From the Interim Taft Faculty Chair

WELCOME TO THIS INAUGURAL ISSUE

Anne Runyan

of the first newsletter launched by Charles Phelps Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati (UC). This first issue of “Taft Talk” introduces you to the history and current activities of this unique humanities center. The memorial fund that gave rise to the modern Taft Research Center was founded in 1930 through the generosity of Annie Sinton Taft in memory of her husband, Charles Phelps Taft, a storied member of one of America’s “first families” who settled in Cincinnati. Her endowment envisioned a larger sense of what constituted the humanities, including fields that are now considered the social sciences as well as mathematics. Given the current interdisciplinary moment in which the humanities, social sciences, and sciences are shaping each other theoretically and methodologically, Annie Sinton Taft was prescient in imagining that the exchange of ideas across disparate disciplines would yield new thinking.

Despite its longevity and considerable endowment, the Charles Phelps Taft Research Center may not be as well known nationally as many newer humanities centers in the US. However, a good deal of the scholarship it has nurtured through research fellowships and other research support to faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates across thirteen departments at UC for almost a century has achieved regional, national, and international prominence. In addition to being significantly responsible for nurturing cutting-edge disciplinary and interdisciplinary research in the humanities writ-large at UC, the Taft Research Center has also consistently brought cutting-edge thinkers to UC. It has supported well over one thousand public lectures in Taft disciplines and interdisciplines and its annual symposium most recently hosted conversations between Michael Hardt and Raj Patel on the multitudes against Empire and between Carole Pateman and Charles Mills on the sexual and racial contract. This year, Taft is hosting Tavis Smiley for an urgent discussion about economic inequality and poverty, an event we highlight in this issue.

With this annual newsletter, we hope to continue to highlight the role Taft plays in the development of an expanded notion of the humanities, to reach out to other humanities centers and funding agencies, to create a more public face for Taft, and to further advance “the exchange of ideas” that is the core of Taft’s mission.

Taft Annual Symposium Features Tavis Smiley

The Taft Annual Symposium proudly welcomes as keynote speaker the celebrated author and public television and radio host Tavis Smiley. He is the popular host of the late-night television talk show Tavis Smiley on PBS as well as The Tavis Smiley Show and Smiley & West from Public Radio International. Honored by TIME magazine as one of “The World’s 100 Most Influential People,” Smiley is also the author of 16 books including his New York Times bestselling memoir What I Know For Sure, and his edited collection Covenant with Black America, which was the first nonfiction book by a Black-owned publisher to reach #1 on the New York Times best-sellers list.

Smiley has joined forces with Dr. Cornel West to co-author The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto, the central idea of which is that “ending poverty is sure to emerge as the defining civil rights struggle of America’s 21st century.” Smiley and West have undertaken a “poverty tour” to bring their ideas to communities and local leaders in dozens of cities across the United States. Under the auspices of Taft on April 4, Smiley will discuss the book and his challenge to all Americans to re-examine their assumptions about what poverty is and how to eradicate it.
When Annie Sinton Taft gave $2 million to the University of Cincinnati to help sustain an intellectual community devoted to “thought, conduct, and character,” the humanities were imagined much more narrowly than they are now. The year was 1930, and the tectonic social and political changes of the post-Civil-Rights era, out of which many contemporary fields evolved, were as yet unimagined. Classics, philosophy, and European languages comprised the bulk of the humanities. But at a time of rising European fascism just after the stock market crash, Sinton-Taft’s prescient concern was that with much of the world’s wealth tied up in industry, the culture of human ideas that is the backbone of a free democracy was vulnerable without more support. At a time of great economic uncertainty not entirely unlike our own, Taft Foundation funds were used to acquire library books and staff, and to support talented young professors in fields that began to enlarge the humanities at UC. Taft also began to support mathematics, economics, anthropology, sociology, and political science. Eighty-two years later, the contemporary Taft Research Center also supports the interdisciplines of Africana Studies, Judaic Studies, and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. While Taft still helps acquire library items and attract and reward exceptional faculty and student researchers, its arena has expanded significantly. Taft’s activities now include interdisciplinary research groups such as Urban and Global Studies, as well as public symposia and fora on topics of regional, national, and international importance.

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**Recent Taft Lectures**

Throughout this 2012–13 academic year, the Taft Research Center has sponsored a diverse array of over thirty talks by visiting scholars from the U.S. and abroad whose ideas are expanding the reach of the humanities. The innovative discoveries that speakers from such illustrious institutions as the University of Chicago and the University of California, Berkeley have recently brought to U.C. thanks to Taft have engaged both traditional and modern disciplines. The subjects of these talks often feature multidisciplinary issues that also attract new audiences to Taft.

A small sampling of topics presented throughout this 2012–13 academic year includes:

- new research on the experiences of low-income African-American men in the workplace
- how science is now meeting science fiction through the concept of “how things disappear”
- a recent study of discrimination against gays in the Bible Belt
- innovative explorations of the newly available Dead Sea Scrolls
- current findings on contemporary ethnic communities in Germany and Europe
- a fruitful filmmaking collaboration between American and European artists in Romania
- how the clash of generations is currently impacting the future of the U.S. economy

**A CONCENTRATION OF INTEREST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS.**

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**THE EXCEPTIONAL TAFTS**

The Taft Research Center bears the name of one of the most illustrious families in American history. The first woman to vote in a colonial election in 1756 was a Taft, as were an impressive list of 19th and 20th century judges, governors, senators, and one President, William Howard Taft.

His niece by marriage, Annie Sinton Taft, was a visionary philanthropist.

She dedicated a portion of her wealth to build a humanities foundation in the name of her late husband, the art-collector and *Cincinnati Times-Star* editor Charles Phelps Taft. In a remarkable insight at the start of the Great Depression, Mrs. Taft recognized that society’s emphasis on material goods needed to be balanced by a commitment to “a concentration of interest in the development of ideas.”

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**Bernadette Barton**

*“Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays”*  
January 17, 2013
SPOTLIGHT: TAFT FACULTY, TAFT FELLOWS

TAFT PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT:
International Math Pioneer

Dr. Magda Peligrad of the Department of Mathematics is proof positive that Taft’s reach goes behind what is thought of traditionally as the humanities. A Taft Professor since 2003, Dr. Peligrad is a pathfinder in an arena traditionally dominated by men: an influential scholar of mathematical theory with practical applications in a broad array of applied fields. When an international conference celebrating her achievements was held at the Sorbonne in 2010, Dr. Peligrad’s lifelong work was honored by dozens of leading scholars from elite institutions across Europe and the United States who attested to the critical importance of her discoveries across related disciplines. In addition to her Taft professorship, she has been the recipient of multiple Ohio Board of Regents, National Science Foundation, and National Security Agency grants. But she credits being named as a Taft Professor as the catalyst that catapulted her research to its international standing. “This high honor,” she says, “helped me interact with foreign mathematicians in fruitful collaborations that contributed to my research and led to my recognition at both the national and international levels.”

ABOUT TAFT PROFESSORSHIPS
Being named to the Taft Professoriate is one of the highest University of Cincinnati faculty honors. This title, which is granted to five faculty members, recognizes distinction in research, teaching, and publication in a Taft discipline.

TAFT CENTER FELLOW SPOTLIGHT:
Digging for a Lost World View

Taft Center Fellow Prof. Sarah Jackson is an archeologist whose excavations reveal both physical objects and valuable insights about how the ancient Mayans saw themselves and the world around them. Her Taft-supported project, “Reconstructing a Cultural Model of Materiality: Investigations of Classic Maya Objects and Identities,” is discovering the relationship between the beliefs of the Mayan people and the power accorded to sacred objects which was lost after the coming of the Europeans to Mesoamerica. In the Mayan world that Taft is helping her reconstruct, objects were “not simply possessions or indicators of status” but possessors of a “liveliness, power, and agency” which influenced human activity. Her project is an important part of an ongoing dialogue about how differently ancient cultures viewed the material world from the way that modern, and especially western cultures do. What Prof. Jackson is discovering, thanks to Taft, is a world in which “human-object relationships” are dynamic actors engaged in a social drama of their time and place.

ABOUT TAFT CENTER FELLOWSHIPS
Taft Center Fellowships offer a unique opportunity for faculty engaged in important research to engage in a truly interdisciplinary conversation at the Taft Research Center. These year-long fellowships allow Fellows from Taft departments to devote full-time effort towards significant projects whose progress they regularly share with each other across the disciplines.

TAFT DISSERTATION FELLOW SPOTLIGHT:
Examining the Asian Arms Race

Taft Dissertation Fellow Jacob Wilson isn’t only finishing his doctorate in Political Science: he is laboring to help us better understand an issue with key implications for American and global politics: the arms race between rival nations China and India. His Taft-supported doctoral dissertation project, "Military Modernization in China and India: Re-Evaluating the Distribution of Power," focuses on the fastest growing militaries in the world. His research is uncovering the elements that are driving this unparalleled military growth and the post-1980 redistribution of international power. This Taft-funded work includes a new database charting the growth of China’s and India’s respective weapons systems to help explain the causes of this build-up. These causes—economic, military, and political—have important implications for an audience that reaches far beyond Taft: in Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi.

ABOUT TAFT DISSERTATION FELLOWSHIPS
Taft Dissertation Fellowships offer unparalleled support for doctoral students across the Taft humanities disciplines to complete important dissertation research in the humanities.

INTERDISCIPLINARY & PUBLIC HUMANITIES

Taft seeks to raise the level of public discourse and impact public policy. Key vehicles for doing this are the Taft interdisciplinary research groups devoted to increasing the engagement of the humanities in the public sphere. Events cover topical issues such as the ethics of scientific experimentation, the future of globalization, the impact of gender on international economies, and the rights of poor people living in a developing urban environment.
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Contact TAFT Staff
Charles Phelps Taft Research Center
University of Cincinnati
Edwards One, Suite 1110
45 Corry Blvd., PO Box 0369
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0369
Phone: 513-556-0675
Fax: 513-558-7136
Email: taftcenter@uc.edu

Anne Sisson Runyan, PhD, Interim Taft Faculty Chair (2012-13)
Joy Dunn, Administrative Coordinator
Sean Keating, Program Director