Confronting Whiteness with the Public Humanities

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In The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin wrote that white people in America are, “trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.” In writing those words, Baldwin meant to convey two things to his nephew, for whom the essay was written. First, that systemic racism ensured that the young Black man would grow up “under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago,” simply because he was black. Second, that white people, above all else, believed in their innocence from this fact. They didn’t see themselves as benefactors of privilege or creators of inequality because the history they believed in assured them they were not.

I’m sure images from the past few years are coming to your mind, too, in reading these lines. I’m thinking about a white woman filing a false report (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/nyregion/amy-cooper-false-report-charge.html) to the police about being threatened by a Black birdwatcher in Central Park and a white man carrying the Confederate flag inside the US capitol to symbolize his opposition to tyranny (https://theconversation.com/the-confederate-battle-flag-which-rioters-flew-inside-the-us-capitol-has-long-been-a-symbol-of-white-insurrection-153071). Beyond these public moments, there are private ones. I remember the stories I heard about my Italian relatives who immigrated from Italy, who worked hard and achieved the America Dream the right way, unlike those other immigrants from places like Mexico.

As with so much else, Baldwin was right about the dangerousness of these white histories. In reflecting on the challenges and opportunities facing the public humanities now, I see whiteness as both. Can public humanists, those working in state humanities councils, museums, and other cultural institutions, take up Baldwin’s call to help unravel the history that so many white people still believe in? In many ways, we’re well positioned to do

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so. The public humanities were created as a bridge between university-based scholars and the public. The scholarship on whiteness is rich and deep. Most white people, I’d guess, don’t see whiteness as a racial category that was constructed historically, legally, and politically to give them material privileges. Can community conversations, museum exhibits, and digital projects show the public this historical reality? Interestingly, one of the biggest pushes in the last several years has been to increase racial diversity in the public humanities (https://inclusivehistorian.com/humanities-councils/), from hiring more people of color to reaching audiences beyond the traditional public humanities audience of middle-class white people.

Efforts to tell the history of whiteness as a materially privileged racial category are critical, but we can also see the fact that much of our audience is white as an opportunity to address these issues with the people who need to engage with them the most. The invisibility of whiteness and its connection to material privilege needs to be revealed in order for us to create a racially just nation. I hope that public humanists make this a central focus of their work in the future.

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Read more here: https://humanitiesforall.org/blog/exploring-whats-new-in-the-public-humanities