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### Title

Globalizing Hayden White

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8gf890rz>

### Journal

Rethinking History, 23(4)

### ISSN

1364-2529

### Authors

Domańska, Ewa  
La Greca, María Inés  
Roth, Paul A  
[et al.](#)

### Publication Date

2019-10-02

### DOI

10.1080/13642529.2019.1679432

Peer reviewed



# Rethinking History

The Journal of Theory and Practice

ISSN: 1364-2529 (Print) 1470-1154 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrhi20>

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To cite this article: Ewa Domańska, María Inés La Greca (editors), Paul A. Roth, Xin Chen, Veronica Tozzi Thompson & Kalle Pihlainen (2019) Globalizing Hayden White, Rethinking History, 23:4, 533-581, DOI: [10.1080/13642529.2019.1679432](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2019.1679432)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2019.1679432>



Published online: 27 Nov 2019.



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CONVERSATION



## Globalizing Hayden White

Ewa Domańska <sup>a</sup> and María Inés La Greca<sup>b,c,d</sup> (editors)  
Paul A. Roth<sup>e</sup>, Xin Chen <sup>f</sup>, Veronica Tozzi Thompson<sup>b,c,d</sup>  
and Kalle Pihlainen <sup>g</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poznan, Poland; <sup>b</sup>National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; <sup>c</sup>Methodology, Statistics and Maths Department, Tres de Febrero National University, Sáenz Peña, Argentina; <sup>d</sup>Philosophy Department, University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina; <sup>e</sup>Department of Philosophy, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA; <sup>f</sup>History Department, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China; <sup>g</sup>Cultural Theory, School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia

### ABSTRACT

This conversation originated in a plenary session organized by Ewa Domańska and María Inés La Greca under the same title of ‘Globalizing Hayden White’ at the III International Network for Theory of History Conference ‘Place and Displacement: The Spacing of History’ held at Södertörn University, Stockholm, in August 2018. In order to pay homage to Hayden White’s life work 5 months after his passing we knew that what was needed – and what he himself would have wanted – was a vibrant intellectual exchange. Our ‘celebration by discussion’ contains elaborated and revised versions of the presentations by scholars from China (Xin Chen), Latin America (María Inés La Greca, Veronica Tozzi Thompson), United States (Paul Roth), Western (Kalle Pihlainen) and East-Central Europe (Ewa Domańska). We took this opportunity of gathering scholars who represent different parts of the world, different cultures and approaches to reflect on White’s ideas in a global context. Our interest was in discussing how his work has been read and used (or even misread and misused) and how it has influenced theoretical discussions in different parts of the globe. Rather than just offering an account as experts, we mainly wanted to reflect on the current state of our field and the ways that White’s inheritance might and should be carried forward in the future.

**KEYWORDS** Hayden White; reception; theory of history; narrativism; political transformation; academia

### María Inés La Greca: Introduction

‘Globalizing Hayden White’ is an idea with which Ewa Domańska and I aimed to provoke a discussion around the current state of the field of theory of history, taking the celebration of the life work of Hayden White as

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**CONTACT** María Inés La Greca  [mariaineslagreca@hotmail.com](mailto:mariaineslagreca@hotmail.com)  National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET), Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Editors: Ewa Domańska and María Inés La Greca

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an opportunity for reflection. I introduced the Stockholm conference panel with a series of questions I considered necessary to ask in order to frame our homage as a moment of critical debate. The speakers had not read my questions before their oral presentations but, surprisingly, they dealt with most of the issues I hoped to raise. Thus, I will introduce their papers through the questions separating them as they point toward the past, the present and the future of White's work and of our intellectual situation. It may seem an odd choice to write part of an introduction in the form of an ordered set of questions, but this is a deliberate discursive strategy: asking about the significance of this undeniable event in our field's recent history – White's work and his legacy – means inquiring into how his intellectual figure can help us chart our present concerns and challenges.

## I

Let us start with the past: White's work has been adventurous and innovative: how did he change the relationship between history and theory for us? Can we answer this by deciding whether he was a formalist, a structuralist, a poststructuralist, a postmodernist, a relativist, or a constructivist? Is it useful or does it even make sense to try to fit him with one of these labels? It is important to consider the contradictory conclusions scholars draw from White's theoretical position: how could it be that he, as the supposed champion of 'narrativism,' was accused of leaving historians in a 'prison-house of language' – as if they were (mis)guided in their writings by an evil trope genius – while being at the same time criticized for giving too much freedom to the historian's task, making him/her suspiciously close to a literary writer? How can we explain that he was considered a humanist and existentialist thinker and, simultaneously, a postmodern one?

White had the clear aim of changing historians' consciousness concerning their discipline and even their intellectual role in society. But has there been any substantive change in this regard? He held polemical claims, raised heated discussions and even employed a confrontative style: was this useful? Was he really listened to? Did he accomplish that consciousness raising or was he responsible for alienating academic historians or even the discipline itself? Or was he, instead, misread and turned into the figure around which the discipline built a theory-scarecrow and avoided really addressing the questions he raised? Which have been the major points of resistance and misunderstandings regarding his work?

If we turn our questions toward the present, we can begin by asking where the impact of his work is really to be measured: in the historical profession as a whole? In the different disciplines and areas of the globe where he was read and studied? Can we measure this solely by statistical quotation standards? Or is his impact to be traced in this field we call 'theory of history' that

exceeds the realm of historiography, given that it is where not only historians but also philosophers, literary theorists and other humanities practitioners meet and think? Is 'theory of history' open to a truly interdisciplinary discussion? What notion of history is being theorized by the encounter between these different disciplines? Is historiography its main focus or is a broader sense of historical thinking at stake? How can we assess White's impact in terms of both the public celebration and criticism of his work and the personal effect he had on young students' and scholars' self-perception of what it is (or should be) to do theory and politics within the humanities all around the world?

In this sense, we can today ask if the debates White contributed to are still fruitful: do they still foster critical dialogue and innovation? Are there worn-down discussions that should be left behind? Are there issues that were raised by White but resisted, thus never fully engaged with or thoroughly analyzed? Is there a normalization or domestication of White's thought going on? Was there a coherent or systematic theoretical position in his writings, or did he bestow us with a provocative but eclectic oeuvre? Can there be a 'normal science,' a paradigm, to develop from his work? Or are his writings always pushing for revolution? Can there ever be theory as an ongoing revolution or do we need to establish some consensus and proceed from there?

Lately White has been read as a misunderstood, well-intended existentialist thinker who, although controversial in his writings, never really wanted to deny the existence and knowledge of the past or the value of historical studies. But, if this is so, why were his claims so strongly resisted? Is that existentialist interpretation (which is clear to anyone who has properly read his work) really the way to study him and to do justice to his intellectual contribution? Are there narrativists nowadays? Is it the same thing to study or use White's work and to be(come) a narrativist? Or is narrativism a bad word used to alienate certain research projects, instead of helping map the debates that sprung from White's work and had diverse lines of development? Is that negative labeling restricted to the specific disputes of some geographically framed reception of White? In general terms, has he been properly studied or are there superficial versions of his work circulating among us? Should Whitean experts 'correct' them to have a 'proper' version, or should we look further into them and ponder why there is a need to have such a simplified version? Which aims and whose purposes does it serve?

Let us finally ask about the future: if from now on we are to witness celebrations regarding White's undeniable contribution to the field, is there a clear agreement today of what that contribution has been? Or are these celebrations going to be a way of leaving the actuality of his thought in some past that is over and done with? We can identify a certain eagerness to declare a post-White or postnarrativist moment in theory of history: But, why is it so? If there is a need to move forward, in which direction should we

move? Is it necessary to move forward by burying White's insights in the past or are there questions that remain unanswered and claims that are still unheard? Or are we being dragged by the market-oriented demand of novelty-at-all costs, a logic of academia and publishing houses that demands newer and newer topics, maybe at a time when we have not properly finished exploring the significance of previous ones? Shall we resist the compulsion for quick change and wannabe-groundbreaking new topics? If it is change we are after, what is it for? To change what?

## II

As noted, the papers in this section resonate with most of these questions. Paul Roth, to start, passionately claims that the revolution that White 'sought to foment in the consciousness of those who write histories or teach them for a living' remains unbegun. Although Roth believes that White was not addressing only academic historians, he considers that White wanted to engage with them but that they have remained to this day unresponsive to his message. Roth claims that White (as Rorty in philosophy) wrote against history as disengaged from the times and cultures to which it belongs. However, at the same time, White raised disruptive doubts with respect to any disciplinary claims to moral privilege and to professionalization as an effort to evade moral responsibility. Here is where Roth insightfully links White's interest in a history engaged with its present and his critique of realism: 'For his repeated point was not that standards of argument be abandoned, but rather that historians had to drop the pretense that they tap into sources of authority that magically transcend the cultural fray.'

The polemic between White and his realist critics was, for Roth, *not* about a need to make sense of the world in systematic, responsible and productive ways but rather 'about whether one advances a moral agenda by claiming to channel Reality or rather by humbly acknowledging that the workings of the human hand are everywhere found.' In the end, for Roth, White's aim was to raise awareness regarding the distinction between being professionally skilled as opposed to having privileged access to Truth. Roth also thinks that producing some normalization of White's thought would be to work against what he worked to achieve. Thus, to embrace White's legacy, Roth urges us to still ask why this aspect of his work came to pose a deep threat to conventional wisdom as well as to resist the current position of theory of history as ancillary or somehow optional to history's practice.

Presented here last, Kalle Pihlainen's contribution coincides in several ways with Roth's overview, particularly with respect to their rejection of the domestication of White's thought. It is interesting to oppose their take to Domańska's, Tozzi's and Chen's, which have a less negative appraisal of how White's work has been 'conventionalized' or integrated into authorized

knowledge in contemporary theory of history in the areas of the globe they reflect upon here.

Taking as his point of departure the discussions in Finland and the UK, Pihlainen traces major points of resistance to White's work. For him, White's thought has been domesticated by critics and, through that, his potentially radical views are, to this day, marginalized. Whether or not they still have a chance of escaping this marginalization is something that for Pihlainen remains to be seen, but he clearly states that White's work deserves a second chance 'despite what currently feels like an overwhelmingly post-linguistic-turn atmosphere – if not indeed, more brutally, a generally anti-theory one.' Roth asks what is to be done and Pihlainen answers with his own close reading of White's writings: he believes we should do away with the negative value associated with White's work as the proponent of a so-called 'narrativism' and recuperate instead the more constructive side of his 'constructivism.' For Pihlainen, as for Roth, there is still much to do with White's legacy if we choose to leave in the past the exhausted debates of whether his position entailed an 'anything goes' relativism and instead assume his major claim that, when thinking and writing history, there are no foundations for how we should act.

Xin Chen, in a very generous survey of White's impact in China, shows how White was first read within the field of Chinese literary theory in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. There, he was labeled (incorrectly, according to Chen) as another new historicist cultural critic. But, from 1999 onwards, Chen claims that White brought disruption to the theory of history as practiced in China. Both in literary theory first, and, later, in theory of history, White's main impact had to do with challenging a prevailing 'blind faith in realism.'

One of the reasons why Chen believes that White impacted in history – and specifically in the subfield of theory of history – more than 10 years later than in literary theory, involves the lack of training in theory and an unwillingness to engage with philosophy of history or theories of history (a similar diagnosis is made by Roth regarding the USA). But Chen's own reading of White is that his work exceeds history's disciplinary boundaries – a sentiment also evident in Tozzi's and Domańska's contributions. According to Chen, even if contextualizing White's work within theory of history was a step forward in his reception, and taking into consideration that this field only really flourished in China after and thanks to White, these findings are not enough to grasp the value of his thinking.

Highlighting White's basic presupposition of the priority of life (in a complex relation to the logic of academic knowledge) as well as his reflections on human existence and the essence of history, Chen strongly claims that White was 'a thinker and critic of an era, an ironic theorist, as well as a secular rationalist who had a positive attitude towards life' (a definition

that Domańska and I share). Chen, finally, takes the interesting risk of claiming that White can be considered the pioneer of postmodern Marxism.

These last claims by Chen bring us directly to Ewa Domańska's declaration of White as a rebel 'who encouraged us to free ourselves from the burden of history and more'; a committed existentialist whose practice deconstructed the principles of academia and founded a school grounded in rebellion and self-discovery; and the last Marxist, 'the epigone of the 1968 movement and a defender of the ideals of democracy and emancipatory humanities that are vanishing before our eyes' (I leave to readers the task of tracing the relationship between Marxism and White's thought in these contributions).

Discussing the reception of White's work in East-Central Europe, Domańska identifies three phases, outlining which themes became central to other researchers' interests. Domańska stresses that the political context of the collapse of communism in this part of Europe shaped the popularity of those aspects of White's thought that were connected to postmodernism, including narrativism, in the 1980s and 1990s. She argues that White became a symbol of freedom of thought and of a democratic academia in the context of these political changes. In promoting the pluralism of interpretations and truths, White 'played an important role as an "external shifter" in the difficult transition from totalitarianism to democracy.'

Domańska makes two fundamental claims about the state of the field through this mapping of White's impact in Eastern Europe: first, a local appreciation: that White's passing symbolically manifests the end of the postcommunist phase of development of historical theory in East-Central Europe; secondly, a promising global overview: that a new moment of more democratic and geographically diverse dialogue is developing in our field, as those attending the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) conferences have witnessed with the visibility of scholars from all around the globe (rather than only from the USA's and Europe's hegemonic academic centers), and that there is also an emergence of new themes and changes in the ways research is being conducted. For Domańska, Hayden White played a significant role in this new scenario, given that his presence brought researchers from many countries and cultures together.

Verónica Tozzi Thompson attests to a similar effect regarding White's presence in South America and the way it brought together scholars from Argentina and Brazil. But, first, Tozzi also identifies a folk tale, born from superficial (mis)readings of White's writings, in which he is accused by outraged historians of having collapsed the distinction between history and fiction. It is exactly the same strategy (the same cautionary tale, I would add) that, on the one hand, Roth denounces as 'the sorry spectacle of members of the professorate trying to frighten graduate students and others' as they equate White's criticism of realist notions of historical representation with



relativism, and that Domańska, on the other, also detects in White having been labeled as a ‘troublemaker.’ Tozzi then wonders how it is that this folk tale can resist a simple reading of the first pages of *Metahistory*, where White explicitly states that he is studying the work of four great historians and philosophers of history as *forms of realism*.

Against this folk tale, Tozzi offers a detailed survey of White’s visits to Argentina and Brazil. First, she narrates how the impact of his first visit to Argentina in 2000 resulted in the founding of a research program under her direction – named *Metahistorias* (‘metahistories’) – that has to this day had almost two decades of uninterrupted growth in academic production and the training of young scholars in theory of history. An intimate bond with White was established as he visited Argentina again in 2011, allowing the development of newer Whitean appropriations and more translations of his books into Spanish. Tozzi then relates how, since 2012, her dialogue with Brazilian historians open to White’s ideas and theoretically aware of the linguistic turn led to the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Metahistory* in a conference held in Vitoria, Brazil, in 2013, at which South American, North American and European experts on White’s work gathered around him to think and debate, and how this prompted new joint publications.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding her own research, Tozzi highlights how she has pursued a dialogue between White’s theory of history and pragmatist philosophy. She also argues that from all the theoretical notions White has offered us, ‘figural realism’ (or ‘causal figurality’) is the most philosophically productive. Finally, Tozzi ends on an optimistic note, claiming that in recent decades she finds a renewed interest in White, accompanied by better secondary literature devoted to his work as well as ‘studies on the rhetorical sources of realistic figurality [that] are no longer perceived as a threat towards historiography but as a means of empowering the historical work and its cultural-educational role.’

### III

Tozzi’s last claim summarizes the general spirit of all the contributions: a rejection of White’s figuration as a ‘moral danger’ for history writing and an appraisal of the message that was left unheard: the need to empower the cultural-educational role of *history* in a broad sense. But we can also infer from Chen, Domańska and Tozzi that in China, East-Central Europe and South America White contributed to establishing the field of theory of history not only through his physical presence and personal involvement in promoting senior and junior scholars in the field, but also through the stronger interest his work awoke there. Why was that so? White himself wondered about this in the preface to the 2003 publication of a collection of his essays edited in Spanish by Tozzi. There, he claims:

Overall, my work has had better acceptance in those parts of the world torn by political and economic conflicts than in the United States. I do not know why, but I suspect that it is only in ‘unstable’ societies where the certainties of a wisdom based in objective historical research can be effectively problematized. (White 2003a, 43, my translation)

So, let me end this introduction with some final questions: what kind of disruptiveness, rebellion or radicality is missing today in our field? Do we choose to have a theory of history engaged with its present? If so, what unbegun revolution is needed to face what Domańska identifies as the vanishing before our eyes of the ideals of democracy and emancipatory humanities?

It seems to me that the historical times we are living in have brought a regrettable kind of globalization: that of political and economic instability all over the world. There are no ‘non-unstable’ societies to be found today, not even the United States. In his last talks and interviews, White again and again denounced the suicidal nature of capitalism. Neoliberal times are felt within and outside academia: through the disappearance of teaching and research positions in the humanities due to state budget cutbacks all over the world, and through the overwhelming expansion of the general precarization of the material and symbolic conditions for human life.

Acknowledging this ongoing threat of the unstable society, the regrettable figure of our times, is fundamental for a theory of history engaged with its present. Domańska’s more optimistic view of the state of our field as a new moment of more geographically and thus culturally diverse and horizontal dialogue suggests that we might be on the right track. In that context, ‘globalizing Hayden White’ can mean a strengthening of the bonds of solidarity between us, a fostering of opportunities for the creation of new perspectives and ideas and the birth of a new moment for the theory of history, a moment where, of course, borrowing Roth’s words, to be professionally skilled does not mean to have privileged access to truth, but also where we do not remain content merely with saying again and again what we already know: that *the workings of the human hand*, when advancing any theoretical or political agenda, are everywhere to be found. Those who have already learnt this in the past decades of humanities self-criticism of its cultural and historical situatedness may now have the more difficult and urgent task of doing something else with those hands.

### **Paul A. Roth: What is to be done?**

The essays in this collection deal one way or another with the tropical element in all discourse. [...] This element is, I believe, inexpungable from discourse in

the human sciences, however realistic they may aspire to be. Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee.

White (1978a, 1–2)

1.1 *Academic history has never managed to transcend its eighteenth century origins as an empiricist enterprise.*

1.4 *Lying behind this fetishism of method is an unquestioned allegiance to ‘ontological realism.’*

1.11 *History’s anti-theoretical preoccupation with empirical facts and realist argument nevertheless entails a set of uninterrogated theoretical assumptions.*

Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder (2018)

After all, historians have conventionally maintained that neither a specific methodology nor a special intellectual equipment is required for the study of history. [...] How can it be said then that the professional historian is peculiarly qualified to define the questions which one may ask of the historical record and is alone able to determine when adequate answers to the questions thus posed have been given? [...] And it follows that *the burden of the historian* in our time is to reestablish the dignity of historical studies on a basis that will [...] allow the historian to participate positively in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*.

Hayden White (1966)

This brief paper stems from an invitation to reflect on how Hayden White’s work has ‘influenced theoretical discussion in different parts of the world’ (Domańska and La Greca 2018, “Mission Statement,” Personal communication) for a session entitled ‘Globalizing Hayden White’ held in Stockholm as part of the third INTH conference in August 2018. Certainly no one could deny that White’s work achieved global influence. Yet the epigraphs above highlight a pervasive irony with regard to who has heeded or taken to heart White’s work. For it appears that audience has *not* included historians. It is now 50 years on from the publication of White’s landmark essay ‘The Burden of History’ and approaching the half-century mark since the appearance of *Metahistory*. But the recent quotes cited above from the Wild On Collective suggest that prominent members of the historians’ guild find that nothing much has changed in that time, at least with respect to the teaching and practice of academic history. I do not mean to imply that White took himself just to be addressing academic historians. But surely he addressed at least that group, and the evidence suggests that they remain to this day unresponsive to White’s message (Vann 1998).

How should one assess where the revolution stands that White sought to foment in the consciousness of those who write histories or teach them for a living? The verdict can only be that it remains largely unbegin. In this key

respect, that is, the fact that change has yet to happen, the present academic positioning of White's writings must be judged a *misplacement* of his work. The unsettling conclusion is that the globalizing of Hayden White proves symptomatic only of a normalizing of his work, and so counts against what he worked to achieve. Hayden White calls on us to be disruptive or destabilizing forces not only with regard to history as pursued by those currently ensconced in such academic departments, but also with respect to *any* disciplinary claims to *moral* privilege. The former point I expect will be readily acknowledged. The latter claim takes a bit more unpacking.

As I have argued elsewhere, striking parallels exist with regard to the academic fates shared by White and another intellectual iconoclast, the late Richard Rorty (Roth 2018). Both concluded their teaching careers in Comparative Literature at Stanford. Each effectively wrote themselves out of the disciplines in which they trained. White had no more discernable interest in teaching in a conventional history department than Rorty did in teaching in such a philosophy department. Yet it would be a mistake, I suggest, to maintain that neither wanted to engage in debate with those they left behind. Evidence for this can be had simply by noting that each until the very end of their very productive careers wrote on topics directly addressing history and philosophy (Rorty 2007; White 2014a).

But what incites such disciplinary exile? A basic reason is that both viewed the erstwhile professionalization of their respective disciplines as an effort to evade moral responsibility. The problem is a deeply ironic one. Academics *qua* academics rightly bridle (or ought to) at any hint that they function as paid skills for one ideology or another. But this laudable stance can prove difficult to disentangle from the fact that positions often enough do have political and moral consequences. For example, philosophy professors may praise Socrates and yet carefully retail only those views that represent no more than a studied avoidance of issues that matter. White and Rorty speak repeatedly and pointedly against attempts to position history and philosophy as disengaged from the times and cultures in which they occur. Both could and did write quite scathingly on precisely this matter:

In recent decades, Anglophone philosophy professors have had a harder and harder time explaining to their fellow-academics, and to society at large, what they do to earn their keep. The more specialized and professionalized the study of philosophy becomes, the less respect it is paid by the rest of the academy or by the public (Rorty 2007, 184).

White was no less acerbic in his assessment of the cost paid to maintain the cozy spot that professors occupy: 'The "scientific" status of history was saved but at the cost of history's demotion from its traditional role as *magistra vitae* to that of a second-order, fact-collecting enterprise' (White 2014a, 97). This helps bring to the surface a key feature with regard to what makes White's

work so uncomfortable for many historians. For his repeated point was not that standards of argument be abandoned, but rather that historians had to drop the pretense that they tap into sources of authority that magically transcend the cultural fray. Realism is to be rejected because it only serves to license an intellectual and moral position that historians have no right to claim.

One depressingly standard move that occurs when White raises such a challenge involves intoning the term ‘relativism,’ as if that should suffice to bring any right-thinking person to their senses regarding White’s brief against realist notions of historical representation. But this is just one more bogus move in a sterile debate. It would seem not to bear repeating, but for the sorry spectacle of members of the professorate trying to frighten graduate students and others by this feint. In any case, the debates that mainly interested anti-realists like White are precisely those where what was at issue could not apparently be settled by questions of fact just because those in the dispute largely agreed about what the facts, however characterized, are.

A key example of acting out this moral pretense can be found by examining how White’s views were (mis)handled in the essays in *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Friedlander 1992). The sort of moral indignation that White’s position there excites, however misplaced, continues unabated. In other words, the failure of White’s thinking on the view of his erstwhile critics often enough does *not* involve his insistence that there must be some moral vision informing historical works, but rather that White makes it an *historian’s* responsibility regarding which moral vision a work underwrites. By denying realism, what White denies to historians is any claim to moral privilege sanctioned by Truth.

Symptomatic of those who invoke an unthinking, unreflective appeal to realism as a moral crutch is writing by Branko Mitrovic:

in order to understand the final, and possibly the most important, objection to postmodernist constructivism and anti-realism in history writing: for many people it may be hard to avoid the harsh judgment that they are morally repugnant [...]. Saying that the injustices people suffered are historiographical constructs that do not refer to anything in historical reality is the most efficient whitewashing strategy that one can think of. It is hard to imagine a better way to exculpate the oppressor. (Mitrovic 2016, 22–23)

Pounding the table and bellowing how one needs moral absolutes in order to justify calling malefactors to account or to ensure that the oppressed receive their due ought not to impress anyone as cogent argument.

But the remark just quoted does help focus the issue. It demonstrates how an underlying but often unarticulated criticism of White actually involves the status or nature of academic authority (where authorization comes not from God, but from Truth). Informally, Mitrovic’s fulminations serve to ‘convince’

only those who already share his moral assumptions. Formally, he simply offers no argument. Only theologians and unthinking ideologues imagine that normative conclusions can be read off some recitation of the facts. Absent some further premise or premises, it simply does not follow from the statement that events are historiographical constructs to the conclusion people did not suffer, or that their cries need go unheard. 'Injustice' is indeed a normative term. And as a normative term, it requires some explicit moral theory to license applying it. Constructivists can, like anyone, employ norms as part of their account. Denying that norms are timeless is completely consistent with arguing for the embrace of certain norms in the here and now. Labeling a norm 'absolute' does nothing to justify it. The label only signals a person's attitude toward the value in question. White's 'failing' from this perspective lies not in his logic, but rather that he deprives professionals of entitlement to *moral* certainty.

The irony here proves quite remarkable. For White takes himself to be urging historians *qua* authors to own up to their moral responsibility. Yet critics charge 'constructionists' such as White with moral failure. And herein lies the rub. White highlights in his polemics against professionalization failures to explicitly acknowledge positions implied regarding culturally significant issues. But he does not dictate adopting some specific moral view. The counter to this too often turns out to be that only by insisting on absolutes, whether they be about narrating the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, can one claim the moral high ground. A special place in academic hell is then reserved for those who doubt either the possibility of certainty or the appropriateness of pontification. A key issue between White and his realist critics, in short, is *not* about a need to make sense of the world in systematic, responsible, and productive ways. Rather, it is about whether one advances a moral agenda by claiming to channel Reality or rather by humbly acknowledging that the workings of the human hand are everywhere found.

In the end, assessing White's legacy proves inseparable from recognizing that his attack aims not just at certain dearly held disciplinary conventions, but that he mounted a general assault on academic claims to special authority and so to moral entitlement. The two – the authority and the entitlement – prove linked, I have been arguing, in an unexpected way. The pretense to realism and so to Truth licenses the moral entitlement. Without the former, academics have no *special* claim to moral authority. But forswearing the pretense leaves academics in no worse position than any other informed and concerned citizen. Why fear that?

Here I would recall Adorno's remarkable essay, 'What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?' (Adorno 1986), first published in the 1960s but not translated into English until some 20 years later. Adorno begins that essay by worrying that what passes as 'coming to terms with the past' 'does not imply a serious working through of the past, the breaking of its spell

through an act of clear consciousness.’ Adorno’s concerns about the persistence within democracies of tendencies to embrace fascism, nationalism and xenophobia, prove frighteningly applicable to contemporary politics. Adorno in this regard sounds a Whitean note *avant la lettre*.

Here I choose to sidestep a question that is very difficult and burdens us with the greatest kind of responsibility: namely, the extent to which we’ve succeeded, in attempts at public enlightenment, to explore the past. [...] Essentially, it is a matter of the way in which the past is called up and made present: whether one stops at sheer reproach, or whether one endures the horror through a certain strength that comprehends even the incomprehensible. For this task it will, however, be necessary to educate the educators (Adorno 1986, 126).

And ‘educating the educators’ surely is what White attempts to do, among other things, in exhorting them to assume *full* responsibility for how the ‘past is called up and made present.’ This does not mean forgetting what one learns in the process of becoming educated, but it does imply that one remains aware of the distinction between being professionally skilled as opposed to having privileged access to Truth.

The legacy of Hayden White can best be realized in this respect by locating him in a specific *philosophical* lineage, one arguably also originating with a philosopher punished because like White he was charged with making the weaker argument appear the stronger. That charge too arose at an historical moment where the standards of authority prevalent in a society were being challenged by new philosophies and new technologies. For those charged with ‘educating the educators,’ it means directly acknowledging the closeted theology that too often lurks behind claims to academic authority. To say that right and wrong represents a choice and not a judgment delivered by some higher authority does not position the choice as arbitrary. But it finds no non-human license for ultimately underwriting that choice. Embracing Hayden White’s legacy requires first and foremost acknowledging *why* this aspect of his work came to pose a deep threat to conventional wisdom, and so staying open and alert to that voice.

As those who try to make revolution know full well, fundamental change requires one of the most difficult alterations of all, viz., a change of consciousness. White’s legacy will remain unrealized so long as theory of history remains positioned (as it now typically is in university settings) as ancillary or somehow optional to its practice. ‘We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken’ (Adorno 1986, 129). Conversely, the burden of history will be fully assumed only when those who educate the educators teach their students that, in the end, all that they can do is to speak in their own voice and acknowledge it as their own:



And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crises they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in time-honored disguise. [...] But] he who has assimilated the spirit of the new language can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new. (Marx 1959, 320–321)

### **Xin Chen: The reception of Hayden White in China (1987–2018)**

Hayden White (1928–2018) first came into serious view in China in 1987, when Zhouhan Yang, upon reading White in 1974, was inspired to write an essay entitled ‘Fictionality in Historical Narrative: Different Interpretations’ (Yang 1987).<sup>2</sup> In this article, Yang discussed the thought of Arnold J. Toynbee, R. G. Collingwood and Hayden White before turning to the historical thought of Chinese historical narrators, notably Qian Sima, Chong Wang Xie Liu and Zhiji Liu. Yang’s intent was to underscore the fact that there was a time, before the Yuan Dynasty, when Chinese historiography sought truth and detested fictionality. When Yang wrote that essay in 1987, he had not yet had the chance to read *Metahistory*. Nonetheless, White’s ideas on fictionality in that essay were enough to give Yang a new perspective from which to understand the relations between literature and history in traditional Chinese thought. Yang later expanded his pioneering essay into a longer one entitled ‘Fictionality in Historical Narrative: Historical Narrative as Literature’ (2016).<sup>3</sup> Inspired by White’s work, Yang advocated a rethinking of the boundaries between traditional Chinese history and traditional Chinese literature. At the same time, Yang’s keen interest in new ideas from the West, working in tandem with his ultimate interest, Chinese culture, gave him the idea of comparing Western historical narrative and Chinese historical narrative from a Whitean perspective. The study of comparative literature in China benefited from Yang’s initiative; it became the first academic field in China to develop an understanding of the connection between White and currents in literary criticism.

Even before Yang published the first version of his essay, some attentive Chinese readers would have encountered White’s name when, in 1986, Georg Iggers’ essay ‘European Historiography in Recent Decades’ appeared in Chinese translation (Iggers 1986). This was the first appearance of White’s name in print in Chinese, but Chinese readers would have gleaned little about White’s academic standing and the significance of his work from Iggers’ comments. Subsequently, though, in the wake of Yang’s initial essay, White’s work began to be translated into Chinese; for example, White’s essay ‘New Historicism: A Comment’ (Wang 1991). Jingyuan



Zhang edited *New Historicism and Literary Criticism* (1993), in which she included four translated essays by White: 'New Historicism: A Comment' (1989), 'Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground' (1973), 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact' (1974) and 'Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination' (1975).<sup>4</sup>

Translation of White's works continued apace thereafter. Citation data indicate that the late 1990s and early 2000s were a kind of 'take-off point' for Chinese scholars' interest in White's work. From 1986 to 2018, a total of 3,082 essays referring to White were published in Chinese, by Chinese scholars, in China. There were very few references to White from 1986 to 1996. Then, in 1997, 13 essays referring to White were published, followed by 20 in 1999, 61 in 2003, 102 in 2004, 199 in 2006 and over 200 in every year thereafter.

Thus, for almost two decades, White has been much discussed in China. I will focus in this essay on two main areas of White's influence: literary theory and historical theory, looking at a number of exemplary Chinese publications.

In the field of literary theory, Sheng (1993) discussed White's conception of historical discourse, his views on the interconnections between historical discourse and literary discourse, and his notion that facts are constructed. In the same year, Xu (1993) introduced White's theory of tropes to China. As a scholar oriented toward cultural criticism and literature, Xu was not very familiar with contemporary historical theories. But after that Xu cited three of White's books in his essay: *Metahistory* (1973), *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) and *The Content of the Form* (1987). Xu was the first scholar in China who placed White in the category of a 'theorist of history,' not in the category of a theorist of literature. Xu pointed out that the theory of tropes put forward by White in historical studies had a wide influence in the humanities in the West. Wang (1997) viewed White's theory of history as belonging to speculative philosophy of history. Wang saw in White's works a development of the notion of historical imagination – but as to how the continuity that he assumed in White's analysis of history was achieved, Wang had little to say.

Clearly, until a much wider range of White's works began to be translated into Chinese, Chinese scholars who were either unable to read him in English or were not very interested in doing so were viewing him as if 'through a glass darkly'; accordingly, they had difficulty getting hold of his thinking. It was thus significant when a selection of White's essays was edited, translated and published in Chinese (White 2003b)<sup>5</sup>. In the wake of that publication, interest in White in the field of literary theory increased considerably. In that field we can see three main types of studies. One set of studies applied aspects of White's thought to the analysis and criticism of literary works, and another set discussed some of White's ideas in the context either of 'new

historicism' or of cultural or historical poetics. Third, and quite interestingly, another set of studies consisted of BA theses on White's academic thought in the field of literary studies. These came to be written in increasing numbers.

Many Chinese literary scholars borrowed White's theories to support the cases that they wanted to make, which is one major direction of White's 'influence' within Chinese literary studies. Even though 'new historicism' is not exactly what White was doing, essays evoking his writings often carried such terms in their titles. Students in the field of literary scholarship came to think that White and 'new historicism' were more or less synonymous. Invoking his name, they actively engaged in unearthing the historical connotations and political implications of works of literature, borrowing new historicist cultural criticism as a tool as they pored over and analyzed all kinds of literary works. The number of such studies was so huge that this could almost be called a new historicism reading movement.

White's thought involves various topics, some of which were familiar to Chinese literary theorists, such as 'literariness' and 'fiction,' while some were difficult for them, such as 'historicity,' 'truth' or 'the real.' Initially, most Chinese literary theorists still had a blind faith in realism. Hence, they were rather taken aback when they were first introduced to White's work and were confronted by what could be labelled with such terms as 'postmodernist,' 'anti-realist' or even 'nihilist.'

Since 2007, the volume of studies invoking White has grown significantly in the research field of literature, history and philosophy in China. This shows both that White's influence in Chinese academic circles has risen dramatically, and that some of the topics studied by White, most notably historical poetics, historical narrative and the theory of tropics, have become important concepts in present-day Chinese literary theory. Undeniably, Chinese literary theorists have made a serious attempt to position White within the broad academic context of Western literary humanities. However, their study of White did not put White into his own historical context, nor did it relate his work directly to the practice of historical research and writing. Their primarily *literary* approach to White failed to develop a sufficiently broad understanding of his work, and it did not come close to grasping its underlying motive.

Perhaps most significantly, the deployment of White's thinking in literary theory circles did not directly address White's considerable challenge to the traditional assumptions and practices of academic history. Perhaps if Chinese scholars had approached White's work from the standpoint of intellectual history and the history of ideas, they would have arrived at a more complex, and also a clearer, vision of what White was doing (much of White's earliest work indeed consisted of writings that discussed the history of Western ideas). But a history of ideas perspective, while valuable, is by itself not quite enough to get a good grasp of the character and

significance of White's work – one needs to go further, situating White within the field of the theory and philosophy of history. To be sure, one might ask whether a 'historical theory' perspective on White allows us to understand everything that is important and significant about White's work. I suggest that it does not. Nonetheless, in thinking about White in relation to fundamental, unresolved issues in the practice of historical research and representation – which is what theory of history tries to do – we are taking a step forward.

For the most part, the decade of the 1990s was a rather uninteresting period for Chinese historical theorists. Few Western works in the field of historical theory had been translated, and few scholars specialized in this field. Except for Zhaowu He and Wenjie Zhang, two scholars who committed themselves to the translation of, and research into, Western works on the philosophy of history, scholars in the field of historical theory simply did not know much about Western philosophy. For example, they were mostly unaware of the work that had been carried out in the field of analytic philosophy of history from about 1950 onwards. But the situation in Chinese historical theory circles began to change after 1999. The number of students majoring in theory of history began to surge. From about 2001, the number of translations of relevant Western works and original academic essays by Chinese scholars, as well as the holding of conferences on theory and philosophy of history, increased significantly. Under these circumstances, 'Hayden White' turned into a hotspot in the field of theory of history.

I was part of this movement. In Chen (1999), I raised the question of the degree to which White's aim was to put forward a *general* narrative theory as distinguished from a theory limited to literature. In 2003, I translated White's essay 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', and in the same year I wrote a review of White's work in which I noted that 'poetic perception in White's works is a kind of aesthetic judgement.' I also pointed out that White made it impossible for us to deny the existence of poetic perception and aesthetic judgment in historical representation (Chen 2003). But other scholars were also involved in this turn. For example, Zhou (2004) emphasized the importance of White's account of the way in which historical events are organized into stories through plot arrangements and with the help of various rhetorical devices. Referring also to Paul Ricoeur and Frank Ankersmit, Zhou broadly discussed their accounts of how the concepts of narrative, fiction and meaning relate to historical representation.

It can be said that from 1999 to 2004 scholars in history departments and philosophy departments, working under the headings, respectively, of 'theory of history' and 'philosophy of history,' translated White's works with much greater frequency than before. However, few of them singled out White as the topic for their monographs. In 2004, the Chinese version of

*Metahistory* (White 2004), translated by me, was published; in 2005, the Chinese version of *The Content of the Form* (White 2005a), translated by Lihe Dong, also appeared. Given that in 2003 a number of important essays by White had already appeared in the previously mentioned collection (White 2003b), by 2005 the most important of White's writings up to that time had been published in Chinese. This greatly accelerated the study of White's thought – especially in the field of theory of history, which emerged from its earlier rather slumbering state.

In 2005, I published two essays on White (Chen 2005a, 2005b). Written after I had finished translating *Metahistory*, both essays aimed to introduce White's academic thought to readers. I argued that the most suitable way to test White's theory was to use it to analyze *Metahistory*. If White's own text could stand the test, we then needed to look for a self-consistent theoretical system and the core or cornerstone of his theories. In the second essay, I offered a global sketch of White's thought and analyzed the academic context of White's entry into the field of theory of history and of his criticisms of modern historiography. I pointed out that the basic presupposition of White's philosophy of history is the priority of life, and that his basic claim was that historical discourses that center on metaphor are the most suitable way of representing the complexity and contradictions of life. The fact that the logic of life is complex and the logic of academic knowledge is relatively simple does not necessarily mean that the two are in contradiction with each other. On the contrary, there are ways in which the two can reach a compromise, although they cannot be synthesized into a unified totality. I focused on how various details of White's research served his ethics and his conception of morals in life; I also highlighted his reflections on human nature, on human existence, and on the essence of history. In other words, I did not regard White as a thinker who belongs to a specific discipline. Rather, I treated him as a thinker and critic of an era, an ironic theorist, as well as a secular rationalist who had a positive attitude toward life.

A different take on White's role in Western philosophy of history in the second half of the twentieth century can be found in Gang Peng (2006). Peng argued that White was the representative of the narrative transformation of Western philosophy of history. Peng thinks that, if it is true that the positivist trend undermines the self-discipline of the historical discipline by assimilating history into science, then it is also true that White put the self-discipline of the historical discipline in danger by assimilating history to literature and poetry.

Before 1999, a naive belief in historical objectivity based on realist and empiricist grounds was still dominant in Chinese historiography but, by 2006, 'postmodernist' historical thought was widely known among Chinese historians. More and more essays discussing historical narrative, historical fiction, historical imagination, and related topics were being published in

China. This change was closely related to the fact that White's thought had been introduced to Chinese scholars. In 2004, White gave a lecture at Fudan University and published an essay entitled 'The Metaphysics of Western Historiography' (White 2004b). By that time, White had already gained special notice among Chinese historians; his thought was both a challenge and a stimulus for them. They greeted him and his work with an open mind. Terms that are often associated with White such as 'historical narrative,' 'the literariness of history' and 'the historicity of literature' were comprehensible even to those Chinese historians who knew little about Western theories. Many historians more or less automatically assumed that this narrative tradition had already existed in ancient Chinese historiography. Since White's thought was still comparatively new to them, they did not realize that their discussions on historical narrative since the beginning of twentieth century, and White's work, were based on sharply different academic traditions, and hence carried quite different connotations. Those elder Chinese historians' discussions on historical narrative lacked philosophical reflections on the nature of history, while White paid more attention to this area.

From about 2006 onward, studies of and references to White increased sharply among historians. At about this time, White's influence among Chinese historians began to surpass his influence in Chinese literary theory circles. There White was not considered so significant a figure; he was regarded as just one among the 'new historicist' cultural critics. In the field of literary studies in China, formalism has long been a central topic. As a matter of fact, enthusiastic literary researchers were eager to borrow any topics that might illuminate their speculations about literature and life, and which they believed might be able to enrich research on literary forms and on literary theory, no matter whether the topics in question came from philosophy, sociology, politics, history or anthropology. However, in the field of historical study the situation was quite different. Chinese historians lacked training in theory, and they also followed the principle that historical materials come first and are the basis for all historical conclusions. Consequently, they were basically unwilling to engage with philosophy of history or theories of history. In this way they were very different from literary researchers, who, to be sure, were also inadequately trained in philosophical thought. This is one reason why White's impact appeared in history (and specifically in the theory of history subfield) more than 10 years after it had appeared in Chinese literary theory. In China's theory of history community, the situation was quite different. The presence of several Western historical theorists in the 1990s such as Foucault, White and Ankersmit was enough to reverberate and influence the whole theory of history group in China.

Even though Croce and Collingwood were thinkers who had great impact on modern Chinese historians since 1980, Chinese universities' history departments did not include any training in philosophy as a requirement

for the major or for graduate studies for a long time. Students in history departments usually regarded the writings of such figures as Croce and Collingwood as entirely optional parts of the standard history of historiography course, and hence read them in a superficial manner if at all. As long as they could remember ‘all history is contemporary history’ and ‘all history is the history of thought,’ they could be said to have done enough. Few people dared to study Foucault. Even after Beicheng Liu wrote an intellectual portrait of Foucault as a guide for readers of Foucault, not so many scholars were interested in reading him carefully. Many scholars thought that Foucault belonged to philosophy, sociology or political studies: even if he was categorized as a postmodernist, he was not seen as belonging to ‘post-modern’ historiography. However, White and Ankersmit were seen differently: it was these two thinkers, White especially, who brought disruption to the theory of history as practiced in China.

Since 1949 ‘historical materialism’ in Chinese academic circles has been synonymous with ‘theory of history.’ Pei Yu (2013) argued in his essay that the challenge posed by postmodernist historiography represented by White ‘is a challenge to theories on historical cognition based on historical materialism; since theories on historical cognition are important elements of Marxist historical view, this challenge is therefore also a challenge to Marxist view of history.’ Yu is an authority on historical cognition in Chinese historical circles, and he called on scholars to advance studies on theories of historical cognition so as to meet the challenge from postmodernism.

On 5 March 2018, White left the world forever. To commemorate him I wrote an essay entitled ‘Hayden White: The Pioneer in Postmodern Marxism,’ in which I briefly summarized White’s academic contribution, explained his role as a structuralist, a postmodernist Marxist, and an ironist, and discussed his academic practice in various organizations as well as his social activities, for example, his lawsuit against the police for excessive surveillance over University of California students and professors. But what is most important is this: White was a pioneer in the field of historical and social thought and in cultural criticism. Grasping his work requires close attention to the intimate connections between life and academia, history and reality, existence and being. However, looking back at the research into White’s work that was carried out in China over the past 30 years or so, we find that to a large extent such existential concerns are missing from the Chinese reception of White. This lack represents a deficiency on both the methodological and the epistemological level in the Chinese reception of White, whether that reception occurred in the history of ideas, literary studies, the history of historiography, or philosophy.

After the publication of the Chinese version of Ewa Domańska’s *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Domańska 2008a), her interview with White has been cited by many scholars. The book has

greatly helped Chinese scholars understand White's thought, but it also shows that, besides monographs, there are other rich sources which can help deepen our understanding of White's thinking and of its potential future implications. The data concerning the reception of White's work examined in this essay show a widening knowledge, in Chinese academic circles, of White's contributions to our understanding of literature, and especially of history. In short, considerable progress has been made. But aspects of White's work remain to be 'unpacked' by and for the Chinese audience. I believe that the discussion of White's work that has occurred in China up to now lays a good basis for further understanding his work and thought, opening the way for his having a continuing impact on Chinese academic circles in the future.

### **Verónica Tozzi Thompson: Refiguring Hayden White from South America (or deconstructing folk tales about Hayden)**

Hayden White is considered by many to be the antihero of a discipline's folk narrative, in which he is responsible for equating history to fiction; a dangerous agenda that – for those who believe or uncritically reproduce this folk tale – could easily be detected just by reading a few of his writings (the Preface and Introduction to *Metahistory*, 'The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact,' 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,' 'The Politics of Interpretation, Discipline and De-Sublimation' and 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Interpretation'). Little did the outraged army of those historians who have endorsed this folk tale stop to reflect upon how, in the first pages of his *magnum opus*, he proposed to study the work of four great historians and four great philosophers of history as *forms of realism*. Even more, White tells us that the reason why we understand these works to be classics is due to the inherent contestability of any 'realistic representation of the past.' In other words, what is at stake in our controversies over the representation of reality is the idea of 'the representation of reality' itself.

I would take a risk and suggest, given my 20-year-long intervention in White's scholarship, and my assessment of the student's take on White, that nobody would argue (White included) against the thesis that facts are not independent of theory. This thesis not only is *not* White's invention, but also it is a frequent topic when discussing the scientific status of history. In fact, the real reason that White cannot be forgiven is not that he held that thesis but that he so thoroughly underscored the literary resources historians use in their search for 'realistic representations of the past.' In other words, White's strategy of differentiating alternative historicizations of the past by appealing to figures and tropes has been interpreted as a defense of four theses against historical knowledge: linguistic idealism, linguistic



determinism, anti-referentialism and anti-realism. Personally, I have joined with those readings of White that explore the numerous and diverse sources informing his metahistory and his interest in rhetorics and literary theory. His deep appreciation of sources representative of an *esprit humaniste* (and I dare to say anti-Cartesian) such as Vico, Auerbach, Gombrich, Frye, Collingwood and Croce, reveals a theorist of language interested in its liberating potential instead of its supposed distorting effects.<sup>6</sup> My main contribution in this regard has been directed toward a dialogue between White's work and pragmatist philosophy (also of humanist and anti-Cartesian roots) and the pragmatist version of the linguistic turn, with the goal of dismissing the deterministic, idealistic and skeptical readings of White and the linguistic turn in general (John Dewey, George H. Mead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Bloor and Martin Kusch). As a result, I would like to describe White's work as a *literarily informed* theory of history that equips us with a priceless instrument for assessing disputes over the representation of the past not only in historiography but in every area of our cultural life for which the past is important, including literature, memory spaces, national memories, identities, and so on (Tozzi 2009a, 2012b).

## I

Hayden White came to Argentina for the first time in 2000, when the First International Congress on Philosophy of History was held. It was organized by the Philosophy of History Chair (UBA) led by professor Daniel Brauer, to which Cecilia Macón and I also belonged. Ewa Domańska and Chris Lorenz were also invited. There the Spanish philosopher Manuel Cruz gave me the task of preparing a volume on White for the 'Pensamiento Contemporáneo' collection, edited by Paidós – a selection of articles translated by Nicolás Lavagnino and myself, with a critical introduction that I wrote, was published in the year 2003 as *El texto histórico como artefacto literario* [The Historical Text as Literary Artifact]. In the year 2000 we also formed, with Nicolás Lavagnino, a research group that soon included María Inés La Greca, Moira Pérez, Natalia Taccetta, Gilda Bevilacqua, Omar Murad and many others. We began meeting twice a month and decided to name the group *Metahistorias*.<sup>7</sup>

In 2010 we published another collection of White's articles, *Ficción histórica, historia ficcional y realidad histórica* with Prometeo Press [Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality]. None of the articles – with the exception of 'Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism' – had been published in any other collection of his essays. Today, *Metahistorias* mainly focuses on two lines of work: one strictly theoretical (each member puts White in dialogue with other



philosophical currents) and the other one relating to what White considered to be the 'practical past' (for us, specifically Argentina's 'practical past').

When White returned to Argentina in 2011, he was met with a fully functional *Metahistorias* research program, and from there onwards strong bonds of friendship were formed. As a result of this fruitful relationship, *Hayden White, la escritura del pasado y el futuro de la historiografía* [Hayden White, the Writing of the Past, and the Future of Historiography] was published by EDUNTREF Press (Tozzi and Lavagnino 2012). The volume brings together a series of articles by members of *Metahistorias*<sup>8</sup> and by several important Argentine colleagues from different disciplines and universities, including philosophy of history,<sup>9</sup> philosophy of social sciences,<sup>10</sup> history,<sup>11</sup> and literary and communication theory.<sup>12</sup> One remarkable point about this book is the inclusion of the Spanish version of two articles by White; one of them 'The Practical Past,' which had begun to circulate by that time through the web and formed the core of one of his presentations in Buenos Aires; the other 'Narrative, Description, and Tropology in Proust,' a lesser known but key work in terms of its proposal to reread the tropological cycle in light of Auerbachian figural causality. His visit surpassed academic boundaries and turned into a cultural event. He was interviewed by three of the most important newspapers in the country – Cecilia Macón's interview for *La Nación* was the best of these.<sup>13</sup>

In 2012, on the occasion of the '6º Seminário Brasileiro de História da Historiografia: O Giro lingüístico e historiografia: balanço e perspectivas,'<sup>14</sup> I met professors Julio Bentivoglio (Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo), Valdeci Araujo (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais) and Alexandre Avelar (Universidade Federal de Uberlândia) – all members of the recently created Sociedade Brasileira de Teoria e História da Historiografia.<sup>15</sup> Hans Gumbrecht (a regular visitor to Brazil) was the main speaker, and the panels, symposia and keynotes were an occasion for interesting discussions about new tendencies in the field. There, I noticed a growing interest in Hayden White among the new generation of historians. Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais also has a Postgraduate Program on Theory of History and students were familiar with White and the linguistic turn. All in all, 2012 was the beginning of a growing collaboration between Brazil and Argentina. Two very prestigious journals, *Historia da Historiografia*<sup>16</sup> and *Artcultura*<sup>17</sup>, testify to the importance that theory of history and Hayden White have in Brazil.

The Argentinian-Brazilian dialogue around theory of history and Hayden White moved forward another step in 2013, when Julio Bentivoglio and I co-organized a new visit by White, now to Brazil, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Metahistory*. The conference was held at Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, in the city of Vitória. Hans Kellner gave the opening lecture and Hayden closed with his 'How I did not write

Metahistory.’ The other speakers were Ewa Domańska (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań), Wulf Kansteiner (Aarhus University), Robert Doran (University of Rochester), Kalle Pihlainen (University of Turku), Claudio Fogu (University of California, Santa Barbara), Chris Lorenz (Free University of Amsterdam), Fábio Franzini (Universidade Federal de São Paulo), and the already mentioned Arthur Lima de Avila, Natalia Taccetta, Mariela Solana, Omar Murad, Gilda Bevilacqua, María Inés La Greca, and Nicolás Lavagnino. The community expanded and was now family-like. Margaret Brose White, Ruth Gross Kellner (who also gave a lecture) and Federico Penelas Tozzi joined the celebrations. Out of this, a *Storia della Storiografia* dossier (Fogu and Pihlainen 2014) was published, along with the Spanish (Tozzi and Bentivoglio 2016) and Portuguese (Bentivoglio and Tozzi 2017) versions.<sup>18</sup>

In 2018, Prometeo Press published *El pasado práctico* [The Practical Past], and in 2019 *Los trópicos del discurso* [Tropics of Discourse], this one translated by Eugenia Gay and with two introductions, written by María Inés La Greca and Omar Murad. By the end of this year, the same publishing house is preparing *La Lógica de Hegel como Teoría de la Conciencia Figurativa y otros ensayos sobre Hegel* [Hegel’s Logic as a Theory of Figurative Consciousness, and other essays on Hegel], consisting of three of White’s articles not included among his own collected essays as well as a critical introduction by Martín Sisto.<sup>19</sup>

## II

White’s notion of the ‘modernist event’ as well as his account of the ‘middle voice,’ ‘figural realism in witness literature,’ and so on, have had deep and wide impact in Argentina, Chile and Brazil, given the traumatic consequences that the dictatorial regimes of the 1970s and 1980s and their state terrorism policies had on these societies. To reject the politics of oblivion and denial, we can count on an enormous amount of victim testimonies and diverse artistic and literary expressions. White’s later work provides our community with a theoretical approach that gives critical tools for dealing with these historical events in more productive ways than simple claims of the non-representability of traumatic events or narratives of redemption and closure.<sup>20</sup>

Of all the theoretical concepts that Hayden White has put forward as part of his metahistorical work (‘tropology,’ ‘trope theory,’ ‘narrativization,’ ‘the modernist event,’ ‘middle voice,’ ‘testimonial literature’ and ‘the practical past’), it is the notion of ‘figural realism’ or ‘causal figurality’ (inspired by Auerbach) that I find philosophically most productive. In a certain way, this concept evinces White’s most thorough treatment of the relationship between the historical past and the present. It is an account of historical

interpretation as a non-deterministic, non-teleological articulation between two temporally distant events, or between two alternative or temporally separated interpretations of the past, or between a historian and his time, context or experience. These connections are always made from a retrospective point of view, which takes another time's unfulfilled agenda as its own and opens up important questions about it. Therefore, the figure-fulfillment pair appears as an extremely productive way of apprehending the moral and aesthetic dimensions of interpretation. Our interpretations are nothing but promises of fulfillment of the unfulfilled figures (or problems/questions) left by our ancestors or rivals. We promise a realistic representation of reality while, if lucky, we will also be subjected to future appropriations by those who may take us as the unfulfilled figures for their own representations.

As time went by, I realized that 'figural causation' was not only a relevant research tool, but also something precious for the training of future philosophers of history. When guiding my students in their grueling thesis work, I found myself recommending that they make use of figural causation to find their own ancestors, their own unfulfilled figures. Figural causation has also proved to be an empowering instrument for interventions in public debates, as it enables us to take into account the challenges that subaltern voices pose to disciplinary historiography – again in terms of the figure-fulfillment relationship. In other words, it encourages historians and scholars in general to read alternative voices as figures to fulfill while, at the same time, it affords hope regarding the possibility that readers in the public sphere will view those academic accounts as figures for them to fulfill.<sup>21</sup>

### III

The turn of the century has involved a renewed take on White. Today, secondary literature regarding his work is thorough and careful. Also, studies on the rhetorical sources of realistic figurality are no longer perceived as a threat toward historiography but as a means of empowering the historical work and its cultural-educational role.

White has applied his metahistorical toolkit to a great number of books and authors. To the well-known nineteenth-century European classics, we must add (as evident in *Tropics of Discourse*) his studies on Piaget, Freud, E. P. Thompson, Vico and Foucault, in which White shows – from the analysis of these thinkers' discourse – how each of them has identified the four modes of consciousness (or unconsciousness, as in Chapter VI, 'The Dreamwork,' in *The Interpretation of Dreams*), world-views or ways of historical thinking and made implicit use of the four master tropes. Let us also remember his readings of Jameson, Ricoeur (White 1987) and Koselleck,

for whom White had great appreciation. When reflecting on twentieth-century extreme events through his notions of the ‘modernist event’ and the ‘practical past,’ he also wrote on the works of Primo Levi, Saul Friedlander, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, W. G. Sebald and Philip Roth.<sup>22</sup>

I would claim that nobody today questions the erudition, originality and intellectual bravery of this great philosopher of history. But for colleagues and disciples alike, White’s passing also means losing a great reader: not just because of his notions of tropology, figural realism, narration and the practical past (among many others) that provide us with essential tools when reading history or because his work opens up new perspectives on the classics, but also, and mainly, because White’s take on other authors involved enormous generosity. His tropologizations were not aimed at discrediting those who wrote about the past, but rather at offering insight on the rich, fruitful, untamed and numerous tools that still make writing about a contested past possible.

### **Ewa Domańska: Theory as the practice of freedom: Hayden White in East-Central Europe**

The reception of Hayden White in East-Central Europe, that is, the former socialist republics in the Soviet sphere of influence (the Eastern or Socialist Bloc), is closely connected to the political history of this part of Europe and to the ideological nature of debates over postmodernism. Discussions of White’s ideas began relatively late, with 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall offering a symbolic breakthrough as communism collapsed. It could be argued that White became fashionable just as ‘state-sanctioned Marxism’ became *passé*. In the late eighties and nineties, East-Central European humanities was dominated by a certain fashion for postmodernism, with anything coming from the West usually (and often uncritically) seen in a positive light. Postmodernism proved to be a temporary state for this part of Europe, serving as an element of the political and social transition, which was followed by the crisis of democracy and the ‘conservative revolution’ that undermines and neutralizes the sharp end of critical theory that permeates oppositional humanities, radical history and methodologies focused on the oppressed – precisely the mode of humanities scholarship that White supported and co-created throughout his entire life (Pihlainen 2017). Indeed, Hayden White was the last Marxist, the epigone of the 1968 movement and a defender of the ideals of democracy and the emancipatory humanities that are vanishing before our eyes. Hayden White’s passing symbolically manifests the end of the postcommunist/postmodernist phase of development of historical theory in East-Central Europe.

When examining the reception of White's ideas in East-Central Europe, we should not overlook the fact that under communism (up to 1989), access to foreign-language publications was limited, while only a small number of scholars were able to travel abroad to conferences and on fellowships. Still, despite these difficulties, by the late 1970s, White's name was familiar among scholars in the region. In the 1980s, largely in the form of photocopies, his texts were circulating among interested researchers, in particular in literary studies circles fascinated by deconstruction, neo-psychoanalysis and post-structuralism (so, postmodernism in general). However, the syllabi of courses in the methodology and theory of history, as well as in the history of historiography, preferred the concepts of local scholars who offered a version of the acceptable vision of the theory of historical knowledge, albeit one that also incorporated unorthodox elements, including concepts drawn from US-American and Western European researchers (Topolski 1976). Theorists of history and historians of historiography focused their interest on revising Marxism, a trend that became increasingly prevalent towards the end of the 1970s (Bogusławski, Tuchańska 2017), and on a critique of the Marxist legacy in historical research (Górny 2013; Antohi, Trencsényi, Apor 2007). Scholars from East-Central Europe nevertheless remained interested in applying historical-materialist methods in historical studies, developing this approach in conjunction with local traditions of thought (Topolski 1980; Norkus 2012; Brzechczyn 2014). However, the point was to promote unorthodox versions of Marxism along the lines of a 'Marxism with a human face.'

Because it offered a dynamic and holistic model for framing history while providing methodological guidelines, historical materialism was considered both a theory and a method of history. It also produced a particular vision of the discipline of history as a field interested in the role of laws and generalizations in historical explanation, while also examining the model-based method of historical research. That is why White's theoretical axis was considered as speculative and not scientific (or scientistic) enough and why, as such, it failed to uphold methodological rigor by ascribing too much significance to narrative and the linguistic dimension of historical writing.

Yet White's ideas and his presence had a transformative and liberalizing impact on academic thinking and academic life in East-Central Europe. White legitimized the changes that occurred after 1989 and opened up young researchers in particular to the tendencies that were the subject of intense discussions in Western Europe and the United States, such as theories of the subject, power/knowledge relations, the end of history, the critique of metanarratives, relations between history and literature, methodological eclecticism, inter-textuality and irony as explored within the

framework of French theory, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, post-structuralism, constructivism, deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis. White's support for a plurality of interpretations and truths, alongside his constructivist approach to the creation of knowledge about the past, proved especially important and liberalizing in the wake of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004–2005) since they resounded with the democratic changes taking place in the country (Sklokin 2009).

## II

Debates were not limited to criticism of White's controversial ideas, such as his argument that history is a form of writing and thus more of a literary than scientific discourse, meaning that it can be investigated using the tools of literary theory. It was not even a matter of offering a critique of objectivity and truth. Rather, the key issue was something that was intuitively felt rather than explicitly verbalized, namely that with his ideas, his position as an engaged intellectual and his teaching style White came to manifest a certain idea of freedom, a way of empowering the subject and provoking rebellion or at least disobedience that forced subjects into making decisions and thus into self-definitions. I have lost count of the number of times I heard White pose questions that caused his interlocutors and/or participants in his lectures or seminars immense difficulties: 'what is the meaning of life?', 'what do you want from life?', 'what are your desires?', 'are you religious?', 'how do you know that you are heterosexual?'

I agree with Paweł Wolski, who commented on White's seminars in Poland that they were 'seminars without borders' where what White called 'anarchy' was practiced, thus contrasting with the usual disciplined arbitrariness of academia. Typical to White's approach to leading seminars and giving lectures is his statement, cited by Wolski, that he 'deconstructs the principles of the Academy' (Wolski 2010, 15–16). White also deconstructed the legitimacy of history's existence as a discipline, believing that it fails to offer practical knowledge, insofar as reading history books does not necessarily make anyone a better person (Harrison and White 2019). The most important lesson that White, a committed existentialist, had for young scholars was the message of Albert Camus' *The Rebel*: to be free means being able to say 'no.' Indeed, White founded a school grounded in rebellion (and self-discovery). His popularity is hardly surprising in light of the fact that he brought fresh, avant-garde elements into debates in the humanities while adopting a rebellious stance toward the system, inspired by the spirit of existentialism that actively sought to 'indoctrinate' young people.

Hayden White has played a significant role in bringing researchers from many countries and cultures together. Those attending the wonderful International Network for Theory of History (INTH) conferences have

witnessed shifts in the origins of the participants, as scholars from Argentina and Brazil, for example, as well as those from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, not to mention China, have become more visible. Indeed, Hayden White connected scholars.

### III

Hayden White visited East-Central Europe for the first time in October 1996 when, as a young assistant professor, I invited him to Poznań for a series of three guest lectures. The first lecture that he gave in this part of the world was presented at the Department of History at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (AMU) on October 14th. It was titled ‘The Textualization of Historical Discourse.’ White also visited Hungary several times (1999, 2001, 2004, 2005; because of his close relations with the Central European University and friendship with Sorin Antohi), Bulgaria (2011) and Romania (2010). White never traveled to Belarus, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania or Ukraine, but he was invited to all these places. In East-Central Europe there is a significant group of theorists of history and historians of historiography. Those who have promoted White’s theories, and narrativism more broadly, translated his works or offered analyses and interpretations include Juraj Šuch and Eugen Zelenák (Slovakia), Petr Čornej (Czech Republic), Róbert Braun, Gábor Gyáni and Tamás Kisantal (Hungary), Sorin Antohi, Lucian Popescu and Bogdan Ștefănescu (Romania), Antonia Koleva and Diana Mishkova (Bulgaria), Volodymyr Sklokin (Ukraine), Zenonas Norkus, Aurimas Švedas and Vytautas Žemgulis (Lithuania), Ewa Domańska, Jakub Muchowski, Jan Pomorski and Jerzy Topolski (Poland).

In this part of Europe, there are certain particularities about the reception of White, which went through a series of phases. The first phase, from 1987 to 1996 (from the first translation, reviews and critical discussions of White’s works to his first visit to the region), could be described as the period of familiarization with White’s theories and their reception. This stage was focused primarily on Poland and Hungary, with studies by Jan Pomorski (1986, 1990) and myself (Domańska 1992; see also Walas 1993) playing a significant role in the former country and those of Róbert Braun (Braun 1995; see also Szegedy-Maszák 1989) in the latter. Juraj Šuch was important in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Šuch 1996) and Zenonas Norkus in Lithuania (Norkus 1996).

The second phase (1996–2005) began with White’s first visit to East-Central Europe and concluded with the Central European University in Budapest awarding him an honorary doctorate in 2005. During his visits to Poland and Hungary, where White not only attended lectures but also gave regular seminars (from 1 October to 30 November, 1997 he was employed as a full-time visiting professor at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań) and



participated in Summer Schools organized by the Central European University in Budapest in 1999 and 2001. Such activities meant that young scholars had a chance to meet White in person and experience his openness, generosity and interest in them (a model of an academic that differed greatly from what they were used to). This encouraged them to familiarize themselves with White's theories and promote them more widely. Another reason for the growth of White's popularity during this period was the impact of the publication of the first collection of his essays in Hungarian (White 1997) and then in Polish (White 2000a), as well as the translation of *Metahistory* into Russian in 2002 (White 2002), followed by Lithuanian in 2003 (White 2003b). It is worth remembering that, beyond English, the Polish and Russian translations made White's work accessible to scholars throughout the region. During this period, myself in Poland, Juraj Šuch in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Šuch 2000), Vytautas Žemgulis in Lithuania (Žemgulis 2004), Antonina Koleva in Bulgaria (Koleva 2005), and Sorin Antohi (Antohi 2002), Gábor Gyáni (Gyáni 2000, 2003), Tamás Kisantal (Kisantal, Szeberényi 2001; Kisantal 2003) and Gábor Klaniczay in Hungary, continued to play an important role in increasing the popularity of White's ideas.

The third phase covers the years from 2005 to 2014, so up to and including White's last visit to the region in 2013 and the publication of a third anthology of texts in Polish in 2014. It was during this period that the reception of White's work reached its zenith, with White becoming 'conventionalized' by around 2010 as his theories were integrated into knowledge on contemporary theory and the history of historiography. During this period, the young generation of humanities scholars started to sense the limitations of narrativism, with its fixation on narrative, text and discourse. White nevertheless remains extremely popular thanks to further visits to Poland, as well to Bulgaria and Romania (Antohi 2008), with the University of Bucharest (2010) and the University of Gdańsk (2011) awarding him honorary doctorates. Primarily, though, the interest in his works has continued thanks to translations, including two anthologies of Polish versions of his texts (White 2009a, 2014b), translations of *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse* into Czech (White 2010b; White 2011; Zeleňák 2012) and critical discussions of his theories (Domańska 2012; Domańska, Skibiński and Stróżyk 2019; Geiko, Kudín 2016; Hudymač 2006; Horský and Šuch 2012; Kultenko, Kudín 2015; Markiewicz 2006; Rosner 2009; Šuch 2010, 2019; Vašš 2015; Zeleňák 2013).

What was particularly important during this period was the publication of texts and articles that expanded the traditional focus of the reception of White's works, namely tropology, historical representation and the relations between history and literature, all explored within the framework of the theory of history and literary theory. Instead, there was a shift toward a comparative reading of his theories in relation to the work of Paul



Ricoeur (Bugajewski 2009; Wilczyński 2003; Žemgulis 2012; Chavdar 2018), with greater emphasis on his significance for analyses of Holocaust testimonies (Krupa 2013) and on exploration of the social significance of history, as was evident in the concept of ‘the practical past.’ White’s works became established elements of course syllabi and in bibliographies of scholarly publications not only in the theory of history, literary studies and philosophy, but also in archaeology, anthropology, the history of art, cultural studies, media studies and performance studies. A new generation of theorists of history has emerged over the past decade who has introduced new elements into the interpretation of White’s ideas. This group of scholars includes Jakub Muchowski, the author of a monograph on White’s theories (Muchowski 2015), and Tomasz Wiśniewski, who has applied a postsecular perspective to an analysis of White’s conception of the figure and historical consciousness (Wiśniewski 2017).

#### IV

Hayden White’s final visit to East-Central Europe took place in March 2013. He gave a masterclass on 7 March at the Department of History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, on ‘Sincerity, Authenticity, and Truth in Witness Discourse.’ Focusing on the question of testimony, he based the discussion on texts by the survivors Primo Levi and Saul Friedlander. White also visited Berlin in 2015, where he was awarded an honorary doctorate on 9 June by the Freie Universität in recognition of ‘his contributions to the analysis of the rhetorical and narrative structures of (German) historical writing of the 19th century.’

In May 2019, the Rector of AMU – Professor Andrzej Lesicki, approved the foundation of the Hayden White Research Center for Narrative Modes at the university. The origins of the center go back to 2014, when White became involved in the European Research Council project ‘Narrative Modes of Historical Discourse in Asia’ (NAMO), led by the Danish scholar Ulrich Timme Kragh. Inspired by White’s approach to analyzing historical writing as outlined in *Metahistory*, the project seeks to examine the narrative structures evident in the ancient, medieval and modern historiography of India, China and Tibet. The project transferred to Poznań in 2016. NAMO has organized numerous lectures and seminars on the theory of history. In 2019, María Inés La Greca led a series of excellent seminars on White’s ideas, while François Hartog, Kalle Pihlainen and Jörn Rüsen have all held guest lectures and seminars within the framework of this ERC project.

Hayden White had a significant impact not only on developments in East-Central European humanities after 1989 but also on the researchers themselves. In this region, White is generally considered a ‘troublemaker’ (Ștefănescu 2010). His ideas were (and remain) particularly significant

because they underscore the agency of the subject, the ability to create the past (and the diversity of narratives about the past), and the democratic idea of pluralism. Hayden White thus became a symbol of freedom of thought and of a democratic academia. As such, he played the important role of an ‘external shifter’ in the difficult transition from totalitarianism to democracy. He is remembered as a rebel who encouraged us to free ourselves from the burden of history and more. It is also symptomatic that the afterword to the Czech edition of *Metahistory*, written by the Czech medievalist Petr Čornej has the telling title ‘White *niezměnil dějiny, ale pohled na ně* [White did not change history, but the way we look at it] (Čornej 2011).

Translated by Paul Vickers

### **Kalle Pihlainen: Why call it constructivism if all it does is question?**

The principal aim of my intervention is to highlight the constructive side of the narrative constructivism of Hayden White. To that end, I revisit a number of core debates impacting on the reception of White’s work, primarily in Europe. The main objective of this very brief overview is to identify core points of resistance as well as several misunderstandings that have led to White being read as a representative of a ‘relativist’ and ‘narrativist’ position in a severely limited sense. Having indicated some of the more influential debates as well as, with luck, some of the impetus for this particular reception, I go on to defend a broader, more nuanced reading of White’s ‘constructivism’ and (even) ‘antifoundationalism,’ with the aim of affirming the continued potential of his thought for ‘reforming’ history.

This inevitably impressionistic account will hopefully support the main argument that I make in the second part. Namely, that White’s position has been domesticated by critics and, through that domestication, his potentially radical views concerning the future of history have (so far) been successfully marginalized. Whether or not they still have a chance of escaping this marginalization is something that remains to be seen. My opinion, unsurprisingly, is that White’s work deserves a second chance despite what currently feels like an overwhelmingly post-linguistic-turn atmosphere – if not indeed, more brutally, a generally anti-theory one. To improve that chance, the domestication strategies in play need to be seen for what they are: to focus on *Metahistory* and White’s tropology, for example, as a *method* to be applied, to refer to White as a ‘narrativist’ while operating with a narrow, Aristotelian conception of narrative, or to say his arguments are only about superfluous literary issues is to bring this thinking comfortably inside the disciplinary house. Similarly, to say that White’s critique of factuality centers on reality or even on historical research instead of on history *writing* and representation is to pull its teeth by making it appear absurd. Whether the aim is to present his thinking as inconsequential or laughable, such

attempts can only be countered by serious reading. In line with this, and despite all such efforts, there is some anecdotal hope: judging by several manuscripts I have had the pleasure of reading recently, White's work continues to be insightfully and supportively discovered by individual historians too.

## I

My original remit was to address the reception of White 'in Western and Northern Europe,' but doing so anything but impressionistically here proved to be too great a challenge. This is in part because academic discourse inevitably transcends national, and continental, boundaries – particularly on a theme such as the broad reformulation of history's representational practices, which obviously concerns historians everywhere (and which I take to be at the heart of White's challenge). Thus, concentrating only on 'Western' or 'Northern' European discussions, for instance, would defeat the purpose of triangulating which views have had an impact. Likewise, trying to cover every 'European' debate would leave little room to say much at all about *what* that impact has been. Hence I will attempt this only from my own situation, straddling between various countries to be sure, but best aware of which debates have most resonated in Finland and the UK. Hopefully my account will at least be symptomatic if not completely representative.

With that caveat, let me begin with what was by no means solely or even primarily a 'European' moment, yet one that historians everywhere seem eager to rehearse: this was White's 1990 California encounter with Carlo Ginzburg (see Ginzburg 1991). The upshot of that debate appears to have been to establish White among historians as a dangerous moral relativist. Since, apparently, he suggested that facts and reality do not constrain interpretations, the only conclusion to be drawn was that anything, indeed *everything*, was for him equally acceptable as and by history. A parallel, often cited and equally formative interpretation of White's extreme relativism particularly for UK audiences was offered in an attack launched against White by Arthur Marwick, for whom it represented a threat to history's role in maintaining the social fabric. (For more on these debates, see the excellent account by Wulf Kansteiner 1993 and White's response to Marwick, in which he carefully dissects many of the absurd claims made by Marwick [White 1995]. Similar views of White have been variously promoted by, for example, Arnaldo Momigliano and Gertrude Himmelfarb.)

A third high-point in this bare-bones reception sketch involves David Carr's (1986) essay 'Narrative and the Real World.' Again, this is not a critique presented in Europe, but one that seems to have been crucially influential for later readings of White here also. The essay has the added

benefit that it allows me to gloss over the White–Ricoeur debate, since White’s exchange with Paul Ricoeur appears not to have had the same kind of broader (extreme-)opinion-forming impact.<sup>23</sup> Carr’s essay seems the more prominent in this respect, and the far less conspicuous disagreements between White and Ricoeur have mostly been obscured by their often sharing the label of ‘narrativism’ (a typical shorthand term in use now for Carr’s ‘discontinuity view’ theorists) as well as their lumping together in connection with the idea that ‘narrative’ largely refers to a simple Aristotelian form. (That argument is made by Carr in this essay, and it persists in his later work [for example, Carr 2014] and in other current debates [for example; Kuukkanen 2015]; more nuanced views have naturally also been available early on [for example, Rigney 1991].) From my particular perspective, the view explicated by Carr has been adopted by a large number of history professors, and thus has likely already influenced their opinion of White’s work as they encountered it in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The other key influencers of interpretations of White have, in my reading, been more accepting and supportive, but some of these have at times also simplified his sophisticated position. Obviously, the most central impact in ‘Northern Europe’ has come from the work of Frank Ankersmit, which White is still so often read alongside and interpreted through.<sup>24</sup> Ankersmit’s views seem, however, to have at times relied on ‘narrative’ in a fairly straightforward Aristotelian sense too, and his own elaborations on fairly structuralist narratological tools – as opposed to the complex processes of literary meaning-making and semiotic and discursive coding and diverse processes of closure that White mostly urged we focus on. In addition, Ankersmit has promoted White as a ‘postmodernist’ in a way that lent itself well to the usual charges of uncaring relativism with which White’s work has so readily been received.<sup>25</sup>

Needless to say, a spirited and relatively visible defense of Whitean views was also undertaken throughout the 1990s and 2000s by Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow, who both engaged in numerous debates with historians in the UK and beyond (see, for Jenkins 1991, 1995; Munslow 1997; Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow 2007; to be additionally mentioned in connection with this effort is the work of Beverley Southgate; for example, Southgate 2003). Because their readings have been exceedingly positive regarding ‘postmodernism,’ as well as intentionally provocative in style, they have inspired a counter-reaction that may have contributed to further marginalization of ‘White and his acolytes’ (which is how Marwick, for example, continued to disparagingly frame them even in 2006). Their willingness to pursue things ‘to the end of the line,’ as White puts it in his foreword to Jenkins’ *At the Limits of History* (White 2009, 1) – much like White’s own early exaggerated statements – has offered further ammunition to many historians, and perhaps some other ‘Whiteans’ within theory of history too, for ignoring the nuanced and far-reaching ideas actually at stake. Having said that, their work also obviously served to

popularize White among more receptive readers – not least through creating and firmly profiling this journal.

## II

For this second part, I will rely primarily on White himself for two reasons: firstly, this is intended as an *homage*, so it seems appropriate to let his work speak directly; secondly, since the key difficulty in assessing what narrative theory of history *could* mean for history practices is that too much of the discussion relies on misperceptions and rumors, it may be better to offer some excerpts selected specifically to counter these. For detailed accounts of White's career and thought as well as the broader reception, there are some key readings and important critical work available (and my recommendation would be to begin with some of the ones already mentioned, especially Kansteiner 1993; also Domańska 2008b; Ankersmit, Domańska, and Kellner 2009; Paul 2011; Doran 2013). Hence my intention here is different: my aim in this very brief declaration is to identify the crucial points of resistance as well as perhaps to dispel several misunderstandings that have led to White being read as a representative of some 'relativist' and 'narrativist' position in a regrettably naive fashion. Let me indicate the main difficulties that I have with these two labelings.

Much of the debate regarding White's challenge to history continues to center on the issue of the epistemological. And, in that already rudimentary context, it tends to focus on the rather tired fact–fiction controversy: Is history fact or fiction? On this question, the simplistic (and completely mistaken) interpretation presented is that, since White likens history to fiction, history is 'untrue' and 'anything goes.' (See, for instance, the exchange between Georg Iggers 2000 and White (2000b), in which White entitles this 'an old question.')

In part, this may result from a broader misunderstanding of the linguistic turn and poststructuralism (and 'post-modernism?') as similarly anti-realist and free-floating, but that still fails to explain how White's basic, historical commitments have been so thoroughly ignored.<sup>26</sup> Even beyond this most extreme reading, his views may (understandably) appear irrelevant to many practicing historians when characterized as 'narrativist' in the exceedingly narrow sense of a fixation on beginnings, middles and ends, or on resolutions and closures, or in the (to many) unfamiliar language of rhetorics and tropology, for instance.

Now, having gestured to some of the impetus behind a limited and domesticating reception, it is time to defend a broader perspective on White's thinking in different terms: those of 'constructivism' and 'antifoundationalism' (as opposed to its narrow formulation as some demonized, nihilist 'relativism' or 'narrativism'). With this, and centering on his own statements, my aim is to indicate some of the neglected potential his thought

may have for reforming history. This also brings things to the point of my title: is there something constructive to constructivism, or is it indeed simply a destructive critique or a place of constant questioning as so many critics claim? Is there something in constructivism that we can sensibly build on as history professionals? Assuming, that is, that we are open to the idea of doing so.

For me, the answer is a definite ‘yes.’ But this requires understanding that, if used positively, ‘relativism’ by no means signifies an ‘anything goes’ position but, far more simply, a decoupling of reality and meaning. It merely refuses foundations for how we should act. And it is only by facing this lack of foundations for meanings and decisions that we become (ethically) equipped to do so. (This ties in with White’s existentialism; see, for example, Paul 2011; Doran 2013.) As White says specifically about the consequences of relativism: ‘I conceive relativism to be the basis of social tolerance, not a license to “do as you please.”’ For him, ‘the socially responsible interpreter can do two things: (1) expose the fictitious nature of any political program based on an appeal to what “history” supposedly teaches and (2) remain adamantly “utopian” in any criticism of political “realism.”’ (White 1987, 227)

Obviously, espousing a ‘realism’ of this kind – or indeed being naively ‘historical’ in thinking that we can derive meaning from history – serves to affirm the status quo. In this same spirit of social responsibility, White even goes so far as to suggest that history, as professionally disciplined and conducted, may be nothing more than a historical accident:

historians of this generation must be prepared to face the possibility that the prestige which their profession enjoyed among nineteenth-century intellectuals was a consequence of determinable cultural forces. They must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline. (White 1978b, 29)

While this by definition constitutes the greatest challenge conceivable for a discipline and its practitioners, noting the historical nature of historical studies is not a nihilist position beyond that limited existential threat. That is to say: it is only a threat for those who are overly invested in the discipline as we currently practice it. Instead, considered positively, and without succumbing to the hysterical fears raised by the specter of a lack of foundations, this ‘historical’ view could also give historians hope of being able to rethink their – our – practices *in alignment with present-day social needs*.

Again, this recognition marks a liberation from ‘realism’ as an oppressive ideology and invites historians to explore alternatives:

The fact is that fields which comprise the humanities never fell from heaven whole and sound and fixed forever in their contents and their methods. [...] no one person or institution can claim supreme authority over how they ought to develop, what topics they should or should not treat and what kinds of recommendations they should make for future development. [...] How a community thinks about its past, the value it attaches to it and the uses it wishes to make of it are all up for grabs for every generation. And this is why we need critics and criticism in these fields. (White 2017, xi)

Here, once again, the ethical and constructive drive of White's critique of history is irrefutable. Beliefs about the purpose of history and its legitimate subject matter need to be continually negotiated: hence we cannot hide behind a disciplined, epistemic search whereby meanings are somehow discovered intact and pure *or* sidestep accountability by appealing to an imaginary 'anything goes' relativism. Instead, as historians, we are called to assume responsibility for the consequences of history presentations and to practice history with care.

Despite the radical implications of this message for history producers – ostensibly in large part freeing and even obliging them to construct stories as they see best – there is a commonsense tempering of their 'literary' freedom contained within White's challenge too, and the fact that our cultural situatedness and professional as well as societal commitments must also be considered should not go unheeded. As he emphatically reminds:

The historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another. (White 1978b, 86)

Whether our present-day negotiations will proceed through some of the means suggested in recent theorizing is an open question. Through, that is, the development of alternative and contemporary forms (as opposed to history imitating 'bad science' or 'bad art,' in White's now-classic formulation), through improved modes of investigation and communication regarding meanings of the past, or through a complete abandonment of authorized past-talk, for example (on all these, see, for example, Norton and Donnelly 2019). Whatever the route, there *are* constraints and guides for the conversations we can have.

## Notes

1. I would add to Tozzi's narration the work in Chile by Luis Gueneau de Mussy (Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez) and Miguel Valderrama (Universidad de Chile); see especially de Mussy and Valderrama (2010), which includes a Spanish



- translation of White's 'Manifesto Time,' along with texts by Frank Ankersmit, Walter Mignolo and the Subaltern Studies Group.
2. Readers in China did not have the opportunity to read Yang (1987, English version) until Yang (1989, Chinese version).
  3. Yang (2016) is the full version and was finished before Yang died in 1989. It has been first published in Yang's collections.
  4. This book includes articles from Veese's *The New Historicism* and White's *Tropics of Discourse*. One result was that many Chinese readers initially saw White as a participant in the Western literary-critical movement known as 'new historicism,' although this was simply not the case. Greenblatt's main concern was with showing how literary works are permeated by traces of the historical time and place in which they were written; this was only marginally, if at all, White's concern.
  5. This collection includes eight articles from *The Tropics of Discourse* and five others from White's *Metahistory* (the Introduction), *The Content of the Form* and *Figural Realism*.
  6. Already in Kellner (1989) was the first to appreciate Hayden White's contributions in terms of a reevaluation of rhetoric.
  7. See <http://metahistorias.com.ar/>. Lavagnino's, La Greca's and Murad's PhD dissertations focused on Hayden White's philosophy of history. See Lavagnino (2018, 2014, 2013, 2011); Lavagnino and Tozzi (2014); La Greca (2016, 2014, 2013, 2010); Murad (2014); Tozzi (2009b, 2017, 2018).
  8. María Inés La Greca, Nicolás Lavagnino, Cecilia Macón, Omar Murad, Moira Pérez, Natalia Taccetta, Mariela Solana, Santiago Silverio, Verónica Tozzi and Mariela Zeitler from the University of Buenos Aires.
  9. Mariana Castillo Merlo and María Inés Mudrovic from the National University of Comahue and Esteban Lythgoe and Francisco Naishtat from the University of Buenos Aires.
  10. Cecilia Hidalgo, María Martini from the University of Buenos Aires.
  11. Gustavo Castagnola and Jaime Peire from the National University of Tres de Febrero and Marcelo Levinas from the University of Buenos Aires.
  12. Leonor Arfurch, Valeria Castelló Joubert, Ariel Idez and Alejandro Kaufman from the University of Buenos Aires.
  13. See <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/1363767-la-nueva-imaginacion-historica>.
  14. Mariana, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.
  15. <http://www.sbthh.org.br/pb/>.
  16. <http://www.historiadahistoriografia.com.br/revista>.
  17. <http://www.seer.ufu.br/index.php/artcultura>.
  18. The Portuguese version also includes articles by Marcelo Durão Rodrigues da Cunha (Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo), Leonardo Grão Velloso Damato Oliveira (Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, Stanford University), Clóvis Gruner (Universidade Federal do Paraná) and Fábio Franzini, who wrote specifically about the Brazilian reception of Hayden White: 'Mr. White chega aos trópicos: Notas sobre *Metahistória* e a recepção de Hayden White no Brasil' [Mr. White arrives at the tropics: Notes on *Metahistory* and the reception of Hayden White in Brazil]. It is also important to mention here the important work of Jurandir Malerba (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul), who has long studied Hayden White's theory of history.
  19. These three articles are 'Hegel: Historicism as Tragic Realism' (*Colloquium* 1966), White's review of *Idealism, Politics and History: Sources of Hegelian*



- Thought* by George A. Kelly (*History and Theory* 1970) and a work in progress entitled ‘Hegel’s Logic as a Theory of Figurative Consciousness’ (dated 1970).
20. Historian Miguel Valderrama (University of Chile) has paid special attention to White’s work by establishing a dialogue with his own critical left and postmodern perspective. See Valderrama 2019.
  21. Most of *Metahistorias*’ researchers and students have paid attention to the consequences that White’s notion of figural causality has for cultural analysis in our contemporary situation. See Martini 2013; Taccetta 2013; Tozzi 2008, 2012a.
  22. The distinction drawn in his last work (White 2018) between the ‘historical past’ (the past with which disciplinary history is concerned) and the ‘practical past’ (of interest to anyone in everyday life, politics and literature) could have been considered as an attempt at conciliation and recovery of the difference between scientific history and uses of the past. However, disciplinary historians soon reacted by claiming the crucial relevance of historiographic research for the practical past.
  23. For an intriguing exposition of White’s reception in France, see Carrard 2018; for a brief, originally 1993 outline of the missed connections there, see Chartier 1997.
  24. In great part, responsibility for articulating this parallel can be attributed to Chris Lorenz (most obviously, Lorenz 1998) but he is not alone in drawing it. See also, for example, Kuukkanen 2015 and Peter Icke (2012, 1), who presents Ankersmit as ‘the European Hayden White.’
  25. This is not to say that White was not a postmodernist in some sense at least, but only that his idea of ‘postmodernism’ contained so much more than the idea of complete linguistic opacity quite visibly defended by Ankersmit early on (see Ankersmit 1989; cf. Kansteiner 1993 critique of Ankersmit’s extreme rendition of postmodernism). Disagreement abounds about White as a postmodernist among ‘Whiteans,’ however (and indeed Ankersmit 1998 also denies White’s postmodernism when addressing Marwick’s critique, instead here claiming White to be a structuralist). Further – and substantially ‘European’ – perspectives on White can be found in, for example, the special issue of *Storia della Storiografia* entitled ‘Hayden White’s *Metahistory* twenty years after’ (see especially the essay by Jonathan Gorman 1993) as well as in Korhonen 2006.
  26. In contrast with this unfounded belief, White has been eminently clear about his position: ‘The reality of the past is a given, it is an enabling presupposition of historical enquiry’ (White 2005b, 148).

## Acknowledgments

Ewa Domańska and Maria Ines La Greca are thankful to the organizers of the third INTH conference, especially to Berber Bevernage and Hans Ruin, for accepting their proposal and allowing the panel to be included, given the significance of White’s passing in March last year, after the conference program was already organized. They also want to thank all the contributors for their wonderful work and commitment with the panel and this publication. They especially thank Kalle Pihlainen for his help in preparing this section. Ewa Domańska expresses her gratitude to Veronika Čapská, Tamás Kisantal, Diana Mishkova, Iryna Odrekhivska, Lucian Popescu, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, Volodymyr Sklokin, Bogdan Ștefănescu, Aurimas Švedas, Juraj Šuch, Rafał Stobiecki and Eugen Zelenák for their comments and help in collecting the references presented in this contribution. The translation of her contribution was enabled by financial

support from the Division of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Kalle Pihlainen, in turn, wants to thank the editors of this conversation as well as Keith Jenkins for their suggestions toward improving his contribution.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Ewa Domańska* is professor of human sciences in the Department of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Her research interests include the methodology of history, contemporary theory and history of historiography, and comparative theory of the humanities and social sciences.

*María Inés La Greca* holds a PhD in philosophy from University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she teaches philosophy of history at the Philosophy Department. She is an associate professor of gender epistemology in Tres de Febrero National University, where she is also the director of the Gender Studies Interdisciplinary Network (CIEA-UNTREF). She is an assistant researcher at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET).

*Paul A. Roth* is distinguished professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has published extensively on topics in epistemology, philosophy of history, philosophy of social science, and the history of analytic philosophy. His book, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press (January 2020).

*Xin Chen* is professor of theory of history in the History Department, Zhejiang University. He is Chinese translator of Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973) and co-translator of Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1993). Chen studies Western history of historiography and theory of history. His works include *Western Historical Narratology* (2005) and *Historical Knowing: From Modern to Postmodern* (2010). His is also a co-editor of the *Series of Ideas of History* (Peking University Press, 2006–present), which has translated and published over 20 volumes on philosophy of history and theory of history.

*Veronica Tozzi Thompson* is professor of philosophy of history at the University of Buenos Aires and of epistemology of social sciences in Tres de Febrero National University. She is principal researcher at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). Her main issues of interest are philosophy of history and social sciences, epistemology of testimony, and politics of memory in the Argentine recent past.

*Kalle Pihlainen* is currently a senior research fellow in Cultural Theory at the School of Humanities at Tallinn University, funded by the Estonian Research Council (PUT1150). His recent publications in theory and philosophy of history include *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past* (Routledge, 2017).

## ORCID

Ewa Domańska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0875-976X>

Xin Chen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7313-7989>

Kalle Pihlainen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3361-5840>

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