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Rationale
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Political Memory and the Burden of History

When I arrived at New York University three years ago, I had no intention of thinking about history. I imagined myself to be a student of Journalism, my highest professional aspiration was to eventually write for *The New York Times*. I am tempted to say that life was simpler, my conception of its progress more assuredly linear. But within, my eternal nineteen-year-old self protests mightily and I must think harder. Better to say that I was not actively considering history and its omnipresent effect – and that this ignorance, while perhaps not bliss, was certainly more straightforward intellectually, allowing me to be “my own.” I knew myself as autonomous, believed that my identity was precisely of my own choosing, and thought that my language – my reality - was stable, precise, benevolent, and universal. Such was the scale of the edifice I had unconsciously constructed as a wall around me. My experience of the world was youthfully insular. This couldn't last.

James Boyd White writes with useful clarity that “reading is an engagement of the mind that changes the mind.” This describes my experience of the past three years.

Gallatin has been liberating. Having escaped from the dogmatic imperatives of both high school and NYU's College of Arts and Sciences, I found myself finally able to develop and indulge my own nascent intellectual curiosities. I began to read books and essays that would not have been assigned to a Journalism student. As I read of lives vastly different from my own, my self-referential stability began to crumble, replaced by a new sense of human continuity. My mind had been changed; I gained a humbling perspective of my

location within the larger human context. As I learned of the world around me, my identity, my language, and my reality were now not so simply of my own creation. My core assumption of my own unique individuality, constantly reinforced by modern Western liberalist capitalism, became extremely problematic and increasingly difficult to justify. If the machinations of social construction were so obviously apparent to me in concepts like race and gender, how then did I not see them at work in my own image of self? C. Wright Mills forced me to consider whether I was indeed living in a "second-hand world" of "meanings received from....strangers and dead men." Where did my ideas come from? Were they mine at all? How much of one's consciousness is an involuntary echo of preceding generations? What of the past lives in us? To follow these questions I had no choice but to consider what existed before I did. My insularity was gone. I began to recognize the incontrovertible power of that which has come before. I began to recognize *history*.

This new knowledge has been simultaneously invigorating and terrifying. I arrive at this rationale with an urgency I did not initially possess because the learning of the past three years has forced me to question my own agency, my own identity, and, since I am a student of politics and struggle, my prospects for changing the world I inherit. For me, this will be the question I spend my life answering: what does one do with the staggering inheritance of humanity? How to make sense of being a son or a daughter? How does one locate one's own identity and possibility within the context of all that has already been? When I realized that to be human is finally to be "born very young into a world already very old," as the poet Louis Zukofsky wrote with such beautiful precision, I discovered what makes all lives parallel, what unites every life lived with those still yet to come.

History is what has happened. However, people experience what has happened in different ways. An infinite number of factors determine one's perception of what is happening as it happens: one's position in society, one's experience of the world thus far, one's relation to the means of production, or even simply how much one has had to eat. Because of this essential variance, a singular "true" or "objective" history is impossible to achieve. And because of this lack of an absolute "truth" – because no one can claim final, total knowledge of what has happened – history becomes political. Whose account of what has happened is to be accepted? To decide this question requires asserting, conferring or denying an authority, namely, the power to author history, to tell us "how it was."

The right to this power is extremely contested. Determining what narration carries the legitimizing imprimatur of "History" and what interpretation of events becomes popularly acknowledged and reinforced as "historical fact" is to exercise control over human experience and to decide what is remembered and what is not. History is political because politics is the study of power relations, and the "winners" – those in power – write the history books, while the vanquished often become invisible, written out of the story. (To drive past a Native American reservation, as I do every time I go home to Buffalo, serves as a stark reminder of this fact.) George Orwell writes, "He who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past," and history has enough examples to prove him right.

Who tells the story, and which story is told? Who listens? Who concurs and who denies? Answering these questions – or having them answered for you, or not asking them at all – determines the contours of one's political identity. Since history is what has

happened *before*, choosing what histories to tell and believe is not only a political act, it must always be an act of selective remembrance. (Thus omission, too, is also necessarily political. As James Baldwin states in a 1973 interview with Frank Shatz, "What Americans mean by 'history' is something they can forget.") What have we committed to memory as individuals - or as a nation? Why do we remember what we remember? What purpose do we serve, what present condition do we justify, and what do we normalize through our history? How does collective history help constitute a community, a movement, a nation? One's understanding of history and one's political calibration are ultimately indistinguishable, for each is informed and born of the other. We know ourselves through the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

So why is history a "burden," as I have identified it here? Because to realize one's historical self - that is, to be conscious of one's place as an individual within a larger historical context - requires an admission of powerlessness. We cannot change what has happened before, nor can we alter the circumstances of our own birth. Oedipus, finally, could be no one but his parents' son, despite the identity he had created for himself on his own terms. William Faulkner's Quentin Compson could not escape the bloody, racist history of his native South, no matter how intense his denial and repudiation. History left W.E.B. Du Bois no choice but to ask, "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" When Du Bois writes, "I remember well when the shadow swept across me," he is writing of history as burden, of the undeniable force of that which has come before. Similarly, in the interview with Shatz, Baldwin states "the situation of being a black American is not past or present. If you wanted to forget it, you can't forget it - you know, some cop would certainly remind you." To admit powerlessness when

confronted with what has come before requires acceptance of an immutable knowledge: historical knowledge. To know of the Middle Passage or the Holocaust or the Trail of Tears is to shoulder the burden of history, to admit the past into the present.

History does not exist except in the mind; it is sustained through language and *remembering*. Therefore, the burden of historical knowledge is not static; through active *political* remembrance, history can be recalibrated and used to affect the future. Baldwin goes on to state that his direct knowledge and experience of racism and its history in America provided him with “an awareness of man’s sorrow which I had to learn to live with from the moment I was born. That can be a tremendous gift. That’s the only gift America has given any black person.” What Baldwin calls a “gift” is the unique knowledge that history has forced upon him – but it’s a gift only because it provides a prospect for change, it becomes a tool to affect the future. The experience of history can become a powerful catalyst for political analysis and change, as Cheryl Harris demonstrates in her essay “Whiteness as Property.” Using her grandmother’s experiences with “passing” in order to make a living in 1930s Chicago as a starting-point, Harris catalogues the ways in which “whiteness” has been legally constructed, protected and privileged throughout America’s history. She argues that historically, the United States is a “society structured on racial caste.” Harris’ arguments are a powerful utilization of the inheritance of her grandmother’s knowledge: specifically, her political memory.

My intention is to examine two specific aspects of history and historical knowledge. First, how does history construct the present and our knowledge of ourselves? As the poet William Carlos Williams writes, “That of the dead which exists in our imaginations has as much fact as have we ourselves. The premise that serves to fix us

fixes also that part of them which we remember.” Second, how does active political remembrance – on an individual, communal or social level – offer opportunities for transforming the burden of historical knowledge into a galvanizing, creative force?

Williams writes: “if we examine it, not as history, that lie! but as a living thing, something moving, undecided, swaying – Which way will it go? Something on the brink of the Unknown, as we are today, – shall we not see it (not as history has pictured it).”

Like DuBois, Harris, and Baldwin, Williams believes history to be both burden and possibility.

Book List
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I. ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL, AND RENAISSANCE CLASSICS

Author	Title
Sophocles	Oedipus Rex
Sophocles	Antigone
Thucydides	History of the Peloponnesian War
Shakespeare	Hamlet
Moses (trans.)	Old Testament: Exodus
Aristotle	Politics
Homer	Iliad

II. MODERNITY – THE HUMANITIES

Author	Title
Foucault	History of Sexuality, Vol. I
Horkheimer & Adorno	Dialectic of Enlightenment
Faulkner	Absalom, Absalom!
Baudrillard	America
Nietzsche	Ecce Homo!
Morrison	Beloved

III. MODERNITY – THE SOCIAL AND NATURAL SCIENCES

Author	Title
Marx	The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte
West	Prophetic Reflections
DuBois	Souls of Black Folk
Downs	An Economic Theory of Democracy
Tocqueville	Democracy in America, Vol. I & II
Mills	Power, Politics & People
Fanon	The Wretched of the Earth

IV. AREA OF CONCENTRATION

Author	Title
W.C. Williams	In the American Grain
Edward Sanders	America: A History in Verse, Vol. I & II
Cheryl Harris	“Whiteness as Property”
James Baldwin	The Price of the Ticket
Henry David Thoreau	“A Plea For Captain John Brown”