

Reader Response 2: A History of Relativism

History is not a collection of facts, it is an interpreted understanding of the past, one that fluctuates over generations while still claiming legitimacy from objects and the written word. Paul Connerton, Eric Gable, and sources related to the Museum of African-American History (MAAH) in Boston describe the affect of social memory on history. By investigating places like Colonial Williamsburg and historical events they make a commentary on the influence of the present on the past. Fact-based history claims to be authoritative and above the influence of social trends but the interpretive nature of choosing and presenting evidence is itself a subjective process.ⁱ These sources each describe various social and political influences on history and historians to demonstrate that social memory and history are not as distant as expected; instead they argue that relativism and subjectivity permeate every level of historical science—cutting the head off of fact-based history.

The presentation and creation of history at Colonial Williamsburg provides a case study on how social and political influences have changed history. In their piece *On the Uses of Relativism* Eric Gable et. al discuss the recent focus on slave history at Colonial Williamsburg. Gable writes that in the 1970's public criticism forced the museum to re-evaluate its utter lack of African American historyⁱⁱ—in a city that was formerly 50/50 black and white.ⁱⁱⁱ Gable uses Colonial Williamsburg to talk about historical relativism and its affect on minority history. Since the inclusion of slave history was prompted by social pressure "the museum thus asserts that black history is 'conjectural,' but it continues to present mainstream history as factual".^{iv} Gable et. al go on to detail cases where fact-based history, which Colonial Williamsburg claims to provide, was distorted or outright ignored

because of social or political pressure. One particularly egregious example of manipulation regards the consumption of watermelon by slaves:

"...Crop records indicate watermelon was a major staple in the summer diet of Virginia slaves and by far the most widely grown melon... curators placed watermelon pieces and rinds in the [slave] houses... however interpreters resisted what they felt was black stereotyping... the watermelon was removed from the cabins, and the next year other kinds of melons were grown and displayed."^v

This is one example of blatantly manipulated historical facts deemed acceptable by the historical curators and the public-facing interpreters because of prevailing social pressure. Gable et. al also write about conflicts of interest at Colonial Williamsburg in a piece titled *Public History, Private Memory*. They discuss how Colonial Williamsburg tries to distance itself from attractions like Disney Land by claiming to present "the 'real thing'".^{vi} In the BBC documentary *Digging for Slaves*, one of the black interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg describes how his presentation of history is limited by a desire to not alienate the majority-white visiting population. The mere presence of compromise and inconsistency in a history museum proves that social changes have influenced our present view of history. Can a museum change history? Only if history is not actually "a narrative account of some past sequence of events constructed by a historian 'located' at some considerable 'distance' from the events."^{vii} It seems like the historians at Colonial Williamsburg are all too close the subject at hand and prevailing social and political opinions prevent them from working independently and factually.

Ideas presented by Paul Connerton and the MAAH describe reasons why certain groups create memories and histories. The museum was founded in the 1970's by civil rights activist Sue Bailey Thurman as a way to remember, and use the memory of, the abolitionist movement of the 1800's. Mrs. Thurman saw power in the history and memory

of the work done by the black community in the African Meeting House during the 19th century. The museum has a political and social purpose yet also participates in factual object-based history. Paul Connerton talks about political motivation for interpreting history in his book *How Societies Remember*. Connerton describes how at the time of the Crusades:

"Medieval Muslim historians did not share with medieval European Christians the sense of witnessing a great struggle between Islam and Christendom... But in the period since 1945 an expanding body of Arabic historical writing has taken the Crusades as its theme. The Crusades have become a code word for the malign intentions of the Western powers."^{viii}

Certain histories reinterpreted centuries later by historians now include new opinions that closely follow the social memory of people oppressed by occupation after World War Two. Clearly history can be created, from facts, but it is colored by the social and political environment of the time.

All the evidence presented by these sources shows that history is malleable under the force of social pressure and political purpose. These lapses in objectivity dismantle the authority of historians and accuse them of being creators of social memory. Even though these papers and their subjects are temporally distant from the reader, the implied argument is that these manipulations are everywhere and many Colonial-Williamsburg-style moments are waiting to be discovered. The expectation is that we will uncover, analyze and rectify the subjective wrongs of the previous generations to make them fit our current social and political influences. This presents an irony, a slow churn that marches over generations, each society tweaking and re-imagining the past, and accusing previous historians as driven by subjective analysis. Connerton was right, even in historical relativism, a revolution is never truly new.(mark)^{ix}

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- ⁱ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 13
- ⁱⁱ Eric Gable et. al, *On the Uses of Relativism*, 793
- ⁱⁱⁱ Eric Gable et. al, *On the Uses of Relativism*, 794
- ^{iv} Eric Gable et. al, *On the Uses of Relativism*, 791
- ^v Eric Gable et. al, *On the Uses of Relativism*, 802
- ^{vi} Eric Gable, *Public History, Private Memory*, 243
- ^{vii} Eric Gable, *Public History, Private Memory*, 238
- ^{viii} Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 15
- ^{ix} Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 6

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21A.104 / 21A.119 Memory, Culture, Forgetting
Spring 2016

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