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# *Historians and Their Publics*

## Passionate Histories: “Outsider” History-Makers and What They Teach Us

BENJAMIN FILENE

**Abstract:** Even as museums and sites struggle to attract audiences and bemoan the public’s lack of interest in history, people working *outside* museums and universities, without professional training, and often without funding, are approaching history in ways that fire the enthusiasm of thousands. Unmoored by institutional expectations, they are what we might call “outsider history-makers”: genealogists, heritage tourism developers, and re-enactors, among others. They establish emotional connections to the past that operate on the level of instinct more than intellect. As public history professionalizes, the field seems increasingly at odds with this approach. The efforts of the outsiders, however, suggest new strategies for drawing passionate audiences to museums and point to new sets of skills that public history training programs should be teaching their students.

**Key words:** Popular history-making, museum exhibitions, genealogy, professionalization, public history education

IT SEEMS STRAIGHTFORWARD: public history should reach the public. Yet museums and historic sites struggle to make history matter to audiences. We defenders of museums fight to sustain attendance, secure funding, and defend their niches in our communities, and we ask, Why don’t people understand history? Why don’t they share our passion for the past? Why don’t they see our institutions as essential to their lives? We need people to *care* about museums—care *personally, emotionally, viscerally*, the way they do about

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their schools, their health care, their neighborhoods. That's what makes people pay their admission, send in their membership dues, lobby their legislators. People are glad to have their history museums around, but do they love them?

Perhaps the problem isn't with "them," the public, but with "us," the museums. While many museums have worked earnestly—and sometimes successfully—to make their institutions more engaging and accessible, most fail to capture the spark that makes history come alive. What does that spark look like and where can we find it?

Some clues lie just beyond the museums' doors. People working *outside* museums and universities, without professional training, and often without funding, are approaching history in ways that fire the enthusiasm of thousands. They are genealogists, heritage tourism developers, re-enactors, collectors, interviewers, bloggers, scrapbookers, and artists. Unmoored by institutional expectations, they are what we might call "outsider history-makers." They respect the past, but unbound by professional affiliation or, often, training, they can break the rules about disciplinary rigor, form, and footnotes. For them, the past is not remote and dead but a comfortable companion. Freed from scholarly and professional conventions, they create passionate histories and revel in the past as a living, sustaining resource.

What does history look like in the hands of these outsiders? Can their approach translate into good work *inside* museums? And if so, why hasn't it taken hold more securely within the museum world? What does that say about the public history and museum studies programs training the field's next generations of professionals?

### ***Passionate Values***

More than a decade ago, David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig's survey of American attitudes showed that although people may have negative associations with the term "history," they embrace "the past," which they define in highly personal and familiar terms. They treasure the stories their grandmothers tell; when they go to museums, objects prompt them to reminisce about the old cars *they* used to drive, the heavy irons *their* mothers used to heft. The audiences for history are out there, Thelen and Rosenzweig assured us, and museums seemed perfectly situated to reach them.<sup>1</sup>

Striving to make these connections, a host of scholars and practitioners explored how public history institutions could reach broader audiences. There is a pattern to these titles: *Museums and Communities*, *Museums and Com-*

1. David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

community, *Museums and Their Communities*, *Museum and Source Communities*, *A Museums and Communities Toolkit*.<sup>2</sup> Despite this explosion of interest in connecting museums and historic sites to their constituents, most history museums and sites seem just as marginal to community life as they were twenty years ago. Cary Carson, formerly vice president at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, recently wondered in *The Public Historian* if history museums and sites may be facing a "nosedive into oblivion": "News of dead or dying institutions appears regularly in the public press," he wrote. "No national organization keeps statistics on museum attendance . . . , [but] the perception goes unchallenged that paid attendance at history museums has plunged in the last five years."<sup>3</sup> The audience-research firm Reach Advisors reports that history institutions are particularly vulnerable. Its 2007 study found that "History museums and historic sites showed the lowest popularity among the eight types of museums measured in this survey, with only 31% visiting historic sites and 23% visiting history museums. Additionally, for all demographic groups, history museums are the least popular."<sup>4</sup> In 2007, leaders in the field met at a conference center in Kykuit (a Rockefeller family estate near Tarrytown, New York) to discuss the crises facing historic sites. James Vaughan, vice president for Stewardship of Historic Sites at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, concluded, "[M]any of America's historic sites are experiencing declining attendance, financial instability, and poor stewardship, and they are in-

2. Ivan Karp, *Museums and Communities* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Sheila Watson, *Museums and Their Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2007); *Museum and Source Communities*, ed. Alison K. Brown and Laura Peers (New York: Routledge, 2003); W. Turrentine Jackson, *A Museums and Communities Toolkit* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002). Some other key titles in this discussion include Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999); Robert R. Archibald, *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004); *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, ed. Ellen Hirzy (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002); *Museums in the Life of the City*, ed. Portia Hamilton-Sperr and Ellen Cockran Hirzy (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1995); Portia Hamilton-Sperr, *Museums in the Social and Economic Life of a City* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998); and Pam Korza, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, and Andrea Assaf, *Civic Dialogue, Arts & Culture: Findings from Animating Democracy* (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2005).

3. Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B?" *The Public Historian* 30, no. 4 (November 2008): 9, 11 (emphasis in the original). Carson goes on to speculate that the problem is even more deep-seated than most observers have recognized: "[T]he fact [is] that visitation has been trending downward, not just for the last five or six years, not just since 9/11, but for more than twenty years. So out the window go all the explanations that start with terrorism, gas prices, Republican tightwads, and other up-close bogeymen. Attendance figures going back to the 1970s are even less reliable than recent counts. But the trend is unmistakable" [15–16]. Author Nina Simon agrees, summarizing a 2008 National Endowment for the Arts report: "Over the last twenty years, audiences for museums, galleries, and performing arts institutions have decreased, and the audiences that remain are older and whiter than the overall population." Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (San Francisco: Creative Commons, 2010), i.

4. Museum Audience Insight, "Family Visitation at Museums, Part II: Historic Sites and History Museums," [http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum\\_audience\\_insight/2007/10/auguste-news-f.html](http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2007/10/auguste-news-f.html) (accessed November 29, 2011).

creasingly viewed by their communities as irrelevant and unresponsive to the societal changes around them.”<sup>5</sup> The recession has only increased the squeeze on history institutions, particularly as cities and states cut their budgets.<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of this demoralizing news, there is a buzz of activity and energy about history in a vibrant underworld—except it’s not very subterranean but everywhere around us. History is thriving in popular culture—on TV, in films and novels, online, and in people’s living rooms.<sup>7</sup> If interest in the past is booming while museums and sites are struggling, we need to reassess. Perhaps we in museums have focused too much on what we think people need instead of what they want. What drives outsider historians?

For starters, they don’t think of themselves as outsiders. They aren’t consciously defining themselves in opposition to universities, museums, and historic sites. In some ways, the truth is more disquieting: instead of defying museums and universities, the outsiders mostly don’t think about them at all. It’s worse to be ignored than disdained. The outsiders are just pursuing history that means something to them as directly as possible. Above all, that involves establishing emotional connections to the past. If one looks at varieties of outsider history, certain themes or preoccupations surface: one sees an emphasis on family, voice, place, and time travel—core themes that operate on the level of instinct more than intellect. These themes are not edgy, but in their understated way, the values they embody fundamentally challenge the work of professional historians, pointing to a more personal and passionate approach to the past. At the same time, these values can help us see how to transcend the divide between “outsiders” and “insiders”—the separation between amateur historians and professionals.

These barriers are not absolute, of course. Some academic historians pursue genealogy and some genealogists have Ph.D.s, just as many museums have hired re-enactors and many re-enactors love museums. The divisions remain real, though, and to truly break them down, we will need to look beyond our narrow professional identities and focus on how and when public audiences

5. James Vaughan, “Introduction: The Call for a National Conversation,” *Forum Journal* 22 (Spring 2008), <http://www.preservationnation.org/forum/library/journal-marketing/spring-2008/> (accessed November 29, 2011). Other observers have identified a particular crisis in historic house museums: “Why are so many house museums and villages struggling?” asks Gary N. Smith, longtime director of the Dallas Heritage Village. “House Museum Partnerships with Local Governments: A Broken Model?” *History News* 66 (Spring 2011): 21. See also Richard Moe, “Are There Too Many House Museums?” *Forum Journal* 16 (Spring 2002): 4–11.

6. For instance, see “Timeline: Museums and the Recession,” *ArtInfo* (June 29, 2009): <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/31099/timeline-museums-and-the-recession/> (accessed November 29, 2011). A 2010 report by Alliance for the Arts finds that “the most severe cuts have been made by history museums and zoos and gardens.” “The Recession and the Arts: The Impact of the Economic Downturn on Nonprofit Cultural Organizations of New York City” (New York: Alliance for the Arts, May 2010), <http://www.allianceforarts.org/pdfs/051910%20Recession%20%26%20the%20Arts%20II.pdf> (accessed November 29, 2011).

7. In tracing the varieties of popular historical expression in contemporary Britain, Jerome de Groot identifies what he calls an “Historiocopia—overflowing plenty and abundance of meaning.” De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

actually engage with—and care about—the past. Exploring each of the values behind outsider histories can help us understand how these approaches to the past sustain practitioners and audiences. That understanding, in turn, can point to common ground among history-makers of all stripes and, importantly, suggest how to bring passionate histories into museums.

For an example of the power of family in history, consider genealogists, perhaps the ultimate outsider history-makers in their passionate dedication, the self-contained scope of their work, and the disdain with which they are regarded by “real” historians. The hobby of genealogy dates back at least to the late nineteenth century, when pioneer associations and organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution (founded in 1890) began tracing family lineages. The practice surged with the popularity of *Roots* in the 1970s and then again in recent years with technologies such as ancestry.com.<sup>8</sup> John Falk and Beverly Sheppard report that genealogy today is second only to gardening as a hobby.<sup>9</sup>

Popular media have taken notice. Since 2004, the BBC has broadcast *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>?</sup>, an hour-long documentary in which a celebrity traces his or her family tree. Sixty episodes had been broadcast by the end of 2010, and a magazine of the same title spun off.<sup>10</sup> In 2006, PBS aired *African American Lives*, a miniseries hosted by Henry Louis Gates that used historical research and DNA testing to trace back the family lines of prominent African Americans such as Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg, followed in 2008 by Tina Turner, Chris Rock, Maya Angelou, and others. An American version of the *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>?</sup> series premiered on NBC in 2010 and followed the roots of celebrities such as actress Sarah Jessica Parker, singers Lionel Ritchie and Tim McGraw, football player Emmitt Smith, and former TV *Friend* Lisa Kudrow (who serves as executive producer of the show).<sup>11</sup>

If genealogy is the most striking example of the draw of family, StoryCorps is the exemplar of the power of voice. Launched in 2003, the brainchild of radio producer Dave Isay, the project is built on a deceptively simple premise. Participants, usually in pairs, interview each other in a soundproof recording booth, sitting across from each other at a table with a desk lamp and two microphones, Kleenex at hand.<sup>12</sup> A trained facilitator runs the recording equip-

8. Sheila O'Hare, “Genealogy and History,” *Common-place* 2 (April 2002); <http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-03/ohare/> (accessed June 30, 2011).

9. John H. Falk and Beverly K. Sheppard, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 68.

10. BBC, *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>?</sup>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007t575/episodes> (accessed May 31, 2011); IMDb, “Episode List for ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’,” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0429466/episodes> (accessed June 30, 2011); *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>?</sup> magazine <http://www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/issue/june-2011> (accessed May 31, 2011).

11. NBC, *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>?</sup> <http://www.nbc.com/who-do-you-think-you-are/> (accessed May 31, 2011).

12. Occasionally, individual participants are interviewed by the facilitators. See, e. g., Dave Isay, ed., *Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project* (New York: Penguin, 2007): 86, 207.

Some of the points here are drawn from a fuller analysis of StoryCorps and its approach to

ment, and, sometimes, interjects a question. The session lasts forty minutes, after which the participants receive one CD copy of the interview while a second copy is sent to Washington, D.C., to be archived at the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center.<sup>13</sup> The project started with a recording booth in Grand Central station, but interest was so high that in 2005 two mobile recording booths, built into silver Airstream trailers, began touring the country.<sup>14</sup> Also in 2005, National Public Radio started airing edited excerpts each week, and the project became a phenomenon, spawning two books and a series of animated shorts on PBS.<sup>15</sup>

The point of StoryCorps is not to gather new information about the past but to foreground first-person perspectives. Although the Library of Congress archives all the interviews, the power of the project lies in personal poignancy, not encyclopedic breadth. In one interview broadcast on NPR, Sam Harmon reflects that the saddest day of his life came when he was in the Navy during World War II. Stationed in Norfolk, he drove to Washington, D.C., for the day. After walking among the monuments, he decided to go the movies and approached the glass ticket booth: "I reached my hand [in] to get the ticket and lay down the money. [The ticket-seller] pulled it back. . . . She saw my black hand and refused to sell me a ticket. [In reflection on the glass] the Capitol dome was superimposed on her angry face. . . ." In another piece, Debra A. Fisher recalls how her father carried with him the legacy of his experience at Auschwitz. "He never waited on line. I remember that. . . . Because the line was for people to die, and that was how he framed his life."<sup>16</sup> StoryCorps invites ordinary people to see their personal experiences as history.

In sharing such stories, StoryCorps humanizes history for listeners and invites them to engage with it emotionally. That emotion gets transmitted to listeners through the masterfully edited vignettes produced for NPR. The narrators' voices stand alone, without voice-over. The tone is conversational, but the pieces are selected and edited so that their voices overflow with pain and warmth. Every two-minute piece becomes a catharsis. The project's deputy director, Matt Ozug, characterizes the typical StoryCorps radio feature as "this tiny little highly crafted piece . . . , very highly produced audio that's like genetically engineered to be tear-jerking and, you know, make people—I mean

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history in Benjamin Filene, "Listening Intently: Can StoryCorps Teach Museums How to Win the Hearts of New Audiences?" In *Letting Go: Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011), 174–93.

13. "The StoryCorps Interview Step by Step," in "Ask Now, Listen Forever," ca. 2008, promotional brochure in author's possession.

14. Media Advisory: News Conference to Announce Launch of Mobile StoryCorps Booths at Library of Congress," StoryCorps Press Kit (May 18, 2005), in StoryCorps Corporate Subject File, folder 1, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

15. Isay, *Listening Is an Act of Love*, 103. In addition to *Listening Is an Act of Love*, Isay published *Mom: A Celebration of Mothers from StoryCorps* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010); StoryCorps, "Animation," <http://storycorps.org/animation> (accessed June 27, 2011).

16. Isay, *Listening Is an Act of Love*, 184–85, 174.

they [the production staff] really go for the jugular with the emotional content."<sup>17</sup> The voices of StoryCorps make events from the past seem real and immediate. Ordinary people become actors in the events of our times and storytellers of their own experiences.

Another way that outsider histories personalize the past is to link stories to the everyday world around us, to place history where we live. Re-photographing projects, for instance, juxtapose an image of a building or street with an image of what that same site used to look like. Wordlessly, the pictures invite viewers to give an ordinary landscape a second look. A nondescript place becomes a site of historical change: the juxtapositions show that buildings, streetcars, trees, and, of course, people once were and now are not; new structures have taken their place. Why? Who made these changes? Are they inevitable? Do they represent "progress" or has something been lost? A particularly striking series of such photos has been taken by photographer Jason Powell, who displays them on Flickr.<sup>18</sup> Powell has created the then-and-now effect in a single image by literally holding an old photo of a place in front of the same location today and photographing the juxtaposition. Often he chooses historical images that show people, bringing a ghostly sense of former residents returning to walk the streets that once were theirs. Frequently Powell's own hand appears in the image as he holds the historic photograph, subtly representing his own role in bringing past and present together.

Heritage tourism likewise strives to repopulate a seemingly ordinary place. Historic preservation professionals have used tourism to draw attention to sites of historic importance, and in recent decades the field, influenced by social history, has considerably broadened the range of stories it tells. In many communities, though, nonprofessionals drive this work and bring fresh perspectives to their region's history, often creating tours that tell alternate narratives of an area's past and reveal hidden histories. In North Carolina, the economic and environmental justice group Resourceful Communities works with impoverished rural communities to showcase the African American history of their towns, seeing this heritage as a way of generating economic activity without destroying natural resources.<sup>19</sup> Resourceful Communities supports groups such as the Sandhills Family Heritage Association in Spring Lake, North Carolina, which offers tours about African American history in the rural Sandhills to participants in family reunions and to tourists. Another partner, The

17. Transcript of author's interview with Matt Ozug, Brooklyn, NY, August 6, 2008, 5.

18. Flickr, "Looking into the Past," <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jasonpowell/sets/72157613841045343/> (accessed June 27, 2011). The Google-supported site Historypin likewise overlays contemporary and historical photos. See <http://www.historypin.com/> and Cody Switzer, "Blending Old and New Tech to Make History Come to Life," *Social Philanthropy*, July 12, 2011: <http://philanthropy.com/blogs/social-philanthropy/historypin-hopes-to-give-old-photos-a-new-life/28896> (accessed November 29, 2011). See also WhatWasThere ([www.whatwasthere.com/](http://www.whatwasthere.com/)), the PhilaPlace project ([www.philaplace.org/](http://www.philaplace.org/)), and other mapping websites cited in Rainey Tisdale, "Do History Museums Still Need Objects?" *History News* 66 (Summer 2011): 22.

19. Resourceful Communities, "What We Do," [http://www.resourcefulcommunities.org/what\\_we\\_do](http://www.resourcefulcommunities.org/what_we_do) (accessed June 27, 2011).



Uptown Business Professionals Association in New Bern, North Carolina, developed a “Trail of Flames” tour about the Great Fire of 1922 that destroyed forty city blocks, mostly in the city’s African American neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, perhaps no outsider group has a more passionate connection to the past than re-enactors. Re-enacting is driven by a fantasy, but one so alluring that it cannot be dismissed—the idea that one can go back in time and experience what the past looked and felt like. Re-enactors approach the past from the outside in, hoping that meticulously recreating uniforms, foods, weapons, and troop formations will lead them into the inner lives of people of the past. Re-enactors pursue this dream with particular dedication, but the impulse is the same as what drives tourists to Disney’s Main Street U.S.A. Disney’s website invites:

Stroll down the street where turn-of-the-century architecture and transportation recreate the quintessential small town of Middle America in the early 1900’s. Wander down the alleyways and hear the bustle of everyday living drifting from the upstairs windows. Sounds from the past fill the air, such as train whistles and barbershop quartet tunes. The nostalgic ambiance is enhanced by the glow of the gas lamps and the *clop-clop* of hooves as horses draw colorful street cars down the road. The scent of freshly baked goods and other tempting aromas waft from the windows.<sup>21</sup>

Critics note that Disney’s past is conflict-free and impossibly quaint (Main Street’s buildings are built at five-eighths size),<sup>22</sup> but not all time-travel encounters depend on happy history. PBS’s *Frontier House* enticed three families to “move to” The Montana Territory in 1883 with this invitation: “The Challenge: Blizzards, hunger, scorching sun, forest fires, the neighbors, and more . . .”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, for *The 1900 House*, another PBS product, the Bowler family prevailed among four hundred applicants for the chance to go back to Victorian London, where the women were squeezed by whalebone-and-lace corsets and cleaned their three-story house with rags, soda crystals, and a hand-pumped vacuum. Never mind that real Victorians didn’t have to learn all the workings of their world from scratch, making the Bowlers’ travails actually inauthentic; for the family (and, vicariously, for the viewers who watched their struggles), the pain and frustration of re-entry into the past added to the feeling that a distance had been traveled and modern life left behind.<sup>24</sup>

20. Sandhills Family Heritage Association, “Programs,” <http://www.sfha-nc.org/> (accessed July 1, 2011); New Bern Now, “The ‘Trail of Flames’ Tour,” <http://newbernnow.blogspot.com/2010/08/trail-of-flames-tour-13-of-new-berns.html> (accessed June 27, 2011).

21. Disneyland Resort, “Main Street U.S.A.,” <http://disneyland.disney.go.com/disneyland/main-street-usa/> (accessed June 15, 2011).

22. Mike Wallace, “Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World,” in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 136.

23. PBS, “Frontier House,” <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse/> (accessed June 15, 2011).

24. PBS, “The 1900 House,” <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/1900house/index.html> and “The Family,” <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/1900house/the-family/index.html> (accessed June 15, 2011); Jill Lepore, “Playing Dress Up,” *Common-place*, <http://www.common-place.org/vol-01/no-01/talk/>

Like the battlefield re-enactors enduring hard tack and drafty tents, time travelers’ discomforts seem to add to the authenticity of the experience and give them what they most hunger for: a feeling of intimacy with the past.

### ***Is Passionate History “Good” History?***

It’s artificial, of course, to identify isolated sources of appeal for the outsiders’ pursuits. While some projects may prioritize family, voice, place, or time travel singly, the most resonant passionate histories combine several of these elements. StoryCorps, for instance, crusades for the power of voice, but its interviews often focus on family history. Genealogists trace family roots, but they often do interviews. Re-enactors strive to go back in time, but the richness of the experience often depends on authenticity of place or, as with the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, on family lineage.

Teasing apart the elements that sustain outsider histories, however, can help us understand their appeal and recognize why passionate histories have not found easy homes in museums or universities. Indeed, the most popular forms of outsider history have generally been scorned by academics and history museum professionals alike. Professional historians assess the viability of a history topic by a set of criteria determined by decades of disciplinary training: Has this story already been told? Does the historical record—documents or collections—support it? Does it have broader implications for our understandings of the past? Outsiders don’t particularly care about any of these standards. Instead of originality, evidence, and context—all values that are externally determined—outsiders look inward, privileging emotional resonance.

Each of the outsider values of family, place, voice, and time travel butts up against core principles of traditional historians. Family and local histories, for instance, strike professional historians as inherently too narrow. Where is the broader meaning? To professionals, small stories don’t count in themselves; what matters is the big picture. The personal voice, too, challenges historians’ traditional assumptions, threatening the credibility of the scholar as an even-handed interpreter. Although few historians in our postmodern age would claim to be objective, one is still supposed to be able to weigh evidence dispassionately and to assure the reader that one has achieved a certain critical distance from the topic at hand. First-person voices are nice as illustrations of ideas, but they can’t carry interpretive weight on their own.<sup>25</sup> The idea of time travel likewise strikes historians as interpretively naïve. It reflects a fundamental

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(accessed June 27, 2011). De Groot writes that “[r]e-enactment reminds the participant and the (potential) viewer of the essential otherness of history. In its purer forms it is predicated upon hardship, complexity, and privation, presenting the past as continually different from now.” *Consuming History*, 105.

25. Of course oral historians have established a significant professional niche within academia, but they, too, generally prioritize interviews that speak to broader trends more than seeking rich personal storytelling.

misunderstanding both of the incompleteness of the historical record and of how contemporary perspectives color our views of the past. Recreating history is simply impossible and, really, not the goal of professional historians. Where outsiders seek escape into the past, professionals look for new questions (and new sources) about history that will lead to new interpretations.

Overarching these disciplinary concerns is a general feeling among professionals that outsiders care too much or, perhaps more precisely, assume self-centeredly that others care as much they do: they take history *too* personally.<sup>26</sup> Their intense connection to the subject makes even isolated names and dates exciting that to others remain cold data, disconnected from broader meanings. Who cares what buttons the Confederates had on their uniforms during Pickett's charge? So what if a then-and-now photograph shows people in top hats and horse-drawn carriages on Main Street? What did one expect? It's a concern that goes far back to the professionalization of the history discipline. When Reuben Gold Thwaites, superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, was asked to assemble a panel on local history organizations for the American Historical Association in 1904, he wrote, "I sometimes feel rather discouraged over these local historical societies, for the majority of them seem to be run by excessively narrow minded people given over to the dry as dust of antiquarianism."<sup>27</sup>

At public research libraries, genealogy buffs can represent three quarters of the users, yet they are disparaged by the staff for the microscopic obsessiveness of their questions and for hogging the microfilm machines. A 2007 issue of *Smithsonian Magazine* was headlined "Why Genealogy Is Bunk."<sup>28</sup> A friend recounted that when she wanted to do research at the Baker Library at Harvard, she received a form back saying that she was welcome to come provided that she did no "genealogical research." She wrote back to say that while her work drew heavily on genealogy, she promised to resist doing any during her time at the Baker. Historian Rebecca Conard has traced how the American Association for State and Local History emerged in part "to check the influence of genealogists within state and local historical societies."<sup>29</sup> As historian William Cronon explains, historians cannot accept genealogical information as history until it is connected to broader contexts: "Genealogy is a wonderful pastime, but family trees should be only the beginning of the historical adventure. . . . We need to plant each of our family trees in the larger forest of history."<sup>30</sup>

26. William Cronon makes this point about genealogists. William Cronon, "Why the Past Matters," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84 (Autumn 2000): 9.

27. In Rebecca Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 20.

28. The article in *Smithsonian*, by Richard Conniff, was titled "The Family Tree, Pruned." *Smithsonian* 38 (July 2007): 90–97. The cover, however, featured the more sensationalized headline. See Genea-Musing, "Smithsonian mag cover: 'Why Genealogy is Bunk,'" <http://www.geneamusings.com/2007/06/smithsonian-mag-cover-why-genealogy-is.html> (accessed June 27, 2011).

29. Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh*, 32.

30. Cronon, "Why the Past Matters," 9.

StoryCorps, too, has faced steady criticism from professional historians as unsystematic and self-indulgent. Do we really need the Library of Congress to hold thousands of (relatively uncatalogued) stories of Thanksgiving dinners, accounts of childhood kick-the-can escapades, and “I love you” declarations? What do we learn from this episodic jumble? Moreover, the stories are colored by the haze of memory and family mythologizing; are highly edited when broadcast on NPR; and, with family members as interviewers and sappy sample questions provided by the project (“What was the happiest moment of your life?”), privilege emotional response over informed reflection.<sup>31</sup> In the *Oral History Review*, four scholars concluded that although the project has some admirable aspects, it does not count as oral history: “[T]he StoryCorps interview is less an oral history interview than it is a highly ritualized performance that inserts the tellers into a larger public culture of affect and remembering.”<sup>32</sup> Oral historian Michael Frisch recounts that StoryCorps founder Dave Isay faced a torrent of criticism after delivering a keynote address at the Oral History Association in 2008: “Most of the fireworks involved issues of professional authority—can or should StoryCorps really claim to be oral history at all, and if so (or if not) what does that tell us? Others saw in the emotional power of StoryCorps programming evidence of a highly problematic, manipulative, even voyeuristic sensibility even further removed from oral history standards.”<sup>33</sup>

So are outsider historians doing bad history? Is there any point to their parochial, emotional engagement to the past? A closer look offers reasons to be more generous to the narrow-bore, self-centered approach that the outsiders take to history; as well, it suggests that the gulf between “professional” and “outsider” may not be as vast as it first appears. For all the outsiders’ obsessive burrowing in detail, their work actually is grounded in some of the most central tenets of historical inquiry—the same bedrock, in fact, on which the work of professional historians rests. The outsider projects that tap into the value of place, for instance, reinforce perhaps the most basic point of all: *history happened* and it happened in your own backyard, too. When then-and-now photographs or a heritage trail populate seemingly inanimate landscapes with people from the past, they implicitly attest to the fact that, indeed, someone was here before us. Does this really need to be asserted? Even as popular media today are permeated by nostalgia, we at the same time live in a historicidal culture: Americans’ political, economic, and cultural assumptions prize forward momentum—growth, new technologies, youth. A sense of loss permeates contemporary life, but it is accompanied by a tacit understanding that to act on those regrets is to resist the tides of progress and be left behind,

31. StoryCorps, “Great Questions List,” <http://storycorps.org/record-your-story/question-generator/list> (accessed July 15, 2010).

32. Nancy Abelmann, Susan Davis, Cara Finnegan and Peggy Miller “What Is StoryCorps, Anyway?” *Oral History Review* 36 (Summer-Fall 2009): 256–57.

33. Michael Frisch, “From A *Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen, and Back,” in *Letting Go?*, 135.

marginalized. The simple idea that history happened here invites longer perspectives and broader horizons. The fact that someone came before implies that someone will come after. It implies a sense of stewardship, which might give pause before tearing down the old downtown library to build condos. It offers a potential antidote to absorption in the here and now that prioritizes economic yield over collective quality of life and longer-term sustainability. Uncovering the history of a place invites public audiences to see themselves as living in a historical moment, part of a dynamic of continuity and change over time that emerges from the past and shapes the future.

The seeming self-absorption of genealogy conveys similar big-picture lessons. The act of recovering traces of information about obscure ancestors in the historical record communicates the core message of social history: you are a historical actor. Not only did generals and mayors and celebrities make history, but so did your forebears. They, documentably, were born and worked and died; they experienced milestones of marriage and moving and voting and, perhaps, buying land; and, of course, they begat those who in turn begat you. For the researcher, genealogy reinforces the idea that you yourself are making history and will leave traces behind for future generations to mull.

Projects that explore the power of voice extend that lesson in an important way. By showcasing people telling stories about the past in their own words, interviewing projects suggest that ordinary people are not only participants in making history but can be *interpreters* of it. StoryCorps urges people to reflect on their own lives and to listen closely to each other's reflections. "Our mission," says founder Isay, "is to honor and celebrate one another's lives through listening."<sup>34</sup> In doing so, StoryCorps implies that ordinary people's self-understandings are both informed and valuable. By encouraging ordinary people to make sense of their lives, StoryCorps positions them not only as historical subjects but historical meaning-makers. It invites them to treat the past as a living legacy that they carry with them and reshape throughout their lives.

For all the romanticism of the time travelers' quest, they, too, encourage reckoning with a key element of the historical enterprise. Historians may be uncomfortable with the idea of re-creating the past, but re-enactors do make concrete the core dilemma of the historical researcher: Is the past a foreign country, never fully accessible to outsiders? If so, is it even worth trying to visit? Even a postmodernist who sees history as a series of subjective interpretations has to confront this dilemma: if the doors to the past are completely closed, then why do we keep knocking? Ultimately, all historians do believe that it is possible to find meaning in the past; the debate lies more in how much to acknowledge that we each carry interpretive frameworks that shape how

34. "StoryCorps Memory Loss Initiative," brochure, n.d. (ca. 2009), in author's possession. In 2008, StoryCorps and NPR declared the day after Thanksgiving a "National Day of Listening." National Public Radio, "NPR and StoryCorps Kick-Off First Ever National Day of Listening," <http://www.npr.org/about/press/2008/112408.NationalDayListening.html> (accessed July 29, 2010).

we understand history.<sup>35</sup> The outsiders might have little patience with this debate in the abstract, but their efforts to go back in time demonstrate concretely both how much the past can and *can't* be reclaimed. In their determination to precisely piece together past experience, the time travelers fruitfully demonstrate that historical interpretation is a continual act of construction.

The broad messages of outsider history—history happened; ordinary people experienced it; everyone can interpret the past; history is a constructed narrative—are so fundamental to professional historians that we rarely feel the need to address them directly. But the fact that these assumptions are bedrock for professionals suggests the potential of bridging divisions between “outsider” and “insider,” “buff” and “historian,” “popular” and “professional,” and the possibility of shared conversations. Instead of dismissing outsiders, perhaps we should see their efforts as an invitation—to make manifest the personal stake that we have in *our* work. At a basic level, professionals, too, are driven by a desire to recover the past, to make human connections, to find contemporary resonance. By leaving these goals and needs latent, the work of the outsiders reminds us, we miss the chance to engage the public with what makes historical inquiry a passionate affair.

### ***Bringing Passionate Histories into the Gallery***

Outsider history-makers, then, bring to the surface the emotional qualities that underlie committed historical work of all sorts. In doing so, the outsiders' efforts achieve what leaders in community-engagement and experience design have been struggling to do for a generation: to convey key historical concepts in ways that passionately engage public audiences. So, can museums learn from the outsiders? The challenge—and the opportunity—for museums is to create projects that tap into the core values behind passionate histories and extend their reach beyond the realms of the committed outsiders.

Museums would seem to be well positioned to engage the values that sustain outsider history. For starters, they are less encumbered than academia by prejudices against local and family history. Most museums start with a relatively narrow geographic area of focus, a single city or state; similarly, the typical historic house or site was founded to preserve the story of individual families or notable local events. As well, museum workers have the advantage that, unlike academics, success is measured not by peer review but by

35. Hayden White envisions a common ground emerging around the challenges—and inherent subjectivity—involved in constructing the past: “[P]ostmodernist experimentation in the representation of historical reality may very well get us beyond the distinction—always kind of scandalous—between the professional historian, on the one hand, and the amateur dilettante or ‘practical’ student of history, on the other. As [theorist Elizabeth Deeds] Ermarth says, we are all historians today.” White, “Afterword,” In *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), 231.

public support, whether through admissions or outside funding; encouraging intense engagement with the past would seem to be at the core of the museum's business.

Often, though, museums and sites short-circuit the passion that animates local or family history in the hands of outsiders. The institutions begin with an allegiance to a body of content, an obligation to "tell the full story of" the family that owned the house or of the city, county, or state where the museum is located—an impossible task made no less deadly by the effort to achieve it. Impelled by a sense of duty, museums deliver overwhelming amounts of information that "cover" a lot of territory but don't engage visitors emotionally. As in many a high school textbook, history becomes a mass of information about events that happened long ago and far away to someone else.

When museums *do* tap into the outsider values, though, the effect can be powerful. The most successful projects engage the passions underlying outsider histories while reaching beyond their sometimes narrow or self-absorbed focus. I first began considering the possibilities for passionate histories in museums when an exhibition I developed at the Minnesota Historical Society inadvertently touched the genealogical impulse. *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk* (which opened at the Minnesota History Center in 2006) focused on a single unremarkable house in St. Paul—one that we happened to have a photograph of from 1925 in our library—and set out to tell the stories of the people who had made their lives there over time. As the house changed from single-family to duplex to triplex, fifty families lived in the house: the Schumachers, émigrés from Germany, built the house in 1888 and established themselves as pharmacists in St. Paul; the Frascos, D'Aloias, and Tinuccis, Italian immigrants, came in the 1920s to work in the railroad yards; the Yangs, Vangs, and Hers, Hmong refugees, began arriving in the 1980s, having been forced to flee Laos after the Vietnam War.

To the exhibition-development team, *Open House* was an experiment in historical storytelling, an exploration of how a micro-history could humanize the past in a gallery. But in the years I spent on *Open House*, most remarkable to me was the reaction I got from people when I described what I was working on. Every time I sketched out the barest outlines of the project—the stories of one house and the families who had lived there—people jumped in to tell me stories of *their* house and *their* family. I heard about ancestral homes sold or torn down, visits to grandparents long deceased, immigrant arrivals and departures, the tangled branches of family trees. People connected to the concept of history unfolding through families and cared about it viscerally. So although the exhibit developers for *Open House* hadn't given any thought to genealogy, the genealogical impulse made the exhibit's premise intuitive to audiences, giving us a significant head start in trying to create meaningful experiences in the gallery.

People's connection to family history enables *Open House* to work at two levels. First, like genealogy itself, the exhibit encourages visitors to look within—to explore their own histories. The gallery for *Open House* consists

of a series of room-like environments, each representing a different era and telling stories of the families who lived in the house in that period. Visitors learn about the Schumachers, the Frascos, and the Yongs, but as well, the summative evaluation shows, they make the experience personal. As visitors explore the lives of the *Open House* residents, they talk about their own families—how they came to this country, settled and adapted, struggled with poverty or prejudice.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to encouraging visitors to look inward, though, *Open House* helps them to look outward, beyond their own families. By encouraging visitors to identify with people of ethnicities different than their own, *Open House* invites visitors to see broader patterns in the families' experiences. The different rooms of the exhibit contain stories suggesting commonalities across time among the experiences of new arrivals—the challenges of being a newcomer in school, for instance, or the fear of the citizenship exam. As well, the juxtaposition of stories suggests differences across time: how immigrants are different than refugees or how deindustrialization has complicated the efforts of new arrivals to find stable work. In each room, window-shaped graphic panels titled "A Look Outside" highlight opportunities and constraints of life in that era. *Open House*, then, builds on people's passion for family history and uses it as a bridge to reflect on broader experiences beyond themselves.

This approach of bringing history inwards while offering paths outwards characterizes other museum projects that have tapped into outsider values. Several recent exhibitions, for instance, have applied the outsider appeal of personal voice to projects that lead visitors into unfamiliar territory. *Slavery in New York*, open in 2005–2006 at the New-York Historical Society, set out to convey a historical point unfamiliar to most visitors: that slavery was an integral part of New York City until 1827. It did so through a mix of artifacts, images, newspaper accounts, court records, video productions, and interactives. But perhaps the most powerful materials were generated by visitors themselves: personal, videotaped testimonials in which contemporary New Yorkers spoke about what they had just seen. During the exhibit's run, six thousand visitors, about 80 percent of them African American, recorded their reactions in the exhibit's Telling Lives "story-capture" station.<sup>37</sup> These visitors described their shock at recognizing that slavery was by no means just a Southern institution, and, often, they identified a legacy of racism that they see daily

36. Almost three-quarters of visitors whose gallery conversations were recorded or whom evaluators interviewed cited connections that they made between the exhibition and their own lives. They linked the exhibition's historical stories to recollections about their families—what the evaluators called their "internal histories." Kirsten Ellenbogen, Beth Janetski, Murphy Pizza, "Summative Evaluation Report: *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk*" (unpublished, prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society, 2006), 4.

For further discussion of *Open House*, see Benjamin Filene, "Make Yourself at Home: Welcoming Voices in *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk*," in *Letting Go?*, 138–55.

37. Richard Rabinowitz, "Learning from the Visitors to *Slavery in New York*," in *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions*, ed. Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock, 62; Chris Lawrence, "Talk-Back Culture," in *Visitor Voices*, 66; Slavery in New York, "Visitor Responses," [http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery\\_2\\_responses.htm](http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery_2_responses.htm) (accessed June 22, 2011).



in contemporary New York. Their personal reflections emotionally reinforced the importance of this historical story and broadened its reach.

The Levine Museum of the New South used a talk-back video booth to address difficult issues arising from more recent history. Its exhibition *Changing Places: From Black and White to Technicolor* (2009–2010) charted the sometimes uncomfortable interactions in Charlotte between new arrivals and long-time residents as the city's ethnic diversity has dramatically increased over the last two decades. In the video booth within the gallery, visitors recorded their own reflections on the changes in the region and their experiences negotiating cultural differences.<sup>38</sup> In both *Slavery in New York* and *Changing Places*, selected videos were edited into a continually running loop on view for subsequent visitors. Hearing these reflections invited visitors to consider their own emotional responses to the exhibit and, as well, brought a sense of collective experience to the exhibitions. The juxtaposition of voices implicitly created a conversation, a civic dialogue, within the gallery.

The Oakland Museum of California's exhibition surveying state history, *The Story of California* (opened 2010), uses a different approach to introduce personal voices into the gallery. For its section on the turbulent years of 1960–1975, the museum invited two dozen Californians to create “memory boxes” documenting their own experiences of that era. First-person memories of serving in Vietnam or confronting prejudice as part of an inter-racial marriage are accompanied by artifacts from the guest curators' own lives. Such first-person storytelling adds weight to other sections of the exhibit where visitors can contribute their own reflections via Post-its, index cards, and computer terminals.<sup>39</sup> When museums replace the omniscient curatorial voice with personal perspectives, they offer visitors viewpoints they can identify with, encourage them to take seriously their own reflections on history, and help them feel a personal stake in the exhibit's broader themes.

The idea of bringing alternative perspectives to the surface has also animated successful museum projects that explore the power of place. A core appeal of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM), for instance, is the idea of unearthing the experiences of ordinary people who lived their lives in a seemingly unremarkable location, a tenement at 97 Orchard Street. Visitors enter the building, and guides introduce them to the stories of the people who occupied the apartments in different eras: fourteen-year-old Victoria Confino, a Greek Sephardic Jew (played by a costumed interpreter); the

38. Changing Places, “Exhibit Introduction,” <http://www.changingplacesproject.org/exhibit-introduction/> (accessed June 22, 2011); *Changing Places*, “Video Talkback Booth,” [www.changingplacesproject.org/video-talkback-booth/?phpMyAdmin=328c4db31f6et51a4bceb](http://www.changingplacesproject.org/video-talkback-booth/?phpMyAdmin=328c4db31f6et51a4bceb) (accessed June 21, 2011).

39. Kathy McLean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?” In *Letting Go?*, 74–76; The Oakland Museum of California, “Forces of Change,” <http://museumca.org/blog/project-updates-forces-change> and “Keeping History Current,” <http://museumca.org/blog/start-here-keeping-history-current> (accessed June 22, 2011); Carol Kino, “Giving Museum-Goers What They Want,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/arts/design/16oakland.html> (accessed June 22, 2011).

Levine family, whose apartment serves as a garment workshop; the Rogarshevskys, who have set the table for the Sabbath table; and the Moores, an Irish family coping with the death of a child.<sup>40</sup> The LESTM makes real the promise of Jason Powell’s then-and-now photographs: meet the people who used to walk these very streets where you stand today. The museum uses that thrill to engage visitors in the core issues of immigration history—sweatshop labor, tensions between assimilation and tradition, housing codes and urban reform—while also urging reflection on the lives of contemporary immigrants to the area and the social justice dilemmas facing the Lower East Side today. The LESTM extended this approach beyond its museum building when it worked with St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church on the Lower East Side to interpret the church’s nineteenth-century “slave galleries,” shielded upstairs rooms where African Americans could attend services without whites having to see them. The project revealed a painful history lurking beneath the surface of the church’s venerable architecture.<sup>41</sup>

City Museum in St. Louis is a completely different kind of museum whose power likewise draws on a strong sense of place. The site features a frenetic circus-like atmosphere—from MonstroCity (“the most monumental, monolithic, monstrous montage of monkey bars in the world”) to the World’s Largest Pencil—but its installations are built entirely from found objects retrieved from within St. Louis. Housed in the 600,000–square-foot former International Shoe Company factory, the museum features the whirl of vintage shoelace machines, some over 140 years old, making colorful shoelaces, necklaces, and lanyards for visitors. Another exhibition shows huge terra cotta architectural fragments salvaged from torn-down St. Louis buildings. Displayed with almost no explanatory labels, the pieces stand as mute relics (an earlier version was accompanied by soaring opera arias) that emotionally convey the loss of the city’s glory years.<sup>42</sup>

Living history sites such as Old Sturbridge Village or Colonial Williamsburg strive for this history-happened-here feeling, too. Ironically, though, the approach at the more urban institutions seems to resonate more closely with the outsiders’ fascination with place—their desire to surface hidden stories from the contemporary landscape. At the Tenement Museum or City Museum, the past is *not* segregated from the present by carefully recreated horse-and-buggy streets and protected viewsheds but rather seems to open up when one steps through the door.

40. The Tenement Museum, “Visit,” <http://www.tenement.org/tours.php> (accessed June 29, 2011).

41. Liz Sevchenko, Reverend Deacon Edgar W. Hopper, and Lisa Chice, “The Slave Galleries Restoration Project,” In *History as Catalyst for Civic Dialogue: Case Studies from Animating Democracy*, ed. Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer-Bacon (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2005), 1–25.

42. City Museum, “About City Museum,” <http://www.citymuseum.org/about.html> and “All Attractions” <http://www.citymuseum.org/allattractions.html> and “Renovated Architectural Hall,” <http://www.citymuseum.org/renarchitecture.html> (accessed June 23, 2011); The Shoelace Factory, <http://www.shoelacefactory.com> (accessed June 23, 2011).

Just as all historic sites and living history venues to some extent draw on the power of place, they also all to some degree capitalize on the fascination with going back in time. Few, though, capture the magical sense of being transported that animates re-enactors. Some innovative projects, however, have taken more imaginative approaches that seem to tap into the outsiders' attraction to time-travel. The Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, just outside Indianapolis, supplements its daytime living history offerings with a pitch-black nighttime program called Follow the North Star. Visitors are divided into groups and told that they are now runaway slaves, striving to escape on the Underground Railroad. "Leave the comfort of the world you know," promises the program's website. "Follow the North Star is not for everyone. You should be prepared to take on the role of a runaway slave; you'll be walking outside on rough terrain in all kinds of weather, told to keep your eyes focused downward and spoken to in an abrupt manner."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the ninety-minute program can be harrowing, stumbling around in the dark, being screamed at by slave hunters, and making decisions about whether to stick together as a group or leave slower-paced companions behind. Yet, like a battlefield re-enactment, the program gives one an intimate and emotional on-the-ground engagement with the past that can't be replicated by being a spectator.

Twenty miles south of Conner Prairie, in Indianapolis, the Indiana Historical Society brings the time-travel conceit into the gallery through its *You Are There* exhibitions, which began in 2010. Each installation opens with a black-and-white photograph projected, life-sized, on a mist screen. Visitors then literally walk through the photograph and enter a meticulous re-creation of the image, including live costumed interpreters trained to depict the people in the photograph. Recent installations (three different rooms are open at a time) range from a 1924 car-repair shop to a 1945 grocery store to the 1968 site where Robert F. Kennedy delivered an emotional speech on the night when Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed.<sup>44</sup> By conversing in a period setting about real events, visitors engage intimately with such themes as how automobile culture changed small-town life, the challenges of home-front scarcity, and the turbulent conflicts of the late 1960s.

### ***Training Passionate Historians***

If tapping into the values that underlie outsider history can lead to path-breaking and broadly appealing work, why haven't more museums done so?

43. Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, "Follow the North Star," <http://www.connerprairie.org/Plan-Your-Visit/Special-Events/Follow-the-North-Star.aspx> (accessed June 22, 2011).

44. Indiana Historical Society, "You Are There," <http://www.indianahistory.org/indiana-experience/you-are-there> (accessed June 22, 2011); John Dichtl, "The Indiana Experience: 'You Are There,'" *Journal of American History* 98 (June 2011): 129–34. Cary Carson, too, notes the appeal of time travel: "Museum visitors today expect to be transported back to another time and place in their imaginations. It is no longer enough merely to be told about times past. They are fully satisfied only if they live it—feel it—experience it." Carson, "The End of History Museums," 18.

Partly, museums themselves limit opportunities for passionate engagement by prioritizing exhaustive and even-handed "coverage" of history. If museums emphasized sparking curiosity, wonder, and personal involvement over chronologically summarizing a series of events, many a prosaic exhibit might be enlivened. Beyond their traditional conceptions of content, though, there are also external reasons why more museums have not embraced passionate histories. Federal funders such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) push museums to topics of academic significance ("humanities themes") that can leech the passion out of a topic. In evaluating projects, the NEH rewards originality of argument, elucidation of historical context, and linkages to contemporary historiography over visitors' emotional experience in the gallery. Conversely, private funders can limit the resonance of exhibitions by the narrowness of their interests. Catering to the personal predilections of individual benefactors or the branding agendas of corporate sponsors can also lead museums to topics that lack broad emotional appeal.

Beyond these outside forces, though, another cause for the deadening of history museums must also be considered: the professionalization of public history itself. The term "public history" was only coined three decades ago, but in the last ten to fifteen years the field has had extraordinary success in establishing itself as a discipline. Professional associations such as the National Council on Public History (NCPH), the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), and the American Association of Museums (AAM) offer increasingly elaborate tools for "best practices," peer review, and institutional assessment.<sup>45</sup> Subspecialties have been codified (museum educator, exhibit developer, audience evaluator). A body of scholarship has emerged, with longstanding journals such as *Curator* and *The Public Historian* now joined by entries such as the *Journal of the History of Collections*, *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, *Museums and Social Issues*, and *Exhibitionist*; numerous public history monographs have been published (seventy-four entries were submitted for NCPH's 2011 book award), and scholarly publishers such as the University of Massachusetts Press have established Public History series.<sup>46</sup> Most strikingly, the number of training programs in the field has exploded over the last two decades. NCPH's Guide to Public History Programs lists over one hundred schools that offer graduate degrees. Some are beginning to offer Ph.D.s in the field.<sup>47</sup> Suddenly, the

45. See, for instance, American Association of Museums, "Standards," <http://www.aam-us.org/aboutmuseums/standards/stbp.cfm#bp> (accessed June 30, 2011); National Council on Public History, "Best Practices for Public History Training," <http://ncph.org/cms/education/graduate-and-undergraduate/> (accessed June 30, 2011). AAM's Museum Assessment Program celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2011. Ford Bell, "A Notable Milestone," e-mail received by author June 21, 2011.

46. "2011 Spring NCPH Board Meeting AGENDA," National Council on Public History (April 7, 2011), 12.

47. National Council on Public History, "Guide to Public History Programs," <http://ncph.org/cms/education/graduate-and-undergraduate/guide-to-public-history-programs/> (accessed June 30, 2011).

history museum world—into which practitioners used to drift almost by accident—boasts credentialed professionals buttressed by associations, conferences, listservs, peer-reviewed scholarship, leadership-training workshops, and a bevy of policies and procedures.

But in our eagerness to establish the field, have we become our own worst enemy? The professionalization of public history does not seem to be helping professionals make the connections we so desperately want and need to make—not connections among ourselves but to public audiences. The most creative work—what really inspires people to engage with the past and *care* about history—is emerging from outside public history’s professional realm. Strikingly, for instance, none of the core creative or administrative positions in the StoryCorps organization is held by trained historians or public historians.<sup>48</sup> Arguably the most far-reaching public history project of the new century has no relationship to the disciplines dedicated to interpreting the past and making it matter to audiences. Of course we can’t expect to have a monopoly on creative history work, but let’s put the question a different way: has *any* path-breaking work of popular history emerged from the newly professionalized ranks of public history? Are we too young a field to be put to that test? Or is it time to wonder why not?

As StoryCorps began to take off, I talked to more than a couple of colleagues who shared my own feeling of envy: “I wish I had thought of that,” we sighed. Or, worse, we felt that we nearly (or sort of) *had* thought of it. Why didn’t we act on our inkling of an idea? Why didn’t we make it real, as Dave Isay did? To a professional historian, the StoryCorps idea is too simplistic. Isay is just recording a bunch of stories. What’s the point? The project lacks intellectual bite, is diffuse not only geographically and temporally but also intellectually in the questions it asks of the past. What would our colleagues say? Isay deserves credit for the attention to detail (and entrepreneurial spirit) with which he has executed StoryCorps, but we should also recognize his ability to preserve the elegant simplicity of his core idea: invite people to talk to each other, record their stories, listen with respect and awe. What makes the project work is its fearless focus on the big picture: *Listening Is an Act of Love*, his book is called, a treacly sentiment that no self-respecting historian would embrace. And yet, really, why not?

It strikes me that several of the most notable museum projects that have captured the passionate history spirit were spearheaded by people who, like Isay, were not historians. Ruth Abram, founding director of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, was driven by her background in social work and her commitment as an activist.<sup>49</sup> The creative force behind City Museum was

48. This assessment of the absence of historians dates from summer 2008, when I conducted interviews with core project staff.

49. Abram received a master’s in social work from Brandeis and began her career by working for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the American Civil Liberties Foundation, and the Women’s Action Alliance, and she was a founding member of Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger. She later completed a master’s degree in history at New York University. Sharon Udasin, “A

artist Bob Cassilly, a classically trained sculptor who turned to a team of artisans to bring the old shoe factory to life.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately we who run public history programs aspire to train the next generations of museum leaders. Are we succeeding? The fire behind outsider histories and the relative listlessness of mainstream history museums gives me pause. Certainly we can't turn back the clock. Museums are moving down a professionalizing path similar to ones taken by other disciplines before us: law, education, library science, or academic history itself. And this direction has yielded some benefits. Because of professional training programs, museums can hire better trained and more experienced young professionals than ever before. And unprecedented numbers of skilled people are thinking and writing about the meaning and craft of public practice.

But if the evolution of the field is inevitable, its ultimate form is still ours to shape. We need to consider what will best meet the needs of our students, our field, and, ultimately, public culture in a country that sees scant value in the past. In this moment of transition as a field, we should step back and consider: what does the public want from public history? Outsider histories suggest a value system almost diametrically opposed to those of our solidifying professional discipline: emotional connections, personal perspectives, links to the here and now, and flights of fancy to worlds beyond. If we are to take seriously the values behind passionate histories, we will have to re-examine our own. The result may demand significant changes in how public history operates within the university.

Can one teach boundary-breaking creativity? Can one ingrain emotional sensitivity, an ear for a story that hits the heart, the touch of the hand that earns the trust of a shy interviewee? Yes, I think so. But we will need to shift the focus of our training programs, placing less stress on best practices and procedures, publishing, and peer review and emphasizing instead the skills that our outsider history-makers deploy: listening, facilitating, crossing boundaries, telling stories, playing. The shift will affect whom we hire as teachers. Is a Ph.D. the most important qualification for teaching students how to spark passion for the past? Likely not. As the number of programs proliferate, we will soon see programs run by people who have doctorates in history (or public history) but who themselves have never worked in a museum or with public audiences. We need to make more room for practitioners in our public history and museum studies programs, perhaps by creating faculty positions that reward skills and experience in professional practice and do not require a doctorate.<sup>51</sup>

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Preservationist, Moving On," *The Jewish Week* (June 4, 2008), [http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new\\_york/preservationist\\_moving](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new_york/preservationist_moving) (accessed June 30, 2011); Arts and Business Council of New York, "New and Events: Encore Awards" (1999), [http://www.artsandbusiness-ny.org/news\\_events/awards/encore/1999/005.asp](http://www.artsandbusiness-ny.org/news_events/awards/encore/1999/005.asp) (accessed June 30, 2011).

50. City Museum, "About City Museum," <http://www.citymuseum.org/about.html> (accessed June 23, 2011).

51. Duke University created a designation it calls "Professors of the Practice" to hire professionals from outside the academy as regular faculty; they work on multiyear contracts instead

The shift to passionate histories must also shape whom we admit to our programs. We need students who have the spark of creativity, not just the GRE scores or the GPAs or even, necessarily, long hours logged in painting numbers on objects in our museum basements. We need to find students who have the passion to fire a popular history movement. We need to open our programs (and the museum field) to these students so that they do not sidestep us in favor of documentary journalism, web development, performance art, communications, or law. We need to welcome those who have the fearlessness to do work that doesn't fit rigid professional molds.

Once we have these would-be path-breakers, we will need to offer them classes that encourage their passion. Already many public history programs enable students to do public projects, but we struggle to fit this work into an academic curriculum. We need to accept that in this more open-ended, project-based work, "learning goals" are less precise. If one is doing public work that community partners feel passionate about, the relationships, the process, and the emotional tenor of the project matter more than the length of the literature review or the professional polish of the end product. As well, we need to partner with other departments to encourage the sort of cross-disciplinary work that breeds fresh perspectives. If creativity and collaboration skills are central to the work of the field, we need to allow classes in creativity and collaboration, even if they displace that seminar on Reconstruction.<sup>52</sup>

We will also need to adjust how we grade so that we reward the kind of work that will make a difference, not just what we recognize as diligent or careful scholarship. For that matter, we will need to continue to broaden our definition of "scholarship." NCPH, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association recently issued a landmark report on "Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Historian" that urges universities to recognize exhibitions, public programs, films, and other forms of dissemination as legitimate work of historians.<sup>53</sup> Some departments are adopting this broader standard, but any public historian up for tenure knows that one rests easier with an academic monograph in one's tenure packet. Can we who teach public practice *accept* public practice as our core work?

To those of us who care about public history, outsider history-makers offer

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of on a tenure-track basis. In 2004, the category made up about 10 percent of the Duke's faculty. Piper Fogg, "For These Professors, 'Practice' Is Perfect," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 16, 2004), <http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/careertrack/documents/dukePractice.pdf> (accessed December 1, 2011): 2. In 2011–12, UNC Greensboro is codifying a similar faculty designation called Academic Professionals.

52. Buffalo State's new master's program in museum studies envisions having students take a class on creative problem-solving through the college's International Center for Studies in Creativity. "M.A. in Museum Studies Program Proposal," State University of New York College at Buffalo, 2011.

53. The "white paper" accompanying the report cites the American Historical Association's definition of scholarship as "the discovery, exchange, interpretation, and presentation of information about the past." "Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Historian: A White Paper," 8, <http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Engaged-Historian-White-Paper-FINAL1.pdf>, accessed June 30, 2011.

a way to understand what makes our potential audiences care about the past. As well, the outsiders invite us to rediscover what drew us into this field to begin with. We public historians are well positioned to recognize the personal passions that animate outsider histories and to use them to open up broader historical understandings. If we prioritize passionate engagement with the past in framing our institutional missions, designing our exhibitions, and running our training programs, we can create a vibrant future where museums and sites and public historians are in the thick of popular explorations of the past. Is there an “outsider” in each of us?

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