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Source: *The Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Expanding Conversations: How Curriculum Theory Can Inform Museum Education Practice (Summer, 2006), pp. 113-121

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40479551>

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Museums, Civic Life, and the Educative Force of Remembrance



Roger I. Simon

Abstract Public history is inherently pedagogical. How it is enacted has implications for civic life now and in the future. A democratic society requires forms of public history beyond those that provide recognition and affirmation of existing identities and values. A museum-based public history is needed that fosters on-going work of repair and reinvention of existing institutions. A sketch is provided in this article of the epistemological framing of one such exhibition.

Those who think museums are about the past have got it wrong. Public practices of remembrance are always about the future. Such practices are inherently implicated in enduring questions regarding the viable substance of social life, questions which include the problem of human connection across historically structured differences of time and place. It has become common among those commenting on the surge of interest in public history over the last 40 years to assert that this desire for a meaningful engagement with the past has much to do with our anxieties in regard to an increasingly complex and uncertain future.¹ In this context, practices of public history offer the possibility of extended time frames from which to speak and act, forms of historical consciousness that promise not only the security of identity but at times the prospect of hope. It is a mistake then to keep separate remembrance and hope, as if one only looks backward and the other forward. Ralph Waldo Emerson's classic observation that we employ nature metaphorically so as to render memory and hope as the "visible distance behind and before us" fails to capture how our lives are structured through the interactive and mutually informing relation between remembrance and an emotionally charged anticipation of future possibilities. There is an educative force in this relationship when images and narratives of the past informed by

contemporary concerns become integral to the visions and practices of civic life now and in the future. While obviously concerned with the past, specific ways of enacting public history initiate the task of inheritance, a task inevitably fraught with implications for how we understand ourselves and engage the world within which we live.

In this sense, museums inevitably intertwine politics and pedagogy, mobilizing various practices of remembrance so as to provoke and inform competing visions of our present and future civic life. This is why museums matter in democratic societies. Neither adequately rendered as “mausoleums” that monumentalize previous civilizations nor “secular palaces” that enshrine a hegemonic set of collective values, museums are vital to democracy understood as an interminably unfinished project. On these terms, “democracy” is the name given a social order to that declares both its constructed historical character and its ambition of future perfectibility, carrying an understanding of the legitimacy of the critique of its never-ending inadequacies and hence the recognition that its full realization is always still to come.² As such, democracy requires forms of remembrance that help open-up existing relations to public appraisal and possible transformation. Much then depends upon the substance of our practices of remembrance, practices that constitute which traces of the past are possible for us to encounter, how these traces are inscribed and reproduced for presentation, and with what interest, epistemological framing, and structure of reflexivity we might engage these inscriptions. Not so much a matter of representation, practices of remembrance are a question of and for history as a force of inhabitation, as the way we live with and learn from the images and stories that intertwine with our sense of limits and possibilities, hopes and fears, identities and distinctions.

PEDAGOGIES OF PUBLIC HISTORY

The historical memories held in democratic societies are commonly constituted within two basic forms of public history. Both forms, in quite different ways, attempt to address the problem of maintaining social coherence and cohesion. In the first, typically mobilized in state-oriented commemorations and ethno-cultural memorializations, practices of public history reiterate iconic images and narratives that serve to reinforce established frameworks of social cohesiveness. Whether in museums, films, websites, or classrooms, such remembrance practices attempt to mobilize corporate commitments based on the dynamics of recognition, identification, and affirmation.

In the second form, public history is more overtly interpretive and didactic. Through text and image, such practices organize and legitimate narratives structures that make possible conversations regarding the “lessons of history,” lessons within and/or against which basic corporate commitments might be rationally articulated. Here remembrance attempts to constitute the grounds for a mutual understanding of and social assent to a communal life grounded in norms embraced as indexical to civility and justice. What both of these remembrance practices share is that they are steadfastly recuperative and formative. They attempt to put forward representations of the past that might be integrated into the social practices of everyday life by underwriting the enduring values and social forms which organize and regulate these practices. In this respect, each of these memorial functions contains a specific pedagogical force intended to articulate a communal definition of the future, a future of which we might know at least its basic constitutive principles. In these practices of remembrance there is a prospective orientation that seeks to legitimate and secure particular social relations, making normative claims on the conduct of human behavior.

As important as these practices are, neither mode of public history is adequate for the requirements of the never-ending democratic project. Something else is required. Jocelyn Létourneau provides an important insight when he asserts public history is insufficient if it only puts forward images and narratives responsive to the question “What must I remember in order to be?” and offers little to those who ask: “Who am I by virtue of my past?”³ Public histories that exclusively authorize attempts to enact a contemporary repetition of lives lived in times and places other than our own offer little to the prospect of an open future inherent in democratic life. Required in democratic civic life are forms of public history that encourage us to engage historical inheritance not as a patrimony to be acquired and admired, but as a form of work that requires commitment and thought. This work of inheritance can help open up existing relations and practices to continual critique and the difficult (and often conflict ridden) work of repair, renewal, and reinvention of desirable institutions. On the face of it, this position provides public history with its project, to fulfill the promise of the historian to endeavor “to tell the truth about the past” bound by a responsibility toward both the dead for whom one might speak, as well as those present and not yet born; those who now and in the future must strive to live together mindfully, working on and through the gap between what exists and what is desirable that might yet be.

While we may accept that history is central to critically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the institutions and values upon which civil society depends, it still remains unclear as to how to conceive of the pedagogical force of narratives of past events and/or lives past. More precisely, what and how might public history teach? Is it that history delivers the “lessons of the past” in the form of a road map whose evidence-based contours offer a passage toward the future marked with the appropriate warnings and guideposts; a passage that we entrust with the task of getting us beyond the present with a minimum of risk and discomfort? If we accept this problematic proposition, we end up much like those Emmanuel Levinas characterized as “worrying about history in a way a shipping company worries about weather forecasts.” On these terms, as Levinas put it, “thought no longer dares take flight unless it can fly straight to the haven of victory.”⁴

The danger here is creating a form of public history whose value is based on an assumed transparent utility, a self-evident and measurable usefulness, in regard to the substance of any given historical knowledge. It is not that the instrumentalization of history is a problem. It is certainly legitimate to claim that events that happened in the past are arguably indicative of the dynamics of the human condition, and that we and people living within our time should know something about them. However, rather than presume a simple one way “listen and learn” pedagogy anchored in the notion of the museum as a authoritative legislator, the matter at stake is what we might presume regarding how any given practice of public history exemplifies learning from the past. Thus my concern for how to keep alive the promise that remembrance might become an occasion for more than just the acquisition of information but for true learning, thought, and judgment. Public history must provide something more than a version of the past that functions as a fragile “post-it” note placed on the refrigerator to remind us of our obligations and values—a note that is always on the verge of falling off or getting lost amid the clutter of other reminders of the pressing concerns of daily life.

NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR A MUSEUM BASED PUBLIC HISTORY

In regard to the above considerations, I have become concerned with how documentary words and images that trace past state-sponsored social violence might serve not only as evidence of past injustice, but also as a legacy capable of initiating a reconsideration of the force of history in social life. Fulfilling such terms requires not just grasping words and images as doc-

uments that claim a particular historical truth subject to verification, explanation, and judgment. Additionally, it means understanding these words and images as a bearing of witness, an enactment of a difficult, at times, terrible gift. Such a gift sets the demanding task of inheritance, a process with the potential to open a reconsideration of the terms of our lives now as well as in the future. While documentary words and images may provide partial accounts of past experience subject to norms of historiographic judgment, they also arrive in the public realm making an unanticipated claim that may interrupt one's self-sufficiency, demanding attentiveness to another's life without reducing that life to a version of one's own stories. This attentiveness sets out the possibility of learning anew how to live in the present with each other, not only by opening the question to what and to whom I must be accountable, but also by considering what attention, learning, and actions such accountability requires.⁵

With these thoughts in mind, I and my colleagues David Goa and Lynne Teather have been working through plans for a museum exhibit tentatively titled *The Community of the Living and the Dead: The Legacy of the Vilna Ghetto 1941–1943*. The core of our exhibit will draw from archival materials and artifacts with a common provenance but subsequently dispersed and now held in museums and research institutions in the United States, Lithuania, and Israel. These materials are the remnants of Jewish Vilna, a community that was first incarcerated and subsequently annihilated in the context of the systematic genocide carried out by occupying Nazi troops and their local accomplices during World War II. Gathered after Vilnius was liberated by Soviet troops, these remnants have taken the form of an enduring testament addressed to future generations.

Brought into the public realm through archival preservation and museological practice, they constitute what I argue is an instance of a terrible gift that inaugurates new possibilities for museum-based public history. This gift offers an opportunity to reconsider what it might mean to relate to and with the past, opening us to a reconsideration of the terms of our lives now as well as in the future. Certainly one of the tasks of our exhibition will be to broaden access to the history of the Vilna Ghetto and the story of recovery and survival of its material remnants. But equally important, our intent is also to initiate a consideration of the material remains of the Ghetto as a cultural inheritance. This is an inheritance to which all (in different ways) can be heirs and upon which we might work in order to determine our ethical commitments and build our interrelated futures. This aim has required that

we rethink what has stood as the museological notion of “heritage,” moving through and beyond the presentation of social histories of particular ethno-cultural groups and/or shared geopolitical locations that serve as the basis of cultural identity.

There is little doubt that the events that comprise what is now referred to as “the Holocaust” have become an indelible feature of our North American historical landscape. The cultural memories of these events have shaped and are reshaping thought and contemporary presumptions about the human condition. Indeed, proportional to many relatively unmarked instances of previous genocidal State violence, it often seems as if our collective cultural imagination has been saturated with images of the Holocaust through television, film, and the arts, as well as access to and discussion of memorial museums and monuments. No doubt this familiarity provokes the question: What justifies yet another museum exhibit based on events related to the Holocaust? Thinking against the grain of this question, we view what stands as the contemporary familiarity with the events of the Holocaust not as a limitation, but rather as a necessary and facilitating condition of our exhibit. Indeed, we argue that this public familiarity with basic fact of Nazi genocide of European Jewry makes our exhibit extremely timely. An unsettling consequence of the last two decades of Holocaust cultural memory is a prevalent dominant discourse that reduces the significance of this history to the warning “we must not let the past be repeated.”⁶ This has resulted in a symptomatic repetition in which the imperative to remember is acted out in the anxious replay of images and narratives justified as a preventive, necessary reiteration given the persisting evils of racism and intolerance. Exhibitions in this vein are too often perceived as theatres of conscience offering emotionally moving, ultimately comforting rituals encouraging the contemplation of the evils humans can inflict on each other.

Quite differently, our exhibition begins with the premise that we have not yet understood how to face the realities of a genocidal fascism in a way that makes possible a hopeful relation between the past and future bearing possibilities for social and self transformation. To do so requires continued explorations in what constitutes the practice of historical consciousness. Thus, we take it as our challenge to find a way of inviting a diverse public to a responsible and responsive relation with lives lived in times and places other than our own. Such a relation places specific demands on exhibition visitors. It asks that they enter into thought attentive to a threefold constellation of: (1) the “pastness” of existence and our own position in the made

world; (2) the immediacy of an exhibition's address to its visitors offering historical remnants as both a gift and demand; and (3) the ways in which material traces of the past are bound up with one's future world as sources of meaning and commitment.⁷

Our interest lies not only in presenting an exhibition regarding one moment of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, but situating such an exhibition in very specific museological questions regarding the purpose, practice, and form of public history. Beyond practices of edification and/or self and social recognition, our project of re-thinking public history points to new directions for understanding the place of museum and the museum exhibition in a democratic society. This begins in the intertwined relation between wonder and thought where, as Lévinas suggests, thought begins the "very moment consciousness becomes conscious of its particularity . . . when thought becomes conscious of itself and at the same time conscious of the exteriority that goes beyond its nature."⁸ The beginning of such thought resides in the experience of being faced by traces of the past not totally graspable through the internalized discourse that sets the terms on which I navigate everyday life and narrate my identity. Thus the importance of thinking through the practice of museum education, but on terms that suggest why the provocation of Levinas' notion of thought must be its bedrock.

It also returns us to Létourneau's insight that the role of public history is to encourage people to ask themselves not what they must remember in order to be, but what it means, in light of the experience of the past, to be what they are now. This open-ended interrogation would be enriched by a museum practice in which one's thinking is never just a conversation one has with oneself but a speaking and listening within which others are needed. On such terms, "to think is not to understand something for the self, but rather to be called into question and to be guided by the questions the Other poses to me."⁹ Here thought about history is "not simply reminiscence, but always the consciousness of something new."¹⁰ While this "newness" may unsettle the present and leave one less secure in negotiating daily life, it can also instantiate hope in holding the present open and thus as being unfinished. Such a hope would not be a form of wishful consolation through which one might gain some peace, but rather a rather anxious and ambivalent state in which one resides in a pre-disposition to actions not yet conceived and taken.¹¹

If museums are to participate in this "holding open the present," they need to put forward practices of public memory in which a horizon of future possibilities is accessible in thought inaugurated through what comes toward

the self that is not totally apprehensible, offering astonishment and puzzlement that complicate existing self and communal definitions. For this reason, a community desiring hope would be well served by a public history in which such thought might be initiated. This would be a sphere of remembrance in which remnants of the past are put forward not as instances or illustrations of pre-established themes that define in advance what is to be learned, but rather as complex sets of testamentary material whose study contains the possibilities of fascination, surprise, and perplexity. Addressed on such terms, visitors are summoned to work through the possible significance of taking on as an inheritance those past events that are beyond one's memory and in which one has not been directly implicated. This is a task we disavow at our peril. For while I may find it strange to be called to be answerable to that which has never been my fault of deed, what is at stake in this responsibility is my future. More boldly stated, there is no futurity (no break from the endless repetition of a violent past) without memories that are not one's own but nevertheless accepted as one's thought-provoking inheritance. This defines the challenge and promise of conceiving of a public history that centers the demands of testament and supports the inheritance work it initiates. This is the hope offered by "the terrible gift" and a museum practice that nourishes a viable "community of the living and the dead."

Notes

1. Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, and Amnesia," in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
2. Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy," in *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. D. A. Curtis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Cornelius Castoriadis, "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime." *Constellations* 4, no. 1 (1997): 1-18.
3. Jocelyn Létourneau, *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).
4. Emmanuel Lévinas, "The Meaning of History," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies, 1997).
5. Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).
6. This might be read by some as a provocative claim. Certainly there have been other far more complex sets of meanings offered for the remembrance of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry. While space limitations here preclude a discussion of the range of practices initiated over the last fifty years, the single most prevalent shared justification for Holocaust remembrance in North America (across a diverse range of schools, museums, public programs, and in relation to built memorials and internet websites) is that cultural memory might function as a spur to action that would prevent the repetition of genocide.
7. For an extended discussion of the structure and substance of this exhibition see Roger I. Simon, "The Terrible Gift: Museums and the Possibility of Hope Without Consolation." *Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* (in press).

8. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 15.
9. Lisa Farley, *History, Ethics, and Education: Learning from Freud and Lévinas* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2005), 134.
10. Lévinas, 16.
11. The discussion of hope in the context of Holocaust remembrance is both extensive and controversial. Foundational in this regard is the work of Lawrence Langer who argues strongly against consolatory forms of remembrance (see Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a discussion of educational approaches which reject hope as an organizing principle for Holocaust education, see Marla Morris, *Curriculum and the Holocaust: Competing Sites of Memory and Representation* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001). The problem with such discussions is their conflation of hope and utopian forms of consolation. For works that offer the possibility of a non-consolatory concept of hope, see: Roger I. Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain: Essays for a Pedagogy of Possibility* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1992), 3-12; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1993); and Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-25.

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