HIC Conversation with Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Chiel van den Akker, and Moira Pérez, edited and introduced by João Ohara

Pasts and Futures for the Theory and Philosophy of History

Abstract: In this conversation, we explore some of the current questions approached in the theory and philosophy of history. Three participants in the field reflect on their professional trajectories, the intellectual traditions from which these stem, and the theoretical questions surrounding historical knowledge and our historical condition.

Keywords: philosophy of history, theory of history, historicity, historical knowledge

It is often said that historians are "theory-averse," whatever meaning we attribute to the term "theory." There is some truth to this claim: at least some historians have had a complicated relationship with the (social and cultural) theory they need to borrow from sociologists and anthropologists. Some were even more reticent regarding literary theory, and perhaps most historians either ignored or bemoaned what little philosophers had to say about the epistemology of historiography. Nevertheless, at least in some countries, such as Brazil or the Netherlands, history departments have for quite some time now had in-house specialists in the "theory of history," and journals and events dedicated to this specialty have been organized with plenty of submissions.[1] So, it is perhaps safe to say that just as *some* historians are averse to talking about theory, *others* have shown a great deal of interest in the theoretical aspects of their discipline (again, whatever meaning they attribute to the term "theory").

We could tell many different stories about such a specialty. For some, it is the story that goes from the "speculative philosophy of history" through the "analytical philosophy of history" to "narrativism." Others prefer to frame it in the spirit of the German genre of *Historik* and its developments. Others still start from neo-Kantianism and go all the way to "French theory," "postmodernism," and the

1 For instance, the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) has organized conferences in Belgium, Brazil, and, most recently, Mexico. Meanwhile, journals such as *History and Theory* (USA), *Rethinking History* (UK), *Historein* (Greece), *Historia y Grafía* (Mexico), or *História da Historiografia* (Brazil) have been published for many years, sometimes decades, without interruptions.

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like. Sometimes, these strands even intertwine, even though the labels used only rarely assume the same meanings across different traditions.[2]

All these different genealogies have an impact on our present practices. Some have made a distinction between the philosophy of historiography, in which philosophers address more traditional philosophical questions, and the theory of history or historical theory, where historians deal with an eclectic mix of problems in an equally eclectic multitude of ways. Others see no such distinction, looking upon "philosophy of history" and "theory of history" as interchangeable terms. For some, the legitimate questions of the field are somewhat related to the questions addressed in the philosophy of science regarding the sciences. Others see no reason to privilege one specific flavor of the philosophy of science (the analytic one) over the others. Furthermore, there are those who see no reason to privilege philosophy at all, thus also bringing to bear insights and questions from social theory or the history and sociology of knowledge.

We can readily see how quickly we get to a kaleidoscope of sorts. We also face the task of either figuring out what these historians and philosophers do or proposing ways forward. In this conversation, I have asked three practitioners about their own trajectories and perceptions regarding the field. The resulting discussion gives us some intricate details on three different backgrounds and intellectual contexts that, in the end, are part of the diverse set of questions and approaches that make up what we could refer to as "the theory and philosophy of history."

1) Our professional labels

"Theory of history," "historical theory," or "philosophy of history" are some of the labels we often use to classify our work. However, it is not always clear whether we understand each of these labels as having the same meaning or if there are meaningful differences between them. In fact, the works we classify using each of these labels are so diverse that finding a common denominator has proven difficult. Nevertheless, we still use these terms, and we use them in ways suggesting that we at

2 See, for example, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, "A Conceptual Map for Twenty-First-Century Philosophy of History," in *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), Christophe Bouton, "The Critical Theory of History: Rethinking the Philosophy of History in the Light of Koselleck's Work," *History and Theory* 55, no. 2 (2016): 163–184, or Jörn Rüsen, "A Turning Point in Theory of History: The Place of Hayden White in the History of Metahistory," *History and Theory* 59, no. 1 (2020): 92–102.

least see some family resemblance tying our work together. How did you end up working in this field and which kinds of questions have you engaged in lately?

Marnie Hughes-Warrington: Historiography has a broad meaning. I have always understood it to accommodate a range of approaches to understanding the past, including historical methods, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. For this reason, it makes sense to at first glance describe my work using the label "philosophy of history." This is what you will see in profiles of my work, as it is a good way for people to understand how I approach my research.

As a student, though, I majored in history and philosophy. I have always viewed them as equal subjects. They are like the left and right hands of my work, and my aim is not just to be ambidextrous, but to join those hands together. History brings insights to philosophy; philosophy brings insights to history. I first saw the potential of joining them together when I read R. G. Collingwood's inaugural professorial lecture on the topic of historical imagination. It was by sheer coincidence that I read this in history class when I was simultaneously studying imagination in philosophy class. As an undergraduate, I was intrigued that the two subjects crossed over on this topic, and my DPhil (PhD) topic was formed in that moment.[3]

Collingwood's approach has influenced my work deeply. He was committed to joining philosophy and history together and to being a public intellectual. I hope that people see in my work a celebration of both history and philosophy, while they in my work as an administrator and for community groups see a commitment to public thought. By deepest training and inclination, I am most interested in metaphysics and in world and global history, but I have always sought to advance our understanding of the nature and purpose of history in broad spaces such as schools, film, museums, and universities. For this reason, I also use the words "history theory" to describe my work. I do so to invite other people in.

I do this as I do not think that the discipline of history "disciplines" tightly. The boundaries and nature of our work are fuzzy and shift over time, including the labels we use to describe it. In *Big and Little Histories*,[4] I argued that this is the case due to ethical reasons: history making is in part an invitation to an *ethos* or the effort of ethics, as Aristotle saw it.

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3 Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *"How Good an Historian Shall I Be?": R. G. Collingwood, the Historical Imagination and Education* (Thorveton: Imprint, 2003).

4 Marnie Hughes-Warrington and Anne Martin, *Big and Little Histories: Sizing Up Ethics in Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2022).

We have to do the work of understanding the nature and purpose of history for ourselves.

People know that I talk about "history makers," for example, to capture the histories made outside of universities. I have pursued the logical implications of this by looking at as wide a range of history-making activities globally as I can. I hope that, like others, I have encouraged students and scholars to see themselves in history theory or philosophy of history. I do not mind which label they use; my role is to encourage them.

This interest in the breadth of history making has brought me to my current work, on whether artificial agents can make histories. Even if we do not think that they can, and even if tools such as ChatGPT make us feel uncomfortable, I hope to further amplify people's interest in the logic of history and encourage those interested in history to contribute to decisions and debates regarding artificial intelligence. We are not just another voice in those decisions and debates. I see artificial intelligence as a fundamentally historical activity, as this concerns the ways in which machines process and reprocess information and past data. Collingwood wrote a critical essay on the gramophone, and I am sure he would have had many critical ideas about machine intelligence. Just like him, I hope that people will not be sure which label to use to describe my work and that they will forge their own path in history. That is my aim.

Chiel van den Akker: Perhaps we may view the distinction between historical theory and philosophy of history as analogues to the distinction between political theory and political philosophy.[5] There are no generally accepted distinctions regarding any of these, although there are differences in terms of emphasis. Philosophy of history is less eclectic and often more ambitious (for better or worse) than theory of history. We may also think of this distinction in institutional terms. Historical theory is taught and studied at history departments just as political theory is taught and studied at political science departments, whereas philosophy of history, just like political philosophy, is taught and studied at philosophy departments. Anyway, I am fine with each label. But how did I end up here? After graduating in historical theory, I wrote a PhD thesis in philosophy on the nature of historical representation, which I finished in 2009.[6] I sent my PhD thesis to an indi-

5 Cf. Andrew Reeve, "Political Theory," Oxford Reference, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100334775

6 The PhD thesis has been published as *Beweren en Tonen. Waarheid, Taal en het Verleden* (Rozenberg Publishers: Amsterdam, 2009).

vidual, Chris Lorenz at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, who then asked me if I would be interested in pursuing an academic career. A colleague of his at the VU, Susan Legêne, was advertising for a post-doctoral position in which historical theory was one of the requirements. I applied for the position, got it, and quit my job as a history teacher in secondary education. After Chris went to Germany, I took over his undergraduate and graduate courses in historical theory, after which I was eventually offered a tenured position as lecturer at the VU. In the Netherlands, all undergraduate students in history take a course in historical theory, which explains why there is a small job market for historical theorists in the Netherlands.

I am currently working on two projects. The first is a short book on how narratives make the past intelligible to us. It is intended for a wide range of scholars and students interested in history writing. The other project is still in *status nascendi.* It concerns the relationship between history and justice. It takes me to the Athenians in the second half of the fifth century B.C., such as the sophist historian Thucydides, whose work is part of the greater debate on the relationship between human nature and written and unwritten laws and customs, and to his contemporaries, the playwriters who in their tragedies addressed the relationship between free action, fate, and justice. This project also takes me to the German idealists for whom the relationship between history and justice plays a key role in their philosophies of history (idealists such as Hegel were also very interested in these ancient Athenians for that very reason). What I am mainly interested in at the moment is the recent interest in Hegel in analytical philosophy and the sporadic interest in his philosophy of history in that tradition. Curiously, most people working on Hegel's philosophy of history are rather ignorant of developments in contemporary philosophy of history. As stated above, however, the whole project is still in its very early stages, and perhaps it leads nowhere (this is also the sort of project for which it is hard to find funding). Anyway, I have given some lectures on parts of the project on different occasions, and one publication is forthcoming early next year.

Moira Pérez: The matter of defining the field is an old question in philosophy, and we somehow just got used to not really knowing what our discipline is about. I say I do philosophy of history as I studied philosophy and as I feel that I have a philosophical way of thinking, but I would not be able to say exactly what that means. Still, the question of disciplinary boundaries is interesting because, on the one hand, you use these to communicate to others an idea of what you do (and, of course, to apply for jobs and grants), but at the same time when we engage in work that goes beyond

what is usually perceived as part of our discipline, we are in a way expanding its boundaries: we say that "this can also be a part of philosophy of history" and open up that possibility for people following in our footsteps.

I became interested in this field as an undergraduate student, when I took philosophy of history as part of the mandatory program for the orientation in practical philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. I had always been interested in political issues, questions of marginalization, oppression, resistance, and social movements. When I took this course offered by Verónica Tozzi Thompson, the professor who subsequently became my supervisor and mentor, I was immediately fascinated by the opportunity to understand the role of historical narratives and representations in these phenomena and in the turbulent political history of my country and region. The first topic I studied was the relationship between historical presence (being included in historical narratives) and political presence (having a say in the public sphere and in decisions affecting our lives). I also specialized in queer theory, which was not at all that common in Argentina prior to the 2010s, and I started to bring both approaches together as I noticed, with some surprise, that this had not been done before. I dedicated my PhD thesis to exploring what a queer philosophy of history would look like.[7] Along the way, I realized that other factors such as ableism, coloniality, and cissexism also had to be included if I really wanted to grasp how historical representations reproduce or resist marginalization. This resulted in my thesis being somewhat more intersectional, which was unusual both for mainstream philosophy of history and for queer theory. With time, questions of coloniality became more central to my work, but I still feel that queer theory informs my perspectives, particularly in relation to temporality, normativity, utopia, and my understanding of identities.

My research still revolves around the exclusion of certain collectives from historical narratives and, through these, from the public sphere. On the one hand, I am interested in epistemic injustice and epistemic violence as pervasive phenomena in historiography, with grave epistemic and political consequences. On the other hand, I study the uses of public space and temporality to exclude certain collectives as part of broader structural

7 Moira Pérez, "Resumen de tesis de Doctorado: Aportes queer para la representación del pasado: aspectos políticos, epistemológicos y estético-formales," *Cuadernos de Filosofía* 63 (2014): 106–108, https://doi.org/10.34096/cf.n63.3138. See also Moira Pérez, "Queer Politics of History: On Progress Narratives and Its Outcasts," *Lambda Nordica* 21, no. 3–4 (2018): 15–34, http://www.lambdanordica.org/index.php/lambdanordica/article/view/525

oppression. I am currently a fellow at the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie in Hannover, Germany, where I am working on the global movement to bring down colonial monuments, which may serve as a way of resisting these exclusions, but also a way of whitewashing them. I hope to contribute to discussions on what to do with historical objects, such as monuments or artworks, that constitute blatant expressions of colonialism or white supremacy. I get the feeling that in the next few years, I will turn more to questions related to temporality, futurity, and utopia, perhaps because the world looks so grim right now...

2) Thinking across traditions

In all the different types of work we nowadays do in the theory and philosophy of history, we can discern at least a handful of different intellectual traditions engaged in understanding our historical condition and the ways in which we produce knowledge of the past(s). This scenario is very different from the times of "analytic philosophy of history," where a small number of philosophers could more or less agree on a core conceptual framework. But while diversity is and should be embraced for our field to thrive in the contemporary academic landscape, it also presents challenges in terms of collective efforts if we lack some minimal common ground where exchanges and collaborations may occur. How can we foster such a community? What does such a community look like in our case? Can someone studying the epistemology of historiography work together with someone studying indigenous conceptions of time in Latin America, Africa, or Asia? In sum, how can we work together across multiple boundaries?

MHW: My training was in analytic philosophy of history. I am still grateful to this day for the rigorous nature of the training I received. It is very helpful for reading all kinds of texts, and I enjoy reading analytic work. Collingwood's work did not, however, fit that approach. To explore his arguments, I read Kant, Hegel, Croce, Sartre, Plato, Aristotle, as well as Wittgenstein and the professors of my time, such as W. H. Dray, Morton White, Hayden White, Alan White. For a short time, I thought you had to have the family name White to be a philosopher! Once I got the philosophy bug, I started reading Derrida, Heidegger, Dworkin, Rorty. I am still an avid reader today, always interested in new approaches and reflections. I do not believe that I understand these philosophies as well as those who are fluent in their first languages, but the effort of seeking to understand is what philosophy is all about. More recently in my life, I have looked to the fusion of approaches

in Asian philosophies. And perhaps most significantly, I have sought to learn about Australian Aboriginal philosophies. Aboriginal people have a tradition of welcoming you to their country. They see everything as connected in their country. I have tried to reciprocate their welcome and generosity by learning. I learned about some Ngunnawal ideas in Canberra, and a senior elder is teaching me Kaurna philosophy in Adelaide. He teaches me two ideas at a time. This slow journey together is one of trust and generosity. It is like the profound act of trust and generosity in Aunty Anne Martin's gift of telling and knowledge in *Big and Little Histories.* We often assume that our world is falling into conversations in which we talk past one another. That is not my experience. Trust, listening, learning, respect, and caring for other people still matter and still have currency. That requires letting go of knowing the answers, speaking, and disciplinary labels. It is for these reasons that I only now see myself as really learning philosophy.

CvdA: These are difficult questions, and I doubt whether I have anything substantial to offer in response. I agree that the celebrated polyphony marking the field of historical theory all too easily turns into a cacophony. Here, however, journals, conferences, networks, study groups, and companions have a role to play. They all allow for exchanges in which a common ground and community may be established. There are several interesting journals in the field,[8] each with their specific mission and identity, as well as several important networks organizing conferences and online presentations.[9] Perhaps the field needs to be more self-conscious about who we see as predecessors and contemporaries working on similar or related issues and how a conversation with these may be initiated and continued.

MP: My background is also in analytic philosophy and, just like Marnie, I am extremely grateful for that, as it has provided me with a set of skills to do my work regardless of which topic I study. However, it is also true that the prevalence of Anglo-Saxon philosophy in our work and background is part of the international division of intellectual labor, which is rooted in deeper structures of domination, most notably colonialism. My hope

8 For instance, *History and Theory, Journal of the Philosophy of History, Rethinking History,* and *Storia Della Storiografia.*

9 Especially the Centre for Philosophical Studies of History in Oulu (Finland), the UK-based IHR The Philosophy of History Seminar, and the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) based in Gent (Belgium).

is that our intellectual community will look more and more like a diversity of traditions and backgrounds that we can draw from, which may open up dialogues and enable us to learn from each other when an opportunity arises.

There are currently countless lines of inquiry in philosophy and theory of history, and we are not necessarily always going to work together, which is fine. The connections and feedback between various subfields, methods, and traditions are dynamic. They depend on the context and topics attracting the interest of scholars. I feel that when this happens, scholars in our field are open to exploring these connections, which, in my opinion, makes it one of the most exciting subfields in philosophy.

I feel that the discipline gains enormously from expanding its boundaries and diversifying its perspectives, topics, and methodologies. For contexts historically seen as being at the center, this can be revealing but also challenging, as scholars in these contexts have to learn about what is being done elsewhere and learn to converse with people from very different backgrounds. For those of us working in Latin America, this is in some way easier as we are already aware of what is happening in the North and as we share a language and, to a certain extent, also a history (including an intellectual history of sorts). But this does not mean that there is no resistance: our foundation is Eurocentric, and we too must learn to read and respect what is being done at home. Of course, there is also financial and editorial pressure to work on topics that are trending in the North, which pushes us to be more creative in order to find ways of working with what interests us and is relevant to our contexts, while still securing access to global academic networks.

3) Our relationships to the past(s)

Historical knowledge and our cognitive relationships to the past(s) have been privileged objects in theoretical and philosophical reflections on history. And although they still retain much of their significance, authors from vastly different backgrounds have started to turn their attention to other kinds of relationships we establish with the past(s) – for instance, pragmatic ones where the past(s) becomes either an arena or a tool (or both) in present struggles. Anthropologists, literary theorists, historians, and philosophers have come to realize that these other relationships to the past were not relics of a bygone era having been superseded by a strictly intellectual interest in the past. These relationships seem to be the very foundation, the very reason some of us look for reliable answers about the past

in the first place. Do you see this shift as something that may circle back and enrich our understanding of historical knowledge? Could it open up unexplored pathways that are worth exploring even if they take us farther away from cognitive problems?

MHW: These shifts delight me, because I see them in no small part as the return of metaphysics after a strong period of analytic approaches. I also see in them a wide variety of historical methodologies as informing theoretical and philosophical reflections on history. I always wondered why our approaches to theory were narrower than approaches to history making, and I am pleased that approaches to epistemology have broadened. This will help us better understand even the most basic things that we take for granted, such as conditionals like "if, then."

CvdA: I am not sure how to conceive of the shift you refer to and whether there is such a shift in the first place. History should serve life, as Nietzsche argued already a century and a half ago, and his distinctions between the antiquarian, critical, and monumental senses of history include different kinds of relationships to the past, each of which is a mixture of dispositions, desires, and beliefs. His essay still serves as a basis for any understanding of the use and abuse of history, and I do not see which new relationships are discovered compared to the ones he distinguished. (I do think he missed the importance of historically articulating the beliefs we hold dear.) The different uses of the past in present struggles certainly fit within Nietzsche's conceptions.

Perhaps there is, and has been, a strictly intellectual interest in the past in some academic circles at some points in time. Such a strictly intellectual interest has, I guess, to do with increasing our knowledge of the past without there being any use for it. But who is interested in knowledge of the past as an end in itself, except for the antiquarian and, as Hayden White once put it, the cultural necrophile?

MP: As I stated above, in my experience, the interest was always in the politics of history. Even when exploring epistemic practices in historiography, or in representations of the past more broadly, this represented a means for understanding how certain subjects, collectives, and ways of life are excluded from the past, how others are affirmed in the present, and so forth. Maybe it is this inclination that leads me to think that the political cannot be understood without the epistemic, and vice versa. Feminist and anti-colonial epistemologies, and what I have more broadly referred to as "epistemolo-

gies from the margins,"[10] have proven that there is a great epistemic loss in the belief that we can explain a cognitive phenomenon, such as the study of the past, through "purely epistemic" factors. Social epistemology has also shown how our epistemic practices are rooted in epistemic dependence, meaning that knowledge does not occur in a vacuum but rather in our interactions with others and from a specific social location. So, I do not think that exploring these paths will necessarily lead us away from cognitive problems (unless, obviously, we want them to). Rather, they will allow us to better understand the epistemic facets of our relationships to the past.

4) Questions unanswered or not yet posed

Narrativism has allowed us to pose new kinds of questions regarding how historical texts could possibly represent past phenomena in an intelligible way. We were able to pose additional questions by turning to memory, to testimony, and then to non-Western experiences of time. However, just as there are probably many kinds of questions yet to be posed, many of those we did pose remain partially or entirely unanswered. Which questions still unanswered grab your attention? And which questions yet to be posed do you think might be on the horizon?

MHW: There are plenty of wonderful philosophers of history working on narrative, so I doubt that I am able to add to that topic. I am most interested in the question of whether you have to be a human to make a history. I have indicated that I am working on whether artificial agents can make histories, but I have also noted in *Big and Little Histories* that algorithms derived from insect movements are being used to sort information. Do we see insects as helping us create histories? I think this is one of the most important questions of our time. I also wonder whether history is, well, not historical enough. If information is constantly being updated and modified on digital platforms, what does this mean for print media, journal papers, and even forums like this? Do we get the chance to revisit our answers to your questions over and over again? I hope so.

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10 Moira Pérez, "Epistemologias das margens e disputas sobre o passado," in *Epistemologias feministas, ativismos e descolonização do conhecimento*, ed. Mariana Prandini, Breno Cypriano, and Eduardo Mattio (Porto Alegre: Zouk, 2023). See also Verónica Tozzi Thompson and Moira Pérez, "Epistemology," *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method* (online) (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350970809.005

CvdA: The question of how history and justice are related, which I mentioned above, has obviously been answered in the past. But given the nature of our field, we constantly reexamine past answers in relation to new contexts. This is how the reflections on our existence in time and history as a discipline "works." Think, for example, of how postcolonial theory offered a reexamination of old questions in relation to the new post-colonial context. Scholars such as David Scott do important and inspiring work in this regard, not by raising new questions, but by reexamining old questions and their answers in relation to new contexts. It is only by reexamining old questions that we continue the conversation of humankind, as Richard Rorty called it. And this is something we should do, rather than starting a new and parochial conversation. This is thus a question that also grabs my attention: how best to continue the conversation of humankind and reeducate our forebears, if needed, as Rorty[11] urged us to do?

MP: I believe that the theory and philosophy of history hold great potential in terms of contributing to questions that are at the forefront of current debates in the public sphere. For instance, neo-conservative movements around the world are feeding on fake news, misinformation, and active ignorance to promote their agendas and expand their power. How may historiography and uses of history more broadly help us resist these movements? How should we do and disseminate history to effectively counter contemporary forms of genocide denial, neo-fascism, and conservative backlash?

On the other hand, our discipline itself must be reexamined. The challenges posed by collectives that are historically marginalized from scholarly work (except as objects of study) lead to us facing urgent questions regarding the methods, practices, and ethics of intellectual work. Philosophy, in particular, has been extremely reluctant to engage with this incitation, and it might ironically be the most resistant to self-critique regarding its racist, sexist, ableist history and habits. So, there is a lot to be done in this respect, not only in our subfield but also in philosophy and the academy more broadly. For example, how can we work with historically marginalized forms of knowledge (you mentioned non-Western experiences of time, indigenous conceptual frameworks, and so forth) without this resulting in extractivism? How can we build truly horizontal conversations? This

11 Richard Rorty, "The historiography of philosophy: Four genres," in: *Philosophy in History: Essays on the historiography of philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 49–75, at 54 and 71.

brings me to a question that is at the root of it all and that might not have an answer: Is Western Europe really ready for the difficult task of provincializing itself?

About the contributors

Chiel van den Akker is a lecturer in philosophy of history at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His research focuses on narrative and the relationship between justice and history. He is editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History.*

Marnie Hughes-Warrington, AO PFHEA, is a Rhodes Scholar and graduate of University of Tasmania and Oxford. Marnie is a metaphysician who studies how the past shapes our present and future. A scholar having received over AU$18 million in grants, her work has been applied to many contexts. Her most recent book is *History from Loss* (together with Daniel Woolf, 2023), and she is currently researching historical logic in AI. Marnie is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Enterprise at University of South Australia and an honorary professor of history at the Australian National University. In 2022, she was made an Officer in the Order of Australia for distinguished service to higher education governance, leadership, and mentoring.

João Ohara is an assistant professor (with tenure) of theory of history at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His current research focuses on the social epistemology of historiography. His most recent publication is the book *The Theory and Philosophy of History: Global Variations* (2022).

Moira Pérez is an assistant researcher at the Argentine National Council for Scientific and Technical Research and professor at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina (Department of Philosophy). She directs the Research Group on Applied Philosophy and Queer Politics (PolQueer) and works from a queer, anti-colonial perspective on the interactions between violence and identity. Her recent publications include “The practical past as an instrument of epistemic resistance: The case of the Massacre in the Seventh Ward” (*Estudios de Filosofía* 66, 2022) and “Contracting imaginations: On the political and hermeneutical monopoly of identity politics” (*Dialectical Anthropology* 47, 2023).