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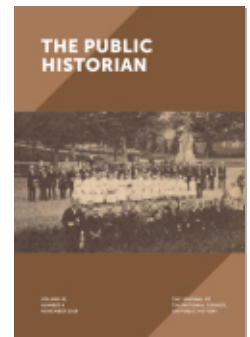
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*History: Why It Matters* by Lynn Hunt (review)

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(Review)

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## Book Reviews

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*History: Why It Matters* by Lynn Hunt. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018. v + 140 pp; notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$64.95, paperbound, \$12.95, eBook, \$12.95.

Forty years after the founding of the NCPH, public historians recognize that the roots of their activities—in museums, local and community history, oral history, archives, historic preservation—date back well before the 1970s. Those activities include historical research and writing, but the contributions of public history to the theory and method of history is not well understood. Surveys of the historical profession that have given public history a mention—Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream* (1988), Ian Terrell’s *Historians in Public* (2005)—do not quite know what to do with it; more often than not, public history is considered the translation and popularization of historical scholarship, rather than scholarship itself.

Lynn Hunt’s *History: Why It Matters*, written as part of a series intended to “inspire a new generation of students,” is along those lines. The book has considerable strengths—in only four chapters and 115 pages, it deftly discusses the uses and abuses of history in contemporary life, with apt examples from not only the US but also Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Particularly valuable is the second chapter, “Truth in History,” an updated, capsule version of the argument Hunt advanced with Joyce Appleby and Margaret Jacob in *Telling the Truth About History* (1994), made sharper in the intervening years by an insistence that “now more than ever” (the title of chapter 1), historians must tirelessly combat the lazy acceptance of “alternative facts” in public discourse. In 1989, Hunt’s influential anthology *The New Cultural History* (1989) introduced a generation of historians to the linguistic turn and the multiplicity of meanings that could be teased from a text; thirty years later, in making the case for why history matters, she emphasizes the responsibility of historians to do more than write for each other playing post-modern word games.

Hunt’s discussion of truth in history mentions South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but largely to echo the criticism that the commission focused “too much on story-telling and not enough on objective or forensic truth” (23). Here, Hunt misses an opportunity to introduce her readers to the other two kinds of truth identified in the commission’s final report. Besides “forensic truth” (fact-finding) and “personal and narrative truth” (storytelling),

the commission identified “social truth” and “restorative truth,” both of which point to the particular theoretical and methodological contributions of public history. Social truth is truth that is established through community interaction and dialogue and puts a premium on the interactive and democratic process through which knowledge is socially created. Restorative truth takes into account the goals of that dialogical process, and how the information is used. Reviewing its work, the commission concluded, “It was not enough simply to determine what had happened. Truth as factual, objective information cannot be divorced from the way in which this information is acquired; nor can such information be separated from the purposes it is required to serve.”<sup>1</sup>

Hunt’s third chapter, “History’s Politics,” offers a revealing account of demographic changes in the historical profession during the nearly half century since she earned her PhD in 1973. College students accustomed to being taught by women and people of color might be surprised to learn how recently the “gates” were opened to these groups, along with the diversity of subject matter and approaches to the past they brought.

Her final chapter, “History’s Future,” makes a convincing argument that history still offers us a source of moral exemplars—past societies and individuals who faced challenges with which we can empathize and be inspired. Hunt also argues that history offers us a way to understand the human place in what she calls “whole earth time,” expanding our consciousness of the earth beyond our own species. Her belief, expressed in this chapter, that history can offer us a sense of continuity and direction is on shakier ground. She acknowledges that ideas of progress prevalent in the nineteenth century have given way to serious doubts in recent years because of wars, totalitarianism, and impending environmental catastrophe. Yet she concludes “Progress may be in question, but the very act of telling a story . . . requires a beginning and an end and therefore some sense of progression.” A few sentences later, she observes, “We still need grand narratives . . . though they need not be the story of progress.” (113). Returning to the work of public history, the dialogues through which public historians seek to establish social truths about history are conditioned by the public’s suspicion of grand narratives yet desire to experience a connection between past and present.

Readers of this journal based in academia might want to assign *History: Why It Matters* in an “Introduction to History” course, although Sara Maza’s *Thinking About History* (2017), which is not much longer (200 pages), covers historiography and the varieties of history more thoroughly. Hunt’s book could work well in an “Introduction to Public History” course by provoking discussion about what’s left out—how the responsibilities of the public historian, and their path to finding truth, might differ from those of academic historians. *History: Why It Matters* might also

<sup>1</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, volume 1, 114 (1998); see also <https://mylearning.nps.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Excerpt-from-TRC-Report-Four-Truths.pdf>

work well as something for public historians to give to their clients. When someone hires a professional historian to write a history of their organization, what should they expect? Hunt's slim but provocative volume appropriately holds historians up to a high ethical standard, and insists that the public should accept nothing less.

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*The Worlds of Junípero Serra: Historical Contexts and Cultural Representations* edited by Steven W. Hackel. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 1 + 300 pp.: illustrations, notes, index; clothbound, \$70.

On December 7, 1749, the Franciscan friar Junípero Serra, OFM, first set foot in New Spain and the continental Americas at the port of Veracruz. Possessing an indomitable will and a zealous regard for Roman Catholic and Franciscan doctrine, this highly regarded Catalan minister and professor of theology voyaged to Mexico with the intent of evangelizing and ministering to the Indian gentiles that populated these new frontiers. Within twenty years of his arrival, the missionary founded the first of nine of what eventually comprised twenty-one Hispanicized Indian missions in Alta California. Ultimately, these Fernandino missions anchored the demographic landscapes and political economy for the great urban centers of modern California. Accordingly, the catastrophic epidemiological consequences visited upon the indigenous communities of California remain central to considerations of the period, and thereby, those such as Serra who were central to its evangelical enterprise.

In 2013, the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, christened a major exhibition and retrospective titled *Junípero Serra and the Legacies of the California Missions* (August 17, 2013 through January 6, 2014). Construed as an international exhibition, it was designed with a general audience in mind. The exhibition consisted of some 250 objects borrowed from both private and public collections in Spain, Mexico, and the United States. As a specialist in the California missions and charter member of the California Missions Foundation, I vividly recall the excitement and trepidation of my foundation colleagues. Though devoted to the preservation of the California missions, even the foundation was conflicted by its sponsorship, while at the same time reticent to lend its name to the Serra exhibition for fear that it would affect its philanthropic mission. By contrast, the Huntington conference devoted to Serra generated an unparalleled interest in revisiting both scholarly and public narratives regarding the holy man.

Whereas the exhibition ultimately drew thousands to the Huntington Library, Serra's contested legacy opened a Pandora's Box of competing historical claims. Steven W. Hackel published *Junípero Serra: California's Founding Father* (2013) so as to coincide with the exhibition, and at the same time, a number of popular and scholarly treatments devoted to the life of the Franciscan "Founding Father" of the California missions were published by, among others, Gregory Orfalea (2014), Elias