



PUBLICPAST

JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HISTORY

PUBLICPAST IDENTIFIER (PPI)

v1i2/op/01<https://publicpast.org/ppi/v1i2/op/01>

EDITORIAL ARTICLE

The Past in Public: Who Owns, Tells, and Remembers History?

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📅 Published: 6 September 2026

📄 PPI: **v1i2/op/01**

🔗 DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23079561>

🔗 Article URL:
<https://publicpast.org/ppi/v1i2/op/01>

ABSTRACT

There is a question that has grown more insistent with each passing decade, and it sits at the heart of what this journal intends to pursue: who, exactly, does public history belong to? The question is not merely academic. It is political, ethical, and deeply personal. It concerns the monuments that line our avenues, the museums that school children file through on rainy mornings, the community elders whose testimonies go unrecorded, and the algorithms that now decide which version of the past reaches us first. It concerns power, in other words, and the uneven distribution of the authority to narrate.

KEYWORDS

Public History • Memory Studies • Digital History • Oral History • Historiography • Artificial Intelligence



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Public history as a discipline emerged from a recognition that the past does not live only inside universities and archives. It circulates, gets contested, gets silenced, and gets revived in courtrooms, in newspapers, at heritage sites, and across kitchen tables. Historians who take this seriously have long argued that the production of historical knowledge is never a neutral act

(Frisch 1990, 68). To tell a history is to make choices: what to foreground, what to leave behind, whose voice counts as evidence, and whose memory counts as fact. These choices accumulate into a picture of the past that serves some communities and excludes others.

The problem is not new. What is new is the scale and speed at which these dynamics now operate. Digital platforms have made it possible for communities to produce, circulate, and defend their own historical narratives without institutional mediation (Rosenzweig 2011, 3). This is, in many respects, an extraordinary development. Oral traditions once confined to a village or a neighborhood can reach global audiences. Photographs, documents, and testimonies that official archives never thought to collect are being digitized and shared by the communities that created them. The past is, in this sense, more public than it has ever been.

Yet democratization and equity are not the same thing. The expansion of access to digital tools has not resolved the older asymmetries of who gets to speak with authority about the past. Platforms that appear open are governed by recommendation logics that reward familiarity and provoke engagement, often at the expense of nuance and complexity (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276). A viral post about a historical atrocity may reach more people than any peer-reviewed monograph, but reach alone tells us little about depth, accuracy, or the relationship to the communities most affected. The democratization of the past, if that is what we are witnessing, is partial, uneven, and contested.

This unevenness is perhaps nowhere more visible than in debates over monuments and memorialized landscapes. The wave of monument removals and recontextualizations that accelerated globally in 2020 brought into sharp relief the tension between official memory and community memory (Legg 2005, 476). Monuments are rarely neutral archives. They are arguments, cast in stone or bronze, about which lives shaped history and which did not. When communities demand the removal or alteration of figures they find offensive or exclusionary, they are not, as critics sometimes claim, erasing history. They are disputing whose version of history has been allowed to stand in the center of public space, often for generations, without question.

The stakes of these disputes are not merely symbolic. There is now substantial scholarship demonstrating that how a society chooses to remember its past has direct consequences for how it treats its most vulnerable members in the present (Torpey 2006, 44). Communities that have experienced historical violence, dispossession, or systematic exclusion from the historical record do not experience erasure as a historical abstraction. They live with its consequences, and they recognize, often more clearly than institutions do, the difference between acknowledgment and redress.

This brings us to a third set of questions that PublicPast intends to take seriously: the relationship between historians and the publics they study or serve. There is a long-standing

anxiety in the discipline about what happens when historians step outside the seminar room and into the public sphere. Some of this anxiety is legitimate. Historians have obligations to evidence and argument that do not disappear because the audience is larger. But much of it reflects a protectiveness about expertise that has not always served communities well. The historian who insists on the complexity of the past while a community is demanding accountability for the violence done to it is not always a voice for nuance. Sometimes that insistence is a way of deferring, or of avoiding, the demands that historical knowledge makes on the present.

Oral history and community-based historical practice have complicated this dynamic productively. The Oral History Association, among others, has spent decades developing ethical frameworks for research that takes seriously the historical agency of those who might otherwise appear only as subjects in someone else's account (Shopes 2011, 261). Feminist and postcolonial historians have argued even more fundamentally that the structures of academic knowledge production themselves reproduce the hierarchies they claim to study (Chakravarti 1993, 580). To ask whose history is public history is, in part, to ask whether academic historians are willing to give up some of their authority over what counts as historical knowledge.

The arrival of artificial intelligence adds a further dimension to these questions, one that this journal will follow closely. Large language models now generate historical content at a scale no human author or institution can match. They can summarize events, reconstruct contexts, and produce plausible-sounding historical narratives almost instantaneously. What they cannot do, at least not yet, is reproduce the relationship of accountability and community that the best public history requires. History is not only an account of what happened. It is a practice undertaken in relation to those who were there, those who remember, and those who are still living with the consequences. That relational dimension is precisely what algorithmic production tends to flatten or omit entirely.

None of this means that AI tools have no place in historical practice. They are already being used, productively and controversially, for archival search, translation, transcription, and pattern recognition across large textual corpora. But the question of who owns, tells, and remembers history cannot be outsourced to a language model. It remains a question about human relationships, political choices, and ethical commitments.

PublicPast begins from the conviction that public history matters, and that it matters differently to different communities and in different contexts. This journal will not pretend to resolve the tensions described above. It will, instead, try to create a space in which they can be examined rigorously, argued about openly, and brought into productive contact with the communities, institutions, and individuals who are navigating them every day. We are not interested in a public history that settles for transmission, in which the past is packaged and delivered to a waiting

audience. We are interested in a public history that is genuinely participatory, that takes seriously the complexity of memory, and that holds itself accountable to the communities whose histories it engages.

The question of whose history is public history has no clean answer. But the asking of it, consistently and without evasion, is one of the most important intellectual and political acts available to us. That is what this journal is for.

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