The Public Life of History

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In September 2005, Bain Attwood and Dipesh Chakrabarty convened a group of historians at the Australian National University to discuss the productive effects of the contemporary politics of recognition on historical practice. The essays in this collection are a selection of the work that began at that meeting and that matured in a collective discussion eighteen months later at Columbia University.[1]

Central to the project was Dipesh Chakrabarty's formulation of the concept of a "historical wound," a notion that grows out of Charles Taylor's discussion of the politics of recognition in multicultural societies.[2] Within the perspective of this politics, wrote Taylor, "misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred."[3] The notion of the "historical wound" extends this idea to the sphere of public representation and debate by reflecting on the fact that the "wounds of misrecognition" invoke the past as the site of the original slight and as the site that calls for redress in the present.

"Historical wounds" are thus a feature of a politics of recognition that is quite recent — a rhetoric that received considerable impetus from the processes of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as from the civil rights struggles of the same period. Moreover, this politics of recognition has intensified noticeably

1. The editors gratefully acknowledge the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University, which sponsored the conference.

2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "History and the Politics of Recognition," in *Manifestos for Historians*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Alan Munslow, and Susan Gordon (London: Routledge, forthcoming). This introduction draws in part on this essay.

3. "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.

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since the 1980s, with the rise of neoliberalism and the reorganization of the social compact in a number of countries around the world. It is therefore not surprising that the effects of historical wounds on historical research, historical claims, and the very presentation of history in public are still very much in tension with history as an established disciplinary practice. Indeed, historical wounds generate all kinds of ambivalence within the historical profession, because they are not identical to "historical truths," even if historical truth is a condition of possibility of any historical wound.

"Historical truths" are broad, synthetic generalizations based on researched collections of individual facts. They may be wrong, but they are always amenable to verification by the methods of historical research. Historical wounds, however, are a mix of history and memory, hence their truth is not always verifiable by historians. Historical wounds cannot come into being without the prior existence of historical truths, but they exceed these by mobilizing history in embodied forms, in the stigmata of present generations.

One example, in this volume, is Bain Attwood's discussion of the tension between the idea of a "stolen generation"—a historical wound that makes claims on the present based on the suffering of Australian Aboriginal people who were removed from their families and raised by settlers—and historical truth as constructed with the traditional instruments of history as a discipline, which suggests that the number of those removed was fewer than has often been claimed, and that the motives for and dynamics of removal were complex, while nonetheless substantiating some of the broader claims of recognition that are mobilized under the banner of the "stolen generations."

Questions similar to these are commonplace wherever the question of genocide is at issue. They are present in alternative representations of the Armenian genocide, in the discussion of truth and fiction in Rigoberta Menchu's account of the Guatemalan massacres of the 1970s and 1980s, and even in contemporary discussion of the historical wounds of the Jewish Holocaust. The mobilization of historical wounds is also critical to the reformulation of the political compact, where performance of historical truths is a highly creative and potent site of public life. This theme is developed in Deborah Posel's discussion of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and it is pertinent to the "foundationalism" that has emerged in many parts of the world, including Argentina, Venezuela, and Chile, for instance, where the social compact has been reshaped on the basis of a revaluation of historical wounds. It also saturates the representation of treaties between settlers and indigenous peoples, a theme that is pertinent to Miranda Johnson's intervention in this volume.

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The claim that present experience is a guide to the past — an appeal built into the politics of historical wounds — is unacceptable to most historians, who are generally skeptical about the "evidence of experience." The capacity to assume a certain distance from the past has been central to the idea of "historical objectivity." Indeed, professional historians as a whole are keenly aware of the radical alterity of the past: "The past," they like to say, "is another country." Experience collapses this distance.

All of this is commonplace, but what is significant about the last fifteen or twenty years is the fact that a number of important historians have felt the need to reiterate and defend these very basic principles of the discipline. Consider books like Carlo Ginzburg's *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* or his *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*, Jacques Le Goff's *History and Memory*, Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Eric Hobsbawm's collection of essays in *On History*, Natalie Zemon Davis's *Slaves on Screen*, or Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob's jointly authored *Telling the Truth about History*. These works are all, in one way or another, thoughtful and sophisticated defenses of the idea of "historical objectivity."

However, the productive tension between the values of academic history and those that are rehearsed in institutions of public life is still insufficiently understood. Museums today increasingly tend to foreground "experience," not just in terms of what spectators get out of their visits to the museums — a "museum experience" that gives "experience" a commodity form — but also as a way of accessing the past. The performance of history in the present has suffused public life and the media, and it spills into legal debate and policy formation. In this regard, the role of representational art forms, various genres of performance, and nonacademic nonfiction writing is significant.

The connection between historical films, historical wounds, and historical truth is perhaps emblematic of this development. As Tom Gunning reminds us, "Film provides indelible images of some of the twentieth century's great events. Our horrified consciousness of the Holocaust relies partly on the filmed images from the liberation of the camps, and our knowledge of the devastation of the Atomic bomb comes partly from motion pictures of Hiroshima or of A-bomb test explosions. Conversely, twentieth century disasters or traumas that went unrecorded by motion pictures — such as the genocide of the Armenians or mass starvation in Asia — are less present in public consciousness because of the lack of vivid images."[4]

4. Tom Gunning, *Making Sense of Films*, History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, February 2002, historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film.

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Similar arguments can be made about the performance of historical wounds on television and in the daily press — an activity that involves re-creating the past on a daily basis.

This collection of essays explores the public life of history. Its authors were drawn together because each has intervened in issues of public life where contention over recognition is critical and because as a group they have worked in a range of relevant institutional sites: addressing the courts, presenting in the media, writing school textbooks, and so forth. Contributors to this volume have intervened in these spaces as academics, that is, as scholars who are invested in "historical truths," but the various connections they have forged between historical research and public intervention differ in interesting ways.

Taken as a whole, then, this collection is a sustained engagement with historical experience, public discussion, and historical truth at a variety of global sites. Historians are only beginning to sort out the unsettling effects of the contemporary politics of recognition on their work. Its effects on history as a disciplinary practice, the effects of historical truth on public debate, and the ways in which public controversies lead to alternative strategies of self-fashioning for historians who engage historical wounds are the focus of these interventions. Scholars have scarcely begun to compare the effects of location on the dilemmas historians face. As a contribution to this effort we offer this collection of essays to the readers of *Public Culture*.

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