ABSTRACT: In this reflective essay, the author addresses how, through the course of his professional public history career, he developed an evolving understanding of the complexities of interpreting community history, the nuances of contested space, and how social privilege fit within this process. Drawing upon decades of personal experiences and professional activities with community and oral history–based projects, he expresses how public historians can recognize multiple perspectives and then work in tandem with various constituencies to navigate an array of interpretive and preservation challenges. Finally, he encourages his fellow practitioners to acknowledge and understand the intricacies of social privilege, from both a personal and project-oriented perspective, in the practice of the public history craft.

KEY WORDS: historic interpretation, community history, oral history, shared authority, addressing contested space, understanding privilege

Since attending my first NCPH meeting decades ago as a graduate student, I have long enjoyed the conversations between members that typically revolve around practice, projects, and a range of reflective musings about the past and future of the organization. When I arrived in Milwaukee as the newly minted president elect, the second comment that many of the past presidents remarked to me, after the obligatory congratulations, was, “What are you going to talk about at your address?” Although this task was only tangentially on my radar upon acceptance, and was a full four years away at the time, the significance of this undertaking perpetually played in the back of my mind over the coming years. There were a range of issues I considered addressing, from my interest in the interface between training nascent practitioners and the necessity of meeting the real-world needs of employers, to the issues of how to integrate digital interpretation with a growing heritage tourism market. My topic, however, crystallized during a planning meeting over lunch at IUPUI with the Baltimore program co-chair Modupe Labode. During that conversation, she posed the prospect of framing the meeting around the conference theme “Challenging the Exclusive Past.” Although most every conference theme has sufficient focus to provide guidance, but enough latitude to encourage a broad range of submissions,
I recognized that the process of encouraging a dialogue of different perspectives that challenge accepted historical narratives was, at one level or another, at the heart of my public history career. The concept itself is hardly revolutionary. We, as public historians, continually consider historical exclusivity with the clichéd, “The winners write the history,” before moving on to ask, “Whose history is it anyway?” We strive to address how various communities, cultures, and constituencies vie to tell their own stories. From a personal perspective, before I ever considered a career in history, these views resonated within my own historical journey of discovery. In turn, these elements manifested themselves in the way I practice my craft and the way I teach—whether this be in courses with my students or in the ways that my professional activities “touch” someone that I will never see or speak to in person.

Before I begin, however, I must extend a word of apology. I am sure many of you share the knee-jerk reaction to reading the ubiquitous graduate school application letter of intent that begins, “Ever since I was little, I’ve always loved history . . .” Further, I know few people enjoy sitting through someone else’s vacation slides, even though we constantly subject ourselves to this on Facebook. With that said, while I invite you to join me on this trip down public history memory lane, I will at least avoid making anybody look at pictures of food.

As a starting point, I grew up in the great state of New Mexico, which encompasses some of the most culturally diverse landscapes in the United States, a complex mix of American Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo traditions. I, however, spent my formative years in one of the least culturally diverse counties in the state. My father was a nuclear physicist, and when I was eight months old, my family moved from Idaho Falls to Los Alamos where he took a position doing nuclear cross sections as part of the Cold War nuclear weapons development and testing program.

An isolated mountain town, with one of highest ratio of PhDs per square mile in the country, Los Alamos was indeed an unusual kind of place. (In reference to the eccentric lead character in the television show *The Big Bang Theory*, locals routinely refer to Los Alamos as “a town full of Sheldons.”) As part of my dissertation, “Federal Enclaves: The Community Culture of United States Department of Energy Cities; Livermore, Los Alamos, Oak Ridge,” which examined the history and dynamics of these three Cold War towns, I partially framed my narrative by addressing the contrasts between Los Alamos and the rest of the state. In many ways, this small town in the Jemez Mountains was indeed an ivory tower. Growing up in this seemingly idyllic setting backed by considerable federal support, where few people locked their doors and children freely roamed the neighborhood in search of adventure until the “five o’clock buzz” (often purported to be the testing of the civil defense alarm) sounded each day as a reminder to head

---

1 Patrick K. Moore, “Federal Enclaves: The Community Culture of United States Department of Energy Cities; Livermore, Los Alamos, Oak Ridge” (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 1997). One excellent resource I used for assessing the contrasts between New Mexico counties was Jerry L. Williams, *New Mexico in Maps* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986). This broad-ranging quantitative tool provided an incontrovertible range of statistics for numerous subjects.
home for dinner, how does one ever begin to understand the complexities of the outside world?

As many of you know, this last summer my father, who over the last few years experienced increasing dementia, passed away from kidney failure after we opted not to let him suffer the rigors of dialysis. As a scientist, he had a perpetually curious mind. Even in my earliest memories, he instilled within me an interest in the world around me. Perhaps initially not so much why things happened, such as the subtleties of why I—let alone all these scientific minds—ended up at 7,300 feet atop the Pajarito Plateau, but at least an awareness that things happened.

Beyond kindling within me a passion for history, my father taught me an innate awareness of not only the need to respect differences in others, but to celebrate them as well. In telling the Paul Harvey-esque “rest of the story,” in addition to being a world-renowned scientist in the US nuclear weapons programs, he was also an ordained Episcopal priest. As part of his calling, he served as a nonstipendiary (i.e., volunteer) clergy person who travelled around northern New Mexico each week serving different congregations. As a youngster who was loaded up into the station wagon each Sunday morning before dawn, I always contended that if you did not have to drive two hours each way for church it just didn’t count.

His first “duty station” after ordination in the mid-1970s was at St. Paul’s mission in Las Vegas, New Mexico. We affectionately referred to it as the “real” Las Vegas, and the town had its own distinctive reputation. From the outset, I noticed that every week a collection of, for lack of a better term through the eyes of a sheltered eight year old, “interesting” people would come to see my father. One of these individuals, who we will call Larry, had a penchant for wearing layers of jackets. After church one Sunday, we found that my father’s suit jacket (which was a Christmas gift from my mother) had disappeared from the coat rack. The following week, my dad loaded up a collection of less sentimental jackets from his closet and, after church, proceeded to negotiate with Larry an exchange of three jackets for his suit coat. Witnessing this exchange finally led me to inquire as to what was going on with Larry and the rest of the folks I saw each week. In my father’s scientific but caring way, he filled in the necessary historical blanks. Predating statehood, the federal government provided resources for the New Mexico Territory for various services. The Morell Land Grant resources went to Las Cruces for what would become New Mexico State University, Santa Fe received funds for the state prison, and, in 1880, Las Vegas became the host for the Territorial Insane Asylum and then the New Mexico Hospital for the Insane. Later known as the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute, this institution treated thousands of individuals afflicted with mental illness.

While the revolving-door tragedy associated with this system was lost on me at the time, I vividly recall that moment of historic discovery. I had a profound conversation about the past that, foundationally, placed things into context. Not only was it okay that they had issues that made them different, but Las Vegas was their place. This was a location outside of my ivory tower and my worldview that cracked the door open for deeper understanding.
The next major leap forward in my world of historical realization came in the sixth grade when my father spent the year on sabbatical working at the European Union’s Euratom laboratory in northern Belgium. During that time, I underwent a dramatic change as a result of my studies at the European School Mol, with daily interactions with students from across the NATO nations, and through the near-weekly travels across northern Europe with my parents. My eureka moment came on a weekend visit to the World War II battle site and monument at Bastogne, in southern Belgium. As a commemoration to the Allied forces that fought at the horrific Battle of the Bulge, the Belgian government erected a massive memorial to the soldiers who helped liberate their nation from the Nazis. Formed in the shape of a five-pointed star from above, around the top are the names of the (then) forty-eight United States, representing the nearly 77,000 US casualties who resisted the December 1944 to January 1945 German counteroffensive. I recall the sense of displaced confusion of my eleven-year-old self when I looked up and read NEW MEXICO some forty feet in the air. Expressing the heart-wrenching emotion that only two children of the Second World War could convey, my parents engaged with me in a transformative conversation about the war, its meaning, and the very point of the structure’s existence. Instantly, the significance of the place and its context within the broader scope of global history became real for me. This moment in time, on that October day, not only sparked my personal desire to understand and connect with whatever history I encountered, but also defined the way that I would teach my students and ultimately practice my craft as a public historian.

Once enrolled in New Mexico State University, my career goals pressed me toward the legal sector, rather than history. While my intellectual passions still led me to earning bachelors’ degrees in both government and history, my real shift toward the public history world came after graduation while working for Senator Pete Domenici in Washington, DC, as a legislative assistant (i.e., a glorified intern). Walking to a committee session one day, Senator Domenici casually inquired, “Patrick, what are you planning on doing with your life?” After listening to my confident ambitions for law school, he responded with a tone of dismay, “Oh no. Not law school. Do something useful with your life.” This moment led me to reconsider my entire future. Among the many who had previously waved the yellow law school caution flag (that I had blithely ignored) was Jeff Brown at NMSU. At this crossroad, I called him, asking, “Tell me more about this ‘public history’ thing,” and soon found myself back in Las Cruces.

Under Jeff Brown, I began thinking more about the process of “doing” history, and about engaging with audiences in more meaningful ways. Moving beyond the traditional research and writing modes from my undergraduate training, in learning new skills, be they conducting oral history, creating a community study, or developing an exhibit, I rapidly discovered that each time I found an answer to a problem the “solution” only seemed to create new questions. As an example, in a museum studies class, my team and I opted to develop an exhibit on the Santa Fe Fiesta tradition of the “Burning of Zozobra.” In 1924, Santa Fe artist Will Shuster...
created the first Zozobra, or “Old Man Gloom,” a six-foot puppet of a monster-like figure. Over time it would expand into a fifty-foot marionette whose public ceremonial burning initiated the fall festival.\(^2\) What started out as a simple exhibit on an annual event for a class project rapidly evolved into a deeper conversation with the past. As we explored Shuster’s influence on local tradition, we began to unravel complex lines of Anglo, Hispanic, and American Indian cultural influence and some more surprising historical roots. Researching Fiesta’s origins, which date to 1712, opened up nuanced issues of fire, the burning of effigies, and even the covert migration of Jews to the farthest reaches of the Spanish Empire to avoid the persecution of the Inquisition.

Throughout this kind of inquiry process, with most every project I began to challenge the accepted explanation of otherwise simple stories. As I began to probe the deeper—and often uncomfortable—questions surrounding historic places and events, I often found myself asking, “Which story is right?” More importantly, how would it be possible to allow very different perspectives to overlap? Finally, and most perplexing, was there an avenue by which I could interpret sometimes painfully contradictory views to complement each other? Despite my youthful exuberance, there were no simple solutions, only more questions and challenges, and so, as I wrapped up my master’s work, I opted to pursue a PhD in history. Although part of this stemmed from my upbringing surrounded by “Sheldons,” the larger motivation came from the desire to seek solutions to these evolving challenges. What I found, however, was that I still did not fully understand the questions. I chose Arizona State University for my doctorate, and Noel Stowe became my mentor. Whereas Jeff Brown developed my understanding of public history as a discipline, at ASU, Noel defined public history as a craft. A true genius of the trade, he transformed my process of seeking multiple perspectives on different events into a formalized inquiry process. Meeting every Tuesday at 7:00 a.m. (for what we, his PhD students, affectionately termed “the 700 Club”), we sat through often-interminable hours of framing and reframing questions, employing a range of analytical “tools” and tearing apart case studies and real world situations.\(^3\) No matter how well prepared we thought we were, each week until noon (or later) we would work through reams of copied materials, awkwardly laugh along at his jokes

---

\(^2\) The foundation for our efforts came from researching the Santa Fe Fiesta at the New Mexico State Archives as well as in Joseph Dispenza and Louise Turner, *Will Shuster: A Santa Fe Legend* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1989). The questions derived from this research opened new questions about local history.

Some valuable insights on the current perspectives on the annual event can be found at the recently developed website Burning of Will Shuster’s Zozobra, created by the Santa Fe Kiwanas club, the longtime sponsor of the event, https://burnzozobra.com.

\(^3\) In training public historians, Noel Stowe focused on a range of methodological tools. Although many derived from specific projects or case studies, the methodological foundation of these exist within published works. Two essential publications include Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986) and Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
that only he understood, and usually depart feeling drained and often confused. In the process, we slowly became public history reflective practitioners. Noel’s sage leadership, coupled with the methodological teachings of the other ASU faculty, opened a new set of doors for challenging historical issues.

As a nascent public history practitioner, I found that actively applying these distinctive inquiry tools really was effective. Some projects began as economic impact studies and evolved to address social and economic hierarchies. Among the most poignant of these was a land-use systems study for the Arizona Department of Transportation. The study focused on the right of way for the 101 freeway and partially centered on the wall that the City of Scottsdale built along Pima Road, which divided the city from the adjacent Pima-Maricopa reservation. Conversations with residents on both sides of the wall opened up a range of complex cross-cultural issues surrounding the building of the wall, its impact on the communities, and perspectives on its “official” versus perceived purposes.

Similarly, in a project completed with the late Jann Warren-Findley, we developed an exhibit on the history of Tempe, Arizona, for the massive new Chase Credit Card Processing Center downtown on historic Mill Avenue. Contracted to focus on the economic history of the city, the research rapidly moved away from the early settlers, the history of the mill, and the growth of the area and on to unsettling questions surrounding economic maneuvering, agricultural dominance, water rights, and layers of evicted communities. Although this narrative ran in opposition to the corporate vision, with Jann’s support, our arguments over its importance worked its way to Chase leadership in New York City, and ultimately they concurred. For these projects, the most important questions were not about what was obvious, but about what stories were never part of the original investigation or plan. As we found in both cases, once we recognized the missing perspectives and then shifted our questions, we could truly start preserving the story.

As I neared the completion of my degree, I had the opportunity to oversee the oral history program for the Central Division of the Arizona Historical Society. The position tasks included assisting with developing exhibits for the newly opened museum facility in Papago Park and conducting oral histories of central Arizona. Facing a somewhat broad charge for the second goal, I yet again set about asking questions about which stories to collect and how to go about the process. From the outset, the logical approach was to build on the impressive collection of materials that G. Wesley Johnson, the NCPH’s first chairman, conducted during the mid-1970s with the Phoenix History Project. In assessing the scope of the collection, and learning which voices of Salt River Valley were not included, I began to reach out to these underrepresented communities. Structuring my efforts around Michael Frisch’s and Linda Shopes’s framework of “shared authority,” I set about engaging my skills as a public and oral historian in enabling others to tell their own stories.  

I soon realized that within a growing metropolitan area of more than two million people, my solitary efforts in preserving Phoenix history would amount to little. Accordingly, I focused on creating relationships within various ethnic and cultural communities, helping those communities preserve their own historical identity, training members in the basics of oral history collection and thus enabling them to collect their own histories. In the days before the Internet and the ability to learn from others following a similar approach, this was an entirely new process for me. I would gradually learn from the hiccups and challenges along the way and implement this evolving structure with other groups. I discovered that this process of encouraging these ethnic, cultural, and even geographically defined groups to ask their own questions enabled them to consider their place within Phoenix’s broader history. This approach exponentially expanded the power of public history in valid and long-reaching ways.

For over twenty years now, the NCPH has influenced the path of my career. This was no more evident than at the 1998 meeting in Austin, Texas, when two faculty members from Florida attended the meeting and asked Noel Stowe who might be a good fit to start a public history program at their university. Later that year, I found myself in Pensacola and began formally applying the methodological and pedagogical skills I had learned by teaching new students through projects and practice. In addition to Stowe’s instruction of public history methodologies and tools that became the cornerstone of my structuring of the new public history program, I also benefited from completing the Preparing Future Faculty program at Arizona State University. Although Stowe passed before completing an in-progress work on public history pedagogy with Rebecca Conard (Middle Tennessee State University), key elements of his foundational approaches can be found in Noel J. Stowe, “Public History Curriculum: Illustrating Reflective Practice,” The Public Historian 28, no. 1 (2006): 39–65.  

Hardly relying on a defined methodological approach, I continued to press the boundaries of how I engaged with various communities and explored different kinds of questions as I developed the curriculum for the new program. The first challenge I discovered when I arrived was partially rooted within the dynamics of southern tradition. Although every region has its own complex history of race and cultural relationships, the nuances of working with communities in the Gulf South were considerably different from those of the Southwest. The inquiry design that I had refined at the Arizona Historical Society of helping enable communities to tell their own stories was equally applicable, but the process of establishing relationships, and fostering a willingness on the part of locals to engage with me and my students, required a considerable amount of trust building. Literally taking years to evolve, it only occurred through constant interaction and a clear demonstration that there were no ulterior motives behind the efforts to record and preserve the various communities’ histories. The time and effort spent in developing and sustaining these relationships led to one of the most rewarding moments of my professional career.
when a minister from one of the African American churches reportedly told his congregation one Sunday, “If Dr. Moore or any of his students come to talk to you, it’s okay as they are doing good things.”

Although this kind of validation was gratifying, there were two more significant outcomes of my experiences with ethnic communities. First, the procedural evolution proved that no matter how sound the methodological approach, and how pure the shared authority intent, without establishing a mutual trust between participants, any public history project will have limited success. The second outcome was one that I never expected, and resulted from an award rather than a specific project. Because of my ongoing projects and the relationships I had developed with various communities, in 2003 the university acknowledged my efforts with the President’s Award for Leadership in Diversity. The honor included support for my participation in the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education (NCORE) meeting in San Francisco. Although I was excited at the prospect of learning about a range of projects and activities from a national perspective, this experience had a much more transformative effect than I anticipated. At the conference, I began to see my work as a public history practitioner through an entirely different set of lenses. This resulted not only from the sessions but also from interactive exercises lead by the facilitators. The most profound of these was that after having the entire audience rise, the leaders would ask people to sit back down depending on their affiliation with the characteristic they called out. One by one, they would list attributes including color, race, ethnicity, sex, religion, LGBT orientation, physical ability, marital status, education, income, etc. One by one, the people around me would sit down. Going through variations of this exercise on multiple occasions that week, I can still feel the sting of the process. At the end, in a room that often exceeded more than a hundred people, with every eye fixed in my direction, I was the lone person standing. In those moments, the significance of my being a highly educated, middle-class, fully abled, Protestant, heterosexual, married, white male came into clear focus. Although others possessed it to varying degrees, I had more of it than anybody else in the room: privilege.

Returning to Florida, this view of privilege distilled my worldview and underscored the way I approached my craft from that time forward. Even within my ongoing projects, it brought new realizations to light. I know many of you attended the 2011 meeting in Pensacola, and I still receive compliments on not just the way we broke from the conference-center model and integrated the meeting into the historic downtown, but also on the beauty of the city itself. However, as we all made our way to the meeting site, I was curious if anybody thought about what was

6 Founded in 1988, the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies, out of the University of Oklahoma, held the first NCORE meeting to address issues of race in higher education. It has since evolved into a broader multicultural forum representing ethnic and cultural groups at university and colleges across the United States. “What Is NCORE?” National Conference for Race & Ethnicity in American Higher Education, https://www.ncore.ou.edu/en/about/.
directly below the elevated I-110 interstate spur downtown. Or better yet, while staying in a hotel with windows that only faced south toward the historic district and the water, if anybody questioned what was to be seen looking north instead? This area to the north and west is the site of many historic African American communities and served as the focal point for many of my projects. Unquestionably rich in culture, this area was home to historic black businesses, leaders including Daniel “Chappie” James (the Air Force’s first black four-star general), and Negro League Baseball. Further, the Belmont and DeVilliers district, also known as “The Blocks,” boasted key musical venues on the historic “Chitlin Circuit” including Abe’s 506, the Bunny Club, and others. With residents’ memories of Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holliday, and most other greats, The Blocks’ discriminating reputation was “If you can make it in Pensacola, Florida, you can make it anywhere.”

Beyond these remarkable pieces of local and national history, however, exists another world. Shaped by economics, race, education, and access to resources, the lives of the residents in these neighborhoods are dramatically different than those even just a few blocks away. As I began to intertwine greater awareness of the impact of privilege into my inquiry models, my students and I began to realize new questions. We found that within the shadow of Baptist Hospital, there are generations of residents who have never seen the inside of the building, believing that this is a place that would not allow their entry. Perhaps even more profound, there are generations of residents, separated only by two bridges and a narrow barrier island from Pensacola Beach, who have never seen this local landmark. Although this knowledge did not lead to any easy answers, the process of understanding the role of privilege within this community matrix transformed my perspectives, my teaching, and every subsequent project I have conducted.

This expanding realization of how privilege fits within my inquiry models extended beyond Pensacola. I frequently teach month-long summer travel courses where I take students across the country so they can learn about history in the places where events occurred. Many of you have met with my groups, given them invaluable exposure to the world of practicing public historians, and some have even worked with them on interpretive projects. Although these practitioner-based experiential learning opportunities are the focus of the class, I also strive to expose my students to issues of historical exclusivity, privilege, and contested space. Sometimes this works, other times my efforts have failed miserably.

One of my less successful efforts occurred during my Civil Liberties to Civil Rights: The Great Urban American Adventure course. In travelling from Florida up the East Coast to Maine, we visited most major metropolitan areas and contemplated the meaning of significant sites. These included African American civil rights sites, such as the Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth building; the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his historic “Dream” speech; and even the courthouse in Boston where Joseph Rakes attacked attorney Ted Landsmark with an American flag. Additionally, we visited sites where other groups fought for rights, ranging from Seneca Falls, New York, home of the first
women’s rights convention in 1848, and the gates of the White House, where Alice Paul suffered arrest in 1917 protesting for women’s suffrage, to the key locations of the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City. Although the discussions with my students may have had considerable depth, these iconic locations themselves are typically accommodating to tourists and tend to expose visitors to a sanitized environment. In an effort to engage students in a deeper conversation about the “real” world, I arranged a driving tour of Baltimore with a friend whose sister worked for the city’s social services. Although I personally found the tour fascinating and educational about the complexities of Baltimore’s diverse populations, the changing urban environment, and efforts to provide community support, most of this was lost on my students. Although excited to see the sites of the two popular crime-based shows set in the city, Homicide: Life on the Street and The Wire, the residual effect of the tour was their perception of Baltimore as a horrible place that none of them ever hoped to visit again. Considering my personal affinity for this culturally and physically beautiful place, I still have remorse over this failing.

As with any botched project, I resolved to learn from my mistakes. Accordingly, the following year in my Route 66 to the Atomic West class, I managed to atone for my pedagogical transgressions. I have found that there are few better places to discuss contested space than in the Southwest. Starting out by exploring issues of land ownership at the historically sensitive Alamo, we then move on to deeper conversations at locations such as the Plaza in Santa Fe, the (albeit geographically misplaced) Four Corners site on the Navajo Reservation, and San Francisco’s Chinatown. In an effort, again, to show the “other” side of these tourist destinations, in Albuquerque I arranged a tour of a University of New Mexico children’s clinic that serves the needs of primarily lower-income, at-risk residents without any stipulations relating to ability to pay or nationality. My students witnessed, in a tangible and meaningful way, the realities of privilege, survival, and support through an entirely different perspective. Further, this experience created a framework for discussing other community structures throughout the remainder of the trip. Unlike the Baltimore experience, this visit has become a permanent part of the itinerary and is routinely one of the reported highlights of the entire class.

No question, exposing students to social hierarchies from the perspective of caring for children is a somewhat gentle route to initiating otherwise difficult conversations. This is not to suggest, however, that student travel experiences are free from more challenging and heartrending experiences. One such case occurs during my class Corps of Discovery II: Exploring the West of Lewis and Clark. We follow the trail of the original expedition between 1804 and 1806 and discuss the multiple perspectives on elements such as American expansion, triumph, nationalism, and discovery. As we move across the Northwest, we look at the historic narrative from not only the perspective of the Corps of Discovery but equally from that of the American Indian populations along the route. In celebration of the bicentennial of the expedition, federal, state, and even local entities developed numerous interpretive resources along the way. Ranging from simple markers to
truly impressive visitor facilities with excellent programs and exhibits, the array of interpretative efforts encapsulates an evolving scope of public history practice. As we travel, we discuss the various approaches of interpretation and largely agree that every site does an admirable job of presenting multiple sides.

Fully considering the broader implications of the arrival of the “Great Captains” and its long-term meaning to the various local tribes as well as to the land itself, however, opened a new set of issues. For these nations and their people, those events two centuries ago were truly the beginning of the end of their way of life. A most agonizing reminder for the class came while visiting the Lower Brulé Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Situated on the west bank of the Missouri, the reservation borders a massive bend in the river that created a choice for the Corps of Discovery to either continue fighting up current or portage over land. The site now features remarkable vistas, excellent interpretation, and a re-created earth lodge.

Although the storytelling about the two-year window in the early 1800s is remarkable, the somber reality of the next two hundred years, evident once we left the interpretative site, is daunting. As a community, the population is isolated, enclosed, and cut off from resources. Whereas other tribes have benefited from casino gaming and other economic development opportunities over the last thirty years, the Lower Brulé is too remote from any large population to reap similar rewards. Clearly part of the larger American narrative, they are a tragic example of a community with severely limited means and opportunities within the borders of the United States that has largely been forgotten. From a historical interpretation and preservation perspective, we had to face sobering questions about the story of these people, attempt to understand how their community developed, and consider how the future might bring change. The process of reflecting on place, privilege, and contested space made moments like these among the most difficult to digest.

As this select set of examples attests, throughout my public history career I have had the privilege of engaging with a diverse range of groups and individuals through a broad collection of projects. As an educator, I am continually seeking ways to capture the nuances of these experiences so that I might package them in a coherent step-by-step way that I can then deliver to my students. However, each time I start to think that I have found a replicable pattern, new challenges arise that force me to reconsider my approach. As I discovered in one case, these realizations may necessitate working in opposition to many accepted analytical and interpretive perspectives.

A few years back, I was fortunate to participate on the Guantánamo Public Memory project under the skilled leadership of Liz Ševčenko. The goal of this partially oral history-based project was to “build public awareness of the long history of the US naval station at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and foster dialogue on the future of this place and the policies it shapes.” Rather than simply developing an interpretive framework and soliciting input from others, Liz managed to wrangle a herd of proverbial cats in coordinating more than a dozen public history programs across the country into developing a national travelling exhibit. Opening
in New York City in December 2012, for the next three years the exhibition toured the country, visiting not only the host institutions, but also the halls of the US House of Representatives, and it even travelled internationally to Turkey.\footnote{Designed partially as a travelling exhibit, the project also had a dynamic digital online presence. Visitors can listen to segments of collected oral histories, learn about the project, and contribute to the project. \textit{Guantánamo Public Memory Project}, http://gitmomemory.org/}

In reflecting upon the project, there is no question that it was an enormous success. Beyond the obvious outcomes of encouraging a conversation with the broader public about a complicated and highly controversial place, it also instilled a new framework for programs and their students to work together on a common goal. In many ways, this truly was a defining example of public history at work and encouraged collaboration between National Council on Public History members and institutions. Early in the development process, however, I began to recognize that there would be a number of initially unexpected, but contextually essential, challenges ahead. As most anybody who works with sensitive issues knows, searching for a balance within interpretation can be a tricky process.

Considering the very nature of GTMO as a site, and the fact that although President Obama promised in his 2008 campaign to close it immediately upon taking office it remains open to the present, we knew this would be a complicated discussion. From the outset, in keeping with the “awareness of the long history of the US naval station at Guantánamo,” there was a stated goal to interpret the GTMO’s entire past. The research and exhibit design process, however, rapidly gave way to much more pressing, and clearly publicly engaging, themes. Although the final product did indeed present some broader elements of the base’s 115-year history, the focus of the exhibit primarily revolved around the most recent legacy of Camp X-Ray and associated detention centers (located on a remote southwestern part of the base).

For my group of graduate students, the question of interpretive focus created a sharp contrast with the approach of most of the other teams around the country. As the 2011 conference attendees are keenly aware, Pensacola is a navy town. Many young sailors will start their careers at Naval Air Station Pensacola. Although the rigors of training and an associated military “regulation” over their personal lives may create an initial disdain for the place, by the end of their years of service, thousands will long to return and strategize as to how to make Florida their last duty station before retirement. As a result, the city has thousands of individuals who had been stationed there, had been spouses or children of service personnel, or even just came through on deployment and consequently have a personal connection with GTMO.

Accordingly, conversations in Pensacola about GTMO are dramatically different than most anywhere else in the United States. The base represented a range of things. For half of its operation, it was emblematic of the Cold War struggle between the freedoms and democracy of the United States in opposition to the
communism and dictatorship of the Soviet Union. For these individuals GTMO was not about unlawful combatants, human rights violations, or the embodiment of American defiance of international law. Instead, they viewed the base as a symbol of the United States’ resolve to defend global freedom and democracy. Further, and more importantly, they viewed it as a community. For these one-time residents it was about neighborhoods, schools, outdoor movies, and an idyllic “Mayberry” world. Although a surface-level assessment may simply chock this up to little more than military indoctrination, draped in red, white, and blue, a deeper analysis of the base and its purpose revealed truths in the residents’ perspective. There were clearly multiple sides to this conversation.

Beyond my access and connection to this considerable pool of subjects, there was another reason for my involvement in the project. In August 2001, I led a team of researchers to GTMO for an oral history project at the base. At the invitation of Base Commander Bob Buhlen, we conducted interviews with Cuban commuters, who walked to work each day from the cities of Caimanera and Guantánamo City to GTMO, and exiles, who were once commuters, but at one point or another did not return at the end of the day. The Castro government viewed these Cubans who became exiles as traitors. Labeled criminals in their own country, they could never return.

The stories we recorded ranged from triumphant to painful. One was of a woman seeking to reunite with her husband. After more than fifteen years doing hard labor on a sugar plantation and earning a pass to Jamaica, she defected and began the arduous process of getting approval to join her husband on the base. Tragically, her husband died a few days after she arrived. More common stories detailed families being permanently torn apart. One recurring narrative related to the process of becoming an exile. Facing pressure for information, or often-brutal interrogation if questions arose about one’s loyalty, workers often chose exile as a last resort. Not wanting to harm family left behind, rarely did a worker let anybody know of a pending decision to remain on the base. As relationships between long-time friends would instantly end upon one choosing exile (as continued communication would endanger the commuter), the one common final request was to tell family left behind about the decision and to initiate a sad final process. We listened to how at the specified time the US Marine Corps would escort the newly self-exiled worker to one of guard towers on the fence line. Once in the tower, he or she could look through the massive observation binoculars, termed the “Big Eyes,” and watch loved ones, who had gone to the designated place in Cuba, to wave a final, somber goodbye.⁸

⁸ Cuban commuters working on the base and exiles living there shared considerable concerns over the Castro government’s potential retaliation on them personally (commuters) or their family members still living in Caimanera and Guantánamo City (exiles) over their participation in the project. Accordingly, although we provided subjects personal copies of their interviews, we agreed to seal the collected oral histories for twenty years after collection. The materials will therefore become available in September 2021.
Although the US government continued to care for these new residents, and in the 1980s even extended Social Security retirement benefits to them, the accounts were continual reminders of the tragic local consequences of a larger global conflict. Dramatically different than Jack Nicholson’s “You can’t handle the truth!” portrayal of GTMO in *A Few Good Men*, for those serving on the base, it truly was an ongoing struggle between nations. Unlike the depictions of angry servicemen with guns prepared to shoot trespassers, marines most commonly acted as saviors. If a Cuban could make it over the fence to a patrolling marine on duty, he or she could petition for asylum under the US “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy. The day before our arrival on the base, a hopeful defector made it past the Cuban defenses and to within fifteen feet of the US fence line before hitting a Soviet-made mine. Hearing his cries for help, the US forces could do nothing but notify the Cuban Frontier Brigade about the incident. Slowly working their way with a metal detector through the field, placing small marking flags in the safe zones, the Cuban military collected the fleeing citizen. He died minutes before they arrived.

For those who lived and worked on the base, including American service personnel, their families, and Cuban exiles, these interactions were key to their narrative. Central to the overall design of the travelling exhibit, this issue of community became the focal point of our panel. Although it comprised decades of history, in light of more contemporary issues our piece was largely an afterthought and rarely entered the local debate or conversation as the exhibit travelled the country. During its time in Pensacola, however, this dynamic reversed. Rather than arranging activities and programs that placed the issues of unlawful combatants and incarceration at the center, my students developed resources focused primarily on GTMO as a community and addressed its place in history. Because of this carefully crafted approach, I found that the hundreds of local individuals who commented on the exhibit and participated in the programs were much more willing to engage with the entire range of themes and topics that the overall exhibit presented. Even when challenging prevailing political and interpretive views, asking different questions and including multiple perspectives creates opportunities for consideration and understanding.

Fortunately, we as public historians have always been extraordinarily well suited for this kind of approach. As a result of both our training and our interactions with different audiences, we have developed an intuitive instinct to ask different questions and seek new answers and solutions. Perhaps more importantly, we have the mouthpiece and the ability to make change. Throughout this week, I have listened to numerous members acknowledge how, as an organization, as demonstrated by

---

9 Under US immigration policy, Cubans attempting to seek asylum in the US may only do so if they physically step foot on US soil. Those intercepted at sea by the United States Coast Guard or other authority are interviewed and, depending on the severity of their situation, are either sent to another country or returned to Cuba. This policy only relates to Cuban citizens and not other nationalities. “U.S.-Cuba Migration Policy,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/27/AR2007072701493.html.
both the content of the program and the attendees, the NCPH’s diversity efforts are having an impact. In this, we need to continue our efforts to tell the entire story, from all angles. We do not do this because we are bowing to the winds of social or political pressure, but because it is part of preserving and understanding our history and our collective heritage. Accordingly, I am pleased that these are the questions we try to answer and problems we solve. I am excited to see what our collective professional future holds and inspired to see how we, as public historians, will continue to communicate the entire past into the future.

Patrick K. Moore is the UWF Public History Program director, a senior historian with Historical Research Associates, Inc., a partner with Three21 Innovations, LLC, and a founder of NextExitHistory™. As a public historian, Moore has spent more than twenty years working with federal agencies and organizations. Moore served as president of the National Council on Public History from 2014 to 2016 and was the 2007 Carnegie Foundation-CASE US Professor of the Year for the State of Florida.