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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty

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The persistence and proliferation of gun violence in the United States, as well as its growing prevalence around the world, has become one of the defining social and political challenges of our time. Over the past half century, scholars have generated a substantial body of knowledge about its causes, patterns, and consequences. We understand far more today about risk factors, access, trauma, and the complex relationships between firearms, fear, and public life than we did in the mid-twentieth century. And yet, for all this learning, our knowledge remains incomplete. The sheer scale of violence, the speed with which it mutates across contexts, and the limitations of available data regularly outpace our explanatory frameworks, leaving educators, policymakers, and communities struggling to act with the urgency and clarity that so much tragedy demands.

These gaps in understanding are not simply intellectual. In the United States in particular, they are shaped by sustained political opposition to gun control, institutional constraints on research, and a public discourse that too often reduces complex realities to familiar talking points. At the same time, gun violence resists easy explanation precisely because it is braided into so many aspects of social life: race, class, masculinity, media, urbanization, mental health, and state power, among others. Educational institutions, as both symbolic and literal sites of public investment, have been uniquely vulnerable to these pressures—expected to serve simultaneously as places of safety, surveillance, care, and control.

It is **in observing** this tension—**in** efforts to impose certainty on inherently uncertain situations—that this issue makes its primary contribution. Megan Knighton Scofield's "Dangerous Predictions: Student Counseling, Guns, and Campus Safety at the University of Texas, 1966–1969" opens with the infamous 1966 tower shooting in Austin. By tracing how university officials sought to prevent future violence through the identification of presumed psychopathology, Scofield exposes the high costs of predictive approaches: intensified monitoring, narrowed definitions of normalcy, and the normalization of surveillance as a form of care. Her work reminds us that what we do not know about violence has often served to justify intrusive systems that reshape campus life in profound and lasting ways.

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Uncertainty also appears in Sarabeth Rambold's close reading of young college women's antebellum letters and diaries, which reminds us that campus-based quests for certainty have long been pursued by students themselves. The seven women at the center of this study illuminate what liberation meant amid intersecting structures of racism and sexism. For the three Black female students, in particular, the ever-present violence of slavery off campus informed their understandings of freedom within their school's walls. The stories of four White peers extend the narrative into one marked by separate spheres and unequal possibilities. Rambold offers readers an intimate view of women's emotional lives in college as they sought certainty while navigating personal, intellectual, and political norms.

In Matt Villeneuve's study of "playing Indian," we see how John Dewey's commitment to experiential education was bound up in a search for more reliable ways to "reconstruct the past in the present." While many contemporaries worried about the open-endedness of experientialism, Dewey viewed this indeterminacy as essential to making lessons feel real, authentic, and concrete. Villeneuve also demonstrates how seemingly benign pedagogical practices at the University of Chicago Laboratory School were saturated with racialized assumptions about civilization and savagery, revealing how ignorance and innocence were carefully manufactured under the watchful eye of progressivism's most famous figure.

Finally, Sian Zelbo's account of the history of New Math reframes curricular reform as more than a response to Cold War fear and uncertainty. While Sputnik's launch helped spur efforts to "modernize" mathematics education, by the 1960s and 1970s American media had made New Math fashionable through a broad cultural marketing campaign. Teen magazines, popular television, and other outlets emphasized a generational divide, insisting that older mathematical approaches give way to something new. Reformers benefited from New Math's associations with modernity, youth, and sophistication—even as uncertainty about a technologically driven future continued to animate the movement.

Taken together, these pieces suggest that historians regularly swim in currents of certainty and uncertainty. Yet, like fish unaware of the water that surrounds them, historians of education too often overlook the analytical power of examining these tensions directly. This issue invites readers to do otherwise.

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