Conclusion
The Uneasy Relationship between
Civic Engagement and Social Justice

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The essays in this volume demonstrate that a commitment to social justice has shaped the broad field of public history and that individuals have been willing to explore connections between political activism and intellectual practice even at some risk to their own professional stature and personal security. Some practitioners have actively reflected on this problem. Gene Weltfish regularly risked censure for her vocal commitment to antiracist action. She criticized fellow participants in the American Civilization Institute of Morristown for paying insufficient attention to white supremacy. Paul Romanoff literally gave his life to establish the role of his collections in challenging anti-Semitism and creating cross-cultural understanding. At the same time, the essays in this volume raise questions about the sustainability of radical practices. Sometimes, social consciousness breaks under the weight of professionalization and institutional development. The Tenement Museum, in its effort to expand both interpretively and spatially, became implicated in processes of gentrification. Carter G. Woodson’s work to promote Black pride and Black consciousness has been watered down—though not entirely lost—by the broad institutionalization of Black History Month in educational and cultural institutions.

As we uncover the potential of public history to serve social justice, it is also crucial that we recognize the qualities and conditions that limit this potential. Throughout this inquiry, participants have understood that the
effort to identify the radical roots of public history was not designed to help create a list of heroes. Rather, we aimed to identify these radical roots in order to develop a more historically well-grounded critique of radical practices, a more clearly articulated set of ethical principles, and a flexible series of best-practices guidelines. Recognizing the impact that historical trends have had on the development of radical forms of public history—from progressive education, to New Deal–era social experimentation, to late twentieth-century identity politics—provides us with a clearer view of both the promise and the shortcomings of politically engaged historical work.

In this vein, there remains a deep contradiction at the center of this volume. The practices the contributors have placed at the center of their collaborative inquiry—a community focus, an emphasis on problem solving, a preference for shared inquiry and collaboration—are recognizable as elements of what is often labeled as “civic engagement.” Each contributor has benefitted, directly or indirectly, from the relatively recent rise of civic engagement as a recognized set of strategies that can demonstrate the broad public value offered by cultural institutions and universities. Indeed, the ubiquity of civic engagement as an ideal lent immediacy to our research. The term dominates mission statements, long-range planning documents, and best-practice guidelines. However, we quickly discovered that there is no one generally agreed-upon definition of civic engagement. For political scientists, the term describes any activity that promotes democracy by expanding citizen participation in decision-making. Public historians and academics have used it more broadly to describe any effort to include audiences, stakeholders, and local people in research and interpretation as part of a larger process to address the social, cultural, and/or political conditions of everyday life. But the practice of civic engagement in this context has been insufficiently historicized and theorized. Indeed, the historiography of civic engagement is at least as problematic as the broadly accepted historiography of public history our work sought to address.

Throughout the existing literature, the contemporary emphasis on civic engagement in higher education is most often traced to the 1990s, when then secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros created an Office of University Partnerships to help colleges and universities develop practical solutions to the problems of poverty and injustice in urban America. Through strategies such as service learning, collaborative research, and university-community partnerships, faculty members and administrators
sought to be more responsive to the communities that existed outside the walls of the academy. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, there had been a sharp increase in the number of faculty committees, administrative offices, and bureaucratic systems dedicated to promoting community-centered research and teaching. Perhaps as a reflection of this trend, the Carnegie Foundation established an elective “community engagement” classification in 2010 to draw attention to the value that civic engagement has for institutions of higher learning. During the same period, museums also turned toward civic engagement. The American Alliance of Museums, the leading professional association for museums in the United States (then called the American Association of Museums), initiated a challenge for museums to become better connected with underserved communities. The timing of these trends indicates they were, at least in part, a response to the late twentieth-century culture wars. During the 1980s and 1990s, politicians and citizens alike questioned the use of public funds to support cultural institutions and the arts, and they vilified scholars, curators, and others who advanced controversial interpretations or promoted offensive works of art and history. Civic engagement strategies provided a way for museums and universities to demonstrate their broad public value and bolster their image.

The emphasis on this recent historical context is relevant. It may explain why the assessment of cultural and educational programs aimed at civic engagement has been focused on internal institutional impacts. Experts on pedagogy have analyzed the value of civic engagement for improving students’ political awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Experts on museums and other cultural institutions have accepted civic engagement as an essential component of best practices and a tool for diversifying audiences, enhancing the relevance of museums, and illuminating new perspectives on the past. City administrators tout the value of civic engagement for improving fiscal management and promoting urban development. All these outcomes are undeniably positive for universities, public history sites, and government entities, but there has been insufficient effort to identify and analyze external impacts. In other words, while the literature indicates that civic engagement can serve as a positive response to institutional crises, it is less clear how well these strategies have benefitted the communities themselves.

The contributors to Radical Roots: Civic Engagement, Public History, and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism argue that radical public historians developed and advanced the practices that compose civic engagement as strategies
for advancing social justice, advocating for marginalized communities, articulating the root causes of pressing political issues, and promoting change. The use and adaptation of these practices over time by individuals connected through social and political networks is the thread that ties past to present, establishing a recognizable genealogy for radical public history. At the same time, without rigorous critical analysis and focused attention on their ongoing use and development over time, it is possible for both civic engagement and public history to lose their radical potential. In order for strategies of shared inquiry, collaboration, dialogue, and other practices of civic engagement to serve a social justice agenda, practitioners must turn their attention outward. Has civic engagement been successful in advancing justice by enabling communities to build stronger platforms from which to influence politics or transform their own social and cultural environments?

The goal of this volume is to begin to allow those invested in advancing social justice to more adequately and accurately recognize and address the potential shortcomings of their work. In turn, this may also allow for the development of a more honest and appropriate approach to self-reflection and assessment. Civic engagement has become implicated in the neoliberalization of both the education and culture sectors; it attracts funding and positive media attention at the same time that it depends on a tremendous amount of unrewarded and unrecognized labor. Further, civic engagement is often marginalized: as “service” rather than scholarship, “outreach” rather than interpretation, “visitor services” rather than the cocreation of knowledge. Yet as this volume seeks to illuminate, professors, museum professionals, oral historians, preservationists, and others who have fully integrated shared inquiry, dialogue, self-reflection, and collaboration into their various modes of inquiry have often activated elements of civic engagement as strategies for addressing issues of injustice and inequality. Paying close attention to the contradictions and conflicts the contributors to this volume have identified may help practitioners develop new strategies for reclaiming and energizing the radical potential of civic engagement, public history, and other forms of community-engaged practice.

Notes

1 For more on the various definitions of civic engagement, see, for example, Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, “What Do We Mean by ‘Civic Engagement’?,” Journal of Transformative Education 3, no. 3 (July 1, 2005): 236–53; Ben Berger, “Political Theory, Political Science, and the End of Civic Engagement,” Perspectives on Politics 7, no. 2 (June 2009): 335–50; Thomas Ehrlich, ed., Civic Responsibility and Higher


