

Book Review

Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums

Brenda Trofanenko and Avner Segall, editors
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Simone Schweber, professor of Education and Jewish Studies and former fellow at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, recalls in *Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums* how difficult it was to reach her working space: “You get [there] by walking through an almost-invisible passageway [near the gift shop]. The passage seems purposely obscured from the Museum’s main entrance as though to suggest that the land of scholarship is meant only for the knowledgeable ... ”(p. 110). Schweber’s anecdote neatly illustrates the traditional divide between public and academic history. She and other contributors to this collection, edited by Brenda Trofanenko and Avner Segall, question that disconnect and consider the shortcomings of the museum as a teaching institution. Though few authors offer practical methods to close the (perhaps growing) gap, their critical perspectives should nonetheless influence good practice for teachers, curriculum designers, curators, and public historians.

In an introduction, Trofanenko and Segall establish their working assumption that pedagogy, the theory of education, no longer applies to the classroom alone. Educators and curators make conscious instructive decisions, thus museums should deliberately function as teaching spaces, an effort the editors package as “public pedagogy” (p. 3). The initial essays discuss changing the way teachers use museums and history more broadly. In the first piece, *After the Critiques*, Margaret Lindauer describes her experience teaching the predicament of curatorial authority to students at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Students received largely positive feedback from visitors (and their instructor) by employing schools of museum theory that emphasize the educational role of museums. Christine Baron also considers the instruction of future teachers in her contribution, *Historic Sites’ Role in Teacher Education*. She notes that while science teachers learn lab techniques as part of their training, history teachers receive no similar experience. However, Baron advises avoiding museum internships, given that their focus is not necessarily education. Mallory Allison Richard also cautions against relying on museums for public education in *The Colonial Past as ‘Usable History’*. Richard acknowledges it is difficult to impart critical themes like colonialism in public spaces, but, as museums are widely-trusted institutions, chastises the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec, for minimizing Aboriginals’ historical roles. In their joint essay, *Encountering Pedagogy at the National Museum of the American Indian*, Trofanenko and Segall similarly lament the portrayal of Indigenous peoples at that institution. No explicit

pedagogical strategy helps visitors organize the “multiplicity of voices” presented by the museum (p. 63). Further, “polite and often positive language” implies that Native Americans’ experiences are “mere history” without a dynamic role in contemporary America (pp. 65-66).

Jonathan Clapperton’s *Preserving Native Space* provides an excellent segue into another set of essays concerning the political and cultural meaning of museum content. Following some questionable early assertions, including that scholars “unanimously” celebrate Native-run museums (p. 70) or that they remain ignorant of inter-community tensions in site interpretation, Clapperton launches into an excellent chronicle of the discovery and public acquisition of Xá:ytem, a Stó:lō settlement dating back over 5,000 years. In *The Meanings of a Holocaust Museum*, James Garrett wonders about the mental and emotional connections people make after experiencing museums and recommends institutions resist “narrative closure,” or capping visitor experience with a narrative end-point (p. 105).

Beyond Pedagogy closes with a group of essays revolving around museums and identity. Schweber discusses staff culture during her tenure at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. She correctly observes that genocide studies impart a healthy sense of irony, on display when employees referred to personnel locker room showers as “not that kind of shower” (p. 111). The takeaway for readers is that jokes, moments of silence, and commemoration are all essentially human coping mechanisms when faced with tragedy. Julia Rose makes a similar point in *Commemorative Museum Pedagogy*, that museum curators should recognize visitors’ internal loss from encountering difficult knowledge. She also lays out one of the few explicit pedagogical strategies in the book: managing visitor reception, resistance, repetition, reflection, and reconsideration of information (or “the 5Rs” [p. 127]). Sandra Schmidt then reviews four South African museums in ‘*United in Our Diversity*’, with particular attention to how each shaped (or shapes) identity in the post-Apartheid era. William Gandelli concludes the essay series with *An Ethnology Museum as Pedagogical Space*, his critical take on the whiggish exhibitions at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, NY.

Each essay provides some commentary on the educational potential of museums, delivering on the book’s stated purpose. However, readers seeking concrete strategies for achieving this potential may be disappointed, with Rose serving as one of the clearest contrasts. Nearly every piece diagnoses something museums are doing wrong, such as Richard’s view of Aboriginal portrayals in Canada Hall at the Canadian Museum of History. Some others implicitly fault schools, such as when Gandelli witnesses previously ignorant museum-goers ask if Atlantic slavery happened “for real?!” (p. 163). Some blame both institutions and long for innovative collaboration through ideas like Baron’s history laboratories. But when general suggestions are put forward, they are sometimes contradictory. For example, Trofanenko and Segall find the absence of explicit pedagogical strategies confusing, while Garrett complains that *too* explicit pedagogical strategies will inhibit visitors’ own meaning-making. Many of the early essays compound this issue with somewhat naïve propositions. In perhaps the most extreme case, Baron briefly acknowledges funding as an impediment to instituting history laboratories but virtually ignores the logistics of integrating school, university, and museum education into K-12 curriculum. In another example, Richard argues that because people overwhelmingly trust museums as sources of truth, curators should engage visitors with even the most unpleasant aspects of the colonial past. This is a reasonable suggestion yet disregards numerous historical and political controversies in which disagreeable has history eroded public trust in museums.

Despite the occasional lapses into idealism, each author in *Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums* attempts to confront the fundamental problem

of public history, articulated by Trofanenko and Segall as conveying an “educational purpose while working with a public that does not understand its intent” (p. 59). Even contradicting opinions will probably assist some readers. The varying perspectives in this collection are welcome additions, as immediate political, social, and cultural contexts make museum design a particularly individualized affair. Readers working in museum studies, education, or both must carefully consider these points, for public historians will never craft a one-size-fits-all field manual. In the meantime, more should take up *Beyond Pedagogy*’s call to reconsider the public purpose of museums.

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