

## Review Article

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### Resistant visitors and the development of empathy

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**Rose, Julia.** *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, paperback £23.95, hardback £49.95, pp. xvi+215.

**Gokcigdem, Elif M.** *Fostering Empathy Through Museums.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, paperback £29.95, hardback £65, pp. xxxii+296.

In the early hours of April 24, 2017, crews in New Orleans, Louisiana, donned headgear, masks, and bulletproof vests to begin dismantling monuments to Confederate leaders and segregation. They undertook this task under cover of night because white supremacists threatened to halt the process, even though the city government had ruled that it was time for these testaments to social inequality be removed. This incident illustrates the continuing power of memorials and museums to generate controversy and reminds us that visitors may lack empathy for victims of oppression and resist efforts to render history more inclusive. Fortunately, two recent books, Julia Rose's *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* and Elif Gokcigdem's *Fostering Empathy Through Museums*, offer practitioners theories and strategies for overcoming these challenges.

In *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*, Julia Rose addresses a problem faced by museums around the world—how to present information that is controversial or disturbing to staff or visitors. Its intent is highly pertinent in this period when museums strive to expand both the histories they present and the audiences they reach. The author draws extensively on her experience working at a Magnolia Mound Plantation (MMP), a historic home museum in the US South, where she undertook the task of increasing the representation of enslaved people in interpretations of the site.

The author's approach to addressing such controversies is based on what she terms CMP, or Commemorative Museum Pedagogy. CMP comprises five phases: reception, resistance, repetition, reflection, and reconsideration. The strategies that form CMP are practical, and in many ways, this pedagogy is an articulation of steps practitioners have successfully adopted elsewhere. For instance, the Reflection step is visible in spaces for contemplation at institutions such as the Shoah Memorial in Milan. Authors including Joshua Adair have examined audience and staff resistance (in his case, to LGBT stories embedded in historic sites).<sup>1</sup> Rose's contribution is to bring these thoughts together in ways that could improve practice. Moreover, specific examples based on multiple sites are persuasive and engaging.

Rose directly addresses the fact that many visitors, together with history workers, must face grief and loss as long-held beliefs are challenged by new interpretations of difficult histories. Therefore, she emphasizes the importance of providing a safe and respectful environment, particularly at exhibitions where individuals' convictions may be tested. Showing sensitivity in this way is closely related to three 'building blocks' for creating empathy among audiences. Rose suggests that visitors respond intensely to *the Face*, or 'multidimensional representations' of the personal; *the Real*, or historical content, which must be questioned; and *the Narrative*, which brings together the first two elements in a form that visitors can follow.

The strongest section of the book is chapter 5, 'Expanding and elevating slave life history', which delineates how the author used CMP to change the interpretive approach at Magnolia Mound Plantation. Her research on the lives of enslaved people at the plantation constituted difficult knowledge for many staff members. Presenting the stories of African Americans when touring the slave quarters was acceptable to them, but they resisted changes to the narrative at the main house, especially when it shed negative light on past owners. Often the resistance was cast as a lack of time to include more information in tours. Ultimately, Rose had to reassure staff that her 'intentions for revising the tour were not to harm MMP, but to enrich the interpretation for broader audiences' (159). The trials she faced will resonate with readers who must also confront resistance to rendering tours more complex and inclusive.

Unfortunately, the book's editing renders it less than the essential compendium it might be. The chapters prior to the development of CMP are so general and repetitive that they are difficult to read at times. This book would benefit from a revision and refinement of these early chapters, which, due to the book's structure including a review of literature, definition of terms, and so forth, are rather dissertation-like. The text also contains too many errors in the prose and citations (in one case, the critical word 'not' is omitted, rendering the meaning opposite to what the author intended). I hope these weaknesses will be rectified if the book sees a second edition.

*Fostering Empathy Through Museums* by Elif Gokcigdem is another book that treats the emotional and cognitive impact of museums. Relying more on psychological concepts than on museum theory, the authors of the articles in this collection address both controversial exhibitions that can be upsetting to the public as well as the importance of museums and similar institutions in teaching empathy. The latter is variously described as understanding another's feelings and putting one's self in another's shoes. A recurring concept, which resembles Rose's three building blocks, is IPOP (ideas, people, objects, and physical [relating to sensations]), developed by the Smithsonian (171-175). IPOP summarizes visitor preferences for exhibitions, indicating conditions that engage the public in ways that generate empathy. More importantly, the individual chapters in this book provide case studies from a range of institutions, mostly in the US but also elsewhere. These include large and small sites—historical museums, science centres, children's institutions, and even a wildlife sanctuary.

The book opens with an introduction by the editor, followed by a chapter titled 'Teaching emotion and creativity skills through the arts.' The latter is persuasive in making the case that empathy can be taught, an argument that underlies the remainder of the book. Its discussion of the uses of emotion in museum or art workshops would be useful to therapists as well as educators and staff, as it presents methods for helping audiences to identify and manage their feelings.

At their best, the subsequent chapters in Gokcigdem's collection are inspiring in their creativity. A sense of humour is evident in fountains at San Francisco's Exploratorium that can be set off to spray one's partner in an exhibition about sharing. At the Levine Museum of the New South, the kinds of difficult histories addressed by Rose come into play, and staff members rely on facilitated dialogue as well as storytelling and listening to help audiences come to terms with the materials on display. Laura Caldwell Anderson's chapter on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute addresses a difficult history, too, but not through the steps proposed by Rose. Anderson describes tactics that build empathy for African Americans, including a slow walk up through the galleries, following the progress of the population; an exhibition challenging stereotypes; and volunteers who serve as listeners as well as witnesses to history. Another chapter focuses on an exhibition on Arapaho chief Niwot which confronted the white middle class privilege of residents of Boulder, Colorado. The goal of the exhibition was to offer a multilayered version of history, just as new interpretations at Magnolia Mound became increasingly complex. Indeed, even if the display created discomfort by drawing attention to the horrors of the Sand Creek massacre, audiences appreciated the information. Museum membership increased.

The diversity reflected in the book's chapters is heightened by the inclusion of texts on Islam, Asian art, and disability. A drawback of these case studies, however, is that the majority of the chapters are written by those involved with the museums they describe, so it is difficult to assess the extent to which critical distance exists. Most of the accounts present the exhibitions or museums as being successful, when, as Julia Rose notes, there is always a danger that a controversial exhibition will result in lost funding.

Both books contribute to the dialogue on museums as social agents, and both address the importance of personalizing exhibitions by telling stories. They deepen the growing dialogue on the role of emotions aroused by exhibitions. As institutions increasingly present controversial issues, they need strategies for approaching anger and resistance. Rose's *Commemorative Museum Pedagogy* summarizes steps that are already taken by many institutions, but in a way that puts them into relief for those who have not yet discovered those strategies. Gokcigdem and her contributors also tie empathy to museum pedagogy, but they stress that teaching empathy is worthwhile in itself, because empathy offers much more than a way to work through conflict. The authors in her collection perceive empathy as a broader social value that will deepen understanding among individuals. Together, these books will be of use to museum educators, curators, and others as they strive to offer experiences in which members of the public engage with contested histories.

Today's contestations, such as the removal of the monuments in New Orleans, present unique and complex challenges for those who will interpret them in public sites as part of our heritage. Should all perspectives be presented empathetically, even if they support violence and genocide? Is removing testaments to an ugly past always wise, or do these statues serve a purpose because they remind us of events that should never be forgotten? Will presenting the stories of these memorials re-traumatize those who have experienced oppression and suffering? These controversies and others remain to trouble museum staff and history workers, but books like Rose's and Gokcigdem's offer pathways toward a deeper consideration of the issues involved.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> J. Adair (2010), 'House museums or walk-in closets? The (non)representation of gay men in the museums they called home,' in A.K. Levin (ed.) *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, 264-278. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge.

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