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# What I've Learned Along the Way: A Public Historian's Intellectual Odyssey

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*National Council on Public History  
Presidential Address*

What I've Learned Along the  
Way: A Public Historian's  
Intellectual Odyssey

ROBERT R. WEYENETH

**Abstract:** In this biographically reflective essay, the author identifies two themes that have informed his public history work in communities with historical secrets, in civil rights history, and on the architecture of racial segregation: the importance of acknowledging and remembering the “dark past” and of asking questions from the perspective of place. His projects have taught him to look for the *pukas* or gaps, to cast down his bucket and engage nearby history, to think ecologically by hitching case studies to broad patterns of meaning, and to accept that the impact of projects may be catalytic rather than conclusive. He argues that the interpretive fluidity of history is a mystery to the general public and suggests that sites and museums teach what history is, as well as what history happened at a property. He offers a way to do this by “telling the whole story” through recognizing the history of site management and exhibiting the process of site interpretation.

AS I MENTIONED IN THE CONFERENCE PROGRAM, Monterey is a stroll down memory lane for me, and our meeting has inspired me to look back personally. I grew up a hundred miles north, in the San Francisco Bay Area, in booming postwar California. My life with history may have begun in our fourth-grade state history class where we used a textbook called *California*

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*Yesterdays*.<sup>1</sup> I remember reading that the first Californians used acorns for food, that the Spanish used adobe to build, and that Father Junípero Serra was buried at nearby Mission Carmel before the American Constitution was even written. As a child I was thrilled when our family drove down to Monterey from the Bay Area. I still recall glimpses of Colton Hall and the Larkin House through the windows of my mother's station wagon, which in retrospect was probably my first historic driving tour. Eventually my grandfather made it his project to take me to all twenty-one California missions, and we got to most of them.

When I studied history in high school, the family travels gave me enough teenage knowledge to notice that the chapters in our American history textbook on "the colonial period" celebrated the English colonial heritage but barely mentioned the nation's Spanish and Mexican colonial heritage. Today our history textbooks are less Anglo-centric and more inclusive, of course. And much has changed since I was in high school, when Lyndon Johnson was president, Ronald Reagan was the governor of California, and Richard Nixon was still a twice-defeated presidential and gubernatorial candidate.

My path from a California kid with a nerdy interest in history to a professional historian was a long and circuitous one, like many of us who grew up and went to college in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. We tend to lump together these years as "the Sixties"—and it is said that if you remember the Sixties, you weren't there—but I do remember starting graduate school in history in the mid-1970s. I also remember a conversation with my dissertation advisor a few years later when I told him that I had discovered something called "public history." I was lucky enough to be in a history department with a distinguished faculty and multiple strengths in a variety of fields, but the Berkeley history department had little regard for public history. In response to my enthusiasm, my advisor told me I could attend a different campus of the University of California that was then in the process of establishing a curriculum in public history. I knew Santa Barbara had a wonderful Spanish mission (which I had visited with my grandfather), a nice beach, and a warmer ocean than we did in Northern California, but I stayed at Berkeley.

I've titled this talk "What I've Learned Along the Way: A Public Historian's Intellectual Odyssey." I want to offer two kinds of observations today. On the one hand, I want to look backward at my adventures in the trenches of public history. (Veterans in the room may recognize some of these.) On the other hand, I want to look forward and share a few discoveries from along the way with those in the room who are encountering the excitement of public history for the first time. To paraphrase the late Irish poet Seamus Heaney: it's been

1. Irmagarde Richards, *California Yesterdays* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1957). This article is a slightly expanded version of the presidential address given at the Monterey meeting of the National Council on Public History on March 22, 2014. For their comments on earlier drafts of this talk, I am grateful to Leslie Arnovick, John Dichtl, Jessica Elfenbein, and Allison Marsh.

a journey where “each point of arrival” has “turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination.”<sup>2</sup>

I want to conclude by pulling these adventures and discoveries into an appeal. It's an idea I've been mulling over the years, inspired by my various public history projects and simply by paying attention to all the ways that history has made the headlines in recent years, for better and for worse. It's rooted in my concerns that professional historians and the general public share different—even conflicting—assumptions about the nature of history. Let me just say at this point that the proposal is intended to reclaim the word “revisionism” from the list of public obscenities.

### ***Conversion Experience***

Like many of us, it was a series of “ah ha!” moments—a conversion experience—that helped me embrace public history. Even as an undergraduate I remember being frustrated that my history professors seemed to abdicate any interest or sense of responsibility for making connections between past and present. Just one example: I happened to be taking a course on the Civil War and Reconstruction as the Watergate drama was unfolding in 1973 and 1974. For the first time in a hundred years, Americans were seriously talking about a president being impeached. My teacher was a particularly notable scholar of the antebellum and postwar periods whose studies of slavery had reflected his own engagement with civil rights politics in the 1950s and 1960s. His lectures were formal and scripted occasions, with questions reserved for a few moments at the end of the hour. To this day, I remember his steadfast refusal over several classes to be drawn into any comments about current events or what Andrew Johnson's impeachment and trial might reveal about the fate of the Nixon presidency. That's just one case where I was frustrated by historians who would not or could not engage the implications of history for the present.

For me, the journey to “the other side” was probably cemented by the convergence of the avocational and the vocational, the melding of a hobby with my professional education. As a college student, I had discovered a recreational interest in the outdoors, backpacking in the high country of the Sierra Nevada. Later, in graduate school in the 1970s, I was introduced to another form of outdoor recreation, white-water river rafting. A bunch of us would spend the occasional Saturday driving from Berkeley to the Sierra foothills—sometimes to the precise places where the California Gold Rush began and flourished in the 1850s—where we inflated our army surplus rafts and set out through the rapids of the Stanislaus, the American, the Merced, and the Tuolumne Rivers. I have no doubt that these intense—and intensely

2. Seamus Heaney, quoted by Michiko Kakutani, “Capturing Rhythms of Nature in Poems,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2013.

rewarding—experiences kindled an interest in the nascent field of environmental history. I was fortunate to work eventually with one of the pioneering scholars in the field who was based in Berkeley's College of Natural Resources.

When one of my rafting friends finished his graduate degree and moved on to a small environmentally oriented college in Maine, the two of us decided to put our passion for rivers into the service of college teaching. The biggest, longest, most historical river in the country seemed to be the Mississippi, so we decided that we would teach a course on the human and natural history of the Mississippi River, while paddling its length. The Maine college agreed to sponsor the course, we had some gigantic wood-and-canvas canoes made for us in New Brunswick, and we lured a dozen trusting students into our experiment with "floating classrooms." It was the summer of 1979. We drove to the headwaters of the Mississippi River at Lake Itasca, Minnesota, put our boats in the water, and paddled and portaged a thousand miles over the next three months. We finally called a halt in Mark Twain's Hannibal, Missouri. We were a bit short of New Orleans, but the summer was gone. We had canoed more miles than anyone we knew. We had suffered through the heat and humidity of a Midwestern summer, survived thunderstorms in open canoes in open water, and seen acres of our skin covered in bug bites. There weren't many snakes, but there were lots of venomous interpersonal tensions. We'd also had a wonderful—even unique—opportunity to take history into the field and to experience the history of river communities from the perspective of the river.<sup>3</sup>

I returned to California with a passion for public history. I finished my dissertation and moved to Honolulu to accept my first job out of graduate school, as a faculty member at the University of Hawaii where I had been hired to teach environmental history in the Department of American Studies. Hawaii eventually proved too expensive on a professor's salary, but my wife and I found it a fascinating place to live, far more interesting than its simple fun-in-the-sun tourist image. We loved the prevalence, even dominance, of Asian culture. We also enjoyed the novelty that Hawaii afforded us to live as racial minorities.

Professionally, Hawaii hurried me along in my journey into public history. In Hawaii I did my first historical consulting. I found enormous intellectual satisfaction working for a client and applying academic expertise in ways that had a real-world impact. My interest in environmental history eventually led me into thinking about built environments, cultural landscapes, and historic preservation. I joined the National Council on Public History in this period, just before leaving Honolulu to establish my own consulting practice in British Columbia and Washington State.

3. The innovative course was described in "The Mississippi River Canoe Expedition 1979: An Experiment in Floating Classrooms," *Journal of Environmental Education* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 8-10. A nature writer and photographer accompanied the expedition for the entire summer, and their account was published as *The Father of Waters: A Mississippi River Chronicle* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982).

## ***Making the Choice***

In choosing to become a full-time public historian, I anticipated some things, familiar to all of us:

- that my work would make a difference
- that it would reach a broad and interested audience
- that I could find linkages between history and modern issues like race relations, social justice, and environmental sustainability
- that NCPH could be a congenial professional home for me
- that I would probably have some interesting “war stories” in the trenches of public history
- and, finally, I hoped that *The Public Historian* might occasionally find some of my adventures interesting enough to publish as “reports from the field,” a section of the journal I loved to read.

In retrospect, there were some things I did not anticipate:

- that some of my experiences in the trenches would inspire death threats
- that one project would rile up enough people that they would try to suppress publication of its results
- that I would move from the West Coast to the American South—and to South Carolina, in particular, a place that I learned had once been described as “too small to be a republic, and too large to be an insane asylum”<sup>4</sup>
- and that at the University of South Carolina—first with Connie Schulz and now with Allison Marsh—we would build a zombie army of over two hundred public history alumni who would infiltrate museums, historic sites, archives, and preservation agencies all over the country, carrying subversive and dangerous messages that would bring history alive.

## ***Embracing the Dark Past***

Something else that I didn’t anticipate is that I would discover an abiding interest in what I came to call the “dark past.” By “dark past,” I mean the chapters of history that are difficult, controversial, or problematical—perhaps not for academically trained historians working in universities—but for public audiences at the community level. I found myself drawn to acknowledging these chapters, in whatever venues my research took me, and thinking about

4. The expression is regularly attributed to James Louis Petigru, a South Carolina Unionist, on the eve of secession. Despite the frequency with which Petigru’s words are paraphrased, their precise source is elusive: “this famous statement was printed, in slightly different forms, in newspapers throughout South Carolina after the Civil War and has become part of the state’s oral historical tradition.” See Lacy Ford, “James Louis Petigru: The Last South Carolina Federalist,” in *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston*, eds. Michael O’Brien and David Moltke-Hansen (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 415, note 98.

the challenges and strategies for remembering and interpreting them in places like museums and historic sites.

I first encountered the dark past in a project in Centralia, Washington, a small lumber town in the Pacific Northwest that was haunted by a bloody labor confrontation that had occurred there in the early twentieth century. It came to be called the “Centralia Massacre.” The incident had disappeared from the town’s memory, even though the events attracted national attention at the time and remain a dramatic example of the domestic Red Scare that followed World War I. The Centralia project introduced me to the challenges of doing public history in a community with an historical secret and the opportunities for remembering chapters of local history that were controversial.

It was also a tale of an historian inserting himself into the story, in an effort to encourage acknowledgment and reconciliation with a dark past. My idea was to do this through the National Register of Historic Places. Working with interested residents in Centralia, I nominated two sites to the National Register: one associated with the official version of what had happened and one associated with the underrepresented role of the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies). The sites were nominated within the umbrella rubric of a multiple-property nomination because I hoped to encourage the listing of additional sites—if there was interest among those living in Centralia. As much as anything, my intention was that the National Register review process would catalyze public discussion of this invisible chapter of community history and bring it out of the shadows.

Those of you who know my article in *The Public Historian* will recall that the nominations did indeed inspire vigorous debate. (This is the adventure that produced death threats: I won’t go into the details here except to say that authorities told me to monitor my car for explosives.) Although the vehement responses at public meetings and opinion pieces in newspapers seemed to produce more heat than light, my faith in the National Register as a vehicle to reach the public about history is unshaken. I have continued to use it as a platform for historical research—for myself and in my classes—and I continue to recommend it as a constructive and often powerful tool for catalyzing community discussion of controversial and difficult histories.<sup>5</sup>

The Centralia project was also important personally because it kindled a fascination with the complicated dynamics of how history operates at the community level. When I moved to South Carolina in 1992, I found myself wondering how I could take with me this interest in the dark pasts of

5. “History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret,” *The Public Historian* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 51-73. The original multiple-property nomination to the National Register of Historic Places that I prepared to encourage public discussion was entitled *The Centralia Armistice Day Riot of 1919, Lewis County, Washington* (July 1991). To my knowledge, the call in *The Public Historian* article for a multiple-property nomination to document labor history sites associated with the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) has gone unheeded.

communities. I eventually settled on a project to look at the modern civil rights movement—from the angle of local history. I realized that although the heroes and villains and legacy of the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s might be very clear to a professor standing at a lectern talking about the big picture, I wondered how the civil rights movement was being remembered in communities, where the heroes and villains were sometimes still alive and the politics of commemoration were complex and delicate. I set out to assess the extent to which the modern civil rights movement was being remembered—and neglected—not just in the South but throughout the United States.

My report is almost twenty years old now, but I think its conclusions still have some resonance. Although there have been impressive and diverse efforts to establish museums, historic sites, and markers—there is even now a segment of the hospitality industry called civil rights tourism—what was not being commemorated was as revealing as what has been recognized. To take just one example: a significant gap in almost all commemoration efforts was the absence of Black Power, the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X. These subjects seemed to be chapters of the modern civil rights movement that were too difficult or too dangerous to commemorate, certainly in 1995 and still to some extent today. It is the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. who dominates how we are remembering the 1950s and 1960s, in part because Dr. King's philosophy fits the model for social change that the majority today finds congenial. Nonviolent means, the vocabulary of Christian love, and integrationist goals are easier for cultural institutions to commemorate than sites associated with violence, armed resistance, and racial separation. That's just one instance of the gaps in remembering the civil rights legacy.<sup>6</sup>

### *Asking Questions from the Perspective of Place*

I said earlier that I hadn't expected to be drawn to the dark past as I made the transition from graduate student to full-time public historian. In a similar vein I did not appreciate until recently how central the concepts of "space" and "place" had been in my work. Although I had done a number of projects with specific places as the focus—historic walking tours, building histories, histories of designed landscapes—it was a project on the architecture of racial

6. *Historic Preservation and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's: Identifying, Preserving, and Interpreting the Architecture of Liberation* (a cultural resources survey and analysis, February 1995). The report was circulated in hard copy in 1995 to government agencies and nonprofit heritage organizations at the national, state, and local levels to encourage the identification, preservation, and interpretation of sites associated with the modern civil rights movement. Synopses of the report were published in *CRM: Cultural Resource Management* 18, no. 4 (1995); *Public History News* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1995); *CRM: Cultural Resource Management* 19, no. 2 (1996); *African Americans and Civil Rights: A Reappraisal* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1997); and the *Proceedings of the Tenth Conference of the George Wright Society* (1999). The original report is now available online: [http://works.bepress.com/robert\\_weyenth/8/](http://works.bepress.com/robert_weyenth/8/).



segregation that encouraged me to try to ask questions from the perspective of place.

I found this new project because it was the missing context of the civil rights story. In the former project I had been trying to tell the “whole story” of the black freedom struggle: acknowledging the role of militancy and violence (as I just mentioned), looking at the local activists (as well as the national icons), and focusing on recently constructed vernacular buildings (not just architecturally significant churches) where organizing meetings had taken place. What I realized was that we were assuming that civil rights activism was inevitable and its origins obvious for Americans alive today, forgetting that fewer and fewer had grown up with the black freedom struggle in the newspaper headlines. My question became—from the standpoint of historic preservation—where were the segregated spaces that defined the everyday experience of racial segregation?

Thinking about this from the perspective of place, I began to see that white supremacy had significantly shaped the American built environment between 1880 and 1960—perhaps as much as the skyscrapers, streetcar suburbs, and urban renewal that routinely make it into textbooks on the history of city planning and architecture. It seemed to me that segregationist laws and racial ideology had created a distinct architectural form in the United States. Although we knew much about segregation as a political, legal, and social institution, I wondered if looking at it as a spatial system would help us comprehend more fully the day-to-day experience of segregation, particularly from the perspective of African Americans. Was the “physicality of place” a vantage point that offered insight or opened up interesting questions? I decided it was.

These were more than just abstract scholarly questions for me. I wanted to encourage preservation of these spaces because of what they could contribute to popular knowledge of a difficult period of American history. Places have a power and an authenticity, and I thought that the preservation of the imposed architecture of segregation might provide appropriate venues for teaching about modern race relations, diversity, and social tolerance.

This was the call in my *Public Historian* article a couple of years ago, which set out a typology for identifying these kinds of places and attaching historical significance to them. Since then, my assessment remains that we are doing a good job preserving what I call the “heroic architecture” of segregation, like Rosenwald Schools, which were monuments to biracial cooperation in the Jim Crow era. But where are the spaces that illustrate how architecture separated the races? Where are the elaborate racially defined architectural hierarchies incorporated into public buildings like courthouses or commercial establishments like movie theaters and railroad stations? Where is the simple but insulting half-wall erected in the medical office waiting room? Where is the horizontal separation of the buildings on the campus of the segregated mental hospital? Where are the duplicative parking lots serving the segregated swimming areas at the ocean beach park?

This is the imposed architecture of white supremacy, and these places tell us very different stories about everyday life in the Jim Crow era. At the moment, we are choosing to be selective in our thinking, looking for whatever can be perceived as upbeat in the segregationist story and focusing on places that can articulate optimistic and ennobling narratives. I believe it is time to begin thinking in a systematic way about preserving the architecture of segregation in all its forms.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Four Lessons***

These are a few of the journeys within my public history odyssey. I've tried to suggest the importance in my work—and I think to the field—of exploring the problematical past and asking questions from the perspective of place. Here are a few other things I've learned along the way.

*I've learned to "look for the pukas."* In my first job out of graduate school at the University of Hawaii, my wife and I picked up a few Hawaiian words that we still use. *Puka* is one of them; it means "hole" or "gap." Let me explain what a "public history *puka*" is. I never intended to investigate Centralia's historical secret—I didn't know it harbored one—until I passed the exit for the town on Interstate 5 while driving one time between Portland and Seattle. It jogged my memory, and I recalled reading about the Centralia Massacre in a long-ago graduate seminar. When I had a chance to explore the town on a later visit with residents, we found nothing that acknowledged the event, and my curiosity was piqued. Similarly, on the civil rights project, I had enough contextual knowledge of the civil rights movement that I was able to compare what I was finding on the ground with what I knew of the history. In both these cases, I was able to spot the *pukas*. I still look for them when I visit museums and historic sites, because their presence usually signals there's a story that's absent. So, early on, I learned that "absence is presence" and to look for the *pukas*.

*I've also learned to "cast down my bucket where I am."* As much as my work hangs together as explorations of the problematical past or asking questions from the perspective of place, I think something else was going on as I moved from project to project: I was looking for interesting projects in my own backyard, first in Hawaii, then in the Pacific Northwest, and now in the American South. Still today I advise students to cast down their buckets where

7. "The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past," *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 11-44. Between 2003 and 2006, three graduate seminars in the Public History Program at the University of South Carolina researched and assembled a multiple-property nomination to the National Register of Historic Places based on the typologies identified in the article. The nomination, *Resources Associated with Segregation in Columbia, South Carolina, 1880-1960, Richland County, South Carolina*, is accessible through the South Carolina Department of Archives and History website: <http://www.nationalregister.sc.gov/MPS/MPS048.pdf>.

they are. In borrowing Booker T. Washington's accommodationist words for a completely different purpose here, I mean to praise the nobility of nearby history.<sup>8</sup> My advice to students about casting down their buckets is less about place (where they are studying as graduate students or working afterwards as professionals) and more about themselves (whether they can dig deeply into nearby history and discover broad patterns and meanings).

*I call this search for broad patterns and meaning "thinking ecologically,"* and this is something else I've learned along the way. It's the intellectual apparatus that we bring to projects that gives context to nearby history and frames the story. We are the ones who answer the questions "so what?" or "who cares?" about the local case study. We are the ones who use the specifics of locality to open up conversations about big issues and large debates. Let me invoke a fellow Californian at this point, the naturalist John Muir. On one of his early rambles into the remote regions of the High Sierra, Muir famously remarked "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."<sup>9</sup> Muir was not a public historian, of course, but I think this ecological observation might be applied to our work. We can use Muir to remind us to hitch the story in our backyard—the nearby history and the case study—to everything else and to find those broad patterns of meaning and significance.

Finally, something else that I have learned along the way is that *many public history projects are catalytic, rather than conclusive*. Some projects have immediate and gratifying results; others seem to take forever to have the consequences one would like. In this sense, many of our projects can—and do—exist in the future, as much as they exist in the present. I only came to this realization as I was trying to be biographically reflective about my intellectual odyssey for this talk. I see now that I've come to accept a time frame of the long-term—and hoped for results in the short term—more often than I had realized.<sup>10</sup>

8. Booker T. Washington used the phrase "cast down your bucket where you are" throughout his speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta on September 18, 1895. See *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, vol. 3, 1889-1895 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 578-87. David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty used the term "nearby history" as the title for *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*; first published in 1982, it is now in its third edition (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010).

9. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 157. The book was first published in 1911, based on the journal Muir kept on his first trip to Yosemite in 1869.

10. One example I would single out in this regard is the *Slavery at South Carolina College* website: <http://library.sc.edu/digital/slaverysc/index.html>. This website was created by graduate students in the Public History Program's Historic Site Interpretation class during the spring semester 2011, based on their own original research into the history of slavery at South Carolina College, the institutional predecessor of the University of South Carolina, established in 1801. To date, the university has shown little interest in acknowledging or engaging this problematical chapter of its past.

## *Apologizing for the Dark Past*

These are some of the things I've learned along the way that have helped me to find and define projects. I've identified and labeled them in contemplating this talk, but casting down my bucket and trying to think ecologically were inchoate impulses for me in the late 1990s when they led me to formulate a set of questions and discover a new project. In my work that assessed difficult and controversial pasts, I noticed that the idea of "apology" kept coming up. I was struck by the regularity of these calls, in my projects and in the headlines. I began to realize that this was a national and global phenomenon, not just a local story. I started to wonder if it made any sense for people alive today to apologize for the past. Was an apology a meaningful way for the present to engage the past and address historical injustices? Did these historical apologies have any power to accomplish what their proponents wanted?

I set out to examine systematically the range of efforts on the part of governments, corporations, churches, and individuals to issue apologies. I looked at the past deeds they were resurrecting and condemning: racism, religious persecution, the dispossession and deaths of native peoples, slavery, and essentially any other historical "crimes" and government policies that were now out of favor. I looked at the motives and goals of those doing the apologizing and the forms that their apologies took. I studied the reasoning of those who questioned the utility and wisdom of apologies, many of whom thought apologies were downright silly. In my analysis, I was particularly interested in whether historical apologies had what I called "power," which I defined as the ability to provide a form of reconciliation between present and past generations. Those of you who remember my article in *The Public Historian* will recall that I answered in the affirmative—although guardedly—when certain conditions were present.<sup>11</sup>

I also tried to offer an explanation about "why now?" Although apologies are not unique to the modern era, we did seem to be witnessing a flurry of intense apologizing in the 1990s, which has continued. One reason is a notion that developed in the second half of the twentieth century: that we were all in it together on "spaceship earth." The peoples and environments of the planet were connected, whether we liked it or not, through a perception of common global bonds and an unease about shared global threats. To my way of thinking, this sense of "global propinquity" heightened sensitivity to the wrongs done to nations and to neighbors.

A second reason for all this apologizing is that history itself is up for grabs these days. The rush to apologize (or to demand an apology) has been shaped by the shifting sands of what constitutes an historical injustice, across centuries and across recent generations. It is only comparatively recently, for example,

11. "The Power of Apology and the Process of Historical Reconciliation," *The Public Historian* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 9-38.

that government policies rooted in racism have passed out of favor or that the claims of native peoples have begun to be taken seriously. The modern climate of opinion supports a rhetoric, if not a reality, of pluralistic tolerance. Societies now find themselves compelled to confront their past in its entirety, to ask new questions about it, and to rewrite the stories we remember from high school. We are at one of those moments when the meaning of history is being vigorously debated and renegotiated because, in the last analysis, the age of apology springs from the interpretive fluidity of history in general.

### ***Basic Assumptions Aren't So Basic***

I have also learned that some of the basic assumptions of the discipline of history are not so basic for the public audiences we claim to engage. I learned this the hard way. A project in Hawaii made me appreciate that historians work in mysterious ways that are often inscrutable, if not downright suspicious, for members of the public. On the face of it, my project will sound innocuous enough: researching and writing a history of a nineteenth-century urban park, Honolulu's version of New York's Central Park or San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Kapi'olani Park, though, was different in one big way: it had been established by royal fiat, shortly before the American overthrow of the monarchy in the 1890s.

My involvement came at the request of the City and County of Honolulu. As I researched park history, I discovered some unknown stories about the origins of the park and its early years. However, these remained safely buried in a consultant's report, a piece of gray literature that few had read beyond the government office that had contracted for it. When a local nonprofit proposed publishing my report as a book in order to generate public support for its park preservation efforts, my research became better known and, to my surprise, inflammatory. My iconoclastic interpretation stepped on enough toes that it inspired a vigorous effort to prevent publication of the report as a book.

Here's a quick synopsis. Local lore maintained that the King of Hawaii had established Kapi'olani Park as a "public park" for his subjects. I discovered the story was more complex and not so democratically inclusive: members of the king's court had actually developed the site as a private preserve and fashionable seaside resort for themselves. In addition to questioning the origins story for the park, my research caused me to re-evaluate the legacy of an Englishman regarded as a park benefactor. Rather than being a benefactor, this well-connected businessman actually orchestrated a real estate deal by which some of the leading men of Hawaii acquired title to prime oceanfront property, essentially diminishing the size and amenities of the parcel that became public. The bottom line is that the descendants of the so-called park benefactor, as well as Native Hawaiians who were keen to protect the reputation of the king, labeled my manuscript "libelous" and mobilized attorneys to defend local legend and ancestral reputation. Many of you will recognize this as a common

tale where descendants of founding families play influential roles in writing and defending the master narrative of community history. In my case, these descendants had access to legal resources, and I had to spend considerable time responding to attorneys who characterized my book manuscript as full of “opinions.”

In the course of answering their questions, I realized that lawyers, like other members of the general public, have little comprehension of how professional historians actually work—and certainly no understanding of the interpretative nature of history. I'm thinking here of such standard professional methodologies as asking questions about sources and points of view, analyzing texts and trying to think critically about them, drawing on our contextual knowledge of a period or place, seeking to draw reasonable inferences from the evidence at hand, and eventually crafting an historical interpretation. I am pleased to report that the nonprofit preservation society, which could have pulled the plug at any point, stood by the research in the manuscript, and the book was published uncensored.<sup>12</sup>

I mention this experience because it has made me wonder if we have an unacknowledged challenge in public history: explaining to public audiences how we know what we think we know about the past. Our basic assumptions about what history is—and how historians work—may not be as basic as we like to assume.

### ***Showcase the Interpretive: An Appeal***

Over the years, I've thought about how public and professional understanding of history seems so different and divergent, and I want to conclude today with an appeal: that we showcase the “interpretive fluidity of history” in our work, especially at historic sites and history museums. Let me pause a moment and consider this phrase that just rolled off my tongue: “the interpretive fluidity of history.” Professional historians use it without thinking twice. We understand what it means, because we are in the business of interpreting—and reinterpreting—the past all of the time. We spend years in school, apprenticing in the trade, and learning the art of interpretation. Sometimes we even learn humility: that our own interpretations will inevitably be overturned and replaced by those of new generations asking new questions and coming up with new answers. All of this is familiar to us.

12. The book is *Kapi'olani Park: A History* (Honolulu: Kapiolani Park Preservation Society, 2002). The controversy over its publication is recounted in “The Risks of Professionalizing Local History: The Campaign to Suppress My Book,” *Public History News* 24, no. 1 (Fall 2003); the essay is accessible online: [http://works.bepress.com/robert\\_weyeneth/5/](http://works.bepress.com/robert_weyeneth/5/). The original consultant's report is *Kapi'olani Park: A Victorian Landscape of Leisure* (an historic landscape report prepared for the City and County of Honolulu, March 1991); it was reprinted in the series *Urban Documents Microfiche Collection* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1993).

But it seems to me that professional historians and the general public share very different assumptions about the nature of history. Public audiences seem to view history as something immutable—an unchanging set of truths—in contrast to the interpretive fluidity that professional historians embrace. Public audiences expect history to be “objective,” whereas professional historians understand that there really isn’t such a thing. We should strive for objectivity in our research and methodology, of course, but ultimately we are always offering an interpretation. We know that even the selection of “facts” and “dates” for an historical marker represents an effort to impose order on the chaos of the past and, therefore, becomes essentially an interpretation. I think it’s fair to say that most members of the public don’t understand the elusiveness of this concept of “objective” history.<sup>13</sup>

The marvelous thing about history is its fluidity. “Every generation writes its own history” may be a bit of an exaggeration, but the statement does emphasize the idea that the meaning of the past is continually changing.<sup>14</sup> And it changes because we in the present ask new questions about what happened in the past. In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement pushed more historians to ask questions about the history of African Americans, for example, and the field of African American history has flourished ever since. The sense of an environmental crisis in the 1960s and 1970s helped create a field called environmental history; now, it’s hard to find a university history department that doesn’t have an environmental historian on its faculty. As historians, all of us appreciate this vitality and dynamism of history.

My proposal is that we let the public in on this trade secret. One way to do this at museums and historic sites is to shine some light on the “interpretation” at the property. Visitors may not know the technical meaning of “interpretation” as applied to an historic site, but they are smart and curious—and many can be drawn into an explanation of why some subjects are discussed at the site, but not others. Why are certain questions asked and answered, but not others? Why do we hear the historical voices or outsider judgments that we do? Why are some pedagogic strategies employed rather than others? Shining light on the “interpretation” means saying: we cannot cover everything, choices have to be made, let us tell you how we made the choices we did.

13. Many will hear echoes here of the so-called culture wars of the 1990s. For an analysis of how these developments shaped debate about standards for teaching history in elementary and secondary schools, see Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

14. Although writers commonly characterize the expression “every generation writes its own history” as an adage—because it apparently lacks a genealogy—one early use was by Henry Morse Stephens in his presidential address to the American Historical Association in Washington, DC on December 28, 1915. The address was published as “Nationality and History,” *American Historical Review* 21, no. 2 (January 1916), where the phrase appears on page 225. A few years later, George Herbert Mead used the phrase “every generation rewrites its history” in “The Nature of the Past,” *Essays in Honor of John Dewey* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929), 240.

For those who manage sites and museums, it means being publicly reflective about what is already done quietly in-house. (In this sense, what I'm advocating is a bit different than "shared authority"; I'd call it "pulling back the curtain.") Although I love the articles in *The Public Historian* and other journals that narrate the elaborate behind-the-scenes stories of how an interpretation is designed and implemented, this is not the degree of on-site detail I am suggesting. My suggestion is much more basic: exhibit the process of getting to the end product, whether it's text panels, talking points for the docents, a walking or driving tour. Let's explain why the old exhibits are being removed to add new exhibits on different topics. Why was the decision made to preserve, rather than to restore, that building over there—and what the heck is the difference between preservation and restoration, anyway? How did the decision to preserve all the physical layers of history at the property affect the intellectual content of the interpretation?

It seems to me that one seamless way to pull back the curtain is to recognize the "recent past" at the site. This is a *puka* at most museums and historic sites today. To my mind, the recent past is as much a part of a site's history as the "historic" events that happened there. Take Hearst Castle, just down the coast from us in San Simeon, as a local example. The "history" at Hearst Castle is usually calculated as the thirty-two years associated with the construction of the estate and its occupancy by William Randolph Hearst, prior to his death in 1951. The property was donated to the state in 1958, so it has been managed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation for almost sixty years now, essentially twice as long as the Hearst residency. The standard practice is to tear out this final chapter of the book, dismissing it as "non-historic" and merely "administrative history." And, needless to say, the absence of this chapter will become an even more noticeable presence as the span between 1958 and the present continues to lengthen with time.

But what if we acknowledge the recent past—at this or any other site—and make it part of the story told to visitors? In doing so, we open up a venue for discussing the stewardship of the property and issues of modern site management—and also, of course, discussion of how the interpretation has been crafted, the questions asked, the choices made. In many grand historic houses that are now museums, the public can take "upstairs-downstairs tours" and see the servants' quarters, the kitchens and pantries, and the mechanical infrastructure that allowed the property to function in the historic period. I wonder if it's time to supplement the "servants tours" with "stewards tours"? I don't mean a walk-through of the administrative offices, although that may appeal to some visitors. Rather, I am suggesting creative and imaginative explorations of how the site inhabits the present. How does the site exist in the modern world, not just in "the vanished one"?<sup>15</sup> Engaging the recent past

15. In a similar vein, most books about the history of Hearst Castle emphasize the construction and occupancy from 1919 to 1947, rather than the site management challenges of the multiple massive buildings and extensive grounds. It should be noted that Hearst Castle has been



in this way is an example of thinking ecologically about public history, and it helps us tell the whole story at historic sites.

Some will point out that in opening up discussion of the recent past, we also open up a venue for activism: to more forthrightly connect the past to modern issues of social justice or environmental sustainability, for example. To my mind, this is an additional argument for doing so, but my proposal focuses on providing the steward's perspective as a method and means to showcase the interpretive fluidity of history.

Some folks are already doing things along the lines of what I'm advocating here, but I think my proposal remains a frontier for most museums and historic sites today. (And I know that still others will dissent from what I am suggesting all together, preferring to stick with what I call "the *Dragnet* approach": "Just the facts, ma'am. Just the facts."<sup>16</sup>) I hope that today's appeal—in a visible forum like this—might be a starting point for further discussions, candid commentary, and reports from the field. What is being done now in this vein? Who is experimenting, if only around the edges? What has been tried—and perhaps abandoned? Is this appeal hopelessly at odds with what public audiences expect and want? If the notion has merit, what are the institutional obstacles to site managers implementing it? Are there success stories out there to be shared? Red flags to be raised?

In concluding my talk by making this proposal, I have repeated these phrases several times: let the public in on the trade secrets, shine light on the interpretation at the property, be publicly reflective about what is already done quietly in-house, pull back the curtain, reveal the behind-the-scenes story, exhibit the process, tell the whole story. These are all calls for transparency, but I want to clarify and emphasize that I am not trying to make a case for transparency for its own sake or as an end in itself. Rather, my call is intended to showcase the interpretive and to set the interpretive fluidity of the discipline of history at center stage, as we hear how a site or museum "inhabits the present." My appeal is for these places to take on the challenge of helping visitors understand what history is, not just what happened at a particular spot. Framed another way, let's get the word "revisionism" off the current list of

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documenting and collecting the post-1958 period, laying a solid foundation if it ever wished to interpret the decades of stewardship by the California Department of Parks and Recreation. According to Victoria Kastner, historian at Hearst Castle (e-mail to author, February 28, 2014), materials include records of the gift transfer, documentation of restoration and art conservation projects, a garden archive with photographs and descriptions that document the grounds, a recent four-volume cultural landscape report, oral histories, yearbooks and photograph albums of former employees, and a library that collects material on press coverage, events, and current operations.

16. The *Dragnet* series originated on radio and appeared on television in the 1950s, with a revival in the 1960s and re-runs ever since. While "Just the facts, ma'am" has entered the language as its signature catchphrase, the *Wikipedia* entry (accessed February 9, 2014) for the series claims that the phrase was never actually uttered by fictional Los Angeles police detective Sergeant Joe Friday, played by Jack Webb. The closest lines were "All we want are the facts, ma'am" and "All we know are the facts, ma'am."

public obscenities. Let's help people see revisionism as the job description of historians—and what we do all the time.

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These are the stepping-stones that have taken me to this place at this moment. I fear that my remarks will have reminded some of you of a scene in one of the early James Bond movies, *From Russia with Love*. Bond and his Turkish colleague, Kerim Bey, are on a train speeding across Central Europe. They have just subdued a Soviet security agent and have him bound and gagged in one of the train's private compartments. Bond heads to the dining car while Kerim Bey is left to watch over the immobilized agent. As he settles in, lighting a cigar, Kerim Bey tells the enemy agent: "I've had a particularly fascinating life. . . . Would you like to hear about it? . . . Oh, good!" Thank you for your patience in listening to me today. I hope you haven't felt bound and gagged.

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