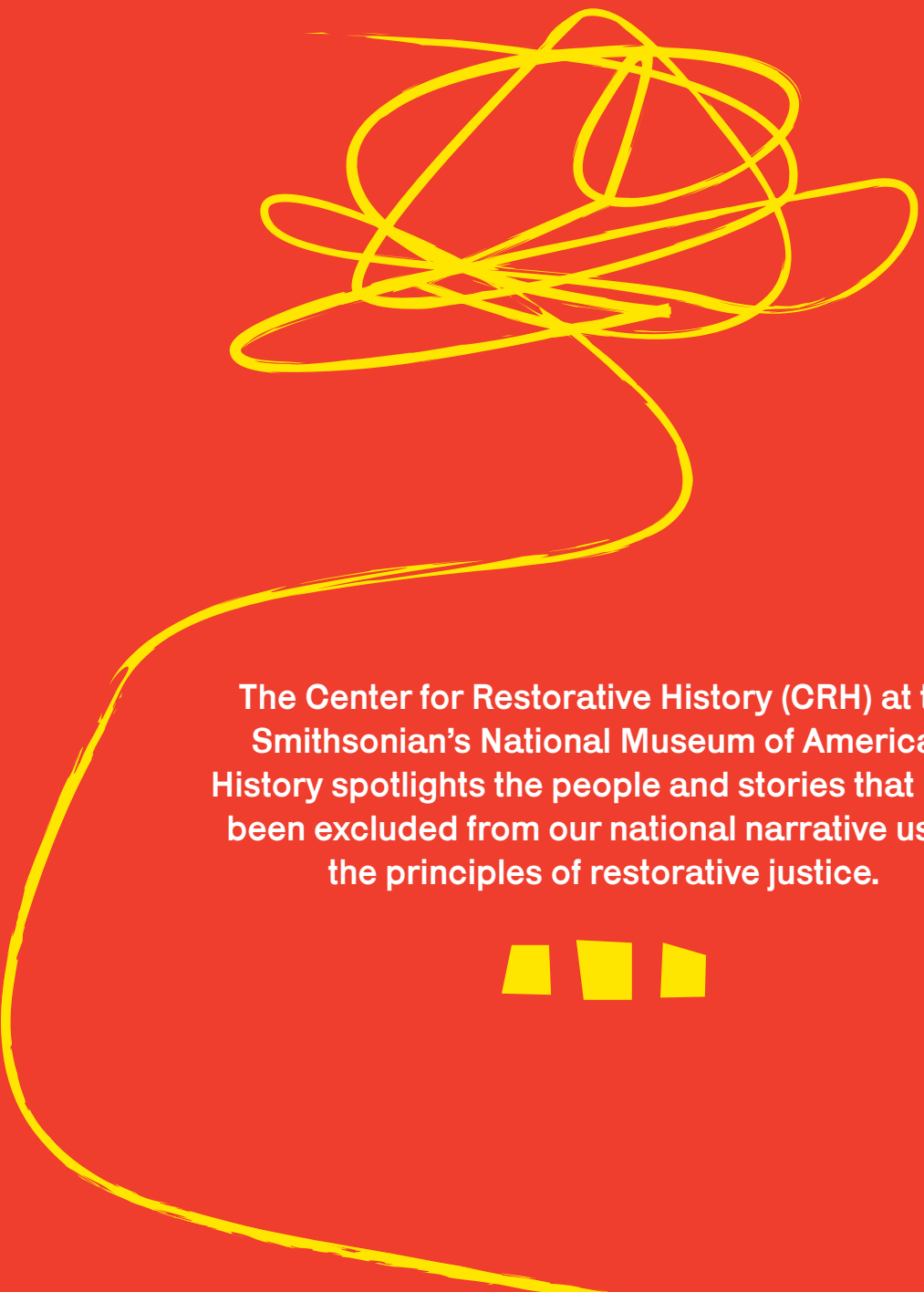


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# RESTORATIVE HISTORY

[explained]

**Who makes history?  
Who decides which stories are told?  
What happens when we amplify  
silenced histories?**



**The Center for Restorative History (CRH) at the  
Smithsonian's National Museum of American  
History spotlights the people and stories that have  
been excluded from our national narrative using  
the principles of restorative justice.**



# Table of Contents:

1

What Is Restorative History?

2

What Does Restorative History Look Like in Practice?

3

What Is the Center for Restorative History?

4

How Can I Learn More about Restorative History?

# 1

## What Is Restorative History?

RESTORATIVE HISTORY *is a theory, a method, and a practice.* Drawing on the principles of restorative justice, Restorative History addresses the needs of historically harmed communities\* by examining the past to understand the root causes of historical harms. It turns to community-based knowledge to define the best path forward, and it spotlights communities across the country that continue to resist historical exclusions. Restorative History works with these diverse voices to make public history a practical tool for justice that confronts the past and ongoing impacts of systemic harm.



A historically harmed community is a group of people who have experienced one harm or multiple harms repeatedly over a long period of time. This harm usually arises because of systemic oppression. Examples of historically harmed communities in the United States are BIPOC people (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color); LGBTQ+ people (who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and more); people with disabilities; working-class people; people from regions without equal access to education and museums; and people who have intersecting identities within these communities.

# RESTORATIVE HISTORY...

- makes history a practical tool for justice
- privileges community knowledge to expose truths ~~silenced~~ in historical narratives
- creates partnerships based on mutual capacity building
- confronts legacies of injustices that our institutions have perpetuated

**Restorative History calls on individuals and institutions to cede authority and to center communities as experts on their own history. This framework grounds its collaborative work in the following four questions:**



### **What harm has been done?**

Restorative history collaborates with impacted communities to investigate historical harms that result in ongoing systemic oppression. Identifying harms also means examining how public history institutions may continue to perpetuate harm by overlooking, minimizing, or excluding certain communities from historical narratives.

### **What are the community's stated needs?**

By developing deep and long-term relationships, Restorative History creates space for communities to identify their needs. Importantly, Restorative History understands that only those who have experienced harm can define those needs.

### **What are the institution's obligations to meet those needs?**

Restorative History acknowledges that some wrongs can never be fully repaired. In consultation with community partners, Restorative History highlights institutional obligations to redress historical harms and meet the community's stated needs.

### **What are the root causes of that harm?**

Restorative History works directly with harmed communities to investigate the root causes of historical harm. In this way, Restorative History is a systemic intervention, concerned with both structural root causes of harm and future systemic changes needed within public history institutions. Through this approach, history can become a practical tool for justice.

## 2

# What Does Restorative History Look Like in Practice?

Restorative History offers practical ways to redress legacies of harm. The practices outlined below may be at odds with standard policies and procedures, challenging practitioners and institutions to shift priorities and resource allocation. This is not a linear, one-size-fits-all guide. Often, different stages of a Restorative History project engage with multiple practices at a time, and community needs will drive how and when these are implemented. You can find additional resources about Restorative History in Section 4.

## Institutional Assessment

Because Restorative History encourages systemic change within an organization, it is important to gauge an institution's capacity to practice Restorative History before beginning a project. Systemic changes to an institution may include extending project timelines and allocating travel expenses to build relationships; accommodating multiple cycles of community feedback; assessing staffing and professional development procedures for equity; prioritizing community co-curation over unilateral institutional decisions; and identifying other opportunities for the institution to cede authority to communities.

The sustainability of a restorative history approach largely hinges on an institution's ability and willingness to alter standard practices and funding allocation, to prioritize long-term community engagement over end-products. The assessment process should be introspective, and the outcome should identify the institution's bandwidth for prioritizing structural justice.

## **Breaking Bread & Building Relationships**

From beginning to end, Restorative History is about relationships, and developing trust takes time. Breaking bread with potential community partners gives them the space to voice their questions, concerns, goals, and needs. Prioritize traveling to meet with community stakeholders in person to better understand local dynamics. Also be open to a project shifting or dissolving as a result of these meetings and be transparent about your institution's bandwidth.

## **Co-Production of Knowledge & Expertise**

Restorative History challenges the often unidirectional flow of information from institutions to the public. Instead, it integrates community-based expertise to increase public understanding of critical issues that impact daily life for at-risk communities. In this way, Restorative History offers a collaborative approach that ensures community needs and knowledge production remain central to the process. The co-production of knowledge can impact every aspect of a project, from the chosen methods of documentation to the scope of a final deliverable.

## **Mutual Capacity-Building**

Mutual capacity-building prioritizes the shared exchange of resources, assets, skills, and knowledge to support community partner needs. This exchange is central to institutional accountability and paves the way for a public history organization to fulfill its obligations to its community partners. Mutual capacity-building may take the form of workshops, toolkits, targeted publications, educational programming, or other resources that community partners identify.



## **Strategic Partnerships**

Having a strong network of support and knowledge is integral to the success of Restorative History, as it helps a public history institution remain accountable and receive honest feedback about its practices and procedures. It is important to develop strategic partnerships not only with historically harmed communities, but also with global leaders in social and restorative justice. These collaborations can help strengthen existing projects, identify shortcomings, and expose new pathways for redress.

## **Structural Changes to Policies & Procedures**

As a systemic intervention, Restorative History can help transform policies to effectively meet the partner's needs while also redressing past and current practices that perpetuate harm. For example, community collaboration may require altering standard procedures for project development or publications. In other contexts, it may be necessary to establish new participant-consent guidelines that prioritize community safety and values over scholarly interest. Working to translate community needs into policy change is a defining feature of Restorative History that distinguishes it from other forms of community engagement.

### 3

## What Is the Center for Restorative History?

Founded in 2019 by Tsione Wolde-Michael and Nancy Bercaw, the Center for Restorative History (CRH) emerged out of the National Museum of American History to address a critical gap in how museums tell stories about the past. Working out of a national museum was an important intervention, as the museum is an institution that has perpetuated harm through its histories of collecting and display. By defining restorative practice and working with historically harmed communities, the CRH is transforming the national historical narrative, restructuring institutional priorities, and privileging knowledge production in the communities that have been silenced or overlooked by museums and other educational institutions.

Today, the CRH is comprised of predominantly BIPOC staff who bring expertise across the spectrum of public history and museum work. Together, the staff supports major collecting initiatives and hosts a research team and decolonization working group. The CRH has also co-curated an exhibition with community partners, generated a plan for new cataloguing procedures, and established the GPEP internship program for formerly incarcerated Goucher College students. The center has consequently become a place to pilot new museum practices, shift internal museum hierarchies, and implement change that may not have otherwise happened across standalone projects.

No institution has all the answers for redressing the nation's harms, and the ideals of Restorative History often come up against the challenges of doing public history work in a federal institution. To sustain this work, the CRH prioritizes the following core values at every stage:

Honesty ■ Generosity ■ Radical care ■ Reflective work ■ Imagination

# How Can I Learn More about Restorative History?

Below, you can explore some of the people and projects that have inspired, challenged, and refined the development of Restorative History. You will also find links to CRH projects. This is by no means a comprehensive list but an introduction to the CRH's network of knowledge. To access a more complete list of global thought partners, use the QR Code below to visit the CRH resources page.



## Explore

Documenting the Now — [docnow.io](https://docnow.io)

Gran Varones — [granvarones.com](https://granvarones.com)

Shift Collective — [shiftcollective.us](https://shiftcollective.us)

South Asian American Digital Archive — [saada.org](https://saada.org)

Texas After Violence — [texasafterviolence.org](https://texasafterviolence.org)


## Center for Restorative History

[Center for Restorative History Home Page](#)

[Center for Restorative History Projects](#)

[Center for Restorative History Resources](#)

## Read & Listen

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