

## Valuing Critical Inquiry Skills in Museum Literacy

Lisa Gilbert  
Saint Louis University

---

As content acquisition is often conceived of as the primary goal of a museum visit, advice for social studies teachers on making the most of field trips primarily focuses on ways to increase the information absorbed by students. Yet, research in museum studies provides ample evidence for questioning this underlying assumption. This article presents a former museum professional's view on the educational potential of museum spaces, suggesting critical inquiry is a key skill of museum literacy. First, a historical view of museums shows how society has inscribed the institutions and their content with unwarranted authority. Secondly, an insider's view of the exhibit creation process raises questions about the nature of the content we are often eager for students to consume. Third, an overview of research in museum studies offers an alternative understanding of the nature of learning in museum spaces. Finally, practical suggestions are given for valuing critical inquiry as part of museum literacy. For social studies educators interested in empowering their students to become reflective citizens, a key component of museum literacy will be critical engagement with not only the narratives on display, but also the institutions that house them.

*Key Words:* field trips, history museums, critical inquiry, museum literacy, critical thinking, museum education.

### Introduction

For six years, I directed school programming at an American history museum. My duties included designing field trip programs, supervising and training education staff, and facilitating teacher professional development opportunities. Over 140,000 children visited the museum on field trips during my time there and attended exhibits that often dealt with issues of race and citizenship. Prior to this position, I spent a year working for the school services department in a Canadian history museum in downtown Montreal, where I led bilingual tours in a province in which language and national identity rub uneasily against each other. These experiences not only taught me about the narratives history museums promote, but also the ways visitors can transform the narratives they encounter when interpreting them on their own terms (Trofanenko, 2006a).

As I began to process my experiences as a practitioner, I took classes in museum studies. I became increasingly aware of the disconnect between museum educators' understanding of gallery spaces and the assumptions most teachers and educational researchers seemed to make about the nature of those same spaces. Many social education researchers promoting better use of museums tend to inscribe the institution and its content with authority, even though the field recognizes the importance of engaging critically with other sources, such as textbooks or the media. For example, Kristy Brugar (2012) indicates, "Educators can use museums to teach content that is squarely situated within the curriculum, and they can do so in more interesting, authentic ways than in the traditional classroom" (p. 33). However, she does not suggest that content may be problematic. Instead, she remains highly focused on aligning the museum's content with curriculum standards, a value shared by Joshua Kenna and William Russell (2015). Likewise, for Andrea Noel (2007), a "winning field trip" (p. 42) emphasizes curriculum and

---

defines learning as acquiring information, a goal that she says requires substantial preparation by the teacher. Similarly, for Patricia Coughlin (2010), “making field trips worthwhile” requires teachers to find sites that “address state standards and allow for purposeful yet flexible integration of the content to meet curricular needs” (p. 200). Her use of the phrase “meaningful learning experience” (p. 201) connotes a narrow focus on content and curriculum. The field trip program she describes as a “meaningful and productive” example (p. 205) does not engage students in critical evaluation, but tacitly encourages them to view the site as a trustworthy source of information. While curricular tie-ins may be valuable, the problem is that the advice stops there. Without critical inquiry into content, these approaches implicitly assign authority to the museum.

While recognizing multiple benefits of museum visits, Cory Wright-Maley, Robin Grenier, and Alan Marcus (2013) still emphasize content acquisition as the essential definition of learning. Social studies researchers Kenna and Russell (2015) advocate for inquiry, but their use of this term connotes gleaning information from a site rather than critically evaluating it. For example, they suggest that inquiry into monuments could be sparked by questions regarding “who organized the monument, who paid for the monument, and when was the monument erected” (p. 98). They do not suggest critical inquiry questions, such as: Was the monument worth constructing? What is the impact of this monument? Whose story does this monument honor, and whose does it demean? Does this monument encourage a false historical memory? These points resonate today when Confederate monuments are challenged (Izadi, 2015), and their history is uncovered and questioned (Blight, 2001). Without compelling questions, inquiry remains shallow (Marcus, 2007).

In another example, Alan Marcus and Thomas Levine (2011) provide good recommendations for helping students “examine how each museum’s history and purpose—and the pressures of the political and social contexts in which they exist— influence the museum’s perspectives” (p. 105). Yet they seem to suggest that students should not “question the decisions made by curators and historians” without teachers gaining advance permission from the museum to engage in these conversations (p. 108). This suggestion ascribes authority to the museum even as it seems to allow for questioning, and privileges the feelings of museum staff involved in exhibit creation over students’ meaningful engagement.

Critical evaluation is not wholly absent from the research on museum-based learning. In particular, Brenda Trofanenko (2006a, 2006b, 2010) writes compellingly about the need to question the tacit authority of museum spaces. Alan Marcus, Jeremy Stoddard, and Walter Woodward (2012) encourage teachers to help students become aware of museum narratives as constructions. Marcus (2007) suggests drawing students’ attention to the tension between museums’ educative missions and vested fundraising interests as a way to engage in critical reflection. Yet overall, education literature’s focus on maximizing students’ content acquisition as proof of a meaningful field trip supports Trofanenko’s (2006b) observation that “[d]espite all of the self-reflexivity on the museum project within the museum discipline...the museum displays still are treated instrumentally, that is, they are understood as knowledge that is unproblematically transmissible, as a commodity that can be readily exchanged for the price of admission” (p. 107).

This article is an effort to question the often-instrumental treatment of museums in social education. Here, I will offer a blend of research from education, history, and museum studies, along with my professional experiences, as a response to scholars’ frequent request for improved

---

dialogue between museum educators and classroom teachers (Coughlin, 2010; Noel & Colopy, 2006; Wright-Maley, Grenier, & Marcus, 2013). Often, these calls for dialogue conclude that museum educators need remediation for their ostensibly deficient knowledge of Kindergarten-12 (K-12) classrooms, but do not draw the parallel conclusion that teachers could benefit from an awareness of museum-specific pedagogy. Instead, a more fruitful approach might start by asking whether a museum educator's seeming disinterest in creating programs designed to maximize content acquisition might in fact reflect a pedagogical practice undergirded by a different theory of learning.

This article is limited to a focus on nonprofit history museums, the type of institution at which I worked. While social studies researchers often conceive of historic sites and nonprofit museums as the same entities (for an example, see Wright-Maley, Grenier, & Marcus, 2013, p. 209), distinguishing between these institutions' staff may prove valuable. These organizations often hire very different individuals. For example, the National Park Service follows government regulations in its hiring practices that often result in a staff with different backgrounds from those of nonprofit museums (Whisnant et al, 2011), which enjoy greater freedom in making staffing decisions. Nonprofit museums are generally able to demand high educational attainment and experience. The prerequisites for entering the field are often a Master's degree plus years of unpaid or underpaid internships (Ivy, 2016; Pelaez & Greenberg, 2015). This practice ensures education staff are often the most qualified in the institution even though they are consistently assigned low ranks in its hierarchy (Tyson, 2013; Zolberg, 1986). Nonetheless, many National Park Service sites do employ at least one education specialist, whereas small, privately held historic sites may be so understaffed that the person tasked with handling education programs does so in addition to their position's primary focus. Given the field's high variability, drawing finer distinctions between field trip site types and staff qualifications would improve the conclusions of subsequent social studies research.

My argument is this: both schools and society have inscribed museums with unwarranted authority. Advice for teachers about field trips generally focuses on enforcing student behavior toward a goal of absorbing museum content. Such advice holds students to a higher standard than adult visitors and takes a naïve view toward the nature of museums themselves. For social studies educators interested in empowering their students to become reflective citizens, a key component of museum literacy will be critical engagement with not only the narratives on display, but also the institutions that house them.

### **Inscribing Museums with Authority**

The reticence to subject museums to critical inquiry may be rooted in their perception as highly authoritative institutions. In their landmark study *The Presence of the Past*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1998) find that Americans view museums and historic sites as the most trustworthy source for historical information, outranking college history professors, high school teachers, and nonfiction books. For many Americans, the presence of artifacts lends a sense of objectivity to the institution. Taking a global view, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992) suggests museums play a role in the shaping of knowledge on the societal level. Here, I offer a historical approach tracing why museums are often immune from educators' critiques of other sources of information, such as textbooks or the media.

American museums have long presented themselves as authoritative institutions. Their institutional history begins with Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia in the late 18th century. Peale offered both an organized version of the natural world and portraits of Americans

---

who embodied high ideals and social positions. While the early republic was an uncertain place, Peale's museum was reassuring and orderly. It was believed that, by contemplating the connections between all things, museum visitors would become more aware of their place in the world and consequently become more virtuous members of society (Miller, 1983). In this way, the museum had the authority to teach visitors how to interpret the outside world, as well as the kind of citizen they ought to be (Brigham, 1995).

The ways in which museums ordered both the collections they presented and the audiences viewing them were far from innocuous. By the late 19th century, many experts applied Darwin's idea of natural selection to human cultures. Consequently, some groups (termed *races*) were considered more or less civilized than others. In this context, museum educators perceived themselves as playing a role in socializing individuals into a more advanced degree of social evolution. Not all social classes were ready for the highest class of museums, that of the aesthetic art museum. Different museums were considered appropriate for different groups, depending on what stage of social evolution they had supposedly reached. In this context, museums positioned themselves as places with the authority to enhance society by improving its members (Bennett, 1995, p. 60; Trofanenko, 2006a, p. 51).

At times, museum administrators felt discomfited by the presence of non-elite audiences; when, in 1891, the Metropolitan Museum of Art made public visiting hours available on Sunday afternoons, the museum's director complained that some "brought with them peculiar habits which were repulsive and unclean" (quoted in Levine, 1988, p. 183). Many, he added, "took the liberty of handling every object within reach; some went to the length of marring, scratching, and breaking articles unprotected by glass" (Levine, p. 183). The museum banned cameras on the grounds that they distracted visitors from appropriate appreciation of the art, placed additional guards in the galleries to monitor behavior, and confiscated visitors' canes and umbrellas. One year later, with Sunday visitors amounting to 30% of the museum's total visitation, the museum publicly credited itself with teaching these disorderly visitors to be "respectable, law-abiding, and intelligent" (quoted in Levine, 1988, p. 185) through policies that restricted their behavior in the elite museum space. Examples like these show that some museums claimed they benefitted society through their exercise of authority.

Not only did museums seek to *improve* various groups by allowing them to enter their spaces, museums also displayed *examples* of various *races*, that is to say, human beings. The June 1885 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* included an exhibit review "from a naturalist's point of view" in which the author described at length the "human curiosities" he had observed (Wood, 1885, p. 760). His comments on a man and woman from Fiji offers a witness to a museum practice that has largely been forgotten over time:

Physically, this is one of the finest races of mankind, and the two were very good specimens of it...Slightly darker than Spaniards, the Fijians have, as a rule, aquiline noses, high foreheads, and well-cut features generally. Their hair is the most remarkable characteristic of the race. Long, wavy, and stiff, it radiates from the head in all directions, so that the face seems quite small...It seems a pity that this fine race should perish, but it has been gradually dwindling away ever since the white man set his foot upon the island...It is a benevolent dream to think that education can elevate any savage race to the level of the white man, and the Fijians must yield to the beneficently inexorable law which commands a lower

race to give way to a higher. So, having this fact in mind, I was very glad to see examples of this splendid but doomed race. (pp. 760-761)

While this 19th-century reviewer limited his comments to living “specimens,” many museums collected preserved corpses as well. Today, this institutional history lingers in archives, with museums continuing to hold human remains as the nature of their acquisition means that it is impossible identify descendants in order to return bodies to families. Museum collections can literally embody institutional authority and power.

By the mid-20th century, museums faced increasing scrutiny from the public, especially in the cases of objects acquired under questionable grounds (e.g., Nazi seizures of artwork owned by Jewish families). In one defense, Neil MacGregor, then-president of the British Museum, wrote an op-ed in *The Guardian* that recurring controversies over ownership of certain artifacts stemmed from a misunderstanding of the institution’s “worldwide civic purpose” of providing a place for people of all nations to see their common humanity on display (MacGregor, 2004, n.p.). In this context, the Greek government’s recurring demands that the Elgin Marbles be returned spoke to small-minded provincialism, whereas the British Museum’s continued refusal to return them was a transcendent affirmation of universality. MacGregor’s argument reflected the belief that museums have the authority to decide who should have objects and for what purposes. Invoking expertise in preservation is one such way to justify this claim to authority.

It has become increasingly fashionable for institutions to distance themselves from claims of elite status. Many museums perceive they are decentering their control and opening up to visitor input. For example, Kathleen McLean (2011) uses two exhibits at the Oakland Museum of California to show that museum professionals “need to think of visitors as partners in a generative learning process within a dynamic community of learners” (p. 72). A close reading of both cases shows museum staff both chose the voices they would listen to and served as the final arbiter of which elements would be included. Such examples likely point toward trends in the conversations museums are having about themselves, rather than reflecting an actual decentering of power. As Donald Preziosi (2006) notes, “Newly articulated ‘missions’ of ‘philosophies’ for museums...[mask] museological practices that in fact are fundamentally unchanged since the early nineteenth century” (p. 72). He summarizes:

There has been virtually no projection of the institution’s future missions or philosophies that has not been more of the same, or not simply better, versions of the safely familiar. Its future continues to be conceived almost exclusively in an instrumental manner – as technically more refined versions of public edutainment and infotainment, or as more ‘responsive’ and ‘representative’ versions of whatever forms of social and cultural diversity seem to be required in increasingly more diverse communities, cities, and countries. (p. 70)

In other words, contemporary museum practice does not reflect the field’s rhetorical commitment to constructivist, audience-centered, and inclusive exhibits. Museums have maintained their authority and status as elite cultural institutions.

In the introduction to his study of American museums in the period from 1876-1926, Steven Conn (1998) notes the inherent tension in museums as elite cultural institutions that nevertheless welcome the public. He suggests that museums are populist educational institutions compared with universities. However, as Andrew McClellan (2003) observes, “My own

---

experience working with underprivileged school children at a public museum in London some decades ago taught me that free admission and liberal programming still competes with an aura of exclusivity inscribed in the museum's walls" (p. 2). Within the social studies community, we need to consider the ways we react to this aura of exclusivity: how do we empower not only our students, but also ourselves, to question authority as a key aspect of critical engagement with these elite institutions?

### **A Closer Look at the Exhibit Creation Process**

The authority inscribed into museums has lent them an august character, promoting a sense of uncritical trust that allows much of their work to remain obscured. Museums have no reason to break this silence, and little has changed since the report *Museum for a New Century* (American Association of Museums, 1984) noted an "ongoing tendency to keep audiences in the dark about choices that are made" (summarized in McClellan, 2003, p. 34). The following provides an insider's view of the exhibit creation process, offering further detail in support of Marcus' (2007) observation that an awareness of vested interests in the museum industry should make us hesitate before inscribing the content in museums with so much authority.

Exhibits generally fall into one of three categories: those created by the institution, those on loan from other institutions, and those created by exhibit companies. In all three cases, the industry's vested interest is to create what we commonly refer to as *spaces that sell*. Financial rather than educational factors determine the outcome of many decisions. As McClellan (2003) summarizes:

Increasing costs associated with blockbusters (transportation, insurance, publications, etc.) compelled museums to seek financial support from private corporations, which, in return for their investment, expected large audiences, the more affluent the better. Larger crowds also meant more profit for museums (and area businesses) as popular shows boosted parking fees, retail sales of food and specialized merchandise, and package deals with hotels and airlines. Visitors became customers and popularism descended into cynical marketing as museums and corporations both pursued exhibitions that would 'sell': hence the steady diet of Impressionism, mummies, and anything with 'gold' in the title. (p. 33)

Here, McClellan shows both money and power ensure that the construction of an exhibit narrative is far from a neutral process. This work is rooted in the institution's goals and the preferences of its stakeholders. In other words, as it creates a narrative from its holdings, the museum acts in the context of societal demands. Museums risk loss of funding and prestige when their production does not match stakeholders' preferences. These stakeholders can include sponsoring corporations, high-level donors, granting organizations, members of the board of directors, and others with monetary or social ties to the institution. Further, the broader civic society itself must not be posited as homogenous or egalitarian, but rather as one in which various groups experience unequal access to power. In ways both overt and covert, dominant societal discourses are often given privileged places in museum narratives. When an institution wishes to advance a narrative that is not part of the dominant discourse (what curators refer to as *pushing the narrative*), its attempts must be subtle lest it risk negative response from stakeholders. Museums thus find it very difficult to step outside the narrative that powerful members of society want to see reflected in exhibits; the controversy over the Smithsonian's proposed display of the *Enola Gay* (the aircraft used to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and

---

Nagasaki) is one famous example of a museum being forced to modify a narrative (see Marcus, 2007, p. 108 for one recounting of this incident). This example is famous only because it was publicized. In my experience, such censorship typically occurs subtly and privately. All of this resonates with Trofanenko's (2006b) observation about the museum as "an organization with significant institutional authority" and her insight that "[t]his authority serves to protect the power and the privilege of the museum to define history and to utilize specific curatorial practices that are at once exclusionary and particular" (pp. 99-100).

The frequent perception of justified authority often stems in part from a common belief that a museum curator is a content expert who is able to control what is present in the gallery and the narrative that is put forth. Museum curators seem to be regarded as somewhat akin to professors, with the exhibits they create being somewhat akin to scholarly monographs (Trofanenko, 2010). This mistaken parallel misses the gap between academic history and public history. As public historians, curators are usually selected not for their ability to engage in original research but rather their skill in selecting elements from historic scholarship that will resonate with visitors. Further, exhibit creation is not in the sole purview of curators but is frequently accomplished by teams where knowledge of audiences is at least as important as knowledge of artifacts (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). As a practitioner, I valued the ways such exhibit teams afforded an opportunity to connect with my colleagues around a common goal. Yet our shared purpose coalesced around the experiences we wanted visitors to have, not necessarily what we wanted them to learn, or even what messages we believed to be the most historically accurate. Seats at the table were filled by representatives from marketing, membership, guest services, and the like, with the individuals who had studied history forming a distinct minority. The fact that our work was not about reporting the results of inquiry, as is the case with research, should not diminish the pride we took in our contributions. Indeed, our discussions were often intellectually satisfying and reinforced the sense of meaning we found in our work. But it remains true that many non-museum-professionals seem to imagine a greater level of intellectual freedom and academic credentialing than is often the case in the creation of a new exhibit (see American Alliance of Museums (2012) for more on staff demographics and qualifications).

In short, an awareness of the realities of the exhibit creation process should make us hesitate before inscribing museums with so much authority and uncritically accepting the narratives they put forth. What is the nature of the content we are so eager for students to internalize?

### **The Nature of Learning in Museums**

Even if the institutional reality of museums matched their idealized reflections, emphasis on content acquisition in student visits remains a problem. While research in museum studies has moved away from the idea that content acquisition is the main type of learning that happens in museums, many social studies education scholars still retain this assumption. As Trofanenko (2010) observes, "research in history education has not kept pace with the growing body of academic research on public museums. Specifically, there is limited research on how history knowledge and learning occurs within public museums" (p.279). If museums are not particularly well suited to teaching content – a body of research I will outline here – what is needed is reconsideration of the educational nature of museum experiences. As Gaea Leinhardt (2014) asks,

How might our understanding of learning in the informal environment of the museum inform our understanding of school-based learning? The museum world itself has much to say about these issues, especially about the issue of the relationship between a museum experience and school types of learning outcomes, outcomes that to a large extent, they eschew. (pp. 14-15)

While visitors absorb some content from their museum experience (Greene et al, 2014), the idea that exhibits are *primarily* geared toward content acquisition has been strongly and repeatedly questioned. For example, in John Falk and Lynn Dierking's (1992) classic study, *The Museum Experience*, data demonstrated visitors brought their own goals to their museum experiences that were not dictated by, or sometimes even related to, the goals of exhibit designers. Falk and Dierking's resulting taxonomy of museum visitors provides a way of categorizing these multiple, and often competing, motivations. Similarly, Jan Packer (2008) explored the satisfaction levels of museum visitors and found that, rather than content acquisition, restoration and relaxation were frequent goals worthy of further scholarly attention. Paying attention to visitors' nonlinear movement through exhibits, Jay Rounds (2004) suggests that optimal foraging theory (a scientific model used to describe the behavior of animals as they seek out food in a habitat) might help explain how visitors are making intelligent choices by not living up to Beverly Serrell's (1998) idea of "time on task" (p. 7). Even for visitors motivated by curiosity over exhibit content, Rounds argues that comprehensive use of the exhibit is less effective in maximizing the museum visit than focusing on exhibit elements with high interest value and low search costs. Rounds advocates skipping over exhibit elements that appear uninteresting, and recommends exercising cognitive frugality in his strategies for curiosity-driven museum visitors, something students are routinely chastised for, despite visitor tracking studies consistently showing adults view only 20-40% of an exhibition (cited in Rounds, 2004). Museum studies researchers recognize that adults who freely choose to enter museum spaces do so for a variety of reasons and use their time toward a variety of goals. Although students do not make the same free choice to visit the museum, they too can transform the dictated purpose of their field trip through interactions with the institution and each other.

While some may worry that reducing a focus on content acquisition means abandoning educational goals, this concern is particularly unwarranted for social studies educators. Knowing our discipline's many fields find their best pedagogical expression in ever-deepening layers of questioning, we already recognize the danger of conceiving of education as a process of acquiring testable bits of information (Grant & Salinas, 2010; Ross, Mathison, & Vinson, 2014). Writing from an educational research context, Leinhardt (2014) develops a Museum Learning Model integrating identity, learning environment, and explanatory engagement. In this model, learning is not defined as information-gathering but rather occurs through the quality of conversations that happen after the visit. Writing from a museum studies context, Rounds (2012) rejects narrow definitions of education in his description of the relationships between the museum and the visitor as a loosely coupled system. Judging museum visits based on content acquisition would only make sense in a tightly coupled system, one in which inputs reliably generate desired outcomes. Yet Rounds tells us that the learning in museum visits is inherently unpredictable, with much of "What Happens" (the term he suggests in opposition to "outcomes") situated at the confluence of a complex group of factors, all of which interact but do not determine each other (Rounds, 2012, p. 425). While many are accustomed to a narrow focus on



the intentions set for an educational encounter and how well students lived up to those expectations, Rounds instead that a wider view of “What Happens” (p. 425) captures more of the empirical reality of museum visits. He indicates educators and researchers alike need a restored faith in the inherent worth of museums, a recognition of the inefficiency of exploratory processes, and renewed respect for the autonomy of visitors (Rounds, 2012, pp. 426-431). I argue this is as true for student visitors as it is for adults. As adult visitors, we trust that our exploration itself is somehow of value, even if we cannot readily identify what we have gained. Students should be offered the same respect, especially if we hope to spark a lifelong love of history museums. As social studies educators, accepting a loosely coupled system theory for museum visits means gaining a new perspective on the instrumental use of museum galleries: instead of seeing a place to gather bits of information, we can conceive of a space that implicitly teaches students that the act of learning about history is itself an open-ended exploration.

Arguments against prioritizing content acquisition during museum field trips should not be cause for alarm but instead recognition of the intricate work involved in engaging with the many disciplines of the social studies. We might make a parallel case with the study of medicine: no one would allow a future doctor to substitute a visit to one of the many exhibitions of plasticized human remains for their required basic anatomy course. Similarly, few science professors would offer credit for such an exhibit visit to enrich their syllabus, a point that reinforces Conn’s (1998) observation that the ubiquity of field trips at the K-12 level but not the university indicates that “we are content to offer our children knowledge which as adults we no longer trust” (p. 19). The work involved in understanding history is no less intricate than that involved in learning about anatomy; instead of a complex web of nerves, muscle, and bone, historians seek to untangle strands of economics, politics, and sociology. For a person with a goal of reaching deep historical understanding, any number of formats would be more appropriate than a museum visit, including enrolling in a seminar, engaging in research, or even simply reading a book.

Social studies educators value a more holistic view of education, emphasizing the power of reflection on the self and society (Banks, 2004; Byrd, 2012; Westheimer, 2014). One strand of museum studies research suggests museums may be ideal sites for identity work. Rounds (2006) explains that museums provide a space to develop a sense of order and ontological security, as well as to enact divergent identities. He suggests that museums offer sites for exploring “the possibility that we might become interested in things that are not consistent with our current identity, or that couldn’t be predicted from our life trajectory so far” and that museum visits help to “keep open the possibility that we might become someone new and unexpected” (pp. 146-147). Falk (2006) argues that “museum visitors’ identities, motivations, and learning are inextricably intertwined” (p. 151) and that “the visitor comes to the museum precisely in order to engage in this subtle process of building personal meaning” (p. 161). Researchers are cautioned to be aware that “the most profound work may be going on in silence” and that multiple roles and behaviors in the context of museums, including “expressing social cohesion,” serve identity-based learning goals (Falk, 2006, p. 162).

As promising as theories of identity work are for illuminating learning in museums, we should remember this power is double-edged. Museum narratives are not neutral and often privilege some groups and not others. Tracing the history of African American representation in museums, Lonnie Bunch (2010) writes, “Often the rhetoric of change fails to match the realities of everyday life in museums... [d]espite two decades of substantive progress and change,

---

whiteness is still the gold standard” (pp. 46-47). Trofanenko (2006b) observes that inclusion of marginalized groups can sometimes function as a form of neutralization: “Although these histories may honor individuals and may celebrate their courage, determination, and independence, they also assimilate the values and experiences of diverse subordinate classes and groups – experiences that include conflict inequality, and struggle against forms of domination – into middle-class notions of the past” (p. 103). The disparate treatment of different historical actors means that museums are an uneven mirror for students’ self-reflections. One way to empower all student visitors is to prepare them to approach museums and exhibits critically. The following section provides one path toward this goal.

### **Critical Inquiry as Part of Museum Literacy**

While the term *museum literacy* and related concepts have been used previously, my intention with this phrase is to evoke students and teachers who possess an ability to engage critically with both museum narratives and the institutions themselves. This is distinct from previous uses of the phrase. For many researchers, investigation of literacy tied to museums means focusing on content acquisition, implying that museums are institutions with expertise in displaying information for consumption by visitors. For example, Jonathan Eakle and Brooke Dalesio (2008) describe a second-grade class project in which students created a classroom “museum”; here, “museum literacies” connoted “communicating concepts in multiple ways” (p. 608). Others use museum spaces and museum-like projects to foster other literacies. Librarian Sandra Roff (2011) describes ways undergraduates might develop skills in information literacy when they work together to create an exhibit. Her conceptualization of the museum space tends to emphasize a tightly coupled system in which the museum’s purpose is to disseminate content. Likewise, Keiko Yasukawa and colleagues (2013) suggest museums are educational spaces where visitors develop various literacies. They do not, however, suggest critical inquiry into museum narratives or spaces as a component of museum literacy.

Reconceptualizing museum literacy to prioritize critical inquiry means that, to make the best use of field trip experiences, social studies teachers need to prepare their students to interrogate both the museum and its exhibits. Museum-literate students are sensitized to the power dynamics present in the exchange between what Gail Anderson (2004) calls museums and the “external world” (p. 6). They create a critical reading of museum visit in its entirety. Museum-literate students question what is put forth, retaining their own power to evaluate their experiences. Through critical engagement with the implicit and explicit messages sent by the museum’s displays, as well as with their interactions with staff, museum-literate students relocate authority toward the self. Students across the K-12 spectrum are capable of adopting this stance (for an example of late elementary students, see Trofanenko, 2006a). As with other practices, students’ skills in museum literacy should deepen over the course of their education.

Such students are prepared by museum-literate teachers. These educators are aware that a focus on content acquisition is too narrow to adequately describe the broad, multifaceted nature of museum experiences. Museum-literate teachers do not ask students to focus their time in the museum absorbing the narrative put forth by exhibits. Instead, they encourage students to critically evaluate, challenge, and draw multiple kinds of meaning from their experiences. Social studies teachers who can draw on their existing pedagogical knowledge about improving students’ media literacy (Kubey, 2004; Orłowski, 2014) do not need new training so much as increased sensitivity to the value of applying these skills to a museum context. Teachers skilled at matching instructional strategies with learning goals in the classroom will transfer this skill to

---

the museum. Scavenger hunts, for example, which emphasize the museum space as a place to collect bits of information and require behavior inauthentic to the museum experience, will be discarded (Jennifer Kaschak (2014) offers a similar critique). In an era of accountability, this may be a controversial move. Yet, even when attempts are made to utilize critical inquiry questions on scavenger hunts, the responses from students are not as cogent as the thinking they demonstrate during discussions or in post-visit writing, a point consistent with Léonie Rennie and David Johnston's (2007) insight that "the significant impact of a museum visit will very often occur not at the museum but sometime later" (p. 62).

Many studies emphasize the importance of pre-visit materials to make field trips meet their potential (Kaschak, 2014; Kenna & Russell, 2015; Noel & Colopy, 2006). While these studies often emphasize improved content acquisition as a benefit of pre-visit activities, the same mechanism may improve students' critical inquiry. Here, I offer strategies that teachers representing a wide range of grade levels might be able to adapt for their specific students' needs.

Since social studies is a discipline drawing from many fields of inquiry, social studies educators may use examples from art history. Before the visit, teachers might show students artist Fred Wilson's 1992 installation, *Mining the Museum*, to prepare them to engage critically with exhibits. Wilson utilized the Maryland Historical Society's collection to draw attention to the nature of the museums as institutions as well as their tendency to create expected narratives from their collections. In one case, Wilson juxtaposes slave shackles with a silver tea set and labels them "Metalwork, 1793-1880." In another, a reproduction skeleton (representing real ones in the collection) is laid out and labeled "Someone's Sister." Another piece by Wilson, *Guarded View*, was installed at the Whitney Museum in 1991. It features four headless, black mannequins wearing actual museum guard uniforms from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney. Students might discuss both Wilson's intention in drawing attention to the ways museum guards are simultaneously invisible and on display while they work, as well as to the frequent place of people of color within the museum industry. Students might also share their own feelings about the museum workers they will meet during their own visit. Many images of both installations can easily be found online and serve as a powerful tools for encouraging student reflection before a museum visit.

As a consequence of this preparation, students might ask how a particular object became part of the museum's collections and why it is present in the gallery space. For those teachers whose class time is so tightly scheduled that pre-visit activities are unrealistic, simply drawing attention to the sponsorship label at the gallery entrance can motivate students to consider which voices are present and which stories are silenced as they explore the exhibit space.

Teachers might also find useful questions for sparking discussion during or after a museum visit in the following list:

- *On museum narratives:* What story does this exhibit want to tell me? Who (or what) is present, and who (or what) is left out of this story? What new information, if uncovered, would change this story? Did the museum choose the right story to tell about this part of history? What do we still wonder about this topic? What new questions can we ask based on what we have seen and thought about today?
- *On specific objects:* How does this object's presence help tell this exhibit's story? How did this object become part of the museum's collections? What implicit and explicit messages are sent from the way it is being displayed? Why might the museum have made

---

the choice to display it this way? What additional information might change the way we understand this object?

- *On the museum as an institution:* What is the history of the museum we're visiting? How was it created, and what is its mission statement? Who provides the funding for this museum today? Who do we see working in this museum, and do we have the sense that we could work in this museum someday?
- *On the relationship between the museum and community:* Did we feel welcome at the museum today? If so, how were we treated? If not, how can we communicate with the museum to give specific feedback on our experience?

This sort of preparation and discussion may prove valuable not only for K-12 students, but also for pre-service teachers in social studies methods courses (Kaschak, 2014; Marcus, 2007). While these suggestions may seem most suited for secondary students, I encourage elementary teachers to consider ways they might use these ideas as inspiration for their classrooms. Elementary students, for example, might be asked: What is the story the museum is telling us? Does this story seem true? Who else should be part of the museum's story?

Finally, emphasizing critical inquiry as part of museum literacy has implications for social studies researchers. I echo Trofanenko's (2006b) recommendation that "social education should interrogate the specific processes of how museums marginalize various peoples in the production of identity in the museum and challenge these conventional theories of museum learning that are often captured in the field trip experience" (p. 109). Scholarship can begin to work from a recognition that, as Rennie and Johnston (2007) put it, "outcomes of a visit are likely to be multiple, rather than singular" even in the case of visits "for an ostensibly information-seeking purpose" (p. 65). We can utilize insights from sociocultural theory to embed the museum in its social context (see Falk & Dierking, 2013 for an overview of this stance and its implications for educational research). Rather than seeking out those factors that influence content acquisition, researchers can interrogate ways to utilize field trips to promote critical reflection on historical narratives and institutions alike. This critical reflection can fulfill the promise of Bunch's (2010) insight that one marker of a successful exhibit or program is that it helps visitors become more comfortable with ambiguity. We might ask whether including critical inquiry skills as part of museum literacy helps students become more aware of history as a discipline that encourages constant questioning. This investigation might follow a similar path as research on the impact of science centers, which has found that, rather than measuring knowledge gained through a visit, it may be more productive to ask if visitors' concepts of the nature of the field itself have changed (Rennie & Williams, 2002). Additionally, we should consider whether the assumptions underpinning our studies match our beliefs about the nature of social studies education. Whereas research methods that test students' short-term knowledge before and after visits are common (Falk & Dierking, 1997), these tend to implicitly suggest history is a collection of facts to be obtained and memorized. Releasing our grip on content acquisition as the primary goal of a visit means museum-based research can catch up with classroom-based research (for more on this gap, see Trofanenko, 2010, p. 279 and Leinhardt, 2014, pp. 14-15). We can consider many ways to translate social studies research about the interplay between history and identity in children's educational experiences (Ahonen, 2001; Banks, 2008; Epstein, 2001) in order to investigate their identity work in museums.

## Conclusion

Even if their content is often fraught with compromises, museums can still be sites of worthwhile student experiences. Drawing a comparison with another popular industry, more Americans attend museums than all sporting events and theme parks combined (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.). Yet we do not worry whether our schools are creating lifelong sports fans and persist in a goal of creating lifelong museum visitors, even though research into a possible link between school-based visitation in childhood and free-choice visitation in adulthood has been shaky at best (Falk & Dierking, 2014). For McClellan (2003), the fact we do not worry whether all social classes can enter professional sports stadiums and yet believe even our most elite museums should be accessible to everyone is an indication that “we continue to harbor utopian expectations about the role of art and museums in western societies” (p. 37).

I count myself among this utopian community, and agree with Daniel Spock’s (2006) assertion that “the museum experience should express to the child that the world is a place laden with curious things well worth exploring just for the sheer pleasure of it” (p. 178). The lights that pulled me toward the museum world have not dimmed simply because I began to be aware of some of the shadows lurking along the galleries’ contours. I still believe the opportunity to view authentic artifacts or stand at the site of a historic event can translate into a powerful student experience. But power need not translate to authority quite as seamlessly as it often does. As a community of teachers and scholars, we can begin by valuing critical inquiry as an essential skill of museum literacy. This tool can help students to interpret the narratives and institutions they encounter on their own terms, practicing the courage that it takes to question authority. In this way, we can make truly meaningful use of these elite spaces, leveraging field trips toward a vision of just social education as a practice of reflective and empowered citizenship.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Alexander Cuenca for his insights and encouragements, both of which helped this project take form.

## References

- Ahonen, S. (2001). Politics of identity through history curriculum: Narratives of the past for social exclusion – or inclusion? *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 33(2), 179-194.
- American Alliance of Museums. (2012). *National Comparative Museum Salary Study*. Washington, D.C. Published by the American Alliance of Museums in collaboration with the Association of Midwest Museums, Mountain Plains Museum Association, New England Museum Association, and Southeastern Museums Conference.
- American Association of Museums. (1984). *Museums for a new century: A report on the commission on museums for a new century*. Washington: American Alliance of Museums Press.
- Anderson, G. (2004). *Reinventing the museum: Historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift*. Lanham: AltaMira Press.
- Banks, J. A. (2004). Teaching for social justice, diversity, and citizenship in a global world. *The Educational Forum* 68(4), 296-305.
- Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher* 37(3), 129-139.

- Bennett, T. (1995). *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Blight, D. (2001). *Race and reunion: The Civil War in American memory*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Brigham, D. R. (1995). *Public culture in the early republic: Peale's museum and its audience*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Brugar, K. A. (2012). Thinking beyond field trips: An analysis of museums and social studies learners. *Social Studies Research and Practice* 7(2), 32-49.
- Bunch, L. G. (2010). People need to remember: American museums still struggle with the legacy of race. *Museum* (Nov-Dec), 42-49.
- Byrd, D. (2012). Social studies education as a moral activity: Teaching toward a just society. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44(10), 1073-1079.
- Conn, S. (1998). *Museums and American intellectual life, 1876-1926*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Coughlin, P. K. (2010). Making field trips count: Collaborating for meaningful experiences. *The Social Studies* 101(5), 200-210.
- Eakle, A. J. & Dalesio, B. L. (2008). Museum literacies of a second-grade classroom. *The Reading Teacher* 61(8), 604-613.
- Epstein, T. (2001). Racial identity and young people's perspectives on social education. *Theory into Practice* 40(1), 42-47.
- Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L. D. (1997). School field trips: Assessing their long-term impact. *Curator* 40(3), 211-218.
- Falk, J.H. (2006). An identity-centered approach to understanding museum learning. *Curator* 49(2), 151-165.
- Falk, J.H. & Dierking, L.D. (2013). *The museum experience revisited*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Falk, J.H. and Dierking, L.D. (1992). *The museum experience*. Washington, DC: Whalesback Books.
- Grant, S. G. & Salinas, C. (2010). Assessment and accountability in the social studies. In L. S. Levstik & C. A. Tyson (Eds.), *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education* (pp. 219-236). New York: Routledge.
- Greene, J. P., Kisida, B., & Bowen, D.H. (2014). The educational value of field trips. *Education Next* 14(1), 78-86.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Ivy, N. (2016). The labor of diversity. *Museum* (Jan-Feb), 36-39.
- Kaschak, J. C. (2014). Museum visits in social studies: The role of a methods course. *Social Studies Research and Practice* 9(1), 107-118.
- Kenna, J. L., & Russell, W. B. (2015). Tripping on the core: Utilizing field trips to enhance the Common Core. *Social Studies Research and Practice* 10(2), 96-110.
- Kubey, R. (2004). Media literacy and the teaching of civics and social studies at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *American Behavioral Scientist* 48(1), 69-77.
- Leinhardt, G. (2014). Museums, conversations, and learning. *Revista Colombiana de Psicología* 23(1), 13-33.
- Levine, L. W. (1988). *Highbrow/lowbrow: The emergence of cultural hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Marcus, A. S. (2007). Representing the past and reflecting the present: Museums, memorials,

- 
- and the secondary history classroom. *The Social Studies* 98(3), 105-110.
- Marcus, A. S. & Levine, T. H. (2011). Knight at the museum: Learning history with museums. *The Social Studies* 102(3), 104-109.
- Marcus, A. S., Stoddard, J. D., & Woodward, W. W. (2012). *Teaching history with museums: Strategies for K-12 social studies*. New York: Routledge.
- McClellan, A. (2003). A brief history of the art museum public. In A. McClellan (Ed.), *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (pp. 1-49). Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- McLean, K. (2011). Whose questions, whose conversations? In B. Adair, B. Filene, & L. Koloski (Eds.), *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (pp. 70-79). Philadelphia: Pew Center for the Arts and Heritage.
- Miller, L. B. (1983). Charles Willson Peale: A life of harmony and purpose. In E. P. Richardson, B. Hindle, & L. B. Miller (Eds.), *Charles Willson Peale and His World* (pp. 170-233). New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Noel, A. M. (2007). Elements of a winning field trip. *Kappa Delta Pi Record* (Fall), 42-44.
- Noel, A. M., & Colopy, M. A. (2006). Making history field trips meaningful: Teachers' and site educators' perspectives on teaching materials. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34(4), 553-68.
- Orlowski, P. (2014). Critical media literacy and social studies: Paying heed to Orwell and Huxley. In E. W. Ross (Ed.), *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* (pp. 335-352). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Packer, J. (2008). Beyond learning: Exploring visitors' perceptions of the value and benefits of museum experiences. *Curator* 51(1), 33-54.
- Preziosi, D. (2006). Philosophy and the ends of the museum. In H. H. Genoways (Ed.), *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 69-78). Lanham: AltaMira Press.
- Rennie, L. J. & Johnston, D. J. (2007). Research on learning from museums. In J. H. Falk, L. D. Dierking, & S. Foutz (Eds.), *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions* (pp. 57-73). Lanham: AltaMira Press.
- Rennie, L. J., & Williams, G. F. (2002). Science centers and scientific literacy: Promoting a relationship with science. *Science Education* 86(5): 706-726.
- Roff, S. (2011). Visualizing history: Using museum skills to teach information literacy to undergraduates. *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 18(4), 350-358.
- Rosenzweig, R., & Thelen, D. (1998). *The presence of the past: Popular uses of history in American life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ross, E. W., Mathison, S., & Vinson, K. D. (2014). Social studies curriculum and teaching in the era of standardization. In E. W. Ross (Ed.), *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* (pp. 25-50). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rounds, J. (2004). Strategies for the curiosity-driven museum visitor. *Curator* 47(4), 389-412.
- Rounds, J. (2006). Doing identity work in museums. *Curator* 49(2), 133-150.
- Rounds, J. (2012). The museum and its relationships as a loosely coupled system. *Curator* 55(4), 413-434.
- Serrell, B. (1998). *Paying attention: Visitors and museum exhibitions*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

- 
- Spock, D. (2006). The puzzle of museum educational practice: A comment on Rounds and Falk. *Curator* 49(2), 167-180.
- Trofanenko, B. (2006a). Interrupting the gaze: On reconsidering authority in the museum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38(1), 49-65.
- Trofanenko, B. (2006b). The public museum and identity: Or, the question of belonging. In A. Segall, E. Heilman, & C. Cherryholmes (Eds.), *Social studies – The next generation: Research in the postmodern* (pp. 95-109). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Trofanenko, B. (2010). The educational promise of public history museum exhibits. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 38(2), 270-88.
- Tyson, A. 2013. *The wages of history: Emotional labor on public history's front lines*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Westheimer, J. (2014). Teaching students to think about patriotism. In E. W. Ross (Ed.), *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* (pp. 127-138). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Whisnant, A. M., Miller, M. R., Nash, G. B., & Thelen, D. (2011). *Imperiled promise: The state of history in the National Park Service*. Published by the Organization of American Historians at the invitation of the National Park Service.
- Wood, J. G. (1885). Dime museums from a naturalist's point of view. *Atlantic Monthly* 55, 759-765.
- Wright-Maley, C., Grenier, R., & Marcus, A. (2013). We need to talk: Improving dialogue between social studies teachers and educators. *The Social Studies* 104(5), 207-216.
- Yasukawa, K., Widin, J., Smith, V., Rivera, K., Van Tiel, M., Aubusson P., and Whitty, H. (2013). Examining museum visits as literacy events: The role of mediators. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* 21(1), 85-104.
- Zolberg, V. L. (1986). Tensions of mission in American art museums. In P. Di Maggio (Ed.), *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts: Studies in Mission and Constraint* (pp. 184–98). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Web-Based References

- American Alliance of Museums. (n.d.). Museum facts. Retrieved from <http://www.aam-us.org/about-museums/museum-facts>
- Izadi, E. (2015, December 17). New Orleans to remove four major Confederate monuments. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>
- MacGregor, N. (2004, July 23). The whole world in our hands. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com>
- Pelaez, N. & Greenberg, A. (2015). Unsafe ideas: Building museum worker solidarity for social justice. *Center for the Future of Museums Blog*. Accessed January 22, 2016. <http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/2015/06/unsafe-ideas-building-museum-worker.html>

### Author Bio

**Lisa Gilbert** is a doctoral candidate in social studies education at Saint Louis University. A former museum professional, her research interests include the learning that takes place in non-classroom spaces, as well as the use of critical theories related to race, gender, and class to explore ways individuals relate to historical narratives. Email: [lgilber1@slu.edu](mailto:lgilber1@slu.edu)