SPLASH 2018 Writing the Past Notes:

Paul Cohen writes that purpose of history is “to understand what happened in the past… [then]…explain it to [the] readership.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This explanatory nature of history is quite pragmatic: by understanding what happened in the past, we can gain insights into human civilizations, contextualize ourselves in a larger human narrative, and learn from past mistakes. The myriad insights we gain from studying the past are indispensable to the present and future alike.

Yet history is not a trove of gleaming gen awaiting discovery by an intrepid historian. As Carl Becker writes: “History is what the present chooses to remember about the past.” This statement forwards two concepts: first, that there exists an objective past (the past is not solely a construct/choice of the present imagination), and second, that that objective past is distorted or selectively forgotten by the memory of present history-writers. (Here ‘memory’ can be interpreted as the historical narratives constructed by historians–to be forgotten is to be left out of the narrative; this term is not to suppose the historian is remembering events that happened to them personally or directly, although they certainly might be). Becker’s second point indicates that history fails in its primary objective to understand and explicate what happened in the past. This failure is due to the selective narrative of the historian, who (either intentionally or inadvertently) articulates a slanted account of what occurred.

This is not to say the historianis a villain–rather, that the historian (despite illusions to the contrary) is not omnipotent, and is thus perpetually constrained by the limits of human cognition. The historian explores and rationalizes the past through constructing narratives. Narrative is the orbit from which the historian can encircle the past without being crushed beneath its momentous gravity. From this orbit the historian can faintly see the mountains of empires and the seas of momentous change, but not the rivulets of personal lives which interlace between them. Narrative affords clarity, but inevitably overlooks individuals on the the surface of the past.

This phenomenon presents us with a conundrum, for it is this very past human experience history seeks to understand and explicate. As Bolch writes: “Behind the features of landscape, behind tools of machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions, which seem almost entirely detached from their founders, there are men, and it is men history seeks to grasp.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This focus on individual experience is not to disregard the importance of machinery and documents, rather it is to emphasize the ultimate goal of studying such temporal things is to understand their effect on the human subject. If Becker were to agree that the ultimate subject of history is the human individual, then he would desire a history of individual human experiences untarnished by historical narrative. A history free of distorted retrospection.

Yet I argue that the human experience is defined by distorted retrospection. Once individuals experience something, they immediately begin to narrate and misremember what has happened. In this way the experience of the individual shifts over time, in that its memory–and thus its effect on the individual– shifts. This phenomenon does not alter what objectively occurred (i.e. wars don’t disappear from the past due to amnesia), but it does have a substantial effect on the human subject of study, in that it changes (often in momentous ways) what people *believe* has occurred. If the purpose of history is to understand and explicate the human subject, then ultimately we must study people’s distorted understanding of the past.

In this view, historians are the most recent misremembering agents–distinct from their subjects in the scope of their focus–but fundamentally the same their use of narrative to understand the past and their identity in relation to it. Thus, Becker’s claim “History is what the present chooses to remember about the past,” might be rephrased as “imperfect narrative is how humans understand and rationalize their reality.” Let us not forget that historians are human.

As people live their lives, they instinctively view them a narrative framework.[[3]](#footnote-3) Individuals contemplate their personal past through weighting certain memories while selectively forgetting others. This phenomenon elucidates a narrative topography from the linear life of the individual, revealing turning points, highs, lows, mistakes made, and places where life should have gone differently from a consecutive series of events. The individual too, is in narrative orbit. Barbara Myerhoff writes that such “autobiographical mythmaking” has a clear value because “it helps to preserve a sense of psychological coherence and personal integrity over time.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Myerhoff uses the term “myth” here indicate that the stories people construct about their lives are often divergent from what actually unfolded, like a myth is distinct from reality. (We must be careful with this use of this term, for it is not used in the sense of a Norse “myth,” which–accounting tales of dragons and gods–has no basis in reality).

As Myerhoff suggests, autobiographical mythmaking is driven by a desire for personal identity. Mythmaking allows the individual to create a coherent self with values, fears and a distinct relation to the world. Yet even more than revealing the attributes of the self, individuals use the past to reveal an origin. This is not the origin of birth, but rather the origin of the contemporary self: the point which explicates who the individual is–as they reflectively understand their self–in the present day and how they arrived there. As Renan so eloquently put: “in all human affairs, it is the origins which deserve study before anything else.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The discovery of personal origin is the ultimate goal of autobiographical mythmaking.

The interconnection of personal origin and autobiographical mythmaking is starkly apparent in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, a piece centered Coates’ experiences as black male in the United States. In the first section of his book (centered on his time as an adolescent), he recounts the traumatic experience of being threated by a boy with a gun:

There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked…and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body….I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon… I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of *Mr. Belvedere…*.I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We can see from Coates’ terrifying narrative that this experience served as a type of origin for him. The word “yet” in the last line is implies that he *would* come to understand the relation between those two worlds; because the title of his book is a direct reference to this experience, we can say Coates sees his life mission–or at least a component of it–*as* explicating this relation. This experience is understood by Coates as an origin of his present self.

As real as this experience is for Coates–and for innumerable people of color in the US– it is a form of autobiographical myth, in that it is a narration of what has occurred. This story implies that Coates, in one “boyish afternoon,” came to contemplate the entirety of racial injustice in the United States, likening this discovery to one on the scale of a galaxy. Coates undoubtedly came to these realizations over the course of his life through perpetual observation and introspection. While this experience is a component of these realizations, it cannot be the entirety of their cause. The retrospective assignment of grandiose insights to this traumatic experience is a way Coates has rationalized what happened to him. Because this experience was deeply disturbing, Coates gave purpose to it through autobiographical myth: it was the day he began to understand the quintessential nature of his existence.

Coates’ account also reveals that autobiographical myths evolve with time. His line “I *came* to understand” indicates that upon contemplating this memory repeatedly, his understanding of it shifted. Thus, despite being created at a set point in time, this memory is dynamic. It is not a static record of what happened in the past, but a cognitive phenomenon that exists in (and changes with) the present. Cohen remarks on this phenomenon: “in reviewing the personally experienced past from a more remote point in time, we inadvertently mythologize it. The process of constantly reworking one’s own experienced past…obviously does violence to the original experience.”[[7]](#footnote-7) As time flows through a series of consecutive presents, Coates’ recollection of this event will continue diverge from reality as it perpetually justifies his identity.

Here we return to our original inquiry: the importance of what “has happened.” I argue a historian studying Coates would gain far less from uncovering what actually “happened” to Coates on that boyish afternoon than from studying how his understanding of his experience shifted with time. Ultimately, his *memory* of his past is what is real to him (not what actually happened) in that his memory is what informs his present identity. If Coates believes this experience the origin of his present self, it effectively is–until his conception of himself shits to necessitate a new one.

Here we may be afraid that history is adrift in the murky waters of nihilism–for if history were solely concerned with human belief, then it would seem be unmoored from reality. I argue that human belief is *inseparable* from reality, and moreover this is the very reason it cannot be discounted as meaningless. To explicate this concept, let us expand our focus beyond Cotes as an individual. Coates carries momentous weight in innumerable imagined communities across the world. His autobiographical myth resonates with people of color because it feels real to them. It articulates the nature of their reality and thus, the way they perceive and effectthe world. As Cohen concisely articulates it: “insofar as what people believe (regardless whether it “true” or “false” in the ordinary sense) exerts a powerful influence on how they feel and think but also on their behavior, such beliefs become agents that generate and condition historical action of the most undeniably ‘real’ sort.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Cohen is speaking about beliefs here, but this argument can be easily expanded to emotional and psychological sentiments as well. focus on the validity of Coates’ narrative would be to overlook its emotional validity, and by extension, its importance to the human subject.

This focus on emotions and belief is not to disregard objective truth *in the slightest*, but rather to refine our inquiry. If Coates’ story was shown to be a complete fabrication and he never was threatened by a boy with a gun, this discovery would certainly change the narrative of a biographical historian writing about Coates (i.e. an event in Coates’ life did not happen). It would *not* substantially change the narrative of the anthropological/sociological historian writing about the black experience in America: even if fake, Coates’ narrative speaks to millions of people, and is therefore very real in an emotional and psychological sense. This narrative would still serve as a cornerstone of numerous imagined communities. Thus, a historian would be brought closer to successfully explicating the experience of African-Americans by studying how this narrative is received–regardless of its validity. The focus of the historian determines the need for objective truth in history.

Now we have returned to the role of the historian in narrating past human experience: the core of Becker’s concern. Because the focus of the historian filters the history we read, it would seem that even if we accept the individual mythologized past as the ultimate subject of history–and not what objectively happened–we are barred from accessing it due to the secondary mythologized past written by the historian. Yet we care about the selective memory of our subject, not that of the historian.

Here we might discount all history and choose to only read primary sources: after all, should the verbatim of the past not deliver us an understanding of individual experience? I argue three factors prevent this approach from achieving its goal. First, only a miniscule fraction of past experience is ever recorded for posterity.[[9]](#footnote-9) We can rarely can hope to gain numerous viewpoints on a time period, or from the same subject at different points along their personal Odyssey. A dearth of information renders most experience forever inaccessible.

Second, even when past experience does reveal itself in the form of personal testimony, cognitive dissonance between us–the reader–and the past individual bars us from understanding their experience. Life is a very visceral thing; it is deeply rooted in the scenes and thus cannot be conveyed in its entirety through language. Furthermore, life exists in the present moment, and thus is dominated by uncertainties we cannot feel from reading testimony. As Cohen writes: “Uncertainty about the future governs virtually all phases of human experience.”[[10]](#footnote-10) People in the past exist in a state of ‘outcome blindness;’ Coates’ was traumatized by his experience because he didn’t know if he was going to be killed. Anxiety about the future cannot be *felt* by us because we, in short, usually know how things turned out (i.e. Coates did not die that day).

Third, we all understand the world (and thus the narratives of other individuals), through our own narrative lens. As David Car writes: “narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence, independently of our contemplating the past as historians.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, the phenomenon of distorted or selective memory is inseparable from our perception of other individuals and their own narratives. In short, we cannot experience the autobiographical myths of other people because we are already engrossed in our own.

These three points cannot be disregarded as epistemological technicities, for together they underscore the onerous expectations with which Becker has burdened the historian. The implicit critique that history should deliver the entirety of the past (not what is remembered), is not only an impossible objective but a nonsensical one. To desire a history free of selective memory is to desire to hear a sound in the vacuum of space; both phenomena lack the medium necessary for their transmission. Thus, Becker demands from history something intrinsically inhuman: an undistorted understanding of the past.

Yet history need not deliver past experience or objective truth to be of use to us. Cohen remarks that the historian’s craft “entails a complex set of negotiations between present and past, incorporating something of vital importance from transforming along the way, the consciousness that each brings to the table from the outset.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The very act of engaging in these complex negotiations furthers our understanding of ourselves the present; our consciousness is matured through this investigation. While we may never traverse that alien world of the past, we perpetually benefit from circling in its orbit.

1. Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys* (New York: Columbia University Press 1997), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage, 1953), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cohen, *Keys*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bolch, *Craft*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cohen, *Keys*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cohen, *Keys*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid 75.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cohen, *Keys*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)