Radical Roots

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Published by Amherst College Press

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Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism.

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This volume critically examines an activist thread—a conscious effort to connect history-making to the promotion of social justice—which runs through the profession of public history as it has evolved in the United States. While it may be argued that all history has the potential to be political, particularly when historians conduct research and produce interpretations that challenge deeply held beliefs about the past, public history is uniquely political. Public historians are engaged in historical inquiry outside the bubble of scholarly discourse. In the words of Cathy Stanton, “Whether we intentionally locate ourselves in controversial settings, have something blow up in our faces, or encounter less-spectacular kinds of resistance or misunderstanding, we are always on the edge of the political, even when we don’t set out to be.” Although, as Stanton suggests, public historians cannot deny the political aspects of their work, some are reluctant to assume an overtly political posture. They believe the conventions of the discipline require a kind of objectivity and intellectual rigor that are undermined when they align their work with a particular political position. Others are constrained by the conditions of
their employment in government or quasi-government agencies from advancing historical interpretations that might be labeled as “biased” or politically motivated. Nonetheless, there is a consistent if often overlooked tradition of political engagement that runs through the history of the profession. A significant minority of public historians see rigorous scholarship as entirely compatible with—even necessary for—productive political discourse, and they embrace the potential of their work to promote change.

The authors assembled here have identified precedents, antecedents, and contemporary examples of what we have loosely termed radical public history, which we define as public history that is future-focused, committed to the advancement of social justice, and engaged in the creation of a more inclusive material record. Taken as a whole, the essays suggest that examples of radical public history become more visible to researchers and practitioners alike when we invert our understanding of professionalism, placing less emphasis on the outcomes and products of historical inquiry and more emphasis on social networks, political goals, practices, and habits of mind that distinguish public history from the larger discipline. In this, our work follows the path established by Rebecca Conard. In her introduction to a 2006 special issue of the Public Historian, she argued there had been no sustained, influential effort to theorize and define public history as a distinct field. Adopting the philosophy of reflective practice developed by the oral historian Donald Schon, Conard called for new histories and theories of public history that emphasize shared inquiry, interdisciplinary cooperation, attention to real-world conditions, dedication to problem solving, and self-reflection, and that valued intuition and artistry as much as research and logic. Contributors to the issue advanced a thorough description of a public history approach defined by reflective practice, shared inquiry, shared authority, and reflection in action. The public history approach they identified has become broadly accepted by educators and practitioners alike, and it manifests in a variety of practices, including dialogic interpretation, community-based collaborative research, and crowdsourced collecting. It also encourages public historians to define their field not as strictly rooted in the discipline of history but rather as broadly interdisciplinary and inclusive of both formal knowledge and knowledge acquired through firsthand experience. This understanding of public history practice serves as the foundation for the lines of inquiry framing Radical Roots. Contributors to this volume have looked for evidence that the community-focused and community-rooted practices that define public
history are not recent developments. Rather, they have been put to use—in the past and today—to advance social justice and promote change.

The initial inquiry that lead to this volume took shape in the summer of 2013. I have long been interested in identifying points of origin for the ideas about community service, dialogue, and collaboration that run through the field of public history. I sought out scholars with similar research interests and entered into a series of conversations with Daniel R. Kerr, assistant professor of public history at American University. As an activist himself, Kerr’s work explores the ways in which practitioners have understood and negotiated the intersection between scholarly inquiry and political action. Together, we put out a call for research collaborators and found a dozen public history practitioners willing to join in a series of online and in-person discussions during the fall of 2013. These initial conversations culminated in a working group session at the 2014 annual meeting of the National Council on Public History, during which participants began to map a historical time line for the development of an activist branch of public history practice. Together, we identified key research themes and organized working group participants into interest groups, each of which made recommendations about how to organize a collaborative research project to fully examine the relationship between social justice activism and public history practice.

The Radical Roots research project began in earnest immediately after this meeting. Four research groups emerged: one examining experimentation with radical practices in museums, a second focused on the intersection between oral history and social justice activism, a third tasked with identifying the ways in which grassroots preservation practices have served movements for equality, and a fourth focused on identifying the emergence of collaboration, community-based learning, and shared inquiry as strategies in public history education. The members of these four research collectives provided support and feedback to one another, and—as volume editor—I reviewed each contribution. Between 2015 and 2018, we sought external commentary from our professional peers, presenting at the annual meetings of the Oral History Association, the National Council on Public History, and the National Humanities Conference. In addition, several contributors have presented their work to the communities directly impacted by or analyzed in their research.

Ultimately our efforts produced the twenty-three essays collected here. Though diverse in approach to context, methodology, and analysis, they are
united by their attention to several interrelated questions designed to address both historical roots and contemporary articulations of radical public history practice: What core practices have shaped radical public history? How have these core practices changed over time? How, when, and by whom have these core practices been mobilized for the purpose of promoting social justice? What larger trends in history, education, museum studies, oral history, preservation, and other fields (formal or vernacular in nature) led some groups or individuals to mobilize core public history practices for the purpose of facilitating civic discourse and promoting social justice? Can we make a case for claiming as part of the genealogy of radical public history incidents, individuals, and/or groups that have been marginalized in the standard history of the field? What do radical public history practices look like today? How effective are they? What constitutes success?

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume shed new light on two interrelated issues that have restricted our understanding of the distinctive roots and professional practices that define public history. First, while radical forms of public history practice have evolved over time in the United States, they have been rendered invisible by the accepted genealogy of the field. Second, and related, the potentially radical strategies of public history as reflective practice can be (and often have been) co-opted and neutralized by processes of professionalization, institutionalization, and standardization. We do not presume that the work of this inquiry is finished. Rather, we hope this volume will generate new research. Drawing attention to both the persistence of a radical public history agenda and the forces that have undermined its influence opens up important new questions about the history and the direction of our field and provides a framework for reevaluating historical and contemporary tensions in museums, in historic sites, in commemorative spaces, and elsewhere.

Broadly speaking, the accepted historiography of the field took shape during the 1980s and 1990s. Peter Novick’s influential 1988 book, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession, tracked historians’ aspiration to document the past accurately and without bias, initially framing the discipline as more science than art. Novick suggests that the pursuit of objectivity shaped the practice of history over time, even as it proved impossible to achieve fully. The pursuit of objectivity has, of course, produced well-documented, carefully researched, complex narratives that have established a meaningful foundation for understanding and analyzing
American history. But historians’ effort to capture an unvarnished past has also—at times—constrained creativity and rendered particular historical experiences invisible. This effort also created a rift between university-based and public-oriented historians that proved difficult to overcome. Arguably, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that historians housed primarily in the academy began more fully and frequently to connect with public historians as peers and colleagues. The culture wars of the 1990s forced professional associations like the Organization of American Historians (OAH) to recognize and address the particular challenges faced by public practitioners. The OAH created a working partnership with the National Park Service in 1994 and hired a public history manager in 2002 to facilitate the organization’s outreach and support for practitioners working outside of university settings.7

Novick’s book helped shed light on the differences in perspective that set history and public history on separate paths toward professionalization. Since its publication, dozens of scholars have examined the roots of public history, drawing necessary, critical attention to the values that shaped the field over time. This important body of scholarship has identified public history as having emerged from several points of origin, including the preservation of historic structures, commemoration of historic events, development of museums and historic sites, acquisition of collections, and interpretation of the past for a broad public. Identifying the motivations and values of each group of founders in this history has made clear that most sought to protect, collect, and interpret the past in order to inhibit social and political change. While academic historians sought objectivity, however imperfectly, the earliest public historians manufactured a past populated by apparently infallible role models of patriotism and morality. For example, Ann Pamela Cunningham established the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA) in the 1850s to preserve the historic plantation owned by George Washington. Cunningham, a Southerner, believed that saving symbols of Americans’ common heritage could stave off Civil War. MVLA perceived the historic homes of founding fathers as incubators of shared American values. In order to advance this interpretation, they eliminated reference to the presence of enslaved people at Mount Vernon. Acknowledging the centrality of slavery to the establishment of the nation would mean admitting to the profound contradictions and tensions at the heart of American identity and enflame the sectional conflicts the MVLA hoped to extinguish.8
Similarly, Maria Denning Van Rensselaer established the Colonial Dames of America in 1890. By then, commentators, policy makers, and nativists had begun to remark on the arrival of “new” kinds of immigrants to the United States: Eastern and Southern Europeans whose cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and habits of work seemed to make them unfit for American citizenship and potentially threatening to the American way of life. The Colonial Dames believed historic structures representing the establishment of the original colonies and the birthplace of American democracy could become spaces for moral education and Americanization. By describing the members of the nation’s founding generation as individuals who had cast off “Old World” values, the Colonial Dames sought to normalize and promote assimilation. The sites they preserved became spaces for reinforcing a narrow set of American traditions.9 Other influential organizations—including the Confederate Memorial Literary Society, the Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities—sought to prevent businessmen and relic hunters from removing Civil War materials from the South and, more broadly, to defend against Northern influence on the South’s economy, politics, and culture.10 Their work included the preservation of historic sites, the memorialization of the Confederate dead, and the commemoration of Southern patriotism from Yorktown to Manassas, and it established White Southern identity as a stabilizing and civilizing force that could prevent African Americans from reshaping political and cultural norms. By the early decades of the twentieth century, national agencies were similarly engaged in assembling collections that could promote patriotism. National Park Service superintendents and Smithsonian curators believed that national collections could “Americanize” visitors, preventing them from asserting any alternative interpretations of the past that might challenge the nation’s identity and values.11 The practice of assembling museum collections reflected a broader cultural imperialism, and the organization and display of these collections tended to reinforce a belief in the superiority of Western Europeans and in the unassimilability of non-White and non-Western peoples.12

With the emergence of formal disciplines in the United States during the early twentieth century, historians, anthropologists, and others began to argue that scientific objectivity was the marker of academic rigor. The emphasis on patriotism and cultural purity that had justified preservation and influenced early collections revealed historic sites and museums as inherently subjective, damaging their evidentiary value. This subjectivity was compounded by
the fact that women’s voluntary associations had pioneered preservation, collecting, and historic site interpretation, the very practices that established public history as a field. They had justified their participation in this very public work by defining it as an extension of women’s private sphere; they preserved houses and homes and collected Americana as part of their duty to protect America’s moral center. Museum curators, hoping to position themselves within burgeoning professions, tended to organize their scientific specimens as study collections, emphasizing their use by students and scholars and displaying them as proof of scientific objectivity.

Historical artifacts proved problematic for advancing professionalism. Some were assembled as anthropological or ethnographic study collections, but materials associated with particular individuals were identified as “Americana” and curators found them difficult to categorize. This task often fell to women volunteers rather than the professional and typically male curatorial staff. At the Smithsonian, volunteers Rose Gouverneur Hoes and Cassie Myers Julian-James collected and displayed clothing worn by the various “hostesses” of the White House in order to inspire visitors to replicate good taste and good manners. By the turn of the twentieth century, academics interested in staking a claim to authority and cultural standing on the basis of scientific rather than emotional or moral measures of significance distanced themselves from museum collections as well as from historical societies, historic sites, and museums. At the same time, curators and interpreters sought to defend their professionalism by concentrating on research and distancing themselves from the needs and interests of audiences. During the late twentieth century, as public historians worked to bring new audiences and new interpretations to historic sites and collections, they encountered resistance and found themselves embroiled in controversy. Such controversy, often dismissed as evidence of audience ignorance, can be better explained as a symptom of the extent to which these mutually constituting impulses to resist change and to protect authority had defined the landscape of public history and shaped organizational and institutional structures over time.

The contributors to this volume do not deny the validity of the well-established histories of the field, broadly defined. Indeed, the existing scholarship has illuminated the origins of problems and tensions that continue to trouble public history practice. Our goal is to identify alternative pathways that can help historicize the smaller but no less significant impact that forward-looking, community-focused preservationists, collectors, educators,
and others have had on the field. While it is tempting to try to identify a straight and consistent line from past to present-day radical practices, our work suggests this is often a fragmentary history, replicated and advanced not necessarily through formal institutionalization or professionalization but through personal friendships and social networks. Our work attempts to connect the fragments, drawing attention to strands of influence that are woven deeply into the history of radical public history practices.

The volume is formally organized into four sections, each of which contains the work of one of the original thematic research groups. Reading these sections as organized provides a window into the concerns, conflicts, and innovations that shaped radical practices in specific fields. It also illuminates the particular approach taken by each Radical Roots research team. The members of the Oral History collaborative worked closely from a set of questions and observations advanced by Linda Shopes and Daniel R. Kerr and eloquently articulated in Kerr’s piece, “Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather.” Kerr argues that the widely accepted historiography of oral history has promoted a “simplistic view of what oral history is” and has misrepresented its development over time. Kerr draws attention to a deeper history for the field, one rooted in the belief that collecting personal narratives could play a pivotal role in fostering political action and promoting social change. The essays that follow provide historical and contemporary examples of the precise oral history tradition Kerr’s work illuminates. Judith Jennings highlights the work of Helen Matthews Lewis, who worked actively to connect oral history, research, and teaching with political organizing and advocacy. Anne M. Valk examines the role of feminist consciousness raising techniques in the evolution of oral history and explores the complex power relationships that shaped its use over time. Kristen Ana La Follette analyzes a tradition of politically aware theatrical uses of oral history in the Latinx community and demonstrates that verbatim scripts have been used to engage audiences and actors in conversation about pressing political issues. Her work not only makes a case for the inclusion of oral history–based theater as part of the field’s radical tradition but also argues that the inclusion of Latinx oral history practices broadens our definition of the field. The final two contributions to the oral history section bring voices of contemporary practitioners into the project of defining radical practice, creating a dialogue among oral historians about the political value and community-based relevance of their work.

The next section of this volume explores the evolution of public history pedagogy. Contributors identified and analyzed the emergence of politically
oriented and community-grounded approaches to teaching and learning both inside and outside of traditional educational spaces. Their efforts challenge the notion that public history education began in the 1970s, when the University of California, Santa Barbara, established its program. Rachel Donaldson argues that the oral history training at Camp Woodland in the Catskill Mountains was both enjoyable and politically significant, providing a vehicle for young campers to actively promote social justice. Burnis Morris examines Carter G. Woodson’s political influence, arguing that his intellectual endeavors were driven by a deep concern about the devaluation of Black lives. Woodson’s work illustrates the potential of inclusive pedagogical practices to foster a variety of movements for social justice. William S. Walker analyzes the pivotal role that Louis C. Jones played in twentieth-century museum studies. In aftermath of World War II, Jones argued that museum professionals must challenge elitism. His personal commitment to antiracism became an essential element of education in the Cooperstown Graduate Program and created the foundation for contemporary demands for inclusive approaches to museum staffing, collection, and interpretation. Denise D. Meringolo examines a short-lived experiment in public history education, the American Civilization Institute of Morristown, New Jersey (ACIM), as a point of origin for community-based, politically engaged pedagogy. She notes that the “radical” nature of public history training is defined as much by its context as by its intent. Elizabeth Belanger describes the contemporary resonance of projects like the ACIM and argues that not only must public history educators provide practical training; they must guide students through the emotional aspects—and discomfort—of community-based work. Her case study explores the ways in which community-university partnerships invite reflection on epistemology and process, and raises questions about how public history educators might acknowledge and diffuse the unequal power relationships that engaged learning can expose. The critical conversation that ends the section addresses some of the very questions Belanger raises. The participants suggest that success in community-based pedagogy is less about completing a deliverable and more about creating truly collaborative space, fostering meaningful dialogue, and addressing the systemic inequalities that can dampen creativity and restrict social justice.

The third section of this volume identifies and analyzes examples of experimentation in museum practice, offering a direct challenge to the widely accepted museum studies historiography. Clarissa J. Ceglio tracks the evolution of museums as visitor-centered social actors. Her contribution provides
both a theoretical definition of radical museum work as socially aware and community-focused work and a close and critical examination of what that work looked like in practice during the 1930s. In that context, proponents expressed concern about how to differentiate persuasive social action in the cultural sector from more pernicious forms of propaganda. Today, public historians and their colleagues across related disciplines express similar worries about what it means to advance particular political perspectives. While Ceglio is examining large-scale trends in United States museums, Laura Schiavo’s study recovers the neglected story of a single curator in an ethnically specific institution. She argues that a critical reexamination of small museums can reveal meaningful counternarrative histories and illuminate important, if not always successful, efforts to resist conservative ideas about collections, their potential meaning, and their appropriate use. Michèle Gates Moresi argues that the founding of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum brought a Black political sensibility into the realm of the Smithsonian Institution. Museum staff engaged in a deeply collaborative process, enabling local residents to become partners in exhibition creation. The institution was, at least in its early years, both overtly politically engaged and profoundly responsive to the needs and interests of local people. Rebecca Amato analyzes the difficulty of maintaining a social justice–oriented museum agenda across time and through multiple contexts. Her work describes and critiques the Tenement Museum’s unintentional but no less impactful role in gentrification during the early years of the twenty-first century. The final contributor to this section, Nicole A. Moore, reflects on her own experience interpreting slavery at plantation sites in the South. She describes both the personal sense of mission and the intense intellectual and emotional labor required to make radical interventions that can dismantle damaging and popular, romantic narratives about the past.

The fourth section of this volume examines the impact that amateurs and history buffs have made in the realms of collecting, protecting, and commemorating the past. These essays demonstrate that the act of preservation has long had radical potential. Lara Kelland offers a critical reexamination of the intersection between social justice organizing and community-authored history. While other scholars have identified the significance of this work in shaping the scholarship of social history, Kelland analyzes its impact in establishing social justice as a concern of public history. Her work suggests that public history can indeed serve the political interests of self-identified
communities. Examining a similar trend from the opposite angle, Pero Dagbovie suggests that Black history as an academic discipline and a subject of formal scholarship has embodied qualities of radical public history. Shaped by both recognized scholars and those outside of the academy, Black history has been committed to establishing a firm foundation for collective action. To this end, the founders of Black history tended to place community-oriented history and the strategies of civic engagement at the center of their scholarship. Abigail Gautreau complicates this notion by examining the ways in which formal preservation—defined by policy and effected through official procedures of site nomination and approval—can create both opportunities and points of friction. By examining the case of a grassroots organization that became integrated into an established preservation organization, she raises important questions about the extent to which formal institutions can successfully counter dominant narratives and promote inclusive practices. Kristen Baldwin Deathridge offers something of a counterpoint. She argues that the history of preservation has been unnecessarily divided into two camps: one that took shape at the intersection where economic and governmental concerns meet and another that grew out of vernacular community needs. Her case studies suggest that preservation best serves the needs of local people when such impulses strike a balance between the interests of development and the interests of local people. Craig Stutman’s essay traces the history and impact of a specific commemorative decision. The Germantown Mennonite Community in Pennsylvania issued one of the earliest protests against slavery in North America. The document became embedded in both the community’s sense of identity and the larger memory of German immigrant history in the United States. In Germantown, preservation of the document and its memory enabled a commitment to social justice to flower and fostered the emergence over time of powerfully self-reflective and inclusive local public history practices even as national attitudes toward German heritage, the historic protest, and antiracist activism fluctuated wildly over time.

In addition to reading within each thematic section, the digital format encourages readers to approach this volume nonlinearly. Reading selections from across the volume reveals additional themes and points of intersection among the articles. For example, several authors in this volume identify connections between the progressive education movement, which emerged in Chicago in the late nineteenth century, and radical public history practices. First defined and tested by John Dewey, progressive education emphasized
community engagement and insisted on respect for diversity. Through the first half of the twentieth century, progressive educators adapted Dewey's ideas to suit the needs and conditions of specific learning communities. During the 1920s, the members of the Progressive Education Association (founded in 1919) opposed the growing emphasis on data collection as a way to quantify learning. They saw intelligence tests and cost-benefit analysis as potentially undermining their efforts to foster emotional and creative development and as a threat to diversity and inclusion. Several authors in this volume have identified the values of progressive education in general and the influence of John Dewey in particular as having shaped core aspects of radical public history practice. Dewey’s influence is evident in both Daniel R. Kerr's and Judith Jennings's work to trace the emergence of radical oral history practices, as well as in the efforts by Rachel Donaldson and Denise D. Meringolo to trace the development of public history pedagogy. These articles demonstrate that oral historians, folklorists, and teachers translated Dewey’s emphasis on the civic value of education as a call to put historical inquiry to work to address the questions and concerns of local communities. Several authors in this collection follow these roots to the Highlander Folk School and its founder, Myles Horton, as well as to the social movements his work helped advance (see, for example, Kerr, Jennings, Kellogg, and Donaldson). Horton’s development of oral history practices and his use of personal narrative for political organizing bridged practices of collecting to social justice aims. Progressive educators and the radical public historians they inspired recognized embodied knowledge and firsthand experiences as relevant both for shaping an understanding of the past and for fostering productive political action. For most of the twentieth century, and certainly in the years prior to the culture wars of the 1990s, this element of radical practice did not really include practices of shared authority. There is an undeniable thread of elitism running through the history of progressivism. In the past, most reformers, educators, museum professionals, and others positioned themselves as saviors whose expert knowledge could “rescue” marginalized and disenfranchised people. Today, radical public historians practice self-reflection and reflection in action as a way to keep authority balanced and to honor various forms of expertise, from disciplinary to experiential. Nonetheless, progressive educators’ understanding that intellectual learning must also include attention to emotional development and respect creativity was revolutionary, and it survives in contemporary radical public
historians’ efforts to promote empathy, facilitate dialogue, and diversify the delivery of historical interpretation well beyond the monograph.

Another selection of authors points to 1930s-era social experimentation as having shaped some of the beliefs and practices of radical public history. The influence of New Deal programs in the realm of public history has been well documented. The Civilian Conservation Corps transformed national parks and national forests, not only implementing protection measures but also building the roads, visitor centers, and comfort stations that made federal and state lands more visitor friendly. The Federal Writers’ Project sought to document everyday life, collecting oral histories from average Americans, including people who had been born into slavery. The Historical Records Project and the Historic American Buildings Survey documented and organized a variety of collections across the country.\(^{17}\) For the purposes of our inquiry, reexamining program-specific outcomes like these is less important than identifying and analyzing shifts in philosophy and practice. Clarissa J. Ceglio argues that the crisis of the Depression and the sense of urgency that drove New Deal collection and conservation projects also inspired museum professionals to experiment with civic engagement. In the 1930s, leaders in the American Association of Museums began to reimagine museums as social spaces, less dedicated to the reproduction of exclusive knowledge and more attentive to contemporary social concerns and focused on visitor needs. Their work, disrupted by World War II, has too often been dismissed as “biased” and overlooked by scholars. Yet the significance of such experimentation for theorizing radical public history practice is made evident by Laura Schiavo’s study of innovations in the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects during the 1930s. Curator Paul Romanoff and his wife, Bertha, promoted the museum and its collections as useful for countering anti-Semitism and promoting empathy and mutual understanding. Their efforts to attract a broad public audience were not appreciated by the museum board, and Romanoff paid a high personal cost for his radical vision. Nonetheless, these essays suggest that the American cultural front gave shape to radical forms of public history practice during the 1930s.\(^{18}\) While it failed to completely replace the racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism deeply embedded in American political and cultural institutions, it did create moments in which educators, oral historians, folklorists, and museum professionals could foster small realignments of power. While many—if not most—of these realignments were temporary, William S. Walker identifies at least one important, permanent site of
influence that continues to advance radical museum practices. The dialogic, collaborative, antiracist, and activist model of museum practice that defines the mission and values of the Cooperstown Graduate Program emerged from early efforts to frame museums as social spaces.

Several scholars in this volume identify the roots of radical public history practice in a variety of social movements, particularly—but not exclusively—those that emerged in the United States after World War II. Grassroots activists in the African American civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and the American Indian Movement as well as in Latinx, LGBTQ, and other social and political movements understood efforts to collect and interpret a communal past as crucial for the development of a viable political identity. Lara Kelland argues that not only did community-centered and community-based preservation and history-making projects serve to counter white supremacist, male-dominated, heteronormative narratives; they also enabled communities to assert authority over their own past and control over their own future. If we recognize this dual agenda as central to the evolution of radical public history practice, we must also denounce the extent to which White practitioners have been placed at the center of our field’s historiography. Pero Dagbovie argues that it is reasonable to identify the origins of public history in the emergence of Black history. He and Burnis Morris both argue that Carter G. Woodson must be acknowledged as a founder of radical public history, because Woodson’s work was shaped by the dual goal of challenging White racism and empowering Black communities. Michèle Gates Moresi explores the effort to institutionalize this agenda at the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, tracking the success of early efforts to engage the community. Daniel R. Kerr explores the ways in which a commitment to social justice shaped the particular form of oral history practiced and advanced by Jeremy Brecher. Kristen Ana La Follette argues that culturally specific traditions within the Latinx community established oral history performance as a tool for political communication and organizing. Yet these articles suggest that as self-identified communities and the radical practices they adopt move away from the margins and closer to the center of American culture, their work can lose some of its counternarrative power. As a result, practices designed and implemented with radical intent became less viable and therefore less visible over time, and their influence has been difficult for many researchers to recognize and trace.

Despite this difficulty, the essays in this collection suggest that important values and habits of mind worthy of both closer examination and better
articulation define radical public history practice. It seems evident that this work is built on a foundation of optimism, however foolish. Abigail Gautreau argues that individuals and communities that engage in preservation are in a unique position to transform the field and that the resistance to—and failure of—these efforts at transformation is a sign of the power and potential of such work. Craig Stutman demonstrates that histories of slavery and abolition, often ignored because they are too “difficult” to reconcile with ideals of contemporary life, can become powerful sites for the creation of inclusive communities. Kristen Ana La Follette, Shane Bernardo, Maria E. Cotera, Fernanda Espinosa, and Amy Starecheski suggest that gathering firsthand accounts of both everyday life and political organizing from marginalized communities is an assertion of power that can create emotional connections and build viable political movements. Nicole A. Moore draws attention to the small interactions between interpreters and audiences that allow dialogue to flourish. Together, these contributors highlight the belief, essential for motivating radical public historians, that the work of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the past can have a powerful, positive impact on contemporary life, providing clarity and direction for those working to understand and address injustice. At the same time, radical public historians remain wary of the exclusive practices of cultural institutions. Many resist efforts to diminish the radical potential of stories, artifacts, and experiences through the quantifying acts of cataloging and transcribing. Questions about how to ensure broad accessibility and actively counter both the further marginalization of particular histories and communities and the diminishment of the political potential inscribed in collections are evident throughout this volume.19

Those questions are amplified by contributors whose work exposes deep and unchallenged inequality in public history broadly and in radical public history in particular. All the contributors to this volume suggest that a profoundly antiracist and antisexist world view lends a sense of urgency to radical public history practices in both their historical and their contemporary articulations. Whether it is the founders of the American Civilization Institute described by Denise D. Meringolo, the actors and oral historians animated by Kristen Ana La Follette, the community-based historians illuminated by Lara Kelland, or the founders of Black history highlighted by Burnis Morris and Pero Dagbovie, these pages are full of individuals and organizations dedicated to harnessing history-making for the dual purpose of creating an inclusive historical record and countering immediate oppression. At the same time, the combination of unexamined privilege and the racist, misogynist,
and heteronormative belief systems deeply embedded in American social, political, and cultural structures continually undermines the impact of radical public history and its civic engagement strategies. Anne M. Valk points to the influence of feminist “consciousness raising” on radical oral history. Designed to help individuals recognize private experiences as part of a larger misogyny in order to foster political action, in actual practice, consciousness raising was troubled by questions about power: Who dictated the terms of the discussion? Who determined which experiences women had in common and which were racially or ethnically or religiously specific and therefore outside the realm of feminism? Who controlled the preservation, use, and distribution of women’s personal experiences? Kristen Baldwin Deathridge recognizes that preservation has long served middle-class interests and endangered the political interests of less affluent communities. She argues that preservationists must shift their focus to the protection of broadly inclusive historical landscapes. Rebecca Amato demonstrates the difficulty of this task. The creation of a politically viable counternarrative is undermined when preservation freezes time, cutting off the past from the present materially as well as narratively. Her work suggests that it may be impossible to protect both the political interests of marginalized communities and the economic interests courted by preservationists. Taken together, these authors suggest social justice is only served when public historians are willing to facilitate dialogue about persistent inequality, connecting past to present in unpredictable and perhaps ahistorical ways. The authors also remind us that radical public history requires radical self-reflection and responsiveness.

Despite these shortcomings, radical public history is grounded in the belief that history-making must be broadly relevant. Long before Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen produced their landmark study, Presence of the Past, radical museum professionals, preservationists, oral historians, and educators conceptualized history as a well of experience from which we might learn rather than as a model we should emulate. As a result, they were comfortable illuminating difficult or uncomfortable pasts in order to help identify persistent social ills and to articulate viable political platforms. For this reason, the pioneers of radical practice advanced the idea that personal experiences are historically and politically significant, and efforts to collect, record, and share personal experiences are necessary for advancing social justice. Working from these beliefs, radical public historians in the past—as today—have worked to build empathy and understanding by fostering dialogue, not by constructing “definitive” narratives. Given this, Elizabeth Belanger argues
that public history education must help students develop skills like mindfulness, empathy, self-awareness, and openness so that the next generation of professionals is prepared for work that can be as uncomfortable as it is rewarding. In their conversation about public history pedagogy, Rebecca Amato, Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani, Dipti Desai, Denise D. Meringolo, and Mary Rizzo explore the challenges of developing pedagogical approaches to public history that are sustainable, actively engaged with community interests, and valuable to both the intellectual and emotional development of our students.

Recognizing and reclaiming a past for radical public history is made complicated by the fact that “radical” can only be understood in context. Projects and practices that were designed to challenge injustice in the late nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, the 1930s, the 1960s, and even the 1990s now appear shortsighted. But both scholars and practitioners have been too quick to criticize the failures and limitations of some early practitioners, missing the opportunity to learn from their experiments. Tracing the genealogy of a field—like the genealogy of a family—presumes longevity and generational continuity, but the work of radical public history has often been ephemeral. It has resisted institutionalization and often failed to attract sustainable financial and intellectual support. Its strategies persisted somewhat haphazardly.

To some extent, this transient quality is central to radicalism: it emphasizes immediacy and acknowledges that needs and interests change over time. Our volume suggests that the ideals expressed in radical public history have survived and evolved not through the establishment of permanent structures but through the creation and nurturance of social networks of practice. Further, these networks can be difficult to identify because they exist outside the boundaries of disciplines. The discipline of history remains central to public history practice because we are applying historical methods and advancing understandings of the past. However, the contributors to this volume remind us that we must look to other fields—including folklore, education, and oral history—to find our radical roots. Radical public historians are not simply interdisciplinary in practice. We are interdisciplinary in origin.

Some final notes: First, following the lead of the Chicago Manual of Style, we have decided to capitalize Black and White to refer to race or ethnicity throughout this volume. However, when writing white supremacy we do not capitalize white. We also capitalize Brown when referring to Brown people.

Second, we are acutely aware of the silences and absences in this volume. Despite our efforts during 2017 and 2018 to recruit additional contributors—with an eye toward expanding geographical scope and incorporating a more
broadly inclusive set of contributors and topics—there is no ignoring the fact that many perspectives are absent. We do not pretend otherwise. Our hope is that this project will inspire others to engage in similar research that can deepen, complicate, and even contradict our arguments. While the production of this volume needed to reach an end, the research is ongoing.

Notes

6 The members of the 2014 working group, facilitated by Daniel R. Kerr and Denise D. Meringolo, were Elizabeth Belanger, Christopher Benning, Peter Bunten, Julie Davis, Abigail Gautreau, Jodi Giesbrecht, Lara Kelland, Kristen La Follette, Laura Schiavo, Linda Shopes, and Craig Stutman. In addition, meeting attendees who joined the working group as members of the audience were fully integrated into our discussion and several—including Kristen Baldwin Deathridge—stayed with the project. I regret that I did not preserve a complete list of attendees. Daniel R. Kerr remained with the project as a key member of the oral history interest group, but he opted not to serve as coeditor of the larger project. While not all of the working group participants submitted an article for this volume, they were instrumental in shaping the project inquiry. Linda Shopes played a particularly critical role. She stayed with the project for its entirety, leading the oral history inquiry, organizing panel discussions at meetings of the Oral History Association, and serving as a true partner in facilitating communication and deepening analysis. We are all in her debt.


15 This finding echoes the notion of public history as a social practice articulated by Keith A. Erekson, Everybody’s History: Indiana’s Lincoln Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President’s Past (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

16 This article was previously published in Oral History Review 43, no. 2 (2016): 367–91. It is reprinted with permission.

17 There is significant project-specific literature each of these programs. For broader program analysis, see, for example, Neil M. Mahar, Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jerrold Hirsch, Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).


19 There is a movement among archivists, librarians, museum professionals, and others to address these questions. Some have adopted terms like “decolonizing collections” and “abolitionist archives” to describe work that can do more than simply increase diversity in collections but also create more broadly inclusive practices that transform our understanding of what collections are and do. See, for example, Bergis Jules, “Architecting Sustainable Futures: Exploring Funding Models in Community Based Archives,” Medium, June 19, 2018, https://medium.com/
community-archives/architecting-sustainable-futures-exploring-funding-models
in-community-based-archives-da9a7a856cbe; Jarrett M. Drake and Stacie M.
Williams, “Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland,”
Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies 1, no. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/
10.24242/jclis.v1i2.33; Amy Lonetree, Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native
America in National and Tribal Museums (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina