

National Council on Public History Presidential Address

Finding Connections

Alexandra M. Lord

Several years ago, in my first job as a public historian, I was invited to give a talk at Ellis Island. When I told my mother about the invitation, she burst into tears. For her, the idea that I had been invited to speak at Ellis Island was a vindication of her parents' decision to leave a small village in northern Greece for the promise of the United States. My grandmother, a marginally literate peasant, would, my mother said, have been amazed to know that her granddaughter would not only have a PhD but would one day stand in the place where she had first set foot in America to talk about the experiences of people like her.

Intrigued and, I'll confess, somewhat amused by my mother's response, I hung up the phone and told my African American colleague about my invitation. Like my mother, my colleague waxed enthusiastic about the event. Stressing the power of Ellis Island, Sheena told me it was one of her favorite places in the United States.

I was both surprised and not surprised by Sheena's comment. Throughout our friendship, she and I had engaged in multiple conversations about what had drawn us to the study of history and the ways in which our identities had shaped—and not shaped—our decision to become historians.

When I teasingly told Sheena that Ellis Island was my place because of my grandmother's experience, she tapped me lightly on the shoulder and said "Ellis Island is my

story; it is your story. Being a slave is my story; it is your story. Being a slave owner is my story; it is your story. We are Americans. These are our shared stories and they are central to our identity, regardless of the experiences of our own ancestors. We need to grapple with these stories together and as a nation, we need to come together to tell and understand these stories.”

Now it was my turn to become teary.

It has been more than ten years since Sheena told me this but I think about her comments frequently. They pose a challenge to us, a challenge that is at the heart of what being a historian entails. This challenge requires us to seek out and understand the experiences of people who were not like us—and to use that knowledge to understand not only who we are today but also the roots of many of the issues we currently face. This is not an easy task. It may be a cliché but the past is indeed a foreign country and understanding the experiences of people whose world differed so much from ours is incredibly difficult.

Yet for many of us what drew us to history was precisely that desire to understand the lives of people who *were* very different from us. My own experiences in this regard are probably not very different from that of many of you—the details differ, of course, but the basic realities remain. Like many of you, I fell in love with history through stories. As a child, I loved reading books such as *The All-of-a Kind Family* series—the story of a Jewish family of all girls growing up on the Lower East Side during the early twentieth century (I am a Christian). As I grew, I turned to books that wrestled with more difficult issues such as those by Mildred Taylor about the African American Logan family’s struggles in the Deep South during the Depression (I am white). I wept over Yoshiko Uchida’s books about a Japanese American family in California in the 1930s (my ancestors were Greek, DutchVlach, and English). My list of books about American history that changed my life is too long to list here, or anywhere. It’s enough, I think,

to say, that as a very shy child, I loved nothing better than curling up with a book about people from “long ago.”

But I also loved books that took me out of my own country—pushing me to look at non-American history. I had a godmother who had joined a commune, and throughout my childhood, she frequently sent me books about Buddhism. Rifling through the pictures in these books led me to think and wonder about the very different world of long-ago Nepal. I was equally fascinated by Katherine Patterson’s books about medieval Japan. But I was especially drawn to books about Britain in the sixteenth century. This was a period when several European countries, ranging from France to Scotland to England to substantial parts of the Netherlands, were all ruled or controlled by women. In 1970s America, this was a very foreign country indeed! (It’s still a foreign country, to a degree that would have shocked many of the feminists of the 1970s.) I loved to imagine myself befriending Elizabeth Tudor when she was imprisoned by her older sister (having two older sisters myself, I imagined I knew exactly what Elizabeth was experiencing).

Historical fiction or, more simply, the telling of stories sometimes gets a bad rap among historians and often for good reason, but historical fiction can instill in us a great deal of empathy for people in the past. Great or even just good fiction writers, unlike historians, can use their imaginations in ways that historians cannot to show differing perspectives. In doing so, they encourage us to see the world from different viewpoints—and that latter ability is, I think, central to being a historian.

When I entered graduate school, I faced the challenge of seeing and understanding things from varied perspectives as I sought to understand the past of a foreign country. My degree is in early modern European history, with a special focus on Britain. Spending nearly two years doing

archival research in Britain confirmed its “otherness” for me. It is not just Britain’s past that is foreign; Britain itself is foreign. Yet for all that, what fascinated me the more I studied Britain was how it provided an odd refraction of the United States, its culture, and its history. For example, as I studied British medical history, I found myself intrigued by the question of why, despite sharing many aspects of a medical tradition, Britain wound up with socialized medical care while we did not.

Studying another country led me to step outside the United States, to see it from a different perspective, and to ask some basic questions about how we have thought about our own history. Why do American histories typically begin in the wake of 1492, leaving precontact history to archaeologists? Why do Americans not discuss, more candidly and more consistently, the history of America’s empire? Why, despite everything, do we Americans still cling to the idea that our history is unique and different—even when there are obvious parallels to other countries in terms of our complex past? It was interesting and provocative to realize that even when I was studying another nation’s history and a different culture, I was thinking about my own nation’s history.

Broadening Definitions

I think this is why I have spent so much time as a public historian talking about the need for us to broaden the scope of public history—to ensure that it is not limited to American history and to encourage us to talk to our colleagues in other countries as well as our colleagues here in the United States who study different cultures. The more we know about other histories and cultures, the more we can see our own country’s past from a different perspective. We talk often about the United States as an immigrant nation as well as a nation to which enslaved peoples from other countries were forcibly brought, but we Americans often know little about the history

of these other countries and the complex ways in which those other histories and cultures have shaped us. Studying these other histories reminds us that we always have been global citizens and that our identity is built on and reflects other cultures. Doing public history—doing history of any type—requires us to know both American and non-American history.

But I would also argue, and have long argued, that we need not only to broaden the geographic scope of public history, but also to broaden the definition of public history itself. I came to public history from a very un-public history background: having received my PhD from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the 1990s, I'm the product of a very conventional academic PhD program. When I attended my first NCPH conference, I felt somewhat out of place. I had been a practicing public historian for several years, having left academia to become a historian for the United States Public Health Service. People welcomed me and I was greatly impressed by the friendly nature of the conference. Yet I was surprised when I sometimes came up against narrow definitions of public history, definitions that left people like me out of the equation because they emphasized a degree or coursework in the field. So even as the number of degree programs in public history rises, we need to be careful about how we define public history and its practitioners. I would like to advocate for our adopting a much broader definition of this term. It is always tempting to create and maintain narrow definitions of our field. This is, after all, part of professionalization. But narrow definitions and gates and boundaries, to be frank, limit and damage our profession in the long run.

Broadening the definition of what public history entails and who practices public history is crucial because, as we know, many people do public history but do not define themselves as such. In the seventeen years in which I have been a historian with the federal government, I have been surrounded by colleagues who do public history—who work as federal historians, curators,

interpreters, museum educators, and preservationists. The vast majority of these people do not define themselves as public historians. While I have seen this most powerfully in my own day-to-day encounters with colleagues, this is true everywhere in the field. Regardless of their work, many interpreters at historic sites, education staff at museums, creators of community-based historical projects, curators, and historians who engage in policy discussions do not see themselves as public historians. When I have asked these historians why this is so, many have shrugged and said that because they do not have a degree in the field, they fear that others would not categorize them as such. Still others have said that because they wear many hats in their jobs, they worry that historians whose duties and work focuses solely on history would dismiss their work. Others, such as colleagues at places like the Holocaust Museum, have said that as non-American historians they do not feel that discussions about public history allow a place for them. Their reasoning shows just some of the perceived barriers that limit our profession. As we think about our profession and the structure of public history, we need to be cognizant of the fact that an aggressively inclusive culture is crucial if we want to have a truly broad and meaningful discussion about public history, what it is, who practices it and why, and even its limitations.

This also means including many of our colleagues in the academy who may not define themselves as public historians but who interact with or do work aimed at the public. This work may range from a history project that entails collaboration with a local community to writing for the public. I realize this last category is something that many public historians traditionally do not characterize as public history; there is a tendency to see these kinds of historians as “public intellectuals” rather than as publicly engaged historians. This past year and a half has demonstrated the need for historians to become involved in our national discourse at many different levels and in many different places. As we open up discussions about difficult histories,

both here in the United States and abroad, we historians must engage with the general public at all levels.

Although the events of the past year, including a growing willingness to discuss the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, emphasize the need to engage a wide array of historians in a public discussion about history, this need has always been there. In 2004, when I was first thinking about how to engage with the public, I read a *Washington Post* article that covered a national history conference being held in Washington, DC. Published less than a year after we invaded Iraq, the headline to this article asked: “Historians Talk about War but Is Anyone Listening?”¹ As the nation settled in for what any historian would have known would be a long war in a country whose history and culture were unknown to most Americans, historians needed to become actively engaged—and this included historians of diplomacy, historians of the Middle East, and American historians. But little in our professional culture enabled us to respond quickly and to engage directly with the public, whether doing something as simple as writing a piece for a newspaper or creating an open community-wide forum to discuss these ideas. Add in our tendency to draw lines among ourselves—a failure that means that those of who do routinely speak to the public do not aggressively work to create a culture that prioritizes *all* historians participating in public debate—and we historians fail to engage in a range of important national discussions. Welcoming and encouraging our academic colleagues to see themselves here at NCPH or even more simply as public historians—active scholars doing work that engages with and is of interest and value to the public—is crucial if our profession is to thrive. And by profession, I don’t mean the profession of public historians but rather the historical profession as a whole. In many ways, what I am advocating is for all historians to see themselves and their

¹ Bob Thompson, “Lessons We May Be Doomed to Repeat: American Historians Talk about War, but Is Anyone Listening?,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2004.

work as having a public angle and for NCPH and those of us who already define ourselves as public historians to create a culture in which it is possible for all historians to aspire to engage with the public and to see themselves not only doing this work but growing in their understanding of how to best approach it.

In the absence of a broad definition of public history, many historians, whether in the field or in the academy, will not see themselves as doing public history. Unfortunately, by leaving these practitioners out of the discussion, our conversations and our work are not as broad or as rich as they can be. If we want to promote nuanced and difficult histories—and I would argue that this is, and always has been, the paramount task facing historians—we need not only to step up to do this work ourselves but also to encourage our colleagues to join us.

How Do We Enable Public History Venues to Tell a Broader Story?

In recent years, we historians have come to recognize that our histories are incomplete and poorly done when we do not incorporate diverse voices. We still have significant work to do in this area and we face structural hurdles in doing this work even when we have the best of intentions. I am not sure how we can address these hurdles, but the questions they present are at the heart of public history. What do we do when we step into a position at a museum, preservation program, or a historic site created during a time of intense prejudice? What does it mean to be the face of an institution like that, as you work to change it to make it more inclusive? How do you fund raise and justify the existence of an institution even as you critique it for its terrible past? Or for government employees, how do you appease the politicians who fund your program precisely because they love its troubled legacy even as you work to overthrow that exact same legacy to make the story more inclusive? Whether we want to

acknowledge it or not, public history requires funding and political support. Finding that support so that we can change these institutions requires that we walk a fine line.

As divisions grow in our country, this problem will only become more and more difficult for us. It may also unintentionally lead to the demise of some older historical sites and museums. Perhaps some of these institutions deserve to die, but I suspect that what they really deserve is to have their interpretation changed to become more inclusive. At the National Park Service, when reviewing sites designated as national historic landmarks in the 1960s when the program was created, we often felt that the designation was correct but the justification for the nomination was wildly off the mark as it prioritized the wealthy elite while failing even to discuss the poor and/or enslaved who designed, built, worked, and lived at these places. Unfortunately, because the majority of these sites were owned by private organizations, many of which were small and struggling for money, our ability to push for a different interpretation was nonexistent. We could and did advocate for it, of course, but could the organization raise money to change its interpretation among its traditional donors, many of whom were invested in that old interpretation? And if not, could they raise the funds to make this change among the communities that had been disregarded and disrespected by that institution for decades or even centuries? The answer to these questions is “no” as often as it is “yes.”

That said, I can understand the anger of communities that feel change does not occur quickly enough. It is appalling, in many ways, to know that our histories have been not just incomplete but grossly misleading because of ingrained racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice. In that sense, change cannot occur quickly enough—in fact, it is long overdue.

We are now cognizant of the need to do this work and we have begun, with some successes and some failures, to engage in better collaboration. Collaboration is never easy but it

always works best when we listen to one another and when we stop to see other perspectives.

This means recognizing that professional historians don't always have the answers and beginning with respect. Sometimes it also means simply being courageous by being willing to confront a problem and to face a community's anger. For me, when I worked at the National Park Service, going into a community as a representative of the federal government when the federal government has failed and even betrayed that community for decades or even centuries was extremely difficult.

But collaboration could and did shift the conversation. On our part, we needed to do a better job of listening to and understanding how different populations viewed their own history but we also needed to do a better job explaining the legacy of the fifty-year-old national historic landmarks program that was developed and first implemented in a segregated world. Providing that explanation could better inform discussions about how that troubling legacy might be shifted. Similarly, listening to communities and hearing their thoughts on the problems they faced as well as their ideas about possible solutions was obviously central to the conversation. Sometimes, and this gets at the limitations of public history, this entailed discovering that a neighborhood's need for clean water or broadband access outstripped their desire to retain the integrity of a historic site.

Doing good and inclusive history within the context of complex laws, regulations, and intense pressure from congressional legislators who vote on funding for your program is never easy and it is always significantly more complicated in practice than in theory. Change does not occur quickly in the federal government (this is, as the past year has demonstrated, not a bad thing), and undoing the tangled legacy of choices made in Jim Crow America in a way that truly transforms our understanding of our past and enables us to tell complex and nuanced stories

takes extraordinary effort. Doing this work—listening to communities, researching their history with them, going back again to listen to the communities—and developing real projects that can make a difference can be incredibly satisfying.

Globalizing Our History

If we have begun to listen to more of our fellow Americans when thinking about our history, I would argue that we still have a fair way to go when we think about the need to listen to voices outside of our own country.

This past fall I attended a public history conference in China that included public historians from many different countries. It was, however, very much a Chinese history conference, and as such, it was revealing for me as an American historian. First, the Chinese historians who had organized the conference viewed it as China's first public history conference. An international public history conference had been held in China previously, but it was clear to me that the Chinese had not seen that event as their conference—a comment that was revealing about how some Chinese historians thought about international conferences, audiences, and their own role in creating places where public history could and should be discussed.

In many ways, the conference I attended felt very welcoming to me because it was dominated by traditionally trained Chinese academics who were still feeling their way toward public history. This has been my own path, and so the papers and conversations that spoke to me asked questions whose answers many American public historians take for granted, such as: What is public history? Who does it? Why should we advocate for it? How do we encourage it?

These are questions that I never tire of—because they are at the heart of the work I do on a daily basis. But I was also intrigued by the discussion about how we can engage with difficult histories. It was fascinating, although not surprising, to listen to an Australian historian discuss

how Australians are grappling with the innumerable monuments to British imperialism that dot their landscape. It was even more provocative to hear him discuss how Australians, many of whom date their own or their families' history in Australia back only a few decades and some of whom date their history there back tens of thousands of years, view prominent historical markers associated with Australian identity such as the military disaster at Gallipoli. Should the nation reassess how it views Gallipoli, he asked, and if so, how should they do this, given that this military disaster has shaped Australian identity for nearly a century? More broadly, his discussion about how individual Australians, many of whom, like most Americans, have mixed ethnic and racial identities, seek to develop a history that reflects this mixing while also exploring and acknowledging the complexities of racism, segregation, war, and violence resonated deeply with me as an American.

As a former British historian, I was especially curious to hear British historians talk about recent efforts in their nation to debate and discuss the complex legacy of African slavery. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britons were always able to distance themselves from African slavery because while people of African descent lived in Britain, this population was small. And, of course, British slavery itself occurred in areas that, while they may have been controlled by the nation, were thousands of miles away from where most Britons lived. This ability of Britons to distance themselves carried into the mid-twentieth century as Britain was, at least until World War II, an overwhelmingly white society, with its ethnic divisions defined in terms of Celts and Anglo-Saxons (and these ethnic divisions reflect a sordid history of prejudice punctuated by wars and violence as well). Encouraging and pushing Britons to see the ways in which their ancestors and their nation were complicit in slavery was, and is, no easy task. It has

become easier in recent decades as Britain has become a multiracial and multiethnic society, but it is still a monumental task.

Of course, the more distance we have on an event, the easier it is for us to discuss. When DNA tests in Iceland indicated that their population was roughly half Celtic and Scandinavian, it shed light on the sordid story of Celtic slavery. Discussing this story, which occurred nearly a thousand years ago and which is reflected in the DNA of almost all Icelandic people, in their national museum presented, I suspect, questions about how Icelandic people feel about their ancestors' complicity in slavery—or their being slaves.²

Confronting Censorship

As we non-Chinese historians spoke about the difficulties of telling complex stories about our nation's past, a silent conversation was also occurring. Every country has a painful past and every country struggles to address it. Some countries, such as Germany in the wake of World War II, have aggressively pushed to confront these difficult pasts. The Germans even have a word for this—*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—which roughly translates to “the struggle to overcome the negatives of the past.” Originally, this term was coined to deal with the need to confront the legacy of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but the term has become broader and also deals with the legacy of the Communist era (a period in which denunciations of one's neighbors was common).³ To their credit, Germans, unlike the Japanese in the wake of World War II or Americans in the wake of the Civil War, have struggled as a nation to address the causes, the meaning, and the extraordinary violence of their nation's past. We can argue about

² Ironically this has also led the Irish to reassess their understanding of who they are and their nation's story of migrations. “Why People in Iceland Look Like Us,” *Irish Times*, October 2, 2000.

³ Peter Wensierski, “East German Snitching Went Far Beyond the Stasi,” *Der Spiegel*, July 10, 2015.

whether they have been successful in doing this or not—but that they have attempted to do this on a significant national scale cannot be disputed.

Americans are still thinking about how to do this. We do not have the same national buy-in that the Germans have had with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (why we would do well to look at how other countries do public history) but this past year has revealed that discussions about our painful past can be brought out into the open. Listening to colleagues from Europe and Asia clarified that other countries are reassessing their histories in ways that are very similar to what we are doing in the United States.

The Chinese approached what we in the West tend to call “difficult histories” very differently from how we in the United States would approach them. We Americans might think of things like the Taiping Rebellion, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Tiananmen Square when we think about the idea of difficult Chinese histories. But while there were multiple discussions over the three-day conference about the Japanese invasion and occupation of China during World War II, an event that was extraordinarily brutal, it was clear that no one was willing to discuss China’s recent history of government brutality or the tensions among China’s diverse ethnic groups. Similarly, no one was prepared to discuss the complicated and painful history of Chinese collaborators during World War II.

The failure to discuss these issues did not stem from people’s ignorance of them. In my discussions with individual Chinese historians, these historians were candid about this history. What was missing was a willingness to engage with this publicly. Americans talk often about censorship—and we do have censorship of a type—but I was suddenly seeing real censorship of the past in action. I had always wondered how people create fictitious pasts, sometimes in order to deliberately “forget” the past. How was it that white southerners and northerners were so able

to forget violence they had witnessed and even in some cases participated in during the antebellum period, the war itself, and Reconstruction? How did people's desire to embrace the mythology of the Lost Cause facilitate this forgetting? What does it mean for a nation and its history when this occurs?

Witnessing the Chinese ignore their past gave me some insight into what had happened in my own country. The Chinese are not alone in doing this. The Polish parliament this winter debated a bill that would punish anyone who studies and openly discusses Polish complicity in the Holocaust with up to three years in prison. The government is pushing to create a completely fictitious past—one that runs counter to the reality of World War II. Although this directive is aimed at controlling scholarship, it will undoubtedly come to shape interpretation at key historic sites that are located in Poland, such as Auschwitz. This practice of quashing academic narratives and rewriting historical interpretation at sites and museums has a long history in countries ranging from Turkey to the former Soviet Union and Russia today—you can see the impact this intentional distortion of history has had at many of these countries' UNESCO sites.

The Chinese historians whom I saw skip over discussions about difficult histories were undoubtedly responding to government censorship. Their reluctance to speak publicly stemmed from very real pressure—and there were undoubtedly nuances in the discussion that I missed either because of translation issues or because of my unfamiliarity with Chinese culture. But the discussion highlighted how nations and people bury their disturbing pasts simply by ignoring them.

Sometimes you do not even need the kind of official censorship Poland and China have. Self-censorship does the work done elsewhere by government censors. The latter form of censorship is something we do constantly here in the United States and something I see

frequently in my own work. If you work for the federal government, you learn pretty early on that the mantra of every federal worker is “how will this play when it hits the front page of the *Washington Post*?” In today’s world of sound bites and rapid social media, we will never have the opportunity to fully correct misinterpretations, nor will we have the opportunity to tell the complex story (and history is always complex!). This makes us cautious, even when we do not need to be. Coming to the Smithsonian as I did three years ago, I see how intense the fallout from the *Enola Gay* controversy remains. It remains intense not only in the museum itself but also outside the museum. During a recent job search, five of the six candidates discussed the *Enola Gay* incident in some depth at their interviews. I am not saying that we should not be aware of this issue. But this controversy occurred nearly twenty-five years ago and our world is quite different from that of 1994. And yet even as I say that, I know that the *Enola Gay* controversy will always hover over the museum; sometimes I think it leads us not only to quash an idea that has the potential to be controversial at its inception but also to avoid raising an idea that might have controversial or troubling aspects to it.

I saw this recently at the museum when we proposed a public program that dealt with the history of vaccination. Anti-vaccinators are and always have been a very tiny minority and yet they speak with a loud voice. Developing an event that explored the history of vaccination evoked a lot of worried discussion, and at times I wondered if we would even do the event. It is a credit to my colleagues that we did this—and it was a fantastic success without any of the protests we had feared. What if our self-censorship had led us to not do the event?

This problem is not unique to my institution. As I wrote this talk, I was fielding questions from a podcast producer who was interested in interviewing my colleague and me about the history of vaccination. The show’s producer asked me about the potential fallout from airing a

show about such a controversial topic. In answering his questions, I recognized his fear regarding a controversy that could damage the podcast series overall. Although I might feel impatient about this producer's hesitancy in questioning a podcast about what I view as a straightforward history, I understand that he is thinking about the future of his program overall. In many ways, this brings us back to those earlier questions about how you can work for an institution, critique its past, and still need to ensure the viability of the institution's future by possibly raising funds among those who endorse that troubling past.

Moving beyond Simple Views of Diversity

Touring Chinese historic sites and museums in the wake of the conference added a layer of complexity to all of this. China's national museum did a good job of showcasing art and culture associated with different Chinese ethnic groups in some ways but there was a superficiality to this diversity. As a museum curator myself, and one who seeks to highlight the stories of a variety of groups in a short exhibit text, I am sympathetic to the daunting task facing Chinese curators and historians. They not only have to cover thousands of years of history at their national sites (something we Americans rarely do when discussing the history of the North American continent) but they also have to discuss and acknowledge the fifty-six recognized ethnic groups in the nation—all while tiptoeing around the idea of ethnic tensions and constructing a history that underscores the idea of Chinese unity. It is a difficult task and yet one that is not too dissimilar to that which confronts us in the United States. How can public historians tell a complex story of many different peoples, many different cultures, many different tensions, and how do we unify that story—and oh yes, how do we do it in a seventy-five-word museum label?

The museums I saw in China led me to ask more questions about how we engage with difficult pasts at museums, in historic sites, in public discussions, and in all of the places where we discuss and think about history—which is pretty much everywhere. Yes, we have begun to reassess our history, and that is an important first step. But the path to reassessing our history is not clearly marked and we can still stumble by failing to acknowledge and publicly expose a wide range of difficult histories. This includes stories that are painful to unearth, such as the story of people who chose to pass as white. How are we to mark and tell these stories? How are we to make them central to our history? How are we to view those who took this path, and how can we ensure that Americans know these stories not only when they encounter them in the classroom but when they are at a historic site or in a museum or when they are thinking about the complexities of America's racial past and present?

Similarly, and this is something I find difficult, how can public historians publicly mark and tell the stories of America's imperial past? We have begun to engage with the history of Puerto Rico, but stories such as our conquest of Guam and the Philippines are neglected—in part because these histories occurred in places that are distant from many, although not all, of us but also because, at least in the case of the Philippines, we push that history onto another nation. For public historians, who like to center their history in terms of place, this can be very easy to do. I would argue that looking at how the British have struggled to engage with and explore their complicity in the global slave trade might provide us with some guidance on how we can prioritize in telling these global stories.

Over the last few years, we have seen people claim that telling these global stories, these more inclusive stories, has resulted in intense identity politics, and this, as some politicians, pundits, and others have told us, is what is driving us apart as a nation. What I have discovered

and I am sure many of you have discovered in your work is that the more we tell these global and inclusive stories, the more we see our connections. As a medical historian, I tend to be a science junky and I am fascinated by how DNA is rewriting our understanding of our families' hidden pasts, bringing centuries-old secrets to the forefront. Recently, the *Washington Post* has run a series of stories that illustrate how the more we know about the past, particularly the painful aspects of this past, the more we see our connections.

The first was a story about “white” Americans who discovered that they had African American ancestry.⁴ I have seen this story play out multiple times, as I am sure you have, with people discovering that their own ancestors were people whom they saw as “the other.” At the same time, as I was reading and sharing this article with my African American neighbor, she was telling me about her discovery of her white ancestry and what this means for her own understanding of and feelings about the past. When I expressed surprise that she had been shocked to discover her white ancestry (it seemed fairly evident to me as a historian), she explained that as an African American girl growing up in Alabama in the 1950s, the color line was so great that she never even dared to ask about this issue. Now, she was asking these kinds of questions—both by researching her own family tree and through DNA testing. We historians speak often of rewriting the narrative and shifting interpretation at historic sites and museums. We also need to be cognizant of the fact that historical narratives are being rewritten every day on a small scale as Americans discover and reassess their own family histories.

Sometimes, too, we discover that the stories we have historically viewed as so important collapse when we truly investigate them, and this, too, can lead to a reassessment of who we are and what our past means. In my own family's story, my grandfather was always defined by his

⁴ Tara Bahrapour, “They Considered Themselves White, but DNA Tests Told a More Complex Story,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 2018.

Vlach heritage. The Vlachs are a nomadic group indigenous to the Balkans; they speak their own language and are often seen as outsiders in most Balkan countries. There are multiple stories about their origins. But when my siblings and I put aside nationalistic mythologies to look at this more deeply, we discovered that evolving scholarship sees the Vlachs as differing little, genetically, linguistically, and even culturally, from their Balkan neighbors. This is not to deny their unique cultural and historical identity—Vlachs, whether people like me and my siblings or people who currently live in the Balkans, will always see themselves as having their own distinct culture and history. But rather it is to push for a wider understanding that, even as this group deviated from the mainstream by being nomadic, by speaking a different language, and by identifying themselves and being identified by others as different, their story, their culture, and their history are no less valid than the stories, cultures, and histories of their neighbors. If someone from the Balkans can see unity through a more in-depth look at the past, there is hope for all of us, in terms of how historical knowledge can transform our understanding of who we are.

As we reassess our identities and our past, we discover multiple connections like this. Another recent *Washington Post* article explored the connections between a white and African American family, both of which were related to the infamous slave trader Isaac Franklin.⁵ Franklin was one of the partners in the nation’s largest slave-trading firm. For the white family, discovering their relationship to Isaac Franklin was, as one member put it, “like [discovering] we descended from Hitler.” Younger family members were horrified to uncover a secret that many older members in the family had known and kept hidden. Even as this family was coming to terms with its history, their African American Franklin relatives were using genealogical

⁵ Patricia Sullivan, “‘Like We Descended from Hitler’: Coming to Terms with a Slave-trading Past,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 2018.

databases to find and share with them their families' stories. So, at the same time that the white Franklins were discovering their slaveholding ancestor, they were also meeting their African American cousins.

Josiah Wedgwood's image of an African American man asking "Am I not a Brother?" posed a question that he and his contemporaries saw as metaphorical. But our nation's history is indeed one in which family members sold their brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, and cousins. This is a global story—one that stretches across continents and that has parallels to those that played out in other countries. But it is not only the story of slavery, immigration, and forced migrations that are global stories highlighting our connections. All of our histories are, as my colleague Sheena pointed out, my story and your story. They are our shared stories as both Americans and global citizens. Uncovering these hidden stories presents a challenge for all of us, whether we are genealogists, interpreters at historic sites, preservationists, writers, or just plain history buffs. As we uncover these stories, we find ourselves on a journey with an ever-changing destination. This may often take us to a difficult path—and we will always have lots of arguments along the way. Yet there is no better work and no more exciting challenge than walking down this road.

Alexandra M. Lord is is the Chair of the Medicine and Science Division and at the National Museum of American History. Prior to joining the Smithsonian, she was the Branch Chief for the National Historic Landmarks Program of the National Park Service and before that she was a historian for the U.S. Public Health Service. Before becoming a public historian, she was a tenure-track professor in the history of science and medicine at Montana State University and the State University of New York, New Paltz. She received her A.B. from Vassar College and her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Lord was the recipient of the Richard Shryock Award from the American Association for the History of Medicine as well as a post-doctoral fellowship for the history of medicine from the University of California, San Francisco.

In 2010, the British Medical Association awarded Lord's book, *Condom Nation: The US Government's Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Johns Hopkins

University), its prize for the best popular book on medicine. She has published on British and American medical history in academic journals and since 2005, she has frequently written about the historical profession for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She has also spoken on historical topics in venues ranging from the History Channel to academic conferences, Ellis Island, and Planned Parenthood. An active public historian, Lord has written successful National Historic Landmark nominations, curated exhibits on the history of medicine, and worked with the Office of the Surgeon General to provide historical briefings.