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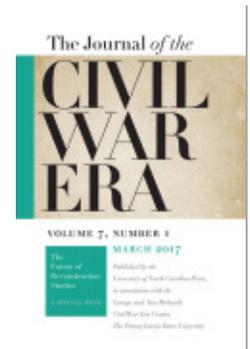
## Reconstruction in Public History and Memory Sesquicentennial

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The Journal of the Civil War Era, Volume 7, Number 1, March 2017, pp. 96-122  
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwe.2017.0014>



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## Reconstruction in Public History and Memory Sesquicentennial

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*The public memory of Reconstruction has long been a complex and fraught subject in the United States. But where do we stand now, and what will Reconstruction's sesquicentennial entail? What issues confront scholars, civil rights advocates, public history practitioners, and teachers devoted to deepening conversations about Reconstruction? What opportunities does Reconstruction's sesquicentennial present?*

*The following discussion of those questions took place from May 2 to May 22, 2016, through a secure webpage that allowed the moderator and the participants to post comments and questions in sequence. The moderator and the journal's editors edited the completed conversation for length, in consultation with the participants. This final version has been condensed slightly for the readers' benefit, while maintaining the open-ended and free-flowing nature of the original conversation.*

DAVID M. PRIOR, assistant professor of history at the University of New Mexico, served as moderator.

NANCY BERCAW is a curator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

BEVERLY BOND is associate professor of history at the University of Memphis and the codirector of the Memories of a Massacre: Memphis in 1866 project.

THOMAS J. BROWN is professor history at the University of South Carolina and has served on Historic Columbia's interpretation committee for the Woodrow Wilson Family Home since 2006.

ERIC FONER is DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University and the author of *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, among many other works.

JENNIFER TAYLOR is staff attorney at the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit civil rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama.

SALAMISHAH TILLET is associate professor of English and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*.

**DP:** *We are in the early stages of the sesquicentennial of the complex and divisive period in American history known as Reconstruction. In your own perspectives, what is most striking about this commemorative moment? What is it about Reconstruction's sesquicentennial that stands out to you as you engage with the public, research, advocate, and teach?*

**TB:** I'm struck by the number of people, if mostly academics, calling attention to the anniversary. I don't think the centennial of the Progressive Era generated comparable emphasis on the period, as distinct from individual landmarks like adoption of the Sixteenth Amendment. Promotion of the Reconstruction anniversary doubtless represents in part a pushback against some tendencies of Civil War commemoration. It stresses that the big story didn't end at Appomattox. It suggests that Reconstruction was a broadly transformative moment and a demonstration of potential that the country has not yet realized.

**JT:** It is striking how deep and pervasive the legacies of that era's developments—including advancements, failures, and missed opportunities—continue to be. At the same time, this period is not widely understood for how it has shaped our world. Its lessons should be a foundation for understanding some of the most difficult problems we now face. It is encouraging to see efforts among academics, agencies like the National Park Service (NPS), and some community coalitions to mark and discuss the 150th anniversary of events like the Memphis Massacre of 1866, the development of Black Codes, and the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments with explicit exceptions for the criminally convicted. We have to expand this work among community members and increase public consciousness to change the narrative around what this history means and what we can learn from it.

At the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI; [eji.org](http://eji.org)), we see the links between Reconstruction-era events, laws, and the current challenge of mass incarceration as at once clear and under-discussed.<sup>1</sup> Our reports on the Montgomery slave trade and lynching aim to bridge the gap between private knowledge and public awareness, precisely because the failure to consider this past in our political and policy conversations has dire consequences.<sup>2</sup> Ignorance has helped to create harsh sentencing policies and a tolerance and acceptance of racially disproportionate rates of arrest and imprisonment. Reconstruction's 150th anniversary provides an opportunity—a “hook”—to discuss in broader media this crucial period between the end of slavery and the start of the civil rights movement. The sesquicentennial is a hopeful moment in which we might finally see these stories properly acknowledged.

**BB:** Our community is nearing the culmination of a semester-long commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Memphis Massacre, and the past two days have been absolutely amazing. After months of wrangling with the Tennessee Historical Commission (THC; <https://tn.gov/environment/section/thc-tennessee-historical-commission>) over language, the Memphis NAACP (<http://www.naacpmemphis.org/>) and the NPS dedicated a marker on Sunday, May 1, commemorating the suffering and heroism of the massacre's victims rather than highlighting the power of the massacre's perpetrators. The backstory of this contested language is the old debate over which people, places, and events we memorialize and how we do this. What is most striking about commemorating Reconstruction is that it pushes us to define who we are as a twenty-first-century nation. Today's (Monday, May 2) events included a luncheon hosted by the Memphis Bar Association Foundation (<http://www.memphisbar.org/about/the-memphis-bar-foundation/>) and a public forum on aspects of the 1866 Memphis Massacre and the impact of this event on the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Our Memphis journey began nearly a year ago, when the NPS approached my colleague Susan O'Donovan and me with a question. What were our plans for commemorating the 1866 Memphis Massacre, the opening act in the long drama of the "reconstruction" of the federal union and, more importantly, the "construction" of African American freedom? The NPS was willing to help, which was the nudge Susan and I needed to start a project that had been percolating in our heads. We accepted the challenge and began formulating plans for *Memories of a Massacre: Memphis in 1866* (<http://www.processhistory.org/rememering-reconstruction/>), an examination of slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction. We quickly realized that "memory" takes time and money, both of which are scarce on campus today.

The Memphis NAACP was also in the midst of plans for a commemorative marker and was just beginning to feel the impact of twenty-first-century southern conservatism. "You can't change history!" seemed the justification for maintaining flawed interpretations of these historical moments. A statue of Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest and parks honoring both Confederate president Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy itself were part of the city's landscape. But the city's "Reconstruction" history had been erased from public memory.

The University of Memphis's history department (<http://www.memphis.edu/history/>) joined forces with the Memphis NAACP in a community-wide project to recover, contextualize, and commemorate Reconstruction-era events. Over the past ten months, support for the *Memories of a*

Massacre project has grown, and the list of our collaborative partners includes the city's other educational institutions as well as the public library, museum system, historical society, and local affiliates of national organizations. Memories of a Massacre evolved into a series of public lectures, teacher workshops, book discussions, and exhibitions. With the support of our university, we've established a website (<http://www.memphis.edu/memphis-massacre/>) and entered the world of social media. There is a growing realization that it is important for our community to confront our Reconstruction past and that this cannot be confined to the 1866 Massacre.

**NB:** Reconstruction serves as a mirror to America. As the second founding of the United States, it informs and reflects our society today: from the grassroots and multifocal insistence that black lives matter to the 2013 rollback of the Voting Rights Act to resurgent capitalism under Citizens United to the election of our first African American president to the often visceral outrage directed at his presidency. We are still living through Reconstruction's afterlives. This was partially recognized in the pairings of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) with the March on Washington (1963) in sesquicentennial commemorations.<sup>3</sup> Yet the anniversaries in 2013 maintained a hushed silence about the immediate present; perhaps this is because Reconstruction resonates throughout the open wounds (and continued promises) embedded within the nation and refuses to be consigned neatly to "the past." How can history offer a usable past when this past is so much a part of a contested present?

As a curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC; <http://nmaahc.si.edu/>) co-curating a permanent exhibition on Slavery and Freedom, I have been navigating these waters and have been impressed with openings created by the mission stated by our founding director, Lonnie Bunch (<http://nmaahc.si.edu/About/Mission>). As the newest Smithsonian museum, the NMAAHC aims to represent the American story through the African American lens. The past cannot be logically viewed along separate shattering axes. Our emphasis is always on this shared story—a national story—that is not confined to a region, to black or white, or even to the past. Coupled with this mission is our mandate to, in the words of John Hope Franklin, "tell the unvarnished truth." As historians, we know this is easy to do in a monograph and it is somewhat easy to do in a classroom where students are required to learn and participate. However, it is harder to tell the unvarnished truth in public, where we want to invite audiences to engage with and contribute to our understanding of the past.

Reconstruction is not an easy subject to do that with. Students and the general public find it either too fact-filled or too paradoxical to grapple with. Most avert their attention. In the Museum, we have learned, perhaps unintentionally, how to engage with a wide variety of audiences around issues of slavery and freedom in the process of collecting for the exhibition. We have found that diverse communities have come forward and connected in unexpected ways because of the power of objects and the stories attached to them. Often a humble artifact provides the past with immediacy. Think of Harriet Tubman's shawl. Many people know about Tubman. They can probably recite something about her striking heroism. But when these stories are paired with her shawl, we begin to imagine her with it wrapped around her shoulders. She becomes deeply, tangibly human. Objects open doors. They invite conversation and reveal connections. So we continue to collect objects with living histories that encourage audiences to consider how African Americans changed the United States during this second founding and to reflect upon how this remarkable influence was the product of many generations.

**EF:** While it will not rival the Civil War's, I am impressed by the amount of public interest in Reconstruction's sesquicentennial. (I judge this in no small measure by the number of speaking invitations I have received lately from venues outside the academic world, including conferences of federal judges and public forums of one kind or another.) The continuing "relevance" of Reconstruction helps account for this. But what I find most striking, compared with when I started focusing on the era, is that then, our task as scholars was still to disabuse people of deeply rooted mythologies about Reconstruction. Today, the more common problem seems to be lack of knowledge. People bring a kind of blank slate to these discussions. They have a sense that Reconstruction was important but have little idea what happened or why. I suppose this represents progress, and it certainly is more satisfying to lecture about the actual history and why it matters than to spend part of a talk explaining why what people were taught in school was wrong.

I am also impressed by how journalists seem finally to have woken up to the fact that Reconstruction cannot be lazily described as a period when vindictive northerners oppressed white southerners. I well recall R. W. Apple, a distinguished *New York Times* reporter in the 1990s, writing that he hoped that after the Bosnian Civil War the victors would treat the losers less vindictively than during Reconstruction. Today, journalists seem to be aware that Reconstruction was in some ways a forerunner of

the modern civil rights movement, not a tragic era à la Claude Bowers.<sup>4</sup> That's progress.

**ST:** What is striking to me, particularly at what we can consider a twin moment of, on the one hand, Reconstruction's sesquicentennial and, on the other, what Henry Louis Gates has called our current "end of the Second Reconstruction," is the dizzying nature of such analogies.<sup>5</sup> As a cultural critic who primarily studies how *and* why Americans remember and represent slavery in popular culture and national memory, I'm also struck by how few contemporary artists engage the period of Reconstruction. For example, on the heels of Hollywood films on slavery, which really came on the heels of African American novels, reparations demands, and visual art on slavery, we now have a number of new television shows and films—PBS's *Mercy Street*, WGN's *Underground*, the History Channel's reboot of *Roots*, and the forthcoming *The Birth of A Nation*, all of which foreground a nuanced negotiation between freedom and slavery, black resistance and white domination. Such tensions make for a good plot and, more importantly, a straight line between the racial politics of the past and our troubled present. In these cases, Reconstruction is not an afterthought but rather a historical aberration—a liminal space that defied both slavery and its offspring Jim Crow. Ironically, this aesthetic privileging of slavery skips over what I consider the other links between our present moment and Reconstruction proper. These connections are primarily rhetorical, as Gates suggests: the age of Obama itself cast as a Reconstruction lite, while the consummate racial backlash to the symbolic value of his presidency is considered comparable to the coming of segregation after slavery and the rise of a Nixon-Reagan southern strategy after the civil rights movement. While artists might find this period ripe for commemoration and recognition, it has yet to become a dominant setting for their inspiration or remembrance. Perhaps this year will change that.

**DP:** *Would it be correct, then, to say that scholars, public intellectuals, and civil rights advocates face a dual challenge as they work to engage with broader audiences during the sesquicentennial? On the one hand, there is still committed opposition in some quarters to an honest accounting of the horrors of white supremacy following the Civil War. On the other hand, many people do not have a strong frame of reference one way or the other when it comes to Reconstruction. If that is an accurate characterization, what is the best way forward? How do we, for example, both critique arguments that deny the pervasiveness of Klan violence and engage with people*

*who do not know much about it? What advice would you offer about how to tackle these issues in practice, how to prioritize them, or how to conceptualize them in the first place?*

**EF:** I find that the best way to engage people about Reconstruction—whether in lectures, museum exhibitions, teachers’ institutes, interviews with journalists, or other modes—is to link it to issues of the present. Of course, there is a danger of forgetting the past-ness of the past. But I usually start off with a litany of issues of the present that arose out of Reconstruction or were radically redefined then. Who is or should be a citizen of the United States? What rights should citizens enjoy, and who has the primary responsibility for enforcing them, the federal or state governments? What is the relationship between political and economic democracy? How can interracial political coalitions be built? What is the proper response to terrorism? Who should be entitled to vote? How was it that the first time African Americans held major public offices was in the aftermath of the Civil War? What were the long-term consequences for our political system of the abandonment of Reconstruction?

Without knowing something about Reconstruction, you cannot understand the origins of these questions, which remain on the front pages of our newspapers. Laying out these ideas makes audiences sit up and listen. Of course we live in a different time, and the answers to Reconstruction-era questions are not necessarily guidelines for the present. Forty acres and a mule is not the answer to the economic gap today between black and white Americans. The racial situation today cannot be reduced to a black-white template. Class differences within the black community are far more pronounced than during Reconstruction. But many seem to want to know more about Reconstruction, which is a foundation to increase public awareness.

**TB:** Your question underscores that how we envision the audience can shape our presentation strategies. The Woodrow Wilson Family Home (WWFH; [www.historiccolumbia.org/woodrow-wilson-family-home](http://www.historiccolumbia.org/woodrow-wilson-family-home)), a longtime presidential shrine that Historic Columbia transformed into a community museum of Reconstruction that opened in 2014, is a case in point. We recognize that our primary constituency will be residents of Columbia, South Carolina, though we are delighted to attract out-of-town visitors. The local landscape is therefore our best point of entry into Reconstruction. The current city hall was built as a federal courthouse and post office, which connects to the Reconstruction-era invigoration of the federal judiciary and the party-building appointments that gave Columbia

one of the country's first African American postmasters. All county buildings are reminders that the Reconstruction constitution created counties and local government in South Carolina. The cityscape is full of remnants of massive industrialization in the 1890s, which underscores that Republicans were right to try to promote textile manufacturing in the 1870s. The canal they wanted to power the mills is now one of the most popular recreational resources in town. The WWFH would achieve a great success if the occasional stroller along that canal wondered how the history of Columbia might have been different if a biracial government had accomplished its desired economic transformation.

**JT:** I agree with Eric. Illuminating the links between the salient issues of the Reconstruction era and those prominent today is an excellent way to make this history less abstract and to recast it as information that is relevant and valuable to the pressing matters at hand. The dedicated racial history project at EJI ([www.eji.org/raceandpoverty](http://www.eji.org/raceandpoverty)) is new within the context of the organization's nearly thirty-year history as a nonprofit law office representing indigent men and women on Alabama's death row. But the links in the Deep South between Reconstruction-era violence, lynching, and racial terror and the modern death penalty were always too clear to ignore. For our staff, working as legal advocates grew into a desire to develop a project that would facilitate public conversations exploring what that legacy means and what it requires of us today.

We can't ignore these roots when discussing and responding to the problems of a death penalty system that disproportionately charges, convicts, and executes poor people and people of color, that systematically excludes people of color from serving on juries in capital cases, makes a death sentence more likely to be imposed on a person convicted of killing a white person than a person convicted of killing a black person, and finds the highest rates of death sentences and executions in the former Confederate states.

EJI is a law office, and we have been fortunate to have the work and advice of historians and other experts while also having the freedom to craft a narrative that pulls from and responds to our expertise: the current state of American criminal justice. Indeed, facilitating greater engagement with how Reconstruction-era history affects our lives requires challenging public perception of who can participate in these conversations and who has something of value to offer to them. Anecdotally, I believe that is happening. Over the past several years, I have seen a significant increase in the number of substantive historical references serving as foundations for journalistic pieces about contemporary issues, which in turn invites

community members and social service practitioners to evaluate their experiences and their work through the lens of this long arc. That feels like progress, and it makes me excited. I believe changes that come from reflection on history's lessons are among the most enduring and promising. We need those kinds of changes.

**NB:** Reconstruction was an era of immense possibilities. It was a time when an older order cracked open. Citizenship was reconfigured, labor challenged capital by harnessing local and state governments, and as a result of both processes, race was dislocated or jarred loose from its moorings. And yet the public imagination jumps from slavery to Jim Crow without skipping a beat, the moments of possibility forgotten. Embedded within these moments of possibility were deeply developed political philosophies that had been generations in the making. Convict labor, sharecropping, the Memphis Massacre, and the Ku Klux Klan were responses to a perceived threat—to new foundations of freedom.

These foundations haven't entered into popular consciousness, and not for want of trying on the part of scholars. The closest we have come might be the concept of the long civil rights movement, which has tapped into the popular imagination, because it takes a knowable present and grounds it in a longer past. Yet the "rights" as defined by civil rights legislation were but a small slice of a much bigger pie articulated by the first generation of freedmen. But successes are also worth noting. I think the work of the EJI has marked the landscape of structural inequality based on thirty years of work with death row prisoners. The connection is immediate and direct and has sparked the intended conversation.

The relative popular success of the long civil rights narrative coincides with the waning years of the Second Reconstruction. A current emphasis on structural inequalities coincides with the end of this moment, with our nation teetering on the brink of another nadir. Can we prepare for this nadir? Can we reach back to both the possibilities of the first Reconstruction and its dismantling to provide a language and narrative to shepherd ourselves through the present moment? I am persuaded by the importance of engaging in national discussions.

Yet I should add that while "Reconstruction" might not be a familiar label to many Americans, its politics are present in families and communities. So perhaps Reconstruction is not entirely forgotten or unknown. Our definition of the public may be clouding our vision. The fact that these complex histories are remembered has been made clear to me over the past three years, as my colleague Mary Elliott and I began collecting what many said was unrepresentable—slavery and the African American experience

of enslavement. We began to focus on collecting within local contexts. Working with families, history museums, and historical societies, objects and the stories and teachings associated with these objects began to come forward. People had been waiting for us—for the Museum, which has been over a hundred years in the making. Our task is not to introduce the history to the people but to bring the imprimatur of our institutions to these histories that have been stewarded over time.

**ST:** What we say about the Reconstruction era is as important as what we do not say. I am thinking of how Toni Morrison grapples with these questions of competing narratives and multiple interpretations in her novel, *Beloved*. She sets the story in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873, but the the book's characters moves back and forth between slavery and Reconstruction. I've always been intrigued by how Morrison represents Reconstruction as a set of laws and institutions that make certain forms of racial freedom possible and as a site of an ongoing black precarity. It is telling that she condenses Reconstruction proper to a paragraph or two and, by doing so, reveals how there were certain actors who administered unprecedented gains, others who remade themselves as a form of political agency, and others who restricted the fullness of American citizenship for African Americans. It has been said that *Beloved* posits Reconstruction as a historical occurrence and a metaphor—Sethe, Paul D, this community, and ultimately, the country have to undergo some “reconstruction” of their own past in order to reimagine freedom or, better yet, democracy in the present. Though this novel is almost thirty years old, I still teach it, alongside W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folks*, as a way to understand how different authors, at different times, do not romanticize this era but present it as an already limited potential.

**BB:** We can keep arguing with those who deny the pervasiveness of racial violence during Reconstruction, but I don't think we'll ever convince them. Instead, it's important to give the public, especially students, a basis for questioning these flawed perspectives. We can encourage them to ask why, in southern communities, particularly, there are so many monuments and memorials to the losers and so few to the winners? How could the Union win the Civil War, then lose Reconstruction?

**DP:** *Let me pick up on another theme present in your comments. Several of you have mentioned relating Reconstruction to the problems of the present, and that raises questions about framing. There are many ways to think of Reconstruction, and addressing this may also get us back to Salamishah's*

*point about the dizzying nature of analogies. Scholars, for example, have presented Reconstruction as a continuation of the Civil War, a new birth of freedom, a second founding, a process of sectional reconciliation, and a transformation in labor and gender relations, to name a few approaches. But how do these ideas relate to Reconstruction's commemoration? How does our framing of Reconstruction shape our engagement with different audiences, whether through museums, the courtroom, social media, or the classroom? Or are we best off drawing attention to specific events, laws, and individuals instead of Reconstruction in general?*

**BB:** Focusing the process of Reconstruction on the “construction of freedom” is an effective strategy for drawing academic and public audiences (which are not mutually exclusive) into discussions of the era’s successes and failures. Concentrating on the social, political, and economic events of the era through this racial lens allows me to bring the past into the present in a “this may be how we got to where we are today” scenario. But I also point out that there are other intervening events and situations between the post-Civil War era and today and that there’s no straight line from the past to the present. As Martin Luther King Jr. said in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability.” So, I favor an approach that frames Reconstruction as a part of a long struggle for human rights. And in the postemancipation “construction of freedom,” freedom was sometimes defined by vastly different goals and agendas. Why do so many people not have an understanding of Reconstruction? Perhaps because our educational systems, the public landscape, and the media have been influenced by differing ideas of freedom—what it should mean, who can claim it, and how it should be exercised.

One of the most effective presentations for our Memphis Massacre commemoration project was a lecture by Dr. Andre E. Johnson linking the current Black Lives Matter movement to the 1866 testimonies before the military and congressional investigating committees. He captivated his audience with the question “Does Black Truth Matter? 1866–2016.”<sup>6</sup> The lecture skillfully wove together past and present in a way that had academic and nonacademic listeners trying to piece together the answer and asking why they knew so little about this important historical event.

**JT:** In her previous response, Beverly asks “How could the Union win the Civil War, then lose Reconstruction?” Yes! That one question includes and leads to so many others that link that past and our present. How did the Union lose Reconstruction—and what were the results of that loss, that

failure, that incomplete commitment, that grant of rights followed by decades of denying the duty to provide enforcement and protection? What do centuries of slavery—and the foundational narrative of racial difference and black inferiority—do to a country and its people? When slavery ends, what is required to reset the path toward black rights and citizenship rather than the same exploitative and dehumanizing goals and justifications? Which did we do and which future did we build?

As W. E. B. Du Bois described Reconstruction in 1935, “The slave went free; stood one moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”<sup>7</sup> The historical record is painfully rich with evidence of the truth in that observation. We see the violent repression of black voting rights in Memphis (1866); New Orleans (1866); Colfax, Louisiana (1873); Vicksburg, Mississippi (1874); and elsewhere. We see Andrew Johnson issue seven thousand pardons to secessionists by 1866, advocate that black labor be funneled into the economic dead-end of sharecropping, and publicly claim that black Americans had “less capacity for government than any other race of people” and would “relapse into barbarism” if left to their own devices.<sup>8</sup> We see the resurgence of discriminatory laws and state constitutions aimed at making black people second-class citizens and enabling the racially biased administration of criminal justice. We see the development of convict leasing as states learn to use the criminal exception within the Thirteenth Amendment—which prohibits involuntary servitude, “except as punishment for crime.” We see judicial decisions like the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1883 opinion in the Civil Rights Cases, declaring the 1875 Civil Rights Act unconstitutional and condemning such legislation as an effort to render black Americans “the special favorite of the laws.”<sup>9</sup> And we see black people like Jefferson Long, born into slavery in 1836, elected as Georgia’s first black representative in the U.S. Congress in 1870. We see him become the first black person to speak on the House floor when he opposed a plan to grant amnesty to Confederate leaders and predicted that, if the U.S. government went forward with such a plan, “you will again have trouble from the very same men who gave you trouble before.”<sup>10</sup>

Specifics like these illustrate the reality of the Reconstruction era in ways broad summaries cannot, and we do well to uncover and share them. The examples above are included in our reports, *Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade* and *Lynching America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, taken from primary source documents and the work of leading historians. That work is necessary and rich. But we can’t abandon the difficult task of also crafting a larger interpretive frame for the Reconstruction era that draws from these examples to create meaning and a path forward. We can frame this era as one of disappointment, lost

opportunity, violence, oppression, and an illustration that white supremacy and black exploitation could and did outlive slavery. Without specific evidence, that claim falls flat, but that evidence without a larger interpretive frame becomes abstract factual knowledge rather than dynamic information that impacts how we conceptualize the challenges of today. What legacies of the slavery era did the Union's defeat in Reconstruction permit to persist into the modern day, through the legal and political institutions that continue to shape our lives? What can we do to reengage that battle? Creating a frame through which to interpret Reconstruction, for a broader public audience most traditionally focused on the present, is the harder work—but it can lead to new questions that directly flow from Beverly's question above and that have the potential to reset us on the path toward realizing Reconstruction's promise.

**ST:** This is an important moment to tease out the distinctions between Reconstruction as a series of events and a particular period, on the one hand, and Reconstruction as a trope for American race relations, on the other. By that, I mean I agree with a historical emphasis on those acts, individuals, and institutions that were supposed to protect the vulnerable rights of newly freed black men and women and help them, and the nation, transition into full freedom while also understanding the battles among and beyond these pro-Reconstruction advocates that ultimately undermined them. From a cultural vantage point, I am quite excited about Amanda Claybaugh's forthcoming book, *The Literary History of Reconstruction*. In many ways, Reconstruction was a nadir in what we now know as African American literary production, squeezed in between the proliferation of slave narratives on one side and postbellum autobiographies, poetry, and novels on the other. Claybaugh hopes to recuperate the "lost writings of the time," including accounts of Freedmen's Bureau agents who assisted onetime slaves in the postwar years, the writings of northern volunteers who went south to help rebuild, fiction by southern authors, and turn-of-the-century writings by African American authors who were educated and influenced during Reconstruction. Taken together, this is one way we can get a complex and contradictory portrait of the era on its own terms.

But, the past is never simply the past, and the very desire to commemorate it speaks to our concerns today. As such, the issue of loss is as important as the victories we inherited. When we think about Reconstruction as a new birth of freedom, whose gains we seek to extend and live out today, we should also think about the undermining forces in the same cyclical way. Returning to the idea that we are watching the end of the second Reconstruction, I have serious concerns about our inability to

predict (or prepare for) what history would tell us is an inevitable white backlash to racial progress. In other words, how might the ending of the first Reconstruction give us insights into how we can better strategize and mobilize against our current forms of racial retrenchment and violence? How can we understand Reconstruction differently in order to stave off the backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement and the age of Obama?

**TB:** Museums and social media are venues that are different from each other but that are even more different from courtrooms and classrooms. Although specificity is valuable in engaging a broad public, it is important to promote a sense of Reconstruction as broader than even its highest highlights. It had further potential that was wrongfully thwarted. Reconstruction is extraordinary for the extent to which it suggests that the country is capable of profound reinvention after searching self-examination, despite our many failures. Unlike the recent enthusiasm for the generation of Washington, Adams, and Hamilton, the emphasis is not on how much the United States got right at a magic moment and now needs to hold onto. That open-ended quality characterizes a cardinal highlight of Reconstruction, the Fourteenth Amendment's definition of citizenship and legislative framework for judicial enforcement. This mechanism continues to transform the nation in unforeseeable ways. Our goal at the WWFH was primarily to highlight radical possibility, and we offer a range of individual stories that can appeal to different visitors.

**EF:** I suppose I am an optimist, but I believe what we need to learn about Reconstruction is the struggle itself—the effort of ordinary men and women to breathe substantive meaning into the freedom they had achieved as a result of the Civil War, and the way racism bent for a while so that remarkable advances were made in the definition of citizenship and the legal and political status of blacks. We need to also portray the violence and the various forms of oppression under the Jim Crow system that followed. We want to frame Reconstruction as a story that inspires hope as well as teaches harsh lessons about the exercise of power.

To track back to Salamishah's earlier point about *Beloved*, I too teach it, but in a slightly different way. As she notes, the novel is set during Reconstruction, but there is no allusion to black politics and empowerment in the South. The racial landscape is exceedingly bleak. Morrison chooses this stance for her own aesthetic reasons. But a more optimistic account of the Reconstruction situation (or for that matter, a portrait of the resiliency and creativity some have found in the slave experience)

would presumably conflict with Morrison's overall theme about the way the history of slavery (to paraphrase Marx) weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. In any event, *Beloved* is not likely to stimulate a positive image of the Reconstruction era.

**NB:** What a rich discussion! For me, the issue that is resonating throughout all the recent responses is that “black truth matters.” Reconstruction’s lost writings have been skipped over much in the same way that people skip from slavery to segregation. I agree with Beverly that it is hard for the public to grasp Reconstruction because it remains fractured. It was fractured at the time, as Salamishah reminds us, and it remains fractured now because, as Beverly writes, “our educational systems, the public landscape, and the media have been influenced by differing ideas of freedom.” Perhaps we can, in Jennifer’s words, “reset the path toward realizing Reconstruction’s promise” by listening more acutely to the visions of freedom coming from the era. These visions, I might add, are not completely locked in the past but have been taught and passed down—perhaps in bits and pieces like a game of telephone, but passed down just the same.

We have had trouble making sense of Reconstruction because black truths matter. The works of many scholars recognize this and have recaptured and reflected these truths. Yet the public at large has no narrative within which to place these truths, for the reasons Beverly suggests. Instead, slavery and Jim Crow remain more knowable. I suspect this is because they accommodate a narrative of opposites, a black history and a white history. With Reconstruction, however, black truths enter the public sphere and the foundations of law and government in ways that are undeniably constitutive of the nation. To bring Reconstruction to the forefront of the popular imagination requires a resetting of the national narrative to recognize the black truths that formed it, before, during, and long after Reconstruction.

**DP:** *Let me pose another question that picks up on the points about inevitability, unpredictability, and opportunity raised by the previous comments. How do we handle the topic of “Redemption”? By my reading, much of the scholarship on Reconstruction finds little room for hope for the survival of African American rights from the 1870s onward. The collapse of northern support for federal intervention in the South and the unrelenting nature of white supremacist violence there, historiography suggests, made a sweeping rollback of freedom and equality inescapable. If this reading of the past stands, how do we speak to our many audiences about both the great promise of the early post-Civil War years and the seemingly irrepressible*

*suppression of that promise? Does one come to overshadow the other? Should one overshadow the other in our accounts?*

**TB:** The nature of the audience matters in striking an interpretive balance between possibility and constraint. In an original work of scholarship, someone might be interested in achieving the freshest insight into either element of the equation. Historiographical disputation alone is not enough to create significance, but academic literature values correction and recognizes the usefulness of opposing perspectives. Public history, however, puts a premium on demonstrating possibility. The practical alternative is often to suggest impossibility in the present as well as the past. So in addressing the foreseeable collapse of Reconstruction, I would emphasize that its achievements went well beyond a hypothetical midpoint in the range of plausible outcomes. History can surprise us, sometimes because people are resilient and resourceful and sometimes because forces of oppression press their advantages too far. It's also important to look at constraint as something other than inevitability, at least as applied to the present day. Some of the tactics that overthrew Reconstruction have been discredited. Other constraints, like the disinclination of the postwar northern public to finance law enforcement in the South, are useful in drawing comparisons with causes for which Americans have shown patience or willingness to pay elevated taxes.

**EF:** Redemption poses a difficult problem for the public presentation of Reconstruction. We do not want to suggest unrealistic optimism about the prospects of "success" for Reconstruction. Yet it is important avoid the trap of inevitability. Like other aspects of this period, Redemption is a teaching opportunity. It reminds us of the fragility of our liberties and that rights in the Constitution are never sufficient without the will to enforce them. It reminds us that all gains are contested and that, in the words of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "revolutions may go backwards."<sup>11</sup> To call Reconstruction a "failure" is not helpful as many gains of the period—the solidification of black families, the establishment of independent institutions like churches, the beginnings of black education—survived Redemption and became the seedbed of future struggles. Moreover, Redemption did not take place at a single moment, as the current scholarly emphasis on a longer Reconstruction makes clear. That said, we have to get people thinking about the causes behind Redemption, whether racism, class conflict, political change, or a combination of all of these, and, as with other aspects of Reconstruction, what parallels may exist today.

**BB:** It's important to recognize the changes taking place in the South but to move beyond the idea that there is a beginning, middle, and end to the process of Reconstruction. As Eric notes, the curtain doesn't fall on the drama of "reconstruction" across the former Confederacy at one specific time. There isn't a sudden, sweeping rollback of freedom and equality; Redemption is a fragmented process. Across the South, even with the institution of poll taxes and other restrictions, African American men voted in some counties and states into the twentieth century. Disfranchisement might be complete in one county while in the neighboring county black men (and later black women) voted. In Tennessee, African American men were elected to the General Assembly into the 1880s, and these men proposed and supported legislation that might benefit all Tennesseans. After a brutal lynching of six black men in rural Shelby County, Julia Hooks (the grandmother of civil rights leader Benjamin L. Hooks) stressed the need for black men to find ways to pay their poll taxes and vote. And, although there were no African American legislators in the Tennessee General Assembly from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, that did not mean that the political activities of African Americans, particularly in cities like Memphis, had ended. I try to communicate to audiences (usually my students) that they need to focus as much on how African Americans are negotiating or challenging the suppression of their rights as on the suppression.

**JT:** The Redemption chapter of the Reconstruction story was not inevitable in the sense that it was the only possible outcome, but it was the foreseeable consequence of inaction and indifference on the part of empowered actors, and that is perhaps the most valuable lesson the period has to teach.

Reconstruction yielded the premature restoration of Confederate citizenship and the granting of black voting rights without a commitment to protect that franchise. This resulted in more powerful and ostensibly legitimate white supremacist state governments that, in exchange for shedding the Confederate label, gained the privilege of counting their formerly enslaved and still voteless black residents as whole people rather than three-fifths of one. Similarly, the emancipation of enslaved people without a commitment to create and maintain the infrastructure required to prevent their reenslavement through new but eerily similar systems of sharecropping and convict leasing enabled the development of more profitable systems of exploitation requiring less investment.

Oversimplifying the problem as "slavery" and the solution as "citizenship rights" conflates surface-level innovation (three constitutional

amendments, among other examples) with the deeper work of implementation. The latter requires unearthing the roots that threaten to spread and sprout anew if not exposed and destroyed. The victorious Union found it much easier to denounce and destroy the most obvious systems that were unique to the South, without committing to exposing and confronting deeper scourges—white supremacy, economic exploitation—that undergirded those southern systems and their northern branches. The work was abandoned before it took hold. As the Mississippi Supreme Court observed in *Ratliff v. Beale* in 1896, when reviewing the racially discriminatory motives of the state’s 1890 Constitution: “Within the field of permissible action under the limitations imposed by the federal constitution, the [state constitutional] convention swept the circle of expedients to obstruct the exercise of the franchise by the negro race. . . . Restrained by the federal constitution from discriminating against the negro race, the convention discriminated against its characteristics and the offenses to which its weaker members were prone.”

There is nothing unfamiliar in that narrative. Federal courts’ indifference to the persistent segregation (and in some cases re-segregation) of public school systems post *Brown v. Board*; the U.S. Supreme Court’s *McCleskey* decision, and its preference for piecemeal reform rather than a commitment to grappling with proven racial bias in administration of the death penalty for fear that it would open the floodgates to racial bias claims; even the recent denial of the Voting Rights Act’s continued relevance—all reveal a national, institutional, political, and legal will to go only so far and disrupt only so much.<sup>12</sup>

Redemption did not have to happen, but, in the absence of full-bodied obstacles erected against it, there was no reason to believe that it *wouldn’t* happen. African American progress and resistance is an invaluable topic of study for its powerful inspiration and for its inability to stem the tide of Redemption. Through studying Reconstruction, we can better recognize when we have erected insufficient barriers to injustice. This history reminds us to be unsatisfied with barriers that go no deeper than the surface and to recognize when stripping the land just leaves a field cleared and plowed with the same seeds buried. We can embrace the apparent conflict between the hope of Reconstruction and the disappointment of Redemption as a moment to teach this story, reevaluate our present and more recent past, and explore ways to build a different future.

**ST:** Though much more popular in the collective memory and tourist industry, and now inspiring television shows, the Underground Railroad

in ways occupies a similar space in American culture as Reconstruction. It is considered a vehicle and institution of interracial cooperation and black agency that exists because of and despite the backdrop of deep racial violence. With the exception of Henry Box Brown's narrative, the Underground Railroad also occupies (and for understandable reasons of safety and security) a huge void in the writings of former slaves. And yet now we accept that contradictory narratives can coexist—the Underground Railroad was a vehicle to freedom but was not quite freedom itself. I think a similar approach (as I think we have said in some form) can be taken with our approach to teaching Reconstruction as well. I realize that narratives of failure overshadow much of the Reconstruction discourse, but as Eric noted earlier, that is a big mistake. The apparatus of racism does not mean that the ideals and goals of Reconstruction were not met but rather that we must consider it as movement toward something much more profound and experimental than even the founding of the United States. This suggests that we could think of it less as collapse or even Redemption than as a pathway or process. This gives it a more dynamic and less static (and perhaps binary) place in our present and our past.

**NB:** Redemption, unlike Reconstruction, is knowable to most audiences. It is what most expect—an almost seamless flow from slavery to segregation. They anticipate the message of “Redemption” and are not surprised by the brutal violence and the legislative, constitutional, and court-mandated restrictions and assaults on black lives. At the NMAAHC, we therefore see our challenge as slowing visitors down. To engage audiences and invite them to take a second look, we juxtapose the familiar with the unfamiliar. The showstopper tends to be that there were African American officeholders in the nineteenth century. This startles many visitors and captures their attention, perhaps because it signals a successful, organized opposition. Once we've sparked their curiosity, we can enable visitors to experience a moment that made black office holding possible—a moment that stretches from Reconstruction into the antebellum period by suggesting organizing traditions with deep roots running back into slavery. I can almost hear the gasp of horror that history's linearity is blasted apart by the description above: Redemption overlapping Reconstruction and spilling backward into a past before the Civil War. Yet this is how exhibitions operate, at least in part. An exhibition is a visual medium that permits multiple layers of communication at once; that can disrupt a strict beginning, middle, and end. Exhibitions provide a flash of insight. The task of a historian in this context is to create a shift in perception that lives long after the visitor leaves the Museum.

**DP:** *What do you find to be the most challenging problem—whether practical, theoretical, legal, institutional, or otherwise—in working on these issues? That is to say, when you engage with and/or reflect on the commemoration of Reconstruction, what is it you find most vexing, daunting, or perplexing? Finally, based on your experiences and research—with the above issue and/or in general—what advice would you offer to others involved in the commemoration of Reconstruction?*

**ST:** The challenge of commemorating Reconstruction—what seems its formidable absence in public memory—gives us so many opportunities to fill in those gaps with the groundbreaking and rigorous research that has already shaped so much of our scholarship and public histories. Each year, when I teach either Slavery in the American Imagination or Introduction to African American Literature, I am puzzled by the fact that so few students even know what constitutes the meaning of the word “Reconstruction,” much less what were its promises and paradoxes (unless they have taken a southern history class or nineteenth-century American history course).

In other words, Reconstruction is not as burdened or overdetermined by its signifier status as the Civil War or civil rights movement are. An interesting approach for me would be teaching a cultural history on Reconstruction by highlighting the paradox of this absence. For example, what would a more extended timeline of Reconstruction look like if we thought of it not only in the strict terms of political history? I am again influenced by Henry Louis Gates, especially his “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black” (1988), in which he charts the artistic arm of Reconstruction as flourishing during what we typically think of as the “nadir” of African American life:

I see this period between 1895 and 1925, rather than the narrower one between 1867 and 1876, as the crux of the period of black intellectual reconstruction. For the literary critic, there is little choice. Between 1867 and 1876, for example, black people published as books only two novels, one in 1867 and one in 1871. Between 1895 and 1925, however, black writers published at least sixty-four novels. While the historical period known as Reconstruction seems to have been characterized by a dramatic upsurge of energy in the American body politic, the corpus of black literature and art, on the other hand, enjoyed no such apparent vitalization. . . .<sup>13</sup>

I find Gates’s periodization provocative and poignant, and I’d be interested in adding to his timeline by staging his paradox as a debate—what were the forms of cultural expression that African Americans and white

Americans created from 1865 to 1876 to wrestle with the questions of nationhood, insecurity, citizenship, race and gender? What do the apparent silences in literature reveal? What do these silences respond to? And what other forms of art (photography, poetry, or letters) did people use to remember the past and the paradox of their present? I then would also expand it to include the twin moment of the nadir and “the new negro” as a way of reimagining Reconstruction as a process and as having an after-life. This can be done through a number of ways in a syllabus, exhibition, film, or public reading—following how one figure, community, or text gets formed, stages its new identity, and then reimagines itself or gets reimagined in literature or art after 1876. The goal is not to create new myths, but through art to understand how the questions and concerns that we have now were dealt with either in real time or in the shadow of the period.

**BB:** I think the most challenging problem is generating and sustaining interest in Reconstruction; so many people see it as just the period between the Civil War and Jim Crow segregation or between the Old South and the New South. How do we get people to see that this is a critical period in American history, a period when questions of civil, social, political, and economic inclusion and equality are on the table? How do we encourage this reflection when the events are so complex? Our Memphis project has given us an opportunity to take an event that’s rooted in slavery, Civil War, and emancipation; examine it in the context of post-Civil War struggles in the urban South; and reflect on the possibilities for the nation of sustaining social, political, economic, and constitutional changes. What advice would I offer from my experience with this project? Realize that communitywide commemorations are educational opportunities and should involve broad collaborations and coalitions. The more extensive these are, the better the possibilities for deeper and richer understanding of this period.

Our project began as a plan by two historians, with support from our department and the NPS, for a two-day academic symposium. When another possible funder told us we needed more community engagement, we included a few presentations at local libraries and on campus to educate the public about the 1866 event. Then we realized that the whole process had to involve more than just one department at one university. At the same time the Memphis NAACP, engaged in its own struggle with the THC over the wording of a proposed marker commemorating the Massacre, approached us for assistance. Out of this relationship grew a broader community collaboration that included all of the major postsecondary educational institutions (public and private), the public library, the museum system, as well as some private donors and supporters. Commemorations

like this should not be the purview of a single educational institution or organization. The significance of this event could easily be dismissed if only a few academics or just one organization was involved.

The months-long controversy between the Memphis NAACP and the TCH over the wording on the marker heightened awareness of the continuing importance of memory and commemoration. A community that has often been mired in conflict over Civil War iconography (statues, parks, and memorials to Confederate “heroes” in a predominantly African American city) now seems poised for deeper discussions of race and memory. But the challenge will be sustaining this commitment to reflection or, as a local newspaper columnist termed it, to “retroactive honesty.” The greater the chronological distance from these events, the more difficult it is to generate and sustain this interest, except when people have (or are persuaded that they should have) some compelling personal, political, economic, or social investment in these events.

**TB:** A lot of people are uncomfortable confronting the legacy of white supremacist violence and fraud in replacing a lawfully established political order with a long-term racist regime. The basic narrative poses other problems. Allegations of Republican corruption were an important part of Reconstruction politics. Some of those allegations were true. That corruption had a nationwide context in the dramatic expansion of a postwar securities market that prioritized state credit, which also tempted northerners and southern Democrats when they were in power. But it’s common for audiences to see corruption as a disqualification from respect or proof of politics as usual, which obscures the larger importance of the Republican Party in the South.

Many people point to the complexity of Reconstruction as an obstacle to effective public presentation, which is not a point without foundation. State variations in the process were significant. Federal measures on topics like amnesty involved a long series of partial steps. Explaining the incomplete rollback of Reconstruction requires nuance. Disciplinary boundaries can reinforce these complications. Civil War and Reconstruction historians perhaps tend to leave it to law professors to interpret the part of the Enforcement Act of 1871 codified as 42 U.S.C. §1983 and the Jurisdiction and Removal Act of 1875, which can result in theoretically rich but often ahistorical understanding of the profound Reconstruction-era remaking of the federal court system.<sup>14</sup>

Another challenge is the flipside to Eric’s observation that Reconstruction is at heart a story about ordinary people defining freedom. It is not a story that lends itself to telling through a few leading figures like the women’s

suffrage movement or the Jacksonian or Progressive eras. Biography may oversimplify all of those stories, but the famous names provide a hook that Reconstruction largely lacks.

My advice is to seize the moment. Current public curiosity about the Reconstruction era may not match that focused on the Federalist era, but it compares well with interest in any other period that precedes living memory. That interest reflects contemporary politics rather than the sesquicentennial, but the anniversary is a genuine season of opportunity. And consider the local possibilities: many communities could generate something exciting. I have been very impressed by the Memphis observance that Beverly has described, and I'd like to think that the WWFH in Columbia offers a model for broadening the presentation of a historic house museum. It's no coincidence that these initiatives have taken place in the South, and I expect the NPS to concentrate on the former Confederacy as well, but there are also rich prospects elsewhere. It's a grassroots story that would benefit from grassroots remembrance.

**EF:** The first problem is not unique to Reconstruction—it is the slow decline in the study of history at all levels of education as STEM subjects get prioritized and the humanities, which do not seem to contribute to economic productivity, become more and more devalued. Thus the opportunities for acquainting young people with Reconstruction steadily diminish. Then of course Reconstruction inevitably seems to get overshadowed by the Civil War.

In addition to emphasizing Reconstruction's modern relevance, as has been discussed, I think we ought to frame the era in part as the beginning of a long struggle for our society to come to terms with the consequences of the end of slavery. Lincoln alluded to this obliquely in his second inaugural when he spoke of the 250 years of unrequited labor. What is the nation's obligation for this? What system of labor, politics, social life, and race relations will replace slavery? The Reconstruction generation was the first to grapple with this on a massive scale. In some ways, we are still trying to answer those questions.

**NB:** Where do we go from here? How do we put our ideas into practice in a way that will bring Reconstruction to the forefront of the public imagination? I agree with everyone about the difficulty of this project. Reconstruction is complex; there is no linear, straightforward narrative that does justice to its looping afterlives. Reconstruction is unknown to most; I recently pitched it to a reporter and was met with a blank stare.

Reconstruction cannot easily be slipped into tropes of what it means “to be American.” So how do we change this?

Like Tom, I think commemoration is an important first step and perhaps our only way in. But it will take a full-court press. Commemorations won’t make Reconstruction memorable unless they are made deeply relevant. A short anecdote by way of example. Recently, many of us were active in commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. At the Museum, we co-curated an exhibit with the National Museum of American History. Together, we collaborated with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the American Library Association to tour a film series and traveling exhibit to spark local discussion. We organized a national youth summit via webcam. And we set up programming around musicians, artists, and poets. Our work and the work of others brought the past to the present moment. Yet I was conscious that something was missing from this anniversary.

In the past, anniversaries of the Emancipation Proclamation served as a time of reckoning. Celebrants marked the past to debate, analyze, and assess the present moment and to chart avenues forward. Think of Frederick Douglass’s “On the Twenty-First Anniversary of Emancipation” and W. E. B. DuBois’s “Celebration of the Semicentennial Anniversary of the Act of Emancipation.”<sup>15</sup> These celebrations represent the work of many conferences, congresses, and expositions organized around Emancipation. These, in turn, brought many different people together to organize their thoughts and propose new ways forward using the Emancipation Proclamation as their springboard. The March on Washington is perhaps the most iconic of these coalitions. The 2013 anniversary did not produce the same results. The commemoration remained largely locked in the past without serving as a moment of reflection and deliberation. The past was not used to debate the present and to map ways forward; this is vexing, daunting, and perplexing.

I can think of all sorts of reasons why this anniversary differed, but one sticks in my craw. In 2013, national museums, national parks, and national humanities centers were hosting and organizing these events. This is wonderful. These pasts are recognized as Americans pasts! The Smithsonian, the NPS, and the NEH offer a strong spotlight that can reach local communities. Yet concomitant with the national is the fact that voices can become muted and less distinct. Therefore, it is vital that we collaborate with others. We need to build relationships among universities, social justice networks, artists, museums, and archives. Commemorations will come and go unless we can work these moments to our advantage by harnessing these

relationships. It's not so much that we have different audiences but rather that we have different voices and therefore varying abilities to speak. I think we should begin with a thoughtful accounting of what we all bring to the table and open ourselves to vigorous public conversation.

**JT:** I think the most vexing and challenging thing about engaging with Reconstruction's history and legacy has been the extent to which it is so much more complex and nuanced than most of our audiences have been taught to believe. The main obstacle to learning what this history has to teach is the broad-brushed narratives that box it away as a brief, inevitably ineffectual period after the Civil War that somehow proved the folly of federal interference into state affairs and the law's inability to create and sustain social change. Without understanding Reconstruction's shortcomings and premature end as a political and moral failure that enabled the resurgence of racial hierarchy and subordination, we cannot properly recognize similar acts of resurgence when they occur. What rhetoric does such a resurgence use? What justifications and fears does it cloak itself in to appear reasonable and necessary?

In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision, white elected officials and community members opposed to the ruling quickly relied upon Confederate states' rights rhetoric. Many of the historical markers and monuments to Confederate history and figures standing today were Civil Rights-era statements of white supremacy's history of resistance. Political rallies and anti-desegregation protests were filled with Confederate flags and messages resisting efforts at a so-called second reconstruction.

When Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy came to Montgomery, Alabama, in April 1963 to urge Alabama governor George C. Wallace to abandon his vow to defy federal school desegregation orders, pro-Wallace protesters placed a brass marker where Jefferson Davis had taken the oath of office 102 years before. A note left with the marker, explaining its intention to "keep any enemy from standing on the star where Jefferson Davis was inaugurated," was signed "Unreconstructed." Similarly, the South Carolina legislature raised the Confederate flag over the state capitol in April 1961 and refused to move it from the capitol grounds for more than fifty years.

We still witness the persistent misuse of Reconstruction as a benign or even heroic narrative by those who continue to defend policies and customs rooted in white supremacy and racial equality. We need a public historical narrative that reveals that rhetoric for what it is and makes it an uncomfortable position to defend. The widespread efforts to commemorate

Reconstruction right now are encouraging, and I hope we will continue to use these anniversaries to retell familiar stories in deeper, new, and needed ways that highlight truth and complexity while shining light on damaging, still-festering legacies. There are so many people engaged in this valuable and important work, we have already seen meaningful movement in public awareness and shifting narratives; I'm excited to see that progress continue.

#### NOTES

1. The Equal Justice Initiative is a nonprofit organization that provides legal representation to indigent defendants and those who have been denied fair treatment in the legal system. Through its reports on the slave trade in Montgomery, Alabama, lynching in America, and other issues, EJI examines the nation's history of racial injustice, its implication in structural poverty, and its impact on contemporary society.

2. Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade* (Montgomery, Ala.: Equal Justice Initiative, 2013); Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 2d ed. (Montgomery, Ala.: Equal Justice Initiative, 2015).

3. The National Museum of African American History and Culture partnered with the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History to create an exhibit, which was open through September 2014, that examined these events in comparison. The Smithsonian maintains an online version of this exhibit at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/changing-america>.

4. See Claude Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside, 1929)

5. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Is This the End of the Second Reconstruction," *The Root*, October 2, 2015, available online at: [http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2015/10/is\\_this\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_second\\_reconstruction/](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2015/10/is_this_the_end_of_the_second_reconstruction/).

6. The congressional report, "Memphis Riots and Massacres," can be found in U.S. Serial Set, No. 1274, House Report 101, 39th Cong., 1st Sess. 2–36 (1866). Dr. Andre Johnson, "Does Black Truth Matter: Black Lives and the Disregard and Recovery of Black Truth," Lecture, University of Memphis, February 16, 2016. The text of Dr. Johnson's lecture is available online at <https://blogs.memphis.edu/memphismassacre1866/2016/02/22/does-black-truth-matter-black-lives-and-the-disregard-and-recovery-of-black-truth/>. An audio recording of his lecture is available online at <https://soundcloud.com/memphis-massacre/does-black-truth-matter>.

7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), 30.

8. The quotation comes from Johnson's third annual message to Congress in 1867 and is quoted in Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 7. For Johnson's entire message, see "Message of the President of the United States," *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 40th Cong., 2d Sess. (1867).

9. *Civil Rights Cases*, 109 U.S. 3 (1883).
10. *Cong. Globe*, 41st Cong., 3d Sess. (1871).
11. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1870), 47.
12. In its 1987 decision in *McCleskey v. Kemp*, the Supreme Court decided that racial bias in the application of the death penalty generally was not grounds to vacate an individual death penalty sentence, unless it could be proven that such bias was conscious and intentional. See Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 21.
13. Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988): 131.
14. 42 U.S.C. §1983; 8 Stat. 470, March 3, 1875.
15. Frederick Douglass, “Address by Hon. Frederick Douglass, Delivered in the Congregational Church, Washington, D.C., April 16, 1883; on the Twenty-First Anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia” (Washington, D.C.: 1883) W. E. B. Du Bois testimony, Hearing on U.S. Senate Bill 180, “Celebration of the Semicentennial Anniversary of the Act of Emancipation” (February 1912).