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Crafting the Past: Theory and Practice of Museums

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How do we know something is real? We say something exists when it is tangible and we can touch it; it is factual when we can compare it to other known variables, and historic when it fulfils our expectation of the past. There are objects and activities that blur these categories and cause people to accept alternative histories. A museum is one such example. The buildings are constructed for displays, the people are only performers and the sounds and smells are fabricated, but the experiences, though they vary from person to person, are real. At museums the public and the interpreters interact in a shared space but not a shared

mindset. By borrowing from Mark Leone's critical theory it is possible to examine the dissonance between the museum's production of history and the public's perception.

> For the public, the authenticity of a presentation is based not on historical documents and archaeology but on their experiences within the created landscape.

The study of the past constructs it and creates it anew each time it is undertaken. According to Mark Leone et al. (1987), critical theory attempts to address the relationship between knowledge of the past and the socio-political modes that produce it. What is examined in critical theory is ideology. "Ideology in this sense comprises the givens of everyday life, unnoticed, taken for granted and active and produced in use" (Leone et al. 1987, 284). Ideology hides, and masks, certain social facts by naturalising or supernaturalising them. For example, social inequalities and violence are seen as part of human nature, instead of products of agency. Ideologies become projected through time and space, leading the public to assume that what is normative today has always been so. Leone would state that one of the main ideologies regarding museums is that they possess a factual account of the past. The public, functioning under this ideology, is unaware that history is constructed and presented for a particular contemporary purpose and aimed at a particular audience. History is seen as infallible and universal by the public who arrives at any historical display with a mental knapsack filled with expectations and ideologies that guide their experience. Museum institutions, themselves, can often play upon the ideologies of the public in order to support their interpretations of the past. The main ideology held by the museum is that they present an authentic account of the past. Museums invoke this authenticity to counter critics who attempt to expose the degree to which our understanding of the past is constructed. Some historical displays monopolise on their institutions authority and right to present the past. In some museums authenticity has become a preoccupation; at Colonial Williamsburg even the design for the locks have historical documentation (Handler and Gable 1997). Richard Handler and Eric Gabe (1996), anthropologists who have conducted longitudinal studies of Colonial Williamsburg, define authenticity as something, anything, that is based on historical truths. An object - be it a house or George Washington's saddle bag - is considered authentic when its existence can be proven by archaeology and/or historical documentation (Handler and Gable 1996).

Museums like Colonial Williamsburg (See photo above), which is an open-air museum, use authenticity as a respond to critics regarding their interpretations. Critics accuse living history displays of portraying an incomplete history in favour of pandering to the public's purse through entertaining displays (Handler and Gable 1997). Museums, in their defence, admit the need to gain revenue to support their activities; however, they do so with a deep commitment to history, unlike other theme parks, like Disney World, that may chose whatever display fits their fancy (Handler and Gable 1996, 571). Handler and Gable recount

how interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg believe that the museum's reputation is on the line every day. If one object fails in its pedigree, then a crack appears in the armour of authenticity and invites the visitor to question the credibility of the entire site (Handler and Gable 1997, 45). One docent at the Winterthur Museum, a gallery style, decorative arts museum, echoed the approach of Colonial Williamsburg when she explained that the museum is engaged in ongoing research and that when an item's authenticity is questioned and proved to be*less than what it was* thought to be, the item is removed from display (Jane Dowe, 20 July 2012 personal communication). Museums strive hard to maintain the perception of authenticity armour, but there has to be a balance so the past does not appear too clean, synchronic and perfect.

However, David Lowenthal argues that museums claim historical authenticity in an attempt to disguise heritage and parade it as history. Heritage, according to Lowenthal, is not bound by the ideology of false accuracy. Heritage behaves much more like how the past was probably like than history does; people are forgotten, certain events are misconstrued and manipulated. "Heritage", Lowenthal writes, "should not be confused with history. History seeks to convince by truth, and succumbs to falsehood. Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error" (1998, 111). The problem with history lies in the fact it appears to be infallible. Heritage does not make such claims. The public is aware that heritage contains certain fabrications. According to Lowenthal, heritage upgrades history and updates it, emphasising certain qualities that we uphold today (1998, 114). Heritage jumbles history, blurring the lines between distant categories, and groups unrelated things together; it selectively forgets and contrives lineages (1998, 114). History and heritage are both driven by ideologies and tell the public more about our modern expectations and behaviours than about the past. Ideologies that are supported today become emphasised in the accounts about the past. Those, such as the acceptability of slavery, are down played or even erased from the past. Thus, the past becomes polished smooth of unwanted truths and romanticised into a better and simpler time.

Many things that occurred in the past have been unrecorded or omitted from the historical record, either intentionally through direct omission or unintentionally. Groups of people who have little written history tend to rely on heritage to present their past and their identity. Heritage becomes their voice. It speaks, providing a narrative not found in the uncommunicative paperwork. Within a group, heritage provides an account speaking to the experiences of all. Sometimes in the process one person or event comes to represent the essence of that group. One example, such as Harriet Tubman and her resistance against slavery through the Underground Railroad, speaks to many others whose personal story is lost to time. Another example would be the falling of the Berlin Wall in 1990, which signalled the end of the Cold War. Heritage is transmuted into an icon. The icons of heritage are not always accepted by the wider culture. Those who support more politically favoured paradigms attempt to discredit heritage by demanding authenticated documentation

(Anderson 1982). Since heritage often tells the tales of those who possess little political power, there is little documentation detailing their lives that would be accepted as an authentic history. Yet, heritage feeds on faith not facts. Fictions that are used to express a cultural identity are viewed as authentic to that group of people or culture.

The interplay between authenticated facts and heritage is at times not grasped by the public. The public arrives at a museum with their own set of ideologies packed away in the recesses of their mind that guide their experiences. According to Wilks and Kelly (2008, 230), one of these key ideologies is that people are alienated from modern society and thus must seek reality (and authenticity) elsewhere, usually in the past. Modern society is displeasing, according to Handler and Gable, because it feels fake, plastic or commercialised (1996). The past has come to represent a *better time* when *life was simple*. The past must be simple, or at least simpler than today, in order to support the ideology of societal progress. If the past was as advanced as society today, there would be no progress. Complicated truths about the past are forgotten, such as the diseases or overcrowding. In the process the mechanisms of today that help simplify modern lives are also ignored: there are microwaves for heating food, dishwashers for washing dishes, washing machines for cleaning clothes and countless other devices. It is because the public thinks the past was more authentic and simple that there is a desire for the past.

This desire is referred to as nostalgia. Nostalgia, according to Mooris Holbrook (1993, 254), "is a longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with the days of yore". The feelings of nostalgia are usually invoked by objects or experiences that are recalled through collective memory from a historical era (Holbrook 1993, 246). Nostalgia breathes expectation into the past by combining heritage and history into account of times past; the public imagines that they understand and can easily relate to former times. This is especially true if the past presented contains everyday activities (Wilks and Kelly 2008, 131) or combines ancient materials into invented traditions that serve the needs of the present (Holbrook 1993, 246). If a historical display does not fit within this expectation, the museum visitor will view the display as inauthentic. For the public authenticity does not rest in documentation, it is found in the emotional response to the display.

There is a dissonance between the museum and the public. Each party assumes the other has the same expectation, when in truth they do not. The museum and the public speak past each other. Each party develops and maintains its own expectation of the past. If something does not fulfil the public's imaginations regarding the past, the public disregards it as inauthentic. Living history displays are fluid enough to answer the public's needs and expectations of history, heritage, nostalgia and engaged learning as well as strikes a balance between these opposing forces. Living history displays are an educational medium that aim to 'make the past come alive' and dress-up the stagnant and static traditional museum. A

mindful display adds depth and believability to an experience that authenticated documentation cannot.

So often when visitors view traditional gallery museums, they do so without deeper reflection and travel from one static display to the next without engaging with the history presented. The account of the past should be one that everyone can relate to and, more importantly, engage with. Gianna Moscardo (1996) argues that the mindfulness, or engagement, on the part of the visitor causes the public to achieve the goals of education and authenticity established by museum directors. The mindful visitor is able to control the experience to shape his or her interpretations of the site (Moscardo 1996, 356). Moscardo (1996, 367) states that there are four criteria to make a display mindful: offer the visitors varied experiences, allow control over their movements within the site, allow them to make personal connections with the past, and challenge the visitors with thought provoking questions. If this is done well the visitor leaves the site with a greater appreciation of the museum and the world it represents.

Moscardo does not outline how to develop and employ these four criteria within a site. In my opinion all four goals can be achieved by populating the past with people instead of documents. Re-enactors, or interpreters, take on the role of representing people from the past and engage in similar activities. By allowing visitors to move freely within a site they will have varied experiences, for re-enactors change their interpretations with each group that passes their display. The interpreters can allow the public to participate in hands-on activities. The interpreters and public are able to engage in a conversation. At a traditional museum, the plaques speak at the public, informing them of what they should know. A living history museum excites the public, allowing them to engage in activities different from their everyday lives such as fetching well water, touching iron or working wood. It is during these momentary interactions that the public develops those challenging questions. These questions should challenge what Leone et al. (1987) referred to as ideologies that naturalise present day activities and project them into the past. This can be with ease; my position as a female blacksmith at a living history museum can raise questions about gender roles.

In theory, this allows the museum visitor to move around within a living world. In practice, there are often a small number of interpreters in comparison to museum patrons. At smaller living history museums the interpreters are often tied to a particular building and are limited in their mobility. The museum world feels empty or at the very least sparsely populated in comparison to how most sites would have been in the past. This is also true when taking into consideration age groups and ethnicities, since most re-enactors fall into certain demographics. For example, young children are often missing and so are minorities. Thus, living history relies on the visitor's feelings of nostalgia and imagination to populate the world. Reconstructed buildings are perhaps the most common form of living history. But if they are not populated by re-enactors, then it is as static as a traditional museum. With living

history there are times the public is expected to watch living history displays and at times are asked to take part in a minor degree. This is true of traditional museums where the public is expected to watch and wander. Other times, the participants are engaged from start to finish, as is the case with many Civil War re-enactments and activities hosted by the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). In either case, it is the re-enactors of historic events and interpreters of historic sites who receive the most mindful understanding of the past. The re-enactors and interpreters are actively engaged in the presentation of the past. They are also responsible for answering the public's questions, which at times can be very challenging. It is difficult to do two things at once; it is more so when someone is portraying a role, crafting something and answering questions.

The public has a fascination with the crafts of the past. One of the crafts that had the greatest impact on the industrialisation of America was the production of iron. Many museums invest considerable time and energy into tailoring their sites to contain a display on iron production. However, much is lost in the displays in traditional museums such as Winterthur Museum. Iron behaves very differently at different temperatures and stages of its production. These properties cannot be demonstrated in a static display. Iron is a dynamic metal and requires a dynamic presentation. At a living history museum the interpretive blacksmith is often surrounded by an audience.

The blacksmith at Jamestown Settlement (See photo above), a constructed site representing the first English colony in America, explained, as he forged a nail, that he presented crafts that a historic blacksmith would not have taken part in. It was his job to preserve the crafts of other tradesman that had disappeared such as nail cutters and blade makers. He serves as a touchstone to the past; it is through him and his craft that people gain an understanding of craftsmen in general. The interpreter, like a chef, chooses flavours to emphasise, ingredients to add depth or aroma, and splashes of colour in the presentation. He or she has the freedom to blend history, heritage, accurate details and whimsy to fit his or her audience at any given moment. He blends Lowenthal's perception of heritage and history together in order to present his craft to the public. The interpreters downplayed certain aspects (nail cutters made nails, not blacksmiths). The interpreters emphasized other features of their site, such as the fact that in the past and today blacksmiths produce hardware for houses, wagons and furniture around the historic site. It is through engaging activities that the public gains the most from historic displays.

The public's imagination and feelings of nostalgia fill in the gaps left by the documented past, and they can see it as their own ancestral past. For the public, the authenticity of a presentation is based not on historical documents and archaeology but on their experiences within the created landscape. Living history presents a possible past populated with layered information and unique experiences that make it feel authentic to the viewer. Mindful participation can make the most fanciful event appear more 'real' than a silent document or

another stagnant display. Museums and living history displays craft a reality, weaving history and heritage together, making it almost impossible for the public to differentiate. Heritage is the compilation of myths and historical events that fosters identity. Front-line interpreters at living history museums can guide the public into deeper reflection. They are able to bridge the difference between the museum's need for authentication and the public's expectation for nostalgia and heritage. The interpreter can takes the visitor by the hand and leads them through the interpretation by answering questions and pointing out the nuances used by the museum to support their interpretation of history. For documents and archaeology are biased, just like heritage. Living history museums are able to cite evidence for why they construct and reconstruct in certain ways. Nevertheless, they are all just stories of a possible past, an important element that is often lost on the public and should perhaps be more emphasized in the museum setting. Some museums built a world using wood, smoke and a pinch of magic dust and expect the public to accept it as authentic without deeper reflection on the complex interplay of history and heritage to interpret the past.

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. THE GOVERNORS' PALACE AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG IN VIRGINIA. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG IS ONE OF THE MOST EXTENSIVE LIVING HISTORY MUSEUMS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. THE LIVING HISTORY MUSEUM INTERPRETS LIFE DURING THE MID-1700S.

FIG 2. THE BLACKSMITH AT JAMESTOWN SETTLEMENT IN VIRGINIA EXPLAINING HOW HIS FORGING NAILS WAS NOT HISTORICALLY ACCURATE BUT PRESERVED THE PAST.

FIG 3. REENACTMENTS ARE NOT BOUND BY TIME OR SPACE. THIS IS A POSTCARD FROM SANGLANDET LEJRE, DENMARK, OF A REENACTMENT THAT TOOK PLACE THERE REPRESENTING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR.