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### **(Re-) Directing History in Museums**

The American historical landscape continues to reel from the upheaval of social historians who, beginning in the 1960s, brought a new set of historical actors and viewpoints to the fore. History “from the bottom up” sought to correct the oligarchy of political and military history; exchanging the stories of the powerful and influential for those of everyday people. The ensuing problems with this historiological flip gradually filtered through to history museums—significantly impacting the methodologies for conveying historical narratives. In their writing, James Loewen and Edward Rothstein offer overlapping criticisms of the impact of social history and open a dialogue for considering how multiple perspectives could be integrated in exhibitions.

Many social historians maintained an underlying activist impulse to “correct history”—especially those like Howard Zinn, who operated in the sphere of popular history. Loewen, in many ways, continues in this social history tradition. In his book *Lies Across America*, Loewen suggests that historians “write back into the American story those men and women whose heroic actions on behalf of justice for people of all races and social backgrounds have been omitted or falsified because they lost, but whose examples remain important to us as we act today in the civic arena” (423). However, at the same time, Loewen urges builders of monuments to temper their celebratory, non-critical approach to their subjects with contrasting viewpoints.

Rothstein’s position on social history reflects a less wholehearted embrace. He worries that, in social history’s attempt to subvert the history of the powerful, it has merely substituted one narrow focus for another. Rothstein takes Loewen’s criticisms of celebratory, non-critical history one step further to

apply to social history as well. Identity museums in particular, Rothstein argues, have overcorrected to the extent that self-blame or self-congratulation became commonplace. As Rothstein sees it, “the revisionist model, like the one it displaced, has its fair share of distortions, prejudices, and orthodoxies[...] it has become less carefully scrutinized and too eagerly harnessed to support ready-made perspectives” (5). For Rothstein, many museums have overcorrected in crafting an equivalently narrow-minded perspective to replace the traditional history that they had sought to correct. Beyond increased historical detachment, Rothstein would like to see an increased historical complexity that can be woven into a grand narrative—a pretty tall order for any museum, let alone those with a narrow focus or limited resources.

Loewen’s criticisms target the broader mainstream of museums and monuments that trumpet a simplistic “civil religion” of unrevised nationalism. Rothstein focuses on the narrower set of museums that have incorporated social history revisions that have overcorrected while remaining simplistic and celebratory of a particular ethnicity or cultural group. In the intersection of their criticism, heritage transforms the past into the possession of the visitor; it becomes *their* past. In considering the merits of their arguments, Old Cowtown Museum in Wichita, Kansas and the Women’s Rights National Historical Park serve as confirmations of the criticisms of Loewen and Rothstein respectively; the *Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History* and *Open House: If These Walls Could Talk* exhibits conversely refute their respective arguments.

The Old Cowtown Museum (OCM) in Wichita, Kansas exemplifies the type of non-critical mythologization that Loewen denounces. In keeping with Loewen’s assertion that “historic sites are always the tale of two eras” (22), OCM encapsulates a popular modern perspective on the past to a greater extent than it represents an accurate version of frontier life. As Jay Price observes, a

“Hollywood image, rather than the actual town of Wichita, served as the inspiration for much of Old Cowtown” during its formative period in the 1950s and 1960s (102). This mythology has persisted in part due to the enduring limitations of the architecture, much as Loewen’s monuments outlive the currency of their historical perspective.

Furthermore, events such as the annual Steampunk Day only serve to solidify OCM’s association with heritage and entertainment by conflating past, fiction, and entertainment into a less-than-historical local mythology. If OCM were to satisfy Loewen’s criticisms, its curators would need to incorporate competing perspectives, such as those of the Native Americans whose land was taken to build Wichita. OCM will likely remain emblematic of many living history museums that have constricted the range of their stories through existing architecture and a family-friendly environment.

The Women’s Rights National Historical Park (WRNHP) conforms to Rothstein’s criticism of identity museums. In depicting the history of gender inequality and the struggle of women’s rights, WRNHP exchanges the dominant male-centric version of history found in many museums for celebratory exhibits tinged with self-blame for the sins of misogyny. The complicated and contentious history of women’s rights is simplified into a steady march of progress that is, as Rothstein said of another exhibit, “celebratory without being explanatory” (2). Rather than incorporate the history of women’s rights into a broader narrative, WRNHP keeps its subject matter ghettoized as a separate, parallel narrative.

For WRNHP to transcend Rothstein’s criticisms, the curators would have to increase their critical detachment and weave their narrative into a national narrative of political struggle. However, changes to their formula would likely be perceived as anti-women even though a more contentious history would in fact further highlight the history of struggle. Through the course of its next redesign

WRNHP will likely retain its celebratory, underdog narrative of progress—keeping it squarely in line with many other identity museums.

As a refutation of Loewen's argument, *Mining the Museum* functions on a purely theoretical level. While Loewen lamented that roadside signs and monuments failed to provide multiple views in staking claims to contemporaneous local pride, Fred Wilson's collaboration with the Maryland Historical Society sidesteps this issue by neglecting to offer contextual historicism typically offered by museums. In juxtaposing anachronistic items in his displays, Wilson calls attention to the curator's input, which is suppressed into the voice of omniscience in Loewen's roadside signs. Rather than telling two clear narratives of the subject and its author's understanding, Wilson's exhibit explores the cluttered divide between an object's historical meaning and the role of context. In lacking a rigid historical narrative, *Mining the Museum* offers a contentious, contingent arena for historical objects.

While many subsequent museums may have followed Wilson's model for exhibition design, *Mining the Museum* cannot be considered mainstream. It actively resists becoming commonplace by positioning itself in contrast to traditional modes of museum expression through offering commentary on their tropes and limitations. Wilson's vision would not be what Loewen had in mind in suggesting possible solutions, but nonetheless the exhibit represents a contentious, multi-viewed perspective on historical artifacts. The spirit of *Mining the Museum* remains sustainable to the extent that the self-awareness of museum orthodoxies can help to move the profession forward into new territories.

In counterpoint to Rothstein's criticisms of social history, *Open House* serves as a small-scale set of narratives that sidestep non-critical celebration while maintaining their explanatory power. The curators of the exhibit use a single home as the common thread linking the disparate experiences of the residents of 470 Hopkins Street in St. Paul, Minnesota—spanning multiple time periods and ethnicities.

Rather than commenting on aggregations of ethnicities and other groups, *Open House*, as Benjamin Filene observes, “illustrates for visitors that individuals make history and that individuals' experiences can speak to broader historical patterns” (147). The explanatory power of *Open House* consequently derives from its focus on a kaleidoscope of individuals rather than a unified vision of life in St. Paul. Rather than tell a necessarily abridged version of American history, *Open House* tells a detailed story of the residents of 470 Hopkins Street to the limits of completeness. In doing so, the exhibit showcases how social history can—to invert Rothstein’s criticism—be explanatory without being celebratory.

While *Open House* presumably has a number of near-analogues in house museums throughout the country, there are likely few that match its nuance and attention to detail in bringing the stories of otherwise unheralded individuals to the historical fore without resorting to pandering or aggrandizing their subjects. The majority of house museums are built around notable historical figures and consequently incorporate social history themes to a lesser extent. Despite being relatively atypical, *Open House* offers a compelling way forward for social history. By focusing on Rothstein’s dreaded particular, simplistic social reductions are avoided and deeper, more engaging stories can be told. Any city could create a museum on this model—all it requires is an older house and an attention to detail in researching and assembling the stories of past residents.

Despite Loewen and Rothstein’s overlapping criticisms, future possibilities for crafting a critical, contentious, contingent narrative in exhibits are encouraging. As long as curators, consulting historians, and other museum professionals operate from an understanding of the strengths and limitations of exhibits as a medium, public interpretation need not be hampered by heritage and pseudo-history. To the extent that social history succeeded in fracturing the grand narrative of political/military/national history into a multiplicity of perspectives based on identity, reconstructing the type of comprehensive,

generalist history to which Rothstein aspires no longer seems feasible (or even desirable). Rather than task museums with constructing a grand narrative, why not assist visitors in constructing their own? Why not tell small stories that radiate outward into larger contexts? If history museums make it their goal to impart the “historical method” in addition to facts and figures, they can make every visitor into a historian. That would truly be history “from the bottom up.”