ARTICLE 1
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ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL HISTORIANS

HINDSIGHT IS 2020

The Importance of Educational Historians in the Era of Black Lives Matter

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Like all of you, I have found 2020 to be a year of incredible turmoil. Here we are, at our annual meeting, gathering over ZOOM—some of us with our screens blacked out to hide our pajamas—because we are enduring an endless cycle of chaos, where we find ourselves forced to continue our work amidst the most challenging of circumstances. We are in our homes, some of us with family members whose health is compromised, trying to make sense of the senseless. As scholars of history, we know we are living at a time of incredible import, and while we don't yet know how it all ends, we do know for certain that our work is critical, and so we meet over ZOOM. We find a quiet space in our basements, plop the kids in front of the TV, hope for a good signal, and log on. We try to engage and connect with one another because we must.

First, I again want to thank the incredible OEH Executive Board for their hard work in putting on this conference—most specifically to Marie

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McCarther and Curtis Mason, who produced this program. Ann Marie Ryan secured us a fantastic Keynote Speaker in Victoria Cain, and Glenn Lauzon handled all our registration needs. Thank you. I also want to thank our dean at UMKC, Carolyn Barber, who has supported this meeting by attending and providing financial assistance to ten of our students to participate.

With all of this going on, I thought about this address and what I would say to all of you. I have ongoing research that I could share, but I did not want to spend what little time we have together walking you through a study. I simply want to talk a bit about what we do, and why what we do has never been more critical to conversations that affect the lives of every student and family in this country.

I'll share a little bit about my own experiences, talk about what it has meant and means to be Black in America, and then challenge all of us to rise to this momentous occasion and provide the world with our expertise as keepers of precious stories and researchers of history.

My earliest memory is of me at about two years old. I am in the front yard of our small home in what is now South Los Angeles, and my parents are painting it. Our neighborhood consisted of young, mostly Black families, and dozens of children were always out in the streets, playing baseball or roller skating. On this particular day, I decided I wanted to help paint the house—and I thought it would be a good idea to stand in the paint pan and dip my hands in and splash all around. In the end, I was covered in white paint from head to toe—and in my memory it seems like it was such a happy experience. I look at that moment now and think about the ease of moving between white and black spaces as an innocent two-year-old, and how incredibly challenging it would be a mere three years later, when school started. I'm haunted by the notion that my existence would in many ways be determined by a system that did not want me to thrive, and how, in those early days of my schooling experience, I would be forced to adapt, adjust, mimic, and sometimes disappear under the layers and layers of suffocating white supremacy—as if covered in thick, gooey, and oppressive paint—if I were to survive and be successful at all. Indeed, I look back at my time as the only Black student in my entire junior high school in 1974 (by then we had moved to San Jose and an all-white neighborhood), where I was routinely harassed and called the N-word, and I wonder how I managed to get out alive, let alone learn how to do algebra. In a lot of ways, while the experience was very painful at times, I found my days living in and amongst white folks illuminating. I saw what they did, how they lived, and how they operated. It would be an education that would serve me well in later years. And I never really feared them. I fought—a lot, but I also had a few friends. My teachers too, all white, were actually pretty decent to me—at least to my twelve-year old face—and that has stuck with me. But

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it was also during my twelfth year on this earth that my family awoke to a blaze in our front yard and the chants of several teenage boys dancing around a burning cross, laughing and pointing at our house. When my father called the police, we were told there wasn't much they could do, and so we gathered the charred wood from the street and cleaned up the mess. I can still see the blackened remnants of the cross leaning against our house, waiting to go out with the rest of the trash. While we did not get any formal justice, my older brother David, 15 at the time, found each of the clowns—one by one—and let's just say they never bothered us again.

TO BE BLACK IN AMERICA: WE WEAR THE MASK

To be Black in America, for me and probably most of us, has meant so many conflicting forces pulling us in all directions—the need to be recognized as a valuable human being, the need for survival in openly hostile settings, the deep need to protect our children from experiencing any form of racial danger or violence—both emotional and physical. It's… a lot. And the past few weeks and months have been especially burdensome. In my lifetime, even after experiencing extreme racial prejudice as a child, teaching high school in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots, and dealing with microaggressions in the academy for as long as I've been in it, this is still worse somehow. Indeed, sitting in the haze of a quarantine, feeling helpless and isolated and confined, we watched in horror the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd. And for Black Americans, we felt every bit of the weight he did: Centuries of oppression and knees on our necks, gasping for air, or that is, the right simply to exist in peace. It was one of those moments where we'll ask each other years from now: "Remember 2020 and George Floyd? Now, that was a crazy time!" And the hope is that sometime in the future, what we are seeing and experiencing now will indeed be considered so outrageous and so evil that we would never want to see it again—like the grainy, black and white scenes of Holocaust skeletons or the yellowed newspaper clippings of the celebratory lynchings of young Black men—the "strange fruit" Billie Holiday so mournfully immortalized in song. Indeed, many years from now, the hope is that this will be seen as a time of great reckoning, when most of the nation and world finally said, "Enough!" There will be anniversary documentaries and retrospectives in twenty or thirty or fifty years, and yes, schools and teachers will be responsible for explaining to the children of 2050 just what the hell happened during the Black Lives Matter movement. So, it's important that we get the story right. It's vital that we—the protectors of history and the tellers of stories—make sure that our work is impeccable and forthright and viewed as sacred.

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I am increasingly convinced that to be Black in America means a constant grappling with being viewed as a "problem" for others to figure out, solve, silence, or erase. To be sure, we need only look to the anthology of great Black thinkers, aptly titled, *The Negro Problem*, published in 1903, to understand that this country has never quite figured out what to do with an entire group of people that were brutally enslaved and then, at least on paper, set free. We hardly knew what to do with ourselves, lacking in any real economic or social support and still living in fear for our lives, so it should come as no surprise that this country hadn't a clue about how to address and confront the evils of a system that could do such a thing. And it should be clear that some folks had no desire to change the system at all. So, in this anthology, *The Negro Problem*, you'll recall that Booker T. Washington (1903) argues for industrial education, asserting that since Black people had vast knowledge of industrial skill as a result of being enslaved, they should capitalize on that knowledge to provide a foundation for economic growth. He stated:

> I would set no limits to the attainment of the Negro in arts, in letters, or in statesmanship, but I believe the surest way to reach those ends is by laying the foundation in the little things of life that lie immediately about one's door. I plead for industrial education and development for the Negro not because I want to cramp him, but because I want him to be free. I want to see him enter the all-powerful business and commercial world. (19)

W.E.B. DuBois (1903) course countered this notion, saying:

> I am an earnest advocate of manual training and trade teaching for black boys, and for white boys, too. I believe that next to the found of Negro colleges the most valuable addition to Negro education since the war, has been industrial training for black boys. Nevertheless, I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men…Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of [America]…Education must not simply teach work—it must teach life. (28)

On the subject of formal education in the South, Charles Chesnutt (1903) stated:

> It is not quite clearly apparent how education alone, in the ordinary meaning of the word, is to solve, in any appreciable time, the problem of the relations of Southern white and black people. The need of education of all kinds for both races is woefully apparent. But men and nations have been free without being learned, and there have been educated slaves…It is not apparent that educated Southerners are less rancorous than other in their speech concerning the Negro, or less hostile in their attitude towards their rights. (46)

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Throughout the collection of essays, the question really is about what is the best path forward for Black people, and how can we find agency in a system that actually hates us? It is hard not to read these words—written over a century ago, and not feel like not enough has changed.

Black artists throughout history have also used their various and unique mediums to express the dichotomy that exists while living in the land of the free without truly experiencing any freedom at all. And in their art, we see that while the situation has vastly improved from the dark horrors of slavery, this country still doesn't quite know what to do with us, and for the most part, it's tired of trying. Indeed, from the earliest spirituals to the urgency of hip-hop, the so-called "Negro Problem" is still confounding to a country lacking in the courage necessary to insist on justice for all. Langston Hughes wrote of this lack of space and place for Black children and the absurdity of segregation in his poem, "Merry-Go-Round," first published in 1942, where he states:

> Where is the Jim Crow section
> On this merry-go-round
> Mister, cause I want to ride?
> Down South where I come from
> White and colored Can't sit side by side.
> Down South on the train
> There's a Jim Crow car.
> On the bus we're put in the back—
> But there ain't no back
> To a merry-go-round!
> Where's the horse
> For a kid that's black? (53)

Zora Neale Hurston said in *How it Feels to be Colored Me* first published in 1928:

> I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (3)

So, there is defiance and race-pride and indeed, protest, in her simple acceptance of herself.

Social justice and protest music have been a part of the Black experience for decades. This started with the songs recalling the horrors of slavery like, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," dating back to the 1870s.

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Then, about a hundred years later, Marvin Gaye (1971) asked the world, "What's Going On?" Sam Cooke (1964) told us a "Change was Gonna Come," James Brown (1968) told us to "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!" And Stevie Wonder (1971) told us we were living "just enough for the city," in his anthem about Black migration and the suffering in urban communities.

And today—some 50 years after Stevie's anthem—artists like Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, and Janelle Monaé have kept the drum beating for racial justice. Indeed, in 2016, Beyoncé told her ladies to "get in formation," in a strong call for racial pride. In her most recent release, *Black Parade* (2020), she echoes Hurston's confidence about her identity as a Black woman, saying:

We got rhythm
We got pride
We birth kings
We birth tribes…
Motherland drip on me
I can't forget my history
It's her-story…
Now we on our thrones, sittin' high
Follow my parade, oh, black parade. (Track 15)

In each of these early examples, there is pain, yes. There is agony and longing and suffering and strength and defiance. But the mere fact that this is all on display for everyone to see, that the artists and countless others chose to bare their souls, suggests that they were and are reaching for what they must fundamentally believe—and that is in the hope that their work touches the humanity of others and that sharing their struggle is not merely for sharing's sake. It is to make real the humanity of the Black experience so that change and justice might follow. There was a direct appeal for empathy, yes, but increasingly the voices became less concerned with attracting a white charitable response and more concerned with getting our due, regardless of whether white folks liked it or not.

The great Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote in 1895:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

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> We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
> To thee from tortured souls arise.
> We sing, but oh the clay is vile
> Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
> But let the world dream otherwise,
> We wear the mask! (21)

And so while the nation and world sit in quarantine and mask themselves to go to Whole Foods and Olive Garden, we are a people who have worn masks for centuries—forced to hide our true humanity and our authentic selves in order to survive.

It seems, though, that while we continue to place literal masks on to protect ourselves against a global health pandemic, the figurative masks Dunbar describes have been completely discarded by many. It is just too exhausting, and we've had enough of playing games. And we need only look at the Black Lives Matter movement to understand that things have fundamentally changed in this regard.

So when I look at the Black youth of today—those listening to both the voices of the past and the present—taking a stand for racial and social justice, I am at once saddened by the need for this action, but encouraged by the strength I see in them. My own daughter, now a junior in college, shared her experiences growing up in much the same way I did in an Instagram post of her at one of the local marches for the Black Lives Matter movement (@daniellem_davis_). She states:

> Today, for the first time in a long time, I am proud to call myself a Kansan. Growing up in a predominately white suburb, my family and I have grown accustomed to being some of the only Black people in a group. And while the same was true today, we did not feel the need to shrink into the background or manipulate our blackness to appeal to the masses. Instead, we were supported. Defended. Fought for—in a privileged, predominantly white environment. To everyone who showed their support from their front lawns, joined the march, and brought their kids along to witness history, thank you. Your actions have proven that this is not just a moment...but a movement. Stay strong KS! (@daniellem_davis_)

But in an equally powerful post, she also writes:

> It is difficult to put into words the paralyzing fear that Black Americans must face every morning when getting out of bed. It is a fear—an exhaustion—that has become so ingrained in my life and the lives of African Americans across the United States that one might not even recognize it at a first glance. We are taught, whether by the brutal actions of our justice system or the bloody pages of our history books, that our lives are an expendable commodity, that we are hopeless in the face of systemic racism, that must haul

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> the souls of our wrongly slaughtered brethren until our backs break beneath them. Under these circumstances, it is easy to feel more like a ghost than an acting citizen of society. I know I have at times. Over the centuries, we have overcome these hardships by handling the prejudices thrust upon us with grace and resilience. But it is no longer a burden that we should have to bear alone. This is an issue that affects all Americans, no matter what color their skin happens to be, and will continue to burn our country to ash if brought into the future. Now is the time to stand with protesters across the US, make our voices known, and forge real, lasting change. Do not allow another generation of Black Americans to feel like ghosts in their own country. We built this country. And we are destined for greatness (@daniellem_davis_).

How is it that incredible hope and all-consuming despair can exist at the same time for an entire group of people? But they do, every day. And we are getting a chance to hear from all sorts of individuals on the subject through social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. Right now, one can go to Instagram and type in #black@ (any particular university), and a compilation of humiliating microaggressions towards Black students and faculty appear. Everything from casting in theater productions to questioning their existence on campus to hearing the N-word from professors in class can be found while scrolling the small squares of Instagram. It's quite illuminating and depressing. And it's history. It's capturing moments and stories in real time.

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PART II: THE HISTORIAN'S ROLE IN THE MOVEMENT FOR SOCIAL AND RACIAL JUSTICE

So, with all of this in mind—with the killing of George Floyd and the question of exactly what should be done to address the centuries of violence and abuse—what is our role in all of it?

I'm reminded that just before the end of Act One in the Broadway hit, *Hamilton: An American Musical* (Miranda 2016), President George Washington, played by an African American singer/actor, warns a young Alexander Hamilton that he has no control over "who lives, who dies, who tells [his] story." In this instant, Washington is mindful not only of the weight of the moment and whether he will survive the revolution at all, but that even if he does, there will come a day when others will define his actions and tell his story. So, the warning goes—it is vital that we do our best to live honorably and with courage so that when our story is told, it is done with as much truth and authenticity as possible. In essence, all we can hope for in this life is that when we are viewed through the lens of history, we will like what we see and be proud of our accomplishments. It's enough of a warning to bring Alexander Hamilton back into the fray and engage in the

Battle of Yorktown—and it also makes for a really great dance number! But the message is clear: What we say and do now has stark implications for historians and historical work, and we must engage in practices that preserve the richness of individual stories. Further, at a time when the current President of the United States suggests that what we see with our own eyes is "fake news," and that time-honored traditions in the areas of research and scholarship can be ignored, it is imperative that we document and validate our work with a rigor that is unimpeachable.

Historians are having a moment. We are being asked either to defend or dismantle certain narratives around race and social justice in this country. People look to us to weigh in on whether a confederate statue needs to stay in the town square or be dumped in the river. They want us to validate their perceptions about who we were and are, and it is our duty to bring our abilities and our sense of obligation to past voices and experiences to the conversation. The hard part comes when our work—and our fidelity to that work—is in contrast with what we see and hear every day from those who would like us to forget the ills of the past. When we are confronted with a tweet or a post that tells us we are not seeing what we are actually seeing, it is up to us to use the skills we have honed as historians to illuminate the truth. Our work is rigorous. We do not rely on a single version of a story. We dig and dig and dig. We reflect on the evidence and look for counternarratives. So, when we finally get to a point where we can say, "*this is what happened*," we can do so unequivocally and with confidence.

Historians, yes, are charged with looking at events of the past and helping to make sense of them, but I assert that we are also responsible for putting current conditions into historical context. We cannot, for example, understand and deconstruct the tragedy of George Floyd without knowing about our country's violent history towards Black men in all walks of life. Indeed, the outrage and ensuing rebellion came not only from the horrific episode itself, but from the stark realization that Floyd was only the latest in a long, terrorizing pattern of abuse and pain at the hands of law enforcement in the United States. History is why so many people from every background and every community came out of their quarantined homes to march for justice. History and an understanding of our country's original sin of slavery are why we were finally able to say, "Enough."

But we have to be careful not to romanticize the movement… It is easy to do. It is easy to feel like being a part of something trendy and cool is the thing to do. Here in Kansas City, I participated in several marches and rallies where my kids and I were among the very few Blacks in attendance. This is partly because we live in a predominantly white community, and I have to say I have been moved tremendously by the crowds, as my daughter mentioned in her Instagram post. My hope is that these same folks continue their involvement, and that they don't see this as merely

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an opportunity to appear politically correct in this moment. I don't think that's the case, but I am cautious. I have concerns… History says I should…

Because to be sure, it is important to note that for too many whites, stories of inequity and terror were not enough to convince them that there was a problem. It was too easy to excuse the terror or to justify it in some way: The officer saw a gun. The victim was acting crazy. Indeed, not until they were confronted with the awful footage of George Floyd being pressed to death for nearly nine minutes were they able to acknowledge the evil that exists in our social systems. It had to be undeniable—no questions, no ambiguity, no "both sides." And the smugness of Floyd's killer—the look of complete privilege, was what was most haunting. He didn't care at all that his murderous act was being caught on film. That was the level of assuredness he had in his absolute right to kill Floyd. So, this is what it took, after centuries of brutality. But history tells us that it wasn't that long ago that even a public lynching with dozens of witnesses would result in justice for the slain. We are a damaged nation with traumatized people. Our country's racial history is absolutely awful, with so much to be ashamed of and to atone for.

Our responsibility as historians of education in the era of Black Lives Matter is monumental. We are charged with determining what constitutes fact, and whose facts are the truth. It is an exhilarating time in a lot of ways, as those of us who understood very clearly certain truths about racial inequality and the violence upon which this country was built are finally seeing a glimmer of a reckoning, with more and more people being willing to say, at the very least, "I didn't get it, and I still don't get it, but I can now *admit* that I don't get it and it's okay." That's incredible progress!

This summer, we endured the very sad news of the passing of the great John Lewis—the Civil Rights icon and way-shower for so many. He challenged us all to get into "good trouble," and to fight for social and racial equality. His was a life of great sacrifice, and, I hope, great reward. But history challenges us to look at his example, and the events surrounding his commitment to the cause that he so valiantly fought for and realize that we are not done. In fact, every time I think I am done writing this speech, yet another Black person becomes a tragic hashtag, most recently Jacob Blake, shot seven times in the back by police in Wisconsin. Or, we learn of the lack of charges for the police officers who shot and killed Breonna Taylor—well, except for the charge of endangering her neighbor—and I have to revise and resubmit.

It is exhausting. Our struggle continues… Wakanda Forever! It has been an honor to serve as your president.

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Figure 1. Donna M. Webster (Davis) in her sixth-grade class (front row, third from right, in case you couldn't guess!) Bucknall Elementary School. San Jose, California. 1974.

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