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The Role of Understanding in Meeting the Moral Demands of Remembrance

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In 2010, the Governor of the state of Virginia, Bob McDonnell, fulfilled a campaign promise to the Sons of Confederate Veterans by proclaiming April "Confederate History Month." The initial proclamation contained no reference to slavery, an omission for which Gov. McDonnell later apologized. He amended the text to include a paragraph on slavery as the cause of the war. Comments from Virginia citizens on the proclamation ranged from "anyone defending this act of the governor of VA is a racist" to the "main purpose of [confederate soldiers] bearing arms was to protect their homes, family, & friends from what they saw as an invading force of outsiders imposing their own will.… Those who fought for such reasons deserve to be recognized."[1]

Ann Chinnery is concerned with different forms of remembrance in her provocative account of invocations of the past and the moral claims they make on us. She considers different ways of teaching students about the past and the conceptions of moral agency these alternatives presuppose. I focus on exploring the different moral projects her alternatives offer and consider the role that understanding might play in Chinnery's project.

Chinnery considers three ways of teaching history. The first, traditional history, has the function of creating "national or social identity" and of cultivating a sense of "collective memory."[2] Among Virginians, the controversy over Confederate History Month raised questions about what it means to be a Virginian in light of the legacy of slavery, but also in recognition of the valor of ancestors who fought and died in the war. They considered what moral obligations Virginians have in being heirs of that history.

The second alternative Chinnery calls "historical consciousness." Here, the goal is for students to learn to "think historically," which involves working with original documents, understanding the contested nature of historical narratives, asking whose stories are left out, and developing "historical empathy." The empathy in question leads us to *not* assume that the ways of thinking and forms of social organization of the past are congruent with our familiar ones. History is useful because it helps us develop sensibilities that are required for encounters with different others whether they "live on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the millennium."[3] The moral project of this way of teaching history is to learn from past lives and their traces in the present so that we can make better decisions as citizens. For example, fostering historical consciousness about the Civil War would generate diverse and complex narratives that could help students consider whether proclaiming Confederate History Month is a wise and moral policy.

The final alternative is developing "critical historical consciousness." It is motivated by a limitation of the first two alternatives: both hinge "on the pursuit of knowledge and understanding as precondition for moral agency and a moral response to the demands of the past." Such perspectives, Chinnery holds, cannot help us respond to the challenge to "know and remember that which we can never really know [said of the Holocaust]." Her alternative to is encounter and receive "the past as teacher" through a process of "passivity" in which we acknowledge "the ethical claim the past has on us here and now regardless of what part we may or may not have played in those events and lives, and regardless of our ability to know or understand them."

In thinking about the different ethical project critical historical consciousness poses, I found helpful Emmanuel Levinas's distinction between "a saying" and "a said": "a saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said."[4] Suppose someone tells me that a friend of mine is cheating on her partner, who is also my friend. Then whether I wish it or not, I am now under an ethical demand to respond to this claim. Whether I keep quite or report what was said, I am still implicated. There is not only the question of evaluating the claim ("the said") but also my response to the "the saying" itself. The testimony I have received has made me a witness, which puts me in position, if I so choose, to become a testifier myself.

I read Chinnery as suggesting that students can be connected to the past, especially to "some of the more unsettling realities," through a form of remembrance that embraces the ethical claim of "a saying," not only knowledge of "a said." She suggests that this could happen in classrooms that are communities of memory, where there is "a shared commitment to living together in the tension of conflicted and contested memories." I find this claim both intriguing and hard to visualize. I would like to learn more about this shared commitment and how it can happen in a classroom of students with diverse social identities who "have nothing in common."

In Roger I. Simon's and Claudia Eppert's account of communities of memory, the communities are formed in remembrance of traumatic events. The commitment among the students is to consider the moral call of becoming a testifier to these events by teaching others about what they have determined it is important to pass on. This moral call is generated through their encounter with the "saying" of these events, especially through first person narratives.[5] I am unclear about whether the performative acts of commemoration that constitute the teaching are to be agreed to, and participated in, by the whole community. It is clear, nevertheless, that disagreement and contestation is to be expected, but also worked through to some extent so that a community is formed capable of saying "'we' while hearing difference and recognizing disparity through which these commemorations are engaged."[6] I agree with Chinnery, then, that this project differs from traditional history in not requiring a unified narrative as the glue that bonds the community of memory together. And it goes beyond the moral project of developing historical empathy, the goal of achieving historical consciousness, in its call for witnessing and testifying.

In our United States classrooms descendants of slaves and slaveholders, of union and confederate soldiers, recent immigrants, and so on, sit side-by-side learning about slavery and the Civil War. How can they, as Chinnery asks, "work toward the possibility of a hopeful future and a community that can say 'we' without collapsing the differences among [them]?" Shouldn't some differences be interrogated and, in a way, collapsed? Consider the Virginia citizen who wrote concerning the controversy over the Governor's proclamation: "We have remembered slavery and MLK … now can we honor MY ancestors who fought on BOTH sides of the American Civil War in peace with some respect without the NAACP being involved [they had protested the proclamation] or do they get to protest everything because of 'THEIR' president?"[7] Will working through differences require acquiring knowledge? Do those who take on the role of testifier have a responsibility not to bear false witness? Can working through differences be achieved without some understanding of the others' perspectives?

Chinnery says that we need to "learn a way of engaging with history that does not attempt to fit the unthinkable and unimaginable into our existing frameworks for knowing, or reduce others' experience to some version of our own." She wants us to be open to an unsettling encounter that might shatter our identities and raise questions we didn't know we had. I wholeheartedly agree. But how is this to happen if our encounters with the past are *wholly* incomprehensible to us? I recognize that there is a perspective from which understanding is suspect because it is thought to always turn into appropriation and thus a denial of otherness.[8] Of course, that indeed can happen, and maybe often does. But is there room for a form of tentative, revisable, partial understanding that recognizes its limits but that makes *learning* possible? Without it, can there be an educational moment in remembrance?

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1. Surae Chinn, "Controversy Intensifies Over Governor's Confederate Proclamation," *WUSA9.com*, April 7, 2010, http://www.wusa9.com/news/local/story.aspx?sotryid=99687&catid=158.

2. The category of "traditional history" combines a number of themes that are in tension with each other, I believe. I have focused on one central strand, the development of collective memory, in this response.

3. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2001), 23. Although Wineburg does not use the term "historical empathy," his discussion of learning to think historically is very much in tune with this concept.

4. As quoted in Roger I. Simon with Claudia Eppert, "Remembering Obligation: Witnessing Testimonies of Historical Trauma," in *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics*, Roger I. Simon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 54.

5. Ibid., 61.

6. Ibid., 62.

7. Chinn, "Controversy Intensifies."

8. See Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), chap. 2.