

## Book Review

**Joanna Wojdon, Dorota Wiśniewska, ed.,** *Public in Public History* (Routledge, New York, NY/Milton Park, 2022).

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What do public historians mean by putting the word ‘public’ in front of ‘history’? When, in 1978, Robert Kelley formulated his well-known definition of modern public history, this seemed rather unproblematic. Public just meant ‘outside academia.’ Public historians, in other words, had to reach out to a public that was already somewhere out there, beyond the walls of academia. More than four decades, many history wars, and many academic reflections on public history practices later, the editors of this volume are less sure. *Public in Public History* wants to explore “the ways people perceive, respond to and influence history-related institutions, events, services and products that deal with the past,” in a multinational and transnational perspective (i). In his inspiring introductory essay to the volume, David Dean explicitly problematizes the concept of public itself by reflecting on concepts like Jürgen Habermas’ ‘public sphere,’ Nancy Fraser’s ‘multiplicity of publics,’ Michael Warner’s work on ‘counter-publics,’ ideas in public pedagogy, and visions on participation and co-creation. He combines these reflections with an analysis of the way the Canadian Museum of Civilization perceived its public before and during its transition to become the new Canadian Museum of History, and the centrality of interaction between stage and audiences in the theater, as for instance stated in Richard Schechner’s famous starting point that audiences in performances are active participants from the moment they approach the theater. All too often, Dean argues, public historians and institutions still conceive the public as a unitary audience, as passive consumers. That simply won’t do if we want to rethink what doing public history is all about, especially when one takes the recent shift from history ‘for’ and ‘about’ the public to history ‘by’ and ‘with’ the public into account (13). Dean underlines that “thinking about ‘publics’ rather than a single, unitary public is a useful step forward in our understanding of what we mean by putting the word ‘public’ in front of history.” (1) Only by taking their publics seriously can public historians start to give answers to difficult questions about their practices and ambitions.

The 14 contributions to the volume that follow analyze concrete examples of public history practices and products

from a wide geographical area (from Eastern Europe to Russia and the Balkans, from Western Europe to Brazil, from the United States and Japan), intended for different kind of publics and users, and produced in and by different media and producers. Divided into four thematical sections – on museums, commemorations, the digital world, and public history research – the multinational team of authors takes the reader of *Public in Public History* to such varied case-studies as the Warsaw Rising Museum, School Museums of History in Russia, Polish students and museums, the reactions to the destruction of the Brazilian National Museum by fire, ‘Indian’ monuments in the Massachusetts Valley, Serbian American memory of the First World War, memorials of the Irish Civil War in Nenagh, Ireland, transnational remembering of Edith Stein, internet comments on the memory and commemoration of anti-communist fighters in postwar Poland, Let’s Play video productions around the historical game *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*, reviews of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum on Tripadvisor, the website Povcast in Croatia, the 1947 Partition Archive of the Stanford University Library, and public history in Russia.

The result is as ambitious as it is uneven. As a sample of interesting case-studies and possible research strategies, *Public in Public History* clearly fulfills its ambitions. Especially the contributions to the section on the digital world demonstrate the possibilities social media offer public historians not only to present history in new and innovative ways but also to come closer to the public reactions of these efforts and the ways people relate to the past. At the same time, it must be said that much of the presented research is hardly original or adventurous in its methodology and elaboration, often connected as it is to well-known research traditions in public history, museum-, memory-, media- and cultural studies. As such, *Public in Public History* is more of a collection of articles demonstrating the state of the field than a new starting point. Even more so because most of the articles are a bit inward-looking: the authors delve into their respective case-study and its problems without connecting their research explicitly to other contributions in the volume or to David Dean’s introductory reflections on fruitful concepts and approaches. Promising approaches from related research fields are regularly missed. The in-itself interesting analysis of the Let’s Play video productions around the video game *Valiant Hearts*, for instance, would have gained depth by using didactic concepts like historical thinking or uses of history. Recent research on tourism and emotion in heritage could have contributed to the research on the uses of TripAdvisor. And notwithstanding the ambitions of the editors,

the transnational perspective is conspicuously missing in most articles. Some contributors indeed cross borders, but most of them stay (too) closely to their subject.

That said, thanks to its broad, multinational, and thematic scope, *Public in Public History* amply demonstrates that public history products and practices never stand alone but are always part of a complex communication network, consisting of other representations and remediations of the

same past, information, knowledge, discussions, and criticism. As a result, public history products do not have a single, implicit meaning that is recognized by all its users or used and valued in the same way. Users have their own agendas; consumption of (public) history is never passive, but a kind of 'second production' that should be taken seriously. *Public in Public History* offers various interesting insights in that second production.