

ARTICLE

Public Participation as Decentralization of the History-Making Process: The *HistorEsch* Project in Luxembourg

Thomas Cauvin 

Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

Email: thomas.cauvin@uni.lu

(Received 13 August 2024; revised 21 November 2024; accepted 26 November 2024)

Abstract

In this article, I explore how public participation affects the research and production of history. As a way of making history more accessible, more participatory, and more connected to present-day public engagement with the past, public history fully belongs to the public humanities. In public participation as decentralization of the history-making process: the *HistorEsch* project in Luxembourg, I discuss the collaboration among historians, artists, and local residents to co-construct new public historical narratives of the town of Esch-sur-Alzette, in Luxembourg. As a paradigm, public history questions and reinvents the role of professional historians who share authority with other actors in the history-making process.

Keywords: Public history; participation; Luxembourg; authority; citizen science

The production, discussion, and dissemination of historical knowledge have entered a new public phase that connects to public humanities.¹ Popularized in the United States of America during the 1970s, public history is now used and practiced all around the world.² Similar to a broader participatory turn in knowledge production, the tenants of public history often support collaboration and participatory practices.³ The participation of members of the public in the production of historical knowledge raises a new set of methodological and ethical questions. What does participation bring to participants, to professional researchers, and to the production of historical narratives itself? More broadly, public participation forces practitioners to reflect on – and perhaps reinvent – their role and expertise.

The article connects theory and practice and focuses on the *HistorEsch* project in Luxembourg (Figure 1). As the 2022 European Capital of Culture (with Kaunas in Lithuania), the town of Esch-sur-Alzette in Luxembourg was the site of a variety of cultural projects, many of which centred around public participation.⁴ Several researchers at the University of

¹ Lubar 2014.

² Map of public history centres and programmes, <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1ZhqyOdB0BcjScyhKsjsTRo9V3Ps2mS2q&femb=1&ll=-3.81666561775622e-14%2C0&z=1> (accessed July 17, 2024).

³ Cauvin 2021.

⁴ As a small country at the heart of Western Europe, Luxembourg has a long history of cultural diversity resulting from transnational migrations that have accompanied industrial development since the late 19th century.



Figure 1. Map of Luxembourg.

Luxembourg took this opportunity to propose, develop, and evaluate public history projects that connect researchers, cultural institutions, associations, and local residents.

Initiated by Thomas Cauvin and Joëlla van Donkersgoed at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), *HistorEsch* – a play on words between “history” and the name of the town – serves here as a case study to better understand the issues at stake in the participatory construction of history.⁵ *HistorEsch* was part of a wider public history initiative called *Public History as the New Citizen Science of the Past* (PHACS) that aims to apply citizen science methodology to develop participatory public history.⁶ *HistorEsch* was a collaborative project with cultural institutions (KulturFabrik and Nuit de la Culture), urban artists, and local residents to collectively interpret and represent the history of Esch-sur-Alzette in the public space. The project led to the production of two main collaborative initiatives: a historical wall painting and an exhibition on the history of the town in 25 family objects. Through this project, the article proposes to develop and assess public history as a way to decentralize expertise and authority in the overall production of knowledge, including the collection, selection, interpretation, and communication of historical meanings.

Public history as decentralization of authority

Public history invites us to reflect upon who is contributing to historical research. A good place to start is through the relationship between public history and oral history. Michael

Although relatively small (35,000 inhabitants), Esch-sur-Alzette (Esch) is the second-largest municipality in Luxembourg in terms of population.

⁵ *HistorEsch* website, <https://historesch.lu/historesch/> (accessed July 13, 2024).

⁶ *Public History as the New Citizen Science of the Past*, <https://www.uni.lu/c2dh-en/research-projects/phacs/> (accessed July 13, 2024).

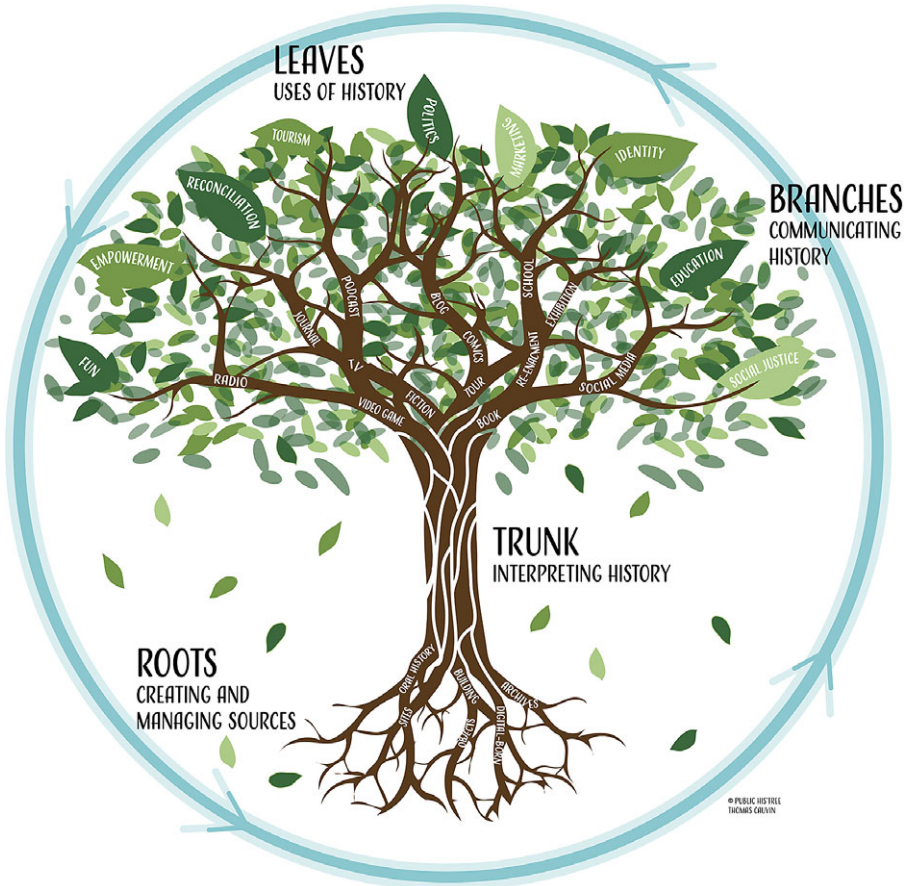


Figure 2. The Public His'Tree.

Frisch's book "*A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*" pointed to the redefinition of authority.⁷ Focusing on oral history, he argued that the authority of the historian is, by definition, shared with that of the narrator.⁸ This shared authority can actually apply to all steps of public history.

Public history can be compared to a tree, a system in which the roots, the trunk, the branches, and the leaves are interconnected (Figure 2). The production of history is not limited to the trunk – the traditional critical and contextualized interpretation of archives – but extends to the creation and preservation of sources (the roots), the communication of historical narratives through a variety of media (branches), and the public relevance for individuals, groups, and institutions (leaves). Public history is produced in different parts, making it a truly decentralized process of knowledge production.⁹

Making public history combines different steps and different types of expertise. In other words, trained historians are never the sole actors of the process and often rely on and

⁷ Frisch 1990.

⁸ Frisch 2011 and Shopes 2003.

⁹ Cauvin 2021.



Figure 3. HistorEsch wall painting.

collaborate with archivists (roots), designers (branches), or historical witnesses (both roots and leaves). Working with media and communication specialists, computer scientists, and artists can for instance help to develop accessibility and therefore make history more public.

We collaborated with a visual artist from Portugal – Mariana Duarte Santos – to produce a historical wall painting in the public space. Based on private archives and oral history, the wall painting was an artistic representation of the town’s past. In this case, the collaboration between historians and the artist helped to visually represent (and make accessible) many historic sites and various personal memories of a changing neighborhood (Figure 3). The challenge of this interdisciplinary approach was to make the public understand that this project was an artistic representation of history, an in-between format that required an additional level of explanation that we produced through an audio explanation accessible via a free phone number.

Decentralizing history also means doing and producing history beyond usual institutional spaces.¹⁰ Unlike some traditional cultural institutions that may have a high threshold for certain groups (of lower socio-economic status or with other reasons for disinclination), HistorEsch aimed, as co-project manager Dr. Joëlla van Donkersgoed argues, to bring history to people where they already live.¹¹ We tried to limit the public threshold to access history

¹⁰ Franco 2017.

¹¹ van Donkersgoed 2024.

so the exhibition was accessible (free entry) in one store in the city centre. The painting was created in a low-income neighbourhood, on the wall of a city-owned building accessible to everyone, opposite a site where a new large supermarket is being built.

All our public meetings with the participants took place in coffee places or public community spaces – and not on campus where academic settings could impose pre-existing power relations. Developing accessibility to history contributes to pushing back against the public impressions of scholarly work being elitist and disconnected from reality. Collaboration and decentralization of the public history process contributed to breaking barriers between scholars, practitioners, and local residents, and played a role in the dissemination of historical research.

Bridges between citizen science and public history: tools to support inclusion

Collaboration is not restricted to professionals from different disciplines; it can include non-academic members of the public. Regarding those members of the public, it is crucial for public history to identify and be aware of who is (and who is not) doing and contributing to the history production, to better understand dominant narratives and dominant groups. As Chris Taylor stresses in his article for *The Inclusive Historian*, “Inclusion emphasizes whether members of diverse groups feel valued and respected within an organization, project, or social system.”¹² Making history more public supports inclusion, trust, and respect between participants. These values should be inscribed in all the steps of the collaborative citizen methodology.

Following the Public History as the new Citizen Science of the Past’s methodology and inspired by the European Citizen Science Association’s principles, we have conceived *HistorEsch* as a citizen science project based on three main pillars.¹³ First, members of the public are not passive sources but are active participants in the production of historical knowledge.¹⁴ Second, public participation is divided into several tasks and practices so that different profiles, different types of expertise, and different types of commitment (time, resources, availability) can co-exist. Finally, the project should lead to mutual benefit for all participants.

The citizen science participatory approach helped us collect sources for the research. Debates about archiving have shown that public participation helps to enrich and diversify resources and improves the representativity of groups and communities.¹⁵ As Michel-Rolph Trouillot explained in *Silencing the Past*, the recording, collecting, and interpreting of archives involves a succession of steps – choices – that define what is worth preserving or silencing.¹⁶ Like museums, archives are not neutral; they are expressions and results of long processes of selection and interpretation. The concept of silencing and representativity in official archives has encouraged practitioners to develop public collaboration.¹⁷

¹² Taylor 2019.

¹³ European Citizen Science Association, “Ten Principles”, <https://eu-citizen.science/resource/88> (accessed July 13, 2024).

¹⁴ High 2009.

¹⁵ Flynn 2012.

¹⁶ Trouillot 1995.

¹⁷ Johnson 2017.



Figure 4. Wood wagon used to collect objects all over the town.

In order to develop participatory public history, the initiators of *HistorEsch* decided to not work with objects, archives, documents, and testimonies already present in official cultural institutions such as museums, archives, and libraries. We instead developed participatory collecting for three main types of sources: physical objects, photographs, and oral testimonies. We had public collecting events all around towns, either through community events or with our wood wagon (Figure 4). For the exhibition, we asked members of the public to look for family objects that they believe tell personal stories that reflect the history of the town. We also created a website where users could download pictures and descriptions of their object.¹⁸ We also use digital tools to gather private photographs of the town. In 2021 we launched a Facebook group about the history of Esch-sur-Alzette, which we called *FL'ESCH Back* – a play on the words “Esch” and “flashback.”¹⁹ By 2022, it had accumulated 1400 members and served as a forum to share documents and stories and to discuss specific aspects of the town’s history. Offering different channels of participation – on-site, online – allowed us to adapt to the variety of participants’ profiles and availability.

We also collected new oral testimonies. Oral history offers ways to access and collect sources for individuals, groups, and topics that may be absent from official archives.²⁰ Used since the 1930s to support a bottom-up and people history approach that includes ethnic minorities, oral history has been instrumental in fighting colonial structures in archival and historical

¹⁸ “*HistorEsch*”, <https://wordpress-892559-3095890.cloudwaysapps.com/index.php/exposition-d-objet/> (accessed July 13, 2024). The website offered a simple interface with information to understand the value and meaning of the objects.

¹⁹ “*FL'ESCH Back*”, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fleschback> (accessed July 13, 2024).

²⁰ Portelli 2005.



Figure 5. Teddy bear submitted online by Anna-Maria.

production.²¹ We used oral history to counter-balance the relative absence of sources about certain groups in municipal and national archives. Besides the preliminary oral history of the residents in the mural's neighborhood, we identified groups and communities with whom we had little contact. For instance, while representing 15 percent of the whole population in the country, and close to one-third of the population in the Esch-sur-Alzette region, members of the Portuguese-speaking communities were relatively absent from the *HistorEsch* participants. Our next project *Lovò* is therefore based on a co-produced history of the town through the oral history of Portuguese-speaking grand-mothers.²²

We collected 106 objects for the exhibition, around 60 photographs, and a dozen of oral testimonies about the history of Esch-sur-Alzette. The participatory process had clear consequences on the types of collected materials. For instance, very few objects dealt with political, economic, or cultural elites. Many more are related instead to the everyday life of ordinary people.²³ Many objects – like a teddy bear (Figure 5) that belongs to Anna-Maria who immigrated from Italy to Esch-sur-Alzette when she was six – reflected a very personal understanding of the town's past. Other objects were more rare from a historical perspective. For instance, one participant brought a wooden toy that had been made by one of the *Ostarbeiters* in the camps established by the Nazis to provide labour for local factories during the Second World War (Figure 6). The *Ostarbeiter* made the toy and gave it to the participant's mother to thank her for sharing food during the war. Through that family object, the exhibition was able to include an aspect of the past that has been relatively absent from the official history.

Public participation helped connect individual, family, and broader histories of Esch-sur-Alzette. We witnessed it concretely when participants brought friends and family members

²¹ Rabêlo de Almeida 2024.

²² "Are we Home Yet?", <https://historesch.lu/en/research-theme/fleschback/> (accessed July 13, 2024).

²³ "HistorEsch", <https://wordpress-892559-3095890.cloudwaysapps.com/index.php/exposition-d-objet/> (accessed July 13, 2024).



Figure 6. Wooden toy designed by an *Ostarbeiter* during the Second World War. Collected during one of the workshops.

for the opening of the exhibition to show how their objects – a bike, a teddy bear, a cooking tool – and their memories and stories were now part of a public history of the town. Participants appropriating the history of the town contributed to not only disseminating historical research but also empowering members of the public.

Expertise and decision-making in participatory public history

One of the major challenges for participatory public history is to offer inclusive frameworks that combine different types of expertise and sometimes conflicting interpretations from a variety of partners. The participation of members of the public in the collecting as well as the interpreting of sources meant, by definition, the presence of a plurality of memories and perspectives. This plurality and diversity of voices helped to make the process less exclusively academic and more representative of the diversity of the public. It also raised questions about authority in the decision-making.²⁴

HistorEsch was based on multiple types of combined expertise. For instance, the artist was responsible for proposing sketches and realizing the wall painting. Residents provided photographs, memories, and testimonies based on their living expertise. Other participants contributed as moderators, event organizers, or community “fixers” who act as vectors of public participation through their social expertise and knowledge of the local networks of communities.²⁵ The combination of expertise in *HistorEsch* was based on mutual respect and clear acknowledgment of what every participant could bring to the project. For the university researchers, it also meant reflecting upon their assigned role in the project.

The role of professional historians – paid for their activities of historians – in participatory projects remains subject to many debates and has been at the core of the public history debates since the early 1980s.²⁶ I see the historians doing public history as walking a fine line between two no-go zones. On the one hand, historians are not bringing historical truths to passive audiences. While few historians would work today as missionaries bringing knowledge to the masses, it is important to not act as simple providers of historical meanings. On

²⁴ Leon 2017.

²⁵ Issued from the field of journalism, fixers are locals who help foreign correspondents. They translate, guide, arrange interviews with members of the communities. Not often acknowledged in the final production, fixers are yet active participants and clearly ensure the links with local communities.

²⁶ Grele 1981.

the other hand, historical critical methodology is crucial to public history and public participation should not lead to any relativism. In other words, the participatory construction of history does not mean that all interpretations of the past are true or equally valid. Jim Gardner, an American historian who has practised public history for decades, insists on the difference between opinion and knowledge, with the latter – to which public history belongs – being a construction based on evidence and methodology.²⁷ Historians should not completely disappear behind historical witnesses and participants.

Citizen science often includes quality control steps in which historians can take part. Rather than controlling, I see the role of professional historians as working at guaranteeing scientific frameworks in which participants can co-produce historical narratives. With the input from participatory design, we later called this process “infrastructuring public history.”²⁸ This for instance leads historians to help participants come up with questions about the past. We set up a group of volunteers who would act as an advisory board for both the wall painting and the exhibition. The group was called the Citizen Historian Circle or *CHiC*. The group offered three types of expertise: lived expertise, research expertise, and community-network expertise. During the *CHiC* meetings, the historians helped frame the talk through an investigation of the past, coming up with questions on how the neighbourhood had changed over time. Questioning changes – when, why, how – was one of the most relevant tasks of the historians. Historians were also useful when additional information was needed regarding sites, events, and characters identified by the *CHiC*. For instance, the participants identified a former local airfield as one of the most authentic historical sites of the neighbourhood. The researchers were able to find and share historical images of what had been the first airfield in Luxembourg, with a direct connection with London for several decades. Information about the historical context was particularly useful for the artist to replace testimonies, family pictures, and documents with a broader understanding of the past. Helping to connect individual, family, and broader stories is perhaps the most critical role of professional historians in participatory projects. Mary Rizzo shows how the participation of historians in a participatory history project in Baltimore contributed to highlighting long and broad processes at play – though not clearly visible – in oral histories.²⁹ Connecting individuals, groups, and broader contexts was particularly needed for the exhibition on the history of Esch-sur-Alzette in 25 family objects. As the texts accompanying the objects were co-written between the members of the *CHiC*, the donors of the objects, and local residents, it was important to make sure to show how individual stories were illuminating broader histories; a kitchen tool and Italian migration in the 1930s, a bike and the development of transportation and industrialization in the 1960s, a toy made in 1943 and the prisoners brought by the Nazis from the East to Luxembourg during the Second World War.

Decentralizing authority in public history also meant not knowing exactly what the project would look like. In *HistorEsch*, the level of control over the final product was limited. Project leaders – archivists, curators, and historians – usually have the power to select and decide what material is worth using, preserving, or interpreting. In *HistorEsch*, some steps in the decision-making process were collective and public. As demonstrated in the book *The Public in Public History*, practitioners have to engage more openly with the definitions and frames of what the term “public” means.³⁰ For *HistorEsch*, one question

²⁷ Gardner 2010.

²⁸ Tsenova, Teli, van Donkersgoed, and Cauvin 2024.

²⁹ Rizzo 2021.

³⁰ Wojdon and Wiśniewska 2021.

was about who could take part in the decision-making. For the research part, the members of the *CHiC* were central and contributed to defining the historical themes of the wall painting and the five historical categories of the exhibition. Both for the wall painting and for the exhibition, local residents were involved in deciding what the project would be about. The artist designed six different sketches to serve as wall paintings and for which residents could vote. Similarly, 106 family objects had been collected for an exhibition in which only 25 could be on display. So who should be able to vote for the sketches and the selection of objects? Who could decide what representations of the town would be on display? Could anyone – even people who may have found the website online but who had absolutely no connection to or knowledge of the town – vote and decide equally with people who actually lived through and had a personal connection to the town’s history? Conversely, was it justified to restrict access to the voting – and if so, how? Although a small and humble project, *HistorEsch* raised questions about who can and should take part in and decide on participatory public history.

For the wall painting, the organizers and the member of the *CHiC* wanted to give some priorities to the residents of the neighborhood while also offering the possibility for other people interested in local history to vote. To give the people who actually live in the neighbourhood greater influence over the final decision, we gave more points (3) to votes collected on-site and through the local door-to-door canvassing process (Figure 7). Online voting was advertised through the Facebook group and each vote was equivalent to one point. While imperfect, the system of weighted votes mirrored the different levels of participation in the project.³¹

Decentralizing the decision-making process allowed us to fight the images of the elitist and isolated scholars that some members of the public may have. It also prevented researchers to work as gatekeepers and act instead more as facilitator of critical and participatory production of history. *CHiC*’s local residents were not simple contributors to the project but worked as active representatives of *HistorEsch*, presenting the project to the press.

Making the production of history more public aims to support accessibility, engagement, and participation. *HistorEsch* started as a research project at the University of Luxembourg and became a participatory experience in which skills, expertise, and knowledge were combined to produce more inclusive historical processes and narratives. Public history does not necessarily mean that all participants can equally take part in all steps of the research production, but it surely widens the opportunities for the members of the public to actively engage, contribute, coproduce, and reclaim historical narratives. Participation is key to make the members of the public to appropriate and help disseminate historical research. Making historical narratives more inclusive does not necessarily mean adding voices to official history but can mean bringing individual and group experiences, memories, and traces of the past to the fore of the public space. Identifying what histories, what topics, and what groups are present and absent from the overall production of history – in the archives, in the historiography, as participants – has been and will continue to be one of the most important roles of public history practitioners.

³¹ We received more than 250 votes. Because of a lack of time and GDPR issues, it was not possible to survey the profiles of the voters. However, this could have brought an additional understanding of who the “public” in this public history project actually was.



Figure 7. Voting station for the wall painting.

Thomas Cauvin is Associate Professor of Public History at the University of Luxembourg and the Head of the Public History Department at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History – C2DH. He is a FNR-ATTRACT Fellow and leads the *Public History as the New Citizen Science of the Past* (PHACS) project. Cauvin is the Director of the newly created Master in Digital and Public History (MADiPH) at the University of Luxembourg; he has been the President of the International Federation for Public History from 2018 to 2021. He received his PhD at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy, 2012) and worked for several years in the United States at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (2013–2017) and Colorado State University (2017–2020). He is the author of *Public History. A Textbook of Practice* (Routledge, 2022, second edition) and several articles and book chapters on public history.

Author contribution. Writing – original draft: T.C.

Funding Statement. Publication supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund, ATTRACT programme.

References

- Cauvin, Thomas. 2021. “New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History.” *Magazen* 2/1: 13–44. <https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni4/riviste/magazen/2021/1/new-field-old-practices-promises-and-challenges-of/>.

- de Almeida Rabêlo, Juniele. 2024. "Counter-Colonial Aspects in and Through Public History in Brazil: Participatory Research, Oral History and Corporeality – Embodied Ways of Storytelling." *International Public History* 7 (1): 27–34. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2024-2007>.
- Flynn, Andrew. 2012. "Archives and Their Communities: Collecting Histories, Challenging Heritage." In *Memory, Narrative and Histories: Critical Debates, New Trajectories*, edited by Graham Dawson, 19–35. University of Brighton, Centre for Research in Memory, Narrative and Histories.
- Franco, Barbara. 2017. "Decentralizing Culture: Public History and Communities." In *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, edited by James Gardner and Paula Hamilton, 69–86. Oxford University Press.
- Frisch, Michael. 1990. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. State University of New York Press.
- Frisch, Michael. 2011. "From a Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back." In *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, edited by Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, 126–37. The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage.
- Gardner, James B. 2010. "Trust, Risk and Public History: A View from the United States." *Public History Review* 17: 52–61. <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/phrj/article/view/1852>.
- Grele, Ronald J. 1981. "Whose Public? Whose History? What Is the Goal of a Public Historian?" *The Public Historian* 3 1: 40–8. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3377160>.
- High, Steven. 2009. "Sharing Authority: An Introduction." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43 (1): 12–34.
- Johnson, Valérie. 2017. "Solutions to the Silence." In *The Silence of the Archive*, edited by David Thomas, 141–62. Neal-Schuman.
- Leon, Sharon. 2017. "Complexity and Collaboration: Doing Public History in Digital Environments." In *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, edited by Gardner James and Paula Hamilton, 44–67. Oxford University Press.
- Lubar, Steven. 2014. "Seven Rules for Public Humanists." *On Public Humanities*. <https://stevenlubar.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/seven-rules-for-public-humanists/>.
- Portelli, Alessandro. 2005. "A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History." *Expressions Annual* 14: 1–8.
- Rizzo, Mary. 2021. "Who Speaks for Baltimore: The Invisibility of Whiteness and the Ethics of Oral History Theater." *The Oral History Review* 48: 154–79 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2021.1943463>.
- Shopes, Linda. 2003. "Commentary: Sharing Authority." In *The Oral History Review* 30 (1): 103–10.
- Taylor, Chris. 2019. "Diversity and Inclusion." In *The Inclusive Historian*. <https://inclusivehistorian.com/diversity-and-inclusion/> (accessed July 13, 2024).
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press.
- Tsenova, Violeta, Maurizio Teli, Joëlla van Donkersgoed, and Thomas Cauvin. 2024. "Infrastructuring Public History: When Participation Deals with the Past." *Participatory Design Conference Proceeding*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3666094.3666106>.
- Van Donkersgoed, Joëlla. 2024. "Be Where the People Are: Public Historical Engagement in the Public Space." In *History in Public Space*, edited by Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewska, 124–40. Routledge.
- Wojdon, Joanna and Dorota Wiśniewska (Eds.). 2021. *Public in Public History*. Routledge.

Cite this article: Cauvin, Thomas. 2025. "Public Participation as Decentralization of the History-Making Process: The HistorEsch Project in Luxembourg." *Public Humanities*, 1, e58, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.67>