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# The Politics of Special Collections and Museum Exhibits: A Civil War or The War of Northern Aggression?

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**The Politics of Special Collections and Museum Exhibits:  
A Civil War or The War of Northern Aggression?  
Essay Draft**

## **Introduction**

This essay examines the politics involved in the construction and curation of special collections and museum exhibits. Recent literature and personal narrative function as lenses through which readers will analyze how the presentation and representation of texts, material objects, and the naming of exhibits generate interest, aggravation, and outrage. Exhibits are meant to draw attention to historical or contemporary issues in order for viewers to both reflect on the past and to ask questions in the present. The contents of an exhibit also echo the educational backgrounds, interests, and biases of both curator and curatorial team. As a result exhibits are often framed sociologically, ideologically, and even theologically in order to give voice to the voiceless and to champion certain positions from history. This essay investigates the contested nature of exhibits by highlighting both their basic and complicated spectrums of meaning. The essay also identifies the political nature surrounding the selection, arrangement, and use of objects chosen or not chosen for exhibition. Finally, the essay also brings attention to the perspective of the viewer by examining the intent of the curator regarding how exhibits are shaped and positioned for museum audiences.

## **Identifying Museum and Special Collections Exhibits**

Museums and exhibition halls as structures are temporary or permanent locations built to house the objects of history. They are designed to showcase the arranged in order to give contemporary audiences opportunities to learn more about the past. Exhibits are the creative assemblages of curators, historians, and archivists who use these locations to frame and shape

meaning for audiences in the present. Exhibits, with their organized curios, artistic murals, extravagant lighting, and high tech audio/visual equipment are meant to draw attention to history or contemporary issues in order that viewers might reflect on the past (real or imagined) and ask questions (through a contemporary lens) in the present. Exhibits also present viewers with a contested and constructed series of spaces. In essence, exhibits function as a location (the exhibit) within a location (the museum, library, or exhibit hall).

Curators are generally forced to create and manage exhibits in locations outside their logistical preferences. Museum and exhibit spaces often exist as established locations prior to the decision to curate an exhibit. The curator, then, is required to decide how they want to arrange the space and how they want to construct the exhibit. Deciding how to plan, construct, and display an exhibit brings to light several questions concerning the political nature of selecting and positioning texts and objects based on the educational and ideological biases of the curator and curatorial team. Which text does one select? Which object does one *not* select? How curators arrange museum and special collections exhibits cannot be removed from the creator's own subjective biases. This makes the selection process easy for some, challenging for others, and incredibly difficult for a few.

James A. Boone in his chapter, "Why Museums make me Sad" from *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* notes, "museums then, or things or processes museum-like, may be said to occur whenever viewers (or their equivalent) are guided, not always willingly, among artifacts, samples, labels, captions, stereotypes, light, categories, drawings, feathers, skulls, visual reminders, and (in the case of museums and zoos and theaters) other goes (Boone 1991, 265)."

In this statement Boone lays out the basic process of how a museum works. Viewers walk into a museum facility and examine an assortment of material culture including manuscripts, objects, and textual and citation labels, among many other components. These objects represent the familiar, the controversial, and the grotesque while providing viewers with a carefully (or haphazardly) constructed snapshot of a narrative (or several narratives) from history. Boone goes on to note the museum and the materials displayed are “fragments wrested from their pasts and elsewhere to be exhibited and categorized, only to yield instead, through their juxtaposition, aphorisms of coincidence (Boone 1991, 256).” This idea demonstrates museums exhibits are often ideologically and politically messy. They bring together an assortment of papers and objects that have their own historical contextualities and past provenances. They were created in a historical space by individuals or entities during and for a given time and location. Those items, when removed from those past locations and placed in a forced contemporary arrangement can yield interesting yet constructed narratives.

But, exhibits also disorder the orderly. The fragment becomes the arranged. In a way, bringing order to a contemporary exhibit, actually disorders the original document or object. Curating an exhibit in the present, then, yields a constructed narrative of chance. Curators hope to bring some order to Boone’s wrested fragment. And, they hope to do it well in order for viewers to make sense of how curators have brought ordered items from the past together in a disordered yet seemingly organized way. As curators we must present a product, an exhibit that will make people think in order for viewers to walk away better informed or asking themselves questions they did not have prior to viewing the exhibit.

The year 2011 was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the American Civil War. From March 2011 to May 2012 the author planned, selected, ordered, named, and presented a

ten-case museum exhibit at Drew University on American Methodists and the war. I selected two locations for the exhibit, one just inside the entrance to the university library and the other within the lobby of the United Methodist Archives and History Center located several hundred feet from the main library. Both buildings have exhibit spaces that are temporary and permanent. There is little room to be creative with the space other than by rearranging of movable exhibit cases. I wanted the exhibit to identify the multiplicity of expressions of American Methodism (close to a dozen unique denominations) in the United States between 1861 and 1865. I also wanted the exhibit to tell a story while knowing my narrative would be constructed based on my academic background, available resources, and intellectual curiosities (and biases).

After several months of looking through special collections and archival materials I decided upon two hundred items for display representing ten historic Methodist traditions. I had ten cases with which to work. This meant I needed to place approximately twenty items in each case. Our curatorial team at Drew prefers to limit the item count in cases to eight to ten objects including text and citation labels. Thus, I had two hundred items selected with space for only eighty to one hundred. I had to decide what to use and what to return to the archive. In the end I selected and displayed ninety-five items including: the manuscript letters of soldiers and missionaries, photographs of church leaders, lithographs of government dignitaries, diaries and journals of Methodist ministers, printed publications, and assorted ephemera. Attempting to shape a narrative with ninety-five items representing ten uniquely different religious traditions meant I had to be selective regarding what to use and what not to use while keeping in mind the exhibit had to make sense to the viewer. I decided to go chronologically and thematically with the arrangement of the cases. As a result, I had my physical space (a museum-like lobby and entrance to an academic library). I also had my objects in mind and was ready to design the

exhibit and write the narrative. Now I needed to decide what to title the exhibit and how to organize the objects in the cases. I also needed to tell a compelling story in order for viewers to leave the exhibit having learned something new and having several questions in mind.

### **The Politics of Selection, Arrangement, and Use of Museum Objects**

The political nature surrounding the selection, arrangement, and use of objects for museum exhibits present curators with an array of difficulties. If exhibits were simply the result of the curator digging through a couple of archival boxes, discovering a few interesting objects, placing those objects in an exhibit case, and telling others to visit the “display,” the job of a curator would be less challenging. But, those who have experience curating exhibits often realize the process is much more time consuming and politically charged. The creation of a well done exhibit requires intellectual fortitude, pain-staking research, subjective decision-making, and lots of time. The presentation and representation of texts, objects, photographs, and even the name given an exhibit generates several responses from the viewer ranging from boredom to interest to aggravation to outrage.

Harriet Hawkins in her article “Collection as Artistic Practice: The Geographies of Collection and Politics of Display” notes, exhibits “develop a visual language that advances a personal and a material politics based on the formation of the relationship among the collector, her objects, and those who experience the collection (Hawkins 2010, 648).” This “visual language” is etched into each exhibit case regardless of whether or not the curator attempts to approach the construction of the exhibit and arrangement of objects with an open mind. How one chooses the contents of an exhibit echoes the educational background, interests, and biases of both curator and curatorial team. Training, intellectual development, and outright curiosity bring some objects to the fore because curators think these items might be more interesting than others.

These decisions lead curators to make subjective choices regarding whether or not an object appears in a display case. Once selected, Hawkins confirms these objects are “never simple representations of the world and of self, but rather as part of the active creation of the subject (Hawkins 2010, 653).” As curators, we become partakers in a special collections creation project. We are commissioned to bring curatorial order to a seemingly chaotic assortment of historical objects by organizing such items as manuscript letters, photographs, and ephemera into an arrangement we find comfortable and familiar.

Additionally, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett in her chapter “Objects of Ethnography” from the book *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* confirms, objects “require a context, or framework, for transforming otherwise grotesque, rude, strange, and vulgar artifacts into object lessons (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 390).” As curators, we attempt to manage history by constructing narratives that makes sense to us, and we hope, in turn, to the viewers of the exhibit. We select objects often because we are aware of the item in our collection or we feel that particular item can contribute to the whole of the display. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett notes, objects “were never intended to hold up to scrutiny as singular creations. Moreover, they are at their most documentary when presented in their multiplicity, that is, a collection (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 391).” The selection of objects by curators leads to the joining of fractured historical things written in the past by people who experienced contemporary life in their own contexts. This may include, in the case of our collection at Drew University, a thumb bone fragment purported to be from the hand of British colonial evangelist George Whitefield, the death mask formerly affixed to the face of Methodist founder John Wesley, or a well-used leather whip given to a Methodist missionary by an indigenous Tribal leader in Sierra Leone, Africa. In their historical contexts the items were tied to death, sadness,

and pain. By themselves they are curiosities. Brought together into an exhibit with text labels the objects become part of a narrative that weaves together a story from the past.

What curators hope to do echoes the scholarship of Maria Zedeño. In “Bundled Worlds: The Roles and Interactions of Complex Objects from the North American Plains” from the *Journal of Archeological Method & Theory*, she writes, “But despite profound epistemological differences between us as analysts in the present and them as objects and persons of the past, it is possible to find a taxonomic middle ground, where fixed spatial, temporal, and formal dimensions may be combined with the notions of transition and relative position of objects in a set (Zedeño 2008, 376).” This “middle ground” ideal brings complexity out of singularity, richness out of sameness, and order out of chaos. Curators locate objects alongside other similar items in order to tell a story chronologically or thematically. For example, what does the death mask of John Wesley placed on his face just hours after his passing in England have to do with a leather whip used on Africans by Africans from a people group in Sierra Leone?

While curating my Civil War project I first needed to think through the titling of the exhibit. I was in Northeast Ohio and Northwest Pennsylvania, attended college and graduate school in New York and New Jersey, and currently work in Northern New Jersey. The American Civil War, one of the most destructive conflicts in the history of the United States, was taught to me by educators who framed the war using the language “Civil War.” So, it made sense, or so I thought, to title the exhibit using a name for the conflict based on my educational background and familiarity with the title. Well, depending upon where one grows up in the United States, how one is educated, and how and where one is taught about that same conflict, the title is slippery, and has ranged from “The Civil War” to “The War Between the States” to “The War of Northern Aggression.” My selection of ninety-five objects, some of which represented items



from The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, The Methodist Protestant Church, and The Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church required me to consider alternate names for the same war. While examining contemporary websites of United Methodist churches in the U.S. South, in this case, the State of Georgia, I realized once again not everyone calls that bloody conflict the same thing. And, now, I am creating an exhibit that will be based in Northern New Jersey, will include almost one hundred items from locations throughout the United States, and will eventually reside online for a global audience. Titles do matter for some, and the hotly contested history and cultural trickle down of that one four-year conflict creates a politically-charged and regionally-based conundrum for curators over the simple, yet complicated, titling of museum exhibits.

The selection of particular objects for the exhibit on the American Civil War required me to carefully think through several possibilities: which items would be of most interest to the viewer? Which items were familiar enough to select in order to author text and citation labels in an efficient and accurate manner? And ultimately, which items should I present that would inform viewers of the rich history of American Methodism and the connections between the war and the church, while at the same time promoting our vast collections of archival materials? Prior to my work on the exhibit I had used Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's theory of objects, mentioned earlier, as part of my doctoral work at Drew University. While planning the Civil War exhibit I recalled her thoughts on "objects as lessons." And, so, the building of the exhibit entailed selecting objects that would inform or tell a story. And, if successful, I hoped viewers would walk away asking all sorts of interesting questions. Thus, I selected several original manuscripts written by Methodist soldiers from fields of battle and original letters of missionaries lamenting the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. What did these letters say in their historical context and

what are they saying to exhibit viewers today? Or, perhaps most importantly, what did I as curator envision the objects would say to the viewer?

Hawkins' notion mentioned above of objects as "visual language" meant that I was writing history simply by placing one handwritten letter next to another. The letters of Union and Confederate soldiers authored near whizzing bullets and around the stench of death had been arranged side-by-side in my exhibit case under the text label "Letters of War." These letters had been ripped from their historical context and neatly arranged in a display on the serene campus of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. These objects were organized far away from the horrors of the battlefield and the mundane contextual realities of the Civil War camp in order to tell a story (my story) of Methodists and the American Civil War.

### **Framing a Viewer's Experience of an Exhibit**

As noted earlier, exhibits are positioned sociologically, theologically, politically, and even metaphorically in order to give voice to the voiceless and to champion certain positions from history. As curators we attempt to bring the past to life through the representation of the past in objects and their lessons. We also want viewers to walk away from our exhibits having learned something new and hopefully with several questions in mind about the past. James A. Boone in "Why museums make me sad" confirms, "what viewers do—amidst the exhibitions and other viewers and captions of museums—is view, and perhaps eavesdrop. I am uncertain that this 'way of seeing' can ever be simply ameliorative...yet the unwholesome 'spectacularity' of museums may be as authentic in its fashion as others (Boone 1991, 264)." The notion of viewer as "eavesdropper" or partaker of the spectacularity beckons curators to plan and construct exhibits that awe, or, to build exhibits that are at least interesting. Curators want viewers to leave contemporary time and space to connect with historical objects, texts labels with quotes, and

various assorted images. This approach forces curators to be careful with their historical framing and contextual analysis since one text label of narrative can inform or mis-inform a generation of viewers. The takeaway is then dangerous, history is skewed (or at least inaccurate) and the object represented accidentally (or in some cases purposefully) misinforms the viewer of the past. The object is not to blame as it has been wrested from the past. The error falls directly on the curator who has encoded objects with misinformation about the past.

Curators usually desire to be accurate and they want to provide a frame of reference for the viewer. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett notes, “approaches to installation establish a theoretical frame of reference for the viewer, offer explanations, provide historical background, make comparisons, pose questions, and sometimes even extend to the circumstances of excavation, collection, and conservation of the objects on display (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 390).” This frame of reference positions the viewer in the contemporary past, as they bring their twenty-first century cultural and analytical lenses to objects created centuries ago. The curator’s task is to help establish frames of reference in order to better inform viewers and to raise questions for participants while looking over the exhibit. Using post-modernist or post-structuralist theories on a handwritten letter from 1862 can be informative for exhibit viewers but the approach can also be disconcerting. As curators, do we want to determine how one reads an object through the narrative provided on the text label? Is that really our task? Or, do we want to present historical evidence about the object and its location in history without having the viewer read the letter through the embedded philosophical lenses of a Derrida or Foucault?

My approach to the curation of exhibits is to inform viewers of factual information about the texts and material objects in ways that encourage participants to walk away with more questions in mind than when they arrived. I approach each exhibit carefully by attempting to

inform viewers about history rather than to force them to read history or analyze an object through my own set of unintentionally biased lenses. This is a messy process since I realize I have my own educational and ideological subjectivities ingrained into my work. Curators should inform, allow for eavesdropping, and enhance the walk-away value of the multiplicity of interpretations. Curators must realize they have been informed in certain ways and continue to inform others with a particular set of biases. We all have them. These interpretations are the result of how we were informed about the past in the past and how we were trained in our universities, graduate work, and library and archival programs.

During the planning stages of my exhibit on Methodists and the American Civil War I knew my religious background and academic training would bleed into the exhibit as much as I tried to carefully nuance the selection of objects and text labels. I am member of one particular stream of the larger American Methodist movement. Because of my personal familiarization with a particular strand of the Methodist tradition I was inclined to include objects from the movement which may have been overlooked by a curator of another Methodist entity. I had to be careful not to include too much or to make my particular tradition into a hagiographical side-show. When I began to think about and plan for take-away value related to the exhibit I also had to decide if I wanted to create the narrative in an ultra-academic way or if I wanted to write for someone with an interest in history but not holding a graduate degree in Civil War Studies. Exhibiting history to the educated as well as the interested forced me to create texts in a balanced manner by attempting to make the exhibit informative and interesting for the viewer with or without academic credentials.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Museums are temporary or permanent locations for the construction of exhibits. Exhibits are ordered attempts to bring together fragments from the past into a narrative that will both inform and raise questions in the present. The selection of the name, objects, and ephemera of exhibits are subjective decisions made by the curator and curatorial team. The naming of the exhibit and the final selection of objects for display are selected based on one's intellectual, ideological, philosophical, and theological biases. Those objects represent fragments from the past that curators use to tell a story in the present. The objects become lessons in and of themselves. The objects selected help inform viewers and can, at times, also confuse or disturb. As curators we hope viewers will be better informed and ask questions after they leave the exhibit.

The process of imagining, selecting, and ordering an exhibit on Methodists and the American Civil War helped me think through the political nature of exhibition. I had an approach in mind regarding how to construct an exhibit narrative and the chronological or thematic positioning of exhibit cases. But, once I selected objects for the exhibit I soon realized there were too many to highlight in the space provided for the exhibit. As a result I had to make hard decisions regarding what to display and what to return to the archive. While placing objects in the cases I began to think about what these objects might represent to the viewer. For example, displaying a whip used by Africans on Africans in Sierra Leone given to a missionary during the 1850s presented an object with a complicated and contested past. I planned to use the object as a poignant example of the historic trajectory of Methodist views on slavery from founder John Wesley to the American Civil War. But, could the object have been offensive to certain viewers? Did it evidence a history of oppression and pain and possibly detract from the exhibit rather than support my narrative in the exhibit case? These questions forced me to think about the

approaches curators must take in order to carefully construct a museum exhibit. The multiplicity of subjective choices involved in ordering historical objects in exhibit cases are politically-charged realities curators must keep in mind while working on an exhibit.

## Resources

1. Boone, James A. 1991. Why Museums Make Me Sad. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., 255-277. Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
2. Ibid., 256.
3. Hawkins, Harriet. 2010. Collection as Artistic Practice: The Geographies of Collection and Politics of Display in the Installations of Tomoko Takahashi and the Geographies and Politics of Display. *Women's Studies*. 39 (September 2010): 647-672.
4. Ibid., 653.
5. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1991. Objects of Ethnography. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., 386-443. Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
6. Ibid., 391.
7. Zedeño, Maria. 2008. Bundled Worlds: The Roles and Interactions of Complex Objects from the North American Plains. *Journal of Archeological Method & Theory*. 15 (4): 362-378.
8. Boone, Why Museums make Me Sad, 264.
9. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Objects as Ethnography, 390.