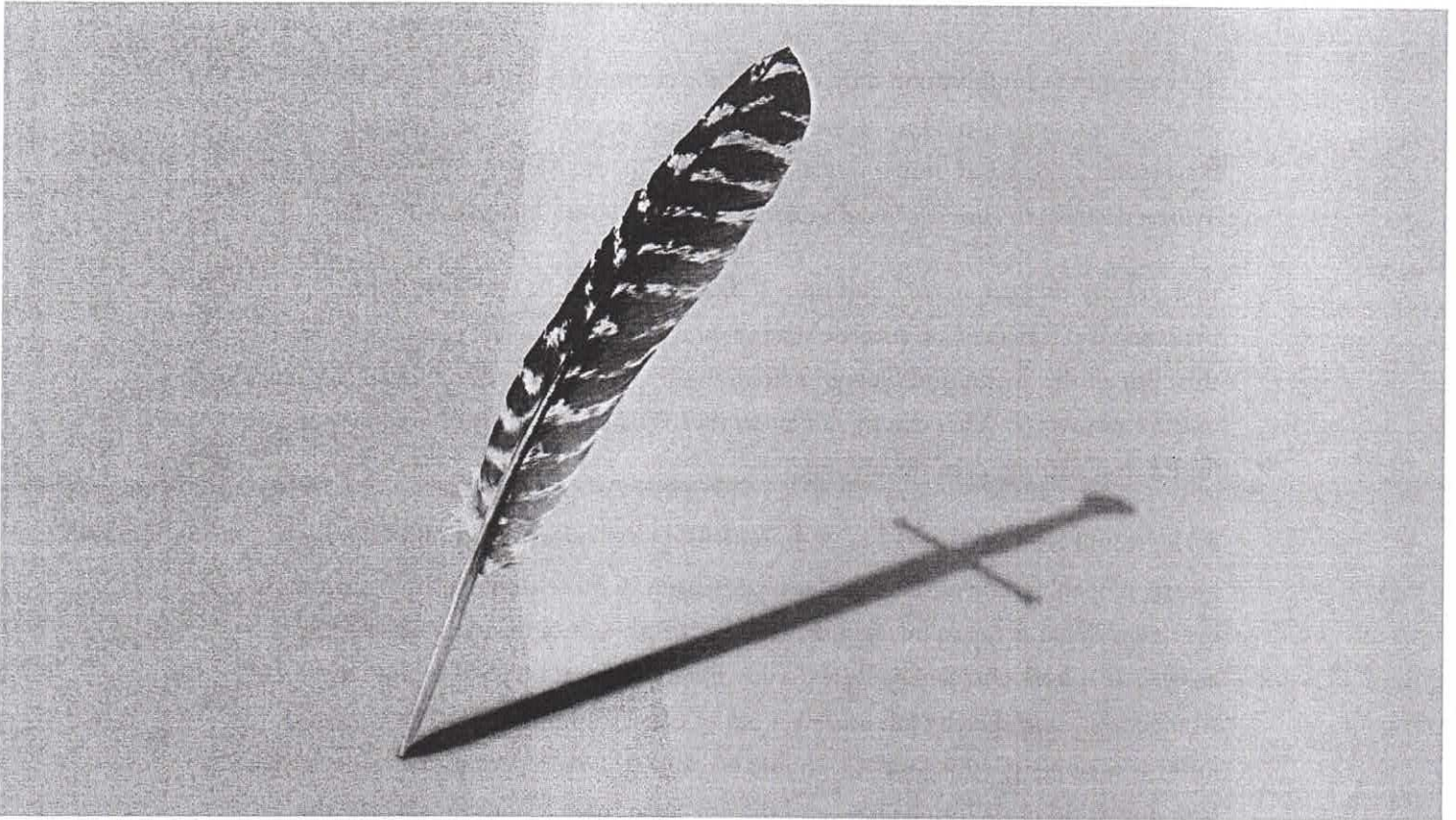


IDEAS

## The New History Wars

Inside the strife set off by an essay from the president of the American Historical Association

By David Frum



Paul Spella / The Atlantic; Getty

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**E**VEN BY THE rancorous standards of the academy, the August eruption at the American Historical Association was nasty and personal.

The August edition of the association's monthly magazine featured, as usual, a short essay by the association's president, James H. Sweet, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Within hours of its publication, an outrage volcano erupted on social media. A professor at Cornell vented about the author's "white gaze." A

historian at the University of San Diego denounced the essay as “significant and substantial violence.” A historian at Knox College, in Illinois, organized an email campaign to pressure the AHA to respond.

Forty-eight hours after the essay’s release, Sweet posted a statement of regret for his words. The four-paragraph message concluded: “I apologize for the damage I have caused to my fellow historians, the discipline, and the AHA. I hope to redeem myself in future conversations with you all. I’m listening and learning.”

That attempt at mollification only widened the controversy. An op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* denounced the “woke mob” that had extracted Sweet’s mea culpa. Fox News soon followed in similar terms. On August 20, the AHA temporarily locked its Twitter account to shut down a discussion it said had been hijacked by “trolls.”

In a country that can make a culture-war flash point out of a two-note flute performance, it may be no surprise that an essay on writing history could explode like this. But all the Sturm und Drang makes it harder to understand the actual substance of the controversy. What exactly did Sweet say? Why did so many of his colleagues find it so upsetting, even threatening?

Sweet would later say that the reaction took him by surprise. In his mind, he was merely reopening one of the most familiar debates in professional history: the debate over *why*? What is the value of studying the past? To reduce the many available answers to a stark choice: Should we study the more distant past to explore its strangeness—and thereby jolt ourselves out of easy assumptions that the world we know is the only possible one? Or should we study the more recent past to understand how our world came into being—and thereby learn some lessons for shaping the future?

[Read: Stripping a professor of tenure over a blog post](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/american-historical-association-james-sweet/671853/)



In real life, of course, almost everybody who cares about history believes in a little of each option. But how much of each? What's the right balance? That's the kind of thing that historians do argue about, and in the arguing, they have developed some dismissive labels for one another. Advocates of studying the more distant past to disturb and challenge our ideas about the present may accuse their academic rivals of "presentism." Those who look to the more recent past to guide the future may accuse the other camp of "antiquarianism." The accusation of presentism hurts because it implies that the historian is sacrificing scholarly objectivity for ideological or political purposes. The accusation of antiquarianism stings because it implies that the historian is burrowing into the dust for no useful purpose at all.

Sweet's essay opened by remarking on the relative decline of doctoral dissertations on pre-1800 topics. He worried that the profession was succumbing to a wave of presentism. If unchecked, the trend could contaminate the profession's integrity. "Too many Americans," he wrote, "have become accustomed to the idea of history as an evidentiary grab bag to articulate their political positions."

Sweet stressed that such misuse of history occurred across the political spectrum. He pointed to the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decisions on guns and abortion as examples of abusing history for political ends by right-leaning jurists. But he also did not exempt progressives when he warned, "If history is only those stories from the past that confirm current political positions, all manner of political hacks can claim historical expertise."

Instead, Sweet argued, historians should always keep in mind the warning of the novelist L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Or in Sweet's words:

Doing history with integrity requires us to interpret elements of the past not through the optics of the present but within the worlds of our historical actors. Historical questions often emanate out of present concerns, but the past interrupts, challenges, and contradicts the present in unpredictable ways. History is not a heuristic tool for the articulation of an ideal imagined future. Rather, it is a way to study the messy, uneven process of change over time.

In other words, Sweet was writing about a perennial professional puzzle, like a chess grand master opining about the best way to open a game: pawn or knight? Sweet does not even use Twitter, and he appeared to have no conception that anybody on that platform would notice or care about his entry into the intramural debate over how historians should do their work. And then the dam burst over him.

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JULIE BECK

The dam burst because of the examples Sweet used to drive home his point. Sweet told a story about a recent visit he had made to Elmina Castle, on the coast of Ghana. Built by the Portuguese in the 1480s as a gold trading post, Elmina guarded the slave market of the Ghanaian coast. Elmina is a grim and sinister place that makes a painful impression on all who visit. And because Ghana is one of the most tourist-friendly countries in West Africa, many do visit. In particular, Elmina is a pilgrimage site for African Americans seeking to come face-to-face with the ordeals suffered by their ancestors who were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic.

Sweet identified a problem. Very few of the people transported to what would become the United States passed through Elmina. Elmina was more a hub for slave markets farther south: the Caribbean and Brazil. But descendants of those enslaved in Brazil and the Caribbean are less likely to pay for a trip to Ghana than the descendants of enslaved Americans. And so, over time, Elmina has retrofitted its history to interest the visitors it attracts—or so James Sweet complained.

[Read: Cancel culture isn't the real threat to academic freedom](#)

Sweet complained about something else, too. When Elmina was built, and for long afterward, Europeans never ventured far inland into Africa, deterred by unfamiliar diseases and the military power of local rulers. The Europeans typically operated on



the seacoast, dealing with African enslavers who sold them locally enslaved people or captives of war. And on the day of Sweet's visit, that indigenous African role in the story got edited out of the narrative told by local guides. The guides instead insisted that the Ghanaian slave-sellers had no idea what would happen to the people they led in chains to the Portuguese marketplace. That falsification of the history irked Sweet.

Sweet was irked also by the imminent release of the movie *The Woman King*, which represents the slave-trafficking African kingdom of Dahomey as a land of freedom fighters against foreign aggression. "Bad history yields bad politics," he wrote. "The erasure of slave-trading African empires in the name of political unity is uncomfortably like right-wing conservative attempts to erase slavery from school curricula in the United States, also in the name of unity."

Sweet is an expert on Africa, the African diaspora, and the transatlantic slave trade. In 2011, he published a book about a West African man named Domingos Álvares, who was enslaved and transported to Brazil probably in the late 1720s. Álvares's expertise in West African healing methods gained him his freedom and even some prosperity in his new land. He converted to Catholicism, formed a family, and fathered a child. But Álvares's success triggered the suspicions of some of his neighbors. Possibly envious, they reported him as a magician who trafficked with the devil. He was arrested, again separated from his family, again shipped across the Atlantic in chains. He arrived in Lisbon, where he was interrogated and tortured by the Portuguese Inquisition. Released, then rearrested, a penniless and friendless Álvares vanished from the written record in 1749, en route to yet another exile. The book was based on Sweet's discovery of a thick file of investigations in the Portuguese state archives. By decoding the antique handwriting of the Inquisition's notetakers, Sweet (who is proficient in Portuguese) restored Álvares to history. This man, to whose story Sweet devoted years of his own life, was abducted, enslaved, and trafficked by the very same Dahomey kingdom celebrated in *The Woman King*.

Sweet's insistence on detailing Dahomey's true record was where the debate got hot. Disputes over how history should be written cease to be abstract and remote when they touch the powerfully emotive issues of empire, race, and slavery.

As an expert on the slave traffic to Brazil and on the victims of the Dahomey kingdom, Sweet thought that he had standing to speak his mind freely. Some of his colleagues vehemently disagreed, for reasons argued by Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, a novelist and scholar who teaches at Cornell. Ngũgĩ comes from a family that was eminent in

Kenyan literary life, but was driven into exile in the United States by political persecution. It was Ngũgĩ who denounced Sweet's "white gaze." When I sought further comment from Ngũgĩ, he wrote back:

It is no secret that African rulers were involved in the slave trade. There is no revelation there. But it is more complex than that because at the time they would not have seen themselves as Africans (an example of presentism) and there were those that resisted as well. Plus we don't talk enough about the communities from which slaves were taken ... are still in that trauma (see Maya Angelou in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* and her discussion of Keta in Ghana). I do not think any serious scholar of Africa denies this ... What I myself was objecting to was the carelessness of using that black family caught up in trying to understand their inherited trauma as a prop in his story.

Ngũgĩ emphasized that he was not arguing for racial segregation of historical specialities. He wrote his own doctoral dissertation on the English Romantic poet John Clare. He admires the work of white Africanists such as Basil Davidson and Caroline Elkins. What matters, as Ngũgĩ wrote in a 2021 essay, is ideology. His target is not white scholarship as such, but an "ideology that assumes the continent and its peoples can and should be studied for the benefit of the western student and scholar, that knowledge is a commodity to be extracted from the continent to benefit the western student and scholar." Scholarship about Africa, Ngũgĩ argued, must not be separated from advocacy for Africa and the African diaspora. "It is not a question of trickle-down reparations but a redistribution of power."

**I**N EARLY SEPTEMBER, I visited Sweet in Madison to ask him about the whole affair. I found someone still shell-shocked by the onslaught from colleagues and even friends.

"I thought I was going to provoke some conversation and maybe piss a few people off, but I didn't think it was going to get the kind of vituperative and sustained blowback that it received," he told me. "In many ways, I think people looked at and imposed the politics they wanted on the piece. I talked about poor uses of history on the right and the left. But my colleagues saw only the critique of the left. And they're not used to seeing those."



In the weeks that followed his essay's publication, Sweet had come under immense pressure. He joked ruefully about the surprise of finding himself cast in an unexpected role as the voice of white power. He had grown up in North Carolina during the desegregation of schools there after 1974. His family was one of the few white families to remain fully committed to public education after U.S. courts imposed busing for racial balance across Mecklenburg County. He learned Spanish from his stepmother, a native of Venezuela of Samoan ethnic origin.

After floundering in college, Sweet worked an entry-level job in airport operations before gaining a place at graduate school. His ultimate academic success felt hard-won, he told me, not an easy gift from some hypothetical establishment. His whole career, he believed, had been devoted to advancing the widest kind of human understanding. Yet now he was on the receiving end of what felt like a determined and willful misunderstanding.

"There are voices in the organization that want to see the piece retracted," he told me. "There are people who are calling for me to resign." But he was also at pains to say that he had not recanted his view about the direction of the historical profession. "The apology I issued was very directed, but not a retraction," he said. "I didn't withdraw any of the arguments I made. I underestimated the extent to which people would react in emotive ways. People were angry that they thought I was defending a particular past."

#### Conor Friedersdorf: A culture of free speech protects everyone

In the interval between the original controversy and our conversation, Sweet had discovered that many of his colleagues—and many in the history-reading public—agreed with him, even if they hesitated to say so publicly. "I received almost 250 emails which were almost the inverse image of what was going on on Twitter," he said. "Those were long, considered, thoughtful emails, not just 280-character responses."

Reflecting on the tumult, Sweet was most worried about a weakening commitment in the academy to the cherished ideal and methods of the historical profession. "There is a move among some of my colleagues to expand the definition of scholarship, to change the way we assess scholarship," he told me. "I worry there will be a move to de-emphasize the single-author manuscript: the book. Instead, anything that uses the historian's craft or skills could count as scholarship. The most radical version might

even include tweets, or at least blogs or essays online. How do you determine, then, what is political and what is scholarly?”

This attempt to separate history from politics is rejected by Sweet’s critics as at best naive, at worst dangerous. When has history-writing been nonpolitical? When George Bancroft, writing in 1830s America amid Native American removals and the expansion of the cotton empire, wrote the story of the nation as one of democratic progress—was that not political? When William Dunning and his many influential students depicted Reconstruction as a “tragic era” of northern vindictiveness and African American corruption and abuse—was that not political? When modern-day “presidential historians” tell the story of the United States from the Oval Office down, rather than from the streets and neighborhoods up—is that not political, too? Brown University’s Keisha Blain replied to Sweet in *The New Republic*:

Black historians ... have never had the luxury of writing about the past as though it were divorced from present concerns ...

We are fighting for our lives. The commitment to engaging present concerns is not simply a method or approach to the scholar’s craft of research and writing. It is a matter of life and death.

Sweet’s critics say to him: You care about *then*. We care about *now*.

To this, Sweet would reply: If academic historians succeed in convincing Americans that history is properly a tool for a political purpose, they will be starting a fight they will not win. Subjugating history to politics has inherent risks, he told me, noting that “the approaches of the hard right are not dissimilar to the way the profession is lurching or creeping today.” The people who hold power inside the academy may feel insulated from the rest of society, but they are subject to the much greater power that can be wielded outside the academy. Sweet’s attempt to erect a firewall to protect the academy from politics and power pushes against the dominant trend in history generally, and in African and African-diaspora history in particular. In the 21st century, many involved in academic history in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe have rejected ideals of detachment in favor of a passionate new engagement. They have undertaken a new mission: to confront the societies around them with a record of their faults and crimes. Another of Sweet’s critics, Stanford’s Priya Satia, described this trend in her 2020 book *Time’s Monster*:



As historians have backed down from their old positions at the helm of state power and adopted a critical posture, their work has become pivotal to countless conversations and legal actions around reparations, restitution, apologies, and, most important, memorialization, which all attempt to make new history.

Satia added, “It is *the continuing struggle for justice* that matters”—and in that burning faith, some academic historians in the West have become critics and adversaries of the societies around them. At times, they seek to assume an almost prophetic role, urging repentance and redress. Under this influence, institutions that had been important sources of research funding, such as the Mellon Foundation, are shifting their emphasis to advocacy. As Mellon declares, support for “social justice” now guides its grant-making in the humanities.

The new mission reached an apotheosis after 2019. “The 1619 Project,” published by *The New York Times*, won a Pulitzer Prize and almost immediately influenced school curricula across the country. In 2020, a series of legal and illegal removals of statues and monuments reshaped public spaces throughout the United States. Confederate generals were unhorsed. Christopher Columbus vanished from parks in Richmond and Chicago, among other cities (his monument in Philadelphia is now covered by a giant box). In Boston, a statue featuring Abraham Lincoln was removed; in New York City, one to Theodore Roosevelt went. Even the abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier came under attack.

The iconoclasm was not confined to the United States, but occurred across the developed world. Protesters vandalized, or governments removed, statues and memorials devoted to Captain Cook, in Australia; Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, in Canada; and William Ewart Gladstone, in the United Kingdom. Museums hastened to restore African, Asian, and Native American art objects and relics to their places of origin.

But the seeming triumph of the adversarial approach to history in 2019 and 2020 elicited a sharp backlash. Idaho, Iowa, and Oklahoma enacted laws in 2021 to forbid the teaching of “divisive concepts” in schools and universities—the critical, race-conscious attitude to history heading the list of such concepts. Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi followed in 2022. Several of these divisive-concepts laws pack a powerful legal punch. Some versions create rights to civil action that would permit students or

parents to sue professors who teach history in a way that the students or parents don't want. Other versions would empower the state to police the political content of university teaching and even academic research. Florida is arguing in federal court that the state can lawfully decree or forbid what state-university professors may say in class.

David Frum: Georgetown's cowardice on free speech

Critical historians who thought they were winning the fight for control *within* the academy now face dire retaliation from *outside* the academy. The dizzying turn from seeming triumph in 2020 to imminent threat in 2022 has unnerved many practitioners of the new history. Against this background, they did not welcome it when their association's president suggested that maybe their opponents had a smidgen of a point.

**A**RGUABLY, SWEET's very background in African history and the history of the slave trade may have additionally aggravated some of his fellow professionals. The field of African studies has been racked by racialized dissension and recrimination since the late 1960s. The most recent of these painful spasms struck only a few weeks before Sweet's essay posted.

Earlier in 2022, seven Black scholars circulated a petition demanding that the editors of the journal *African Studies Review* retract an article by two white anthropologists. The essay in question was a scholarly work of what is called "autoethnography," referring to a practice that involves the scholar explicitly inserting his or her own experience into the work. In this case, one of the two white co-authors wrote:

I (Katrina) explore autoethnography from the position of a European American feminist scholar, a cisgender woman, and a full professor at a Research 1 institution, where autoethnography's status is ambiguous. My training has taken me through literary criticism to cultural and media studies, which necessitated learning ethnographic methods in the field, first in Zimbabwe and later in Tanzania. During ethnographic fieldwork in Zanzibar in 2009, I began a relationship with a Zanzibari man and soon converted to Islam. At our wedding later that year, my experience in receiving premarital instruction from



Zanzibari women launched me into new research on how Swahili women talk about, and teach one another to talk about, Islamic marriage.

The African critics of this article denounced the work as an insulting indulgence in cultural tourism. They wrote that it “propagates odious tropes that have bedevilled the field of African Studies both through methodology and pedagogy such as ‘white saviorism’, and ‘frontierism’.” They complained of double standards in accepting such an article into a learned journal. “African scholars are expected to decentre themselves and their epistemic traditions, or risk lacking objectivity,” they observed, but the two white academics were allowed to make themselves the stars of their show. Academic journals are supposedly peer-reviewed; the critics demanded to know who here counted as a peer.

The debate rapidly degenerated into highly personal and racialized abuse and recrimination. Both the white authors and the Black critics complained that they had been subjected to harassment and psychic harm.

In the end, the article was not withdrawn. But the dispute was still smoldering when Sweet’s essay ignited controversy a few weeks later. What the earlier incident might have cautioned everybody about is a background reality of the humanities in the contemporary academy: a struggle over who is entitled to speak about what. Nowhere does this struggle rage more fiercely than in anything to do with the continent of Africa. Who should speak? What may be said? Who will be hired? One of the greatest American Africanists was the late Philip Curtin. He wrote one of the first attempts to tally the exact number of persons trafficked by the transatlantic slave trade. Upon publication in 1972, his book was acclaimed as a truly pioneering work of history. By 1995, however, he was moved to protest against trends in the discipline at that time in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

I am troubled by increasing evidence of the use of racial criteria in filling faculty posts in the field of African history ...

This form of intellectual apartheid has been around for several decades, but it appears to have become much more serious in the past few years, to the extent that white scholars trained in African history now have a hard time finding jobs.

Scholarly study of Africa in the United States began a century ago with work by Black writers and scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. These writers and scholars were denied research and travel funds, and sometimes even refused access to academic libraries. When private foundations began to fund African research, in the 1920s and '30s, they instead directed their resources to rising white scholars at elite universities. These credentialed scholars became the leaders of the field in the 1950s and '60s, when the Cold War made Africa an urgent interest. Those established patterns have come under fiercer and fiercer fire.

In 2018, the then-president of the African Studies Association, Jean Allman, who is also white, delivered a blistering critique of her own association at its annual meeting. Her title—*#HerskovitsMustFall?*—played off the *#RhodesMustFall* hashtag that circulated in South Africa in the mid-2010s by those who demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Capetown. Rhodes was a business giant of the late 19th century, a builder of the British empire in southern Africa. The Herskovits in Allman's title was a very different kind of builder. Born in 1895 to Jewish immigrant parents, Melville Herskovits grew up in El Paso, Texas. Intelligent and scholarly, he aspired at first to a career in the rabbinate. Service in the Army during the First World War shook his faith and radicalized his politics. He chose instead a career as a student of Africa and the African diaspora. He and his wife and co-author, Frances Shapiro, traveled through West Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, recording film footage and taking field notes. Their most famous book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, published in 1941, became a key text of the Black Power movement of the 1960s—because the “myth” that the book attacked was precisely that African-diaspora peoples in the Americas lacked a past, that slavery had erased their ancestral culture.

From the June 2014 issue: The case for reparations

Herskovits trained many of the next generation of graduate students. He sought to impose upon them a few key tenets, including a strict separation of scholarship and activism. It's an interesting question whether Herskovits had been chastened by his own experience. He had become involved with suspected Communist front groups in the 1930s, and thus disqualified himself from possible Senate-confirmed service in the Kennedy administration.



A fascinating 2010 documentary, *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*, tells much of the story. It offered a mixed verdict on Herskovits, as a great and humane innovator who bequeathed a legacy that some Black successors resented as domineering. A dozen years later, that assessment had become much less mixed. In 2018, Allman ended her lecture's title with a question mark, to signify: "Must Herskovits fall?" In 2020, the year of George Floyd and racial reckoning, she decided he must. Allman posted a short essay urging "a kind of personal academic reparation" that would lead white scholars like her to "step aside" for good. What exactly stepping aside might mean in practical terms Allman left to conjecture. But at a minimum, stepping aside might preclude stepping *into* a controversy about African subjects in the way James Sweet did with his AHA essay.

The political and methodological stresses within the historical profession are intensified by economic troubles. For a long time, but especially since the economic crisis of 2008, university students have turned away from the humanities, preferring to major in fields that seem to offer more certain and lucrative employment. Consequently, academic jobs in the humanities and especially in history have become radically more precarious for younger faculty—even as universities have sought to meet diversity goals in their next-generation hiring by expanding offerings in history-adjacent specialties, such as gender and ethnic studies.

The result has produced a generational divide. Younger scholars feel oppressed and exploited by universities pressing them to do more labor for worse pay with less security than their elders; older scholars feel that overeager juniors are poised to pounce on the least infraction as an occasion to end an elder's career and seize a job opening for themselves. Add racial difference as an accelerant, and what was intended as an interesting methodological discussion in a faculty newsletter can explode into a national culture war.

**O**NE OBVIOUS ESCAPE route from the generational divide in the academy—and the way the different approaches to history, presentist and antiquarian, tend to map onto it—is for some people, especially those on the older and

whiter side of the divide, to keep their mouths shut about sensitive issues. That escape route is surely the one that many of Sweet's colleagues must wish he had chosen—as his silent supporters have discreetly chosen. Much of academia is governed these days by a joke from the Soviet Union: “If you think it, don't speak it. If you speak it, don't write it. If you write it, don't sign it. But if you do think it, speak it, write it, and sign it—don't be surprised.”

Yet this silence has consequences, too. One of the most unsettling is the displacement of history by mythmaking. Maybe the directors of *The Woman King* can be forgiven for their inaccuracies—it is a movie, after all, and films have always been governed by the John Ford rule “print the legend.” But the mythmaking is spreading from “just the movies” to more formal and institutional forms of public memory. If old heroes “must fall,” their disappearance opens voids for new heroes to be inserted in their place—and that insertion sometimes requires that new history be fabricated altogether, the “bad history” that Sweet tried to warn against.

Sweet used a play on words—“Is History History?”—for the title of his complacency-shaking essay. But he was asking not whether history is finished, done with, but *Is history still history?* Is it continuing to do what history is supposed to do? Or is it being annexed for other purposes, ideological rather than historical ones? These are uncomfortable but important questions. If it is not the job of the president of the American Historical Association to confront those questions, then whose is it?