

KNOWING YOUR PUBLIC(S): THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AUDIENCES IN PUBLIC HISTORY

Michelle A. Hamilton and Jean-Pierre Morin, Co-Chairs of the 2013 Program Committee



From April 17 to 20th, 2013, the National Council on Public History (NCPH) will return to Canada to hold its annual meeting with its joint host, the newly established International Federation for Public History. The NCPH meeting model is unlike most historical conferences in Canada, and in addition to the typical panel sessions, it includes hands-on skill-based workshops; working groups which begin discussions before the conference and often produce a best practices or policy paper; a THAT Camp (The Humanities and Technology Camp), a digital ‘unconference’ workshop; a free public plenary; formal networking opportunities for graduate students and new professionals; two minute Lightning Talks which showcase digital projects; a poster session; Dine Arounds which pair facilitated discussion with dinner; and tours of the city and Ottawa museums. Together, the joint conference offers four packed days with over sixty sessions and over twenty tours, workshops, and special events.

The NCPH (www.ncph.org) was established in 1979 to represent the growing number of historians who practiced their craft outside of academia, the result of the declining number of university teaching positions in the 1970s. Practitioners of “public history,” a term coined by Robert Kelley, both a consultant and an historian at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), decided they needed an organization which addressed the challenges of their field and created a professional identity for its members. Kelley and his UCSB colleague G. Wesley Johnson, both of whom had been teaching public history to graduate students at UCSB since 1976, were fundamental to the establishment of the NCPH and of the journal *The Public Historian*.

Today NCPH “inspires public engagement with the past and serves the needs of practitioners in putting history to work in the world by building community among historians, expanding professional skills and tools, fostering critical reflection on historical practice, and publicly advocating for history and historians” (National Council on Public History website <http://ncph.org/cms/>). Its membership is diverse, consisting not only of university scholars and graduate students, but also historical consultants, policy makers and government historians, museum and archives professionals, teachers, parks and cultural resource managers, and film and media producers.

NCPH has visited Canada only three times in three decades, once in 1983 hosted by the Master’s program in Public History at the University of Waterloo, in 2001 in Ottawa, and in 2004 in

Victoria with the American Society for Environmental History. In 2009, NCPH members established a Task Force for the Internationalization of Public History in order to explore how to expand the boundaries of the discipline and make greater connections with public historians outside the United States. This Task Force transformed into the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) and is now an internal commission of the International Committee for the Historical Sciences/Comité international des sciences historiques). IFPH aims to create international linkages between public historians and to promote the development of a worldwide network of practitioners (International Federation for Public History website <http://www.publichistoryint.org/wordpress/>) With over 150 Public History university programs worldwide, it is time for an international examination of the field.

The 2013 joint NCPH/IFPH conference centres on the theme of “audience,” and how historians serve, shape, respond to, collaborate with, and even exclude, the public. From historical podcasting to commemorating the War of 1812 to engaging with dangerous histories, the planned sessions are methodological and topical, theoretical and practical. Because of IFPH’s involvement, the conference will be truly international. In addition to American presenters, there are almost 100 participants from Canada, Europe, India, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. Many sessions use a comparative national approach to examine the conference theme.

Our public plenary features Vittorio Marchis, a radio broadcaster and a professor from the Politecnico di Torino, who will conduct a ‘machine autopsy,’ an engaging performance in which he analyzes and deconstructs the techno-anatomy of an object. Accompanied by video clips and a lecture assistant who will read aloud from various texts (as was the practice in classic 18th- and 19th-century anatomy lectures), Marchis will invite the audience to consider how embedded we are in technology. John Milloy of Trent University and the Director of Research, Historical Records and Report Preparation for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), will deliver the keynote address. The TRC was established to document the Indian residential school system and promote awareness to all Canadians of the experiences of those who attended these schools. With the TRC almost at the end of its mission, Milloy will thoughtfully reflect on its role and legacies.

Other unique sessions include a screening of the CHA’s affiliated Canadian Committee on Public History’s 2012 award winning project, “*The Oldest Profession in Winnipeg: The ‘Red Light’ District of 1909-1912,*” a documentary about the history of prostitution; international panels about museums and reproductive rights, interpreting cultural landscapes, and the



significant budget cuts and reorganizations within Parks Canada, Library and Archives Canada, and other related federal institutions. For students and young professionals, the ever popular Speed Networking returns, and new this year is a session called “What Employers Seek in Public History Graduates.” Hands-on workshops this year explore social media, oral history, material culture, and the writing of historical landmark nominations.

We are excited to be able to bring such a diverse and international slate of conference sessions and activities to Canadian public history scholars and practitioners. The full program is available for perusal here: <http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2013-Annual-Meeting-Program-Web.pdf>. See you in Ottawa!

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upcoming centenary of World War One; working groups on teaching public and digital history; and a Digital Drop-In which provides expert advice on digital humanities projects. Those interested in the history of Aboriginal peoples will not want to miss the panel on the challenges of litigation-driven research which pairs lawyers, scholars, expert witnesses and consultants across North America.

Everyone concerned about budget cuts and changing government directions in history, museums and heritage will want to attend the comparative session which explores these issues regarding Parks Canada and the US National Park Service, and a roundtable hosted by the CHA entitled “After the Cuts: The Future of History in Canada”. This roundtable, organised by the CHA/SHC and made up of senior historians, archeologists, archivists and anthropologists, will assess the shifting landscape of historical work in Canada in the wake of

