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# Dr. Shelley Lee Interview (Journal of American History)

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## Interview



Dr. Shelley Lee is an editor on the Louis Pelzer Award Committee for the *Journal of American History*. She is also an Associate Professor of Comparative American Studies and History Affiliate of Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at Oberlin College. Dr. Lee specializes in Asian American history and has written two books: *Claiming the Oriental Gateway: Prewar Seattle and Japanese America* (2011); *Pacific Crossings: A New History of Asian America* (forthcoming).

- 1) What is the Louis Pelzer Memorial Award? How do you apply and who is eligible?

This is directly from the OAH website: “The Louis Pelzer Memorial Award Committee of the Organization of American Historians invites candidates for graduate degrees to submit essays for the Louis Pelzer Memorial Award competition. Essays may deal with any period or topic in the history of the United States. The winning essay will be published in the *Journal of American History*.”

- 2) Based on your experience as a member on the Pelzer Committee, how do the best submissions separate themselves from the rest of the competition?

Again, from the website: “Significance of the subject matter, literary craftsmanship, and competence in the handling of evidence are some of the factors that will be considered in judging the essays.”

Essays that make the strongest impression on me are well written with a clear thesis that is developed and sustained throughout and whose historical importance is explained. Most if not all of the entries represent a prodigious amount of research, but not all are able to see and explain the forest from the trees. Additionally, not only do I need to be able to find and understand the main argument, but I need to come away with an understanding of the “so what” dimension. Why should I care? Why is this important from a U.S. historical and historiographical standpoint? These things must be addressed explicitly, and too often authors don’t address this at all or leave it implicit.

- 3) For graduate students who are looking to submit their research for the first time, there may be many unknowns that loom over the inner workings of academic journals. Could you shed some light on the process of publication and walk us through, step-by-step?

Unless you work at a journal, I don't know if you'll ever know the inner workings of these entities, and they are all different, as are individual editors and reviewers. I would say read and follow all submission instructions very carefully. Know that finding readers and turning around reports often take longer than expected or promised, so get things in the pipeline earlier rather than later. If you get a revise and resubmit, and you wish to be published in the journal, work with your readers and editors rather than against them.

- 4) What happens after their work is accepted for publication? Can you provide a general time line of what to expect?

Once the essay is accepted, you may still have minor revisions to make. The piece will go through copy editing and formatting, and you should have at least one opportunity to review the manuscript and/or proof before it is published. Time lines vary depending on the journal and their publication schedules and backlogs, but it will probably be at least several months if not more between acceptance and publication.

- 5) Why should graduate students be interested in submitting their research? What do they have to gain from being published?

It's an important way to disseminate new knowledge and interpretations, and be part of a larger scholarly community and conversation. It's good experience and can greatly demystify what can be otherwise an intimidating process. More pragmatically, it is a great idea to get an article on your CV while still in grad school, as it will make you more competitive on the job market. I would also stress the importance of choosing a venue carefully. Don't just publish anywhere. Publish in a refereed journal that has recognition and respect among specialists in your field. Talk to your advisors or other senior scholars about this if you're not sure about which journals to approach.

- 6) Should graduate students consider presenting their research at a conference before submitting it for publication? Why or why not?

If you have a paper that you've worked hard on and reflects good research, then absolutely you should consider presenting it at a conference. Conferences can be hit and miss with regard to the quality of feedback one receives on works in progress, but at the very least it allows you to get your name out there and let people know about you and your research. Sometimes journal editors and publishers attend conference sessions looking for potential authors. And I've certainly had some wonderful discussants, co-presenters, and audience members push my work in productive new directions.

- 7) Are book reviews the smartest and easiest way for graduate students to land a publication? Or should they be putting all of their energy into publishing an article?

It doesn't hurt to write book reviews in graduate school, especially if there are books you already need or want to read for your research. It's a good skill to start developing early on as

you'll certainly do more over the course of your career. Plus, good book reviews are much appreciated by those reading them! I wouldn't go overboard with these, however, as book reviews in themselves are not going to be a game changer on your CV. One original research article "counts" in ways that even a hundred book reviews cannot. So I'd say if you have the time and interest in doing book reviews, by all means do them, but make sure your main writing energies are going toward what matter most—your dissertation and research publications.

- 8) Is there a way to find journals that publish graduate student work beyond a simple keyword search using Google? What should graduate students keep an eye out for when scouring the internet for a journal that fits their research?

I believe any journal will publish graduate student work (it's quality that matters, not the rank of the author!), but I don't have any advice on how to find venues that publish only graduate student work. As far as how to find an appropriate journal, think first about what journals you read and admire. Which ones publish the best, most interesting work in your field? Go from there. In addition, I would talk with your advisor or other senior mentors who are engaged with and knowledgeable about the publishing landscape. Hopefully they can also give you an honest assessment of your work so that you can aim appropriately (i.e., not too high, but also not too low).

- 9) What are some common mistakes that you see graduate students make time and again? Can you offer any advice on how to avoid making the same mistakes in the future?

Not being engaged with or in conversation with the wider literature. And as I mentioned above, not being able to explain the "so what" part of your research. Why should anyone care? While it can greatly boost one's CV to have a publication while still in grad school, the larger mistake I've seen among ABD's is not having any clear plan for publication (articles, book proposal, etc.). As you write your dissertation, be thinking about which chapter(s) you might want to turn into an article. And as your filing date approaches, it's never too early to think about when you may want to submit a book proposal, what kinds of revisions you'll eventually want to make, etc.

- 10) What documents should graduate students have prepared when the time comes to submit their research to a journal (e.g. abstract, CV, cover letter, etc)?

These sound good, but I would also consult the guidelines of the individual journals. They are usually very thorough.

- 11) If a graduate student has some questions regarding a journal is it appropriate to email the editor? What questions should they ask? What questions should they avoid?

Don't ask questions that are already covered in the guidelines. Most journals have websites that provide lots of information so make sure you've gone over everything that's readily available. The review process can be long and stressful, but journal editors cannot control if/when referees return their reports. Generally speaking, asking editors, "when will I hear back" is not productive—they won't know. If a process has dragged on, you could certainly inquire as to when the journal will decide to move on to another reviewer or otherwise make a decision on what to do about your article. That seems reasonable to me. But it's all case-by-case, so use your

good judgment and talk with peers and mentors first.

12) Finally, do you have any comments or insights you would like to add that the interview did not already cover?

It's a tough balance doing original, rigorous work and knowing when/how to put oneself "out there" via publications or conferences. You certainly don't want to put out work that's underdeveloped or otherwise not ready, as this can ding one's reputation, but you also can't hold onto things forever due to perfectionism, as that will take a toll as well. Sending something off requires a leap of faith, and ultimately it's your judgment about the quality and importance of your work that counts most as far as how/when you will begin and navigate the publication process. Also know that over the course of a career, you will likely (hopefully) have many experiences, and each one will be unique. You'll have successes and failures and hopefully learn a lot from each. Finally, don't take any of it personally. Most of us offer feedback in good faith, so try to learn even from the tough reviews to improve your work. The productive scholars I most admire are also people who accept all kinds of feedback graciously.