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ARTICLE

Who Are the Publics in Public History?

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Abstract

It is often claimed that public history represents a democratisation of historical knowledge, but how is "the public" being imagined here? This short article provides a report from a collaborative, student–staff research project that investigated how key stakeholders involved in public history—students, academics, and heritage professionals—understood their publics. It reflects on two key themes that emerged from the testimonies: issues of inclusion and positionality. We analyse a selection of telling cases, situating these extracts in the context of financial pressures, neo-liberal marketisation and the politicisation of DEI agendas. We suggest that there is a need for more open, reflexive, and cross-disciplinary dialogue between different stakeholders about the various publics they construct and engage.

Keywords: heritage; inclusion; museums; public history; History Education

In the last five years, "public history" has emerged as a major focus in the teaching, research, and impact agendas of UK universities.[1] It is often claimed that public history represents a democratisation of historical knowledge—extending beyond the academy to engage a wider proportion of the population as audiences, participants, collaborators, and creators.[2] If this is the case, then which publics do public historians reach and which do they recognise as excluded or marginalised? Moreover, how do the stakeholders involved in public history imagine their public? David Dean is of the opinion that "public historians tend to conceptualise the audiences of historical representations as a single, unitary public."[3] At a moment when the so-called culture war has cast public understandings of the past in a deeply politicised light, the time feels ripe to probe Dean's claim.

1. Surveying public history stakeholders

This imperative animated a staff–student research project that we—Lilac Marsh, a third-year English student, and David Geiringer, a lecturer in public history—recently conducted

[1] Evans and Burkett 2022.
[2] Cauvin 2018.
[3] Dean 2022, 3.

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at the Queen Mary University of London (funded by the QMUL HSS Student Research Bursary Scheme). We ran an online survey in the first 3 months of 2024 that investigated how those with a self-avowed role in public history—students, lecturers, and heritage professionals—understood "the public."[4] We recruited participants from across the United Kingdom through a targeted email campaign, identifying key academics and professionals involved in public history and asking them to disseminate the survey to students and colleagues within their networks. This snowballing process garnered 50 responses in total, a self-selecting sample, as is almost always the case for this sort of research, but a sample composed of respondents who clearly felt invested in public history. Working as co-researchers with differing positions in relation to public history was particularly useful when co-designing the survey questions (Appendix). David, as a "expert" in public history with the term in his professional title, was well-versed in the, ironically not so public-facing, theories of the field, but this familiarity held the potential to encourage leading questions and obscure wider perspectives. Lilac, as a student from a different discipline who consumed history both within and beyond her degree, brought a different set of questions and experiences surrounding public history. These contrasting but complementary positions allowed for a more nuanced approach to both the generation and analysis of qualitative data.

Historians have recently become interested in the intellectual work that the term "public" does. For example, Alex Mold et al. ask, "who are the publics in public health?"[5] In our project, we wanted to better understand what happens when the word "public" is attached to "history." The responses offer an insight into not only the values and assumptions that underpin public history as a field of knowledge but also the power dynamics that shape its practice. Here, we reflect on two key themes that emerged from the responses: inclusion and positionality. These words are widely used across the various institutions involved in public history but are often freighted with different meanings and motivations.

2. The illusions of inclusion?

The lack of inclusion within the history and heritage workforces is now receiving long overdue attention. A recent survey by Historic England has indicated that over 90% of the workforce in heritage identify as white, while less than 1% identify as Black or Black British.[6] Similarly, a 2018 Royal Historical Society Report on race, ethnicity, and equality found that 93.7% of academic historians are white, with 1.5 identifying as Black.[7] Strategies are being employed to redress this lack of diversity, with varying levels of success, but it remains more difficult to measure the inclusivity of public history outputs, collaborations, and audiences. The "public" component of public history is less amenable to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI—an ordering more favoured in UK contexts than DEI in the United States) evaluation tools.

The responses to our survey suggest that while the different groups shared a commitment to imagining the public in the broadest possible sense, in practice, they engaged with very

[4] "Heritage professionals" is a baggy term that is used here to describe our sample of paid and unpaid workers involved in organizations, including museums, archives, media, community groups, and charities.

[5] Mold, Clark, and Millward 2019.

[6] Heritage England 2025.

[7] Royal Historical Society 2018.

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different groups. Academics and students both tended to speak confidently about their work in engaging "disenfranchised," "underrepresented," and "minoritised" groups in their public history work:

> I've worked with local communities, particularly those living in disadvantaged urban areas, in Belfast and Jordan and am hoping to develop my work in order to engage with recent migrant communities including refugees. I'm also working with heritage organisations and the owners of privately-owned historic houses.
>
> —*Teacher at Higher Education Institution*

> Personally speaking, three different audiences emerge: children, adults and those with physical impairments. While children need informal, pedagogical approaches to history, this should entice them to search for the higher data provided to adults, and not be a separate way of approaching history.
>
> —*Student at Higher Education Institution*

> I work with adults survivors of child abuse and neglect in the mid-late 20th century, which is my area of study. I do this via individual contacts and through charities, advocacy organisations and practitioner groups in my area of interest.
>
> —*Teacher at Higher Education Institution*

This capacity to work with underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in research-led contexts reflects a level of autonomy amongst those working in universities. By comparison, heritage workers spoke of their interest in reaching disadvantaged communities, but were also candid about the demographic profile of the publics they engaged:

> ...audiences that tend to be either white, middle-aged to senior male and females or family groups of at least 2nd generation British families....
>
> —*Heritage professional*

> ...particularly with older people and older community groups....
>
> —*Heritage professional*

Heritage workers were conscious of how the financial demands and cultural identity of the heritage sector shaped the publics they engaged with, as exemplified by the acquisitive language used here: "To me, the 'public' in public history is the target audience." Those working in Higher Education appeared to enjoy greater levels of autonomy in selecting the types of public they engaged with.

Inclusion was identified as a major issue for all those involved in public history. Many acknowledged that not enough was being done to broaden the voices and stories being platformed:

> Established hierarchies and inequities continue to prioritise certain people and certain histories over others....
>
> —*Heritage professional*

There was a tendency amongst the different groups to label other groups as being less inclusive. In response to a question about whether public history was inclusive, some academic participants pointed the finger at heritage organisations:

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> Not as much as it could be. Some museums or heritage sites remain very elitist in the histories they represent or even just how they present it. But things are changing for the better....
>
> —*Teacher at Higher Education Institution*

We found that some heritage professionals claimed the exact opposite:

> As a very broad statement, I'd say museums and heritage organizations have a more inclusive approach than more traditional academic institutions!
>
> —*Heritage professional*

One academic respondent identified "public archaeology" as the main culprit:

> I think public history is a lot more inclusive than public archaeology! I think historical knowledge generally is more accessible, and people are able to run with it and make it into something significant and empowering.
>
> —*Teacher at Higher Education Institution*

This sense of competition between different sectors of public history tells us something about the marketisation of inclusivity agendas within the creative industries. Claims to inclusion are a vital source of cultural capital, with programmes such as the gender equality framework Athena Swan measuring EDI-related metrics and offering a badge of honour for academic institutions. The recent Trumpian attacks on DEI have garnered much attention, but it is important to note that the neoliberal logics of ranking and competition have structured the way public history stakeholders frame inclusion for a while now.

3. Anyone but us—self-exclusion from "the public"

One common trait amongst participants from all three groups was a tendency to define the public as anyone but themselves. Consider these typical responses to the question: "Who do you think are the publics in public history?":

> Anyone who isn't part of the academic world...
>
> —*Teacher at Higher Education Institution*

> Anyone who does not work for a heritage organization.
>
> —*Heritage professional*

These participants see their historical expertise as precluding their inclusion in the public in public history. This suggests a sense of intellectual humility and self-awareness, a consciousness of the power they hold as authors and arbiters of historical knowledge. For some participants, this was tied up with their economic relationship to public history. One academic participant explained that they became a part of "the public" when the history no longer related to their professional work:

> I like to think of myself as a member of "the public" when it comes to histories I am not engaged in studying professionally.
>
> —*Teacher at Higher Education Institution*

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It is clear that financial remuneration influenced the way the participants positioned themselves in relation to the public. There seems to be an intriguing paradox at the heart of public history—many dedicate themselves to public history because they believe that history should include a broader public, but exclude themselves from their definition of the public. While the reasons for this self-exclusion may be virtuous, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the implications. A recent study of public history blogging suggests that history students tend to view their target "public" as themselves—young people who tend not to engage with public history and heritage content.[8]

4. Reimagining the publics in public history

There have been widespread calls to improve inclusion in public history and heritage, and indeed we are seeing the production of new resources, such as *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*, aimed at this end, but little analysis of what inclusion actually means in these contexts.[9] Our research suggests that, rather than assuming a unified, coherent understanding of inclusive practice, there is a need for more open dialogue between different stakeholders about the various publics they engage. Knowledge exchange between archivists and historians is common, such as the collaboration between the Institute for Historical Research and the National Archives History and Archives in Practice. Integrating public history students and teachers into these discussions would be a useful starting point for thinking about how the very category of the "public" can be usefully reimagined. Equally, thinking across disciplinary lines to engage with other organising categories such as the "public humanities" will help disrupt siloed working practices and the logics of competition. Jane Moody has suggested that those working in "heritage" and "history" should recognise their role as social actors in the processes that constitute the other.[10] There is a need for a reflexive approach amongst public history stakeholders, calling into question clear lines between the producers of history for the public and public consumers of history. At a moment when "public history" has ascended to a position of cultural and educational authority, it is time to think critically, creatively, and collaboratively about the effect that these two words have on each other.

David Geiringer is Senior Lecturer in Public History & Heritage at Queen Mary University of London, UK. He is a historian of modern Britain and has published on Catholic sexualities, the home computer, religious anti-racism and the 1990s. He leads on several public history teaching programmes, such as the student knowledge exchange scheme qHeritage.

Lilac Marsh BA (Hons) completed an undergraduate degree in English Literature (2024) at Queen Mary University of London and is currently studying for an MA in Philosophy at Birkbeck University of London. She successfully applied for the QMUL HSS Student Bursary Grant in 2023 to collaborate with Dr Geiringer on this research project.

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[8] Geiringer 2024.
[9] Brinkley 2023; *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook* n.d.
[10] Moody 2015.

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Appendix: Survey questions

What is your relationship to public history?

Tell us about your experiences with public history.

Who do you imagine as the "public" in public history?

Which groups, communities, and individuals do you engage yourself with, and which do you hope to engage with in the future?

How do you engage with these different publics?

How do you think public history affects people's lives?

How inclusive do you think public history is?

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