

Presidential Message

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The past months have been wrenching: our in-person conference canceled, our Summer Institute and Second Book Workshop on hold, our endowment on a roller coaster ride (with more dips than rises as of this writing), our individual and collective prospects more uncertain than they seemed just a few months ago. There was a lot of talk, when the virus took off and public health officials urged people to shelter in place, about life on the other side. But there is, at present, no certainty that we will get to the other side, and less that we will do so soon.

If we do make it to the other side, what will that mean? In my first few months of teaching via Zoom, I heard many references to “normal life.” Reporting in from attics, basements, and bedrooms, my students fervently wished for a return to campus life as they had known it. But as the protestors who have taken to the streets around the world have insisted, normal is not good enough. Normal has meant inequality, injustice, exclusion, precarity, and suffering. We—meaning individuals, governments, corporations, and organizations such as SHAFR—need to do better.

For this reason, Council has adopted the following statement:

“The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) affirms that Black Lives Matter and condemns state and non-state violence against racialized communities in the United States and abroad. We stand in solidarity with those who have been fighting anti-Black racism and vow to continue working for the full inclusion and equality of all peoples in all institutions and communities to which we belong, including SHAFR.”

Consistent with SHAFR’s mission to promote ‘the study, advancement, and dissemination of knowledge of American foreign relations,’ we believe in identifying the inequities and imbalances of power and influence between and within states and highlighting the connections between racism, patriarchy, economic exploitation, and imperialism. We hope you will join us in fostering research and dialogue including diverse constituencies, working towards meaningful change, justice, and healing.”

SHAFR owes a great debt to its Committee on Minority Historians (CoMH), which has worked since its inception to make SHAFR a more diverse and inclusive organization and to advance scholarship on people of color, the shameful history of racist policies and practices, and related topics. I’d like to recognize and thank committee co-chairs Christopher Fisher and Perin Gurel and committee members Ronald Williams, Jeannette Jones, Dan Bender, Benjamin Montoya, Penny von Eschen, Tessa Ong



Winkelmann, and Eilin Raphael Perez for their contributions to our organization and field.

One of the CoMH’s current endeavors is to rethink its name, but the fundamental goals of equity, justice, and inclusion will continue to guide its efforts. The adoption of the solidarity statement underscores a point that I hope has been clear all along: these goals are not just committee goals—they are SHAFR goals. SHAFR’s Council, along with its many committees and task forces, its publication teams, staff, and members need to work collectively to advance

these core goals. We can do better; we must do better. I hope that all of SHAFR will join me in taking this statement to heart and striving to live up to the principles it expounds.

Another inclusivity issue that has been brought before Council is making SHAFR less U.S.-centric. Following a recommendation to this effect, I am appointing a task force on further internationalizing SHAFR, with two leading concerns being equity and access. These concerns played a major role in deliberations over the shape of the 2021 conference. In the face of uncertainty over travel restrictions, prohibitively expensive health insurance for travel to the United States, safety, and economic constraints—issues of concern to all SHAFR members yet of heightened concern to members located outside the United States—Council has decided to make the 2021 conference a hybrid event, meaning that there will be an in-person component at the Arlington Renaissance and a virtual component.

SHAFR Vice President Andrew Preston and the 2021 conference co-chairs, Megan Black and Ryan Irwin, are tackling the challenge of blending the cherished aspects of our in-person gathering with new kinds of sessions that will allow for broader participation and enhance the experience of all participants in our first hybrid gathering. Though prompted by crisis, the novel format of the 2021 conference will allow for new modes of scholarly connection and exchange. Adding virtual participation options will also enable us to move in a more sustainable direction, as will the decision to experiment with remote participation in Council meetings even after these meetings can again have an in-person component.

Among the long-term issues that has been magnified by the pandemic is archival access. Archival closures and impediments to on-site research have massively amplified earlier hurdles to on-site research. In response to the problem of archival access, Karine Walther and James Stocker have organized an on-line sharing group to connect researchers with unrestricted documents and researchers in search of documents. The newly constituted Task Force on Freely Available Research Databases, consisting of Victoria Phillips (chair), Melanie Griffin, Philip Nash, and Carole Finke, has proceeded on a parallel track, curating a list of

freely available electronic collections. This resource can be found on the Research tab of the SHAFR website (under Archives and Resources), along with contact information for submitting more entries.

SHAFR members have long advanced the precept that normal is not good enough, both in their scholarship and in teaching that casts a critical eye on the exercise of power. Our new public engagement committee—Brad Simpson (chair), Augusta Dell’Omo, Kaeten Mistry, Luke Nichter, Amira Rose Davis, Brian Etheridge, and Kimber Quinney—has been charged with helping SHAFR members reach larger audiences, thereby affecting change through the dissemination of knowledge.

Another way that SHAFR can push for a new normal is through direct advocacy on matters such as adequate funding for the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Matt Connelly has agreed to chair a new Task Force on Advocacy that will work in tandem with the Historical Documentation Committee and with Amy Offner, our representative to the National Coalition for History, to amplify the voices of SHAFR members on policies and procedures that affect our work.

When everything went haywire and the 2020 conference chairs, Julia Irwin and Gretchen Heefner, were working with the Conference Contingency Planning Task Force

to take down the in-person conference they had worked so hard to produce and to develop an alternate format in conditions of great uncertainty, Julia referred me to Rebecca Solnit’s *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Her email directed me to an Amazon review that read as follows: “The most startling thing about disasters...is not merely that so many people rise to the occasion, but that they do so with joy. That joy reveals an ordinarily unmet yearning for community, purposefulness, and meaningful work that disaster often provides. *A Paradise Built in Hell* is an investigation of the moments of altruism, resourcefulness, and generosity that arise amid disaster’s grief and disruption...”

That text kept me going through the last few stressful months because it rang true. The 2020 Program Committee, the Conference Contingency Planning Task Force, Council, Executive Director Amy Sayward, and IT Director George Fujii rank high among the SHAFR leaders who rose to the occasion. Julia and Gretchen deserve particular credit for their resourcefulness, purposefulness, and altruistic dedication to SHAFR in a time of crisis.

These are not easy times. But SHAFR will weather them. What’s more, SHAFR will continue to strive to go beyond normal, so as to serve its members and advance its mission in creative ways. It has indeed been a joy to be part of this collective effort.