohort such as Durgā (‘Inaccessible One’ or ‘Invincible One’) or Pārvatī (‘She of the Mountains’), whose names refer explicitly to key aspects of their mythology. Svasthānī also evades simple description as either a so-called wild or mild goddess or in terms of her iconography, as she is a historically aniconic deity who yet possesses a form of great beauty. Traditionally an elusive figure, it is only during the winter month of Māgh (mid-January to mid-February) that Svasthānī is brought out from the private, protected places in the home to be worshipped daily by Nepal’s Hindus. It is during this month that Nepali Hindus celebrate the annual recitation of the Svasthānīvratakathā, or the story (kathā) of the ritual vow (vrata) to the goddess Svasthānī, and the ritual observance based upon it, the Svasthānī vrat, the vow to Svasthānī. Both the recitation of the text and the ritual observance of the vrat span the thirty-one days of the month and are observed only during Māgh. Reciting and listening to the text earns devotees religious merit and a boon from the goddess.

The Svasthānī Kathā (as Nepalis commonly refer to it) is one of Nepal’s most well-known and often-read and heard storytelling traditions. According to most Nepalis, it is celebrated “in every Hindu household in Nepal” each year, which I have largely found to be true over my twenty years of studying the text. The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, the indigenous inhabitants of the valley, have a particularly long association with the tradition. At the same time, Nepal’s socially and politically dominant high-caste Hindus, i.e., Bahuns and Chetris (in Sanskrit, Brahmins and Kshatriyas), whose heritage is in the hills of the Himalaya and the Gangetic plains, also claim the tradition as their own. How is it, then, that both the goddess and her tradition have largely escaped scholarly attention?

My new book, *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal* (Oxford University Press, 2018) addresses this lacuna with a critical study of Svasthānī and her tradition, with a particular focus on the Svasthānī Kathā (also abbreviated here as the SVK) textual tradition. Based on extensive archival and ethnographic research conducted in Nepal between 2004 and 2016, I reconstruct the emergence of this local goddess and the making of this Nepali Hindu tradition that began in the sixteenth century. It started as a simple local legend and expanded over the centuries into a several-hundred-page authoritative Purāṇa text that is the primary source for Nepali Hindu belief and identity. Remarkably, the Svasthānī Kathā boasts an unbroken written tradition in a historically non-literate culture and is celebrated annually to this day by hundreds of thousands of Nepali Hindus. Further, I employ Svasthānī and the Svasthānī Kathā as a lens through which we can bear witness to the making of modern Hinduism in Nepal more broadly. I weave together these and other narrative threads from Nepal’s past to offer a more comprehensive and integrated account of Nepal’s religious, cultural, and literary history – histories that are often disparate and overshadowed by its political history.

Professor Birkenholtz’s book, *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and Making of Hinduism in Nepal* was published by Oxford University Press in 2018.

Reciting the Goddess

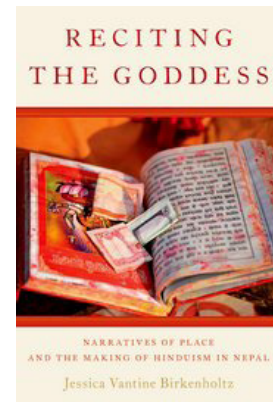
Specifically, it is the focus of *Reciting the Goddess* to excavate these narratives that are reflected in the pages of the Svasthānī Kathā and contextualize them within a broader framework of the religious, cultural, and political movements and conversations on the Indian subcontinent that shaped medieval and modern Nepal. These discourses informed the forging of Nepal’s identity as a Hindu kingdom, particularly vis-à-vis Hindu identity elsewhere in the region. In doing so, this book brings to the fore a marginalized piece of the larger narratives of Hinduism that dominate the study of both Hinduism and South Asia. In particular, it highlights the meaningful ways in which the goddess Svasthānī and, even more so, the Svasthānī Kathā can be viewed as a medium through which the effects of important shifts in the political and cultural landscape that occurred at the highest levels of Nepal’s court(s) and ruling families trickled down to the masses and are evidenced within one decidedly local, lay tradition.

At the most fundamental level, the Svasthānī Kathā is just a text, a collection of stories. But it is a text that has been shared and understood within a growing community and over several hundred years. It is in this process of sharing, interpreting, and retelling that these readings have had a great effect upon understandings of identity among individuals, local and regional communities, and even nations. While these stories are grounded in the geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural specificities of Nepal, *Reciting the Goddess* aims to explore more broadly the reflexive, layered relationship between people, places, and literature as a critical site for identity negotiation and the translation of ideology into and through practice.

The privileged status and embeddedness of the Svasthānī Kathā in Nepali Hindu culture and identity cannot be overstated. As one Nepali interlocutor put it, “People—scholars—often think only of the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, and Bhagavad-gītā as the most important texts for Hinduism, but for Nepalis, it is the Svasthānī Kathā.” The widespread popularity of the Svasthānī Kathā and the use of its stories as a shared cultural vocabulary among Nepal’s Hindu majority (80% of 29 million) is reflected in its ubiquity.

Although I did not know it at the time, *Reciting the Goddess* was a project for which the initial seed was planted as an undergraduate study abroad student in Nepal in 1996. During my primary period of research in 2004–2006 as a PhD student (with follow-up trips in 2008, 2014, and 2016), I studied the extensive (over 600) collection of Sanskrit, Newar, and Nepali-language SVK manuscripts at Nepal’s National Archives and other local archival collections, ultimately selecting 125 to survey (approximately five SVK texts per century from the sixteenth to twentieth century) and two dozen to read closely. SVK manuscripts are often found in curio shops, where I found one from 1830 that contains some of the earliest painted images of the goddess Svasthani, as well as a rare illuminated SVK manuscript from 1845.

I also documented another two dozen handwritten texts found in the homes of Nepali residents in the village of Sankhu, my primary non-archival field site, where a communal, public performance of the



continued on Page 6

Svasthanī ritual vow is observed. One of my fondest memories while doing fieldwork for this book occurred on a sunny January afternoon in 2005 while a Nepali friend and I were warming ourselves over a hot cup of Nepali tea. I asked him if I could see his family's copy of the Svasthānī Kathā. He happily complied and began to rummage around under the sole bed/seating area in the tiny 6x6 room where we were sitting. After pulling out various odds and ends, he presented me with a small cloth bound package. The tight cloth wrapping, once dark in color, was now faded with age and lightened by dust. I eagerly accepted the package and carefully unwrapped the cloth to find the text situated between two dark wooden covers. There were four flower maṇḍalas carved into each cover, all brightly colored with various shades of yellow and red sindur from repeated worship. I scanned the yellowed but well-preserved folios of this family heirloom - my eyes hungry to understand the classical Newar language and script that was unintelligible to my friend, a farmer by trade, and would only become familiar to me after several more months of research and study. But I knew my numerals well enough to read the date of composition given at the end of the text: Nepal Samvat 664, or 1764 CE! I was shocked to find such a treasure and to know that my friend kept it nonchalantly under his bed. As I sat there reflecting on this unexpected discovery, all I could think was that history can be found in the most unexpected of places!

After months of studying Classical Newar with a Nepali teacher, I was able to read this and other SVK manuscripts in addition to the Sanskrit and Nepali-language manuscripts. As noted earlier, the oldest SVK manuscripts from the late sixteenth and early twentieth century narrated a short local legend about the power of the local goddess Svasthānī as demonstrated through the trials and triumphs of a pious mother, her sinful daughter-in-law, and their son/husband. Between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, my reading of SVK manuscripts revealed that this foundational folk story was amended in three distinct phases with three sets of well-known Hindu myths culled from the Sanskrit Purāṇa corpus. In the first phase, the SVK added a popular Śaiva narrative cycle in praise of the great god Śiva that details his marriage first with Satī and later with Pārvatī, Satī's reincarnation. In the second phase, the SVK introduced a creation myth with both Vaiṣṇava (Viṣṇu worship) and Śakta (goddess worship) overtones. In the third and final phase, another series of Śaiva myths was added that includes, among others, the burning of Kāmādev, the rape of Vṛnda, and the births of Gaṇeś and Kumār, and/or a series of didactic narratives was added.

The cumulative value of these developments is three-fold. First, they broadened the temporal and geo-mytho-historical framework of the text by moving away from the this-worldly, locally-situated and focused concerns of the "original" SVK folk narrative of the mother, daughter-in-law, and son/husband. Second, they establish the SVK as a central warehouse for local articulations of different sectarian devotional traditions otherwise most prominently found in the Sanskrit Purāṇas. Third, they establish the SVK itself as a Purāṇa text and, ultimately, as the primary source for Hindu religious, social, and culture beliefs and practices in Nepal—in short, for Nepali Hindu identity. Together, these developments reflected contemporary conversations circulating broadly on the Indian subcontinent and in historical Nepal regarding notions of Hindu identity and place and, more specifically, of Hindu womanhood. Historically and today, the Svasthānī Kathā holds a place of privilege for Nepali Hindus on account of its local origin and specificity, coupled with its breadth of pan-Indic mythology and ideology.

In addition to my textual, archival findings that are the foundation of *Reciting the Goddess*, I infuse the book with ethnographic vignettes from formal and informal interviews with ritual participants, devotees, and others, as well as from Nepali media accounts and newspaper editorials to reinforce the fact that the Svasthānī Kathā is a living tradition that remains a defining devotional and cultural experience for many Nepali Hindus. Further, I draw on my observance of the ritual performance in Sankhu five times between 1999 and 2014, and my participation listening to the stories with numerous families over the years.

Professor Jessica V. Birkenholtz is Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Illinois. She will be a Faculty Fellow at the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities (IPRH) in 2019-20.

FROM THE PAGES OF OUR HISTORY

Compiled by Dr. Wayne Pitard, Professor Emeritus

In the fall of 1968, Howard Marblestone, a graduate of Brandeis University in Hebrew Bible, and Vernon Robbins, a graduate of the University of Chicago in New Testament, arrived on campus. But rather than being placed in a newly founded Department of Religion, they were appointed to the Classics Department. The state Board of Higher Education had refused to allow a Department of Religion to be established, apparently convinced that such a department could only function as a training ground for ministers.

Faced with this obstacle, the University decided merely to set up a Committee on Religion, with no faculty lines or budget of its own. Many professors of the original committee were dissatisfied with this and pressed instead for the formation of an interdisciplinary program in religion that would possess faculty lines. By 1971, the idea had been approved, and a search was made for a senior scholar to set up the new Program in Religious Studies. William R. Schoedel, a specialist in early Christianity who was teaching at Brown University, was hired for the position. This proved to be a spectacularly good choice.

Schoedel arrived in the fall of 1971 as a professor, 50% in Classics and 50% in Religious Studies. From the beginning, he was interested in making the Program into a full-fledged department. The first order of business was to get faculty lines into the Program, and he quickly was able to shift 67% of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament appointments into the Program. Thus Marblestone and Robbins settled in as joint members of Religious Studies and their original departments.

Marblestone left the University in the spring of 1972 and was replaced by David Petersen, who was two-thirds in Religious Studies and one-third in Linguistics. Then Schoedel went after some new appointments. The true founding of the Program as a virtual department came in 1973, when the University hired Gary Porton in Judaica and placed him 100% in Religious Studies. This appointment was so critical because in University policy tenure resides only in departments. Until now programs had always been understood as interdisciplinary groups of faculty whose appointments and tenure resided within the members' departments, while a percentage of their work was assigned within the Program. But now the Program had a faculty member who did not reside in any department, only in the Program. In view of the difficulty the University had had in trying to create an actual Department of Religion, the administration simply accommodated the irregularity created by Porton's appointment. And thus Schoedel had formed a virtual department, with its own budget and faculty lines, and in which tenure could reside, a department that was called a program for thirty-five years and that could function without having to receive that actual designation from the Board of Higher Education.

to be continued

STUDENTS SHARE THEIR STORIES

Asena Acar is a second-year M.A. student in Religion focusing on Islam. She hopes to pursue a PhD in Religious Studies with a focus on Islam in the modern world and Islam in America. She would like to focus on political Islam and Islamophobia and the relationship between the two phenomena.

Beau Ott is a second-year M.A. student in the Department of Religion. His primary research area is religion in America, with a focus on the intersections of evangelicalism, gender and sexuality, secularism, and twentieth-century American politics. He has recently applied to a number of Ph.D. programs in religion, and hopes to begin doctoral work in the fall of 2019.

Heather M. Wetherholt is a second-year M.A. student studying religion in America through the lens of comics and graphic narratives. She has spent the last year examining the representation of evangelical Christians in graphic novels, Christian fundamentalism in fiction, and the use of the Indian Amar Chitra Katha comics in retelling Hindu mythology.

Levi Marshall's academic interests are in cultural connections between Islam and Judaism. He is interested in how the mystical and philosophical traditions of Islam and Judaism can enlighten each other. Allowing each of these traditions to hermeneutically unveil itself, he analyzes conceptual comparisons between these traditions which he believes enrich an understanding of each tradition.

Shuncai Yan joined the M.A. program in Religion in 2017; she received a B.A. in History from Sun Yat-sen University, China. Shuncai is interested in East Asian Buddhism, especially Chinese Buddhism. She is planning to learn Japanese.

FACULTY NEWS

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta, Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and of Religion, was awarded a major grant under the University of Illinois Presidential Initiative to Celebrate the Impact of the Arts and the Humanities. The initiative is a new funding opportunity across the three campuses of the University of Illinois, aimed at highlighting and celebrating the public good flowing from the arts and humanities. Professor Mehta has been awarded \$150,000 to support a project entitled *Global Film History from the Edges: Engineering a Comparative Public Humanities*. This project aims to create an online archive and research platform for the study of cinema on a global scale.

Under the broad rubric of digital humanities, Mehta's project will build a platform that approaches cinema from the edges of global reception, circulation, and influence. The aim is to bring the global public experience of cinema into the fold of film history.



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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