

## Engaging with Nießer and Tomann's Engaged History

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Mark Twain's "The Awful German Language," written after his 1878 visit to Germany, poked fun at, among other things, the way that the language used compound words. Twain proudly showed off some terrifying compound words of his own, but he also acknowledged the power of the technique: "They impart a martial thrill to the meekest subject."<sup>1</sup>

Tomann and Nießer walk us through a garden of *Geschichts*-compounds. They redeem the language's Compoundnounfacility by showing us the ways that contemporary German historians have thought through the various kinds of public history, its purposes, and its politics. Paying attention to language, the essay insists, is important. Historywords, like history, have histories and politics. *Geschichtswissenschaft* differs from *Geschichtsdidaktik*, *Geschichtskulture* from *Geschichts-bewusstsein* and applied history from public history, in ways that are harder to express in English.

English lacks not only those expressive compounds, but also, perhaps, the German language's attention to naming. We don't make these distinctions as much as we might. Public historians writing in English have for the most part been happy to call their work simply public history. (Applied history, an early term, has mostly disappeared.) This has its advantages: it allows us to find a happy home in a big tent, uniting most public historians in the National Council for Public History and in the pages of *The Public Historian*.

But American public historians also worry about the distinctions Tomann and Nießer raise, and examining our language similarly might be useful. We make our distinctions not by compounding nouns, but by debating prepositions. Is public history for, by, about, among, concerning, or with the public? Or, looking at the other side, is academic history despite, above, without, or beyond the public?

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, "The Awful German Language," Appendix D in *A Tramp Abroad* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), 2:277.

This debate over prepositions, over the relationship of the public and the historian in public history, is familiar to anyone who teaches the subject. Our introductory seminars are focused on the complex nature of the relationship of public historians with the public. In the early years, many public historians assumed that their field was about history for the public; public historians were translators of academic history for a larger audience. More recently, public historians have insisted on the possibilities of history connected to the public through all those other prepositions. This makes for a much more useful and more interesting history.

It also makes for lively classroom discussions. A few years ago I put this question of relationship front and center in my Introduction to Public Humanities course at Brown. (Public humanities includes public history, but also other forms of publicly engaged scholarship. Perhaps there's a compound word for it in German?) The syllabus was divided into three sections: Us, Them, and You, and our focus was on the relationships between the participants in public humanities work, or between practitioners, subjects, and audiences. "Us" addressed just who was included as members of the public: How did communities define themselves? Who determined that, and how? (Think of the 1960s joke: The Lone Ranger saying, we're in trouble, and Tonto replying: What do you mean, we, white man?<sup>2</sup>) Readings in this section included Stephanie Yuhl's *A Golden Haze of Memory* and Sarah Thornton's *Seven Days in the Art World*.<sup>3</sup> "Them" addressed "the other," the ways in which public humanities addressed outsiders and counterpublics and the ways that those groups represented themselves. For this section we read James Clifford on contact zones and Sally Price on the Musée du quai Branly, and considered Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's "Couple in the Cage."<sup>4</sup> Finally, "You" addressed the students in the class as emerging professionals, with readings from Andrea Witcomb, Claire Bishop, and others.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, the relationships of public historians and their publics has become increasingly complex, in some ways parallel to the German example. More recent versions of my "Introduction" course therefore focus less on the distinctions between groups and more on the overlaps. Readings from Habermas

2 E. Nelson Bridwell, writer, Joe Orlando, artist, "TV Scenes We'd Like to See," *Mad Magazine* #38, 1958. See also "The Source & Meanings of the 'What Do You Mean White Man' Joke," Pancocojams blog, July 5, 2013, <http://pancocojams.blogspot.com/2013/07/sources-meanings-of-what-do-you-mean.html>.

3 Stephanie Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

4 James Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones" in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Coco Fusco, Paula Heredia, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatianau Odyssey* (Video Data Bank, 1993).

5 The syllabus is available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/109968899/Syllabus-AMCV2650-2010-Fall>.

and Michael Warner provide more theoretical depth on the topic of “the public.”<sup>6</sup> Shared authority is front and center throughout the course. Benjamin Filene’s “Passionate Histories: ‘Outsider’ History-Makers and What They Teach Us,” and Nina Simon’s *The Art of Relevance* help break down the walls between public history professionals, the subjects they study, and the audiences they reach.<sup>7</sup> So too, in a different way, do Jennifer Gonzales, *Subject to Display* and Lisa Gilbert’s “Loving, Knowing Ignorance.”<sup>8</sup>

These new readings, or books and articles like them, appear on many public history, public humanities, and museum studies syllabi now. They are a sign of the growing sophistication with which we have come to analyze the relationships of professionals in these areas with their subjects and audiences.

These new directions in public history lean toward the “applied history” as it is defined at Viadrina European University. The applied historian, Nießer and Tomann suggest, acts as a “moderator and facilitator of historical dialogue.” They suggest the word “grounded” as a synonym for applied. It’s a good word, with its many meanings: on the ground, local; practical; well balanced; even, in the electrical meaning, connected. Public history is grounded in community, and in action.

Perhaps another word serves as an English translation of “applied”: engaged. American universities have discovered engaged scholarship. Brown University’s Swearer Center for Public Service’s definition is typical: “Engaged scholarship is a form of scholarship (teaching, research, service) in which faculty and students partner with organizations and individuals outside the academy to address challenges faced by nonacademic partners, thereby co-creating new knowledge.” The Swearer Center logo calls for community, scholarship, and action.

Engaged scholarship, especially in the past year or two, often means politically engaged. It’s not just about co-creating knowledge, but it’s also about having an effect. My students are eager to discuss the line between public humanities, engagement, and activism. For some, public history is only the first step toward community organizing for social justice. It is scholarship co-created with community, with a political purpose, a goal. Public history, for many public history students, is a form of activism. In Nießer and Tomann’s words, it is history that matters, that’s more than “just another brick in the wall of the ivory tower.”

History that is engaged—grounded, applied, public in the largest sense—is history that changes the world. Perhaps that’s the most useful definition of public

6 Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974); Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90.

7 Benjamin Filene, “Passionate Histories: ‘Outsider’ History-Makers and What They Teach Us,” *Public Historian* 34, no.1. (Winter 2012): 11–33; Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Museum 2.0, 2016).

8 Jennifer Gonzales, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008); Lisa Gilbert, “Loving, Knowing Ignorance’: A Problem for the Educational Mission of Museums,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 2 (April 2016): 125–40. The syllabus is available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/358284576/AMST2650-Introduction-to-Public-Humanities-Fall-2017-Syllabus>.

history, one that moves beyond the compound nouns and debates over the right prepositions. We should, with Nießer and Tomann, consider the language that we use and the institutional settings of our work; but we should also move beyond it to do the work.

Mark Twain began his “Awful German Language” with an epigraph: “A little learning makes the whole world kin. Proverbs xxxii, 7.”<sup>9</sup> He was being sarcastic, as was his wont—not to mention making up the quote, and even the 32<sup>nd</sup> book of Proverbs. But we public historians might consider that epigraph in a different way. It challenges us to connect internationally, to continue the conversation Nießer and Tomann began. And it reminds us of the ways that public history—sharing learning about the past—can connect us, in the present and future.

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<sup>9</sup> Twain, “Awful German Language,” 2:262.