

Introduction

NAN GOODMAN

Since January 6, 2021, much has been written about insurrections, bringing a subject that was relatively unfamiliar to most Americans to the fore. As Lindsey Claire Smith, one contributor to this “Of Note” section, observes: “On January 6, 2021, many learned the meaning of the word *insurrection* for the first time.” Indeed, journalists, jurists, artists, and scholars, among others, have devoted themselves to parsing the insurrection on January 6—who were the insurrectionists? what did they want?—and to considering the actions of the insurrectionists on that day in the context of other insurrections in the Americas, Jamaica, and elsewhere. At first, little was known about who was at the Capitol insurrection and what they wanted, but at this point most of the participants have been identified and their crimes enumerated. To date, nearly half of the roughly two thousand people who stormed the Capitol have been arrested and charged with a variety of offenses, from rioting to obstruction of justice, assault, and seditious conspiracy.

Deeper questions about insurrections linger, however, and the authors and commentators contributing to this section invite us to think about what insurrections are and what role they have played in global and national histories. As Smith explains, “What happened on January 6 is not as unprecedented as it may seem.” Asked to comment on an interview of Ta-Nehisi Coates by Chris Hayes (“The Attack on the Capitol with Ta-Nehisi Coates,” January 7, 2021), as well as two recent pieces on insurrectionary activity, “‘The Fate of St. Domingo Awaits You’: Robert Wedderburn’s Unfinished Revolution” (*The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, Fall 2020), by Shelby Johnson, and “Provocation: Phillis Wheatley on the Streets of Revolutionary Boston and in the Atlantic World” (*Early American Literature* 56:2, 2021), by Betsy Erkkila, our contributors note that the problem of racial inequity is especially salient in driving insurrectionary activity. In both Johnson’s and Erkkila’s pieces, the question of race involves the oppression of enslaved people, in Jamaica and the American colonies respectively. As “Of Note” contributor Alexander Mazzaferro puts it, “For both writers, racism constricts democracy but also motors further attempts to realize it.” For “Of Note” contributor Sam Plasencia, thinking about the American and Haitian revolutions through race overturns some of “the mythologies . . . [that] represent revolutionaries as middling-class white men” when they often included the poor and the jobless from multiracial backgrounds. Similarly,

thinking about the January 6 insurrection through race allows us to see the specter of white supremacy in which, as Smith observes, one insurrectionist further erased the history of violence on which the United States was built by “playing Indian” and appearing in a distorted semblance of Native American dress.

In this and other observations, Mazzaferro, Plasencia, and Smith identify another preoccupation of the three pieces under consideration: how insurrection and revolution, which are by definition transient, recur at regular intervals in response to unfinished business, namely, the persistent injustices that were never quite resolved by previous struggles. “In this way,” Mazzaferro writes, “Johnson’s and Erkkilä’s work exemplifies the field’s ongoing effort to complicate notions of revolution as a clean break with the past . . . or an activity monopolized by a single demographic.” Plasencia, too, marks this reframing of insurrection and revolution, noting that Johnson’s reading of Wedderburn, among other things, “stresses incompleteness and suspension, thereby conceptually incorporating ‘finitude as constitutive of revolution’ so that events like the Haitian Revolution are reframed as unfinished projects.”

It thus remains unclear with respect to the January 6 insurrection, whose plotters have already threatened a repeat performance, but also with respect to all past and future insurrections whether any given insurrection is in some sense a response to previous insurrections and whether their failure in any one case is actually in some perverse way a measure of their success. Among the many other unanswered questions that remain about insurrections, the primary questions Smith, Mazzaferro, and Plasencia ask us to contemplate—do insurrections ever come to an end? are they ever successful? do they remain pure potential?—suggest at the very least that there will always be more questions to ask about insurrections.