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Introduction. Being alongside: the practice of collaborative public history

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Abstract:

This is the editors' introduction to a group of three articles on collaborative public history: history that is made with and by, as well as for, a range of public and community actors. We focus on collaboration with members of the public and community groups rather than institutions or people who are working in a professional capacity. In this introduction we use Saima Nasar and Gavin Schaffer's notion of being 'alongside' to describe their positionality as academic 'co-travellers' with their collaborators. The models used here all involve academics working alongside their collaborators in physical and embodied ways, but being alongside also encompasses a political, emotional, empathetic standpoint, that as Nasar and Schaffer note, might involve letting go of a sense of academic critical distance. Being alongside involves working in ways that reject or try to push against hierarchies which often dominate such academic interactions. This way of thinking encapsulates an aspiration and a key question for all of us who are engaged in collaborative public history: how can we work alongside our collaborators in a way that approaches ethically the political, practical and emotional challenges of such work?

Keywords list: public history, collaboration, public engagement, ethics, community

List references of your article: there are no references in this article.

Articles:

Tanya Evans, Jerome de Groot, Matthew Stallard, "'I don't even trust now what I read in history books': family history and the future of co-production and collaboration'

Sarah Lloyd and Gary Rivett, 'Fraught Spaces: The Risks, Challenges and Failures of Collaborative Public Histories'

Gavin Schaffer and Saima Nasar, 'Black Lives and the 'Archival Pulse': The Murder of Neil "Tommy" Marsh and Other Stories'

This special issue brings together three reflections on the practice of collaborative public history: history that is made with and by, as well as for, a range of public and community actors. Our contributors' focus is on collaboration with members of the public and community groups rather than institutions or people who are working in a professional capacity. In putting together this special issue, we were particularly interested in projects which had explored stories which have not been well represented in mainstream public and academic history.¹ However, we have been cautious about using language that suggests that these stories and communities have been silenced, marginalized or untold. As Sarah Lloyd and Gary Rivett point out in their contribution, many of these stories have been told but not been *listened* to. They remain 'under-heard'. What is marginal, invisible or hidden depends on where you are standing – a central task of our contributors here is to reflect on their stance as academic historians, and the shift in perspective afforded by collaborating with colleagues from outside academia.

As we reviewed the papers, we were struck by Gavin Schaffer and Saima Nasar's use of the word 'alongside' to describe their positionality as academic 'co-travellers' with their collaborators. This word seemed to capture a key quality of all the pieces in this special issue: from Tanya Evans, Jerome van de Groot and Matthew Stallard working side by side with family historians in local archives, to Gary Rivett taking a seat with two members of the Sheffield and District African Caribbean Community Association in the large meeting hall of their imposing three-floored building. The models used here all involve academics working alongside their collaborators in physical and embodied ways, but being alongside also encompasses a political, emotional, empathetic standpoint, that as Nasar and Schaffer note, might involve letting go of a sense of academic critical distance. Being alongside involves working in ways that reject or try to push against hierarchies which often dominate such academic interactions, or as Rivett puts it, 'horizontalising' relationships. This way of thinking encapsulates an aspiration and a key question for all of us who are engaged in collaborative public history: how can we work alongside our collaborators in a way that approaches ethically the political, practical and emotional challenges of such work?

The parallel qualities of alongside reflect that fact that the projects described here move away from a model of academic leadership, or a sense that academics are enabling research or helping people to tell their stories. Many of these projects were initiated outside the university, and all of them relied on highly specialised bodies of knowledge beyond academia, from the technical skills of family historians detailed by Evans, de Groot and Stallard to the personal accounts of men in the First World War which destabilize dominant narratives of these men's heroism, discussed by Lloyd. These contributions also highlight how the practices of our collaborators - as well as their knowledge and experience - will often be instructive for the academic. Our profession has a great deal to learn from these collaborations, not

¹ This special issue emerges from a conference organised by the co-editors, in Bristol in January 2019, entitled 'Socially-Engaged Public History: Practice, Ethics and Politics'. Many thanks indeed to all participants and speakers who took part in this event, and helped develop the thinking presented here in this special issue.

least a renewed awareness of our own blind spots and failings. The expertise and practices of our collaborators, and the bodies of knowledge that by their nature sit outside of academic institutions – in their many and varied forms – are central to all these pieces, and have to be a central element of respect in all forms of collaboration.

Yet as our contributors point out, such collaborations are also fraught with long-term asymmetries of power, structural inequalities and historical trauma.² Academics – like other representatives of institutions – have historically failed to serve communities disadvantaged by race, class and socio-economic inequalities, or to recognise the expertise within these communities. Listening emerges as a key challenge here – how can we as collaborators become better listeners, and can purposeful and empathic listening begin to dismantle justified mistrust? Schaffer and Nasar's work points to the importance of long-term, sustainable relationships to create the conditions in which this listening can happen.³ As Rivett points out, personal and often uncomfortable reflection on when things go 'wrong' as well as 'right' is crucial to better, more ethical collaborations. And as Lloyd shows, listening doesn't just mean hearing, but understanding, acknowledging and acting on what is being said.

Readers may be wondering why – given our emphasis on listening – only academic voices are represented in this special issue. Have we inadvertently fallen into old habits of academic navel-gazing, leaving our co-travellers by the wayside? It is true that a different kind of publication might have brought together academic and non-academic collaborators to reflect together. Nevertheless, the fast-developing nature of this field means that there is also an important place for methodological reflection. Only by reflecting on the challenges and failures of our past projects can we develop a better and more ethical practice for future work. It is up to us as academics to do this work better, to learn from what has and hasn't worked, and indeed to know when academic input is not helpful or needed. Whilst we should listen when our collaborators tell us we're getting things wrong, it's not up to them to figure out how an academic should and should not work in these spaces, or where and how academics should position themselves. As editors, we observed that it was not always easy for authors to attend to their own role in such collaborative public history, fearing that foregrounding this would result in 'making it all about them'. Our contributors have navigated this tension skillfully, and in very different ways: Lloyd and Rivett raise nuanced questions about affect and emotion; Evans, de Groot and Stallard explore the impact and potential of their shared research practice; Schaffer and Nasar navigate their collaborative landscape with tact and sensitivity. This spectrum of different modes of reflection illustrates the varied paths to undertaking this kind of collaborative work. It is often messy and complicated; separating out 'we' and 'them' of collaborative projects often doesn't make sense in itself, and within an idea of being alongside is often the hope of dissolving some of these boundaries. Being alongside requires collaboration, respect for expertise and listening – but can take very different forms.

² These challenges have been researched and documented by the Common Cause project, whose report is essential reading for all universities and academics seeking to collaborate ethically and effectively with the widest range of people outside academia. For more information, see <https://www.commoncauseresearch.com/report/> (accessed 11 August 2021).

³ Of course, it's also worth noting that to ensure the success of such collaborations, academics must also be well supported in the difficult emotional work that such partnerships can involve. Recent guidelines produced by Jessica Hammett et al are valuable here. See <https://researcherwellbeing.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/> (accessed 11 August 2021).

