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All over the world, we have this thing called public history. It informs the public about the history that happened around them, wherever they are. Public history is also something that not many scholars agree on the definition of. With this, there are many different definitions that many scholars use to define public history. Public history is a skill that is learned through the practice of lots of reading on the field itself and how it works in the public. It is always changing and is always growing to reflect on the world and improve itself through time. There are also many reasons that the field is changing and growing. This is due to the growth in technology and the slow movement in the realization that there are people who have been silenced from the past, and their stories have been forgotten.

The definition of public history used to be something that you know when you see it, or history applied to the issues of the world.¹ Many scholars have created definitions like a methodology and collaborative study to practice history, and others, like Kathy Corbett and Dick Miller defined it as, “Public history is a multidimensional effort by historians and their publics, collaborating in settings beyond traditional classrooms, to make the past useful in the present.” But others like Jennifer Dickey have explained other ways of defining the field as one where public historians want to help the public understand the past.² This is the definition that helps

¹ About the field | National Council on Public History, accessed April 25, 2026, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

² Jennifer Dickey, “Public History and the Big Tent Theory.” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (November 2018): 37-41, 37-39

define all of the different subsets of the field and gives a good idea of what public historians do. Overall, though, public history can be defined as using history to help the public understand the setting that they are interacting with. This is the best definition to incorporate digital history, museums, archives, historic preservation, oral history, and cultural resource management.

To add to public history as a whole, all over the world, there are many issues that impact it. These issues stem from the fact that public history has many different publics, and this leads to competing interpretations across different sites and spaces. Sometimes this stems from organizations not wanting to be political, but sites and interpretations are always political. Other times, in other organizations, they pick the events and aspects that they think are important and want remembered, but leave out others.³ This is what creates silences in the historical narrative at sites and places, and creates a space where people can be forgotten.

When Michel-Rolph Trouillot talks about the Haitian revolution in his book *Silencing the Past*, he talks of the memory of Sans Souci. When he mentions the difference between the Potsdam Sans Souci and the Sans Souci in Haiti, he explains how they were both treated, and how the history of the two has been told. Within this agreement, it tells the reader that this is the fault of the historical narrative. It also tells the reader that this is an example of the inequalities of the historical process, which starts before the historian comes into play. They even start in the sources and archives in which they can be silenced.⁴ Also, it is said, at the end of the book, that there are lessons that can be learned from these silences and what they do. Here, the chapter explains that historical narratives are made of silences, and not all are deliberately made because

³ Thomas Cauvin, Chapter 17 “Public History, Conflicts, and Competing Narratives” Public History: A Textbook of Practice (2022) 23-24

⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1997), 45.

they are subject to the time at which they were written.⁵ Through this analysis, it gives an understanding of how historical narrative is created. It also gives an understanding of what kind of impact primary resources have on the past and how we see the present.

There are many kinds of silences that can occur in the historical narrative, and the main types of these are in America and all over the world, and they include: Women's history, African American history, disabled history, Native American history, and LGBTQ+ history. These stories have been forgotten from the record and are only rarely told. All of these different silences explain things that we as a community have forgotten and need to work to get back into all the spaces that they belong in. Specifically, with women's history, for example, women are present in the history of different spaces; you just must look for them in the landscape.⁶

There are many spaces in which this kind of silencing occurs in the historical narrative, and how different spaces handle this problem differently is something to be identified. Clint Smith, with his work, *How the Word is Passed*, examines different sites in the United States. He examined these sites to show how slavery has been represented. The first site that he visited was Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's plantation. He mentions that mainly white people come to the site and are stunned to find out all the slaves that he had and how they lived. After talking with the site's public historian Niya, he learned that in the 1950's the site had hired interpreters who were African American, and they also had them dressed like slaves to tell the story of Jefferson.⁷ This is a representation that tells how the site has changed, and what people thought during those days. It also tells its own history of the time that this kind of interpretation took place. While he

⁵ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 152-153

⁶ Michelle McClellan, "Did Martha Washington Sleep Here? Feminism, Power and Preservation," in *Bending the Future*, 2016, pp. 166-169.

⁷ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2021), 46-47.

was there for a tour of the site, he got to know his tour guide, David. He told him that there is a line of balance between telling people the truth about a site and not pushing people so far that they shut down.⁸ This balance is what many people have to deal with when it comes to telling the history of anything in the historical narrative. Sometimes, with people like presidents or leaders of the United States, all the way through, public school students are not told these people's faults, and they visit sites like Monticello, and it is only then that they learn what kind of the lives these people lived. While Smith was talking with Niya, the public historian of the site, Smith mentions a conversation that he had with two women whom he called Grace and Donna. He told Niya that in their conversation, they said that they were history buffs, and they had no idea that Jefferson had slaves. Niya told Smith that this is an example of why the site must be gentle with the guests and tell them that what they learn may be difficult and that there are no wrong or stupid questions.⁹ This goes to further explain how the public education system has failed in this area.

Another site that needs mentioning is the Whitney plantation, which was bought by John Cumming. This site was reviewed by Randi Lynn Tanglen, who tells how the site came to be a museum of slavery and how the site reflects slavery. He says that the site ignores the brutalities of slavery and portrays slave owners as benevolent. The tour starts in the slave house and ends in the mansion. This way is backwards from most mansion tours in the South of slave owners.¹⁰

⁸ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, 41.

⁹ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, 48.

¹⁰ Randi Lynn Tanglen, "Review: *The Whitney Plantation* by John Cummings, Ibrahima Seck, Ashley Rogers, Laura Amann." *The Whitney Plantation*, by John Cummings, Ibrahima Seck, Ashley Rogers, and Laura Amann. *The Public Historian* 37, no. 4 (2015): 145–49.

This site tries to tell slavery correctly and tell the story of the slaves, but it falls short in the brutality that the slaves endured in the Southern states.

To continue this analysis of historic sites and how they handle potential silences in the history of their sites, this author has made a review of a site. This chosen site was the Belle Meade Historic Site and Winery. Here, the main tour started like any other in the mansion to tell the history of the people who lived there. The guide was very clear that the site would like to acknowledge the Native Americans who lived at the site before the family. They started by mentioning the way that the family got their wealth and the number of slaves that helped create the plantation that stands today. They represented all the white women who lived at the site, and they also included facts about African American women who played a part in the daily household needs and inner workings. Aside from the house tour, the site gave an interesting look into the slave house, which they used to expand on things that were mentioned in the house tour. Here, they give a detailed look into the African American people that they have researched, and what their lives looked like as enslaved people by representing what they would have lived in. The site also gives a video of oral interviews with descendants of former slaves to add more interpretation to the site. They also have a designated corner of the room to look at the slave census, so that visitors can see for themselves what this kind of research looks like. Also, here they list the people that the site is currently researching to find out more about what life was like then. Overall, this site did better than most sites, but there are some areas that could be improved, only slightly. For example, the original family cabin could have some more interpretation done to include the Native Americans that were present at the beginning of the site, and if available, in the slave cabin, adding details on how the Harding-Jackson family treated their slaves.

The use of the silences at different sites plays a big role in historical memory, and not just the memory of sites, but also within the public. Historical memory changes throughout the years, depending on how different sites treat their history. For example, in an article by William F. Stoutamire called “Imagined Heritage: A Local History of Walnut Canyon National Monument,” Stoutamire tells how a community in Flagstaff, Arizona, came to the belief that they were the protectors of cliff dwellings. For a long time, the site had been looted, and many people, not only in the community but also tourists, had taken pieces of Native American heritage with them. At a certain point, this looting made the dwellings a part of the community, and the community wanted to protect the dwellings. This was in part because a few community members had collected enough artifacts to create small exhibits, and they were profiting from their looting. Then the National Forestry Service came in because the dwellings were considered a National Monument, but they did little to protect the site. Soon, a Native American man not from the tribe of the people that made the dwellings came to the site of the dwellings. It was not until the National Park Service took the dwelling that the dwellings were finally preserved and protected.¹¹ This story in time tells us that interpretation and protection at a historic site are very important to the way a site is remembered. It is also important that a site be interpreted so that the history of the site is in the community's memory, and this itself may help in the preservation of the site.

These issues, like silences in historical memory and in historical narratives, make an impact on many subjects and ideas in public history. They show us where the people are learning things and tell us what needs to change. With this change, it will address the faults in the system,

¹¹ William F. Stoutamire, “Imagined Heritage: A Local History of Walnut Canyon National Monument” *The Public Historian* 1 November 2016; 38 (4): 17–37. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2016.38.4.17>

and public history can reach the public where it needs to. These silences can appear from the very beginning of the record, as Trouillot said.¹² This has a big impact on archives, as the archive is where this author aspires to be a professional. In this way, the records that are present in archives also have their own biases. As with the present, this issue exists, and it is with these biases that historians can determine what the people at the time were thinking about what was going on around them.

In another light, there is the notion that the archives themselves are a foreign country, as Terry Cook says in his article, “The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape.” Cook is an archivist in Canada and has experience with archives and the way that they work. This article examines the way historians treat the archive and how they visit to get what they think they need and leave. They overlook their surroundings as one does in a foreign country.¹³ Another layer to this is the silences that an archivist can create within the archive itself. Cook even says that archivists appraise documents for their value in the future. They figure out which records have the most value and then later reappraise them for the future.¹⁴ In this way, the issue of silences can occur right in the archive, before the historian has the chance to find something in history.

Overall, this course has presented opportunities to understand the way that public history works and how the different subfields of it can work together to create a bigger picture.

Previously, before this course, this author did not understand all the different deliberate ways that

¹² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1997) 152-153.

¹³ Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape." *The American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011): 600–632, 605.

¹⁴ Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape," 606.

historical organizations could ignore things that happened in the past. To add, the ways to correct these silences were unknown as well. The different ways that public history can be defined have also added to the way that this author learned how to do history as well. Before this class, the complexity of this was unknown. All the different aspects of this class have grown to introduce and build a foundation for the rest of this author's career as a public historian.

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