

## Book Reviews

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*Teaching Public History* edited by Julia Brock and Evan Faulkenbury. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023. 270 pp.; hardcover, \$99.00; paperback, \$34.95.

*Teaching Public History's* most obvious and significant contribution is clear in the title—it will help old and new educators alike to hone the skills needed to impart knowledge of the public history field to various learners. Through personal reflections, edited interviews, and academic essays, the authors deliver best practices for teaching public history and unpack core complexities in the field. However, *Teaching Public History's* more significant contribution may be what it models—community. Community not only for the public history project and scholarship public historians participate in, but for instructors working in the often stressful and isolating world of the classroom.

Multiple authors contend with core questions about the practice of teaching public history. These questions include: How can teachers build public history classes around a core tenant of the field—community practice—when semesterly schedules often work in direct opposition to long, sustained community building practices? What are the best ways to incorporate group projects—a core of the field—in a way that is not overwhelming for students and instructors alike? How can instructors juggle passionate public history majors while also teaching first-time public history students? How can instructors mirror real world working conditions in the field to add value to the classroom? Is using student labor on public history projects through coursework ethical? How can the classroom be a space to model inclusivity not only on syllabi but as a practice in the field? Although several contributors offer creative solutions to these challenges, many also frankly acknowledge that there are not always good solutions. They model that teaching is an art and a science, a skill that takes a lifetime to hone. And in the face of less-than-ideal conditions, they admit that sometimes instructors must contend with complex classroom issues, work around them, and ultimately, live with the results.

*Teaching Public History* also reinforces the importance of the field at large and the skills it can foster—critical thinking, reflection, collaboration, and concise writing. Those working in traditional academic history settings where arguing why public history matters may be a constant necessity may find themselves breathing

a sigh of relief. In this book, the fact that the public history field matters and that it has something unique and important to contribute to the education of students is taken as given, leaving plenty of space for figuring out how we best teach the basics of the field to learners. The authors also exhibit varied teaching and public history training and experience. With contributors ranging from public historians who have taught and trained in the field since the 1980s to those who were not formally trained and began teaching in the 2010s, *Teaching Public History* reflects the “big tent” of the public history field not only in practitioners but instructors.<sup>1</sup>

Many contributors expand beyond individual classrooms or instructors, instead urging critical reflection on the field of public history at large. One such example is Patricia Mooney-Melvin’s approach to reflective pedagogy. Mooney-Melvin argues for the need for public history courses to define a signature pedagogy—or “more than just history education with a twist”—and asks public history educators to be clear about what the field offers that is unique from other types of historical practices (18). Jim McGrath’s discussion of the “hybrid practitioner,” which he defines through a digital humanities project, is interesting: “individuals who are well-versed in uses of technology and increasingly aware of the cultural and ethical implications of specific use cases and perceptions of digital tools, platforms, and contexts” (96). McGrath’s definition is exciting outside of specific digital humanities contexts and could hold incredible promise for the field at large. Julia Brock’s argument for “keeping the tensions present in the public history classroom” seems like a call that models the work public historians do in the field and reflects it back *towards* the field (189). Instead of presenting a highly professionalized and overly polished view of the field, Brock urges us to consider how we make the complexities and complications inherent in the practice of public history present not only when teaching but when practicing.

*Teaching Public History* seemed notably more focused on student involvement and student enjoyment than other pedagogical resources. Many authors modeled a consultative approach with students, asking if they enjoyed readings or found them to be educational as well as asking if the projects they participated in served larger educational goals. This might seem to align with a current view of higher education that views it through a capitalist lens, seeing the university as providing a service which should be beholden to market-driven interests (that is, the student’s desires as the “customer”). The inclusion of students and co-collaborators in their educational journey, however, does not need to suggest that universities are supplying a “product” to students. It is possible for students to both enjoy their classes and to learn fundamentals of the field, something these authors continually model throughout.

Readers will find a plethora of reading recommendations, activity examples, interesting reflection questions, and more pedagogical resources in this work. Its

1 Jennifer Dickey, “Public History and the Big Tent Theory,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (November 2018): 37–41.

only fault might be the book's non-prescriptive approach. For those looking for clear directions, you will find instead gentle suggestions, creative encouragement, and honest discussion of pedagogical disappointment. But since problem solving is a core skill of the public historian, you may find adapting the author's practices to be a thrilling exercise.

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*Kids on the Street: Queer Kinship and Religion in San Francisco's Tenderloin* by Joseph Plaster. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. vii + 289 pp.; abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$104.95; paperback, \$28.95.

To explain Joseph Plaster's new book, *Kids on the Street: Queer Kinship and Religion in San Francisco's Tenderloin*, it is perhaps best to begin at the end. In 2014, San Francisco opened the Tenderloin Museum. This museum documented the supposed rise and fall of the Tenderloin neighborhood. Known in the 1960s for its upscale housing, the Tenderloin neighborhood was by the 1980s notorious for its visible population of economically marginalized "street kids," who performed youth and vulnerability for white, adult male sexual consumers (10). *Kids on the Street* is the opposite of the Tenderloin Museum. It offers an intervention into the narrative of urban decay, and puts street kids at the center of academic and public storytelling.

As of 2023, Joseph Plaster serves as a Lecturer and Curator in Public Humanities for Johns Hopkins University. *Kids on the Street* reveals his long engagement with public humanities work, from when he was a recent college graduate exploring the archives of the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society after hours to his extensive experience coordinating community-based projects and exhibits. Examining what Plaster dubs the "performative economies" of San Francisco street kids, *Kids on the Street* provides a well-cited academic contribution to queer and urban historiographies while illustrating the potential of public history methods to document street-based activism (5). Drawing upon more than eighty oral histories of the Tenderloin and Polk Street communities, as well as archival research and secondary sources, Plaster argues that street kids survived by practicing a moral economy rooted in reciprocity and mutual exchange. Plaster writes primarily for an academic audience, adding to a historiography that rejects linear notions of queer progress from a supposedly closeted past to a present marked by marriage equality and consumerism. In his intervention into this literature, Plaster argues that queer historians often privilege housed populations, whose records are more likely to be archived, and asks historians to include economically and socially marginalized communities in queer history. For public historians, Plaster offers a model for connecting academic-facing and public-facing scholarship, as well as a methodological frankness that enriches conversations about the ethics of public history work.