

The Vital Role of Public History

An Interview with
Chantel Rodríguez

Dr. Chantel Rodríguez believes that public history must be accessible to everyone. Rodríguez, the senior public historian for the Minnesota Historical Society, spoke to Minnesota History about the vital role of public history in shaping our understanding of the past and present.

MH: Tell us about your role at MNHS and how your background and experience have prepared you for this work.

Rodríguez: I am the senior public historian at MNHS and I work in the Research Department located at the History Center in St Paul. My primary role is to perform historical research and analysis, to develop sound historical methods, and to communicate to the public how historians work and how historical narratives are constructed.

I was trained as a professional historian at the University of Minnesota, where I received my PhD in US history in 2013. Professional historians, like me, are trained to think historically, master the historiography (the theory and history of historical writing) of specific topics, develop methodologies, conduct research, analyze sources, and craft reliable historical interpretations. Most importantly, professional historians abide by a set of guidelines that establish standards for what it means to research, analyze, and interpret the past in a responsible manner. Prior to



joining MNHS, I spent over seven years as an assistant professor at the University of Maryland practicing and teaching the historian's craft to undergraduate and graduate students. I also spent five years as a research associate at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, where I worked in collaboration with Latinx communities to record and preserve their traditional health practices. The work I do every day at MNHS is informed by both my professional training and my public history experience at the Smithsonian.

MH: What is public history?

Rodríguez: The definition of public history has been the subject of much debate. Academic historians define public history in a number of overlapping ways: a field of study or a methodology; an approach for supporting communities in the telling of their own stories; or a form of historical practice that takes place outside of traditional academic settings. Community members, on the other hand, have viewed public history as a movement to achieve their specific goals. In short, the definition of public history is flexible and depends on the practitioner or institution. There is at least one common thread across these definitions—public history is for public audiences.

But even this common thread leaves us with the question, who is the public? The answer to that varies depending on the goals of the public historian or institution.

MH: How is public history different from the history practiced in academia? Are there different methods and tools to interpret and present public history?

Rodríguez: There are several key differences between academic history and public history. The most significant difference is the audience. Academic histories are written for experts in the field, and public histories are designed for lay audiences with little specialist knowledge.

Academic historical scholarship embodies the notion that history is an ongoing conversation. When academics produce scholarship, they are contributing their own argument to an existing dialogue among historians. For example, the Civil War is a topic that historians have written about extensively. All of the academic books and articles published on this topic constitute a conversation between historians. An academic historian will position their argument in relation to the arguments made in previously published works (that is, the existing dialogue). It is for this reason that academic historians must have a firm grasp on the historiography of their topic. Broadly defined, historiography is the writing of history. But mastery of historiography means more than simply reading all of the published academic books and articles on a topic. It requires an understanding of how historians have treated the topic over time, used novel approaches and sources to ask questions, and been influenced by the works of scholars in other disciplines. Most importantly, it necessitates an assessment of why historians' assumptions and methods have produced different, or similar, interpretations over time. The ongoing conversation in any specific historiography encompasses debates about argument, methodology, sources, interpretive frameworks, and author assumptions. An academic historian's objective in producing scholarship is to make a contribution to the historiography and engage in conversation with their academic peers.

Dr. Rodríguez in the Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center

“There is nothing more important than meeting your audience where they are. Public historians need to understand what the audience knows and what they expect to learn.”

Public histories do not wade into the historiographical debates of academic histories. Rather, the overarching goal of public history is to create opportunities for the general public to engage with history. At MNHS, part of our mission is to do public history in a way that sparks curiosity and encourages audiences to ask questions about the past. Public historians use a variety of tools, such as oral history, digital media, documentaries, exhibitions, programs, historic sites, and interpretive signage, to present interpretations of the past.

While the tools of public history extend beyond the traditional toolkit of academic history, public and academic historians share a commitment to a historical methodology that recognizes sources as the building blocks of historical interpretation. They share the same basic task to select *reliable* sources, read and analyze those sources *reliably*, and weave them together to craft a *reliable* interpretation of the past.



MH: How do public historians and institutions anticipate and meet the needs of audiences? What are some of the challenges and rewards of doing audience engagement and delivery?

Rodríguez: There is nothing more important than meeting your audience where they are. Public historians need to understand what the audience knows and what they expect to learn. There are many ways to measure the general public's historical knowledge and expectations, such as surveys, public forums, community engagement, and an assessment of historical narratives circulating in popular culture, just to name a few. This information is used to guide public historians in their development of engaging, meaningful content.

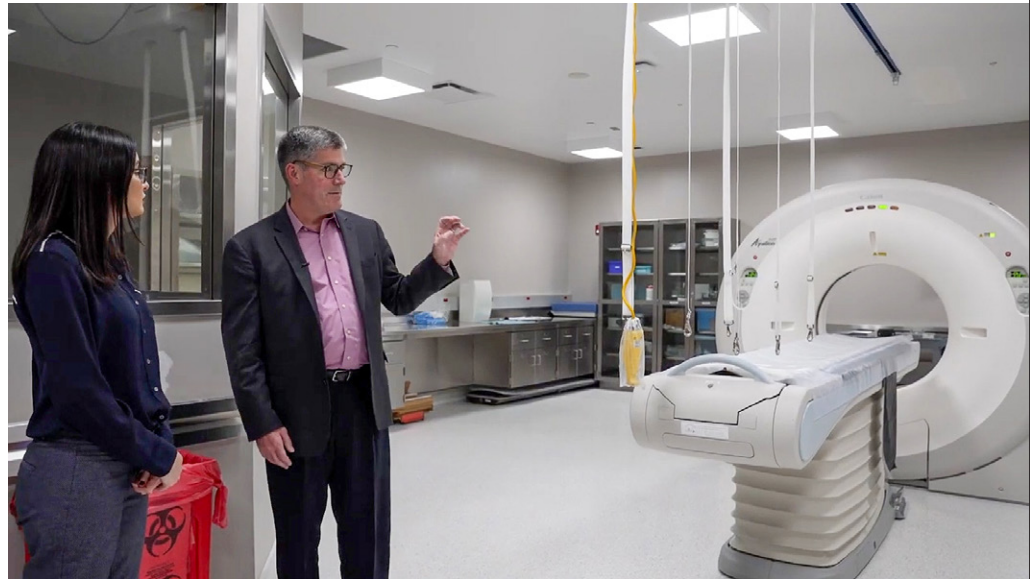
Challenges arise when audience knowledge does not align with the most recent historical scholarship. This misalignment is, in large part, a consequence of historical scholarship being an invaluable form of knowledge production with limited dissemination outside the confines of the academy. The most up-to-date historical scholarship produces more complete histories than have previously been told in both public and academic histories. Public historians rely on their professional training and experience to determine the best way to communicate these expanded histories to general audiences.

One of my primary tasks as the senior public historian is to explain to audiences how those expanded histories came into being. History is an ongoing conversation. It requires updating because there is always new information—the discovery of sources, the development of new questions, the use of new methodologies—that is coming to light.

MH: So much of what you describe above was integral to the success of the recent MNHS exhibit on Sherlock Holmes. What were some of the ways that exhibit incorporated the best practices of public history?

Rodríguez: As a historian and avid fan of Sherlock Holmes, I was excited to learn that the History Center would be hosting the Sherlock Holmes International Traveling Exhibit for

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Dr. Rodríguez interviews Andrew M. Baker, MD, chief medical examiner of Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties at the Medical Examiner's office in Minnetonka, Minnesota.

six months between late October 2022 and early April 2023. One of my primary responsibilities as the senior public historian is to find innovative ways to communicate the historical inquiry process to the general public. Sherlock Holmes offered an excellent opportunity for me to do so because of the similarities between the work of historians and detectives.

The first thing I did was think about the audience. The creation of engaging content requires meeting audiences where they are. I had to determine what the public knows about Sherlock Holmes and why he has captivated their imaginations. I did this primarily through surveying scholarship on Sherlock Holmes, fandom, and popular culture. Sherlock Holmes is the most recognizable fictional detective in the world. General audiences may not have read the original Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but they are certainly familiar with Sherlock's legendary observational and deductive skills. Detective work, therefore, was a tangible starting point for audiences when learning about the historical inquiry process. Drawing on the 2022 American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) report "Making History Matter," the MNHS research department adopted detective

An interview session with Dick Sveum of the Norwegian Explorers of Minnesota, a group dedicated to the study and appreciation of Sherlock Holmes

work as a metaphor to explain the process of historical inquiry and interpretation.

My second step was to identify the best tools for engaging audiences in the message that the process of historical investigation is a lot like detective work. Every public history tool offers different ways for audiences to connect with history. A video series was the most promising tool for conveying the process of historical inquiry. The many years I have spent in the classroom and in public history taught me that it is always better to show than tell. Audiences are more likely to connect with material through dynamic learning where they experience the information through story, role play, or problem-solving scenarios, to name a few approaches. I began to work in close collaboration with the digital access and creative services department to make the video series a reality.

The four-episode video series entitled “Sherlock Holmes in Minnesota” was released on the MNHS YouTube channel starting in December 2022. The first episode provides an overview of the video series, and the subsequent three episodes explore death investigation, the Norwegian Explorers, and the Sherlock Holmes Collections at the University of Minnesota, respectively. The second episode is a problem-solving scenario designed to teach audiences about the historical inquiry process. Using the Kitty Ging murder case (1895), we examine how criminal death investigation in Minnesota changed over time. The host (me) guides the audience through each step in the historical inquiry process: ask questions, gather sources, analyze evidence, and draw conclusions. This process flashes up on the screen throughout the episode. The purpose is to assist audiences in connecting the action they see unfolding in front of them to specific steps in the historical inquiry process.

The production of the video series was not without its challenges. First and foremost, the video series required a considerable amount of time from MNHS staff across departments. As the senior public historian, I contributed my disciplinary expertise and historical knowledge to the content development process. I also hosted the video series, which required me to do work on camera and in the sound recording studio. The digital access and creative



services department played a significant role in making the video series. They did the work of videography, lighting, direction, sound mixing, video editing, and more. Each episode was internally reviewed to ensure that the content met the institution’s high-quality standards for public history work. The communications and marketing department promoted the series on social media and incorporated an opportunity for audience feedback. Doing quality work requires time and coordination across various departments. The high viewership for episode two suggests that it was time well spent.

The main lesson I took away from working on this project is that videos and digital media are invaluable tools for public historians. This is by no means a new revelation. However, it was a reminder that public historians must be committed to making history accessible to everyone. Exhibits and programs offered on-site will always be central to the practice of public history, but not everyone has easy access to these physical locations. Digital media allows public historians to reach a much broader audience.

The “Sherlock Holmes in Minnesota” video series embodies the collaborative nature of public history at MNHS. Collaboration involves community engagement and partnership with a wide variety of communities and external stakeholders. What makes public history at MNHS so dynamic and robust is the expertise that every staff member brings to the table. At MNHS we have professional historians, exhibit developers, curators, librarians and archivists, archaeologists, oral historians, interpreters, and more—all of whom contribute to making MNHS an exciting place to do public history in the service of all the people who call Minnesota home. □

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