Emphasis on the Public

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Abstract: St. George’s, Bermuda received World Heritage status in 2000, and today many of the island’s majority Black population still don’t know what that means. Is it because we aren’t educating or marketing this ‘achievement’ or do the peripheral voices and marginal communities view the designation as unimportant or an imposition? This case study examines the importance of examining the disparity in how we, and our public, interpret and value history. My job is to examine these acts of inclusion/exclusion and shift the balance with programs like “Bringing History to Life,” a student summer workshop series that uses different mediums to interrogate history.

Key words: Inclusion, diversity, democratic storytelling, use of multiple media

Public history’s emphasis on homes and districts, museums, societies and archives, or the tangible objects of certain groups of people relegate many publics to a peripheral place in a field that claims to place them at the center. I am unsure that the question “where is the history in historic districts” is correctly framed, and I have struggled with its assumptive and presumptive subtext. To ask this question is to presume that history and historical things can be itemized, defined, pointed to, touched, and displayed. From where I stand as an African-American, academically trained historian, the answer is simple; it is with the public.

If we examine the dominant portrayal of human recorded events, we will see that written texts, art, pottery, and ornate buildings reflect ruling institutional practices everywhere. If we examine why this is so, we must acknowledge that access to power is a determining factor. Those with power are able to define and delimit what stories are told, the way they are told, and where
the emphasis may lie in the re-telling. The significance of the question “where is the history in historic districts” takes on new meaning. A community’s attitude to history is a reflection and embodiment of what that culture has valued, and public history is often the arena where the powerbrokers of the dominant culture exercise their management plan. If we ask why buildings and landscapes, military installations, and churches are the common historical currency of the western world, we cannot get far in our analysis before we discover the patrician bias and ruling-class values contained here. Much of the historical record reflects the perspectives of the powerful. These stories are tributes, which reinforce the value system that great men and, to some limited extent, great women, make history.

Academic history has perpetuated this mythos, and it is this model that I, as a public historian, seek to challenge. The idea that the public sphere, which belongs to everyone, can subdivide into private spheres belonging only to the important, the well born, and the wealthy must be challenged. Leaving underrepresented communities and marginal groups to admire from a distance is patently undemocratic. To these communities, such history merely re-poses power and authority, rendering them silent. Why should a woman, or a non-English-speaking Latino immigrant, or an African-American teenager want to visit, or value, historic districts that often do not reflect or include them? This disconnect between much of the public and museums and historical sites can be seen in low visitor rates, decreased revenues, and reduced hours. One conclusion we can draw is that vast sectors of the public vote with their feet and choose not to participate.

Much of my work is done on the Atlantic archipelago of Bermuda, which is not immune from these trends. Bermuda’s architectural monuments and protected buildings depict the dominant narratives of the European elite that first came to the island in 1609 and settled there in 1612. The codes, ordinances, buildings, and preservation rituals largely reflect the values of a small aristocratic class of men and women. These perspectives form the assumptive framework that constrains our possibilities as undemocratic seventeenth- and eighteenth-century laws continue to dominate public discussions and attitudes right up to the present day.

In 1999 The Historic Towne of St. George and its Related Fortifications applied to UNESCO for World Heritage site status based on its architectural history and heritage. The committee comprised a small group of Ph.D.s, wealthy and powerful business owners, and politicians who saw the application and subsequent designation as symbolic recognition of Bermuda’s historical significance among the community of nations. In 2000, the application was approved. However, ten years later, many of the island’s majority Black population are unaware of this world-class status or, if they are aware, most are unclear why they should care. The significance of this designation passes without fanfare or even a modicum of concern. Why is that? Did historians miss a grand opportunity to engage in communal reflection about what World Heritage could have meant historically and culturally for our island? Did the
board of academic, economic, and political elites presume that their view had a broader import than the subsequent reality made clear? And did the guardians of the narrative assume that our future role was just to educate, market, and package the message in a univocal exchange with the masses, who would rush to embrace our work with gratitude? Clearly, that has not happened. The majority population is slow to learn about our status, our work, and how it affects their lives. A legitimate question for this group might have been “where is the Bermudian public in this decision?” If Bermuda’s history, architecture, and heritage are truly public resources, then why do the wishes of a select few become the normative expression of the many?

The St. George’s Foundation is responsible for the accurate public description and preservation of St. George’s as a World Heritage Site. Within this context, my work as director of education forms an important avenue of negotiation between the dominant narratives and expressed democratic sentiments that bubble up from below. As a professional historian, I have embraced a mediator/interpreter role between the prevailing values, which guide the laws that preserve certain historical buildings and architectural assets, and a broader public whose lack of power and authority denied them a place early in the designation process. The malleable “in between” spaces are where acts of inclusion and exclusion merge and diverge. They become central facets of my work during the summer’s “Bringing History to Life” program.

Although my position reaches populations inside and outside of Bermuda, I decided to concentrate my efforts on young people. It is from this space that I aim to tip the balance away from its present upper-class bias towards a more democratic and inclusive future. I conceived, planned, and executed a program called “Bringing History to Life” as a weeklong summer workshop series for a key public: students aged 7–14. Each year we focus on a different medium. In 2008 we used nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and field trips to significant locations within the World Heritage Site. I encouraged students to compare their experiences with those of the artists as they walked in their footsteps. At the end of the program I created a time and a space for discussion and sharing. I asked questions of them and they asked questions of me. Then I invited them to express their thoughts and perspectives through art and blogs.

My goal was gently and gradually to empower them through immersion in the story of these places. I believe that the physical movement between multiple locations, the pauses for questions and conversation, the ability to reflect and respond to their own impressions as they viewed the paintings and walked in the footsteps of the artists allowed them to capture the number one

1. Thomas Driver, St. George’s Harbour, oil on canvas, 1821, Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art; Albert Gleizes, Portrait of Juliette Roche, oil on board, 1917, Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art; George Ault Copeland, Bermuda Park, oil on canvas, 1922, Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art; Catherine Tucker, A Street Scene in St. George’s, watercolor, 1934, Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art; Ogden Pleissner, Shinbone Alley, St. George’s, watercolor on paper, 1950, Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art.
learning goal for the workshop; namely that history is a reflection of the choices and values of human beings. I wanted them to appreciate that some of these values can be expressed in art, others in stone, and still others can be communicated orally. Secondarily, and no less significantly, I wanted them to grasp their civic duty as young Bermudians to own their voice and to contribute to this ongoing and dynamic discussion.

A noteworthy outcome of this project was that the students recognized that the dominant narratives were “not set in stone”; rather, they were provisional and provincial expressions of one stratum of the human family that lived long ago. In one blog entry a student observed, “paintings teach about the past . . . it’s like taking a snapshot.” Moreover, they had the additional insight that history is not static; it is a dynamic, conversational, and interactive discipline in which they too have a place. I invited them to add their voice, to record their thoughts, and then to use digital technology to share their perspectives with others. The result is that these students came to understand that Bermuda’s story belongs to them and that they had a valid claim to be included in history’s ongoing conversational narrative. They started to understand that history is not a dry, stagnant, academic discipline best left to adults, and instead, they began to see adults and teachers as possible conversation partners, useful occasional tour guides, or resources they can recruit to aid their understanding. Additionally, the students saw that good historical work and insight occur when people in the present ask questions of the past in a way that includes broad portions of the community as participants in the ongoing dialogue. I wanted to leave students with a sense that they can shape the discourse even as they were being shaped, in a way that will aid future generations’ understandings.

In 2009 I was able to continue this work with the same group of students during the second installment, “Bringing History to Life” with Photography. Students contributed to the historical record through their photographic analysis of Bermuda in 2009, the island’s 400th anniversary of British settlement. They captured the natural landscape, the fortifications, and the human environment of St. George’s and recorded their thoughts and impressions of present-day Bermuda in a blog. These images will serve as a record for prospective generations, and once again, our students realized the importance of their place and the power of their voice in the ongoing and ever-evolving story of Bermuda. One thirteen-year-old student wrote, “Each picture shows something that is important and special in my eyes . . . the picture that means the most to me is a picture of destroyed, cracking limestone. It is part of a house that has been allowed to decay. This is important to me because Bermuda is made up of and formulated by limestone and it stands for unity and strength and is the base Bermuda is set upon. The cracking and breaking of the stone represents how Bermuda’s culture and history is being cracked.

and broken. The deformation of the limestone, which takes on another shape, represents the deformation of Bermuda’s history and culture but also how it has changed shape and taken on a whole new formation.  

As the student quotation shows, there is great possibility for new and interesting perspectives to come forward which underscored and reinforced my third learning goal: to appreciate that history is much more than a record of what the royal, political, military, and economic leaders have done and left behind in written records or enshrined in buildings. History suggests the need to explore the multiple responses of all kinds of human communities to events and circumstances as they were encountered. Nine-year-olds Priya and Marcus stated: “I took pictures of people because I want them to know how people are different from one another” and “I took pictures mostly of non-important old things to show people who are looking at this twenty years from now that even though it’s not important it can still look important.”

Similarly, my pedagogical approach is a concrete example of a “new interpretational praxis,” where there is no disjunction between medium and message, which devolves inexorably from my methodology. I regard a teacher as a kind of “midwife” and not as a presiding expert who fills students with objective facts. I assume that students come with knowledge. They are not blank slates; they are members of the community, and my role is to assist the birth of their unfolding knowledge. As a teacher my aim is to guide, to prod, and to engineer meaningful and productive educational experiences where there is space for mutual learning and debate, change and growth. My decision to use photography was deliberate because I sought to challenge the dominant culture’s explicit value systems and the privileging of written documents and physical structures. Although photographs are tangible, photography utilizes intangible tools. It engages the senses, it elicits observation, and it invites imaginative interpretations. All of these facets encourage students to bring more of their unique selves to the learning experience, and with this inclusion it is possible to discover layers and fresh questions and sites of inquiry. Kristi, 13, states, “We ventured all around St. George’s looking for significant things that tell a story [from] our point of view . . . [and] I want to portray these feelings to everyone who takes the time to not only look at my photos, but also see them.”

At the outset I approached the summer program with the working assumption that it can be meaningful and useful for students to engage historical material as actor-participants. I wanted them to dialogue with the voices of the past and to sift through the material in a way that enabled the emergence of their own unique perspectives. Academicians must work to expand the discourse and challenge the stranglehold that tangibles have on our discipline. This workshop fostered inclusion. It opened space for democratic val-

5. Ibid., July 2, 2009.
ues and sharing without being “preachy, disrespectful or negative.” It became an engaged and truly meaningful learning space for me, and based on the feedback I have received, for my students as well: “I took beautiful pictures that each tell a story in MY words . . . I’m definitely coming again next year.” “I love this program and the one last year if there’s another I would shout and cheer.” “I really enjoyed this program and [I’m] able to appreciate Bermuda and also the fact that we helped to make and record history, this program rocks!”

It is important that public history professionals participate with and engage the public in the discourse. The conversation does not belong to us. We are and can be guides and resources, but we need to shed the role of “resident expert” and adopt with some humility the part of invested communal broker who asks open questions and invites the public into a journey of mutual discovery that could go anywhere.

In the summer of 2010, as this article went to press, students were in the driver’s seat as they “Bring History to Life” with Film. The same group of students again traversed St. George’s, but this year they led and I followed. Public history should not be a top-down, expert-driven enterprise where academic specialists shape and frame the subject according to our image. Our methods must reflect a collaborative, democratic praxis. Our organizations must reflect the diversity that reigns in the broader community. Our boards and committee choices, celebrations, programs, and exhibitions must reflect and take seriously the varied perspectives that are present among our people. When we share histories through any medium (exhibits, signs, lectures, re-enactments, tours), we must seriously ask who is, or who is in, our audience? And we must be prepared to converse with and include those previously relegated to a footnote. To do this work we must all move beyond the norm and past our cherished conceits and comforts. We must be willing to revise our models, which are at their best, merely interim assessments. Our claims are neither universal nor objective. If we accept as a fundamental, the claim of our discipline that public history is about the public, then we also need to practice inclusion, especially around the parts of our story (Native, African, Latin/o, Asian, gender/sexuality, labor, immigration, youth) that remain obscure because the telling traverses issues of power, resource depletion, and oppression.

If these stories are excluded, or if they are watered down, what relevance can our work have to our diverse populations? Why should African Americans, Latino Americans, or Native Americans want to converse with the sanitized history that is on display at our historic sites? Each group creates a sense of place on its own terms. It is intended not to mirror the values of the dominant culture but to inject and reflect their traditions. Oral traditions and cultural contributions like fashion, the blues, rap, hip hop music, and YouTube are an essential part of our historical personality and the texture of our na-

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tional quilt. When stories are not shared, we lose the rhythms of our past and our sense of place and connection to the communities that form our present. Human beings have a deep-seated need to know that they matter. Oftentimes, minority populations, including youth, are reduced to a footnote, and hundreds of years of information about their experiences are merely glossed or never engaged.

As public historians, our focus should be less on reinterpreting history and historic districts, and more on the interrogation of the lenses and models and rules by which we do our work. The intentional redefinition of public history to address the needs of our multicultural public is the best place to begin again. It is important to re-examine the disconnection between the academic historian and the public we purport to serve with our work. Furthermore, it may be useful to be concerned about our multiple audiences. We may discover that our default preferences for static exhibitions, written documents, academic language, learned conferences, and erudite workshops needs to be rethought. Our almost evangelical love for linear interpretations and “objective facts” keeps vast swaths of the public outside the gates. Quite rightly, therefore, many persons have taken the valid option not to participate in “our” discourse.

Where is the history in historic districts? As these students have demonstrated over the past two years, it is everywhere. It resides in the deep, dark, murky recess of our conflicted past and it reverberates with unsettling passion in our present moments. However, our discipline has reached a tipping point. The old methods are no longer acceptable in a postmodern world that rejects meta-narratives, the rule of the elite expert, and the dominance of one mode of organizing the discourse in the public space. The time has come to practice what we say we believe in and to mirror with integrity the democratic values we claim to cherish. It is time for the public to take its place and for us to take them seriously, allowing room for mutual learning and change. I remain hopeful that we are at that moment today in our journey together, and I am encouraged to be a participant in this process.

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