

# The American Historian

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS

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## *The* **ACT** *of* **HISTORY**



### **The Promise and Pitfalls of Historic Portrayals**

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#### **ALSO INSIDE**

**Finding Time for Social Media p. 8**

**The Vexing Challenges of Contingent Historians p. 10**

**Writing History with Emotion p. 12**

**Reviews p. 28**

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Alan M. Kraut



# Welcome to the New OAH Magazine

Dear Colleagues:

Welcome to the preview issue of *The American Historian*, the Organization of American Historians' new magazine for American historians in every venue where the American past is being explored. Those of us engaged in the teaching and practice of American history require a place where our needs and concerns are center stage. What do we need that a magazine can offer? It can keep us current on historiographical trends and debates in various areas of specialization, it can inform us about the latest ways our colleagues teach with technology, it can suggest how to use anniversaries of historical events as springboards for engaging the public in dialogue on the past, it can review the restoration and interpretation of particular historic sites and suggest whether they are worth a visit, and so much more. With intelligence and good humor, *The American Historian* can keep us in touch with each other and encourage us as we strive to better teach and practice the historian's craft.

In print and online *The American Historian* is designed to aid, inform, and entertain all of us engaged with the challenges and rewards of bringing the lessons of the American past to others. Where do we do our work? Many of us teach in K-12 classrooms, hoping to take our young students on their first journeys to other times and places in their country's history. Others teach at community colleges or at four-year colleges and universities where our challenge is capturing the past's complexity and nuance. And still others teach American history outside the academy's walls—in parks, museums, and on television, computer, and smartphone screens where we reach out to the broader public, hoping to remind them that the past is not past at all, but that American history is neglected at great risk in the construction of the present and the planning for the future. And finally there are those who speak to our society's decision-makers in the public and private sectors. When the stakes are highest and truth must be spoken to power, the past offers lessons that are the foundation of wise policy. *The American Historian* will have something for all of us and it will be offered to us in the sprightly, readable style of a magazine whose arrival in our mailboxes, our computers, or our mobile devices we will welcome with anticipation.

What can you expect? While the highly regarded *Journal of American History* will continue to deliver new knowledge derived from state-of-the-art research, *The American Historian* will offer its readers perspective on how new knowledge in the latest scholarly articles and books is changing the American historical narrative and how new knowledge can be cast in lesson plans, syllabi, exhibits, websites, or social media that make it accessible to American history's audiences. *The American Historian* will also address the issues that matter to our work as teachers, writers, researchers, and as public historians and intellectuals.

This preview issue of *The American Historian* includes a multi-essay feature on how important historical figures are portrayed to audiences in a variety of venues, including public history sites, the classroom, and in mass media. The essays discuss the immense possibilities that dramatic portrayals of historical figures offer historians, students, and the general public, but also analyze their more problematic aspects. The issue also includes three columns that address issues relevant to our community of historians, including the use of emotion in the writing of history, the budgeting of time for social media and blogging, and the distressing challenges faced by contingent historians.

In a recent interview published in *The Atlantic*, Columbia University's Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Eric Foner, a former OAH president, commented on the importance of history teaching. "We try to teach people the skills that come along with studying history," Foner said. "The skills of evaluating evidence, of posing questions and answering them, of writing, of mobilizing information in order to make an argument. I think all of that is important in a democratic society if people are actually going to be active citizens." The Organization of American Historians is proud to launch this new magazine dedicated to all those charged with this sacred trust. So, pull up a comfortable chair, pour a cup of coffee, and engage with this informative and entertaining issue of *The American Historian*. ■

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## CONTENTS

# The American Historian

PREVIEW ISSUE: APRIL 2014

## Departments

<b>FROM THE PRESIDENT</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>ANTE</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>REVIEWS</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>END NOTE</b> .....	<b>32</b>

## Columns

<b>4:4 TIME</b> <b>The New Social History: Finding the Time for Social Media and Blogging</b> Heather Cox Richardson.....	<b>8</b>
<b>THE PROFESSION</b> <b>The Vexing Challenges of Contingent Historians</b> Donald W. Rogers.....	<b>10</b>
<b>READY FOR PUBLICATION</b> <b>Writing History with Emotion</b> Andrew J. Huebner.....	<b>12</b>



## FEATURES

<b>14</b> <b>The Act of History: A Conversation with Ian Ruskin and Gary B. Nash</b>	
<b>18</b> <b>From the Page to the Stage: Performing History in the Classroom</b> Jeff Lantos	
<b>23</b> <b>[Re]Living Slavery: Ask a Slave and the Pitfalls of Portraying Slavery for the Public</b> Joanne Pope Melish	

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**HEATHER COX RICHARDSON** is a professor of history at Boston College and an OAH Distinguished Lecturer. She is the author of several books, including *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* (2010) and *To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party* (2014). She writes for a wide range of media and tweets at @HC\_Richardson.

**DONALD W. ROGERS** has been chair of the OAH Committee on Part-Time, Adjunct, and Contingent Employment since 2009. He has authored *Making Capitalism Safe: Work Safety and Health Regulation in America, 1880–1940* (2009), taught American history at Central Connecticut State University and other institutions as an adjunct instructor since 1992, and was a finalist in CCSU’s Excellence in Teaching Competition last year.

**IAN RUSKIN** is an actor and writer. He wrote the one-man play *From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks*, about the labor leader Harry Bridges, and he has performed it more than two hundred times. He will perform *From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks* in April and May for the English Houses of Parliament and the Scottish Parliament. Ruskin will perform his new play, *To Begin the World Over Again: The Life of Thomas Paine*, at the 2014 OAH Annual Meeting.

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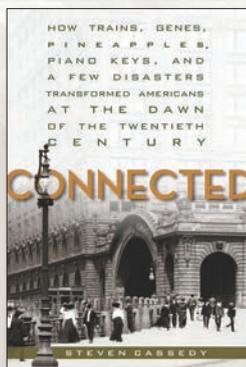
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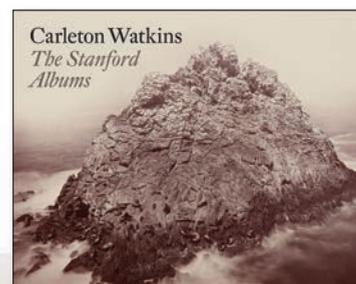
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**Q: What American history book should every American read?**

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**LUNAR MANNERS**

**"The idea is, you leave our stuff alone, we'll leave your stuff alone."**

—Henry Hertzfeld of the George Washington University Space Policy Institute, describing his proposal that countries work together to set rules to protect their lunar landing sites. Members of Congress have proposed a "moon bill" that would designate the Apollo landing sites as national parks, but the measure would likely violate a United Nations Outer Space Treaty and be interpreted by other nations as an aggressive action, Hertzfeld said.



Photo by Tony da Franca (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/11657411@N00/27707579/>)



Photo courtesy of Library of Congress

"The Beatles are not merely awful; I would consider it sacrilegious to say anything less than that they are godawful. They are so unbelievably horrible, so appallingly unmusical, so dogmatically insensitive to the magic of art, that they qualify as the crowned heads of anti-music."

—William F. Buckley, writing in his syndicated column, September 1964.

**QUOTES FROM THIS ISSUE**

**"By integrating history with the performing arts, I have found a way to inject joy into the learning process."**

"When reenactors personify marginalized historical figures, the politics of race, class, and gender in the present intrude in complicated ways."

**"Social media and blogs are simply new tools to make it easier to do what historians have always done."**

**"By far, the search for secure, adequately paid academic jobs is the central challenge faced by contingent historians."**

**"History can come alive when it is performed brilliantly. Or it can fall flat on its face."**

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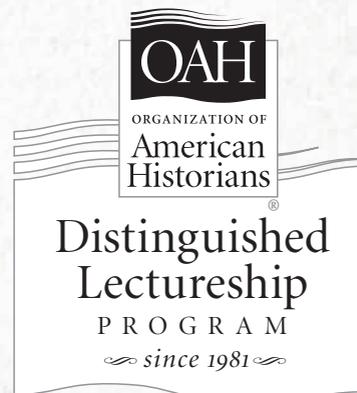
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# The New Social History: Finding the Time for Social Media and Blogging



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Historians are increasingly recognizing the importance of online media in their professional lives, but how on earth can anyone incorporate blogging, tweeting, and Facebook into workdays that are already stretched tight? Participating in social media can seem like just one more annoying demand to be avoided as long as possible.

That sense of frustration comes from a misunderstanding of the purpose of an online presence. Many historians, sometimes pushed by their editors to start splashing in online pools, make the mistake of seeing social media and blogging primarily as new advertising tools. Suddenly, in addition to being scholars, they are supposed to turn into publicists, a new job requiring time and energy that they would much rather devote to their scholarship and teaching. They think they have no time for it, and they're right. So long as we conceive of creating an online presence as an add-on to what we are already doing, it's impossible.

In fact, conceived a different way, social media and blogs are simply new tools to make it easier to do what historians have always done. The whole point of historical scholarship is to participate in a larger discussion about the way societies function: what creates change, what doesn't. Twitter, Facebook, blogging, open-access digital projects, and other Internet-based media are not add-ons to traditional professional demands. They simply enable scholars to engage more effectively in that conversation.

What does that mean, practically? First, it's important to remember that there is nothing that says every historian has to jump onto the Internet to participate in society's debate about what creates change. There will always be ample room for those scholars whose careful articles

and monographs add to the foundation of human knowledge, and whose teaching inspires students. Their work may not reach beyond the academy, but it will continue to shape the way we view the world. That sort of scholarship has always been crucial, and it will continue to be.

But engaging with a wider online community offers scholars a chance to discuss their field with people from a wide variety of backgrounds interested in the same thing. It allows participants to get feedback on new material, and it introduces to them new ideas that might otherwise bypass the halls of academic departments. It also lets historians inject their interpretations and arguments into places and spaces they might never otherwise go.

The easiest way to engage in a public conversation is with Twitter, which takes the least time of any social media and fits most naturally into an academic day. Twitter has rhythms, with different users frequenting it at distinct times, and long quiet periods, generally at night. You can check it at the times your crowd is active, or once in the morning and once at night, or when you have more time to engage with an interesting conversation for several hours during the day. Most people use Twitter on their smartphones, but you can also simply check it on a computer whenever you need a break from working: much easier on older eyes (and older fingers) than viewing and typing with a smartphone.

On Twitter you can field questions about archives, readings, and teaching, while following links can show you the most interesting articles the day has to offer on a given topic. An hour every morning spent on Twitter, with glances throughout the rest of the day, will yield far more ideas from a far wider range of sources than a day spent reading on your own in traditional

media. You are essentially crowdsourcing knowledge filtered according to your own interests.

At the same time, Twitter lets you share your latest ideas. While self-advertising should never be more than about a third of what you tweet, you will frequently engage in discussions with smart people interested in the same things you are, which allows you to put forward your voice in a public conversation. You can even set up Twitter chats with colleagues in which you toss around ideas to start new discussions. In addition to engaging with other people, you can—and should—use Twitter to point followers toward blog posts, open-access articles, and books that contribute to the conversation, including, of course, your own.

It's not just Twitter. Any online media platform that puts you in conversations with other people interested in history has the potential to broaden your ideas and your reach. Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, and LibraryThing can all provide places for historians to exchange ideas. Their great beauty is that these media do not have to be used in real time, the way Twitter does. Conversations can take place over days, with a variety of people chiming in at whatever times are convenient for them. There, too, the key concept is sharing ideas, not advertising.

Blogging takes significantly more time from a historian's day job than social media, but it offers payoffs that make it worthwhile. A December 2013 study of academic blogging by *The Guardian* revealed that most bloggers are not, in fact, reaching out to a nonacademic audience. Historians who blog are trying out new ideas, making connections, and critiquing the academy in what *The Guardian* researchers called a "giant,

global virtual common room." Blogging, then, essentially expands the advantages of Twitter beyond 140 characters into nuanced conversations.

An hour every morning spent on Twitter . . . will yield far more ideas from a far wider range of sources than a day spent reading on your own in traditional media.

But blogging also offers a medium for historians to hone their skills. Bloggers develop a voice as they write for a virtual community in which they must find and hold on to an audience solely with their ideas and writing style, rather than with their professional credentials. Blogging can provide immediate feedback, often surprising feedback, about what topics and styles readers find interesting. This has the odd effect of pushing scholars in unexpected but productive directions—such as when a throwaway paragraph sparks an unexpected debate or a seemingly forgettable post goes viral.

Like any kind of writing, blogging becomes a habit. A post can take as little as a few minutes—if you're giving your opinion on a specific issue—or as much as an entire day if you are writing a deeply researched piece on a historical event. Since a post should never be more than

six hundred words, you should generally figure that writing a blog post will take no more than two hours. Posts can also be written and scheduled in advance.

Recently, historians have begun to blur the line between blogging and books. To make the entire historical enterprise transparent, from the ideas to the research to the crafting to the polishing of a book, they are posting their evolving work online. This method allows historians to get feedback at an early stage of the research and writing process—and it also makes the production of historical scholarship more transparent and less mysterious. It is still too early to tell whether or not those experiments will pay off, but it is significant that historians have launched them on Twitter and Facebook.

Not all that long ago, tenured professors were gatekeepers whose ideas dominated historical debates. Today, that elite, gated world has shrunk dramatically while the Internet has opened the study of history to all comers. That openness offers enormous opportunities for cross-pollination between the academy and nonacademic historians. Indeed, it's hard to imagine how rising scholars can operate without developing an Internet presence.

At the same time, though, the free-for-all nature of the Internet increases, rather than decreases, the value of traditional academic voices there. Those voices are imperative to ask questions, demand standards of evidence, and promote narrative writing skills. While not every established scholar must adjust to an online world, unless more make that effort, the modern historical profession will take shape without input from past masters.

That would be ironic, indeed. ■



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Donald W. Rogers

# The Vexing Challenges of Contingent Historians



As we all know, part-time adjunct instructors and full-time temporary professors are a growing presence in modern college and university teaching, representing around three-quarters of all faculty nationwide, including historians. On the very day that *The American Historian* invited me to write this essay, I received a reminder of what being part of this burgeoning cadre of faculty means. A public college where I have happily taught American history part-time for more than a decade informed me that my spring classes had been cancelled due to declining student enrollments. That event eliminated my job there for the coming semester, revoked my state health insurance funding, and reduced my employment to just one other part-time university position (which I feel mighty fortunate to keep). Like other adjunct instructors, I got no help from my publication record, seniority and experience, teaching commendations, or service to schools and the profession. My predicament epitomizes the challenges faced by the contingent portion of the history profession today, and by the profession itself.

Historians assume temporary full-time or part-time teaching jobs such as mine for many reasons: as an avocation outside of other careers, a way to accommodate family responsibilities, a method to sustain teaching after retirement, a stepping stone to tenure-track employment, or increasingly, as a career in the absence of full-time jobs. Whatever the reason, contingent historians affirm the traditional values of the tenure-track core of the history profession—the love of teaching, a dedication to critical thinking, and a devotion to the intellectual growth and occupational advancement of students. Most importantly, they stand committed

to historical expertise—cultivating and propagating accurate, up-to-date historical knowledge through effective teaching, and sometimes through research. Contingent historians thus remain very much part of the professional community occupied by traditional tenure-track faculty. Yet the vast restructuring of the modern academic labor force has compromised their ability to serve traditional goals, not to mention live normal professional lives.

For those who make a career of it, the baseline challenge for contingent history faculty is maintaining employment and a living income. Nowadays, many full-time professors are hired on one- or two-year temporary contracts, while an increasing number of part-time instructors are engaged at meager wages in semester-to-semester, course-by-course arrangements. Both practices satisfy the financial strategy of modern educational institutions to employ a flexible, low-cost faculty labor force. Recruitment of such contingent faculty has, of course, risen dramatically in the last forty years along with a limited increase in tenure-track positions, causing a preponderance of contingent instructors to replace the former predominance of tenured professors. One happy result is that opportunities have expanded for part-time historians, more of whom can now enter the profession with M.A. degrees as well as Ph.D.'s. Yet low compensation and job instability have accompanied growth, especially for adjunct professors. As the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW) study “A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members” (2012) shows, most part-timers earn personal incomes of less than \$35,000 yearly and a majority survive by living in households wherein spouses, parents, or partners provide additional revenue. The 2014 report “The Just-in-Time



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Professor” published by the Democratic Staff of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce adds that contingent instructors frequently do not enjoy the middle-class standard of living that their education and experience would normally afford them. Consequently, news stories proliferate about how adjunct instructors cobble together multiple jobs, go without health insurance, worry that schools will cut hours to avoid Affordable Care Act coverage, and in worst-case scenarios, resort to food stamps.

**With critics comparing adjunct employment to dead-end fast-food jobs, a final challenge for the historical community is to create opportunities for the growth, occupational advancement, and financial improvement of contingent history professors.**

The problem is not just low wages. Contingent faculty members’ short-term jobs leave them constantly vulnerable to nonrenewal due to fluctuating academic market forces. A 2011 article by historian Robert B. Townsend shows that “wild gyrations” in academic employment have occurred within long-term growth

during the past four decades. As I found out, contingent historians are at the loose end of these gyrations, experiencing booms and busts in job opportunities due to changing student enrollments, up-and-down economic cycles, vacillating institutional politics, and varying rates of tenured professors’ retirement.

By far, then, the search for secure, adequately paid academic jobs is the central challenge faced by contingent historians. It is a matter of equity. It is also a matter of professionalism, because the instability of contingent employment distracts historians from practicing their expertise. Long teaching hours, travel to multiple institutions, low income, and perpetual job searching all detract from professional requisites such as buying new books, attending conferences, and especially devoting time to reading, preparing up-to-date classes, and working with students.

A related challenge for contingent historians is upholding rigorous professional teaching standards under the terms of contingent employment. Work conditions vary from school to school, and among research institutions, four-year universities, and community colleges. Yet, across the board, to use the labor parlance of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce report, adjuncts suffer the same “piece rate” system—that is, a fixed, low per-course stipend that fails to take account of work time needed to prepare for classes, build websites, grade assignments, and tutor students in large survey sections. Even so, most adjunct instructors apparently enjoy freedom to teach history as they see fit, but spotty provisions for office space, clerical help, textbook choice, advanced course assignments, a voice in departmental decisions, and the freedom from arbitrary nonrenewal notoriously undermine their efforts. Moreover, as Adrianna Kezar’s and Cecile Sam’s 2010 article “Understanding the New Majority of Non-tenure-track Faculty in Higher Education” suggests, informal and spur-of-the-moment hiring leaves adjuncts and contingent professors isolated and undersocialized in the programs that

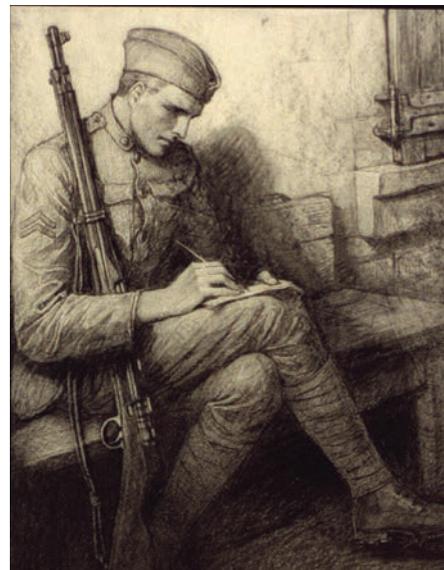
they serve. The disconnection and lack of material support underlay contingent faculty’s complaint that they do not receive “respect.” Their challenge is to overcome contingent employment conditions and receive better support for the work they do—to get job security, adequate pay, orientation in the departments that hire them, sufficient administrative support, inclusion in governance, and opportunities for professional development.

A bigger challenge for contingent historians is prospering and advancing professionally. According to Townsend, a significant portion of historians with new Ph.D.’s secure full-time tenure-track jobs after some adjunct service during the first five years following receipt of their degrees, but very few Ph.D. recipients in adjunct jobs get full-time tenured employment thereafter. One possible reason is that contingent part-time jobs offer minimal support for scholarly work that would qualify adjuncts for advancement into full-time ranks. Indeed, fragmentary evidence confirms that adjunct instructors experience little upward mobility, and that a large proportion of contingent historians are now trapped in a permanent adjunct caste. The CAW and House Committee on Education and the Workforce reports, as well as a 2013 report commissioned by the OAH, all verify that most adjunct professors have long tenures in part-time slots. A clear majority have more than five years of experience. Nearly one-third have ten years. With critics comparing adjunct employment to dead-end fast-food jobs, a final challenge for the historical community is to create opportunities for the growth, occupational advancement, and financial improvement of contingent history professors.

The recent media storm about adjunct and contingent faculty has focused deservedly on their employment difficulties, but members of the OAH historical community might contemplate how their challenges implicate the profession at large. Not only is the well-being of contingent historians at stake, but so also is the success of history education. ■

Andrew J. Huebner

# Writing History with Emotion



As historians we write about the most dramatic and poignant human experiences, yet too often we drain those subjects of emotion. Our admirable quest for detachment, our devotion to provable assertions, our reliance on often dry archival sources, perhaps even our desire to be taken seriously in the academy—all inhibit more evocative writing. But this need not be so. We can maintain our dedication to scholarly rigor and yet still write with feeling. I'm not talking about the important and still-developing field of emotions history, which seeks to explain and historicize human sentiment. Rather, I'm suggesting that all of us, no matter the subject of our interpretive interest, pay more attention to the emotions of our historical characters as well as the emotions of our readers—that we cultivate sympathy and even empathy as a way of truly excavating the character of the past and conveying it to our audiences. I'll first suggest how to do this, and then turn to why.

One way to bring more feeling to our work is to pay attention to the emotional cues of our subjects. These cues don't have to be central to our analytical purposes, as they often are for historians of emotions, but they can add color and mood. We should say it when historical actors were forlorn, ecstatic, confused, or angry, provided we have the evidence to show it. In her book *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (2013), Mary Louise Roberts writes of a murdered prostitute:

By talking to women who worked in the same neighborhood as Marie, police discovered that she had eaten her last meal—two glasses of white wine and a sandwich—alone and depressed at the café Sans Souci on the rue Pigalle (pp. 147–48).

The passage demonstrates one of Roberts's arguments—that social networks governed the lives of French prostitutes—while also profoundly evoking the woman's isolation. Often our historical training leads us to eschew such claims. How can historians really know what was in people's hearts? We can make those claims the way we make other claims, by accumulating familiarity with our subjects, reading their words, quoting them, and making reasoned judgments about what they felt.

Of course, sometimes the sources don't contain explicit emotional cues. In those cases we can work to cultivate a novelist or filmmaker's eye for poignant detail. A single sentence in Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999) captures the indignity and sorrow of American slavery, with neither direct evidence of emotion nor resort to fraught language. Details are what do it:

Twelve-year-old Monday was whipped by his mistress because his lupus made his nose run on the dinner napkins (p. 21).

We *feel* something about the scene because we can picture it—a boy with an illness, a finely set table, a whipping, terrible pettiness and cruelty. The scene and the feeling help Johnson re-create the character of everyday life in the antebellum South. Novelists call this “showing” rather than “telling.” There’s no need to say the abuse of innocents is tragic if the narrative detail shows it more vividly.

Gloominess need not dominate our emotional repertoire; our sources typically offer opportunities to elicit positive feeling as well. We should assign humor a larger role in our work, whether it means pointing out an ironic detail, quoting a funny line, or just writing with more wit. David Greenberg combines these approaches in a passage from *Nixon’s Shadow: The History of an Image* (2003):

The thick curls of black hair, the bushy eyebrows, and the five-o’clock shadow enveloped Nixon in an aura of gloom. He scowled and frowned, prematurely creasing his forehead and cheeks. Few profiles of him failed to note his “ski-jump” nose, which poked out, Pinocchio-like. His eyes, beady and dark, darted as he spoke, adding to the air of suspicion; “shifty-eyed,” Truman called him. The heavy jowls, which grew more pronounced as he aged, made him seem, Kempton wrote, as though “a great wad of unmelting butter [was] stuffed next to his lower jawbone.” Liberals just didn’t like the looks of him (pp. 38–39).

Here Greenberg uses wry humor not just for amusement’s sake, but to help him develop the main theme of that chapter in his book—liberal hatred of Richard Nixon. Many other subjects lend themselves naturally to positive feeling.

Courtroom dramas, the reunion of prisoners of war and their families, civil rights victories—all offer opportunities to invite suspense, relief, joy, titillation, and surprise.

Why do all this? Partly it’s an aesthetic matter—our books are more readable, memorable, and lively when we highlight our actors’ emotions and stir those of our readers. In a competitive market it can help sell books. But more deeply, *it’s our job*. Evoking feeling does not have to distract us from our primary goal as historians—to vividly convey the character of human life in the past—and in fact helps achieve it.

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Our readers’ main ambition is probably to learn, not to feel. But to make them feel is to *help* them learn. All the pieces of writing cited above carry water for their authors’ interpretive arguments. In fact, many of our professed aims are served by seeking out emotion in our research and eliciting it in our readers. We constantly argue for contingency in history, insisting that things didn’t have to happen the way they did. Cultivating feelings of suspense can help us do that. We value “accuracy” in our work, usually regarding facts and figures. A fuller, more emotional rendering of the past is likewise more faithful to history as it was lived—provided we’re sensitive

to the ways emotions change across time and space. Even those scholars who do broad, quantitative studies of the aggregate value the experiences of the individual. Encouraging empathy and sympathy underscores the uniqueness of people even as we understand them as members of groups.

We do need to be cautious, of course. In building empathy we risk making ourselves falsely similar to people in the past. “They do not think the way we do,” Robert Darnton wrote of historical actors in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984, p. 4). They don’t necessarily feel the way we do either. Yet excavating and evoking emotion helps us comprehend and assess those differences, showing us where we’re similar and where we’re not. Mourning the mass murder of cats can help us understand eighteenth-century Parisians, even if—or more precisely, *because*—they weren’t sad about it. Evoking emotion thus fulfills the mandate of historical research and the humanities more broadly: to understand people.

In short, the best reason to write with emotion is that it’s good history. We often tout the conceptual richness of our discipline, its ability to deliver the fullest possible picture of human civilization and culture. We consider virtually any source fair game, and borrow liberally from other disciplinary approaches. Bringing forth the emotional component of the past only gets us closer to that full picture the study of history promises. Avoiding doing so, in my view, risks a worse violation—sucking the life out of our subjects in the name of detachment. Let’s unleash the emotion of history for our readers, and awaken theirs along the way. ■

Photo courtesy of Ian Ruskin



Photo courtesy of Ian Ruskin



Photo courtesy of Gary B. Nash

## The Act of History: A Conversation with Ian Ruskin and Gary B. Nash

Some twenty-five history teachers gathered at a University of California, Los Angeles summer teaching seminar on the American Revolution waited expectantly for a visitor from the eighteenth century who had traveled in time to tell of his experiences on both sides of the Atlantic in the era of democratic revolutions. Thomas Paine, in greatcoat, buckled shoes, rimless glasses, and a slightly disheveled wig, took his place at a table upon which stood a decanter of brandy, a pen and inkwell, several books, a sheaf of papers. For the next seventy minutes Paine, played by Ian Ruskin, spoke of his spotted background, his dreams of a better life and a better world, his struggle to reach America to begin his life anew, his unlikely role as the key pamphleteer of the American Revolution, his reformist ideas to align the new American nation with its stirring founding principles, and his post-revolution years in England, France (which included a spell in prison), and finally back to America. UCLA emeritus professor Gary B. Nash, the seminar leader who had invited Ruskin to perform his play *To Begin the World Over Again: The Life of Thomas Paine*, remembers that the teachers learned more about Paine from Ian's performance than they would have from any lecturer.

*The American Historian* spoke with Nash, a renowned scholar of early American history and a former OAH president, and Ruskin, an actor trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London who has since appeared on television and the stage, about the challenges and promises of dramatic portrayals of historical figures on stage, in the classroom, and at public history sites.

**TAH** Ian, what led you to write *To Begin the World Over Again: The Life of Thomas Paine*?

**IR** While on an East Coast trip performing my first play, *From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks*, about the radical labor leader Harry Bridges (which I performed at the OAH Annual Meeting in 2009), three separate people suggested that I consider writing and performing a play about Thomas Paine. As soon as I began reading about Paine I knew that he would be my next subject. He was a man with remarkable similarities, both personally and philosophically, to Bridges. I then received a City of Los Angeles Fellowship to write the play.

I gathered a number of scholars who had written about Paine to act as an advisory board, including Harvey J. Kaye, a University of Wisconsin–Green Bay professor of history and author of *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (2005); Jack Fruchtman Jr., a Towson University political science professor, constitutional law scholar, and the author of three books on Paine, including *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Paine* (2009); and Edward Gray, a Florida State University history professor and specialist in early American history. I also asked Gary, a scholar of the American Revolution and author of *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (2005), to be a part of this process and he agreed. These scholars reviewed drafts of my script and noted any factual inaccuracies and, equally important, questionable interpretations of events and Paine's part in them. They helped me to understand the dynamics of those revolutionary times, uncover the many layers of Paine's character, and measure his impact on the events around him. Their guidance also left me free to trust my interpretation of the man himself and write without any outside obligations.

**TAH** Gary, what has been your experience with dramatic portrayals of historical figures?

**GN** Teaching courses on the American Revolutionary era at UCLA, and on the road as a guest lecturer, I had dabbled with dramatic presentations—mostly playing Daniel Shays. But acting

was better left in other hands. Nonetheless, I saw teachers with dramatic flair contrive first-person presentations for their classroom projects at Department of Education Teaching American History summer and weekend seminars. One teacher played an enslaved African on a Virginia plantation; another portrayed one of George Washington's generals. I think these kinds of dramatic portrayals serve students well, engaging them with the sense of seeing the clock turned back for a century or more. With plenty of research and a gift for acting, history can come alive when it is performed brilliantly. Or it can fall flat on its face. What's needed is a great script and great acting.

**TAH** Ian, what are the challenges in writing a historical play and portraying a historical figure?

**IR** I find two basic challenges in writing this kind of play. First, history is always open to interpretation and there is even disagreement about specific facts, down to details such as the publication dates or even the authorship of a book, pamphlet, or essay. I believe that any historical writing must, and should, be written from a particular viewpoint, and that this applies most especially to a dramatic piece. The second challenge is to find a character whose life had high and low points, victories and defeats, and personal challenges and demons that can make for exciting drama. A dramatic presentation must firstly be entertaining for the audience, whether it is a fictional or historical piece. An audience must care about the figure or figures being portrayed because of who they are as human beings, not because of their particular achievements and impact on history. This has been my aim with both of my one-man plays.

If the play is well written and succeeds in portraying a compelling human character, then specific challenges to portraying a historical figure melt away. Any character must have some relevance to our lives today, whether it is Joan of Arc, George S. Patton, or Forrest Gump. There is a particular challenge, however, to performing one-person plays. Actors are taught to perform with other actors and, hopefully, to react to other characters.

With my one-person plays I am in a direct relationship with an audience that, in a sense, becomes the other character. Also, once I walk on, there is nowhere to hide and no time to go offstage and take a breath. It is more like jumping off a cliff and hoping that you can first learn to fly and then have the stamina to get to ground safely. I find it exciting if not addicting!

**TAH** Ian, are there problems with the ways Paine has been portrayed in popular and political culture?

**IR** When I was doing research for *To Begin the World Over Again*, I discovered so much outrageous misinformation about Paine that defines many Americans' understanding of his role in American history. To take one example, Bob Basso, a former Honolulu, Hawaii, news anchor and now a corporate motivational speaker, began uploading videos to YouTube in 2007 in which he portrays Paine delivering speeches that espouse Tea Party principles and accuse President Barack Obama of betraying the nation's founding principles. One of his YouTube videos has received more than 11 million views. In my opinion, Basso delivers the antithesis of Paine's actual political philosophies. To take another example, David McCullough's HBO miniseries *John Adams* (2008), which one might assume would be a more accurate portrayal of the American Revolution, had one moment and one line, in an eight-hour program, for Thomas Paine. Yet he and Adams were passionate combatants who helped to define each other's political

"I believe that my presentations can inspire individual audience members, teachers and students included, to stand up for themselves and see the possibilities of building better lives."

philosophies. It makes me wonder why such omissions happen, and why some figures from history thrive while others starve.

**TAH** Gary, what are the drawbacks of historical reenactments as a teaching tool?

**GN** An hour with a historical reenactor is usually entertaining and enlightening but the performance, however beguiling, is often misaligned with modern scholarship. Much depends on the venue and sponsorship of the event. Millions of Americans and overseas visitors who have seen the Thomas Jefferson interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg will enjoy the portrayal of an ever-brilliant Jefferson and a sunny portrayal of a son of the Enlightenment. But Colonial Williamsburg is a tourist attraction that does not want to disappoint. So however enthralled they might be by the Jefferson reenactor, K-12 teachers who flock to Colonial Williamsburg for summer seminars (and who pay a hefty tuition fee to do so) will learn little about Jefferson's belief in the innate inferiority of Africans; little about Jefferson's retreat from earlier efforts to find a way to end slavery, which he recognized as an evil and corrupting labor system that undermined the principles on which the Revolution was fought; little on Jefferson's treatment of his own mixed-race children; and nothing on Jefferson's squandered opportunity to free his several hundred slaves spread over three plantations, when he withdrew as the executor and beneficiary of Tadeusz Kosciuszko's American estate that the Pole had left to his bosom friend. These inconvenient truths don't make for pleasant Colonial Williamsburg visits, though Colonial Williamsburg, to be sure, has done much in recent years to cut through the romanticized picture of the

colonial Virginia capital.

The case of presenting Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia is similar. An excellent actor has been interpreting Franklin for nearly four decades. Many thousands will testify to how they have come away with a deepened reverence for Franklin's intelligence, humor, political savvy, and voracious scientific appetite. Franklin becomes the essential American, and this cannot help but please the tourist-industry leaders in the City of Brotherly Love. What visitors (and teachers) will not come away with is an understanding of Franklin's involvement in the African slave trade and the ownership of slaves, his callousness toward his wife, his sponsorship of the conversion of Pennsylvania to a royal colony, and other uncomfortable aspects of his career.

**TAH** What, then, is the appropriate role for historical plays and portrayals in the teaching of U.S. history?

**IR** I hope that my plays present compelling figures from history that are as human as they are "giants of history." I strive to do more than simply educate a group of students about a particular time, but to show that these often revered figures were human beings, with the same challenges, possibilities, and frailties that we all share.

After a performance of *To Begin the World Over Again* at Cerritos College, a

California community college, Julie Davis, a Cerritos professor of history and women's studies, wrote to me to say that the play not only highlighted Paine's "life, work, historical context and significant impact on Western thought" but also did so "in such an engaging, empathic way that it vividly

impresses upon the viewer the belief in the triumphant possibility of the great impact of one person's imprint on the historical record." She added that the experience was especially valuable for the community college student audience, who, she wrote, "are all in their own right

struggling to realize their own value and contributions to this world." I believe that my presentations can inspire individual audience members, teachers and students included, to stand up for themselves and see the possibilities of building better lives.

**GN** In general, historical portrayals today, insofar as they treat the founding era of the nation, mostly glorify the Founding Fathers, turn them into men of marble, and perpetuate founding myths that ignore the tumultuous birth of democracy (a concept that was roundly attacked by some members of our pantheon such as John Adams and Alexander Hamilton) and the radical reform agenda launched by lesser leaders of the time such as Thomas Paine. Ian is very aware of this; in his presentation he shows us Paine, warts and all. Beholden to nobody and not limited to a revolutionary-era venue, Ian can construct his portrayal from original sources and scholarly analysis of Paine. This uncouples him from what David Lowenthal, in his book *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1996), called the "heritage crusade"—the "chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism." With no need for "domesticating the past," Ian is at liberty to address inconvenient truths (pp. ix, xi).

**IR** Can a theatrical presentation to a group of students, whether at a highly regarded university such as Harvard or a community college such as Cerritos College, actually educate and inspire students through the telling of a story? Is there a value in an actor/writer, guided by one or more scholars, attempting to present a slice of complex history in a one-hour presentation? Perhaps the answer to these questions lies in the extent to which history can be brought alive not just through an understanding of facts, but through an understanding of the human beings who, with all their human frailties, and in their own turbulent times, made history happen. ■

"With plenty of research and a gift for acting, history can come alive when it is performed brilliantly. Or it can fall flat on its face. What's needed is a great script and great acting."

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Photo courtesy of Jeff Lantos

# FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE:

## Performing History in the Classroom

by Jeff Lantos

**I**t happened in the jury room in Los Angeles Superior Court.

That's where I had my epiphany. This was in the summer of 1996. In those days, when you received a jury summons, you had to report every day for a week. On the Monday, I was not called to a courtroom, so I had eight hours to while away. Sometime before lunch, my thoughts turned to the upcoming school year. In particular I began to think about my teaching of history. Having majored in American history at Brown University; having studied with prize-winning American historians John L. Thomas, Gordon S. Wood, and James T. Patterson; and being passionate about all things historical, I liked to think that I could take just about any eighteenth- or nineteenth-century

topic and make it compelling. And it irked me when I wasn't able to do that. Especially painful had been some late spring lessons on the Constitutional Convention. I just couldn't find a way to excite my fifth graders at Marquez Elementary School in Pacific Palisades, California, about proportional representation, balance of power, and state sovereignty.

Then it hit me: the Constitutional Convention had great characters, eloquent speeches, lots of conflict, and a happy ending. Wasn't it crying out for some sort of dramatic presentation? Why not take it from the page to the stage?

I knew that the dramatist Peter Stone teamed up with a former high school history teacher (and former Brill Building tunesmith)

named Sherman Edwards in the late 1960s, and together they created *1776*, a musical based on the Second Continental Congress and, in particular, on the spirited debate that preceded the Declaration of Independence. As a piano player, a lyricist, and (in a former life) a scriptwriter, I thought, "Why not try to write a sequel to *1776*: A show set in that same Philadelphia State House eleven years later?"

By the end of that first day in court, I had roughed out lyrics for two songs: "Gotta Compromise," sung by Ben Franklin, and "The Rhode Island Song," sung by petulant Rhode Islanders who insisted that their state boycott the Convention. Into these lyrics I tried to cram as much historical content and as many high-level vocabulary words as I could:



By integrating history with the performing arts, I have found a way to inject joy into the learning process.



*We're Rhode Island, and we've come this far.  
We like things the way they are.  
Sure we may be small but we're not inconsequential,  
when the count is eight to four our vote is essential,  
we'll say, "no" to plans that make us much less influential,  
we're Rhode Island, and we like the way we are.*

Franklin sang:

*If the little states can wheel a little,  
and the bigger states can deal a little,  
then together we can heal a little,  
that's what it's all about,  
gotta compromise.*

Back at the courthouse the following day, while sitting on a foam cushion so thin I could feel the ribs of the chair, I wrote:

*It was a miracle  
in Philadelphia,  
it was a miracle,  
it's true,  
fifty-five men who sat right here,  
knew what they had to do.*

On Wednesday I was called to be on a jury. Luckily the case lasted only four days.

The rest of that summer I spent researching, writing, and collaborating with my piano teacher, Bill Augustine, who wrote a toe-tapping score that ran the musical gamut from waltz to rap.

Using James Madison's "Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787" and a number of secondary sources, I completed a fifty-seven-page script by Labor Day, and I titled the play *Miracle in Philadelphia*.

To lighten the tone, to break up the long debating sessions, to conform to musical theater convention, and most importantly, to give my students a way into the story, I created a romantic subplot. The boy, I decided, would be a teenage tough doing time in the Philadelphia jail, a building adjacent to the State House. According to the historian Catherine Drinker Bowen, four inmates were recruited to carry the sedan chair of the eighty-one-year-old Ben Franklin. The elder statesman was suffering from "gout and stone," and was unable to walk the few blocks from his home to the State House (although some historians have challenged this account). The girl would be a local lass hired by George Washington to fill the State House teacups and empty the spittoons. She would also serve as the narrator. When boy meets girl, he's smitten, but she's dubious. His persistence

pays off, though, and by the end he's helping her finish her chores and the two of them are canoeing on the Delaware River.

In September, I was able to convince my skeptical school principal that my theatrical approach to teaching history was academically sound, and she agreed to give me (and my students) ninety minutes of rehearsal time per week. (Convincing this first principal was critical; once the program was up and running, parents, teachers, and students were so enthusiastic that succeeding principals were reluctant to tamper with the program.)

At a local dance studio, I found a game choreographer, and presto—the Performing History program was born.

In the months leading up to opening night, cast members honed their oral language skills by reciting actual statements spoken at the Constitutional Convention such as, "It comes down to this. How does a government control the people without limiting too much the freedom of the people?" Or, "How can Virginia with seven hundred thousand citizens have the same number of representatives as Delaware which has fifty-nine thousand citizens?" Or, "The problem is this country is so large that we lack common interests. . . .

The interests of the southern and northern states are as different as the interests of Russia and Turkey.” By having students pose those questions and declare those sentiments I was able to give them a much better sense of what was at stake and what was worth fighting for. Soon they began to inhabit their characters and argue passionately their different points of view.

The success of *Miracle in Philadelphia* inspired me to cowrite a new play about the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. Again, we had great characters (not just the leading men, but also Napoleon Bonaparte, Thomas Jefferson, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Toussaint Charbonneau, and Sacagawea); conflict (with the Teton Sioux and Blackfoot Indians); a love triangle (undocumented, but possible) featuring Clark, Charbonneau, and Sacagawea; and a happy ending (if you discount Lewis’s probable suicide in 1809).

*Hello Louisiana*, which premiered in 1998, begins with the following chant in which students recount the ten-thousand-year history of the territory:

“ I have no doubt that teaching history through musical performance can work for all kinds of students. ”

*Louisiana . . . Louisiana . . .  
Mother Nature set the stage  
with rivers, fish, and carnivores  
and flocks of birds so thick they  
hid the sky.  
And herds of bison far as the eye  
could see.  
It was an animal, mineral, veggie  
potpourri.  
An animal, mineral, veggie  
potpourri.  
Then came man to this expanse,  
Indians first, then guys from  
France,  
came the French and Indian war,  
soon most Frenchmen were no  
more,  
then came Spain knockin’ on the  
door.  
They lived a while  
in the Spanish style  
then came Napoleon to settle the  
score.*

*Water and Power*, written in 2000, completed my curriculum-specific trilogy. This show dramatizes the conflict between owners and workers in the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. It is a historical story in which teenage girls and young women play the most dynamic roles:

*Sisters are you with me when I  
say that  
cuttin’ down our wages is wrong.  
Then on top of that they raise our  
workload  
and just assume that we’ll all go  
along.  
Yeah, we’ll burn out,  
unless we turn out  
and demand a better deal.  
In the world of capital and labor  
you either eat or you’re the meal.*

By integrating history with the performing arts, I have not only found a way to inject joy into the learning process—I have also created a form of content delivery that allows students to absorb information more quickly and retain it longer. In 2002 a team of University of California, Los Angeles psychology professors tested the historical knowledge of 440 sixth graders at our local middle school. The experimental group comprised students who had participated in the Performing History program as fifth graders at Marquez Elementary; the control group comprised students



Photo by Scott Buschman

who had attended other elementary schools with no Performing History program. In a 2004 article in the journal *Theory and Research in Social Education*, the UCLA researchers wrote that the study suggested “that a dramatic art-based curriculum can improve students’ achievement in the field of history” and also can improve students’ enjoyment of history instruction. What’s more, the study suggested that the program had significant effects on students’ knowledge of history beyond the year they spent in the Performing History program. “Such findings,” the researchers wrote, “speak to the lasting effect of this type of dramatic history instruction.” In addition, recent scientific research suggests that music is a powerful learning tool. Henry L. Roediger III, a psychology professor and researcher at the Washington University in St. Louis Memory Lab, told the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2013 that while humans are able to store information in their brains fairly easily, “pulling out data efficiently” is another matter. Music can help humans retrieve such data. Music, Roediger wrote, “provides a rhythm, a rhyme and often, alliteration. All that structure is the key to unlocking information stored in the brain—with music acting as a cue.”

Thus far, my performing history program has been exported to only a handful of other schools. Can it be scaled nationally? It would seem to require some sort of post-graduate learning academy where a cadre of piano-playing history teachers could be trained.

I have no doubt that teaching history through musical performance can work for all kinds of students. In the first year of the Performing History program,

only students in the school’s gifted program participated, but after watching and feeling the excitement generated by the initial performance, the principal and the other fifth-grade teachers urged me to make the program more inclusive. In year two, and in the sixteen years since, every fifth grader at my school has performed history. Most years that means four classes, four different casts, and four performances. Many of them, having seen the shows as third and fourth graders or having heard older siblings singing the songs, already know the lyrics, the dance moves, and what roles they want to try out for. And if and when the class gets a bit rowdy, nothing restores order like the words, “Okay, time for auditions,” or “Get out your scripts.”

Over the years lead roles have been played by kids who struggle with autism, attention-deficit disorder, or fetal alcohol syndrome; kids who struggle with their multiplication tables and subject-verb agreement; and kids who do not speak English

at home. Often these were the very kids who would tune out during classroom lessons. Now, many of them tell me that history is their favorite subject and that they can’t wait for the morning sing-a-longs or the weekly rehearsals.

One day, about five years ago, a theater producer who had heard about our program walked into the school auditorium. He would later include us in his Festival of New American Musicals, but this was his first glimpse. Sixty students were doing a leg-flapping dance move called “slapping leather” and belting out the lyrics to a big production number:

*Hello Louisiana, you were quite  
a deal.  
We all itch to see the secrets you  
reveal.*

“What did you think?” I asked the producer afterward.

“I felt the magic,” he said.

I knew what he meant. I feel it every day. ■

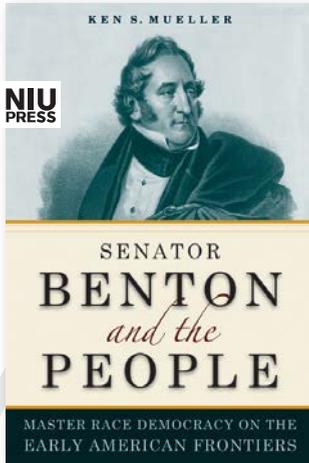




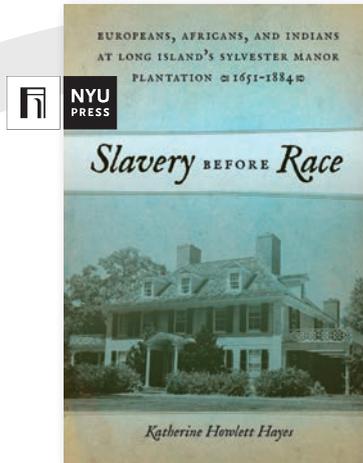
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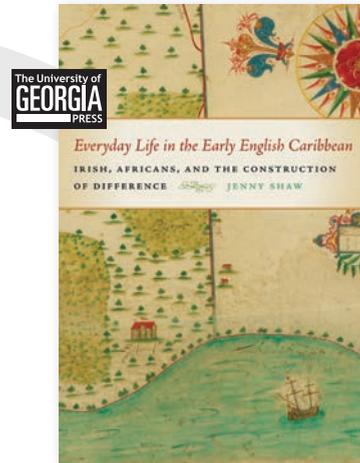
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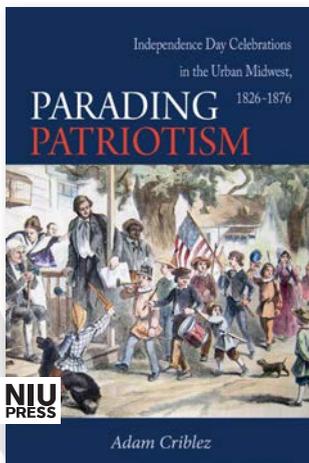
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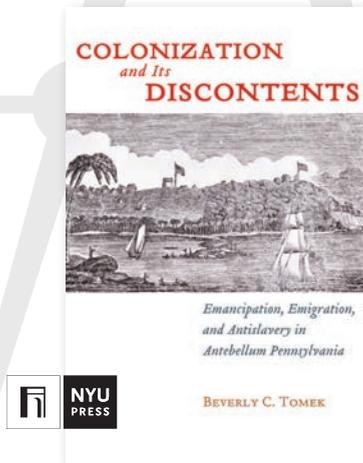
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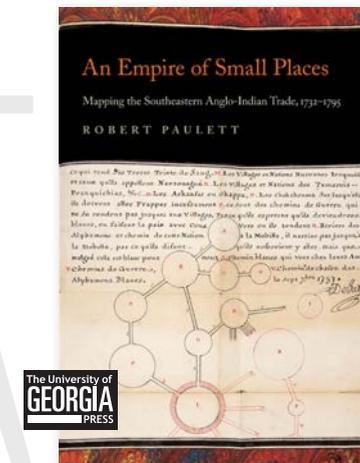
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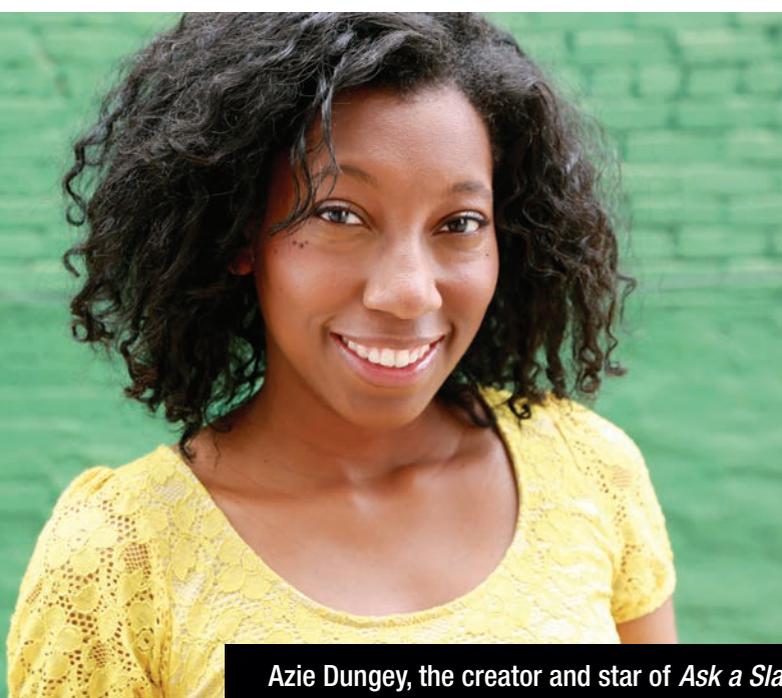
## *Ask a Slave* and the Pitfalls of Portraying Slavery for the Public

By Joanne Pope Melish

**“Good day to you, lords and ladies.**

I’m Lizzie Mae, personal housemaid to President and Lady Washington, and I’m here to answer all your questions about the Washingtons’ home and plantation.” So begins the first episode of a popular Web series entitled *Ask a Slave* ([askaslave.com](http://askaslave.com)), created by and starring Azie Mira Dungey, an African American actress who once worked at Mount Vernon portraying Caroline Branham, Martha Washington’s enslaved personal maid. There, many of the questions posed by visitors about Caroline Branham’s life as a slave struck Dungey as so outrageous that she was moved to re-create them in *Ask a Slave*, which debuted in September 2013. In two seasons of six episodes plus a “Christmas Special,” the fictional Lizzie Mae welcomes viewers to the Washingtons’ Mansion House

in the year 1795 and answers questions from male and female visitors of all ages and races. Dressed in mob cap and apron, Lizzie Mae is filmed in close-up, seated at a tea table in front of portraits of George and Martha Washington; occasionally she is joined on camera by other characters, notably her son Jimmy and Tobias Lear, Washington’s personal secretary. Questioners in present-day dress are filmed at various other locations but appear to address their queries to Lizzie Mae directly (or occasionally as unseen “callers”). Each episode is introduced by text assuring the viewer that all the questions and answers are based on “real interactions,” followed by an animated cartoon image of Lizzie Mae sweeping; the dust fills the screen, and then the cartoon Lizzie Mae appears again to wink at the viewer.



Azie Dungey, the creator and star of *Ask a Slave*

Photo by Johnny Shryock

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“*Ask a Slave* seeks to highlight what Dungey sees as two mutually reinforcing issues—the failure of the public to value African American history, and the failure of more conventional institutions to educate the public about it.”

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*Ask a Slave* calls itself a “comedy web series,” and the wink seems to confirm its comedic intent; but in a September 2013 interview with Meghna Chakrabarti on NPR’s *Here and Now*, Dungey insisted that her motivation was more complicated. Chakrabarti mused, “maybe we’re justified in laughing at the ignorance in some of these questions that you get at Mount Vernon. But on the other hand, in defense of those tourists, at least they’re coming there, right, for historical experience.” Dungey agreed. “This isn’t really about the people and the questions,” she said. “It’s about a system that allows these questions to [persist]. . . . Everybody is so proud of what it means to be an American, but . . . people don’t take the time to understand . . . what’s considered a lesser valuable history, which is African-American history.”

With *Ask a Slave*, then, Dungey seeks to highlight what she sees as two mutually reinforcing issues—the failure of the public to value African American history, and the failure of more conventional institutions to educate the public about it. She clearly intends the series to be

educational. To Chakrabarti’s suggestion that some people might feel “there shouldn’t be any comedy brought to this horrific part of American history that had to do with slavery,” Dungey responded that, for her, “humor is a way to break down people’s defenses, and I think that if you do it right and you catch people on a moment when their defenses are down, through the humor, you can squeeze in some kernel of meaning.”

So what historical meaning is Dungey trying to squeeze in? One way to think about *Ask a Slave* is as a kind of training film for would-be visitors to actual historic sites, in which viewers are asked to examine their own assumptions before plunging ahead with thoughtless questions. Beyond that, does this series educate viewers more broadly about American, and African American, history? In many ways it does. The second episode, for example, explodes the notion that all early national antislavery advocates were passionate believers in racial equality; it exposes the fact that many of them were convinced

that black freedom must entail, in the words of a self-proclaimed abolitionist who joins Lizzie Mae in that episode, “safe passage for all the Negroes back to their home in Africa—that is where you people want to go, right?” In another episode, Lizzie Mae is joined by Red Jacket, the revolutionary-era Seneca orator and chief, who skewers romanticized notions about the so-called First Thanksgiving, the “vanishing Indian,” and George Washington’s warm relations with native peoples. And every episode illuminates important aspects of the experience of enslavement: the severity of the restrictions and burdens it imposed, especially on women, and the self-awareness, fortitude, resilience, and spirited resistance of enslaved people. While *Ask a Slave* does tacitly validate the notion of slavery as exclusively southern (a misconception that I, as a historian of northern slavery, wish she had debunked), on the whole she does a good job with the history.

*Ask a Slave* lampoons the questions asked by visitors to historic sites, not the answers

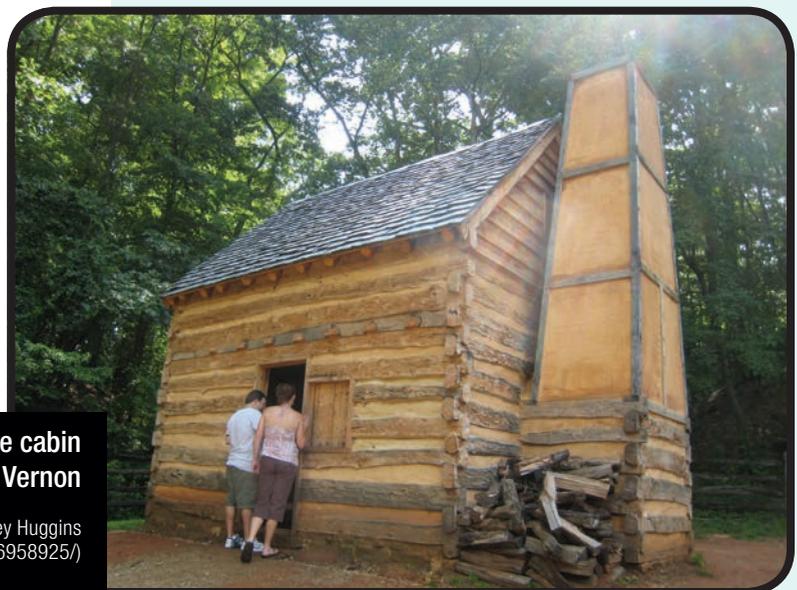
they receive. How good a job, then, are actual living history sites such as Mount Vernon doing at interpreting American history? In her interview with Chakrabarti, Dungey called preparing for the role she played as a character interpreter at Mount Vernon “some of the hardest work I’ve ever done because I had to know the history. [It] took about two months of studying. And then it never really stopped.” Most living history sites do try very hard to prepare their reenactors thoroughly for the roles they will portray. But in a short period of time it is difficult to acquire a broad enough knowledge of the economic, political, and social world of the characters associated with a particular site to offer fully informed answers to the wide range of questions that visitors, some of them historians (or at least buffs) themselves, may ask. The difficulty is especially great for those who will interpret enslaved or otherwise marginalized figures. Learning this history involves unlearning many “facts” naturalizing the subordination of slaves, poor people, and women that were staples of history education until quite recently. Then, too, there is far less information available about most enslaved people than about their elite owners; this forces reenactors to portray specific slaves in generic terms, making them categories instead of individuals (as slavery itself did). All of this raises many questions about the value and limits of historical reenactment, especially with respect to illuminating the lives of historically marginalized groups.

The recent enthusiasm for reenactment is an outgrowth of what Vanessa Agnew, an associate professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan, calls the “affective turn” in history, with its emphasis on “personal experience, social relations and everyday life.” Living history sites seem to offer, as Agnew wrote in 2007, “the kind of sympathetic identification with the past that R. G. Collingwood . . . called the precondition for historical understanding.”<sup>1</sup> One of the greatest attractions of reenactment is that it offers the opportunity to give voice to formerly marginalized groups, and in recent years more and more living history sites have moved to incorporate slaves and servants into their rosters of interpreted characters. Historical role-playing has also found favor in the classroom, part of educators’ recent embrace of experiential learning as a particularly powerful teaching strategy.

The general public is drawn to “living history” for different reasons. At one time or another, most people have found themselves wishing they could travel back in time to talk to some

especially fascinating historical figure or participate in a thrilling event. This longing to be present in the past is more than a desire for historical understanding; it is a yearning to experience what the past was *like*. But many people also come to the past hoping, often unconsciously, that their encounter will somehow yield insight into the present, and in this way reenactment encourages a kind of collapse of temporality that is at odds with its very intention.

When reenactors personify marginalized historical figures, the politics of race, class, and gender in the present intrude in complicated ways that may obscure rather than illuminate the past in the encounter. While most of us claim tirelessly that all questions are good questions no matter how ignorant they seem, this presentist resonance turns a simple lack of knowledge into an expression of insensitivity. In some of the questions asked of Dungey at Mount Vernon and lampooned in *Ask a Slave*, white questioners are clearly taking the opportunity to air their beefs with present-day blacks, or they at least are attempting to gain insight into a current situation



Visitors explore a replica slave cabin at Mount Vernon

Photo by Stacey Huggins  
([www.flickr.com/photos/staceyhuggins/2566958925/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/staceyhuggins/2566958925/))

that they find exasperating or baffling: “Why don’t you just go to Massachusetts?” seems to encode an impatience with current disadvantage: “Why don’t you just change your situation? Get off your duff and get a job?” And Dungey/Lizzie Mae clearly *hears* modern beefs in these questions. In the “About Azie” link on the *Ask a Slave* website, Dungey explains how portraying an eighteenth-century slave during Barack Obama’s first term as president, when there was “racial tension all around,” made her “feel like I was in some sort of twisted time warp. . . . Talking to 100s of people a day about what it was like to be black in 18th Century America. And then returning to the 21st Century and reflecting on what had and had not changed.”

Dungey frankly exploits this “time warp” for comedic effect in *Ask a Slave*. While Lizzie Mae sometimes expresses puzzled ignorance at questions that presume knowledge of events outside her time and place, she also deliberately creates double entendres that reach into the present for their meaning. For example, in response to a man’s suggestive request that she show him where on her body she has been branded, she pretends to examine her hands. “I think it’s right there,” she exclaims, raising her middle finger triumphantly: “See that? Got it?” One is tempted to conclude that this is really Dungey’s overall message, reflective of a longing to exorcise what she calls the “somewhat infuriating encounters” she suffered at Mount Vernon.

The sense of dislocation that Dungey uses as fodder for comedy suggests the special challenges facing character interpreters who are asked to

portray slaves. Their exchanges with the public do not take place in some neutral space of historical inquiry, but in a vexed present-day cultural and political arena. That vexed arena extends into the classroom, where historical role-playing is supported by myriad online and print-based collaborative and interactive resources. Scenarios involving slavery are popular precisely because they do offer an opportunity to encourage students to connect oppression in the past with social injustice

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“The sense of dislocation that Dungey uses as fodder for comedy suggests the special challenges facing character interpreters who are asked to portray slaves.”

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today; but even with the most random matching of students with roles to avoid racial stereotyping, many teachers will attest to uncomfortable moments when students in the roles of slaves have had to contend with questions or opinions that inject present-day concerns in hurtful ways.

Engaging slave reenactors also seems to lead some questioners to develop Collingwood’s “sympathetic identification” with the subordination of slaves rather than with their perspectives and experiences. For some, an encounter with people of color, especially women, in roles officially defined

as submissive, seems to break down customary inhibitions and authorize the offensive sort of familiarity illustrated by the male questioner’s avid interest in the branding of Lizzie Mae’s body. In fact, slave reenactors’ seemingly unrestricted and unprotected availability to questioners, and their obligation to stay in character—in other words, their vulnerability—is probably the most uncomfortably realistic, and troubling, aspect of performing enslavement. Something similar can happen in the history classroom when students portraying elite figures take the opportunity to bully students portraying slaves and other subordinated characters.

The fact remains that many visitors to living history sites find the opportunity to engage in conversation with “actual slaves” one of the most emotionally powerful and meaningful encounters with history they will ever have; and many students say the same thing about classroom scenarios involving slavery. If Azie Dungey is at all representative, the story is quite different for slave reenactors themselves. So—do the advantages of giving voice to enslaved figures in the past outweigh its perils? On balance, the answer is probably a cautious “yes”—with the following caveat: Reenacting slavery is a delicate business, laced with potential missteps, the consequences of which fall most heavily upon the reenactor—and the greatest difficulties will come from failing to reckon with the present, not the past. ■

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<sup>1</sup>Vanessa Agnew, “History’s Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present,” *Rethinking History*, 11 (Sept. 2007), 300, 302.

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P R I N T

## An Insider's History

by Steven Lubar

The Smithsonian finally gets its Washington insider-tells-all memoir, complete with memorandums in the author's files but not the official archives, off-the record conversations remembered thirty years later, and, of course, some snarky (but discreet) score settling. Current and former Smithsonian employees will immediately check the index. (Disclosure: I'm one of those former employees, and a former colleague of the author, and I'm in the index.)

But the book's not really an exposé. It's more a history, and a narrowly focused one. The title is misleading. Post is interested in the history of technology, and so he focuses on activities in the curatorial offices of the fifth floor of the National Museum of American History, and, to a lesser extent, the National Air and Space Museum. He considers only exhibits, not collections or public programs. And it's not really about "the problem of history" in a general way. Post is interested in museum management, historical exhibitions, and the relation of museum work and academic work.

Post, retired curator at the American History museum (and former editor of *Technology and Culture*), has a good memory, good archival instincts, and an engaging writing style. He's written an insider's history that lets an outsider listen in on staff meetings, read memos, and get a sense of the ways that the Smithsonian made decisions. He was part of that world, knows the people he writes about, and does a good job of explaining how things worked, especially in the years when he was actively engaged at the museum. But he doesn't bring much perspective or much interest in the bigger issues of museum work more generally. There's some discussion of ownership of the past, and the "problem" of public historical work, but almost no mention

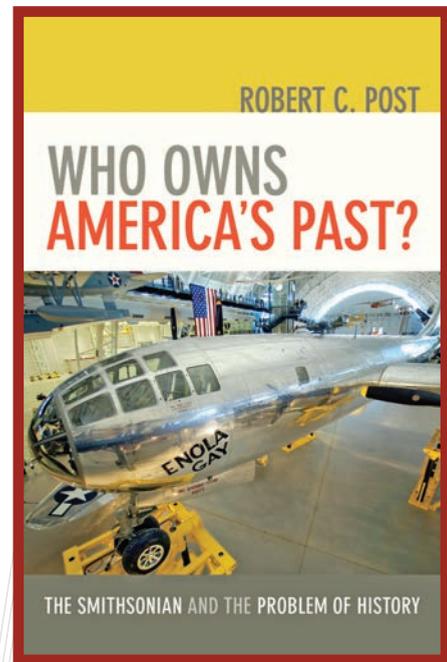
of other museums, or connection to the extensive museum studies literature. Still, there is some valuable history and analysis here, and a rare inside view that will be instructive for history museum studies students and curators.

Post argues that there have been three styles of history exhibitions at the Smithsonian: collections-driven, neo-traditional displays of objects; story-driven narratives; and postmodern, immersive exhibitions. He documents that all three types have coexisted for almost a century, and credits designers, even more than curators, for the exhibitions that worked well.

The relationship of academic work to museum work is a recurring theme. Post notes the Smithsonian's desperate eagerness to be like a university, to hire Ivy League Ph.D.'s and faculty consultants, and to push curators to write academic books. This rarely ended well. Related to this is another theme: curators' resistance to change, or, for that matter, to work on anything other than their own pet projects. Museum administrators can find many how-not-to's here.

Post covers recent Smithsonian controversies—the *Enola Gay* exhibit fiasco, increasing reliance on private donors, Secretary Larry Small's expense accounts—and while he does not add much information, he does provide a useful historical perspective. Post notes the rise of the "stakeholder" in museum discussions, and muses about the difference between, say, the demands of the Air Force Association to control the story of the *Enola Gay* and the concerns of Native American groups about their representation in Smithsonian museums. He doesn't have much patience for newfangled ideas about community involvement or shared authority.

Post is too good a historian to write



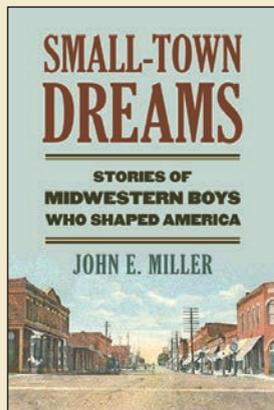
### WHO OWNS AMERICA'S PAST: THE SMITHSONIAN AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

Robert C. Post  
Johns Hopkins University Press  
2014

the easy story of decline from the good old days that he occasionally veers toward. Indeed, this book documents a remarkable consistency. The Smithsonian has always negotiated with the rich and powerful who wanted their stories told. Exhibitions were always a combination of "authentic" collections and "postmodern" construction. Museum directors have always fought with curators. Curators have always been focused on their own work. But the Smithsonian has also kept its eye on its mission, "the increase and diffusion of knowledge"—while spending lots of time fighting over just how best to do that.

The Smithsonian, for better and worse, doesn't change easily. *Who Owns the Past?* documents the value of the Smithsonian's distinctive culture—and also the way it has kept the institution from being all that it might be. ■

# KANSAS

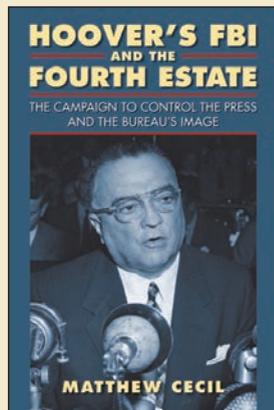


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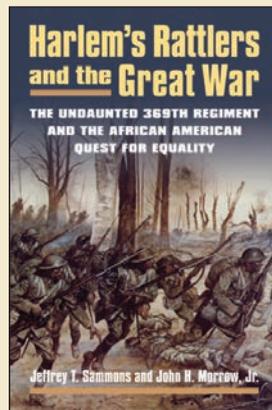


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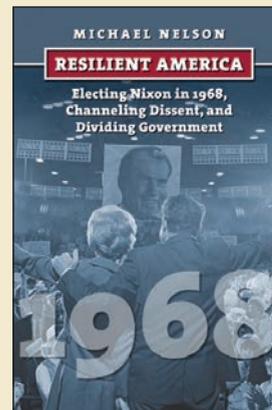
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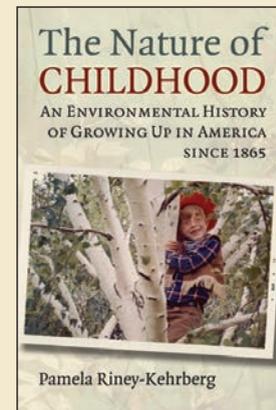
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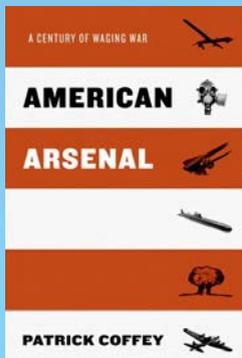
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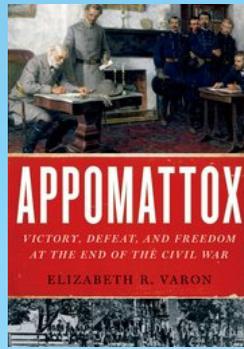
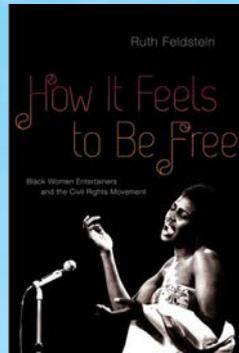
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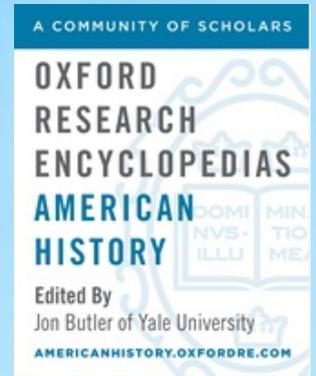
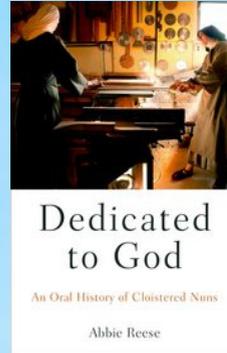
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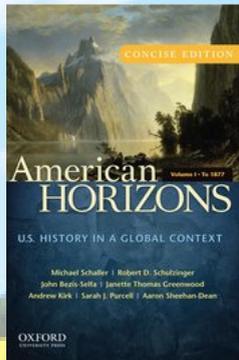
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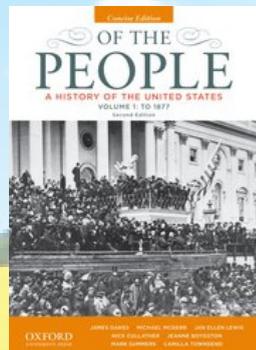


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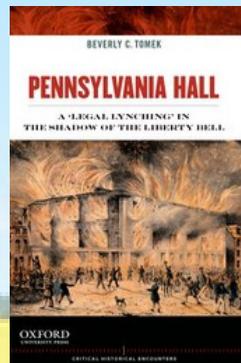
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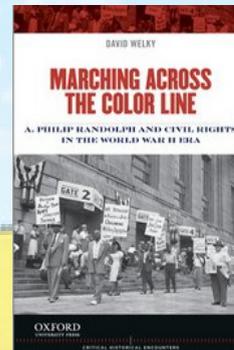
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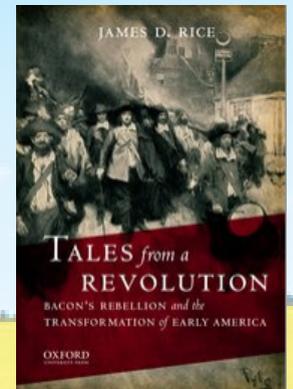
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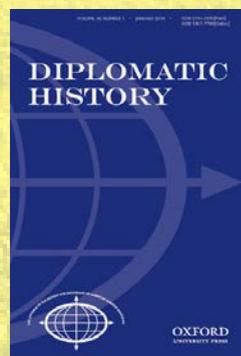


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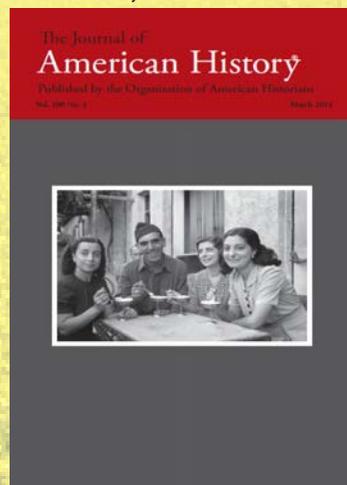
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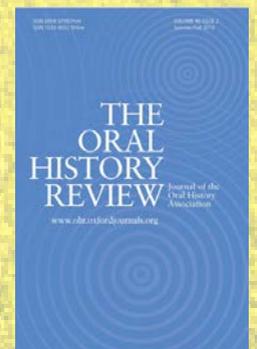
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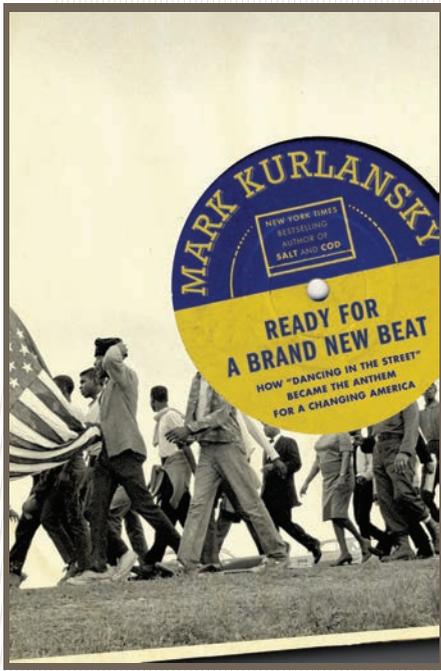


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P R I N T

## Just an Invitation

by Michael J. Kramer



### READY FOR A BRAND NEW BEAT: HOW "DANCING IN THE STREET" BECAME THE ANTHEM FOR A CHANGING AMERICA

Mark Kurlansky  
Riverhead Books  
2013

In *Ready for a Brand New Beat*, Mark Kurlansky, author of more than a dozen books of popular history, sets out to demonstrate how one song, the 1964 single "Dancing in the Street" by Martha and the Vandellas, became what President Barack Obama called (along with Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," 1971), "the soundtrack of the civil rights era" in 2011. The book's breezy, quick-moving narrative contains many colorful anecdotes, suggestive quotations, and illustrative facts as it toggles between the production of "Dancing in the Street" at Motown Records's "Hitsville, U.S.A." studio in Detroit, the political context of the 1960s, and the song's strange afterlife in its circulations through the culture industries.

What the book lacks, however, unlike the tune whose history it so lovingly depicts, is a satisfying hook. Kurlansky describes *how* "Dancing in the Street" became an anthem, but his survey's many details are like scattered riffs, never consolidating into one compelling argument as to why the song has resonated so powerfully. We learn that "Dancing in the Street" was ambiguously, but never definitively, linked to calls for urban insurrection during the 1960s, that it was increasingly heard at many black power rallies and other radical political gatherings, and that it can be understood as a revolutionary tract when heard through the "masking"

tradition of African American cultural expression. We also learn that the song was simply intended for, and most of the time received as, nothing but a catchy call for fun and togetherness. Kurlansky implies that "Dancing in the Street" was ultimately denuded of any political meaning whatsoever. H. Rap Brown used it to pump up crowds for his fiery speeches in the 1960s, but so too, eventually, did the Disney Corporation employ the song as a gag in its animated cartoons. In 2012, even conservative Republican candidate Mitt Romney played the song at campaign rallies. This was a party song that, it turned out, could not belong to any one party line.

Kurlansky's book is chock full of ironies such as these, but the problem with *Ready for a Brand New Beat* is that it lacks a strong interpretation of them. That challenging explanatory task still awaits a historian who might take up the song's tantalizing "invitation across the nation." ■

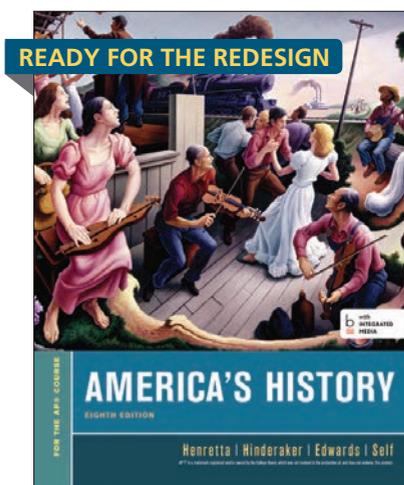
## END NOTE



**FUNNY TO SOME.** Esther Bubley captured images of World War II homefront life as a photographer for the Office of War Information. In 1943 she took this photograph of passengers traveling on a Greyhound bus bound for St. Louis from Pittsburgh, who passed the time by telling “moron” jokes. Not all the passengers appear amused.

PHOTO BY ESTHER BUBLEY. COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

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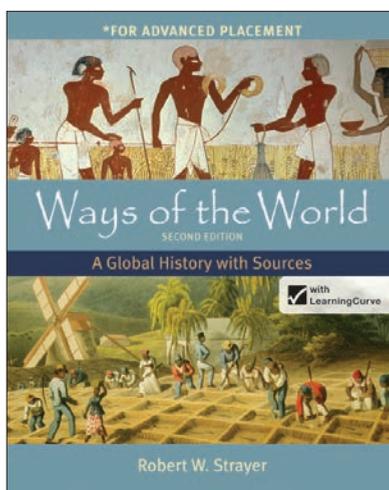
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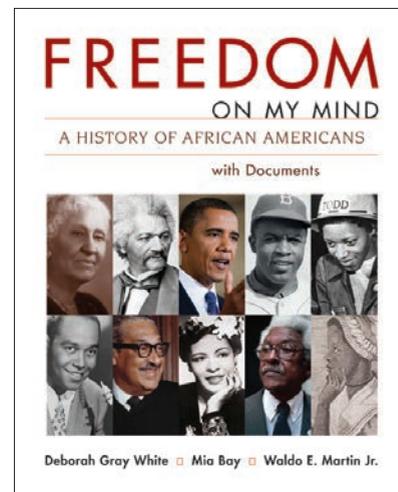
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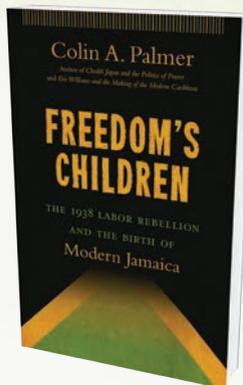
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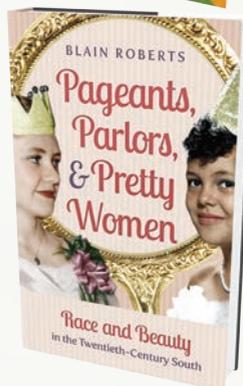
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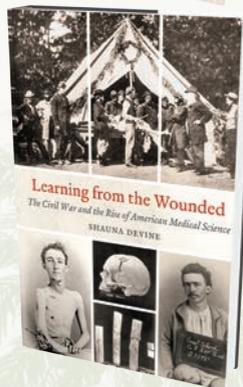
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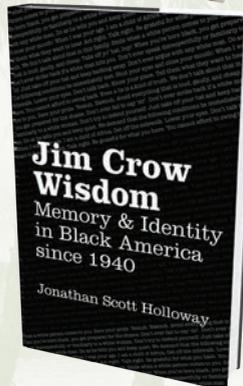
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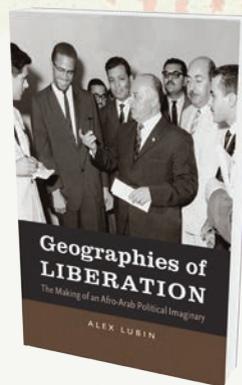
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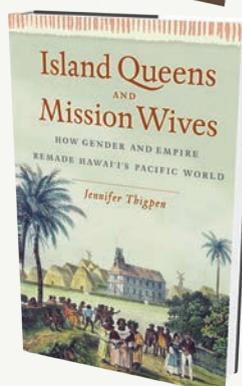
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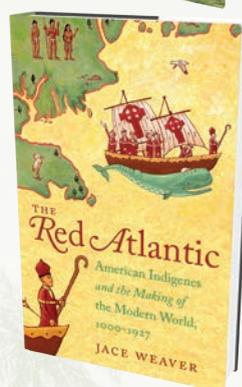
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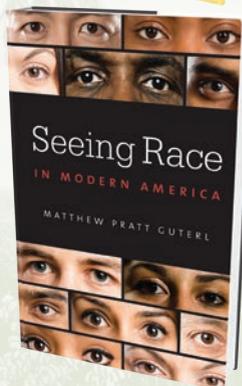


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