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RACE, HISTORY, AND UNDERSTANDING

SHAHZAD BASHIR AND DAVID GARY SHAW

"Race," an old chameleon of a word that covers and connects multiple concepts, has found its true home in modernity and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the roiling postmodern world in which we now live. Historically, it might always be associated preeminently with slavery in the New World and in the United States especially, with its "peculiar institution." But its reach is much greater—possibly universal, as some see it. It is today especially political, emotional, insistent, and reflection on it is global. There is no other area of public life that presses so continuously on cultural life and that very often calls on history to mediate the personal and the political, an uneasily pertinent place for the historical. Police actions in various places in the United States, and in the world, are plausibly deemed to connect to historical events and processes that started centuries ago. Few historical phenomena connect so potently across time.

We present this virtual issue as an invitation to readers to think with us and to enrich the discussion by imagining themselves as contributors to our pages. *History and Theory* has long been centrally concerned with encouraging critical thinking about how history finds its meanings, who might carry and shape those meanings, and how we need to be deeply skeptical about the work that concepts do to shape us, free us, or subdue us, sometimes in bonds so fine and shiny that we hardly know whether to resist them. This virtual issue is an invitation both to engage and to temper engagement with race in light of theory and its tools. It shows a turn toward our necessary, even presentist, connection to our pasts in order to challenge those pasts even as we have to acknowledge them. Myth, memory, and facts are powerful forces, but they are not so sturdy as they sometimes feel. We make them and unmake them.

With an eye toward race in America especially, but also in the world more broadly, we have selected articles in which race stands at the center. This inevitably means thinking hard about the discomfiting formulations through which history and historians, in all their contingency, if not also falsity, create the grounds from which we are compelled to take our next steps. But can there be an escape from the trap of pernicious and perpetual prejudicial construction? The conversation started here needs to be continued and linked to other discussions about the scholar's relation to action, to critical race theories, to interpreting the past and its monuments, to our own personal and collective memories. History is always *now*, even as it is also *then*. Theory can, we think, help the crucial business of making self-understanding enrich public reflection.

The activism of *History and Theory* has always been of an intellectual type, concerned with theorizing the place (and problem) of commitment, experience, and the dynamic of memory, personal and collective, rather than with intervening on immediate needs. We are concerned with meaning making and the construction of and commitment to particular histories. Our posture toward time—toward the intuitive but confounding series that runs past, present, and future—might hold a key to the terms by which a theory of historical engagement works.[1] Objectivity and its opposites are at least postures toward commitment, toward emotional as much as political expressiveness.

Situated in the United States but addressing a global audience, we have, like so many others around the world, been compelled to evaluate the terms of our work in light of current circumstances. Especially in America, race can seem a doppelgänger of the nation, of modernity's promised benefits, the dark destructive presence. On all fronts, there is a sense that the United States' story now somehow belongs to the world, which has become both complicit and responsible, watching and waiting. George Floyd's "I can't breathe" echoes worldwide, capturing a sense of strangling, both individual and social, that is felt viscerally by those whose necks are put under authority's knee and vicariously by those who empathize.

Reflections and actions in racial politics and thought often show a strong personal engagement at play that is driven as much by a sense of collective memory as by a precise history. How should we understand or theorize such a relationship of memory and the historical? Since both memory and history involve doubts, contests, and disputes, virtually everyone feels the political stakes sharply, even the sometimes cooler academic historian. Race and history lately bring an intense rather than only subtle engagement. Experience and memory are sometimes history's companions, and those moments—this moment today—can be intense and difficult. It all forces us to interpret history's present landscapes around us, the texts we make and that have come down to us, the monuments, the art, the language engraved as heritage, encoded in forms of speech, packed into the writing of law and tradition, and all the stories and symbols we might grasp for identity. History lurks under every gesture and thought.

For good or ill, fashioning stories is the stuff of history and ideology, to be sure. We all arrive, fallen into a history not initially of our making. How the past affects us now and how the past contributes to the present are powerful and present questions these days. But much of what *History and Theory*'s authors have worked to show over the journal's sixty years of publication is how the present also creates the past and how past and present and future engage us even as they are recovered, forgotten, and refashioned. History always raises questions of critique and creation, and there are always backstories. Learning how to find and interpret such narratives and their dynamics is one of the skills we need to cultivate. How do we react to a statue of Christopher Columbus raised on the banks of the Connecticut River? How do we react to it when we learn as well that it was raised only in 1996 by members of the local Italian American community? That statue was in fact removed from its prominent position in June 2020.[2] It will shape memory less from its new low-key indoor location.

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[1] See, for instance, *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism*, ed. Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

In the recent explosive context of racial violence and the claims of systemic racism underlying it, controversies and ambitions have also centered around explicitly historical ventures such as The 1619 Project that the *New York Times* has developed. The project is a self-consciously revisionist account of the United States' history, starting 164 years before the American republic fully achieved its legal status as a nation-state. This date would seem calculated to replace the Jamestown and Plymouth arrivals with the symbolic moment when African slaves first arrived:

> Out of slavery—and the anti-black racism it required—grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional: its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, its diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain.[3]

Such a philosophy of history is one of seeds carrying their truth through time, constituting history's future. Many might and have contested some of The 1619 Project's factual claims; others have challenged the imbalance of its picture, its possible failures of context and proportion.[4] But part of what theorizing can do is let us better understand its ambitions and its myth-historical turns, the status of its hopes to make a new past to embolden action and reflection in the present. The dominant figure in the theory of history in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Hayden White wrote of how crucial events within national histories might well get so overdetermined, so weighted with importance, that only a quasi-psychoanalytic redescription might free the traumatized patient.[5] A knowing attempt at such therapy is surely part of the 1619 gambit. White, however, never believed that the ultimate question of truth could come into play when the histories became so full and incorporating. One form of emplotment might indeed be epistemologically as good as another, but that leaves the aesthetics, politics, and ethics to fight over.[6] Theorists have been uncertain whether a narrative can ever be true.[7]

[2] "Middletown Mayor: Why Christopher Columbus Statue Was Removed," *Middletown Press*, 14 June 2020, https://www.middletownpress.com/middletown/article/Middletown-mayor-Why-Christopher-Columbus-statue-15339180.php.

[3] Jake Silverstein, "Why We Published The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, 20 December 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html.

[4] For some of this challenge and riposte, see Jake Silverstein, "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, 20 December 2019, updated 4 January 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html, which incorporates the criticism of Victoria Bynum, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon S. Wood and follows with the project's defense. On criticism of The 1619 Project's interpretation of race and the American Civil War, see "Twelve Scholars Critique the 1619 Project and the New York Times Magazine Editor Responds," *History News Network*, 26 January 2020, https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/174140.

[5] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as a Literary Artefact," *Clio* 3, no. 3 (1973), 277-303.

[6] Ibid., 287-94.

[7] For some insight, see Chris Lorenz, "Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn,'" *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (1998), 309-29.

With a successful use of the facts, a story that is useful politically, potent emotionally, and plausible historically can emerge. It might be embraced by many but vilified by some, and history might then move on its new Jekyll and Hyde paths, partisan in just the way Enlightenment scholars and their nineteenth-century successors hoped it could avoid. A nation such as the United States, which so anchored professional historiography, might finally achieve a brutal rupture and diverse parties would march with different historical stories. Events that occurred in Washington, DC on 6 January 2021 were historical the moment they happened, although their meanings are likely to multiply as people come to look back with variant hindsight.

Reflection on race is also a sharp reminder that even if history and memory become fraught with the felt and suffered consequence of our current politics and society, our obligations as scholars and writers press forward. That does not mean, for this journal, giving up what we have learned about the complexities of theorizing the past and its present. Part of the impetus for this virtual issue is to remind readers that coping with race, racism, memory, and memorializing is likely to be richer and more helpful if shaped by the deeply reflective concepts and practices that historical theory provides; the antidotes to simplicity might have the side effect of peacefulness. Race operates not only as a concept within theories of history but also in moments of history.

The articles we have selected for this virtual issue seem to have regained relevance and urgency today. Their value to make us think is recharged when brought into a new iteration in the form of this collection. Reading or rereading them in the midst of current and future debates pertaining to race can help to clarify ideas, passions, stakes, and intellectual as well as political prospects.

Given that no mention of race can evade the relevance of the past, are historians, theorists, and empiricists especially bound to discuss it? A simple affirmative response to this question is too anemic, since the proposition is as much about the nature of the history as it is about race. Marjorie Becker's essay dives headfirst into this deep pool by speaking about experiences and the memory of silencing.[8] Her pictures of Mexican and Black and Jewish American women bring relational webs to life, ruminating on historians' burdens when acting as ventriloquists for others. Critically for questions pertaining to race and gender, she treats herself as a case study, a historian making herself history's object. Becker plays with form to highlight boundaries whose strength lies in their invisibility. We cannot ignore our own places.

Keith Jenkins takes up the question of the historian's special burden from a direct and no less significant perspective.[9] For Jenkins, historians do not bear a special ethical responsibility. This is because all intellectuals carry the same responsibility, and he wishes the curtailment of the type of history that claims or seeks a lack of ethical engagement. Historians who are unwilling to engage ethics are not intellectuals and thereby are fundamentally problematic. Berber Bevernage complicates this matter by digging deeper into the "chronosophical" framework that makes the (imminent) present and the (absent) past operative principles of historical projection in the first place.[10] Bevernage's working examples for urging attention to analytical foundations are problems and possibilities of modern truth commissions and movements for transitional justice that are essential elements in ethically engaged conversations about race on a global level.

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[8] Marjorie Becker, "Talking Back to Frida: Houses of Emotional *Mestizaje*," *History and Theory* 41, no. 4 (2002), 56-71.

[9] Keith Jenkins, "Ethical Responsibility and the Historian: On the Possible End of a History 'of a Certain Kind,'" *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004), 43-60.

Wherever it arises, race implicates the physicality of human bodies. Laurence Shore's essay draws attention to Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, published in 1968 to acclaim but having since become a part of the cited rather than read canon.[11] Written for a general public and spanning a very long period for a work of empirical history (1550–1812), Jordan's book details the causal building blocks of anti-black racism imbricated in American history. More than half a century old, the book speaks to the long tradition of historians' attention to matters brought to the fore in recent years via the Black Lives Matter movement. In Jordan's account of American history highlighted by Shore, racial distinction stands at the nexus of society and polity.

Andrew Curran's essay takes us to Enlightenment-era debates that have contributed crucial elements to the racialized understanding of individuals and societies.[12] Curran focuses on European scholars' obsession with the figure of the black albino, who both affirmed and defied a color-based definition of race. For some, the exceptional figure became a way to connect black and white races, who were then put into a developmentalist scheme tied to supposed environmental effects. In this method, the black albino became a living relic that proved current European racial hierarchies. As race became ever more about radical physiological differences, the black albino was recontextualized. For the likes of Kant, the figure was not a connecting point between races but a deformity excluded from nature conceived as a set of ordered categories.

Although presumed to be rooted in human bodies, race has had the habit of transmitting outward to representations and physical forms created by bodies. Leigh Raiford's essay takes us to photography as a means for preserving, creating, and contesting African American memory in the United States.[13] Perhaps to be seen as a prehistory of the image- and video-infused world brought to us by the mobile phone, Raiford's work highlights the role photographs of lynched black bodies played in creating vehement political action since the nineteenth century. Often deployed to exercise control, the photograph in this case turned into an instrument of political praxis and communal solidarity in a hostile sociopolitical environment.

Relevant to heated debates about renaming buildings and removal of symbolic structures such as statues, William Whyte's essay asks that historians not approach architecture as if it were readable text.[14] Such a view has the effect of erroneously fixing the meaning ascribable to monuments to a point of origin or some other past moment that is not here and now. Whyte offers translation as a more efficacious language-related parallel for architecture. This forces the fact that architecture's meaning is fluid and congeals in moments of human engagement with materiality. On this count, architectural monuments, and possibly monuments more generally, are always meaningfully multiple, inviting us to a method attentive to animating imaginations when looking at things made of stone and mortar.

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[10] Berber Bevernage, "Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice," *History and Theory* 47, no. 2 (2008), 149-67.

[11] Laurence Shore, "The Enduring Power of Racism: A Reconsideration of Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*," *History and Theory* 44, no. 2 (2005), 195-226.

[12] Andrew Curran, "Rethinking Race History: The Role of the Albino in the French Enlightenment Life Sciences," *History and Theory* 48, no. 3 (2009), 151-79.

[13] Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009), 112-29.

Kerwin Lee Klein identifies a case of contradictory pressures in recent academic patterns: just as the world we experience seems ever more connected and interdependent, the academic fashion is to eschew master narratives on suspicion of being hegemonic in favor of the local.[15] One way in which the tension has been resolved is to seek universal principles that can be exemplified through citing local dates. Klein cautions that this approach recalls the pitfalls of an earlier era that divided the world between peoples with and without history. There, as in the current impulse, some ended up being treated as models for others through calibrating on the scale of primitive to modern. Racial thinking is inextricable from the old pattern and has the potential to seep in again. Klein's call is to attend to multiple ways of conceiving the universal-local divide rather than investing in the problematized dichotomy embedded in Western intellectual discourse. Categories apparently about time inflect those about race.

Although coming from a different vantage point, Vanita Seth's critique and caution regarding contemporary academic trends parallels that of Klein.[16] Here, too, we see pressure originating from contradictory impulses: on the one hand, recent scholarship argues for understanding race as a geographically and temporally global category; on the other, often the very same scholars who have taken up race in times past are also ethically and intellectually invested in identifying the peculiarity of racialization as a modern problem. For Seth, the crucial way out of this conflicted position is to transcend the presumed opposition between continuity and rupture in favor of interrogating historicizing itself as a process with diverse modes. Rather than seeking, or refuting, definitive origins of racism, we may wish to attend to alterity within any and all projection pertaining to racism as a historical and contemporary issue.

Our highlighting the work of some scholars by assembling this virtual issue is a choice based on the sense of urgency generated by contemporary circumstances. The permanent silencing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor through deadly violence, to name only the recent and most publicized cases, has created the compulsion to speak. Helena Pohlandt-McCormick's essay takes us to the severe racial violence of South Africa under apartheid rule.[17] She focuses on the Soweto

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[14] William Whyte, "How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture," *History and Theory* 45, no. 2 (2006), 153-77.

[15] Kerwin Lee Klein, "In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History," *History and Theory* 34, no. 4 (1995), 275-98.

[16] Vanita Seth, "The Origins of Racism: A Critique of the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 59, no. 3 (2020), 343-68.

[17] Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, "'I Saw a Nightmare . . .': Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)," *History and Theory* 39, no. 4 (2000), 23-44.

Uprising (1976–1978), which began when schoolchildren in Soweto resisted the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of teaching. The state responded with severe repression of both people and acknowledgement of the events in official memory. The combined "violence and silence" did not, however, erase the memory of those who experienced the events.[18] In this instance as in many others, to remember, to insist that one must remember, are historicizing acts with tentacles extending long into the future.

With this virtual issue, we seek further engagement from our readers, who we hope will be stimulated to reflection on the basis of what we have assembled with these articles. We want to continue the conversation by seeking more contributions in the form of reflective reaction that we may publish and by tweeting, sharing, worrying the issues our authors have raised. Being a historian in distressing times can be a burden with no relief. Even as we engage with the troubling circumstances that surround us, awareness of horrors of the past can feel like a bromide lulling one to cynicism. Conceptually and empirically rich engagement is an imperative for us, for our own sakes as well as for the communities of which we are a part. If progress, even the progress of knowledge, turns out to be something of a confidence trick, each step we take still should satisfy, be authentic, and make each person free again. The illusion of advancement might be sweeter than any absolute truth we can offer. Perhaps predictably, the stories told in the articles included in this virtual issue illustrate this very fact while registering the urgency to engage ever more vigorously with the issues.

Brown University (Bashir)
Wesleyan University (Shaw)

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[18] Ibid., 24.