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One of the issues raised in this forum was to consider how the notion of the classroom expands when it encompasses the commitment of American studies to activist pedagogy and to public humanities and K–12 sites. Indeed, we have many opportunities to use our training in public settings to teach, collaborate, and serve as community resources. At the same time, we can use our own public involvement to broaden opportunities for our students to incorporate community-based activities into their coursework, benefiting both students and communities.

With respect to opportunities for public engagement for us as teachers, my own experience suggests the breadth of possibilities. I came to graduate school with a background as a community organizer and a planner for an African American community-based organization, and my interest in my subject area, slavery and race in the colonial and post-Revolutionary northeast, grew out of this activism and the conviction that ignorance and misunderstanding of this history fuels the “naturalization” of racial disadvantage, while knowledge about it is a crucial tool in discrediting that naturalization. The same conviction fueled my involvement beyond the college classroom. Besides nearly twenty years of conventional college and graduate teaching, with eight spent directing an American studies undergraduate program, I have been able to participate in, plan, or direct a host of public history projects: lecture and film/discussion series in such venues as libraries, historic sites, churches, and a nursing home; workshop series and institutes for K–12 teachers and docents; documentary film productions, script, website, and children’s book development; and the interpretive focus and forms of presentation at several existing historic sites.

All of these activities have been extensions of American studies pedagogy, and they have been immensely rewarding. They have also led me to think differently about the relationship between the conventional classroom and other public teaching and learning opportunities.

First, I have learned to pay much more attention to what the various publics that we encounter in and out of the classroom bring to the conversation.

Participants arrive with a set of expectations conditioned by their previous engagements with history: first, family memory, then history education at the elementary, secondary, and (for some) postsecondary and professional levels, punctuated by regular encounters with popular history in documentary and fictional forms in all sorts of media, and often supplemented by field trips and family vacation visits to historic sites. Most individuals also come to their engagements with the past with something at stake, an agenda in the present. Sometimes an audience drawn to a particular topical program or discussion outside the classroom will bring to the event a widely shared investment in one perspective or else a clear division into two opposing camps. Some professionals seeking assistance in sharpening or reshaping the interpretive focus of their historic sites can be invested in defending the status quo despite their stated commitment to change. Even without an obvious stake in a particular interpretation, some audiences are uncomfortable with the very notion of interpretation. Polarization of the political sphere and the fracture of media appealing to narrow interest groups, coupled with the recent emphasis on teaching to the test in elementary and secondary schools, seems to be producing public audiences (and students) with an ever greater expectation of and dependence on certainty, a demand for “fact,” even as we scholars have learned to pay ever more attention to contingency and complexity in our analytical approaches. Our audiences often want us to build on the representation of the past with which they are familiar, while we want to encourage them to reflect on, reexamine, and complicate their understanding.

To make these encounters meaningful is challenging, especially in a subject area as charged as slavery, emancipation, and race. I have learned that I cannot simply offer and defend an interpretation that may call into question my students’ and audience’s convictions; I must invite them to share with me what their representation of the past means to them, where they learned about it, and what their investment in it is, so that we can explore this complex past together. Put simply, I have concluded that my role both in public venues and in the classroom is to facilitate dialogue at least as much as it is to share my interpretation.

One of the greatest benefits of my involvement with public history programs has been the opportunity it has offered to foster a different kind of dialogue—the collaborative engagement of classroom students with the communities that surround the university walls. Building a service-learning component into an American studies course can be rewarding in many ways, not the least of which is the possibility it offers for students and community members alike to learn to communicate and make common cause with people very different from

themselves in age, race, economic background, culture, and political viewpoint. Students often gain a new and more complex understanding of a particular aspect of American history from their sustained personal engagement with a community living with its legacies.

Sometimes classroom discoveries can motivate students to initiate their own imaginative types of public engagement, enlisting us as partners, in projects that challenge conventional interpretations at public history sites with which they are familiar. The best example from my teaching career is a student who was a part-time paid docent at My Old Kentucky Home when he entered my introductory African American studies course. After some weeks of exploring the hidden histories of slavery in my class, he enlisted my help in rewriting the docent script to recognize the enslaved people who had worked there, and in championing its adoption at the park.¹

Incorporating hitherto-excluded or hidden histories in the storytelling at public humanities sites is important, but, as W. E. B. DuBois once said of African American history, doing so really requires a wholesale reconceptualization of the stories, and perhaps of their modes of presentation as well. In my experience both in the classroom and in other public venues, discussions beginning with the social justice issues animating past lives and events, rather than with the lives and events themselves, have led to rich and productive explorations of the relevant history. I am convinced that many historic sites whose focus of attention raises social issues with contemporary resonance (e.g., the homes of slaveholders and slave traders, abolitionists, women's rights advocates) would do well to consider adopting idea-based interpretation and facilitated dialogue in addition to, or in some cases instead of, more conventional life-and-work-and-furnishings interpretations.² This, too, would draw the classroom and the public venue closer together.

The increasing professionalization of public history / humanities is beginning to exclude scholars whose training has been experiential and not formal—people like me—from positions defined as such, most of which now list an MA degree in public history as an appropriate foundation for entering professionals. That is not to say that American studies-trained scholars do not continue to have a collaborative role to play in developing public history programs and projects. Hilary Iris Lowe points out that while academic historians tend to be consulted by historic house museums as content experts, literary scholars are more frequently consulted by literary house museums as “vision people” and are welcomed into the planning processes to collaboratively “engage in the creative story-telling work of interpretation.”³ I think that our interdisciplinary training as American studies scholars uniquely positions us to offer both

content expertise and creative “vision” with respect to storytelling and mode of presentation, outside the classroom as well as in it.

Notes

I wish to thank Julie Sze for putting together this terrific forum.

1. Federal Hill is the home built by Senator John Rowan in Bardstown, Kentucky, between 1795 and 1818 that was purchased by the Commonwealth of Kentucky as a historic site in 1923 and renamed My Old Kentucky Home. The American songwriter Stephen Foster was a cousin of John Rowan, and it is believed that he wrote “My Old Kentucky Home” after seeing slaves at work at Federal Hill. A detailed description of this project can be found in Joanne Melish, “Recovering (from) Slavery: Four Struggles to Tell the Truth,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: New Press, 2006), 114–19.
2. See Hilary Iris Lowe, “Dwelling in Possibility: Revisiting Narrative in the Historic House Museum,” *Public Historian* 37.2 (2015): 64.
3. *Ibid.*, 48.