Building Communities, Reconciling Histories: Can We Make A More Honest History?

Rebecca S. Wingo and William G. Thomas III

Since the social and cultural turn of the 1960s, public historians have created more inclusive and participatory historical spaces through community engagement and a deliberate incorporation of a shared authority.[1] One need look no further than the National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, D.C., to see the power of these twin methods. The museum invited contributions from the public to tell the history of Blacks in America and hundreds of people and organizations responded. One of the objects donated to the museum came from Hagerstown, Maryland. It was a slave auction block, but for decades a local organization displayed it to commemorate and celebrate election speeches delivered from it by Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay in 1830. Yet, President Barack Obama noted during his speech at the museum opening, the slave block told multiple histories: "day after day, for years, men and women were torn from their spouse or their child, shackled, and bound, and bought, and sold, and bid like cattle, on a stone worn down by the tragedy of over 1,000 bare feet."[2] Exhibited for decades as a monument to two of America's leading political figures, both slaveholders, the auction block held other stories and latent meanings. Voices long silenced included those who also stood on its rough surface, other men, women, and children who played just as much of a role in shaping the nation as the slaveholders who gave stump speeches from its height.

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[1] For more, see Rebecca S. Wingo, Jason A. Heppler, and Paul Schadewald, "Introduction," in *Digital Community Engagement: Partnering Communities with the Academy*, eds. Rebecca S. Wingo, Jason S. Heppler, and Paul Schadewald (University of Cincinnati Press, 2020), especially fn 5. In 1990, Michael Frisch popularized the term "a shared authority" to describe the mechanism by which academics could treat the public as an equal partner in knowledge creation. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990). See also, Frisch, "From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back," in *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, eds. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011): 126-137

[2] Katie Reilly, "Read President Obama's speech at the Museum of African American History and Culture," *Time*, September 24, 2016, accessed August 7, 2018, http://time.com/4506800/barack-obama-african-american-history-museum-transcript/.

Obama's reinterpretation of the block in a museum dedicated to the history of the people enslaved on it exemplifies a more critically aware conversation about the representation and re-presentation of history in American public spaces. From this same ethos stems discussions of Confederate monuments. After debates over public history turned deadly in Charlottesville, it became increasingly clear to many Americans that objects, whether monuments or named buildings, offered a particular version of historical memory, that a series of historical interpretations came with the stone and marble, and that these could be, and should be, critiqued and reconsidered.[3]

Meanwhile the medium for public discussion around history has expanded to include digital spaces and platforms.[4] As the web moved from "read-only" to "read-write," and as social media communities exploded, non-academic critics suddenly had a means to communicate their interpretations of historical objects and sites.[5] Digital tools like geomapping offered opportunities online to re-present historical objects and work with communities to reach a more honest, more complete account of our shared past. We believe digital public historians are poised to make advances in community engagement by pushing the traditional definitions of community, and even the ways in which they form. In so doing, historians can buttress the tenants of a shared authority and continue to challenge the traditional role of scholars as the primary, even privileged, keepers and producers of history.

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[3] Joe Heim, "Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death," *Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, accessed November 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/; and Farah Stockman, "Who were the Counterprotesters in Charlottesville?" *New York Times*, August 14, 2017, accessed November 6, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/us/who-were-the-counterprotesters-in-charlottesville.html.

[4] Contributors to Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel's *Disrupting the Digital Humanities* comprise a self-described "motley crew" that seek to critically engage issues around digital humanities' own "embedded practices in relation to issues around multilingualism, race, gender, disability, and global praxis." Of any recent volume, it does the most work at picking at loose threads and critiquing digital humanities' narrative of egalitarianism. Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel, *Disrupting the Digital Humanities* (New York: Punctum Books, 2018).

[5] Sharon Leon, "Complexity and Collaboration: Doing Public History in Digital Environments," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 58-63.

Types of Digital Community Engagement

Communities have traditionally formed by three intersecting spaces: geography, demography, or shared interest.[6] Through spaces like these, Benedict Anderson argues, communities are bound by a "deep, horizontal comradeship."[7] Digital platforms have added new, exciting spaces for community formation, especially around history. Dynamic online communities are imagined by their constituencies and the past is the unifying force that brings them together. They are bonded by both common interest and shared motivation even though they may have never gathered in person. In fact, members of these communities increasingy become acquainted in virtual spaces first and in person only later, if they ever do meet. Such communities have grown up alongside HTML protocols, chatrooms, and digital history projects. They are the public—online.

Digital community formation in historical projects typically falls into one of three categories. The first is through user communities that form around a historical question or mission. Many of these are digitization projects. For example, the New York Public Library's award-winning project *What's on the Menu?* asked the public to transcribe the corpus of menus in their archives. As of 2019, a community of volunteers transcribed more than 1.3 million dishes from over 17,500 historic New York City menus.[8] The *Mapping Prejudice* project investigating housing covenants and restrictions in Minneapolis, Minnesota, also tapped into a vibrant transcription community through a crowdsourcing tool called Zooniverse.[9] Similarly, the Civil War Photo Sleuth project out of Virginia Tech uses BetaFace facial recognition software and a community of users to identify unknown Civil War soldiers in the photographs in their archive (Figure 1).[10]

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[6] Wingo et al., "Introduction."

[7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2016), 7.

[8] *What's on the Menu?*, New York Public Library, accessed July 28, 2019, http://menus.nypl.org/.

As demonstrated in these projects, the public is eager to contribute to and become part of historical dialogue in digital spaces.[11] The communities that formed around each project play a powerful role in the projects they help produce. Their expertise may even shape the ways in which scholars ask their questions as the users often spend more time investigating the minutia of historical sources than the academic partners. Their expertise comes in many forms—noting the make and model of a Civil War locomotive and ascertaining its exact specifications and year of production, for instance—and contributes to the richness of new knowledge. Their work often advances the project's overall mission in clearly discernable ways. But despite these contributions, user communities do not often share authority with the project scholars.

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[9] Kirsten Delegard and Ryan Mattke, *Mapping Prejudice*, accessed September 12, 2018, http://mappingprejudice.org/.

[10] Kurt Luther, Ron Coddington, and Paul Quigley, *Civil War Photo Sleuth*, accessed July 11, 2019, https://www.civilwarphotosleuth.com/. See also Kurt Luther, "Photo Sleuth: New Digital Tool Redefines Photo Sleuthing," *Military Images Magazine* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2017), https://militaryimages.atavist.com/photo-sleuth-summer-2017.

[11] For a candid conversation about developing trust and empowering citizen scholars to assert their own dialogic place in the presentation and re-presentation of history, see John Kou Wei Tchen and Liz Ševčenko, "The 'Dialogic Museum' Revisited: A Collaborative Reflection" in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for the Arts & Heritage, 2011), 80-95.

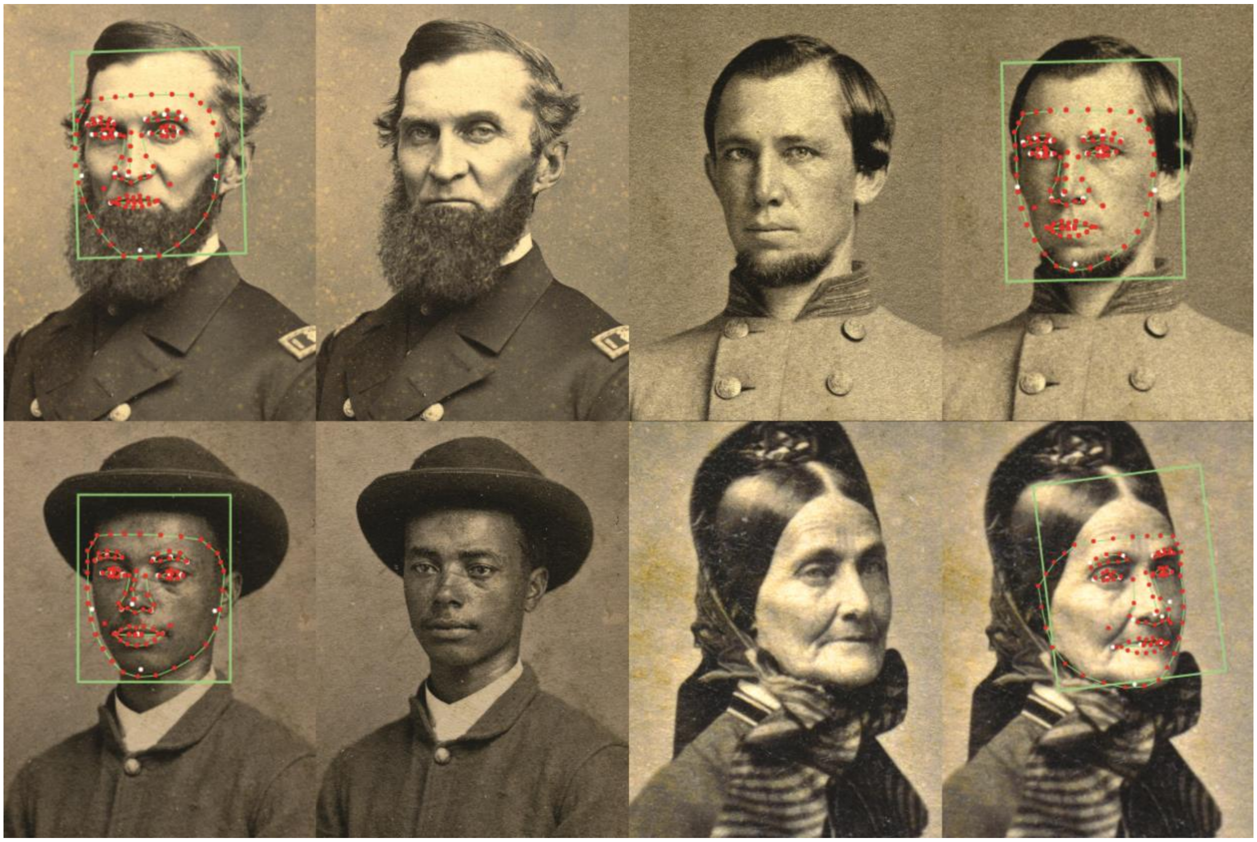

Figure 1: Artwork by Ron Coddington, Civil War Photo Sleuth Project, 2017.

The second type of digital community engagement uses digital outcomes for more traditional engagement. A good example of this hybrid community project is the History Harvest, a community-based, student-driven digital archive.[12] Students organize a one-day event in which community members bring their items of significance, students digitize them and record a story about the items, and then contributors take their items back home. The format might be compared to Antiques Roadshow, except that understanding the historical rather than monetary value is the goal.

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[12] The History Harvest was developed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln by William G. Thomas, III and Patrick D. Jones. For more information, visit http://historyharvest.unl.edu. See also Thomas, Jones, and Andrew Witmer, "History Harvests: What Happens When Students Collect and Digitize the People's History?" *Perspectives* (January 1, 2013), https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2013/history-harvests and Rebecca S. Wingo and Amy C. Sullivan, "Remembering Rondo: An Inside View of the History Harvest," *Perspectives* (March 1, 2017), https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2017/remembering-rondo-an-inside-view-of-a-history-harvest.

The objects people bring to a History Harvest are often stunning. At the North Omaha History Harvest in 2011, Warren Taylor contributed an 1840 penny and a collapsible drinking cup that belonged to his great-great-grandmother. She carried the "Liberty" penny with her until the day she died, he told the students, because when she was enslaved she was not allowed to have any money. On a small, folded piece of paper with the outline of the penny still visible, Taylor's great-aunt wrote, "This was my grandmother's penny." (Figure 2) At the 2016 Remembering Rondo History Harvest in Minnesota, an anonymous contributor brought a unique scrapbook of ephemera relating to the Inner City Players, a short-lived Black theatre company founded by Abdul Salaam el Razzac in the 1970s. The collection is truly one-of-a-kind.[13]

The History Harvest, and projects like it, rely heavily on building trust with communities. This is difficult, however, without face-to-face engagement. There is no substitute for making announcements at church services, asking local businesses to hang flyers, or attending community functions as a representative of the academic partnership. The Harvest emphasizes the value of the community partners as citizen scholars, as experts of their own histories. This is much closer to a shared authority than developing a user community, but also requires a deeper investment from the community involved.

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[13] "Scrapbook of the Inner City Players," *Rondo History Harvest*, accessed July 12, 2019, http://omeka.rememberingrondo.org/items/show/71.

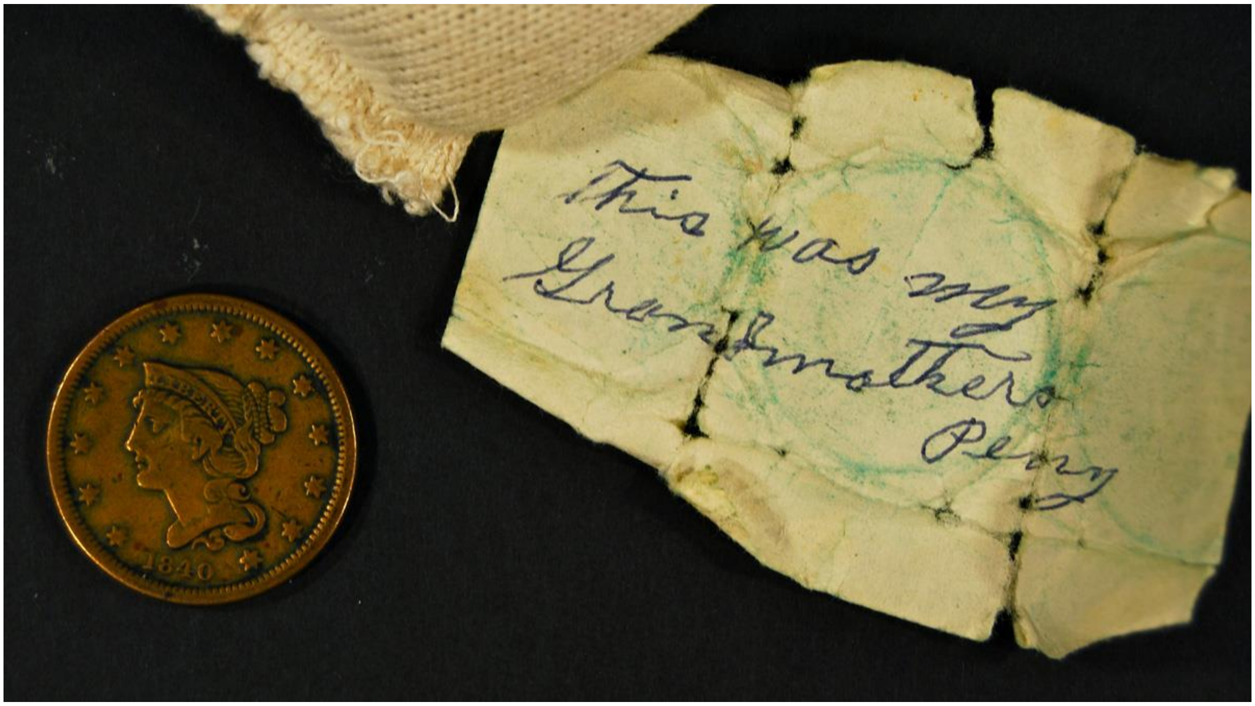

Figure 2: The penny from Warren Taylor’s great-great-grandmother and the note from his great-aunt.

The third type of digital community engagement occurs when historians create or curate communities that did not know they shared a common past. Scholars have done this on both local and national stages. For example, Amy Sullivan (Macalester College) organized a History Harvest to collect stories from Minneapolis’ harm reduction community active in the 80s and 90s. Before harm reduction became synonymous with needle exchange programs in the current opioid crisis, grassroots activists worked with homeless youth, passed out condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS / HIV, and provided outreach to women and LGBTQIA populations. While these communities worked in the same city at the same time, their efforts were rarely coordinated if they were aware of each other at all. Sullivan used Facebook to unite a community of these organizers and generate excitement over the History Harvest. Until they assembled for the event in May 2017, these important activists did not realize they were part of a collective history.[14] With a minimal budget, Sullivan leveraged a digital platform to create a community that met in person to contribute to a digital project about an untold history.

At Georgetown University a similar process unfolded, one not directed or controled by the university. In 2016 the *New York Times* published a leading story on the university's 1838 sale of 272 enslaved men, women, and children to sugar planters in Louisiana. Two descendant community organizations subsequently emerged. The Louisiana-based GU272 Descendants Association brought together modern descendants of the families the university sold. Separately, a Georgetown alumnus began the Georgetown Memory Project and used DNA testing to identify all living descendants of the families. Both groups formed quickly and outside of the university, and both communicated and grew through digital spaces, such as Ancestry.com and 23andme. Again, digital platforms united people who did not otherwise know they comprised a community.

Despite these communities there was no clearly defined role for the descendants in shaping the memory and interpretation of the history of the sale. And the history at stake in the Georgetown case concerns the actions of the university, the Society of Jesus, and the Catholic Church, because each participated both in the sale itself and in the historical lies of omission ever since. When the university formed a working group to study the matter, the administration turned exclusively to professional historians, lawyers, and academics. The university's working group did not include a single descendant. Nevertheless the group met with descendant stakeholders and drafted a final report recommending several ways Georgetown should repair the historical trauma of the sale. Georgetown University and the Society of Jesus apologized for the sin of enslavement. The university renamed buildings and began digitizing its archival materials related to slavery. Descendants were accorded preferential status in admission decisions at the university. But the omission of descendants from the working group proved difficult for Georgetown to overcome. Initially, the university decided on its own to rename a building "Isaac Hall" for the first person listed in the 1838 sale. But descendants quickly pointed out that his full name should be used -- Isaac Hawkins -- and that it was presumptive and an insult to his memory not to do so. Georgetown's administration renamed the building "Isaac Hawkins Hall." The university and the descendant community organizations continue to navigate and negotiate what a more honest, more complete history means for one other.[15]

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[14] Amy Sullivan, "Seen and Heard: Using DiCE to Reconnect Communities and Enrich Pedagogy," in *Digital Community Engagement*, eds. Rebecca S. Wingo, Jason A. Heppler, and Paul Schadewald (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Press, 2020). See also Sullivan, *When 'Rock Bottom' Means Death* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020) and http://amycsullivan.net/mnopioidproject/archive/.

Community Engagement in Practice

Georgetown's oversight in developing a working group does not model the best practices for building trust between communities and their academic partners. But the project does align with nascent efforts in digital public history to repair, reconstruct, and make visible what has been invisible in the artifacts and records. By opening digital opportunities for communities to engage in ways they have not before, historians are being pulled deeper into a phase of public work where we are called on to help repair the past.[16] What could historians accomplish if we worked with communities through digital media to create, interpret, and re-present history? If we invest in a shared authority with the public, could we reach a more honest history?

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[15] Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University, Summer 2016, accessed November 8, 2018, http://slavery.georgetown.edu/.

[16] While there are many solitary and unique examples of this type of work, foremost in the field is the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, founded in 1999, that brings together places "united by their common commitment to connect past to present, memory to action." "About Us," International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, accessed November 1, 2018, https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/who-we-are/about-us/. See also Arguing with Digital History working group, "Digital History and Argument," white paper, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (November 13, 2017): 10, https://rrchnm.org/argument-white-paper/.

We have assembled a list of questions that, when considered in advance, can augment the equity of the community partnership—with or without a digital component:[17]

1. Is the partnership mutually beneficial and reciprocal?
2. Are all stakeholders represented among the leadership and on the editorial boards or committees?
3. Are the goals, objectives, and governance of the partnership co-created and clearly defined?
4. Are meetings/gatherings and project updates accessible to all stakeholders?
5. Is there a clear understanding of how the project will be assessed?

Digital tools can change the dynamics, longevity, and sustainability of a project. We have identified three questions that pertain directly to the lifespan of a digital community engagement project:

6. Who controls / will control the digital content?.
7. Are any of the tools used proprietary and how will on-going costs be covered?
8. Is there a clear data management plan with explicit agreements about project sustainability?

Not all of these questions will remain relevant as technologies change, but one thing remains constant: the need for scholars and community stakeholders alike to generate ethical partnerships that draw upon the core tenants of a shared authority and thoughtful engagement. The questions we present here are offered as starting points, as guiding ideas, and as a means to reframe and reorient how we work with and in communities. It is up to scholars and the communities with whom they collaborate to make sure the partnerships in the present and future rectify rather than replicate old power structures of intellectual elitism and mask historical injustices.[18]

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[17] Inspiration for these questions come from Sheila Brennan, “Public, First,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) and Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), 270-271, as well as our own experiences working with communities through the History Harvest.

[18] Nina Simon cites the community engagement work of the Wing Luke Asian Museum as one of the leaders in the field of community engaged practices that embrace a shared authority over their history and presentation. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 264-271. The Wing Luke Asian Museum has also published extensively about their

The role of the digital public historian is changing alongside the technologies they use—shifting as history is performed, reconstituted, and repaired in digital form—and recognition for that work is inconsistent. Community-engaged digital public history projects present new challenges to versioning that traditional scholars have taken for granted. We know what a book looks like; we also know what a book will look like in fifty years. Digital projects have a different lifecycle. They are flexible and dynamic, both as a result of technology and their expansion (or contraction). The first release is rarely the final version, which means that we have an ephemerality of scholarship relative to our peers. With community-based projects in particular, control may transition back to the community, or the project may never reach formal "completion." Our national organizations have collectively issued guidelines for valuing community engaged work, but it has yet to filter downstream.[19]

Digital public historians create projects for many reasons. *Community engagement* remains a principal design strategy as ways to build and support audience for digital projects. Often, digital public historians enter into *community partnerships* which offer both obstacles and opportunities. Harnessing the power of digital projects to engage with communities, or even redefine community formation, holds new promise and new challenges for historians. Perhaps the bigger challenge is training historians to see that the public is always around us, online and otherwise.

"Come here and see the power of your own agency," Obama beckoned in his remarks at the NMAAHC, a museum that accentuated the actions people took to change history. Historical

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model: Cassie Chinn, *Wing Luke Asian Museum Community-based Exhibition Model* (Seattle: Wing Luke Asian Museum, 2006). See also, Arguing with Digital History working group, "Digital History and Argument," 10.

[19] Kristin Ahlberg, et al., "Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian: A White Paper by the Working Group on Evaluating Public History Scholarship," 6-7; and Modupe Labode, "Does it count? Promotion, tenure, and evaluation of public history scholarship," National Council of Public History, December 6, 2017, accessed August 5, 2018, http://ncph.org/history-at-work/does-it-count/.

contributions like those made to the NMAAHC offer a different paradigm for public history, a re-presentation of historical objects whose full histories have yet to be told. Can we ensure that digital (and hybrid) spaces hold the same promise?

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