

Public History

A Textbook of Practice

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Historians as Activists

From Civic Engagement to Social Justice

By working not only with but also for their audiences, public historians perform a public service. The uses of the past and the historians' public service can take several formats. Historians may understand their public service as coming from the research of the truth. The uses of the past are an inescapable part of public historians' professional ethics. In the 1990 collection of essays on *Ethics and Public History*, Theodore Karamanski argued that the research of the truth "strengthens the characters of individual and empowers institutions to achieve their goals" (1990, 10–11). The past can have some very practical uses; it can, for instance, contribute to group/individual identity.¹

Activist historians argue that history can be used to improve the present and – therefore – the future (Korza and Schaffer Bacon 2005). According to this definition, there is a long tradition of activists among historians. Public historian Rebecca Conard recalls that James Harvey Robinson articulated the concept of "useful history" in 1912 when he "called upon historians to 'exploit' their methods of research and analysis to advance the 'general progress of society'" (2015, 116). History has a wonderful potential to examine contemporary issues and social concerns in the light of the past, so that history can help people understand the complexity of the present (Korza and Schaffer Bacon 2012). This objective translates in historians' role in civic engagement. According to public historian Mary Rizzo, the concept of civic engagement is at the core of the public humanities. She wrote:

When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences makes the case for federal support for the public humanities in its Heart of the Matter report, it relies on arguments about the potential for civic engagement. AAAS contends, for example, that the humanities encourage "civic vigor" and prepare citizens to be voters, jurors, and consumers.

(2014)

In other words, historians can help people to become better citizens.

What appears to be more recent is the shift from civic engagement to social justice. In a 2014 conference arranged at North Carolina State University, public historians discussed the move "From Civic Engagement to Activism: Public History as Civic Responsibility." The move from civic engagement to social justice and activism has become central in public history debates. Some public historians consider their role as social activists and advocate for a multitude of groups who have been marginalized, economically and/or socially, and whose histories have been devalued or ignored by mainstream history, in the preservation of historic places, and in the interpretation of history for the public.² In the United States,

social activism received more attention during the 1960s and 1970s along with the civil rights movement and related rights movements. In history, the main consequence was a new research focus on people's history.³ In her article on the pragmatic root of public history, Rebecca Conard points out that "'people's history' was introduced in 1986 with the appearance of an edited collection of essays under the title of *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*" (2015, 115). British historian Raphael Samuel influenced the authors of this collection. In the United Kingdom, Samuel's History Workshop at Ruskin College in Oxford greatly affected the people's history movement. As activist, Samuel worked at empowering ordinary people through history. Through different tools and practices – for instance, participatory museums and digital crowdsourcing – some public history projects inherited Samuel's objectives to empower individuals and communities by making them actors of historical production.

In a 2014 National Council on Public History's (NCPH) working group entitled "Toward a History of Civic Engagement and the Progressive Impulse in Public History," Denise Meringolo and Daniel Kerr questioned how public historians could more effectively use historical work to foster change (NCPH 2014). One answer was to produce more inclusive and more diverse representations of the past. The 2007 NCPH Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct highlights that "a public historian should welcome opportunities to represent cultural diversity in his or her work and to enfold members of underrepresented groups into the profession" (NCPH 2007). Likewise, the Social Justice Alliance for Museums explains, "we acknowledge that many museums have for many years failed to operate for the wider public benefit, and instead have catered primarily for educated minorities. We reject this approach."⁴ The objective is not to adapt the past to present issues, but to provide more complex representations by giving voice to underrepresented aspects and actors of the past. This creates richer interpretations of the past as well as empowers underrepresented groups in the present.

Public historians can also be more interventionist and act to change societies. In the 1980s, Michael Wallace argued that museums could be activist in different ways, "by intervening directly in inter-community conflicts; by presenting alternatives on issues of public policy, and by promoting historically informed planning initiatives." For instance, he proposed that:

a museum could present a full-rigged exhibition on a controversial subject, and conclude by presenting various proposed solutions, perhaps screening short video presentations by spokesperson for alternative approaches. Visitors could then vote, and a computer terminal would tally and present updated results.

(1996, 51–52)

More recently, a conference in 2008 entitled "Active History: History for the Future" resulted in the creation of Active History, an organization that intends to "make a tangible difference in people's lives" through a "history that makes an intervention and is transformative to both practitioners and communities."⁵ In those cases, public historians would not only foster cultural diversity, but would also participate in public policy and present-day social justice.

Before going more into detail about practices, it is necessary to stress that historians' activism is controversial since it is often based on their personal convictions. In a blog post about activism, public historian Cathy Stanton explains, "most public historians are reluctant to

describe themselves as advocates, activists, or political actors per se.” One reason is that “deeply-held values within the historical profession still tend to place advocacy in direct opposition to analytical rigor” (2015). The NCPH’s Code of Ethics and Professional Status warns, “a public historian should critically examine personal issues of social conscience as distinct from issues of ethical practice” (NCPH 2007). As Ludmilla Jordanova points out in her book on history in practice, “feelings are not always a very good guide because, by their very nature, they make people uncritical.” However, she does not condemn activism, but suggests that “the moral commitments of historians and the nature of their human values need to be made explicit whenever possible and tempered by evidence that is open to scrutiny” (2000, 169). The least historians should do is to be aware of the impact of activism on their work. This helps, according to Jordanova, “to explain more openly to a wider public the processes through which historical judgments are reached” (2000, 171).

Public History as a Source of Social Empowerment for Underrepresented Groups

The range of underrepresented groups in historical narratives is way too broad for an exhaustive presentation in this chapter. The purpose is not to cover every topic but to propose some practices and examples to inform public historians about their role in social empowerment.

Native Populations

In settler societies (the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, among others), the voices of native populations have – for a long time – often been silenced in mainstream culture. In his history of the history profession in America, Ian Tyrrell explains how the rise of a national “scientific” and professional history in late 19th and early 20th century America resulted in the “distancing of American history from what came before the arrival of Anglo settlement” (2005, 231). The study of Native American peoples shifted from history to anthropology (Conn 2004). Historians established a clear distinction between Indians’ and settlers’ past. For a long time, historians not only silenced the history of natives, but also participated in the destruction of their heritage. According to David Neufeld, “the practice of public history with aboriginal peoples in North America over the past century and a half has been generally destructive of their communities and identities.” In collecting “relics” – including the bodies of ancestors – museums participated in the looting of native communities (Neufeld 2006, 117). History was done without, and to the detriment of, native populations.

Historians and cultural institutions need to collaborate with and empower native populations (Lawlor 2006; Peers 2007). Public historian Amy Lonetree has recently argued for decolonizing museums (2012). In other words, historians should fight the colonial views on native populations that have been conveyed by books, movies, museums, and other media. Historians should reconsider the view of a superior and dominant culture, should acknowledge the history of native populations, and collaborate with natives more often. There are now numerous sites where public land management have established agreements with native groups (Kelman 2013; Spence 2000). For instance, the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in Oklahoma tells the story of an attack on a Cheyenne village by General George Custer and the 7th U.S. Cavalry. Historians can help shed light on parts of the past that have been ignored.

Shared authority is essential.⁶ Historians and political actors should not speak in place of native populations. In 1989, the U.S. Congress passed a law establishing a National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) as part of the Smithsonian Museum.⁷ More than 25,000 Native Americans attended the opening of the museum in 2004. It is important that museums, exhibitions, documentaries, and archives should not just be about native populations, but also be produced with them. Historians may consider the creation of committees that include representatives of native populations (Neufeld 2006, 119). Amanda Cobb explains:

The NMAI staff held dozens of community consultations at different sites in Indian Country. At each consultation, participants voiced their ideas for the building, landscape, and overall tone of the museum, going far beyond what was originally asked of them.

(2005, 490)

Collaboration could apply to the various steps of history projects, from the creation to the final production. For example, the objects and exhibitions at the NMAI have to be managed in conjunction with representatives of Native Americans. Cobb stresses that: "As a result of such collaborative curation, the museum employs 'nontraditional' (by museological standards) methods of care and preservation, display, and classification, and privileges Native conceptualizations of history and truth." Some of these techniques result from "the belief that many cultural objects are alive rather than inanimate and often require curators to allow them to 'breathe' rather than suffocate in sealed plastic containers." Finally, the NMAI provides "tribal citizens with the ability to visit their objects and to 'feed' them, often with pollen, or perform ceremonies with them" (Cobb 2005, 493). Shared authority helps empower native populations and to enrich public history methodology.

Some public historians go further and strive to acknowledge the present-day consequences of colonial history. For example, some projects focus on the long-term consequences of residential schools in Canada (Regan 2011). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) highlights that "For over 100 years, Aboriginal children were removed from their families and sent to institutions called residential schools ... to eliminate parental involvement in the spiritual, cultural and intellectual development of Aboriginal children." In order to "revitalize the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society" the TRCC gathers "statements from former students of the Indian Residential Schools and anyone else who feels they have been impacted by the schools and their legacy."⁸ Likewise, the TRCC's Missing Children project presents research on the numerous Aboriginal children who, after having been sent to residential schools, never returned to their home communities. This public history project addresses the traumatic experience of parents who never found out about their children.⁹ History and education at large are, in this case, seen as cultural reparation, making people aware of past injustice.

Looting and Repatriation

Colonial dominant actors have, for a long time, been looting native populations' heritage (Fine-Dare 2002). As a consequence, public debates have discussed the issue of repatriation of human remains and sacred objects. In 1990, the U.S. Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) to encourage the identification and the return of human remains and sacred items to their communities of origin. All public

and private museums that have received federal funds must obey NAGPRA.¹⁰ Historians working in such institutions must know the complex repatriation process that is composed of identification, inventory, and consultation with descendants (Mihesuah 2000).¹¹

The process of repatriation is by no means limited to native populations. In addition to the now famous controversy between Greece and the British Museum over the ownership of the Panathenaic Frieze, international discussions emerged about the role of historians in the repatriation process. The 2009 Athens conference on the “Return of Cultural Objects” discussed case studies in Zimbabwe, Greenland, Ethiopia, and Iraq (Museum International undated).

Repatriation can also result from more recent periods. The Nazis plundered and collected a huge number of cultural artifacts (Kurtz 2009). Louis Marchesano, curator at the Getty Research Institute argues, “we are very aware that tens of thousands of looted objects were never properly repatriated or returned to their lawful owners” (1999). The topic is extremely complex since works of arts were looted by the Nazis but were later brought back by the Allies. Historians can help, through their research, to find the owners of those artifacts. Historians must question how the Nazis obtained the items, from whom, when, and under which circumstances. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) provides a very useful list of resources for historians interested in Nazis’ looted art, and lists the current projects by country (USHMM undated).

Migrants

Migrants are another group whose voices are barely heard in public historical debates. While debates on immigration have, by definition, international and transnational components, the issue is also extremely powerful at the local scale. In 2014, for the project Dialogues on Immigration, 20 history museums and heritage centers organized public discussions in the United States. Sometimes museums are even physically concerned. In 2010, immigrants who were applying for legal documents, occupied La Cité de l’Immigration (the French Museum of Immigration) (Labadi 2013).

Museums and heritage sites have the potential to become spaces of public discussion for controversial topics. For example, although it represents 40 percent of the population, the Hispanic community of Tucson (Arizona) seldom visits the Saguaro National Park. In order to remedy this, the park created an outreach project and undertook a study of its early Hispanic homesteads to connect with the Hispanic community (NPS 2009, 25). Museums can also be at the origins of projects that take place beyond their walls. In 2014, Ghent (Belgium) Stadsmuseum arranged an exhibition on the history of migration outside of its walls, through highlights in the city. The project contributed to recovering the city’s migration past and to give it a space (STAM undated).

In the 1980s, Michael Wallace suggested to make exhibitions about the history of “guest workers,” Mexicans in the United States, Africans in France, or Turks in Germany (1996, 48). In the same vein, the Bracero History Archive – a collaborative project between the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, the National Museum of American History, and the UTEP Institute of Oral History – collects and makes available the oral histories and objects related to the eponymous program that facilitated the migration of millions of Mexican guest workers in the United States between 1942 and 1964.

Historians can help the public understand how important immigration has been for societies. In New York City, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum has now become a traditional example of public history. The museum has developed a program that “engages new

immigrants in dialogue about contemporary immigration-related issues, and helps them to strategize about actions they can take to shape those issues” (Ševčenko and Russell-Ciardi 2008, 12). Historians can participate in debates on immigration and identity. For instance, in their project “At Home in Holland” students from the University of Amsterdam respond “to the way that hostile reactions to immigrants have undermined the traditional idea of Dutch tolerance and hospitality in recent years.” Students investigated the changing attitudes towards refugees and new migrants in Holland. They noticed how “the language of the debate has shifted, from refugee, to asylum seeker, to illegal immigrant, to criminal” (Foulidis et al. 2014). Following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the Arab American National Museum designed an exhibition entitled *Patriots and Peacemakers* about the history of Arab Americans in the U.S. Army and institutions. Historians should not design the past according to their opinions in present-day debates, but they can help demonstrate how the past is often much more complex than some simplistic views argue.

Slavery and Segregation

Slavery has always been an international phenomenon. In 2007, the International Slavery Museum opened in Liverpool (UK), giving a large space to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In Louisiana, Whitney Plantation is the site of a slavery museum whose academic director – Dr. Ibrahima Seck – is a historian from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar (Senegal). Seck has worked on international collaboration, in particular with the House of Slaves (Maison des Esclaves) on Gorée Island, two miles off the coast of the city of Dakar.¹² Figure 12.1 shows one of the most striking components of Whitney Plantation. The “Children of Whitney” are 40 statues of children designed by artist Woodrow Nash



Figure 12.1 “Children of Whitney.” Statues of slave children designed by artist Woodrow Nash for Whitney Plantation, Louisiana, 2015. Courtesy of Whitney Plantation.

for Whitney Plantation. Their purpose is first to remind visitors that slavery was not just about adults but also greatly affected children. The focus on children also comes from the fact that Whitney Plantation uses oral testimonies of former slaves from the U.S. Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s. The majority of these former slaves were children at the time of emancipation. The use of these sources by Whitney Plantation participates in a more general focus on children during slavery.

Nevertheless, historian of slavery, James Horton, underlines that "The history of slavery and its role in the formation of the American experience is one of the most sensitive and difficult subjects to present in a public setting" (1999, 20). The United States has a World War I national museum (Kansas City), a World War II national museum (New Orleans), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a museum devoted to the 9/11 attacks, but there has been no national slavery museum. Historian Eric Foner recently stressed that:

It's something I bring up all the time in my lectures ... If the Germans built a museum dedicated to American slavery before one about their own Holocaust, you'd think they were trying to hide something. As Americans, we haven't yet figured out how to come to terms with slavery.

(Amsden 2015)

In Louisiana, as in most Southern states, until very recently, visitors to plantations could not learn much about the slaves whose history was absent from the narratives that focused on rich white families and decorative history.

Several types of public history projects attempt now to preserve the trace of slavery. Archaeology has been critical in the recent reinterpretation of slavery. The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery was initially based on sites like the archaeology programs at Monticello (Thomas Jefferson's plantation), Mount Vernon (George Washington's plantation), and Andrew Jackson's Hermitage.¹³ Another new and very interesting project is the Periwinkle Initiative, which aims to build a National Burial Database of Enslaved Americans.¹⁴ Likewise, Joseph McGill Jr. is the founder of the Slave Dwelling Project. He spends nights in many different slave dwellings in order to bring attention to those sites that are often neglected. Like for plantations in Louisiana, McGill stresses that "Americans tend to focus on the 'big house,' the mansion and gardens, and neglect the buildings out back ... If we lose slave dwellings, it's that much easier to forget the slaves themselves" (Horwitz 2013). However, it is important not to forget that slavery was not a unique Southern issue, but belongs to American history. In 2006, the New-York Historical Society mounted an exhibition called *Slavery in New-York* to show that slavery was not a uniquely Southern phenomenon.

The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1865) did not mean that the consequences of slavery were no longer visible. In the introduction of his book on slavery and public history, Horton argues that "what we understand today as racism is largely a legacy of the slavery that formally ended nearly a century and a half ago" (Horton and Horton 2006, x). Some historians extend the period of their studies from slavery to its long-term impact and significance. The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool explains that "our vision is to create a major new International Slavery Museum to promote the understanding of transatlantic slavery and its enduring impact ... on Africa, South America, the USA, the Caribbean and Western Europe."¹⁵ Another famous example is District Six that used to be, before the 1970s, an example of cultural diversity in South Africa. Opened in 1994, the museum is located in Cape Town, in an area where

60,000 people were forced to move during the Apartheid in the 1970s. The mission of the museum is to “mobilize the masses of ex-residents and their descendants into a movement of land restitution, community development and political consciousness.” The creation of the museum was an act of activism for which “the recovery and restoration of memory is just as important as, and needs to be a vital component of, the recovery and restoration of land” (Prosalendis et al. 2013, 284, 286). The District Six Museum offers a way for people to discuss and challenge the impact of the Apartheid. For historians, reparations for past injustices may not be about money or legal actions, but rather through the shape of educational projects to fight oblivion.

Women and Gender History

Women are by no means a minority, but they are often underrepresented in historical production. One excellent example is the Women’s Rights National Historical Park that has been interpreting the struggle for women’s equality since it opened in 1982 (Conard 2012). However, as Dubrow and Goodman point out, relatively few properties significant in women’s history are listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places (Dubrow and Goodman 2002, 3). Besides, when part of the narratives, women are often confined to the history of domestic tasks. Historians have participated in producing male-defined and male-centered representations of the past. Women’s history can help historians and the audiences develop new interpretations and new understandings of the past.

In order to bring women back to the front of the historical scene, it is first necessary to undertake surveys. Such surveys about women’s part in historical institutions have been done in Wisconsin and Georgia. Georgia’s Historic Preservation Division was the first state agency to address gender issues related to the identification, documentation, and evaluation of historic properties through its Women’s History Initiative (Dubrow and Goodman 2002, 11). Surveys in states or in specific institutions could enable public history actors to enrich historical narratives. For example, *Raising Our Sights: Women’s History in Pennsylvania* was a project of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council in 1992 that worked for the inclusion of women’s history in more than a dozen historic sites. Historians in charge of collection and interpretation should always ask themselves if both male and female experiences are represented.

Debates about a possible National Women’s History Museum reveal how difficult it is to reach an agreement on women and gender history (Michel 2014). Cathy Stanton wonders where the next generation of gender studies in public history is. She argues, “what’s being said and done in public history interpretation of gender and sexuality remains firmly within the model of adding neglected or ‘subaltern’ histories into mainstream or ‘official’ narratives” (Stanton 2013). Historians can go further than simply incorporating women’s experiences into traditional narratives. Sometimes, the overall historical narrative is driven by male representations. In this case, it is important to rethink the whole interpretation of the past. One option may be – like through the creation of the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites – to adopt women’s point of view as the central frame of reference for the narrative. For instance, *HerStories* is an oral history archival project that focuses on mothers’ experiences and representations in Sri Lanka.

Karen Nickless and Heather Huyck from the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites have detailed the steps for “Putting Women Back in History” (2015). They give three very useful pieces of advice. First, “Every single historic site is a women’s history site – including the ones you don’t think are.” Interpreters should also “See women both

independently and as part of a greater whole” and “Let the women speak for themselves” (Nickless and Huyck 2015). Likewise, Edith Mayo argues that historians should redefine the meaning of objects “placing them within a framework of women’s history” (Mayo 2002, 121). Historians can also provide a space where visitors can discuss their own representations of gender relations. For Stanton, “masculinity—the foundation of much of that structure—remains the elephant in the room that nobody’s really talking about” (2013). It may be extremely challenging for historians to make users and visitors think about mainstream categories in the past and present.

LGBT, Queer, and Sexual Practices

In terms of sexual practice and identity, historical narratives have mostly been conservative and preferred focusing on traditional family relations. As Alison Oram demonstrates in her article on historic houses:

the stress on the genealogy of the elite families who have inhabited them is strongly heteronormative, and they have certainly been less permeable to the now well-established social histories of class, gender, colonialism and sexuality than other popular genres of history.

(2011, 192)

Homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender relations remain globally absent from public historical narratives. It is still problematic to find funding for events that deal with what has been called LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender).

Notwithstanding this general reluctance, the history of the LGBT movement developed since the 1960s and has now global networks (Hayward 2015). History became an important tool for the LGBT movement. Gays and lesbians, Lauren Gutterman argues, “see history as capable of teaching them not only about themselves, but also about the potential for political transformation” (2010, 96). Likewise, Oram explains that “Naming key historical figures as lesbian or gay instead of glossing over or denying their sexuality was akin to the politics of coming out. Gay activists claimed a positive historical narrative of homosexuality, critiquing the heterosexist bias of existing history-writing” (2011, 195). Historians interested in LGBT projects can now access and use many different resources, such as the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the City University of New York.

Similar to women history that challenges the male-centered representations of the past, LGBT public history could challenge the implicit heterosexual norm of historical production. Historians can work at preserving archives. The Society for American Archivists’ Gay and Lesbian Archives identifies LGBT archives and collections all over the United States. With the Internet, it becomes easier to bypass the lack of funding to create online repositories. For instance, gay activist Jonathan Ned Katz founded OutHistory.org in 2003, a wiki to allow users to upload and curate materials.

Through archival works, historic preservation, and exhibitions, historians can foster more inclusive narratives. For instance, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum had an exhibition called “Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals, 1933–1945.” Likewise, a memorial to homosexuals persecuted under Nazism was created in Berlin in 2008. The GLBT Historical Society has been working on a comprehensive study of queer historic sites in San Francisco. It is important for historians to show how materials about the past construct and convey definitions of sexual practices and sexual norms.

Mainstream History

The links between public history and underrepresented groups raise questions about what mainstream history is. The main question is to know whether ethnic minorities and underrepresented groups should be more acknowledged in mainstream institutions or whether it is necessary to design specific sites and narratives. The National Museum of the American Indian now represents Native Americans, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture is scheduled to open in 2016. However, some historians like Jacki Thompson Rand – historian specialist in American Indian and Native Studies – consider that “the museum represents a lost opportunity to integrate American Indians into the national consciousness” (Rand 2007). Similar debates took place regarding the project of a national women’s history museum (NWHM). One criticism has been about the relative lack of presence from historians in the NWHM’s project that would rather be a “Women’s Hall of Fame.”¹⁶ Are such museums the sign that African Americans, American Indians, and women are still not fully part of the mainstream national history?¹⁷

Outside the United States, the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum (New Zealand) is extremely interesting. As one of the Dominions within the British Empire, New Zealand received European populations and became a settler country. As other settler societies, the representations of the relations between Europeans and native populations (Maori) have been controversial in New Zealand. In 1998, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa opened as the new national museum and art gallery of New Zealand. The name itself reflects a focus on biculturalism and on the contribution of the Maori to the national culture and history. The museum is based on the concept of biculturalism, “the recognition of the historical interaction of two peoples, Māori (the indigenous people) and Pākehā (the settler population)” (Bozic-Vrbancic 2003, 295). Although somehow artificial, the two distinct cultures became the prism through which the past has been represented in the museum. In this case, the museum displays “two mainstreams of tradition and culture” (Paku undated). The museum offers an example of how historians not only have to reckon with history as a source of empowerment for minorities but also with the overall concept of mainstream and national history.

Public Historians and Everyday Suffering

The relations between the past and the present are at the center of public history. It is critical for public historians to take into consideration what the present motivations and demands of the public are. Like historians, historic sites, museums, and other cultural institutions cannot live in an ivory tower. In a recent post Linda Norris asked whether museums need disaster plans for people not only to take care of the collections but also to help the communities (Norris 2014). Public historians might consider how they could help relieve communities from some everyday suffering.

Criminality, Incarceration, and Prison Memories

In his 1996 book on American memory, Mike Wallace was convinced that “Urban crime is both an indisputably sexy subject and a matter of immense contemporary concern” (1996, 44). Historians may address those issues not only because they are “sexy,” but also because they reveal the complexity of the past. New projects such as the Prison Public Memory Project use history to create forums where different actors “can come together to engage in conversation and learning about the complex role of prisons in communities

and society" (Prison Memory Project undated). In a recent interview with Martha Swan, public historian Mary Rizzo discusses the use of history in creating public understanding of complicated contemporary issues such as mass incarceration (Rizzo and Swan 2014). Created by Swan in 1999, *John Brown Lives!* is a public history project – in the memory of Abolitionist John Brown – that deals with mass incarceration and drug laws and encourages "people to question the narrative of American history, the meaning of freedom, the role of policy in racial issues, and the connections between history and place" (Rizzo and Swan 2014, 61). The *John Brown Lives!* project shows how the links between past and present are crucial for public historians. The project examines the effects of the 1973 Rockefeller drug laws on mass incarceration, on the people who work in prisons, and on the communities where prisons are built (Rizzo and Swan 2014, 62). The approach is very similar to the work of Heather Ann Thompson and Michelle Alexander, who argue that mass incarceration and the disproportional percentage of African Americans in prison is the consequence of a persistent system of racial inequality (Thompson 2010; Alexander 2010). The issue here is not to agree or disagree with their argument but rather to demonstrate the need for public history projects on issues that continue to affect everyday life.

Incarceration can lead historians to deal with long-term issues. The Guantánamo Public Memory Project (GPMP) was launched in 2009 and aims at building public awareness of the long history of the station on the island of Cuba. The project goes further than the mere history of the site; it includes examples and interpretations from various actors, on-site workers, detainees, and staff, and shows the complexity of the different perspectives. Different universities participate in the project and help broaden the historical narratives.¹⁸ For example, Brown University's students designed a panel questioning what a refugee is, and what makes a refugee. The project also fostered interaction by proposing users to vote on questions such as "Is the U.S. an Empire?"¹⁹ The project shows how incarceration can help historians and students to question much broader aspects of everyday life. GPMP extended to other sites of detention. The University of Minnesota created a digital project to accompany the GPMP. Named GTMO in MSP (Minneapolis-Saint Paul), the project examines "immigrant detention in Minnesota along with increased surveillance of the Somali American community in Minneapolis since 9/11" (University of Minnesota 2014). It demonstrates how the tactics used to detain suspected terrorists have had actual consequences in Minneapolis and St. Paul (Taparata 2014). Incarceration and criminality are but two examples of everyday suffering, that public historians could deal with in order to explain the complexity of the past and present.

Poverty and Exclusion

Another sort of everyday suffering that historians have recently dealt with is poverty and homelessness. Among the voiceless actors of the past, poor and homeless people are certainly the most difficult for historians to research. Those topics are extremely difficult to deal with because of the lack of sources and materials. Nevertheless, public historians have proved to be inventive and to use new techniques to give space to poverty and homelessness.

The Museum of the City of New York mounted an exhibition in the 1990s on the history of homelessness (Wallace 1996, 45). More recently, Daniel Kerr – public historian at the American University – published *Derelict Paradise: Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio*. Oral history is very effective at dealing with poverty and homelessness and producing a bottom-up analysis (2003). The Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project demonstrates how public historians can give a voice to the homeless population as well as

to provide social change (Kerr 2012). Kerr explains how oral history and social justice are linked. Likewise, since 2008, the Oral History of Homelessness Project has collected hundreds of stories from people across the state of Minnesota.²⁰

In addition to giving a voice to homeless people, oral history can be used by historians to help isolated communities to recover social links. The Shenandoah Valley Oral History Project works both at preserving and strengthening social links for marginalized communities. For the project, Kerr's students interviewed "poultry farmers and processing workers, labor and civil rights activists, Native Americans, Latino immigrants, ex-offenders, homeless people, gays, lesbians and bisexuals throughout the Shenandoah Valley" (James Madison University undated).

Another example is about history projects that deal with how people affected by diseases have been excluded from societies. The Brooklyn Historical Society has collected oral histories and materials about the AIDS epidemic. They have collected "photographs, medical records, t-shirts, phone bills, herbalist bottles, workshop pamphlets, and the sickroom contents of a man felled by the disease" (Wallace 1996, 46). Since 1986, Victoria Harden – member of the History Office of the U.S. National Institutes of Health – has worked on an AIDS History Project based on oral history "to ensure that the American people were given an accounting of what the NIH had done to deal with this disease" (Harden 2000). Similar to their work with ethnic minorities, historians can contribute to conveying the history of voiceless people who suffered from everyday violence, and empower people to fight isolation.

History for Peace: Human Rights, Apologies, and Reconciliation

Human Rights and Coming to Terms with the Past

The links between human rights and history have strengthened in the last two decades. History and historians have been asked to help people come to terms with the past. First used to enable Germans to deal with their Nazi past, the expression is also about making peace with the past. In order to do so, actors first have to acknowledge their violent past. One example was the creation of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience in 1999. Sites of conscience are historic places that foster public dialogue on pressing contemporary issues in historical perspective. The founding members "believed that remembering sites of both abuse and resistance [was] critical in the transition to democracy" (Ševčenko 2008, 9–10). Representing and discussing the history of human rights – and their violation – has a direct connection with democratic engagement. The argument is that coming to terms with the violent past can help populations overcome past tensions and move towards better democratic systems.

Among the various partners and projects of the International Coalition, *Memoria Abierta* sheds light on the human rights abuses during the dictatorship in Argentina. *Memoria Abierta* encourages public discussion "about what should be done with the clandestine detention centers where torture was perpetrated." In Czech Republic, the Terezin Memorial is about Nazi atrocities; it "involves children into dialogues about contemporary examples of racism such as the attacks on the Roma people and the rise in neo-Nazi nationalist youth groups" (Ševčenko 2008, 12–13). In Romania, the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER) aims at collecting online archives, at organizing exhibits, and providing student programs to support public awareness on the history of communism in Romania. Historians can also work in commissions, like Latvia's History Commission that studies the Crimes against Humanity



Figure 12.2 Villa Grimaldi, international day for the victims of enforced disappearances, Santiago (Chile), 2015. Courtesy of Villa Grimaldi. www.villagrimaldi.cl/.

Committed in the Territory of Latvia from 1940 to 1956 during the Occupations of the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany.

Figure 12.2 was taken at Villa Grimaldi in Santiago (Chile) in 2015 during the international day for the victims of enforced disappearances. Villa Grimaldi is part of the International Sites of Conscience network. In operation from 1974 to 1978, Villa Grimaldi was used during Augusto Pinochet's regime by the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA), the Chilean secret police, as a site of interrogation and torture for political prisoners. Among the 4,500 detainees brought to Villa Grimaldi, more than 200 disappeared, likely assassinated by DINA. During Operation Colombo at least 119 political dissidents disappeared. Figure 12.2 shows the faces of those disappeared in Villa Grimaldi as well as the list of names in the wall panel.²¹ The Corporación Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi (Corporation Peace Park at Villa Grimaldi) was created in 1996 in order to recover the history of the disappeared and atrocities committed in the villa. In addition to the historical research necessary to recover the roots of Villa Grimaldi, historians participate in the creation of a larger historical perspective. Recent panels deal with the history of DINA all over Chile. Historians also participate in present-day civic engagement through education programs that address discrimination, torture, political violence, and human rights.

The International Coalition wants to use the past to reach a better future. Their website asserts that:

By analysing the underlying factors that resulted in the Holocaust we might find ways to prevent genocide today; by walking in the shoes of past generations of immigrants, we might better understand immigration struggles today; and in unravelling the mechanisms of past dictatorships, we can fight repression today.

(International Coalition of Sites of Conscience undated)

Through training, funding, and international networks, the International Coalition is representative of how history has become a tool to build democracy.

Apologies

Debates about apologies have emerged in countries such as the United States (for the enslavement of African Americans), in France (for the participation in the deportation of Jews during World War II), or in Australia (for the uprooting of natives by settlers) (Bookspan 2001; Maier 2003). Apologies are often political acts, coming from governments or parliaments.²² Governments can, like in Australia, set aside a day to remember an injustice. In 1998, the Australian government created a "Sorry Day" to acknowledge that the government "had forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families on the assumption that their culture was doomed" (Weyeneth 2001, 14). Those political acts are partly designed to appease present-day political tensions. For instance, in 1996 Tony Blair accepted English responsibility in the 1850s Irish Famine. He did so, in the heart of the Northern Irish Peace Process, as a way to close the past and to make the current political situation in Northern Ireland more suitable for peace.

Apologies may also have financial components through the payment of reparations. While the prospect of German reparations has recently been raised by the Greek government, the German government already announced in 1999 the establishment of a "Remembrance, Responsibility, and the Future Fund" to compensate the victims of exploited labor by private companies during the Nazi era. In the United States, Congress passed a law in 1988 about Japanese Americans interned in camps during World War II. The law "apologized for the incarceration and paid \$20,000 to each survivor of the camps" (Weyeneth 2001, 18–19). The New York Attorney Deadria Farmer-Paellmann founded the Restitution Study Group that examines "innovative approaches to securing justice for injuries inflicted upon oppressed people." Considering that slavery and segregation have left indelible marks in all areas of the lives of people of African descent, the group favors "a humanitarian trust funded by parties that participated in and benefited from slavery [that] would address the capital needs of African Americans" (Restitution Study Group undated).

Apologies raise many questions for historians. First, are apologies valid historical processes or are they more political and activist issues from which historians should exclude themselves? Questions also deal with the format. Regarding the uses of the past, remembering past injustices may also revive present-day tensions. There have been so many crimes and acts of injustice in the past that apologizing can become an endless process. Another interrogation is about responsibility. When asked whether the United States should apologize to Japan for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, President George Bush answered, "War is war. There is nothing to apologize for" (Weyeneth 2001, 27). More broadly, can and should present-day actors apologize for events they did not directly participate in? For instance, who could, today, apologize for slavery in the United States?

Work from historians and historical committees can lead to apologies. Historian Jan Gross published *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* in 2001. The book focused on the massacre that took place at Jedwabne in July 1941. The massacre against Polish Jews was not undertaken by the Nazis, but by non-Jewish neighbors. This work led the president of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski, to publicly ask pardon in the name of Polish people. Historians can play a role in establishing a deconflicted space of discussion with critical analysis of the past.

Reconciliation

In an article about historians and reconciliation, Elzar Barkan explains:

because group identity is shaped by historical perspectives, historical narratives have an explicit and direct impact on national identities. Thus, by playing an adjudicatory role in the creation of such narratives and ensuring adherence to ethical norms, historians can contribute to reconciliation among nations.

(Barkan 2009, 900)

Institutions like the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), the International Center for Transitional Justice, the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, or Facing History and Ourselves support public history projects. For instance, created in 1984 by the U.S. Congress, USIP undertook a history initiative that aimed to explore how divided societies recovering from violent conflict have been teaching the conflict's history to participate in a larger process of social reconstruction and reconciliation (Cole and Barsalou 2006).

However, judges and lawyers, not historians, dominate most of those institutions. As a consequence, Greg Grandin argues that "In most truth commissions, history was not presented as a network of causal social and cultural relations but rather as a dark backdrop on which to contrast the light of tolerance and self-restraint" (2005, 48). Partly due to this lack of historical thinking, the process of reconciliation has had the tendency to use the past as a mere background in which injustice took place. For instance, some Chilean historians have criticized the Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation for "its insistence on the need to establish moral equivalency between the Left and the Right" (Grandin 2005, 48). Historians should be aware that the primary purpose of truth and reconciliation commissions is not historical research but rather to provide the basis for a new shared identity.

Nevertheless, historians from different origins have participated in reconciliation. For example, they can help create archives of truth commissions and other processes (Peterson 2005). Historians can also help contextualize representations of conflict (Blom 2007). Led by historians Charles Ingrao and Thomas Emmert, historians from different countries and different cultures met and worked in teams to confront the Yugoslav controversies about the past. Subjects such as the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, but also ethnic cleansing, were discussed (Ingrao and Emmert 2012). The diversity of historians provides a rich account to be used for reconciliation. Likewise, in order to deal with the issues of expropriation during World War II, Austria created a commission with historians from different countries and invited Jewish representatives (Barkan 2009, 900). The Alliance for Historical Dialogue and Accountability also seeks to give individuals the tools to deconstruct historical narratives for themselves, to challenge past myths. Historians could become examples for collaborative works that can lead to reconciliation.

Historians involved in post-conflict and reconciliation processes must be particularly careful with the consequences and uses of historical production. Barkan asks several questions about how historians should address contested versions of the past.

Does constructing a "shared" narrative mean giving equal time to all sides? How do the goals of delegitimizing the nationalist historical myths that feed ethnic hatred and conflict converge with the aim to construct, through history, a new national identity?

(2009, 903)

One aspect is to delegitimize nationalistic and xenophobic uses of the past for present-day political uses. Historians could also work at providing space for competing popular interpretations of the past. In Northern Ireland, Healing Through Remembering (HTR) has provided public spaces to discuss the different interpretations of the Northern Irish conflict. In *Everyday Items Transformed by Conflict*, HTR enabled people to provide and comment on everyday objects that they thought symbolized the conflict. The multiple voices and interpretations present the complexity of the conflict and the multiple perspectives. Those historical approaches are particularly interesting to design history textbooks in divisive societies (Cole and Barsalou 2006).

Notes

- 1 See Chapter 13.
- 2 The author thanks Rebecca Conard for her comments on the shift from civic engagement to social justice.
- 3 See Chapter 3.
- 4 Social Justice Alliance for Museums, <http://sjam.org/about-us/>. See the case studies at <http://sjam.org/case-studies/> (accessed November 15, 2015).
- 5 Active History website, homepage, <http://activehistory.ca/> (accessed August 27, 2015).
- 6 See Chapter 11.
- 7 The law was introduced by Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawai'i and Representative Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne) of Colorado.
- 8 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's website, www.trc.ca/websites/reconciliation/index.php?p=312 (accessed November 13, 2014).
- 9 Missing Children Project, TRCC's website, www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=823 (accessed August 31, 2015).
- 10 Likewise, the NMAI has a Repatriation Office to work on Native American objects, <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/repatriation/> (accessed November 12, 2014).
- 11 About identification, in 2009, 38,671 individual human remains, 998,731 funeral objects, 144,163 unassociated funerary objects, 4,303 sacred objects, 948 objects of cultural patrimony, and 822 objects that are both sacred and patrimonial had been registered and published by the NAGPRA program, www.nps.gov/nagpra/FAQ/INDEX.HTM#What_is_NAGPRA? (accessed August 31, 2015).
- 12 Opened in 1962, the House of Slaves intends to memorialize – through its Door of No Return – the final exit point of the slaves from Africa. See the virtual tour, <http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/en/index.shtml> (accessed September 5, 2015).
- 13 See Chapter 2, pp. 66–67.
- 14 The author would like to thank Rebecca Conard for the suggestion.
- 15 The Liverpool museums website, www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/about/index.aspx (accessed September 5, 2015).
- 16 There is actually already a National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls (NY), www.womenofthehall.org/ (accessed August 30, 2015).
- 17 To know more about the arguments in favor of the NWHM, see www.nwhm.org/about-nwhm/; to know more about their exhibits, see www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/ (accessed November 21, 2014).
- 18 For a list of university partners, see <http://gitmomemory.org/televisual-monitor/?panel=5&refresh=5> (accessed November 13, 2014).
- 19 For the list of questions, see <http://gitmomemory.org/televisual-monitor/?panel=10&refresh=5> (accessed November 27, 2014).
- 20 The Oral History of Homelessness's website, <http://ststephensmpls.org/oralhistory/project.html> (accessed August 31, 2015).
- 21 "El olvido está lleno de memoria" can be translated as "oblivion is filled with memory."
- 22 See, for instance, Jacques Chirac's recognition, in 1995, of France's responsibility for deporting thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps during the German occupation in World War

II. As well, the U.S. "Congress issued a formal apology to native Hawaiians in 1993 for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii by the United States government in 1893" (Weyeneth 2001, 13).

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