The French humanist Jacques Rancière once described the work of an historian as the effort to address a “twofold absence” in history: one, an absence of a past that is “no longer there,” and two, an absence born of our knowledge that it “never was such as it was told.” Rancière argues that in these absences lies our “specific passion for the past,” our desire to employ “les mots de l’histoire,” to fill this absence “at the heart of historical affect.” He could well have been commenting on this issue’s five core articles. Ranging from postindustrial Australia to Abraham Lincoln’s boyhood home, with stops in Mississippi, Pittsburgh, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and along Georgia’s blue highways, each displays public historians at work to fill the twofold absence with research, insight, and interpretation.

Alexandra Dellios invites us to a critical examination of how historians involved with the Australian Heritage Commission have “tried to produce a practice that privileges evolving ‘social values’ rather than maintaining a practice that reproduces static, elitist, and predominately Western notions of heritage.” Gippsland Immigration Park in Morwell aims to forefront the immigrant experience, especially in the region’s coalfields and related industries, as part-and-parcel of Australia’s multicultural history. Dellios finds that the “park contains its own gaps and silences, but [also] offers specific historically grounded narratives of immigration and labor that hold the potential to challenge the limits of Australian multiculturalism and heritage practice.” Employing interviews with the park’s director, himself of immigrant heritage, close reading of interpretive plaques, and criticisms from the local immigrant-descended community, she finds that the park “re-centers able-bodied men as the image of postwar migration, even as it works to destabilize the presumption of migrant progress, linear settlement, and belonging, and that celebrating industrial heritage is therefore wrought with many complex emotions, not all of them celebratory.”

Jennifer Dickey travels the highways and byways of Georgia to trace the history of that state’s historical markers, beginning with the first amateur efforts in the 1950s and continuing into our present. From its inception, she argues, “Georgia’s Historical Marker Program has reflected the power dynamics within the state as much as it has reflected Georgia’s past.” The gradual professionalization of the program met resentment and resistance, as progressive themes around race and

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gender increasingly appeared on markers after the Georgia Historical Society assumed responsibility for interpretation in 1998. Employing peer review that drew upon scholars in colleges and universities across the state, one of the first markers developed under this new review system treated the gruesome lynching of George and Mae Murray Dorsey and Roger and Dorothy Dorsey Malcom at Moore’s Ford Bridge in 1947. Markers that people had long associated with a celebration of heritage were becoming serious engagements with the painful history that underlay much of the state’s romantic traditions. As the seventh decade of the program unfolds, each year sees some dozen new markers, not a few of which echo historian Matthew Gabriele’s admonition that we work not to “preserve memory,” but to “challenge memory.”

Challenging memory is at the heart of T. DeWayne Moore’s deeply researched exposé of Mississippi’s Blues Trail to reveal a major error (or cover-up) in the immensely popular tourist draw’s historical representation. Whereas the Blues Trail interpretation explains the sobriquet “Yellow Dog” by reference to the railroad that crossed the Great Swamp, Moore gives us a much deeper backstory that ties to some of the most brutal forms of Redemption-era coerced labor in the South. But he goes beyond critiquing particulars to explain how an unwillingness to adequately confront systemic racism shadowed the Blues Trail from its very inception. When tied to a music industry that even today maintains near-total control of the editorial content of Blues Trail memorial markers, Moore allows us to see that public history born of an impulse toward racial reconciliation and social justice can be subject to local, state, federal, and private sector “revisionism” that undercuts the trail’s meaning to African American musical culture and preserves the very absences we hope to fill.

Benjamin Houston also addresses absences in racial history with his meditation on a twinned photography exhibit of legendary photojournalist “Teenie” Harris’s work that ran simultaneously in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. Designed to render the “master-narrative” of the civil rights movement more complex than the upward teleology of “progress-toward-justice” of the far-from-complete Black freedom struggle, Houston’s article also offers oral historians methodological insights, especially in the “layered interpretations” one sees between the synchronic nature of photography and the diachronic qualities of oral history, which reflect memory and the present in their telling. In doing so within the context of art installation in two locations, he also reminds us that place can shape narrative reception in unexpected ways.

Finally, Michael A. Capps explores absences in a single location, that of Abraham Lincoln’s boyhood home in southern Indiana, by historicizing the changing nature of memorialization between its creation in 1897 and today. Born of a moment when architectural edifices seemed the apex of honor for a revered leader (and located at the birthplace of Lincoln’s mother), over the decades, the memorial’s emphasis on visitor-engagement brought living history interpreters to the site. Capps shows us that close-focus longitudinal analysis on a single location affords us the chance to view the evolution of absences and presences as shaped by historians and visitors alike.