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PROJECT

Hard Histories

Hard Histories examines the role of historical thinking in processes of reckoning with the difficult, unwelcome, and even unspeakable past. They shatter old myths and open up new ways forward. "Hard" points to how difficult it is to dislodge a mythical past, while also pointing to how new historical truths threaten to humble, destabilize, and transform us. Hard histories is also a practice that reckons with the difficulties of reinterpreting the historical archival record while also changing it.

Historians often speak to other historians – a debate we term historiography – while hard histories speak to those outside the academy. Hard histories challenge popular narratives while also valuing transparency, collaboration, an ethics of care, and public-facing knowledge production that builds bridges, relationships, and new modes of storytelling.

Hard histories invite a look inward at what happens when historians counter mythical tellings of the past. Lessons surface. Denial is a force distinct from the archival record. Subterfuge distorts understanding. Values – tradition, reputation, and excellence – keep myths afloat. Hollow gestures paper over vestiges of a troubled past. Academic explanations of the past run counter to those of families, communities, and critics who stand in defense of the myths we aim to dispel.

Hard histories in the U.S. have been especially brought to bear on the past of slavery, settler colonialism, and racism, shattering myths and replacing them with new histories. Still, we must ask where hard histories end and new futures begin. We must ask, "Who owns history?" I am a historian unearthing how slavery and racism are embedded in the present and also a descendant of women enslaved in 19th-century America. Hard histories expose not only how the histories we tell have changed. It reveals how who tells those histories has changed, too.

Recommended Reading

Jones, Martha S. *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

—. *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

—. *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

"The Trouble of Color: An American Family Memoir"

In "The Trouble of Color" I discover who my family has been, but also how it has felt to be us. It is a story about a generations-long confrontation with the color line and about how it feels to me as its inheritor.

As far back as I can know, my people have been caught up along a jagged color line. Snatched by its teeth – that endless line of gleaming menace, ragged and razor-sharp like the blade of a hand saw – its bends leaving a kerf and then a scar. We've trod gingerly, approached it, even attempted to climb over. Allure has pulled us close to the deep cuts; we've backed away, putting distance between our thin skin and a blade designed to skin us alive. We've skipped, strode, and danced an awkward two-step. Some of us have waltzed. Pens in hand, we've sometimes re-drawn the line, at least a short span of it. It's a journey harrowing and confused, cruel and seductive, personal and perniciously public. We played possum and trickster, stand wide-eyed and defiant, while tragedy in its many guises tracks us, looking to take us out. Approaching this line, I am tethered to the generations before me by ambiguous and even unspoken beginnings – expressed in skin too light, features too fine, hair too limp. I am an heir of misunderstanding, misapprehension and mistaken identity.

The historian's craft, I knew, wanted me to collect my family story and connect it to histories we've previously told. For our lives to matter, for history, I'd need to show that we'd contributed to narratives about, say, slavery, emancipation, American Apartheid, or Civil Rights activism. I knew other historians, admirably, had used our stories to just these ends. Me, I wanted to tell you what our family has meant, not to history, but instead to me, to us, as a family. I was sure that we mattered, not because other scholars told me so. I knew we mattered because as I immersed myself in our past my heartbeat quickened, my eyes welled, anger, fear, and even pride coursed through me. I could write a book about facts and figures, and there are lots of those running underneath my prose, but what I most needed to say was how I felt. This sort of writing, that goes from the head to the heart, that asks you to think and then feel, I came to learn is what writers term memoir.

"The Trouble of Color" is a meditation on ancestors, an immersion in the stories they told and the tales we craft about them. It is about the past and how it is present for us even now. Through recollections, shards of paper, along with hopes, dreams, and fears we may recover our richest legacies. Each generation told the tales it best knew and that it needed to face the troubles and reach for the promise of its time. I have stepped into that stream, joining in a tradition of family storytelling that I expect will continue long after this book settles quietly onto a library shelf. The dear ones who came before me have kept me company along this journey. They have granted permission, encouraged, intervened, and cared for me every step of the way. Because of them, I am. Because of them, I know what I know.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Jones, Martha S. (New York, NY, 2025)

The trouble of color : an American family memoir

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1909056189>

American family memoir

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1909056189>

Jones, Martha S. (Buffalo, NY, 2022)

Thick women and the thin nineteenth amendment

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853644048>

Jones, Martha S. (New York, 2021)

Citizenship

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853643130>

Jones, Martha S. (New York, 2020)

Vanguard : how black women broke barriers, won the vote, and insisted on equality for all

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1695578139>

Jones, Martha S. (Cambridge, 2018)

Birthright citizens : a history of race and rights in antebellum America

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1018087214>

Studies in legal history

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1018087214>

Jones, Martha S. (Chapel Hill, 2015)

Toward an intellectual history of black women

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=792556127>

The John Hope Franklin series in African American history and culture

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=792556127>

Jones, Martha S. (Chapel Hill, 2007)

All bound up together : the woman question in African American public culture, 1830 - 1900

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=526396059>

The John Hope Franklin series in African American history and culture

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