

Book Notes

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'Who Owns History?'

Foner, Eric. *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*.
(New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).



"Who owns history? Everyone and no one— which is why the study of the past is a constantly evolving, never-ending journey of discovery."
— Eric Foner [1]

What is history? Who owns it? And why is American history such a contentious topic just now? In the next two *Book Notes*, we'll examine those three questions through the lens of two books and a holiday. The books are Eric Foner's *Who Owns History?* and Annette Gordon-Reed's *On Juneteenth* and the holiday is "Juneteenth."

American history is and always has been contentious, as we saw in an [earlier Book Notes](#) commenting on Ty Seidule's *Robert E. Lee and Me*. Seidule cut through the clutter of a century and a half of historical fog to ask and answer a simple question: Was Robert E. Lee a traitor? To which question, after a detailed excursion into both personal memoir and archival research, Seidule answered "Yes."

His reasoning was simple.

Lee swore an oath to protect the U.S. Constitution and the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. He broke that oath and waged war against the United States. It's about as simple an example of treason as one could identify.

That *Book Notes* generated varied responses ranging from several short emails agreeing with Seidule to several others saying they wanted to read what he had to say before venturing an opinion but thanking me for bringing the book to their attention to one longish response bedecked with *red herrings* and *what-aboutisms* condemning both Seidule and me as exemplars and advocates of the "woke left." Although I can't speak for Seidule, it amused me, because in response to another *Book Notes* about heroic centrism I was accused of being a retrograde, old, white guy who needs to "wake up."

Why the contentiousness about history?

The short answer is that history is about where we came from and who we are; in short, it's about identity. And American identity is contested ground. American history, in many ways, is about that contest.

This has been an ongoing interest of mine. Several *Book Notes* touched on this topic. They can be found [here](#). My *America in 1968* program series sought to identify what *Smithsonian* magazine meant when it said 1968 was the year America shattered. What shattered or, to change the metaphor, what unraveled was the fragile consensus about the American story, about what it means to be an American. *The American Tapestry Project* is not only a Jefferson Society program series, but a radio program and podcast series on WQLN Public Media and NPR One (which can be found [here](#) and [here](#), respectively). It seeks to reweave that unraveled fabric by identifying and tying together the major themes, the major threads, the many stories that comprise the American story. The current *American Holidays* series continues that work by exploring what Americans celebrate in order to identify the common objects of their love that binds them together as a people. The *Tapestry* and *Holiday* series can be found [here](#).

All of these share a common purpose. They are inquiries into the origin and shifting shape of the American story, or, perhaps more accurately, the origins and shifting shapes of the many American stories, which, when woven together, are the story of America.

So, my inquiry into the history, in the sense of evolving understanding, of the American story asks a set of questions: What is the American story? Is there such a thing? Are there multiple interwoven American stories? Who is included? Who is excluded? What excludes them? What includes them? How are the stories connected?

Even that is too vague, too general, for when we say "American Story," what story do we mean? Do we mean the story of all the people and cultures that ever occupied the North American land mass, which land mass only got its name "America" sometime in the early-16th century when a German mapmaker named it after Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian explorer who may or may not have ever gotten here?

Or do we mean something else?

For clarity's sake, I mean something else.

I mean the story (stories) of the people who since the late-18th century have attempted to create a *political state* based on certain notions of self-government while at the same time attempting to create a *nation* – a people sharing a common culture – out of a vast, everchanging mix of people. That experiment in self-government continues, although different people at different times have had different notions of what self-government means and how it should be achieved. Likewise, the people included in that sterling phrase, “*We the People ...*,” continues to expand and diversify into ever greater inclusiveness and variety.

But, and it's an important “but,” at almost every step expanding that “*We*” has been contested with blood and violence. It is not a story of straightforward progress and success towards greater inclusiveness. On more than one occasion, the forces of exclusion have prevailed. Still, over that story's 200-year arc, the definition of “*We the People ...*” has continually expanded toward including all of America's people.

So, the interwoven stories of America define (a) the shared, frequently contested understanding of America's founding ideals stated in its founding documents: “*We hold these truths*” and “*We the People in order to form a more perfect union ...*” and, (b) the ongoing argument about who constitutes the *People* in “*We the People ...*” The story is about who is included, who is excluded and those excluded's fight to be included by appealing to the ideals asserted in America's founding documents. Because how those two statements are understood, or maybe more precisely, how the story, how the history of those two statements' interweaving is understood and expressed defines America and Americans.

If it were only that simple.

While that ever so brief sketch of what history “is” or at least my take on what history “is” might partially answer the question, “What is history?,” it does not answer who owns it or why it is so contested. First published in 2002, Eric Foner's ***Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*** attempts to answer all three questions. Although he only partially succeeds, he sheds some interesting light on all three.

Foner organizes nine previously published essays around three major topics: “The Politics of History and Historians,” “Rethinking History in a Changing World.” and, most interesting, because of its acute relevance to our own times, “The Enduring Civil War.” The two essays in “The Politics of History and Historians” trace out Foner's career as the preeminent historian of America's Reconstruction Era and that of Richard Hofstadter, arguably the most influential historian of mid-20th century America. In doing so, Foner touches upon historiography, which is the study of the methods and approaches historians use in their work. Once upon a time, historiography was thought an esoteric subject – the province of the specialist.

Today, it is a hot topic. Some want history to be neutral, a simple chronicle of events and people. Others on both sides of the political spectrum want it to advocate for positions they support. On the right, to glorify America's recorded past; often, on the left to ferret out every error or transgression anyone ever

committed. And, of course, those positions often flip-flop with the right advocating for this or that understanding while those on the left utter "Pshaw" and argue history should be neutral.

They're both wrong. History is never neutral. Based on what it includes or excludes, even the most basic timeline has a point-of-view. In reviewing his and Hofstadter's careers, Foner acknowledges what any attentive reader knows: historians have a point-of-view. They have a thesis for which they are advocating. As historian Jill Lepore states, "History is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence." [2]

There are four assertions in that deceptively simple sentence. First, history is an art. Like an artist, the historian has a perspective, a point-of-view, drawing your attention to this item and not to some other. Because a history has a point of view, a perspective, it asserts a specific understanding of the meaning of the "facts," the meaning of the "pattern of the facts" under study. It advocates its thesis by telling a story about the pattern of the facts and how and why they came to be the way they are. Although, like science, history has a methodology and techniques that must be true to the data, it does not have either mathematical or statistical precision. Like science, however, it is always contingent. The thesis is always subject to revision in light of new evidence, because it and its advocate, the historian, are accountable to the evidence upon which the "thesis-the story" rests. The honest, the "neutral" historians, do not pick and choose their facts. They tell the whole story and the pattern it reveals.

In a certain sense, they let the chips fall where they may.

But not all historians are either honest or transparent about the thesis for which they advocate. They pick and choose their facts to fit a preconceived notion. When they do this in the service of the state or the church or some other entity, history becomes weaponized. It becomes a tool with which to control the past in order to control the future. In his essay, "The Russians Write a New History," Foner explores the challenge a society has when it awakens from a lie. Disoriented, it does not know where it came from and how it got to now. Not knowing how it got to now, it is uncertain about where it is. Uncertain about where it is, it is unsure about where it is going.

What to do?

History now becomes not an academic discipline, but an existential necessity as an entire society attempts to rediscover its origins, to retrace the path to *now* by exploring all of the "facts" – the good, the bad and the ugly – in order to fully comprehend the now and to prepare for the future. But that is an arduous and often painful process. Sometimes a society throws up its hands, seeks a simpler path and bows to the authoritarian with simple answers.

And, hey presto, Vladimir Putin!

Or sometimes the past is too painful, the truth of what happened too brutal. What to do then? In "We Must Forget the Past: History in the New South Africa," Foner examines just such a phenomenon. How to transcend the legacy of apartheid when both the victims and the perpetrators are still present living literally side-by-side?

Maybe in this instance it is better to accept the mental health counselor's advice

to learn how to forget what you can't forgive.

Or is it?

William Faulkner said, "the past is never dead, it's not even past," and I think it was Sigmund Freud who said something to the effect that the repressed always returns. Given that, then denial only delays but does not avoid the reckoning. History, at least as a written document, is short, but memory is long.

What to do?

Perhaps, to extend the mental health metaphor, the only thing to do is to acknowledge the elephant in the room, to confront it and to embrace it, and to finally tame it. Speaking figuratively here, avoidance and denial don't work, for eventually the elephant twitches, moves, maybe even stampedes and then chaos is loosed.

The question becomes, "How to acknowledge the elephant?" With that question, history returns. For, of course, the elephant represents those facts and the pattern of their meaning we either suppressed, denied, or flat out lied about. And, as Faulkner said, it isn't dead or past and, as Freud warned, it will out.

Foner doesn't dwell on South Africa, for America and Americans have their own elephant twitching in the room's corner. That elephant is racism. It has been in the room since the beginning of American history from which every date you care to say American history began.

As Sgt. Joe Friday used to say in the old '50s detective show *Dragnet*, "Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts." In three essays in his concluding section, "The Enduring Civil War," Foner touches on the facts of that history.

In his "Who Is an American," Foner provides a concise and accurate chronological recounting of the struggles over who gets included and excluded from "We the People" At first, as the Naturalization Act of 1790 stated, only free white people were included, but not all white people for all white people were not free. Indentured servants were excluded. All non-white people were categorically excluded. As the 19th century wore on, who was considered white was a shifting, fluid concept. In mid-century, Irish and German Catholics were targeted by nativist groups in the American Party (the "Know Nothings" because when members were asked what did they know of the party, they replied "I know nothing ..."). Women of all hues occupied ambiguous positions. Enslaved blacks were excluded by definition and free blacks occupied a tenuous position, included in some places and excluded in others. Both were denied inclusion, never more infamously than in the Dred Scott decision when Chief Justice Roger B. Taney said "a black man had no rights a white man was obliged to respect." [3]

Later in the century, Asians, i.e. Chinese, were explicitly rejected. First in the Page Act of 1875, then the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As the 19th century turned to the 20th, black people were legally discriminated against as a result of Black Codes and Jim Crow law. The great influx of southern and Eastern European immigrants also felt the racist scorn of nativists like Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., Prescott Hall, and apologists for eugenics like Madison Grant and Lathrop Stoddard who did not consider them white, reserving that racial classification only for northern Europeans. The door of inclusion was finally closed with the Immigration Act of 1924 only to have it unwittingly thrown wide open with the Immigration Act of 1965, which has changed America, some argue, more than

any other measure in its history.

It's a complicated story, but the one constant has been "race," either used as a mistaken synonym for what we would now call ethnicity or as a "racial category" based upon skin pigmentation, which, of course, is the standard sense of the word and the exclusions and discriminations that result from that recognition. Its primary victim, but not the only victim (cf. Asians, Native Americans, and others), has been Americans of African ancestry. In his "Blacks and the U.S. Constitution," Foner traces that history in the structure of the U.S. Constitution as first composed, then as amended in what he calls the "Second American Revolution" of the three great Civil War amendments: the 13th, 14th, and 15th, which repudiated the slavery provisions of the original Constitution.

While it never used the word "slavery," using instead such euphemisms as "those bound to service," the original Constitution tacitly made slavery legal, permitted the importation of slaves for 20 years until 1808, included a Fugitive Slave clause obligating the return of escaped slaves to their owners, and the infamous three-fifths clause, which counted three-fifths of all slaves in a state's population for determining representation in Congress. Unwittingly, in the early Republic, it more or less gave control of the federal government to the southern slavocracy.

All of that was wiped away by the Civil War amendments. The 13th abolished slavery, although it had a legal loophole through which some southern states during the Redemption and Jim Crow Eras reinvented it as chain gang labor in their prison systems. The 14th created birth right citizenship by saying anyone born in America was an American citizen. This was originally intended to eliminate any debate about whether African Americans were citizens. The 14th also created the concept of due process of law, i.e. no one could be deprived of their citizenship rights or property rights other than through due process of law; in short, it provided African Americans access to the legal system. The 15th granted black men the vote.

As a result, one can argue, all of American politics in the intervening 155-plus years down to today is the story of the states' rights pushback against those amendments, periodic federal attempts to rein in those rights, Supreme Court decisions limiting those rights, and the counter-pushback by those who would defend and expand those rights.

It's an old, old story. As Faulkner and Freud warned, it won't go away. It will return. It's the return causing the current agitation against history and historians trying to tell the story of America's many stories in all their fullness. It's not revisionist history. It's not "cancel culture." It's history and historians doing what they have always done. Correcting the story in light of new or rediscovered evidence. It's precisely like Sgt. Friday following the facts wherever they lead in order to get the story "right" and to stop the elephant twitching before it runs over all of us.

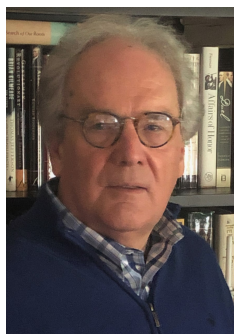
But there are those who don't want the story told, who see every new insight, every new discovery of some old wrong, every refinement and correcting of the story to more closely conform to the facts as an existential threat to their identity. They want to freeze the story in some whitewashed version of history confirming their biases, but the story won't stay frozen.

As the old saying goes, "the truth will out."

The elephant keeps twitching and folks keep discovering new things about the

American story – some unpleasant, but many very positive and ennobling. Among the positive and ennobling is the rediscovery, at least by white people, of “Juneteenth” – a celebration of freedom and one of America’s great triumphs: the abolition of slavery.

Next week in *Book Notes* – “Juneteenth,” Part Two.



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End Notes

1. **Photo of Eric Foner** from Department of History, Columbia University available at <https://history.columbia.edu/person/foner-eric/> accessed May 20, 2021.
- 2.
3. Foner, Eric. *“Blacks and the U.S. Constitution”* in **Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World**. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), p. xix.
4. Lepore, Jill. **The Story of America: Essays on Origins**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 15.
5. Foner, Eric. *“Blacks and the U.S. Constitution”* in **Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World**. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), p. 177.

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