Introduction

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> I think that a pro historian might cloud the issues by having their own strong points of view. I prefer the simplistic way of researching one's own interests and helping others with similar aims.[1]

This quote from a member of an internet local history discussion group focused on Warrington in the north of England may be depressing reading for public historians interested in exploring different ways of interacting with people, to create, as Grele has famously put it, 'shared authority'. The instigator of this particular debate on the website was a post-graduate student of public history. He found to his chagrin that his previously accepted status within the group, as a resident of Warrington interested in the past, was not

enhanced but instead undermined by his academic historiographical knowledge.

Jorma Kalela has recently confronted this dilemma of the relationship between a professional historian and those who make history for their own interest in his new book, *Making History*.[2] Describing his work with the Finnish Paperiliitto trade union in the 1980s, he created 40 research circles of 200 workers engaged actively with the past in which they defined their own parameters for the making of history:

> Once they had accepted the idea that they had the same right to define the substance of history as a professional historian, the circles proliferated. This agitation was the hard way in which I discovered that the traditional academic concept of history that I had taken for granted was, by its nature, patronizing… They had to have the right to study what in their view was their own history, rather than take for granted a ready-made concept of it.[3]

Such engagement relies on both experience *and* personal interest in the subject matter. People need to have 'affinity with the topics debated', as Ludmilla Jordanova has put it, rather than simply acting as 'audiences for the discussions of others'.[4] Certainly engaging people other than as mere audiences has been a focus of discussion for many public historians including those working in Britain, where public funding invariably raises 'inclusion' as a criteria. State strategies for incorporationism are flourishing.

Laurajane Smith, Paul Shackel and Gary Campbell have criticised the tendency in the heritage field, particularly in Britain, for practitioners to adopt cultural policies of 'social inclusion' of marginalised groups, often defined in terms of class and ethnicity. 'All too often', they note, 'these initiatives, though superficially worthy, if overly earnest, do not work to democratise heritage. Rather they work in an assimilationist fashion, where members of marginalised groups are urged to emulate the form of cultural consumption of the middle classes'.[5] In similar vein drawing on her own experience of working on slavery and racism in the former slaving town of Bristol, Madge Dresser has commented that 'true public accessibility also involves the cultivation of trusting, organic relationships… This can be a time-consuming process needing imaginative and sensitive approaches. It is not always assessable by the reductionist tick-box methods so often favored by officialdom'.[6]

CRITICISMS OF CURRENT PRACTICE

This issue of *Public History Review* discusses aspects of the distinctive role of public historians that goes beyond an approach simply aimed at bringing in people to exhibitions or making historical knowledge 'accessible'. Emily Duthie, for example, critically engages with the current projects of the British Museum, which include creating new audiences through imaginative trails and exhibitions, not least, the current offer curated by Turner prizewinner Grayson Perry. She notes the imperialist origins of the institution and the way in which the removal of objects from a 'colonial periphery' to an imperial centre changed the ways in which they were interpreted. She analyses the way in which Neil McGregor, the latest director, has tried to overturn the perception of the museum as the quintessential imperial institution that looted the world and acquired the trophies of global power for the glorification of Britain. Nevertheless it has fiercely rejected attempts at returning such looted goods, most famously the so-called Elgin marbles, to their countries of origin. Far from moving forward in a post-imperial world the museum has, she argues, re-enacted the attitudes and ethics of its imperial founders.

Rob Baum, too, looks critically at museums, specifically two United States Holocaust museums. Her focus is first on the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance and its intended impact upon the visitor and the creation of 'experience' based on techniques 'lifted from Stanislavski, Meyerhold and meta-theatre'. She analyses the way in which the museums are seeking to engage an audience and to create a particular emotional outcome. The forms of presentation do, apparently, engage, particularly in the form of computer screens, resembling a video arcade. But as Baum asks the reader, 'What do [children] learn from having this power to manipulate imagery on their consoles – rejecting parts of history they find boring or too remote, looking for action and reveling in violent death?' Turning to the Washington Holocaust museum her emphasis is upon its 'self-conscious Americanization' impressing the visitor with an order and aesthetic that is specifically American. Thus, she argues, the Holocaust is presented as a 'foreign evil, and liberation of the camps as an event for which Americans took physical and moral responsibility'. Critical of museums' emphasis on entertainment she critically engages with what it means to provide 'an *experience of* the past.' This contrasts with what she sees as a worthier mandate, the provision of 'an observable past, elucidated by those who know more about it than those who visit.'

Underpinning both these articles are implicit criticisms of the role of some public historians or curators. Certainly their intentions are not usually made explicit in museum displays. A honourable exception is the recent 'War horse: fact or fiction?' temporary exhibition in the National Army Museum in London. This arises from then highly successful play based on the novel by Michael Murpungo, staged by the National Theatre (and now turned into a film by Steven Spielberg). An explicit feature of the exhibition is an emphasis on remembrance and collective memory. Near the end of the exhibition is a large horizontal display cabinet in the centre of the room consisting of rows and rows of small white outline horses with two named from the play. The accompanying text states: 'You have learnt about a lot of named horses in the exhibition, horses like Joey. Many of them were not as lucky as him. Help us to remember these forgotten heroes by naming them and decorating a paper horse and putting it on the Remembrance wall'. The wall already contains such testimony. One of the final panels defines remembrance as a feature of collective memory thus being explicit about the rationale of this part of the exhibition.[7]

As James Gardner argued in the last issue of *Public History Review*, 'We are often our own worst enemy, failing to share what we do. If we want the public to value what we do, we need to share the process of history'.[8] Opening up the premises underpinning exhibitions (or books) can assist in widening the historical process and, as Gardner has described it, facilitating a way of understanding and making meaning. With conventional history this rarely happens. Distinguished British historian and former pro-vice chancellor of the University of Oxford, Sir Keith Thomas, recently wittily described his 'technique' in the *London Review of Books*:

> It never helps historians to say too much about their working methods. For just as the conjuror's magic disappears if the audience knows how the trick is done, so the credibility of scholars can be sharply diminished if readers learn everything about how exactly their books came to be written. Only too often, such revelations dispel the impression of fluent, confident omniscience; instead they suggest that histories are concocted by error-prone human beings who patch together the results of incomplete research in order to construct an account whose rhetorical power will, they hope, compensate for gaps in the argument and deficiencies in the evidence.

Perhaps that is why few historians tell us how they set about their task…[9]

In different vein, but responding to the same problem, Kalela has lamented, 'That the historian selects his or her audience has been tragically covered up: it is an issue disregarded by the profession even though every historian is confronted with it… As regards the research questions asked, a universal single audience remains an undisclosed premise.'[10]

PROCESSES OF ENGAGEMENT

Certainly those who define themselves as imaginative public historians have attempted both to explain the historiographical process and to make it as open as possible.[11] Alan Rice, for example, has done much to bring into the public spaces of the twenty-first century Britain's slaving past. This includes the creation of a public memorial 'Captured Africans' in Lancaster, at one time the fourth largest slave trading port in Britain, and co-curating the exhibition 'Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery' in Manchester. As Rice realises, history is not about a past that is finished, settled or gone but a process by which the past is brought into the present. Significantly, as Rice demonstrates in his own practice and analysis, the engagement in different ways with people other than professional historians including artists, teachers and activists as creators of meaning will influence significantly the type of history being developed.

In an attempt to challenge the 'morbidity of heritage'[12] the Manchester exhibition explicitly included the very debates the curators had had about the objects they should display. The discussion of this process was particularly illuminating over the inclusion of four doll-like models of slaves created by the Samuel family to apparently mark the freeing of their slaves. While the figures were individualised and dressed imaginatively they were also crude caricatured images. There was discussion whether the cost of even conserving such models was justified and it was realised that 'the very unveiling of such troubling objects could prove problematic for many visitors'. Eventually the objects were displayed alongside labels showing the discussion amongst the co-curators that revealed that even they did not agree on a reading of the dolls. In addition visitors were invited to add their comments, which included those criticising the curators' critical stance by arguing that the dolls were not intended to be racist.[13] Such an exchange is rare

particularly when curators are fearful of being seen to permit potentially racist comments.

The Slave Trade Arts Memorial Project (STAMP) involved community activists, creative workers, councillors and academics with Rice as the project's academic advisor. This Lancaster-based project obtained funding to engage with schools and community groups and to create a memorial that would adequately represent generations to come as well as the past and the present: a 'memorial that converses memory without being conservative'. The result was 'Captured Africans' by Kevin Dalton- Johnson erected on Lancaster's quay.[14] This was not a project in which the 'expert' told the 'people' the facts of a moment of history and corrected any perceived misunderstandings. Rather, it was an exemplary public history project in which, as Michael Frisch has described it, there was 'a broadly distributed authority for making new sense of the past in the present'.[15]

The project achieved new ways of thinking about the past and bringing it into the present not by the scholarship of an individual historian but by all those involved in the project 'reaching in to discover the humanity they share'.[16] Rice's role within the project inevitably drew on his scholarship but this was not separated from his political commitment to facilitating broad understandings of the past, and his belief that there are many pasts that should be remembered.

MATERIALS FOR THE CREATION OF HISTORIES

Inevitably, as Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton have recently reminded us, there are different perceptions of what it means to be a public historian. The metaphor of a house with many rooms to categorise 'history' was one they usefully adopted in their new book *History at the Crossroads*. As they noted, 'Different groups inhabit various quarters… Some of these people inhabit more than one room while many make occasional visits to other parts of the house… Many from the academy insist that they are in possession of the house. But several of the residents are a little restless'.[17]

Such restlessness might include challenging the historian's conventional focus on archival 'sources' and looking imaginatively at different materials to make the ordinary extraordinary.

Mandi O'Neill takes as a starting point the role of archives, the mainstay of any historian – irrespective of the 'room' into which we place ourselves. In a previous issue of *Public History Review* Joanna Sassoon drew our attention to the constructed nature of archives.[18] O'Neill develops Sassoon's work in a case study that considers the

implications of gate-keeping with reference to two community archives in Wales, that of The Butetown History and Arts Centre (BHAC) which has recorded oral interviews with women from the Cardiff community of Butetown ('Tiger Bay'), and Archif Menywod Cymru / Women's Archive of Wales (WAW) working to 'rescue' sources of women's history across Wales. Butetown has been seen as an important site of debates on the nature of multicultural Britain with the mixed heritage community based on relationships between Asian, Caribbean and African sailors and Welsh women dating back many decades. The very 'popularity' of this community has created a number of questions.

While interviews with the local people have been conducted, access to them is denied since the intentions of researchers may be deemed to be different to those of the original interviewers. What started as a community project has over time shifted to a more conventional arts and culture project with the original relationship between the community and 'facilitators' shifting in the process. As O'Neill argues since the project is more concerned with the ways in which people from the community can represent themselves *now* it means that the recorded voices of earlier generations are rarely heard. In turn, she suggests, the stereotyping and negative representations of these women remain unchallenged. In different vein the WAW has used its road shows in which women brought along their own ephemera to intervene in locally held official archives to create awareness of different women's histories.

Others have seen a role for public historians in drawing attention to the wide range of material existing outside archives. Dwight Pitcaithley has recently described the way in which he became a public historian of the United States National Parks Service. One of his first assignments was analysing the remains of machines for processing bat guano in a cave with a 180-foot vertical drop into which he was obliged to drop. It forced him to 'recognise that historians could find research material almost anywhere'.[19] In similar vein in this volume Andrew Hassam asks us to recognise the value of thinking about Indian jute as a new starting point for histories. He is not concerned as such with what was contained in sacks made of the material – which is often noted – but rather what is not seen, the containers of such goods. The absence of such items in public collections should be rectified, he argues, for jute sacks substantiate the lived experience of those who worked with them, and illustrate collectivities, like socio-economic class, or race or gender that extend beyond the immediate locale. He notes that community–based museums are more likely to contain examples of the quotidian, of what is important locally to the people who donate.[20] However, the inclusion

of such material is not to reflect back to people what they already know about their own experience but rather it has the capacity to change and destabilise established histories.

Alexander Trapeznik also considers material in the landscape originating from the industrial past of New Zealand for the creation of histories in the present. As David Atkinson has previously observed in discussing what he calls 'mundane places' numbers of people both see 'more history all around them, while also seeing more *of* their histories too'.[21] While recent work has tended to focus on the non-industrial landscape of New Zealand,[22] Trapeznik considers rather more neglected places, such as those on the Dunedin waterfront. By drawing attention to industrial and mercantile buildings he stresses the importance of the legacy of structures resulting from colonial developments in areas such as agriculture, mining, shipping, railways and processing industries. The traces of industrial and mercantile practices in the physical landscape demonstrate, he argues, the interconnectedness and development of commercial enterprises for at least a century from the 1870s. In such buildings the past in brought into the present in physical ways, time being crossed in one space.[23] Such buildings provide us with opportunities to challenge the notion of the repository of history being in the archive or the curated museum exhibition. As Trapeznik concludes, the Dunedin waterfront precinct is a cultural landscape that both reflects social institutions and relations, *and* has helped shape social relations.

MOVING BEYOND THE PARAMETERS OF 'HISTORY'

Many innovative pubic historians have turned their attention to the plethora of forms in which the past is presented. This trajectory was well covered at the international public history colloquia held at UTS towards the end of 2010 including discussion on various uses of multimedia and the internet.[24] Often starting points for the creation of imaginative analysis of the past originate outside the 'house of history' constructed by Ashton and Hamilton. Novelists such as Kate Grenville or Sarah Waters in their respective fiction[25] or artists such as Jeremy Deller, Christine McCauley[26] or Jane Palm-Gold have in recent years done much to address the importance of the past in illuminating ways. Jane Palm-Gold for example produced an engaging exhibition in London earlier this year originating from the scenes she observed outside her flat in central London, opposite the site of the nineteenth-century Rookery. Later working with archaeologist Sian Anthony she both brought to light traces of the cellars and underground passages that helped facilitate easy egress for criminals of an earlier age as well as using Hogarth's images of

the locality superimposed on her own work to create different narratives of the area.[27]

In analysing a joint historian-artist project centred on Cannon Hall in the West Riding of Yorkshire, Martin Bashforth and Patricia Bashforth argue that inter-disciplinarity and collaboration between historians and experts in others fields such as art open possibilities for moving away from over-interpreted mediation. Here they discuss the ways in which artist–historian engagement can lead to the creation of space to bring imagination into play. In explaining their own reaction to being reduced to tears by particular works in the house they say, unconvincingly, 'Perhaps historians with this level of vulnerability should not be let near historical documents?' Yet, as they realise, the opening up of vulnerability leads to different understandings. Processes common to historians were destabilised by working with the artistic element leading in turn to new ways of thinking.

Paul Martin takes such discussion further. Starting from the assumption that public history can be understood as a field of contestation he argues that one role of a public historian is to problematise, to find fault with or to note omission in a dominant or received narrative and take issue with it. His article focuses on unofficial popular music compilations on CD-R of 1960s music. He too is a participant in this practice. In similar vein, the Pew Centre for Arts and Heritage in Philadelphia has published a substantial volume entitled *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. In the Introduction, the editors argue that:

> The traditional expertise of the history museum seems to be challenged at every turn. Web 2.0 invites ordinary people to become their own archivists, curators, historians, and designers as they organize images on Snapfish, identify artifacts through Flickr, post text on wikis, and create websites with WordPress and Weebly. Bricks-and-mortar museums, meanwhile, in pursuit of "civic engagement," give community members more say in what stories the museum showcases and how they get told. Exhibitions frequently shun the authoritative voice.[28]

Paul Martin reflects on a survey he conducted with various online practitioners, analysing the responses of those who engage in such compilations. He sees this both as an exchange of ideas and the construction of social knowledge. While acknowledging that the participants themselves would not define themselves as public

historians, or indeed historians of any sort, he nevertheless states that a historical, archaeological and taxonomic mindset is clearly discernable in the responses. For him, then, his role as a public historian can be to offer another way of seeing and questioning the gate-keeping role of historical authority. It is also about identifying everyday 'moments', where the impact of change is shown to be experienced.

Such discussions on the very practice of history and the varied activities of practitioners are a far cry from an approach to history that sees a monograph as a normative output. In a recent odd article in The (British) Royal Historical Society *Newsletter* Ian Mortimer wrote a contribution suggesting, as if this was an earth-shattering revelation, 'that it might be possible to arrest the decline of the academic monograph by encouraging scholars to write for a wider audience'.[29] The proposition as such is sound. But the idea is hardly unusual or new. In different vein in a recent discussion on H-net public history there was coverage of the New York Historical Society's latest exhibit, *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn*. As one contributor put it, 'I want to say we need a law that keeps historians away from history exhibits. I say this only half in jest.'[30]

Initiatives such as the colloquia organised in September 2010 by the Australian Centre for Public History at UTS or the material analysed in this latest issue of *Public History Review* indicate, however, that there is much imaginative practice internationally in the field. It also suggests that there is indeed a role for public historians today.

I started with a perhaps troubling quote from one the Warrington internet historians. I finish with another of the group suggesting a more positive way of thinking about the role of all of us who engage in historical practice:

> History you learn is mainly wrong due to any number of
> reasons, but your own is gathered by your own
> experience and is partly right. That is why I enjoy the
> history on here because we share our experience and that
> gives us a greater knowledge for the truth.[31]

Endnotes

[1] David H. as quoted in Graham Brinksman, 'Internet Social Networking: And the Role it Plays in Public History', unpublished MA in Public History portfolio, Ruskin College, Oxford, portfolio, 2011.
[2] Jorma Kalela, *Making History*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2011.
[3] Kalela, *Making History*, pp55; 63.

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4 Ludmilla Jordanova as cited in Holger Hoock Introduction, *The Public Historian,* vol 32, no 3, August 2010, p18.

5 Laurajane Smith, Paul A. Shackel and Gary Campbell, Introduction, *Class Still Matters: Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes*, Routledge, London, 2011, p13.

6 Madge Dresser, 'Politics, Populism, and Professionalism: Reflections on the Role of the Academic Historian in the Production of Public History', *The Public Historian*, vol 32, no 3, August 2010, pp62-3.

7 For a fuller discussion of the exhibition see Hilda Kean, 'Challenges for historians writing animal-human history: What is really enough?', *Anthrozoos*, forthcoming 2012.

8 James B. Gardner, 'Trust, Risk and Public History: A View from the United States', *Public History Review*, vol 17, 2010, p54.

9 Keith Thomas, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 10 June 2010, p36.

10 Kalela, *Making History*, p52.

11 See for example the recent collection of Mark Leone, *Critical Historical Archaeology*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, 2010.

12 Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2010, p45.

13 Rice, *Creating Memorials*, p69.

14 Rice, *Creating Memorials*, p48. See also, Hilda Kean, 'Personal and Public Histories: Issues in the Presentation of the Past', in Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008.

15 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, University of New York Press, New York, 1990, pxiii.

16 David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2001, p210.

17 Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past*, Halstead Press, Sydney, p8.

18 Joanna Sassoon, 'Phantoms of Remembrance: Libraries and Archives as "The Collective Memory"', *Public History Review*, vol 10, 2003, pp40-60.

19 Dwight T. Pitcaithley, 'Taking the Long Way from Euterpe to Clio', in James M. Banner and John R.Gillis (eds), *Becoming Historians*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, p61.

20 I certainly found the Gundagai museum of interest when I visited a few years ago and viewed specimens of barbed wire found in different Australian states. ('Public history and two Australian dogs: Islay & the dog on the tucker box', *Australian Cultural History*, vol 24, 2006, pp135-62.

21 David Atkinson, 'The Heritage of Mundane Places' in Graham and Howard, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, p381.

22 See, for example, Sally Morgan, '"To fill this Void Land": Acclimatisation as Mnemonic Device in Victorian New Zealand', in *Memory Connection,* vol 1, no 1, December 2011, pp99-113; *Contained Memory* http://www.memoryconnection.org/; eds Kynan Gentry and Gavin McLean (eds), *Heartlands: New Zealand historians write about places where history happened*, Penguin, Auckland, 2006.

23 See Doreen Massey, 'Places and their Pasts', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 39, 1995, pp182-92.

24 Contributions included those on the work of the New South Wales Migration Heritage Centre (John Petersen), Visualising the past in Three D (Peter Read), opportunities with web 2.0 (Tikka Wilson) or the online multimedia Sydney city biography (Lisa Murray).

25 See for example, Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*, 2005, *The Lieutenant*, 2008; Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch*, 2006, *The Little Stranger*, 2009.

26 See for example, Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, a re-enactment of the miners' strike of 1984-5, *Folk Archive*, an investigation of folk /popular/vernacular art <http://www.jeremydeller.org/>; Christine McCauley, *Bedtime Stories, Timeline* http://www.christinemccauley.co.uk/>.

27 'London's Underworld Unearthed: The Secret Life of the Rookery', Coningsby Gallery, London, May 2011. She discussed her work at the Public History Discussion Group at the Bishopsgate Institute in November 2011, http://janepalmgold.com/>.

28 Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski (eds), *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, The Pew Centre for Arts & Heritage, Philadelphia, 2011, p11.

29 Ian Mortimer 'New vessels for New History', *Newsletter*, Royal Historical Society, 5 May 2010, pp4-5.

30 Consider This: Response to Alan Singer, Darlene Roth, PhD, <www.h-net.org/~public> 14 December 2011.

31 Kenny S quoted in Brinksman, 'Internet Social Networking', p4.