

Local Food, Public History, and Sustainability

The First Course: A Case for Locating Public History within “The Food Movement”

MICHELLE MOON and CATHY STANTON

Abstract: The current enthusiasm for “local food” offers public historians an opportunity to strengthen civic dialogues about place, land and energy use, labor, economy, health, and governance. Moving beyond conventional exhibitry and living history approaches challenges public history practitioners and institutions to confront politicized “real-life” aspects of food systems, but it also offers important benefits to those engaged in the reshaping of both scaled-down food systems and civically engaged museums and historic sites. A nuanced, reflexive engagement with food and farm history can be a way to address much broader issues of economic, institutional, and environmental sustainability.

Key words: civic engagement, food history, food movement, interpretation, sustainability

Introduction

A WELL-HEELED URBAN PROFESSIONAL cashes everything in to reinvent himself as a rural artisanal cheesemaker. A new farmers’ market opens in

The Public Historian, Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 109–129 (August 2014).

ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576.

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a city park or town square. A neighbor begins raising chickens in her backyard. These now-familiar scenarios are part of the surging “local food” or “sustainable agriculture” movement, which has seen vigorous expansion in the United States and many other places even within the uncertain economy of recent years. The popularity of local and artisanal food appears to be part of a common response to contemporary anxieties about the environmental, economic, and social costs of global industrial capitalism and the fossil-fuel dependency that has been so central to enabling it. As the widening socioeconomic inequality and rapidly escalating climate change caused by those systems become clearer and better understood, people in search of change, hope, and a sense of community often turn to food as a site of action and activism. Food is intimate; it strengthens our sense of agency within dauntingly large-scale systems; it offers us a point of entry into complex interlocking problems. It is a place to start.¹

It is also an arena that offers public historians an opportunity to engage more actively with lively civic dialogues about place, land and energy use, labor, economy, health, and governance. However, the great majority of public history practitioners and institutions have not yet embraced what seem to us to be the most urgent, important, and far-reaching implications of food and farming history. Today’s rediscovery and reinvention of low-input, locally and regionally scaled agriculture blurs the too-simple past-present-future timeline and creatively recombines old and new modes of producing and consuming food by drawing on many tropes from the past: the image of the independent, small-scale, pre-industrial yeoman farmer; the philosophical allure of ideas about agrarian self-sufficiency; the emotional and social

1. Various terms are used in referring to the current re-embrace and reinvention of small-scale farming methods and food systems. Most of these terms center around notions of localness or regional identity (“local food,” “locavore,” “re-localized or -regionalized” food systems) and of “sustainability,” a term that generally connotes a concern with the long-term health of social, economic, and environmental systems. This new food and farm activism intersects in complex ways with a range of other movements focusing on labor and immigration, indigenous rights and sovereignty, and wealth inequity. Somewhat paradoxically, it is linked with both agrarian discourses and the ever-expanding tourism sector, in the form of agritourism and both urban and rural place-making projects. It manifests most markedly in particular places (particularly those associated with a particular *terroir* or set of food traditions, such as Provence, Tuscany, or Vermont) but is also transnational, often responding to threats and trends (like climate change and corporate dominance of food supply chains) perceived to be global in scope. Recent influential figures within “the food movement” include celebrity “locavore” chefs like Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, advocates like “Slow Food” founder Carlo Petrini, and bestselling writers like Michael Pollan, whose work (particularly *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* [New York: Penguin, 2006] and *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* [New York: Penguin, 2008]) has arguably been as important in raising awareness about food and farming issues as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* was in the early twentieth century or Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* during the 1960s. Anna Lappé’s *Diet for a Hot Planet: The Climate Crisis at the End of Your Fork and What You Can Do About It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) explicitly links food choices and food production with climate change, arguing for a more “climate-friendly” way of growing and consuming food.

“Food” and “farming” are clearly related but not always the same thing. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we are considering them as part of the same realm of thought and action. We recognize that there are many exceptions, subtleties, and additional avenues of exploration that a short article like this one cannot reflect.

satisfactions of short food chains with recognizable places and people at the other end. But these popular understandings of historical modes of food production and consumption are seldom informed by careful critical questioning of why farmers and consumers made the choices that led toward our now-dominant industrialized food systems. More public historians could be—but are not yet—at the leading edge of mobilizing historical knowledge about food and farming in a way that is not merely wishful or romantic, on the one hand, or confusing and paralyzing, on the other.

This way of envisioning the public historian's role pushes those who interpret food and farm history in public to go far beyond what we think of as the "butter churn approach," a set of interpretive strategies typified by hearth-cooking demonstrations and costumed interpretation of cultivating fields with draft animals. These strategies were shaped in eras of generally nostalgic reinterpretations of small-scale farming and the foodways and cultural patterns associated with it. Starting in the 1930s and thriving by the mid-1970s, food demonstrations have been a pillar of living history interpretation, humanizing the past through the familiar activities of cooking and eating.² Current foodways-based presentations and projects, the "bread and butter" of much public history, offer rich sensory experiences and appealing entry points. Because the sights, smells, and textures of food are intrinsically compelling, food has often been used as a "hook," drawing audiences in in order to redirect interest to other interpretive messages deemed more significant. This approach makes itself felt in the 2012 issue of this journal devoted to "Food in Public History"; Adam Steinberg's discussion of food interpretation at New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum is tellingly titled "What We Talk About When We Talk About Food: Using Food to Teach History at

2. A future publication will explore the history and historiography of food interpretation at museums and historic sites in the United States. Preliminary constructs for this work identify three main eras in food history presentation, distinguished by their reigning ideologies. Dating from the early institutionalized presentations of living history at sites like Colonial Williamsburg, food was presented as an illustrative component underscoring celebratory, Americanizing agendas of progress, organized family life, rugged simplicity, ingenuity, and abundance. New social history approaches in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the significance of everyday tasks in the lives of ordinary people, also ushering in an age of "experimental archaeology" focused on the exacting recreation of past processes, exemplified by practices at Plimoth Plantation such as the recreation of beer brewing and construction and management of a springhouse. By the 1990s, cultural anthropology inspired a reorganization of food interpretation around the concept of "foodways," highlighting the intersections of food production and consumption practices with cultures, places, and communities. In advance of the publication of resources specifically on food in public history, general concepts may be gleaned from discussions of the larger ideologies in which choices about food interpretation were made. See Scott Magelssen's *Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), Richard Handler and Eric Gable's *New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), Stephen Eddie Snow's *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethno-Historical Roleplaying at Plimoth Plantation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), Jay Anderson's anthology *A Living History Reader: Volume One, Museums* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1991), and Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig's *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

the Tenement Museum,” while Andrew Haley’s illuminating exploration of the emergence of “taste” in American culture similarly sees food and history as somehow distinct. “Food is familiar,” Haley notes, “and history often is not.”³ As long as we frame food history as a colorful detail or useful starting-point for embellishing or approaching “real” history, we will have difficulty perceiving food as a topic of public history in and of itself.

In contrast, we see food and farming as subjects worthy of a more central focus, a vital and variable resource sitting at the nexus of multiple complex systems of production, consumption, and exchange. If these subjects are not unpacked in depth and with serious intent, current interpretive approaches will not help audiences connect the detail of past food systems to their own pressing and personal concerns. By moving beyond merely illustrative, nostalgic, or celebratory interpretations, public historians can convene a conversation of variety and sophistication, empowering visitors to approach daily choices and civic questions with deeper knowledge and a sense of personal agency and social import. But even the most nuanced and critical food interpretation will still remain unconnected to larger crises and processes happening all around us unless practitioners are fully willing to act as facilitators for a present- as well as past-oriented conversation. A reenvisioned food and farm interpretation would engage much more directly with the political and economic implications of agricultural and food history and with the workings of those implications in visitors’ own lives. It would require bringing together often-fragmentary local historical and archaeological records and resources with extremely broad, unfinished, and contested narratives about progress, safety, and stewardship. It would seek to wed careful, critical scholarship with everyday choices and decisions. Again, Andrew Haley’s 2012 article in these pages points the way toward the former, arguing that because food seems so familiar, interpreters need to be even more vigilant than usual about letting present-day assumptions color their sense of the past. But Haley also believes that the open-endedness of food histories poses a threat to scholarly rigor: “The greatest danger,” he states, “is that we will offer up our culinary past to our audience even when we do not have a ready argument.”⁴ We disagree: to us, this “danger” is in fact an opportunity to enter more fully and usefully into urgent and consequential public dialogues.

This reenvisioning challenges public historians to articulate the specific values that might lead them to align their work with one kind of food production and not another—a task that is by no means simple, for a range of definitional, legal, and philosophical reasons.⁵ It disrupts the distinction

3. Adam Steinberg, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Food: Using Food to Teach History at the Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* 34, no. 2 (May 2012): 79-89; Andrew F. Haley, “The Nation Before Taste: The Challenges of American Culinary History,” *The Public Historian* 34, no. 2 (May 2012): 53-78.

4. Haley, “The Nation Before Taste,” 64.

5. For a detailed discussion of the conceptual and economic separation of small-scale farming from the “real” agricultural sector, and public history’s place within those processes, see Cathy

between the not-for-profit realm in which most public historical work is located and the for-profit sector in which small-scale agriculture is struggling to become and remain economically viable. It forces public historians to think about the various kinds of privilege and difference operating within their own professional and cultural settings as well as within many areas of the agricultural sector. In short, it pushes practitioners well out of their comfort zones, but in ways that can be incremental and approachable even while also signaling a radical change from many of the field's established patterns. As public historians begin to grapple more seriously with how their work might engage discourses and action relating to climate change and other global environmental challenges, food and farm history offers us, as it does for many among our audiences and potential partners, a place to start.

Elsewhere, we are working to develop the kinds of conceptual and methodological tools that we see as crucial to making this effort, highlighting some of the good work that is already beginning to be done in the field.⁶ In the remainder of this piece we will approach the project of a more civically engaged food interpretation from two angles. First, we will look at the situation from the perspective of small-scale food producers trying to make a living in extremely challenging and quickly changing markets. How might we make a case to farmers who are generally already over-busy, over-stressed, and under-capitalized that the kind of knowledge we produce and the kinds of skills we bring to the table could have real value for their work? This is where we can see food and farm interpretation as something of a test case or a proving-ground for the more generalized value of public humanities in a time of ever-more-pressing environmental and economic crises (and the erosion of public funding that has accompanied many of the “austerity”-oriented responses to these). In the second half of the article, we approach the project from the perspective of public historians. How can professionals engaged in site planning, programs, and exhibitions create the platforms required to host these civic discussions—and more important, *why* should they? We will identify potential gains for the cultural sector in the forms of increased participation, renewed commitment to public-service missions, and clear demonstrations of the relevance and civic value of historical resources in an era when their sustainability and utility is continuously challenged.

Stanton, “Between Pastness and Presentism: Public History and the Local Food Movement,” in *Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. James Gardner and Paula Hamilton (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

6. The purpose of this article is to set out a programmatic statement rather than a set of methods or case studies, so further detailed examples are not included here. See the *History at the Table* blog, <http://www.historyatthetable.blogspot.com>, for links to some of the many nascent public history/food movement partnerships and projects. On methods and approaches, see Michelle Moon and Cathy Stanton, *How History Can Help Reinvent the Food System* (working title; Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, forthcoming).

What Public History Brings to Food Producers

We see three central benefits to small-scale food producers from greater public historical engagement with food politics. First, as noted above, public historians can contribute to creating cohesive yet complex narratives about the histories of a sector that agricultural and resource economist Sandra Batie has characterized as a “wicked problem.” Wicked problems, in Batie’s formulation, are issues so fraught with internal paradoxes and inconsistencies and so overlaid with competing and often contradictory ideologies and assumptions that it is difficult or impossible to frame, debate, or fix them.⁷ Food and farming are “over-determined” topics: they carry such heavy loads of association and emotion that it is hard for us to see them clearly or sort out our terminology for talking about them. Try to define “local,” “small-scale,” “industrial agriculture,” “family farm,” or even just “farm” and you quickly find yourself in a welter of new questions and exceptions to every attempt at establishing a rule. There is an obvious difference between an enormous, fully mechanized “factory farm” and a 25-acre, draft-animal-powered Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation. But where does a dairy farm with 150 cows, using milking machines and human-made pesticides on its hayfields and selling in a regional wholesale market, fit within the supposed distinctions between local and global, “conventional” and organic, large and small, family and corporate, “sustainable” and unsustainable kinds of farming?

Beyond these definitional quandaries lie even more complex class and racial disparities that have recurred stubbornly throughout the long history of attempts to reform and sustain the agricultural sector in the United States and elsewhere. The whiteness and maleness of the stereotypical figure of the independent yeoman farmer contains many hidden genealogies.⁸ For example, during the 1930s, federal programs designed to help struggling farmers directed aid money toward larger operations likely to be owned by whites, resulting in the loss of countless small southern African American farms. And the powerful image of the agrarian homesteader has always coexisted uneasily with the fact of unequal access to land and the use of unfree or low-paying farm labor dating from the time of European settlement through today’s

7. Sandra S. Batie, “Wicked Problems and Applied Economics,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 90 (Dec. 2008): 1176–91.

8. Studies of racialized, class-specific, and gendered experiences and disparities in relation to food, including both historically and in the contemporary food movement, are proliferating in the current climate of interest about these subjects, building on the foundation of older work that was linked in many ways with an earlier era of food and farm activism. For just a few relevant examples from this literature, see Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, eds., *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999); E. Melanie DuPuis, *Nature’s Perfect Food: How Milk Became America’s Drink* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); and Rachel Slocum, “Race in the Study of Food,” *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 3 (June 2011): 303–27.

rediscovery of local and artisanal foods.⁹ That rediscovery has thus far been highly dependent on a relatively affluent consumer base and on various kinds of investment and subsidy that may not be equitable or sustainable in the long term: for example, the low-wage labor of a new and youthful generation of back-to-the-landers or of often-undocumented migrant workers, or infusions of support for publicly and privately funded energy-, education- and nutrition-related projects linked with farms. There is much work to be done by public historians in sifting through these issues for ourselves first—or rather, in a spirit of more shared inquiry, in sifting them through in dialogue with various partners and publics. It will require sustained collective thought and effort to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges of moving beyond the forced choice between subsidy and upscale markets, or to address issues of farm succession as the rising generation of new farmers matures, or to tackle long-standing dilemmas about scale, labor costs, food prices, and access to land and capital. Public interpretation that foregrounds these questions may be useful and interesting to farmers and farm advocates themselves as part of their ruminations on the future of locally and regionally oriented farming. But it seems even more useful in bringing existing and new publics into the conversation and deepening shared understandings of why these questions seem so intractable—why, for instance, “sustainably” grown food costs more to buy yet the farmworkers who produce it are barely able to survive economically. The market for local food is continuing to expand despite ongoing economic contractions in many sectors and places, but increasingly turbulent weather, appropriation by corporate agriculture, and the emergence of newer culinary enthusiasms will inevitably challenge its longer-term strength. Riding out these challenges will require more than just passing support from consumers and politicians, and public historians can help by raising complex questions in a clear and inclusive way.

Building more reflexivity into these public conversations is a second benefit that public historians can offer to food producers. Thanks in large part to the historiography of the past several decades, with its focus on processes of social memorialization, there is an increasing tendency to interpret historic sites and processes in a layered way, taking into account not just originary events but also the ways in which they have been remembered, used, and contested, and

9. The University of California Press has been a leader in studies of labor inequity in contemporary agriculture, including its supposedly “alternative” sectors. See, for example, Julie Guthman’s *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (2004), Margaret Gray’s *Labor and the Locavore: The Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic* (2013), and Seth Holmes’s *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (2013). The substantial but mostly older literature on the rise of a market economy and the shift into industrialism includes studies considering agricultural and labor issues within those processes—for example, Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

how the layers of meaning created through these processes have continued to reverberate over time.¹⁰ Pushing past a too-simple “now” and “then” relationship of past to present, public historians often challenge their partners and audiences to think about those layers, an inherently reflexive exercise that can foster a more active sense of participating in the creation of individual and collective meanings.

In the case of food and farming, this approach enables us to parse out more clearly the long and somewhat cyclical history of attempts to balance farmers’ economic viability; the quality, safety, and affordability of the food supply; and the changes prompted by new technologies and kinds of supply chains. Lamenting over the decline of small farms has a surprisingly long lineage in the United States and other industrial countries; in the northeastern US, it dates to quite early in the nineteenth century.¹¹ Conversely, the persistence of small farms, even in the industrialized northeast, also has a longer history than is generally realized. Although the size and economic vitality of the northeastern agricultural sector had undeniably declined by the turn of the twentieth century, it was not until after a fully fossil-fuel-powered agricultural economy and transportation system emerged in the mid-twentieth-century that small market- and truck-farmers around major northeastern cities found themselves unable to compete with the new supermarkets and long-distance shipping systems.¹² In that nearly two-century span there have been multiple movements to revitalize rural life and enable small-scale farmers to remain competitive in commercial markets. The histories of agricultural improvers of the 1820s and 30s, scientific reformers and “Country Life” advocates of the Progressive Era, a back-to-the-land impulse during the Depression, and the well-known embrace of farming by hippies and homesteaders, cooperatives and commune-dwellers in the 1960s and 70s, constitute a rich and sometimes contradictory legacy for today’s food movement.¹³ Civic dialogue about the

10. Building on foundational studies by Paul Connerton, Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and others, scholars have produced a substantial body of literature that considers historical sites and memory in this way. See, for example, the work of David Blight, David Glassberg, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Edward T. Linenthal, and Kirk Savage, among many others.

11. In the northeastern United States, financial panics in 1819 and 1837, along with the rapid growth of cities and industrial production, prompted a range of ameliorative and nostalgic responses including the founding of popular agricultural journals and fairs designed to improve agricultural practices and profitability, as well as the incorporation of pastoral sights into the nascent national tourism industry. See Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002) on the former, and Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) on the latter. On some of the ways Americans have articulated a sense of concern about what would be lost with the decline of rural and agricultural economies, see David B. Danbom, “Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Agricultural History* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 1-12.

12. For a discussion of this process around the city of Boston, see Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 64-74.

13. For just a few of the works tracing this legacy, see Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Brown, *Back to the Land*; Jeffrey Haydu, “Cultural Modeling in Two Eras of U.S. Food Protest:

future of our food systems would be deepened by a fuller understanding of these earlier movements—for example, how they made themselves felt in policy and how often they have been plagued by unintended consequences (as the rise of “big organic,” antithetical in so many ways to the goals and methods of the initial organic movement, shows).¹⁴ Farmers and their allies, especially the many who are new to the field, may find in these histories models, cautionary tales, or both. Consumers may gain a more nuanced sense of the challenges that small-scale farming has always faced in a market-driven economy. The over-simple David-versus-Goliath narrative that circulates in the new food movement may in some ways be a more powerful motivator than a complex history in which there are few clear-cut heroes or villains, but that narrative is not rigorous enough to capture the realities of food and farm debates over time, and it seems unlikely to support a truly thoughtful reevaluation of policy and strategy over the longer term. As the environmental and economic challenges created by our current systems become ever harsher, a clearer collective sense of the flash-points and pitfalls of past attempts to maintain small-scale farming may help to produce wiser decisions. Again, the benefits may be somewhat indirect, less about advocacy per se than about helping to seed collective deliberations with careful historically informed questions and explorations. In New England, a number of recent policy-oriented studies have drawn on historical data in thoughtful and engaged ways; public historians are well positioned to move these kinds of projects into greater visibility and engagement with a range of audiences.¹⁵

And this is the third and perhaps most obvious benefit that can accrue to food producers from partnering with public historians: we have the tools in hand to begin fostering this kind of civic conversation and thus to help increase the efficacy of action within the movement. Farmers, especially those just learning their physically demanding craft, are naturally more focused on producing food and staying afloat economically than on mastering the subtleties of historical research or convening public fora. Many advocates who have chosen food as their starting-point *are* doing wonderful work on public awareness and education, but this is seldom linked in any serious way with critical

Grahamites (1830s) and Organic Advocates (1960s–70s),” *Social Problems* 58, no. 3 (August 2011): 461–87; Dennis Roth, “The Country Life Movement” in *Federal Rural Development Policy in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Dennis Roth, Anne B. W. Efland, and Douglas E. Bowers (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2002); Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*.

14. See Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams* and Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*.

15. See, for example, the work of environmental geographer John Carroll, including the recent *The Real Dirt: Toward Food Sufficiency and Sustainability in New England* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011); Brian Donahue et al., *A New England Food Vision* (Durham, NH: Food Solutions New England, 2014), <http://www.foodsolutionsne.org/new-england-food-vision>; and *New England Food Policy: Building a Sustainable Food System* (American Farmland Trust, Conservation Law Foundation, and the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group), http://www.clf.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/1.New_England_Food_Policy_FULLL.pdf.



Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago has worked to link its founding mission as a center for popular and civic education with the long history of food production and social service at the site. Its recent food-related projects have included this urban farm. (Photo by Gail M. Tang.)

historical inquiry.¹⁶ Public history, with its foundational emphasis on public engagement and growing sense of mission about facilitating civic dialogue, its responsibility to careful and rigorous historical knowledge-creation, and its recognition of the importance of “sense of place” can bring to the table precisely the skills and values that can add a crucial piece to the vibrant, consequential public debate about health, community, equity, and stewardship.

What the Food Movement Offers Public History

Arguing that food should take a more central role in public history may seem strange to some who see it as already there. After all, don’t most living

16. Two of the notable exceptions are the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, which links its founding mission as a center for popular and civic education with the long history of food production and social service at the site, and Hancock Shaker Village in western Massachusetts, which similarly makes interpretive and infrastructural connections between past and present. A webpage explaining its installation of solar electric panels noted, “Hancock Shaker Village is a center for exploring what it means to live a principled life in the 21st century. Part of that process is to understand the impact of energy consumption on ourselves, our community, and our world.” “Photovoltaic Array at HSV,” http://hancockshakervillage.org/content.php?section_id=2&page_id=9&content_id=249, accessed 21 June 2012. For other established and emerging projects, see the *History at the Table* blog, <http://historyatthetable.blogspot.com/p/links-and-resources.html>

history sites have a hearth fire going in a period kitchen, with a costumed interpreter browning corn cakes on a griddle? What about the oral history projects that dwell on the role of food and farming in ethnic and rural communities? Don't most house-museum installations feature a tea service, a dough trencher, or some other object representing the presence of food in daily life? Many museum interpreters and planners conduct painstaking research on food production, preparation, preservation, and consumption, becoming technical experts on seasonality, hardy plant varieties, livestock care, gardening, soils and climate, and strategies for feeding a household in the absence of modern amenities. Foodways researchers in museum settings have spent the better part of a century developing forms of practical knowledge that contemporary Americans now seek. But as we have already noted, history organizations, broadly speaking, have been slow to connect this knowledge to the current groundswell of interest in contemporary food politics, at most being content to tweak existing programs to highlight coincidental overlaps with the local food movement. Standard presentation of this content, kept narrowly confined within an illustrative mode of period interpretation, stops short of giving contemporary audiences a way to make deeper connections with their own lived experience. Even where institutions are reaching beyond older interpretive templates, as in some of the examples described below, they are still reluctant to break the museological "fourth wall" and to engage directly with food as a site of action and change.

Today's museumgoers are increasingly food-literate, reading bestsellers like Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* and Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* and watching popular documentaries like *Food Inc.* and *Supersize Me*. They are attuned to the politics of food production and consumption and accustomed to being participants in larger public discussions of food—discussions that take tangible shape as consumer choices and citizen actions. They are sensitive to food safety and increasingly interested in understanding place through short, localized chains of food production, fueling¹⁷ an explosion in the establishment of farmer's markets which has more than quadrupled their number in fifteen years.¹⁸ They are concerned about food pricing relative to income, economic and geographical limitations to access, quality and freshness, the ethics of humane food production, the wisdom of

17. Over the past decade, multiple large-scale polls have repeatedly shown high levels of concern among the American public over food safety, measuring attitudes on a family of issues including foodborne illness, food labeling, and rates of food inspection on both domestic and imported products. For examples, see the Pew Charitable Trusts' Safe Food Project, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/food-safety>; Brian Montopoli, "Poll: Most Not Fully Confident in Food Safety," CBS News, Jan. 9, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-most-not-fully-confident-in-food-safety/>; and Allison Kopicki, "Strong Support for Labeling Modified Foods," New York Times, July 27, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/science/strong-support-for-labeling-modified-foods.html?_r=1&

18. "Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing," accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth%5D>

altering the genetic material in food plants, and the increase in nutrition-related health risks such as food allergies and Type 2 diabetes. Yet when these audiences encounter food in the context of public history, they often find that these complex dimensions of economics and inequality, public health, quality and safety, supply chains and trade networks are squashed or elided, creating a puzzling gap between an apparently simple past and a contemporary world of seemingly unprecedented difficulty.¹⁹ Reframing the rich detail available in the public history realm within broader questions and problems at the personal, regional, national, and global levels, past and present, would position historical institutions and projects as centers of learning and discourse on an issue that is central to the lives of all audiences.

Currently, the public's free-choice education on food systems, history, and policy comes from a patchwork of sources: journalism, advocacy campaigns, food producers, and marketers themselves. Although important, these sources are seldom deeply informed by historical thinking and unable to offer longitudinal perspectives on the issues that so engage the public's interest. This cultural moment, then, represents a strikingly good opportunity for public history—a heritage-breed goose laying golden eggs. Public historians and cultural organizations ready to join the conversation by contributing much-needed and historically grounded perspectives stand to gain in ways which directly benefit the sustainability of their projects and institutions: increased participation and audience advocacy; a renewal of activity at the heart of the mission; and improved long-term stability, built on an enhanced case for relevance and impact.

Of these, a boost to participation may be the most immediately regenerative tonic for public history organizations and practitioners. For well over a decade, gloomy professional conversations have noted shrinking annual attendance numbers across major historic-site destinations and local history organizations. Theories abound, from the dropping cost of air travel, to more leisure time choices, demographic fluctuations, lack of interest resulting from poor history education, and steep declines in foundation funding. One, all, or a combination of these causes may be responsible for the existential threat to any one institution, but no matter the specifics, history organizations have been taking desperate measures: layoffs, "austerity" cuts to program budgets and scope, decreased collecting and exhibition activity. Public historians bemoan the relative paucity of resources devoted to their projects by a society

19. Food historian Ken Albala has identified a schism in the study and interpretation of food. In his formulation, "food history" deals with "the social, economic, intellectual and cultural parameters of consumption," while "culinary history" investigates "ingredients, cooking methods, recipes, and the history of the cookbook, often accompanied by the reconstruction of historic cooking in situ." This dichotomy leads to a situation in which food presentations at historic sites ignore the broader contexts of food history and fail to include "rigorous methods of textual analysis." It is our belief that a more civically minded public history of food will need to transcend culinary history approaches and participate more fully and critically in the developing interdisciplinary field of food studies. See Ken Albala, "History on the Plate: The Current State of Food History," *Historically Speaking* 10, no. 5 (November 2009): 6-8.

that simply seems no longer to care about history. Summarizing a litany of dire predictions in 2007, Cary Carson cited fears within the field that the history museum itself might be obsolete, going the way of the Automat on a “nosedive to oblivion.”²⁰

Meanwhile, right outside the boardrooms in which these sobering conversations take place are audiences that need what civically engaged history institutions could offer. Noting that “modern visitors are not content to be passive spectators,” Carson posited that the twenty-year attendance decline reflects profound shifts in learning preferences in rising generations, pointing out the success of experiences giving participants opportunities to take action, make choices, and take on new identities. Even more important than the activities themselves, he asserts, is providing a sense of connection to a large and significant narrative. Visitors want to be part of “a story big enough to convince them that their participation in the narrative has involved them in something important in American history.”²¹ The food movement offers a direct, material link to one such important narrative. A recent survey found that “just over half of regular museumgoers have an explicit interest in food,” and “would love for museums to engage them via food.”²² In 2011, the AAM’s

20. Cary Carson, “The End of History Museums: What’s Plan B?” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 9. Carson’s comments reflected the tenor of a painful and protracted era of field-wide introspection and examination. Individual institutions had been noticing attendance declines at least by the late 1990s, but the dramatic events of 2001 disrupted patterns of travel, spending, and leisure time use and sparked serious discussion of the present and future viability of public history institutions. In April 2002, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) partnered with The National Trust for Historic Preservation to convene the first Kykuit Summit, a gathering at which leaders in public history began to ponder the questions challenging the field as a whole. Meanwhile, the Trust’s president, Richard Moe, asked the pointed question “Are There Too Many Historic Houses?” in the group’s *Forum Journal* 16, no. 3 (2002). In 2006, original summit partners were joined by the American Association of Museums and the American Architectural Foundation for a “Kykuit II” meeting on the sustainability of historic sites. See <http://download.aaslh.org/history+news/VogtHNSmr07.pdf>. These meetings resulted in the development of a standards program for history institutions (AASLH’s StEPs) and an AASLH Technical Leaflet including a checklist of “Characteristics of Historic House Museums in Peril,” <http://download.aaslh.org/technical+leaflets/Tech+Leaf+244.pdf>. Following further blows to endowments and consumer spending following the 2008 economic crisis, and in an attempt to quantify the perceived decline and correct the general lack of reliable and comparable figures on attendance across the field, AAM in 2009 began an Annual Condition of Museums and the Economy (ACME) Survey, revealing continuing financial stress and low participation levels 2009-2012. See <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/research>. The popular press also took note of the crisis in history organizations, publishing pieces like “Struggling to Attract Visitors, Historic Houses May Face Day of Reckoning” (J. Freedom du Lac, *Washington Post*, December 22, 2012). Finally, in “Attendance Slide: A Call to Action,” the consulting group Reach Advisers cited National Endowment for the Arts’ Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, saying “museums are losing attendance on both measures of audience share and size,” with history museums having lost more than 8 million visitors since their peak. . . . This drying-up of the pipeline imperils . . . history museums, because if it is not reversed, obsolescence lies ahead,” http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2013/09/the-attendance-slide-a-call-to-action.html

21. Carson, “End of History Museums,” 20.

22. Susie Wilkenning, “Do Museums Need to Care About Foodies?” (Center for the Future of Museums, accessed January, 2014), <http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/2011/09/do-museums-need-to-care-about-foodies.html>

Center for the Future of Museums hosted a symposium titled “Feeding the Spirit,” spurred by the perception that “America is immersed in a reexamination of its relationship to food.”²³ By linking food and farming interpretation to real-world interests and problems, audiences are already voluntarily immersing themselves in food-based discussion. Public history initiatives can extend an invitation to find a more meaningful place in a story that is, like the topic of food itself, both massive in scale and intimately personal. But although many public history professionals agree the time is ripe for new forms of food and farming interpretation, there are few robust examples of projects that connect to action and change on an individual and collective level.

In recent years, a new seriousness of approach has combined with scholarly analysis and larger interpretive frameworks to bring a few highly visible exhibitions to the fore. Among these are the American Museum of Natural History’s sweeping 2012-13 exhibition “Our Global Kitchen: Food, Nature, Culture” and a linked set of projects by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History; an exhibition titled “Food: Transforming the American Table, 1950-2000,” which opened in 2012; and a larger-scale “American Food History Project,” incorporating research, educational resources, and events. These immense projects present a variety of sophisticated concepts around food production and consumption to their respective audiences. The AMNH’s exhibition unites science, social science, and history in examining the current state of the world’s food supply, selectively historicizing questions of market inefficiencies, biodiversity, and the push for ever greater yield. In the Smithsonian’s exhibition, visitors explore past food movements in sections titled “Voting With Your Fork” and “The Good Food Movement,” and confront issues of labor and the environment as experienced in the rapidly expanding food economy of the twentieth century.

Exhibitions dealing with these histories are an encouraging development for public history. They are at last treating food with the seriousness of any other major topic in human history. They illustrate and acknowledge chapters in America’s and the world’s food history that begin to complicate nostalgic visions of a past of simple abundance, self-sufficiency, and food purity. However, they do not quite forge the transformative links so badly needed between public history and real-world food communities and practices. Labels historicizing contemporary questions allow visitors to see themselves and their own life experiences part of broader narratives, but these didactics often stop short of describing how, as citizens, visitors might enter into discussions focused on finding answers, generating new relationships with food producers, and making informed choices at personal, household, community, state, regional, national, and global scales. Exhibits like those at the Smithsonian

23. “Feeding the Spirit,” (American Association of Museums, accessed December 28, 2014), <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/center-for-the-future-of-museums/projects-and-reports/feeding-the-spirit>

and AMNH emphasize learning, but not in ways that are tightly connected to personal and community action. Curators and interpretive planners working on projects like these, loaded with powerful stakeholders, mandated to serve a vast and diverse public, and closely observed on all sides for potential political bias or funder interference, often remain within a set of museological conventions that can actually constitute a barrier to deeper, more personal investment in the topic that might promise to be transformative, for both institutions and their communities. Such projects may draw on important critical insights from both scholarly and applied research, yet stop well short of engaging with the real-life implications of that research.

Meanwhile, outside the halls of such large “indoor” museums with thematically conceived exhibition programs, the visitor’s personal experiences may be foregrounded, but often at the cost of the interdisciplinary critical perspectives so well developed in the large-scale shows. What we term the “butter churn” approach prizes “hands-on” interaction, woven into the sensory illusion of immersion in another time. Rarely do the two ends of the intellectual spectrum meet in meaningful interchanges that situate historical data in the center of contemporary issues and concerns. Currently, some enterprising practitioners are beginning to knit those ends together, working past and present into a cohesive experience encompassing learning, questioning, reflection, and applied action. At the Shapiro House at Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example, visitors are not only engaged in discussion about how foodways in this small East Coast city were diversified through the processes of immigration from Ukraine in the early twentieth century; they are invited by first- and third-person interpreters to gather heirloom seeds from real gardens, and given instructions for planting, cooking, and preserving them as well as traditional cultural knowledge about specific plant varieties. This insistence on the experiential linkage of learning and action helps visitors to see their participation as part of the intertwined stories of both past and future: the human migrations and centuries of cultivation that maintained the existence of those valued plants even as a commodity market engineered hybridized replacements; an entrée into participation in the informal networks in which these seeds are exchanged today; a sense of connection to both a particular ethnic identity and this country’s many histories of migration; an awareness of the genetic diversity that may produce specimens to withstand coming extremes of climate; and an appreciation for the tensions and trade-offs between maximum yield, durability, marketability, nutrition, tradition, safety, and flavor. According to the museum’s staff, visitors often return years later to share stories of how these and other experiences inspired them to begin gardening, seed saving, preserving, or reconnecting to family, ethnic, or local food communities. Using the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives offered in such rich encounters of public history, participants can reframe personal actions and choices as more than impulses of the moment or one-dimensional consumer decisions. No longer just spectators, audiences are recast as active learners whose experiences resonate both forward and backward in time.



A role-player at Strawberry Banke Museum (Portsmouth, NH) portrays Sheva Shapiro, a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant, processing heirloom seeds from the nearby garden to share with visitors. While staying largely within established conventions of presenting traditional foodways in first-person living history settings, Strawberry Banke's interpretive approach is designed to creatively link past and present, inviting visitors to consider issues of biodiversity, develop practical skills, and connect events in the past to ongoing narratives about migration and cultural property. (Image courtesy of Sherry Brandsema and Strawberry Banke Museum.)

Could these approaches really result in increased attendance? Early signs are that they do. Following a fiscal nadir in 2006, Old Sturbridge Village (OSV) expanded its interpretive program with special attention to agricultural topics. Initiatives included the addition of winter tours of root cellars and cooking with preserved food, a summer internship in sustainable agriculture, and the redevelopment of heirloom gardens. A sitewide exhibit, "Farms, Families, and Change," was initially spurred by funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities; as OSV developed it, it drew grants from two other foundations. In 2013, OSV reported its third straight year of increasing attendance.

A second gain for museums and historic sites lies in a renewed fealty to public service and educational mission. During the years of decline, history organizations have cut programs and staff and cast about for new income streams, often in the form of "peripheral" events like birthday parties, weddings, festivals, holiday-themed recreational events, and corporate gatherings. These activities serve as expedient survival strategies undertaken to counter declining gate receipts and support the bottom line. Demanding time, space, and funds to manage, these programmatic tails sometimes threaten to wag their dogs, drawing institutions into realms of activity only loosely correlated to purposes specified in their missions.

Reenvisioning the exploration of food as a complex topic of contemporary relevance gives institutions the opportunity to move from merely surviving to thriving, and to do it in ways that are no longer tangential, but which emanate from the core of the mission. Questions relating to food and farming are entwined with larger histories that will almost inevitably intersect in some way with an institution's central focus. Food-related programs, exhibitions, and events make use of the resources museums have built and protected over decades of operation: collections, historic settings and installations, reproduction objects, expert staff, existing bodies of research, practical knowledge, teaching expertise, outreach tools, public access, and the ability to articulate and explore meaningful questions. For example, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site in Kinderhook, New York has been making a gradual shift in interpretation from a historic house museum commemorating a political figure to a farm estate connected to a two-century narrative about land, labor, commerce, and democracy.²⁴ Already perceived as trustworthy sources of learning, museums and historic sites are well positioned to draw on both local historical content and larger narratives of food history to offer highly desired levels of skills-based practical training, convene respected symposia, host informative festival or educational events, or stage markets, expositions, and demonstrations. In addition to seeing these sites as credible sources of information, visitors also perceive them as more authentic when their experiences there fall within the institutions' perceived areas of intellectual and material strength. In their 2007 book *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, James Gilmore and Joseph Pine find that qualities of realness and honesty are prized by consumers operating within what they have termed the "experience economy."²⁵ Although it is important to question a too-simple notion of "authenticity," Gilmore and Pine's ideas are still useful in understanding visitor motivation and perception, particularly in relation to the museum. They note that in order to be perceived as authentic, a museum must "render authenticity" by being "true to itself" and true to the propositions it makes to potential participants. An authentic museum must "understand what you really are as a museum, specifically taking into account the essence of your enterprise, the nature of your artifacts, edifices, and encounters; the effects of your heritage; your sense of purpose; and your body of values, and then ensure that everything you do coincides with this identity."²⁶ Historically based interpretive projects emerging from a site or practitioner's genuine expertise in food-related topics, congruent with the principles and values of

24. See Cathy Stanton, *Plant Yourself in My Neighborhood: An Ethnographic Landscape Study of Farming and Farmers in Columbia County, New York* (for Martin Van Buren National Historic Site/National Park Service/Northeast Region Ethnography Program, 2012), <http://www.nps.gov/mava/historyculture/upload/Plant-Yourself-E-Copy.pdf>

25. James B. Gilmore, and B. Joseph Pine II, "Museums and Authenticity," *Museum News* 85, no. 3 (2007): 79. See also Pine and Gilmore, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (New York: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2007), and *The Experience Economy* (New York: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1999).

26. Gilmore and Pine, "Museums and Authenticity," 79.



Martin Van Buren National Historic Site in Kinderhook, New York has been making a gradual shift in interpretation from a historic house museum commemorating a political figure to a farm estate connected to a two-century narrative about land, labor, commerce, and democracy, as reflected in this wayside plaque overlooking the farm fields at Lindenwald, Van Buren's post-Presidential estate. (Photo courtesy of Cathy Stanton.)

public history and compatible with core aspects of common institutional purposes, promise to reunite the two streams of activity—revenue-generating and mission-driven—that have recently been moving in divergent directions, and to cement museums more deeply in the minds of the public as authentic and reliable resources.

Finally, food interpretation can help lay new foundations for long-term institutional sustainability. The locally rooted nature of food networks offers the opportunity to deepen community connections, in which the public historian can be partner, collaborator, expert, convener, teacher, learner, facilitator, and participant. The multimodal character of local and regional food systems can expand institutional and professional networks, creating opportunities for mutual advocacy within profoundly interdependent ecologies. Municipalities, state agencies, universities, restaurants and food businesses, food banks and other service organizations, school districts and teachers, grassroots groups, festivals and arts organizations, and food producers are only some of the potential partners and allies in amplifying the presence of public history in civic experience, and thus in increasing institutional impact and visibility. Because food systems take in a full range of entities from soil and land care to cultivation, distribution, and disposal along the production/

consumption continuum, changes in the food system are easily quantified and immediately evident, providing clear metrics and targets useful in goal-setting and funding case statements.²⁷ As communities address the longitudinal challenge of building food security, a topic which touches on everything from water resources to disaster planning to transportation networks to open-space policy, public historians can claim a central educational role in the real-world process of food system problem-solving, collaborating on both practical training and historical perspectives on land use, crop selection, household food supply responsibilities, coping with episodes of scarcity, threats to health, and other topics that reverberate through time.

In taking on this role, public historians and the organizations in which they work become contributors to community resilience.²⁸ Along with governmental bodies, schools, libraries, businesses, and other vital elements of localized systems, public historians can help to equip communities with tools for comprehending and addressing disruptions and challenges. These tools include critical assessment; the discovery and evaluation of historical models of production, consumption or exchange; and the organization of metanarratives providing contexts for decisionmaking and building adaptive self-understandings. In contributing to a community's resilience factors, public historians and their organizations create new kinds of justification for their presence in a community, the resources they consume, and their requirements for sustenance. Though there is some legitimate fear that historical

27. The practice of food systems mapping or food system assessment, done even at a rudimentary level, can help to identify partners and establish baseline benchmarks for the current state of the food system, providing comparables for future assessments of public history impact. For examples of thoroughly developed food system maps, see the Vermont Food Atlas, <http://www.vtfoodatlas.com/atlas>, and the Maryland Food Systems Map, <http://mdfoodsystemmap.org/map/>

28. The term "community resilience" is used here to refer to the presence of factors that allow a human community to withstand disruptions and continue to function in a healthy state. Resilience, in the natural sciences, is defined as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks" (Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* [Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006], 37). Before 1980, the term "community resilience" referred to the responses of groups of natural organisms to changes in habitat. Natural scientists observed that certain factors, such as species diversity or nutrient reserves, could help biological communities absorb a wide range of dramatic changes and return to a state of equilibrium. During the 1990s, the notion that the composition and structure of a community could determine its ability to sustain damage and continue to thrive found new application in the fields of international development and disaster response. Community resilience became a powerful guiding idea in global community and economic development. Today, governments, NGOs, and grassroots groups are exploring community resilience as protective construct usable by geographically distinct human populations to better contend with forces of change. These groups identify "resilience factors" in the social fabric and the built environment, and promote infrastructures that create greater resilience. For discussion of the application of concepts of biological resilience to the social world, see Fikret Berkes, Carl Folke, and Jonathan Colding's *Linking Social and Ecological Systems: Management Practices and Social Mechanisms for Building Resilience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Ayda Eraydin and Tuna Taşan-Kok's *Resilience Thinking in Urban Planning* (New York: Springer, 2012).

organizations may face potential risks to fundraising and corporate relations when directly linking history to present-day policy issues, being “part of the solution” may in fact engender increased support from individual donors, community foundations, “green” and other transformational businesses, school districts and universities, and new partner organizations. In an age when the relevance and even necessity of cultural learning is contested, the contribution of expertise in presenting information and framing questions with historical context is a strong indicator of value.

Conclusion

In concluding, we would like to offer a note about our own positionality within the topics we are exploring here. Both of us are supporters of the multifaceted effort to build or rebuild less energy-dense, more locally and regionally scaled, socially inclusive, environmentally responsible food systems. We are in general agreement with those who argue that longer, more corporatized food chains and reliance on greater mechanization and bioengineering extend rather than address the problems that threaten long-term food security. We are not disinterested observers, and that is part of our larger argument: in a time of planetary crisis, disinterested observation is becoming more and more of a luxury, as well as a stance that public historians and other public humanists have increasingly begun to question for a variety of reasons.²⁹ The arguments in this article are made from the position that we should all be seeking ways to align our work with projects we believe are most productively addressing the larger problems we all face.

However, we also believe that one of the best gifts public historians can bring to the food movement is our critical sensibility and our ability to create thoughtful and inclusive rather than purely polemical or purely academic spaces for discourse. The movements we support urgently need friendly critics who can draw on the long historical record of past attempts to keep small-scale farming viable within commercial agricultural economies, and who will join in the task of facing difficult questions as part of building more

29. A growing literature addresses the role of engaged scholarship and practice, a topic that has of course been central to public historical discourse since the emergence of the professional field in the 1970s. For some recent works on civic engagement from around the humanities, see Ruth J. Abram, “Kitchen Conversations: Democracy in Action at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 59-76; Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, *Letting Go? Sharing Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011); Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Julie Ellison, “The New Public Humanists,” *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (March 2013): 289-98; Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Liz Ševčenko, “Sites of Conscience: New Approaches to Conflicted Memory,” *Museum International* 62, no. 1-2 (May 2010): 20-25; and the Publicly Engaged Scholars Study from Imagining America, <http://imaginingamerica.org/research/engaged-scholars/>.

sustainable futures.³⁰ The environmental implications of our still-expanding industrial and fossil-fuel-powered global economy are staggering, and the problems involved in changing course are immense. The politically fraught attempts to address these issues over the past decade show us how badly we need inclusive civic spaces where those questions can be raised and considered. Public historians have a vital role to play in creating those spaces, and in doing so, we will strengthen the case for the essential value of our own work. Food is a small part of the larger picture in some ways, but it is a part that connects to nearly everything else: modes of production and exchange, ecological impacts and relationships, cultural memory and individual and collective change. We should use it as a starting point with those larger contexts in mind, but we should resist the temptation to treat it as just a stepping-stone to “real” histories. We should pursue it not only as a rich subject in its own right but a point of connection to principled, consequential participation in civic life. If we can do that, we will enter more fully into dialogues that our current and potential audiences are already engaged in about questions that become more urgent and inescapable with every passing season.

MICHELLE MOON is Assistant Director for Adult Programs at the Peabody Essex Museum. Building on a background in K-12 formal and experiential education, she has held positions in museum education and interpretation, serving as Director of Education at Strawberry Banke Museum, in Portsmouth, NH and as Program Area Coordinator at Mystic Seaport. She is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Museum Studies at the Harvard Extension Studies program. Her interests focus on museums as resources for building social capital and community resilience, including intersections with cultural and economic development, placemaking, and the creative economy.

CATHY STANTON is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Tufts University and an active public historian who has served as a consultant to the National Park Service’s Ethnography Program for many years. Her 2012 study “Plant Yourself in My Neighborhood: An Ethnographic Landscape Study of Farms and Farmers in Columbia County, New York,” won a 2013 Excellence in Consulting award from the National Council on Public History. With Michelle Moon, she is co-authoring a book for Left Coast Press on how history can help reinvent the food system.

30. We are indebted to the participants in the 2013 National Council on Public History Working Group on “Public Historians and the Local Food Movement” for helping us to articulate this vision for public history’s participation within the politics of food and farming. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers who suggested ways to sharpen this and other arguments in this article.