

I AM History:

The Way **Public History Embraces Inclusion**
in Today's **Social and Political Climates**

BY DINA A. BAILEY



2017 Women's March
on Washington at
L'enfant Metro Station

Tobi Voigt

Editor's
Note:

*This is the
theme article for the
2017 AASLH Annual
Meeting. The Program and
Host Chairs and AASLH staff put a*

significant amount of time into drafting the theme to make it resonate widely across the field. Because we know not everyone can make it to the meeting each year, each spring beginning in 2008, we have included an article in History News about our upcoming annual meeting theme. To learn more about the 2017 meeting and theme, please go to: <http://about.aaslh.org/am-theme>.

History is action personified. History is relevant. History is each of us. Every second that passes becomes a part of history. And, as individuals, we participate in historical moments every day. That said, some historical moments make more of an impact on our consciences than others. We usually know these moments because they are attached to

sentences like, "I remember exactly where I was when President Kennedy/Martin Luther King Jr./Malcolm X was assassinated" or "I remember exactly what I was doing when I learned the Twin Towers had been attacked." Those experiences change our lives forever; they influence how we see others, how we vote, what we value, and how we perceive the world around us. And too often, these events are marked by tragedy.



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Visitors at Monticello participating in its "Hamilton Tour Takeovers."

ing collections, developing programs, and building advocacy statements to support funding for programs and agencies that have been influential in ensuring that we can continue to be stewards of history and culture. Fifty years from now, those who see these collections may say, "I remember where I was when the Women's March happened."

I, and more than forty fellow history professionals, was in Austin, Texas, at the 2017 program committee meeting choosing the sessions for the program of the 2017 AASLH Annual Meeting. We discussed the many interpretations of the meeting theme, *I AM History*. We introduced ourselves by sharing an example of how we each are an important part of history. Examples ranged from advancements in communications—growing up with a party line and/or rotary phones—to witnessing Vietnam War-era protest marches, to an acknowledgment of the joy of CDs versus streaming music. Through these

examples, we shared the big and small ways that we have each been active participants in history; we recognized these moments as simultaneously unifying and uniquely personal.

To fully embrace the inclusive nature of history is to embrace the idea that each of us has "our" moment and each of us is entitled to an acknowledgment of that moment. *I AM History* embraces and celebrates the continuing journey of the United States towards an increase in inclusion. It asks us to consider how we take obstacles and turn them into opportunities. It challenges us to tell the extraordinary stories of *all* people in *all* places. It compels us to review our missions, visions, and strategic plans to ensure our organizations will remain relevant as our communities and their needs grow ever more diverse. And it prompts us to be more flexible, more responsive, and more adamant in supporting the transformative power of truth, transparency, and integrity.

The theme, *I AM History*, can be transformative for our field. In order to do so, we need to embrace the theme's depth and breadth and use it for the good of our organizations, our communities, our field, and our nation. It is a tall order, but not an impossible one. First, we must ask ourselves who history belongs to and how it connects each individual to a larger story. Within our field, we have both the platform and the responsibility to usher in

With these events often come choices. Both "sides" can choose to become bitter and filled with frustration and hatred, or we can choose to find the courage to see past the immediate fears and hurts and discomforts in order to embrace the values of compassion, empathy, and understanding. That is not to say that frustration and anger cannot or should not be a part of the process; they often are, but we can't allow ourselves get stuck there. The values of compassion, empathy, and understanding are essential to embracing inclusion in today's social and political climates. And inclusion is essential in ensuring a country (and a world) where the United States Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals guide us to be engaged and informed global citizens. I use global citizen because now, more than ever, we live in a global community and what one individual does, what one group of people does, and what one nation does affects everyone in the world to some degree. We are tied to each other's successes, challenges, and failures. We can't afford to be isolationists; and, really, it's just not possible anymore (if it ever truly was).

History is reflected in the (global) connections that link together people's daily participation in historical moments. On January 21, 2017, the Women's March on Washington became a global movement. Estimates say that up to 4.5 million people participated in marches around the world. Women and men, boys and girls walked together on all seven continents. They marched because they could. They marched because a lot of women couldn't. They marched because they believe, as I do, that what affects one of us affects all of us. Part of what made the marches so significant was the fact that people around the globe could unite together even as being able to join a march meant something very personal and unique to each individual. It wasn't as simple as one political group marching. It was about people with many different viewpoints. Women's March signs immediately headed to museums across the globe. Museums and historic sites have scrambled to respond through gather-



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new perspectives and critical examinations of America's ever-changing identity. By reorienting history to be more inclusive, more authentic, and more about exploring the boundaries and intersections of how we understand ourselves and our stories within the larger American narrative, we may internalize the very nature of inclusion.

AASLH has embraced four aspirations that align with the principles that undergird *I AM History*.

These ambitions reflect

the organization's values and those of the field it supports. AASLH seeks to:

1. **Promote the relevance of history**
2. **Build diversity and inclusiveness**
3. **Cultivate an experimental and creative spirit**
4. **Increase organizational sustainability and transparency.**¹

These four aspirations support what the association and its members work toward on a daily basis. Through efforts to increase stability and transparency, AASLH desires to encourage greater engagement and trust within its own membership while also acting as a "role model for other nonprofits in the areas of financial decisions, processes, and reporting." In acting transparently and consistently, our communities will more clearly see our members' motives and will increasingly rely on our organizations as stable anchors for community endeavors.

In addition to modeling behaviors in stability and transparency, AASLH also seeks to model "an adaptive and nimble, yet reflective, culture to address change and quickly take advantage of opportunities." The experimental and creative spirit cultivated through this modeling will further open the door to previously unheard voices. It encourages members to search out new ideas and new constituents within their communities. It will also support efforts underway by a number of history organizations to decolonize their operations: from collections, to exhibitions, to thought processes. By supporting informed risk-taking, knowledge-sharing, and imaginative problem-solving, AASLH members will be living through action the idea that *I AM History* embraces an openness for all people to experiment in what it means to be active participants in historical moments.²

The aspiration focused on diversity and inclusiveness further supports the openness the 2017 annual meeting theme fosters. This aspiration "encourages telling the stories that have not been told," promotes partnerships with other organizations that have "successfully developed inclusive policies and programming," and supports building relationships that are based on "mutual trust, balance of power, and recognition of expertise within diverse communities to democratize the historical narrative and sustain the relevance of history

to a rapidly changing demographic." As we continue to coax a greater understanding of the relevance of history in contemporary local, regional, and national decisions, it is imperative that we unite together as a field and as active organizations that embrace the further diversity of our communities and acts of inclusion within our communities.³

Further, as an AASLH aspiration, the promotion of history relevance recognizes the complexity of history and encourages being transparent about the fact that history is often contested. *I AM History* aligns with history relevance in fostering healthy and constructive provocation. And many of the sessions during the annual meeting will provide examples of "history and material culture as the essential shaper of the present and as a context for each individual."⁴

History is relevant because we are continuously impacted by the legacies of past actions and reactions of people. The five C's of historical thinking—change over time, causality, context, complexity, and contingency—constitute one of several methodologies that provide a foundation for recognizing how the past and present are strongly tied to each other. In recognizing how those ties are attached to us in both professional, and perhaps more importantly personal, ways, we have the potential to build individual and collective empathy. The ties may lead to increased community inclusion; they may also showcase the relevance of history.⁵

We saw these principles in action at the 2017 Annual Meeting Program Committee meeting. AASLH received the largest number of session proposals in its history. The amazing depth and breadth of proposals provide strong examples to support both the theme *I AM History* and the AASLH aspirations. Below are examples of sessions that directly correlate to these objectives.

Promote the Relevance of History

"History isn't about dates and places and wars. It's about the people who fill the spaces between them." —Jodi Picoult

HISTORY HAS ITS EYES ON YOU

Public historians can (and should) demonstrate relevance in new and creative ways through popular culture that is already tied to history. In "History Has Its Eyes on You," Stacey Mann and co-presenters will highlight how the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton* uses the intersection of historical and contemporary themes, deliberate inclusivity, collaboration, and a commitment to the highest artistic and intellectual standards to inform and inspire its audiences. While the musical depicts a familiar history, it does so in unfamiliar ways that invite audiences to shift their perspectives. Mann and her colleagues build off these aspects of *Hamilton* to discuss how museums and historic sites can leverage a more inclusive future by striving to diversify their stories and their audiences.

"History Has Its Eyes on You" concentrates on how storytelling can and should engage visitors on emotional and intellectual levels and therefore highlights the power of people, places, and events and the intersection of media

and civic literacy today. Presenters Becky Schlomann of the Indiana Historical Society and Kate Quinn of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology will bring to bear their experiences translating between the languages of education, history, museums, and the arts and using the power of experimentation, collaboration, and innovation to support history relevance. And Steve Light of Monticello will explore how history institutions are expected to demonstrate relevance to new audiences by connecting the institution's history to modern day issues and legacies.

Together, Mann, Schlomann, Quinn, and Light will emphasize how entertainment and historical rigor are not mutually exclusive and can be leveraged together to engage audiences in compelling ways. They want to consider what “hooks” audiences into the narratives within our organizations while examining how and when to respond nimbly (yet responsibly) to popular culture. Ultimately, they want those who attend this session to gain confidence in demonstrating history's relevance in response to contemporary pop culture phenomena.

Build Diversity and Inclusiveness

“I know there is strength in the differences between us. I know there is comfort where we overlap.” —Ani DiFranco

DESIGNING FOR OUTRAGE

With a focus on diversity and inclusion, Suzanne Seriff, Senior Lecturer, University of Texas at Austin, and colleagues illuminate the need to push boundaries, to engage in issues of oppression and injustice in traditional and non-traditional museum spaces. Seriff and her colleagues will demonstrate how “Designing for Outrage” examines the systemic and often unconscious practice of ignoring issues of exclusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our field and how we should “legitimate, celebrate, and engage the voices of histories, art, and actions of people who have so often gone unheard and unseen.”⁶

Prior to the Austin conference Seriff, Scott, and Lau issued a strong call for designing for outrage in *Exhibition* magazine. “The common cause and vision for twenty-first-century museums,” they declared, “involves a more confrontational, immediate, and disruptive exhibition discourse about issues that matter in our lives.” Productive dialogues, they maintain, converge on the intersection

of outrage and hope in order to responsibly confront contemporary injustices; as a matter of fact, they insist that outrage *is* hope and that strategies should begin with this premise.⁷

Seriff and co-presenters Jennifer Scott, Barbara Lau, and Yolanda Chávez Leyva will demonstrate how to extend invitations to co-create exhibition experiences for individuals who do not officially “count” in our American democracy: those who are incarcerated, undocumented, underage, and/or unemployed. They will highlight the many ways institutions can create activist spaces of engagement around issues of oppression and injustice. Leyva will also share her approach to using history and culture as tools for social change as well as in imparting her experience in projects related to women's advocacy, community organizing, creating safe spaces for women, and providing programming for disenfranchised youth and their families. Ultimately, the session will not just reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion, but it will critically explore the outrage that can come with the systemic exclusion of some voices from American institutions.⁸

“Designing for Outrage” offers less traditional, but important, strategies to build diversity and inclusion in communicating practical tools and strategies to engage visitors, employ disruption and controversy as tools of engagement, and prepare staff and administration to authentically host a place of disruption without becoming coopted, sanitized, or shut down.

Cultivate an Experimental and Creative Spirit

“You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.” —Maya Angelou

INNOVATIVE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT FROM OUTSIDE THE MUSEUM BUBBLE

Often looking outside of the public history field brings to the fore experimental and creative ideas (and research) that benefit our field immeasurably. This should be an active, not passive, activity. As institutions of cultural trust, we have the responsibility to engage and amplify new perspectives and critical examinations of historical narratives and events.

To do so, organizations must find ways to expand connections with audiences and should design experiences to be more inclusive, more authentic, and more willing to challenge

History is reflected in the connections made through participation in historical moments such as the January 21, 2017 Women's March on Washington.

boundaries. Identifying and implementing powerful ideas from outside our field strengthens our ability to engage our visitors. Facilitators will utilize examples from humanitarian organizations, public radio, journalism, and others to focus on techniques and methods that effectively connect story, content, and experiences with audiences in innovative ways.

In “Innovative Audience Engagement from Outside the Museum Bubble,” Andrea Jones of Peak Experience Lab, Stacia Kuceyeski of the Ohio History Connection, and Beth Maloney at Baltimore Museum of Industry will explore the concept of engagement in twenty-first-century history organizations. They noted complexity in the increased recognition that visitors often arrive with intersecting identities (for example: gay and Puerto Rican/African American) and that our institutions are also often intersectional (a museum, community center, school, or event space). As the field becomes more comfortable with intersectionality, they posit, it can and should expand the definition of what museums and historic sites can (and should) be.

As history organizations continue to compete for leisure time, searching for innovative strategies is imperative. And, in the spirit of change, there must also come a spirit of risk-taking and letting go of the fear of failure. This session reveals techniques to improve informal, transformational learning experiences and encourages engagement strategies that lead to feelings of empowerment and permission to experiment. As those great museum philosophers *The Golden Girls* once opined, “If you take chances in life, sometimes good things happen and sometimes bad things happen; but, if you don’t take a chance, nothing happens.”

Sustainability and Transparency

“Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.”

—Mother Teresa

COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Sometimes looking outside the field just means looking to our “sister” organizations in the cultural heritage world: in this case, libraries and archives. Gathering together with intentionality to collectively pursue learning is an extremely effective tool. Such was the case with a group of library, archive, and museum professionals who joined together in the Collective Wisdom Project.

In this session, Stephanie Allen of the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza and her peers from the Collective Wisdom Project will relate their experiences with the program and share how a dedicated cohort of library, archive, and museum professionals generated solutions for cultural heritage that focus on productive collaborations, cross-sector professional development, and continuing education needs for practitioners. They will address issues of structural barriers, diversity and inclusion, sustainability, education, and other topics that emerged as important to our organizations and professionals.

Allen, Darla Wegener of the Tulare County (CA) Library, and Susan Irwin of the Arizona Historical Society will share

conclusions and experiences from conversations between library, archive, and museum professionals in a way that will encourage further understanding and action across the sectors. In learning about current structural barriers and cross-sector collaborations, session participants will be able to brainstorm additional ideas for future collaborations and projects between libraries, archives, and museums. And through investigating the overall organizational cultures of these institutions, they will critically explore how we currently work across sectors and how we might better do so in the future. This exploration ultimately factors into how we can become more aware, engaged, and collaborative in seeking funding for a wide variety of professional development and continuing education opportunities. As Genna Duplisea, a fellow cohort member, said, “We all believe in celebrating and preserving a wide array of cultures and knowledges; we all believe in safeguarding the things and spaces we steward; we all believe in reaching users/communities/patrons—people.” Acknowledging and using this collective wisdom unites us, bringing more stability and transparency across a number of fields.

These examples all highlight AASLH’s guiding principles and the meeting theme, *I AM History*. Countless others do as well. I encourage you to consider history relevance, diversity and inclusion, creativity, and sustainability in your own work.

And more than anything, do not forget that history is about the actions people take. The 2017 Annual Meeting theme, *I AM History*, acknowledges that it is the awesomeness of personal participation in the big and small moments that makes the history profession such an amazing field to be a part of. The way we see the world is what makes us good at what we do. And the more we see history as always complex and often contested, the better stewards we will be.

Adversity can bring people together just as often as it tears people apart. Where there is adversity, there is also hope, determination, and activism. So, as we live each day in these precious historical moments, let us see with renewed clarity. Let us not be afraid to take action, coming together in the spirit of inclusion and always remembering that what makes America great is the complexity of our history, the passion of our people, and the diversity in our culture. ●



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¹ Katherine Kane, “AASLH Aspirations,” *Broadside*, September 29, 2015, <http://blogs.aaslh.org/aaslh-aspirations/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives on History*, January 2007, <http://go.aaslh.org/5C's>.

⁶ Suzanne Seriff, “Designing for Outrage: How to Create Activist Architectures for Disruption, Engagement, and Action around Issues of Oppression and Injustice in Our Time,” 2017 AASLH Annual Meeting session proposal.

⁷ Barbara Law, Jennifer Scott, and Suzanne Seriff, “Designing for Outrage: Inviting Disruption and Contested Truth into Museum Exhibitions,” *Exhibition* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2017).

⁸ Ibid.