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History versus Heritage?

Archives and museums represent battlefields on which the preservation, interpretation, and presentation of history and heritage unfold. If, as David Lowenthal would have us believe, “history is mostly written by the winners[...] but heritage increasingly belongs to the losers,” then determining how to navigate the differences between history and heritage is an important consideration for archivists and museum professionals.¹ As cultural mediators, should we take sides and either recount the history of the winners or seek to uncover the heritage of the losers?² Or should we find new ways of navigating the gulfs between history and heritage?

Before delving into such questions, “history” and “heritage” need working definitions. History encompasses the products of professional historians and researchers who study and interpret the past using a rigorous set of criteria—it remains subject to peer review and revision, but should be based on the best empirical evidence available. Because it requires an author, history remains extrinsic to the subjects; it represents a second-hand narrative. Conversely, heritage represents the cultural meaning and memory of an artifact (tangible heritage) or an activity (intangible heritage) transmitted through groups of people. As cultural geographer Stephen Hoelscher indicates, “heritage is a mode of understanding and utilizing the past that is, at its very core, deeply partisan and intensely felt.”³ The meaning of an artifact or activity exists intrinsically within its relationship to cultural actors—therefore heritage does not require

¹ David Lowenthal. *The History Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 78. Quoted in: Barbara J. Little. *Historical Archeology: Why the Past Matters* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 159.

² Lowenthal, in *The History Crusade*, takes the side of history, warning that the ascendancy of the cult of heritage leads to a fetishization of the past.

³ Sharon Macdonald, ed. *A Companion to Museum Studies*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 200.

authorship or even active analysis to exist. While history is preserved through authors who create documents, heritage must be preserved through cultural actors who enact their customs and curators who assemble artifacts in museums or archives.

Through his quotation, Lowenthal posits a dichotomy between history and heritage, winners and losers that obscures the more complex factors at work. History has indeed traditionally been the province of the winners, who justify favorable outcomes as inevitable—or at least as universally positive developments. For example, historical accounts of Manifest Destiny typically present the eventual coast-to-coast expansion of the United States as essential to the development of Americanness, with a disregard for the destruction of Native American lands and cultures.⁴ However, historiographical shifts toward social history have, at least partially, helped to bring the voice of common people into the historical record. Popular histories like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* represent inversions of the “history of the winners” trope by giving voices to otherwise muted groups.⁵ As a result, history no longer belongs solely to the winners—although winning and losing remains a significant thematic element of historical narratives.

Heritage similarly cannot be taken as solely the domain of the losers, in fact it increasingly belongs to *everyone*. Groups do not shed their cultural heritage as a result of socio-political success; customs and cultural values continue to inform their actions. For example, Puritans were political losers in Great Britain, prompting many to exile in America. However, the Protestant work ethic, an outgrowth of their religious heritage, has become a part of the

⁴ A prime example of this line of reasoning can be found in: Frederick Jackson Turner. *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920).

⁵ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

dominant narrative of the United States.⁶ As a part of our “mixing pot” national heritage, American have co-opted elements of separate cultural heritages and claimed them universally—hence “success through hard work” has been appropriated by winners even more than losers.

After dissecting the absolute statements in Lowenthal’s quote, we can dismiss the need to side with either winners or losers in history versus heritage. Instead, archivists and museum professionals should find new ways to navigate the divide between history and heritage. The question becomes: how can we give an equitable and meaningful voice to disparate cultural heritages while maintaining some critical historical oversight? Rather than become mired in an academic debate on the merits of different interpretative frameworks for understanding the past, we should look toward *sankofa*, or “the concept of reclaiming the past and understanding how the present came to be so that we can move forward.”⁷ By giving history and heritage an active purpose in informing the present and future, our professions can practice history while celebrating heritage. As public servants (broadly speaking), archivists and museum professionals should approach history and heritage as applied disciplines, the raw material for cultural lessons. Recognizing that both heritage and history should belong to all cultural actors, how can we best approach our collective memory of the past?

According to Barbara Little, “muted groups are those who are prevented from expressing their preferences and worldviews in the dominant cultural discourse.”⁸ In order to recover and preserve the culture of these muted groups within the context of their dominant counterparts, some historians have turned to microhistory—the study of historical vignettes that, while not necessarily universally representative, open windows into otherwise unheralded groups. Carl

⁶ Max Weber. *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Stephen Kalberg, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiii.

⁷ Little, 15.

⁸ Little, 67.

Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* offers an example of this approach. Ginzburg freely acknowledges that his subject, a sixteenth-century Italian miller known as Menocchio, is not representative of a broader social class or other aggregate. Instead he argues that Menocchio not only manifests "what should be understood," but also that the miller "permits us to define the latent possibilities of something (popular culture) otherwise only known to us through fragmentary and distorted documents, almost all of which originate in the 'archives of the repression.'"⁹ The use of microhistory presents a viable line of inquiry into the cultural worldviews of minority groups by foregoing attempts to write universal narratives—an approach that could be implemented by archivists and museum professionals contributing to the histories of socio-political losers.

As for the goal of ensuring that heritage belongs to everyone, bridging social capital offers a means to balance the scales for socio-cultural winners and losers. Little argues for an emphasis on bridging social capital (connecting disparate groups) over bonding social capital (increasing internal group cohesiveness): "rather than drawing dividing lines between the struggles of 'us' and 'them,' such work seeks to unite people through shared struggle and shared goals of creating viable and meaningful lives."¹⁰ Lowenthal would likely agree since bonding social capital tends to feed into the cult of heritage that he warns of. Archivists and museum professionals connecting cultural actors through shared heritage should not ignore instances of historical conflict—instead we should emphasize the shared inheritance of such struggles in looking to the future.

While David Lowenthal's quotation does not accurately represent the complicated relationships between history and heritage, his association between winners and losers resonates

⁹ Carl Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worm*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xxi.

¹⁰ Little, 163.

throughout the decisions of archivists and museum professionals. No matter how we frame our inquiries, there will always be cultural winners who are featured in our collections, as well as muted groups that lack an adequate voice. As such, self-awareness of institutional and personal bias is necessary for effective balance in handling our subjects. We must act as referees in forming our collections.