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Historical *Sankofa*: On Understanding Antiblack Violence in the Present through the African Diasporic Past

Alaina M. Morgan*

Department of History, University of Southern California
*Corresponding author. E-mail: alainamo@usc.edu

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This essay makes a theoretical and methodological intervention into the historical discipline by arguing that there is a serious and necessary role for historians to engage with the realities of our contemporary world. Using the Black Lives Matter movement and the global uprisings of 2020 as a case study, the author rejects long-standing critiques of presentism in the historical discipline. Instead, she argues that the history of transnational black activism and protest engaged by activists in the African diaspora throughout 2020 were indicative of the ways in which the realities of the past continue to materially inform the lives of real people in the present. The author calls the process of excavating these connections between the past and the present "historical sankofa*"—a concept borrowed from the Akan tradition of Ghana.*

On every interminable day of the COVID-19 pandemic, Patrice Peck felt like she was experiencing déjà vu. In an opinion piece published by the *New York Times* in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, Ms Peck, a black woman and journalist, admitted that three months of reporting during the coronavirus and the constant murder of black people had drained her emotionally. With every black death from COVID-19 and every unprosecuted police murder of black men and women she personally felt the "waves of trauma crashing down" on *her* community. For Ms Peck, these traumas did not simply exist in the present, but were also rooted in the past. Black journalists had expressed these traumas as early as 1827 when John B. Russwurm and a group of black New Yorkers published the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*. Ms Peck's experiences were not novel, but rather exposed long-standing structural inequities that had survived and transformed from the antebellum era.[1]

Ms Peck's editorial was published at the end of a long and tense spring punctuated by the brutal and casual murder of Mr Floyd by white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin. For a minimum of eight minutes and fifteen seconds Chauvin knelt on Mr Floyd's neck, refusing to yield to his panicked cries that he could not

[1]Patrice Peck, "Black Journalists Are Exhausted," *New York Times Online*, 29 May 2020, at www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/opinion/coronavirus-black-people-media.html. For more on *Freedom's Journal* see Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

breathe.[2] These facts, brought to light by a cellphone video posted to Facebook, stood in stark contrast to the statement that the Minneapolis Police Department published the day before, cryptically noting that Mr Floyd died after suffering from "medical distress."[3] After the video was posted, hundreds of people gathered in protest at the corner where Mr Floyd lost his life.[4] These protests soon transformed from raised fists and placards to destruction of the physical manifestations of police brutality, white supremacy, and racial capitalism. Protesters breached the doors of big-box stores like Target and Walmart to loot goods and set Minneapolis police stations ablaze.[5] Like the fires these protestors set, the rage and anger that ignited these protests spread from Minneapolis to Los Angeles, Europe, the Caribbean, and beyond.[6]

The murders that ignited widespread protests in May 2020 began in the United States, but protesters around the globe felt the injustices just as keenly as if George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, or Rayshaud Brooks had been murdered on their own shores. With the same rage that sustained the protesters that filled the streets of American cities, thousands of global citizens filled public squares and blockaded highways day after day for weeks.[7] On 13 June 2020, as protesters in Atlanta blocked highways and set flame to the Wendy's restaurant where Rayshaud Brooks was killed by police, a crush of bodies filled London's Trafalgar Square protesting instances of police violence, marginalization, and racism not only in America, but also in the heart of the British Empire.[8] On 13 June, as

[2]Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christaan Trieberg, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein, "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times Online*, at www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html?searchResultPosition=5.

[3]John Elder, "Investigative Update on Critical Incident," *Minneapolis Police Department Webpage*, 26 May 2020, at www.insidempd.com/2020/05/26/man-dies-after-medical-incident-during-police-interaction.

[4]Christine Hauser, Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Neil Vigdor, "'I Can't Breathe': 4 Minneapolis Officers Fired after Black Man Dies in Custody," *New York Times*, 27 May 2020, at www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/us/minneapolis-police-man-died.html.

[5]Patrice Stockman, "'They Have Lost Control': Why Minneapolis Burned," *New York Times*, 2 July 2020, at www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/minneapolis-government-george-floyd.html.

[6]"Protests across the Globe after George Floyd's Death," *CNN*, 13 June 2020, at www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/world/gallery/intl-george-floyd-protests/index.html; Melissa Noel, "The Fight against Racial Justice Is a Caribbean Fight Too," *Essence Magazine*, 17 July 2020, at www.essence.com/feature/united-states-caribbean-relations-solidarity-protests.

[7]"Protests across the Globe after George Floyd's Death"; Zamira Rahim and Rob Picheta, "Thousands around the World Protest George Floyd's Death in Global Display of Solidarity," *CNN.com*, 1 June 2020, at www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/world/george-floyd-global-protests-intl/index.html; "George Floyd: Protests around the World Show Solidarity with US Demonstrators," *USA Today*, 18 July 2020, at www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/news/world/2020/06/03/george-floyd-protests-around-world-show-solidarity-us-demonstrators/3133960001; "How George Floyd's Death Sparked Protests around the World," *Washington Post*, 10 June 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/2020/06/10/how-george-floyds-death-sparked-protests-around-world.

[8]On the burning of the Wendy's where Rayshaud Brooks was shot by Atlanta Police see Ray Sanchez, "Atlanta Wendy's Where Rayshaud Brooks Was Killed Has Been Demolished," *CNN.com*, 14 July 2020, at www.cnn.com/2020/07/14/us/rayshard-brooks-wendys-demolished/index.html; Jennifer Calfas and Katie Honan, "Atlanta Police Shooting Sparks New Outrage," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 June 2020, at www.wsj.com/articles/atlanta-police-chief-to-resign-after-shooting-of-unarmed-black-man-11592087452. For more on Black Lives Matter protests in London's Trafalgar Square see "London Protests: Demonstrators Clash with Police," *BBC.com*, 13 June 2020, at www.bbc.com/news/uk-53031072; Ylvia Hui and Arno Pedra,

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Atlanta burned, an overwhelmingly black and brown crowd of protesters filled Trafalgar Square, a space named for a colonial-era battle of domination between the British and the French, to declare their solidarity.

In Trafalgar Square, against a backdrop of buildings funded with the spoils of the transatlantic slave trade, protesters raised their fists and held signs declaring their humanity as black people. In Paris, Rome, Madrid, Hong Kong, and Sydney, protesters echoed these actions.[9] Ignited by the grotesque violence against black people in the United States, protesters seized this moment to shine a spotlight on the ongoing legacies of white supremacy and racial violence in their own countries. In Bristol, activists tore down a statute of slave trader Edward Colston and threw it into Bristol Harbour.[10] In Barbados, protesters demanded the removal of the likeness of Lord Admiral Nelson, the same British naval captain whose likeness graces the center of London's Trafalgar Square.[11] In Sydney and Melbourne, Aboriginal peoples and their allies rejected the prime minister's assertions that activists were "importing" problems that did not exist in Australia, and shone a light on disproportionate Aboriginal death at the hands of the police.[12]

The disparate media responses to this crisis reflected the gulf between the rights and protections afforded to white citizens and denied to their black and brown counterparts. But they also reflected a difference in perspective and experience of the ongoing impact and legacy of historical racial violence and resistance. The mainstream media reacted as they had during uprisings in 1968, in 1992, and in 2014—with shock tempered by relatively sanitized "objective" coverage, and a myriad of questions about why black people were driven into the streets in protest at that particular moment.[13] In 2020, the mainstream media surprise extended to

"From Minneapolis to Paris and London: Right-Wing Demonstrators and BLM Protesters Hit the Streets in Europe," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 June 2020, at www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-nw-london-protests-paris-protests-20200613-64rglqweqvegthuzkkbcmphdse-story.html.

[9]"Protests across the Globe after George Floyd's Death"; Rahim and Picheta, "Thousands around the World Protest George Floyd's Death"; "George Floyd: Protests around the World Show Solidarity with US Demonstrators"; "How George Floyd's Death Sparked Protests around the World."

[10]Nora McGreevy, "British Protesters Throw Statue of Slave Trader into Bristol Harbor," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 10 June 2020, at www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/protesters-throw-slavers-statue-bristol-harbor-make-waves-across-britain-180975060.

[11]Jacqueline Charles, "People in These Caribbean Nations Want Statutes of Columbus and Lord Nelson Taken Down," *Miami Herald*, 12 June 2020, at www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article243425806.html; Noel, "The Fight against Racial Justice Is a Caribbean Fight Too."

[12]Luke Henriques-Gomes and Elias Visontay, "Australian Black Lives Matter Protests: Tens of Thousands Demand End to Indigenous Deaths in Custody," *The Guardian*, 6 June 2020, at www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/06/australian-black-lives-matter-protests-tens-of-thousands-demand-end-to-indigenous-deaths-in-custody; "Australians Protest against Racial Injustice, Deaths in Custody," *AlJazeera.com*, 13 June 2020, at www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/13/australians-protest-against-racial-injustice-deaths-in-custody.

[13]For examples of typical mainstream media responses to protests taking place after the death of George Floyd in 2020 see, for example, Jenny Jarvie and Melissa Etehad, "'How Are We Here Again?' Black America on Edge after Killing of George Floyd," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 2020, at www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-29/how-are-we-here-again-black-america-on-edge-after-police-killing-of-george-floyd; Spencer Bokatt-Lindell, "Why Is Police Brutality Still Happening?", *New York Times*, 28 May 2020, at www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/opinion/minneapolis-police-brutality.html?searchResultPosition=20; Sarah Kerr, Mike Shum, Katie G. Nelson, Dmitry Khavin, and Haley Willis, "Video: Minneapolis Precinct Fire: How a Night of Chaos Unfolded," *New York Times*, 29 May 2020, at www.nytimes.com/video/us/

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the global nature of the uprisings as well, relying heavily on gorgeous photograph essays documenting Aboriginal populations protesting in Sydney, Congolese immigrants raising fists in Belgium, or the descendants of Caribbean migrants holding placards in London.[14] To this end, as the protests endured, newspaper op-eds compared the uprisings of 2020 to the unrest that swept the country after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968, asking how they were (and occasionally were not) similar.[15] On the other side of the spectrum, the black media response was exhausted, exasperated, and impatient.[16] Journalists for all publications intermittently advanced the view that "it"—the cycle of police brutality, black protest, and the exoneration of those responsible—was "happening again," or that "history was repeating itself."[17]

100000007162707/minneapolis-police-protest-burn.html?searchResultPosition=26; Andrew Beaton and Ben Cohen, "Colin Kaepernick's Protest Is Raging across America," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 June 2020, at www.wsj.com/articles/colin-kaepernick-george-floyd-and-the-era-of-athlete-activism-11591012801?page=50. For an article investigating the disconnect between mainstream surprise on police murder of black people and the expectations of violence in the black community see Kurtis Lee, "Breonna Taylor's Death Shocked the Nation. In Louisville, Black People Are Far from Surprised," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Sept. 2020, www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-09-27/la-na-breonna-taylor-louisville. For archival sources reflecting mainstream media responses to urban uprisings after the death of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968, the beating of Rodney King in 1992, and the police murder of Michael Brown in 2014 see, for example, Douglas E. Kneeland, "Behind the Violence: Despair and Spring Madness," *New York Times*, 12 April 1968, 20; Willard Clopton, "Curfew Imposed as Roving Bands Plunder and Burn," *Washington Post*, 6 April 1968, A1, A14; Seth Mydans, "The Police Verdict: Verdict Sets off a Wave of Shock and Anger," *New York Times*, 30 April 1992, D22; Ruth Marcus, "History of Mistrust May Have Contributed to Riots," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1992, A18; Samantha Storey, "Scenes of Chaos Unfold after a Peaceful Vigil in Ferguson," *New York Times*, 12 Aug. 2014, at www.nytimes.com/2014/08/13/us/after-a-peaceful-vigil-in-ferguson-scenes-of-chaos-unfold.html?searchResultPosition=16; Jim Slater, Mark Berman, and Todd C. Frankel, "Uncovering Source behind City's Unrest," *Washington Post*, 13 Aug. 2014, 10.

[14]"Protests across the Globe after George Floyd's Death"; Rahim and Picheta, "Thousands around the World Protest George Floyd's Death"; "George Floyd: Protests around the World Show Solidarity with US Demonstrators"; "How George Floyd's Death Sparked Protests around the World."

[15]Karen Grisby Bates, "1968–2020: A Tale of Two Uprisings," Code Switch, *NPR Online*, 3 June 2020, at www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/06/03/869138222/1968-2020-a-tale-of-two-uprisings; Rachel Chason and Rebecca Tan, "For Black Residents Who Saw D.C. Burn Decades Ago, Floyd Protests Felt Like Hope," *Washington Post*, 16 June 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-protests-1968-george-floyd/2020/06/15/bc5475e6-ab28-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html; Ted Anthony, "In George Floyd Protests, Echoes of 1968 Social Unrest," *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 May 2020, at www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2020/0531/In-George-Floyd-protests-echoes-of-1968-social-unrest; Mark Z. Barbarak, "News Analysis: Racism, Unrest, Police Brutality: Is America Living 1968 All Over Again? Yes and No," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 2020, at www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-04/george-floyd-protests-1968-parallels-2020-election. For two op-eds discussing how 2020 was *not* like 1968 see Thomas J. Sugrue, "2020 Is Not 1968: To Understand Today's Protests You Must Look Further Back," *National Geographic*, 11 June 2020, at www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/06/2020-not-1968; Sugrue, "Stop Comparing Today's Protests to 1968," *Washington Post*, 11 June 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/11/protests-1968-george-floyd.

[16]See, for example, Neal Justin, "Floyd Story Got Personal for Black Journalists," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 4 July 2020, at www.startribune.com/floyd-story-got-personal-for-black-journalists/571607492/; L. Z. Granderson, "George Floyd and the Special Hell Reserved for Journalists Covering His Killing," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2020, at www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/george-floyd-and-the-special-hell-reserved-for-black-journalists-covering-his-killing.

[17]Stephon Johnson, "It's All Happening Again: Police Kill George Floyd, Protests Ensue," *Amsterdam News*, 28 May 2020, http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2020/may/28/its-happening-again-police-kill-george-

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The above approaches try to make accessible for readers their present realities, but they both fall short in one key way. As historian Tom Sugrue argued in two op-eds on how 2020 is in fact *not* like 1968, the reasons why these approaches are inadequate is that they ignore the historical realities of long-standing ideas of solidarity between black people in the United States and other colonized people of the global South dating back to the antebellum period.[18]

* * *

I argue here, in the spirit of this forum on the historical discipline and the study of the present, that there is a serious and necessary role for historians to engage with the realities of our contemporary world. To do this, I will examine the global Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 in relation to the historical precedents that activists engage while keeping themselves rooted into the present and looking toward the future. I call this process historical *sankofa*, a concept that I borrow from the funerary practices of the Akan tradition of Ghana. Loosely translated as "go back and fetch it," *sankofa* is symbolized as a bird with its legs rooted to the ground, its feet and body pointing forward, and its beak reaching into the past to grab an egg from its back. This powerful symbol is indicative of our relation to our ancestors as we stand in the present and look to the future.[19]

Like the more than a century of transnational black activism that came before, the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 are rooted in a long tradition of freedom dreams that have continuously emerged from black protest and solidarity movements. The effects of 2020 are likely to reverberate, just like the national and global uprisings of 1968, the Los Angeles uprisings of 1992, and the Ferguson uprisings of 2014. The ways that this will manifest, however, are a matter for the historians of the future to figure out as they use our contemporary experiences of uprising, grief, and anger as their historical archive. Using a process of historical *sankofa* —recognizing the unique moment of the present while reaching back in history and looking toward the future—is critical for us as historians to contextualize the ways in which the radical imagination of 2020 blossomed while respecting the long and particular history of transmission and translation of ideas on black freedom, liberation, and solidarity in the African diaspora.

As I write, it is 2022. Until very recently, it was common practice for the majority of historians to reject an impulse to write an article on events which occurred a

floyd-prote; "As America Confronts Old Demons after George Floyd's Death, a 1770 Slaying Is Recalled," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 2020, at www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-06-04/as-nation-confronts-old-demons-a-1770-slaying-is-recalled.

[18]Sugrue, "2020 Is Not 1968; Sugrue, "Stop Comparing Today's Protests to 1968. See also Brandon Byrd, "As BLM Goes Global, It's Building on Centuries of Black Internationalist Struggle," *IBW21.org*, 5 Aug. 2020, https://ibw21.org/editors-choice/as-blm-goes-global-its-building-on-centuries-of-black-internationalist-struggle.

[19]For more on *sankofa*, including analysis of various translations of the word and concept, see Erik Seeman, "Reassessing the 'Sankofa Symbol' in New York's African Burial Ground," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67/1 (2010), 101–22, 109 n. 16, citing W. Bruce Willis, *The Akindra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Akindra* (Washington, DC, 1998), 188; Alfred Kofi Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns*, 2nd edn (Legon, Ghana, 1994), 17; and Daniel Mato, "Clothed in Symbol: The Art of Akindra among the Akan of Ghana" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1987).

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mere two years prior. Presentism has long been identified as the archnemesis of many historians.[20] This desire to starkly separate the past from the present reflects in the disciplinary standards that we set for ourselves and the ways in which others view the role of history in the world. This has been implemented and supported at an institutional level. As late as 2002, eminent historian of the French Revolution and then president of the American Historical Association Lynn Hunt wrote a piece in the AHA's *Perspectives on History* magazine entitled "Against Presentism."[21] In this essay, Professor Hunt argued that presentism led to two problems in the historical profession: first, the tendency to examine the past with the values and concerns of the present; and second, a shift of interest toward the contemporary and away from the very distant past. Focusing so much on the present carried the risk that our profession would at best turn into a secondary-school version of history, where specificity is wanting and the dangers of "short-term history of various kinds of identity politics defined by present concerns" lurk around every corner.[22] This is not the opinion of just one historian, but rather of an eminent, highly respected, and extremely prolific professor who at one point headed *the* largest organization of historians in the United States. For historians who are trying to historicize the present, however, there is nothing short-term about the type of history that we are doing. Instead, we seek to illuminate the deeply entrenched, *longue durée* history of racial violence and white supremacy, and the equally lengthy history of minority protest that accompanies it.

Institutional prerogatives can do much to limit the study of particular subjects and the adoption of particular perspectives, such as a lens that considers the present. A salient example is the recently resolved question of whether oral history falls under the purview of Institutional Review Board (IRB) review. On 21 January 2019, after years of debate, federal Rule 82 FR 7149 went into effect.[23] This rule, which governs the protection of human subjects in federally funded or supported research activities, excluded oral history from the list of activities that fall under IRB review. This revised rule was the result of decades of lobbying by historians to automatically exclude oral history from the list of IRB-regulated activities. In the process of lobbying, historians laid out many excellent reasons to exclude oral history—there are already privacy and informed-consent protocols recommended by the professoriate; the IRB process assumes a scientific method

[20]For a far more thorough summary of the history of the discipline's opposition to presentism see David Armitage, "In Defense of Presentism," in Darrin M. McMahon, ed., *History and Human Flourishing* (Oxford, forthcoming), available at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/armitage/files/armitage_in_defence_of_presentism.pdf.

[21]Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism," *Perspectives on History*, 1 May 2002, www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism.

[22]Ibid.

[23]A new federal rule excluding oral history and historical scholarship from IRB review was passed in January 2017 and was intended to go into effect on 19 January 2018. This rule superseded the regulations found in 45 CFR 46, implemented in 1981 and revised in 1991. In April 2018, the Department of Health and Human Services delayed the implementation of the new rule until January 2019. See 45 CFR 46; "Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects," 19 Jan. 2017, 82 FR 7149; "Federal Policy for the Protection of Research Subjects: Proposed Six Month Delay of the General Compliance Date While Allowing the Use of Three Burden-Reducing Provisions during the Delay Period," 20 April 2018, 83 FR 17595.

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that does not apply to historical research; and the potential of harm that is inherent to, say, pharmaceutical trials on human subjects or even psychology research is not present when performing oral histories. All of these were excellent reasons for exclusion, but ultimately the argument that won—and the path of least resistance—was to argue that what historians do is not "research" at all because it is not designed to "contribute to generalizable knowledge," and therefore is not covered by DHHS requirements.

I am certainly not arguing that we should return to the days of onerous IRB applications, but for oral historians of marginalized peoples who use oral history as much to record individual experiences as to fill the enormous craters present in Eurocentric and white-dominated institutional archives, this is not representative of what we do. We do not ask standardized questions, but that does not mean that what we discover in the process of our research is not in some way generalizable or applicable to our society at large.

The types of values articulated in the debate on oral history and IRB review have led to a self-fulfilling prophecy for the historical profession. We have been encouraged to approach our subjects by framing our discipline as the examination of sets of events that exist in the hermetically sealed chambers of neatly defined historical decades, movements, and eras. Those of us carrying the burden of our double consciousness as marginalized people who study our own histories are prevented from breaching the walls of these sacred disciplinary tombs. We are prevented from emotionally and politically engaging with our own pasts, lest we be accused of the type of identity politics that Professor Hunt identified in her address two decades ago.

The problem is beyond personal—it's disciplinary as well. People of the African diaspora, even given, and perhaps because of, their violent disconnection from the African continent, have been driven to engage with their pasts. Other disciplines, like English, comparative literature, and anthropology, have fleshed this out much more clearly through ideas like *sequelae*, wakes, and "tragic continuities."[24] These theories give us tools to understand the ways in which the past ripples into the present and informs the lives and realities of people of African descent. It also gives us language to describe the ongoing violence that our institutions and methods of evidentiary extraction do to the history of black people.

The field did not have a name at the time, but when W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1903 that the "problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea," he was articulating ideas of imagined relations and

[24]Anthropologist Christen Smith uses the term *sequelae*, which she defines as the "gendered, reverberating deadly effects of state terror that infect the affective communities of the dead," to understand the compounding gendered, medical and psychological effects of ongoing state violence against black people. The concept of the "wake" was developed by English professor Christina Sharpe and describe the way in which historical and contemporary black life exists as part of the same afterlife of slavery. Comparative-literature scholar Saidiya Hartman has written repeatedly on the violence that the historical archive does in its failure to document and recognize the agency of black lives. See Christen A. Smith, "Facing the Dragon: Black Mothering, Sequelae, and Gendered Necropolitics in the Americas," *Transforming Anthropology* 24/1 (2016), 31–48; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, 2016); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997); Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12/2 (2008), 1–14.

solidarities between people who had never met, but who shared a common history of oppression and subjugation under white supremacy.[25] Du Bois, and his contemporaries like Marcus Garvey and his second wife Amy Jacques Garvey, articulated a diasporic consciousness that pre-dated the formation of the field of African diasporic history by nearly a hundred years.[26] Arguably, they were engaging with an imagined consciousness that connected black people in all corners of the world and which pre-dated them by four hundred years, stretching back to the hulls of slave ships and to the African continent itself.[27]

African diasporic studies was designed, from its inception, to elucidate the connections between people of African descent on the African continent or in their locations of dispersal.[28] Scholars of the African diaspora reject using a lens limited by the boundaries of nation-states and instead adopt a perspective that sees the development of "diasporic consciousness" on a global level. Necessarily, the history of the African diaspora is connected to the exchange of the history of ideas—it relates to the ways in which black people define themselves and each other as part of the same communities over sometimes expansive geographical distance.[29] Because of this, as historian Robin D. G. Kelley has argued, much of the black radical tradition is premised on the ability to dream of a dramatically different world.[30] In dreaming of this world, black people have found ways to redefine themselves as global majorities and develop strategies for navigating and overthrowing global white supremacy. They have redefined the contours of blackness, as they did in the aftermath of the Second World War and as they do now, to include Muslims, Dalits, Aborigines, and East Asians in their movements.[31]

[25]W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (New Haven, 2015), 1.

[26]Michael A. Gomez, "Of Du Bois and Diaspora: The Challenge of African American Studies," *Journal of Black Studies* 35/2 (2004), 125–94; Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Changed Global Politics* (Princeton, 2014); Ula Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill, 2002).

[27]Gomez, "Of Du Bois and Diaspora," 177, arguing as of 2004, that the conversation regarding the connections between African-descended people in all parts of the globe dated back at least five hundred years.

[28]I cannot in any way do justice in this short essay to the history of the field of African diaspora. However, for a small sample of key pioneering studies see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1993); James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9/3 (1994), 302–38; John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (New York, 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Margaret Washington, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs* (New York, 1988); Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43/1 (2000), 11–45.

[29]Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (New York, 2003); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2018).

[30]Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 1–12.

[31]For more on Afro-Asian and Afro-Muslim solidarities see Penny von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-colonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, 1997); Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis, 2012); Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895–1945* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-orientalism* (Minneapolis, 2004); Keisha Blain, "'[F]

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Thus, when a British Muslim holds up an anti-police-brutality sign in Trafalgar Square declaring that "Pigs are Haram" or waves a Palestinian flag alongside a Black Lives Matter placard featuring the likenesses of black Americans who fell to police violence, they are engaging with this long-standing tradition. *This* is perhaps the biggest pitfall of rejecting presentism—the way that ignoring the historical roots of these movements makes these formations seem strange, haphazard, and peculiar instead of intentional, powerful, and historically informed. Our twenty-first-century definitions of race and racial identity make Afro-Asian, Afro-Dalit, and Afro-Aboriginal solidarities, to name a few, seem out of the ordinary instead of part and parcel of the African diasporic and internationalist landscape. Whatever the latest technologies and advancements in communication—whether they were syndication networks, underground radio, or television—have been at the core of what has enabled these ideological connections to exist where physical travel proved too costly, too impractical, or simply undesirable.[32] Today, these aims are achieved through a twenty-four-hour news cycle and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook that reach nearly every corner of the globe simultaneously.

* * *

It is no surprise, thus, that today it is black historians and historians who study people of African descent who are leading the movement to reclaim presentism in the historical profession, and they are challenging the power of institutions to stop them. From the birth of the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS) and its award-winning public-facing blog, *Black Perspectives*, to the controversial 1619 Project of the *New York Times*, black historians and their allies are speaking out in favor of a historical discipline that does not ignore the realities of antiblack violence in the present and makes sense of its roots in the past.[33] These historians are informed by long-standing indigenous practices of understanding the relation of the past to the present, like *sankofa*, and also powerfully by their own experiences.

The profession is coming around as well. In December 2020, after the coronavirus pandemic cancelled annual professional meetings and gatherings, the then president of the Organization of American Historians, Joanne Meyerowitz, made

or the Rights of Dark People in Every Part of the World': Pearl Sherrod, Black Internationalist Feminism, and Afro-Asian Politics during the 1930s," *Souls* 17/1–2 (2015), 90–112.

[32]Von Eschen, *Race against Empire*, 8; Gerald Horne, *The Rise and Fall of the Associated Negro Press: Claude Barnett's Pan-African News and the Jim Crow Paradox* (Urbana–Champaign, 2017).

[33]For more on the 1619 Project, including debates on the factual integrity of the project, see Victoria Bynum, James M. MacPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon S. Wood, "RE: The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, 29 Dec. 2019, at www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html; Adam Serwer, "The Fight over the 1619 Project Is Not about the Facts," *The Atlantic*, 23 Dec. 2019, at www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093; Sean Wilentz, "A Matter of Facts," *The Atlantic*, 22 Jan. 2020, at www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152; David Waldstreicher, "The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy," *Boston Review*, 24 Jan. 2020, http://bostonreview.net/race-politics/david-waldstreicher-hidden-stakes-1619-controversy. For more on the formation of the African American Intellectual History Society see "About AAIHS," *African-American Intellectual History Society*, at www.aaihs.org/about/; "About," *Black Perspectives*, https://www.aaihs.org/about-black-perspectives.

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the decision to publish her outgoing address in the *Journal of American History*. Entitled "180 Op-Eds: Or How to Make the Present Historical," Professor Meyerowitz broke from years of institutional suspicion of presentism by arguing that our mission "as historians [is] not only to study the past and not only to make the past somehow relevant … but also to study the present, to make the present historical, to give historical depth and complexity to the world in which we live."[34] Perhaps I am in the minority of historians, but it is also what serves our students and the educated public with which some of us engage. Contrary to Professor Hunt's 2002 suggestion that focusing on the present threatens to put historians out of business entirely, business for historians who engage with the present is booming.[35] In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, I was inundated with requests from reporters wanting to know everything from the historical context of these protests to why Juneteenth mattered. In a semester held completely online and in an age of falling history enrollments, my hundred-person Race in America class was completely full with a waiting list. And I know I am not alone. During the protests, Professor Ibram X. Kendi's book *How to Be an Anti-racist*, Robin DeAngelo's *White Fragility*, and Michele Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* were sold out on Amazon.com and in local bookstores.[36] Black bookstores, in particular, could not keep their collection of antiracist literature in stock.[37]

I do not argue that we should choose our subjects based on their likelihood to sell books. There is value in choosing a subject entirely contained in the distant past simply for the curiosity and wonder that it brings. But for those of us who have long waited for the public to care about our subjects because of how deeply they resonate for us in our present time, these are small silver linings in an otherwise bleak present. In support of implementing this practice of historical *sankofa*, I end here with the Akan proverb from which the concept of *sankofa* emerges. *Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki*—"It is not taboo to go back and fetch what is at risk of being left behind." Simply because we are historians, we need not allow convention to prevent us from retrieving the gems which can enrich our world and enhance human understanding as we move forward into the twenty-first century.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

[34]Joanne Meyerowitz, "180 Op-Eds: Or How to Make the Present Historical," *Journal of American History* 107/2 (2020), 323–35, at 327.

[35]Professor Hunt wrote, "There is a certain irony in the presentism of our current historical understanding: it threatens to put us out of business as historians." Hunt, "Against Presentism."

[36]Heather Schwedel, "There's Been a Run on Anti-racist Books," *Slate*, 1 June 2020, at https://slate.com/culture/2020/06/antiracist-books-sold-out-amazon-george-floyd-protests.html.

[37]Francine Keifer, "On Stories of Black Struggle, an Iconic L.A. Bookstore Surges," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 June 2020, at www.csmonitor.com/Books/2020/0612/On-stories-of-Black-struggle-an-iconic-L.A.-bookstore-surges.

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