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Who Tells the Tale: Teaching History in Uncertain Times

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(Received 16 February 2026; revised 07 April 2026; accepted 08 April 2026)

Abstract

This article examines not only who is recognized as legitimate within historical narratives but also how the very standards of historical validity have shifted over time. It was sparked by a question that interrupted an otherwise ordinary lecture: “What does that have to do with history?” Asked during a discussion of the Stonewall uprising, the question did more than challenge a specific topic; it unsettled deeper assumptions about what counts as historical knowledge and who has the authority to define it. Rather than dismissing the moment, I treat it as an opportunity to reflect on the fragile boundaries of the discipline and the political forces that shape them. Drawing on memory studies and historiographical debates—from E. H. Carr and Carl Becker to Elizabeth Jelin—I discuss how mainstream accounts and public policies determine which lives are archived and which remain marginal. In light of recent US executive actions seeking to restrict how history is taught, the classroom has become a contested space where perspectives can be fostered or silenced. I argue that teaching history responsibly means confronting uncomfortable pasts, embracing intellectual friction, and recognizing that students themselves participate in history’s ongoing construction.

Keywords: history; legitimacy; memory; teaching

I am a faculty member in the Department of History at a liberal arts university in New York, and I love what I do. The moments I value most are when students challenge assumptions, remain curious, and ask the question no one else is brave enough to voice. Yet since Trump’s first administration, a quiet sense of caution has settled into the classroom. Although faculty have been encouraged to carry on “as usual,” there is an unspoken awareness that certain topics now require extra care. That subtle shift changes the atmosphere, the tone of discussion, and even the confidence with which students raise their hands. In a space built on inquiry, even slight hesitation can reshape the entire dynamic.

That unease deepened last year when, during a faculty meeting, we were advised to avoid words such as *diversity*, *social justice*, *equity*, *inclusion*, and *gender*. A few weeks later, we were told we could continue using them as before. But by then, the uncertainty had already settled in. It lingered in the pauses between questions, in the self-censorship of both students and instructors, and in the sense that some conversations might be safer left untouched. For those of us in the humanities, this matters profoundly. Education depends not only on what is said, but on what people feel permitted to say. While some students still dare to speak, others sit in silence, as if waiting for me to guess the question they are afraid to

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ask. When I invite them to speak, their responses are often: “I do not want to make a mistake,” “I am afraid I am wrong,” or “Am I allowed to ask that?” This, also, is a two-edged sword, since professors now must be cautious in their answers.

Let me use an example to illustrate this. In 2023, during an introductory course called *Timeless Issues in History* I have been teaching for a few years, one query triggered my authoritative historian voice—thankfully I was able to quiet it down and listen instead of provoking an unwanted exchange.

I began class as usual:

“Today we are diving into the Stonewall riots and their significance in the struggle for LGBTQAI+ rights.”

A hand went up.

“Okay ... but what does that have to do with history?”

Pause.

Internally, I went through possibilities at lightning speed. Is this defiance? Confusion? Discomfort? A challenge?

Out loud, I replied: “Let us take a moment to remember what we are doing here. This class is not about memorizing distant dates or learning chronologies of events. What I intend to convey is how the study of the past helps us to understand the present.” In this moment I remembered a sentence that impacted me as a PhD student: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” which reminded me why I love history.¹ Fortunately, I was able to articulate the idea that the present is always informed by the past and that everything has a history.²

The exchange lasted seconds. The aftershocks have lasted years.

It was not really about Stonewall. It was about legitimacy and why some subjects become recognized as “history” while others not. Difficult or uncomfortable histories have long been treated as taboo in classrooms and public discourse. Governments and educators often justify this avoidance by claiming that confronting histories of violence, exclusion, or national wrongdoing may harm students’ emotional well-being, foster dissent, or challenge patriotic narratives. In some contexts, the pressure goes even further, with legal or institutional efforts to restrict how the past can be discussed. Yet shielding students from these histories does not protect them; it limits their ability to understand how power, memory, and identity are shaped. Increasingly, educators and students alike are embracing the need to engage with these difficult pasts, recognizing that meaningful learning often begins where comfort ends.³

The student’s inquiry led us toward a reflection on remembrance and oblivion, on the complex relationship between what societies celebrate and what they suppress. When

¹ Faulkner 1951, 92.

² White 2018.

³ Goldberg 2020, 132.

certain groups, LGBTQAI+ communities in this instance, are pushed to the margins of official accounts, pedagogy becomes an exercise to challenge and criticize this: a deliberate effort to broaden perspective and whose experiences are granted historical presence. And truly, the same question could have been asked about women, children, First Nations, Black communities, immigrants, and any group historically treated as peripheral to the “main story.” My challenge then and now is the same, to help students see that plurality is not an add-on to the narrative. It is the narrative.

What I initially interpreted as a provocation turned out to be an invitation. An opening. It revealed assumptions about what “counts” as history and illuminated the tension between narrow, conventional definitions of the field and more generous, public-minded understandings of the past. In the end, the moment did exactly what good historical inquiry should do: it unsettled presumption, expanded the frame, and reminded us that the struggle over whose stories endure is itself part of the story.

1. What to teach then?

After some experience in the classroom, I have come to believe, as many colleagues do, that professors are not there to provide final or absolute answers, but to encourage curiosity and thoughtful questioning. History should challenge the certainty of what we believe we already know. Too often, history in school is presented as a straightforward record of past events, a collection of facts to be memorized rather than questioned. Even if later we are introduced to more nuanced and critical interpretations, those early lessons often remain deeply influential in shaping how we understand the world. To insist that history should unsettle us is to insist that the stories we inherit are never complete, and that there is always more beneath the surface of what we have been taught.⁴ So, what might appear to be a straightforward and uncontroversial principle has become increasingly complex since January 2025, when Donald Trump’s second administration began. In the months that followed, policies and public rhetoric have raised concerns among many observers about the treatment of LGBTQAI+ communities as well as Black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, Jewish, Muslim, and other racialized and religious minorities. What once seemed like a shared civic commitment to diversity and inclusion now feels contested, exposing the fragility of rights that many, me included, had assumed were secure. So now my student question comes to mind again: What do these communities have to do with history? Nothing, according to Executive Order 14190, issued on January 29, 2025. This policy instructs federal agencies to review and cut funding to K–12 schools that teach what the administration calls divisive ideas about race, gender, and identity. While it is presented as protecting parents and promoting neutrality, it restricts discussions of civil rights, racism, and LGBTQAI+ history.⁵

As scholars such as Elizabeth Jelin remind us, total remembrance is impossible; memory is always selective, and competing narratives often become a source of conflict.⁶ Likewise, history education scholar Hillary Cooper argues that answering difficult questions requires openness to new information and *possibility thinking*—the willingness to imagine alternatives

⁴ Sheehan 2020.

⁵ Trump 2025.

⁶ Jelin 2002.

and confront complexity with an open mind.⁷ Therefore, to respond to my student's question, I had to reflect carefully on why some lives are deemed worthy of remembrance while others remain marginal.

What is at stake under Trump's second administration is not that history is contested—it always has been—but that the authority to determine legitimate memory is increasingly concentrated in executive power rather than shaped through scholarly debate or democratic dialogue. The danger lies not in disagreement itself, but in the shrinking space where disagreement can be openly expressed.

2. How to teach then?

As a Latin American public historian, I often address topics that can feel sensitive or uncomfortable—racism, discrimination, gender, human rights, women's struggles, and Indigenous sovereignty, among others. I have taught the class mentioned above since 2021, and these conversations usually unfolded with curiosity and respect. Most of my students have been thoughtful and willing to engage, even when the material challenged them.

Currently, the question is no longer simply *what* to teach but *how* to refute one-sided interpretations that restrict intellectual curiosity and creativity in an atmosphere of watchfulness. Following Sam Wineburg, I see the study of history as the development of historical thinking—a mode of inquiry that humanizes us and expands our understanding of what it means to be human. Rather than asking only *which* history should be taught, Wineburg urges us to ask *why* we teach history at all. For him, its value lies in helping students navigate the tension between the familiar and the strange: the past grounds our sense of identity while also confronting us with ways of thinking and living radically different from our own. Wineburg also argues that historical thinking is an “unnatural act” because it requires us to resist the instinct to interpret the past through present-day assumptions. Genuine understanding demands that students suspend those assumptions and ask why people in the past acted as they did within their own context. In this sense, teaching history is less about transmitting facts than about cultivating critical habits of mind—questioning evidence, embracing complexity, addressing difficult pasts, and remaining open to perspectives that unsettle what we think we know.⁸

In our current political climate, what troubles me most is the creeping possibility that teaching could be reduced to technical delivery, a plain transmission of approved information, stripped of inquiry. In such a scenario, the classroom becomes a space of compliance rather than exploration, and knowledge is offered as settled rather than contested. We stand, in other words, at the edge of what the Nigerian postcolonial feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of the single story.”⁹ When complexity is flattened, when discomfort is avoided, when certain questions feel safer left unasked, education narrows and imagination is hindered.

3. What should history be about then?

The question of legitimacy is not new. For centuries, political elites, nation-states, and academic institutions have defined which events, actors, and archives deserved scholarly

⁷ Cooper 2017.

⁸ Wineburg 1999.

⁹ Adichie 2009.

attention. The expansion of social history, women's history, Black history, and LGBTQ+ history in the twentieth century was itself a struggle over legitimacy. Here I want to return to another student from the same class but from another semester who once gave this simple answer: "History is what you make of it." She had no intention of quoting E. H. Carr, Carl Becker, or Michel de Certeau, just to name a few historians who have discussed the topic before, yet she echoed their ideas.¹⁰ In that genuine and unrehearsed remark, she reminded me why I chose my profession.

Her words rekindled something I feared was powering down. They suggested that historical thinking is not confined to professional scholars or bound within archives; it lives in the capacity to interpret, to question, to situate oneself in time, and to understand that one-sided and familiar versions of the past are dangerous. If more people grasped the weight of that insight, perhaps we would not hesitate when confronted with unsettling inquiries. Perhaps we would not feel the urge to take refuge in safer terrain. The real task, difficult as it may be, is not the act of teaching itself. It is cultivating the willingness to welcome questions that defy official dominant versions and to guide students to recognize that they are not merely observers of the past. They inhabit it, shape it, and carry it forward.

Jimena Perry is a Latin American scholar specializing in Colombian history, memory, and cultural practices. She earned a BS in Anthropology from the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, an MPhil in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge (UK), and a PhD in History from the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on violence, museums, memory, the history of anthropology, and public history. She brings these fields together to examine how individuals and communities negotiate remembrance and forgetting, and how these processes shape collective identities, ethical debates, and historical narratives. Dr. Perry is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Iona University, where she teaches Latin American history and museum-focused courses. Since 2018, she has also served as the project manager of Explorers of the International Federation for Public History, coordinating international initiatives that document and promote public history practices worldwide. She has worked as a curator and college instructor in the United States and Latin America. Some of her publications include *Museums, Exhibitions, and Memories of Violence in Colombia: Trying to Remember* (Routledge, 2023) and the edited volume *Comunidades digitales, museos e historia pública: experiencias en torno a América Latina* (2023). She is also the co-editor of *Public History, Gender, and Power in Latin American Museums: Women Curators and Cultural Leaders* (Routledge, 2026).

Author contribution. Conceptualization: J.P.

Conflict of interests. The author declares no competing interests.

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¹⁰ Becker 1932; Carr 1961; de Certeau 1992.

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