Meaghan Harrington: 2018 Research Award Entry Essay

My research is the culmination of my work in Dr. Nunez’s class on ‘Sex and Race in the Age of Empire.’ We were assigned a 10-15 page final paper on a topic of our choosing. Our first assignment for the paper was to write a brief primary source analysis in which we engaged with our chosen primary source before delving into any secondary research. I chose The Turkish Embassy Letters on a whim from a list of potential sources that Dr. Nunez had provided and I instantly fell in love with Montagu’s writing style, ideology, and background. The challenge with The Turkish Embassy Letters is that they do not fit into one ‘box.’ I kept switching in the initial stages of my research between Montagu as an orientalist and Montagu as an anti-orientalist. She was such a multifaceted character with such contradictory beliefs that I did not know what to make of her. There were several points throughout my research where I wanted to find one argument and stick with it even if I did not think it was strong or to just give up on Montagu and move to something easier. I reached out to Dr. Nunez regularly and she was able to help me organize my thoughts and to keep me from giving up on something I was so passionate about. Our class had several library sessions in the CLE classroom where I was able to get the help of librarians and even my fellow students in the form of peer review. I felt The Turkish Embassy Letters were not providing enough information for me, so I took advantage of the library’s collection of every volume of Montagu’s collected works. By this point, I had collected hundreds of letters, I could recite the story of Montagu being chased on horseback after her fiancée was late to their wedding, and I had gathered a great deal of secondary research from JSTOR. Yet I still faced the problem of Montagu not adhering to one ‘box.’ The greatest challenge I faced in this research was that I had to become comfortable with theory and analysis after years of simple arguments. After some lengthy discussions with my professor, I realized that my argument could actually be that Montagu does not follow the norm. This conclusion opened my eyes to new ways to read Montagu, orientalism, and feminism. This complicated and thought-provoking experience has helped me identify not only my niche in history, but also how to approach research and analysis.