

INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

Issue 4: March 1995

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The purpose of this column is to address the need for improving our interpretation diversity and developing a broader approach to WHAT we interpret and to WHOM we interpret. This includes changing both our techniques and our subject matter to reflect a more diverse and encompassing education and interpretation program.

Column Notes

This is the fourth article in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Replies can be sent to me as can any articles for later dispersment. I am serving as an editor and will issue materials on an occasional basis. Comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail "reply to this message" or find my name on the directory. (Remember - do not retain all original addressees!) Please indicate if your item is intended for future printing in this column.

Editor's Note: The following is an address delivered by Douglas E. Evelyn to the annual meeting of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) in September 1994. Evelyn is the deputy director of the National Museum of the American Indian and was president of AASLH 1992-1994. The address is reprinted from the January/February issue of History News with the permission of AASLH. I believe this address is of relevance to the NPS for two reasons: 1) AASLH is a respected and influential organization in the development and delivery of interpretation and education, and 2) many of the points made in this address apply directly to the mission of the National Park Service. (Costa Dillon)

History, Inclusivity, and Responsibility

Douglas E. Evelyn

In my nomination statement to the membership in 1990, I defined the Association's task as "helping history practitioners and organizations of all types preserve and present the history of all Americans." I believed then, and do now, that AASLH had to be concerned with everyone's history and the full spectrum of individuals and organizations bringing history to the public. Following on those beliefs, I will focus today on importance of inclusivity in American society--inclusivity in regard to the people whose history is saved and told and our commensurate responsibilities in the history field.

Inclusivity to me requires an openness to new ideas, multiple points of view, and diverse cultures and peoples. It involves proactivity and tolerance. My first point is that commitment to inclusivity is an essential element in helping our unique society live up to its ideals--ideals based ultimately on respect for human dignity and equal opportunity for all. Perhaps Abraham Lincoln expressed these ideals best.

The Gettysburg Address described the nation as one "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln foresaw a free and united society that placed human dignity and respect above any difference of national origin, race, or ethnicity, but he knew that the ideal was not guaranteed or secured. He asked dedication to the "unfinished work...the great task remaining before us." It is to the service of that unified society envisaged by Lincoln that we pledge our work today--work of collecting, preserving, interpreting, and narrating our society's collective experience.

We continue to be challenged by the notion of a unified history which respects the presence and contributions of all Americans. Clearly, an inclusive approach serves more than an ideal: with the fast-emerging interdependence between world peoples and increasing diversity of our own communities, steps to help our communities appreciate the roles of all the cultural and ethnic stakeholders in America, would seem to make eminently good sense from a practical standpoint as well. If taking a fully inclusive approach to our history makes our task more challenging and complex, so

be it.

My second point is that history practitioners are especially qualified to lead our communities in appreciating the need for an inclusive history. We bring extensive and diverse resources to the task: historical knowledge, training, and perspectives; collections, records, and sites; and the very diversity and ubiquity of our multiple locations. Our organizations, staff, and products can reach and serve broad audiences in virtually every community. With our networks, associations, collaborations, and emerging technologies for use in education, we have the potential to link our resources and stimulate historical appreciation as never before.

Our local organizations are important for their concern for history as well as in their potential for stimulating public discourse. For example, in his book *The Spirit of Community* (1993), Amitai Etzioni speaks of the decline of "mediating" institutions in communities as schools, churches, even general stores, and other institutions consolidate, close, or relocate. Local forums for discussion of public matters are being lost at a time when the character of national-level debate is woefully deficient. Too often we see simplistic slogans substituted for reasoned discourse; important questions reduced to media blitzes, evening news sound-bites and talk-show patter; political posturing and attacks in lieu of problem solving; narrow cultural and religious agendas obscuring cross-cultural communication; and the persistence of polarizing stereotypes, buzz-words, and images in advertisements. If civil discussion and informed judgment are to prevail in our national decision making, it may well be up to those working at the local and community level to take the initiative.

Our increasing numbers of evolving, decentralized, and highly local history organizations can serve as new centers for citizen involvement and discussion. Their vitality and potential is demonstrated each year through the Association's annual Awards Program. We see with the Corey Award winners--and many of the other awardees--the significant impact of small, newly established volunteer-driven organizations as well as the contributions of large and longer established institutions, all "doing" history to the best of their capacities. (Fully a third of this year's awards were for projects dealing with aspects of cultural diversity in our communities.) So, I see strengths in the numbers and wide diversity and various emphases of our organizations--by type, size, jurisdiction, and specialized focus, including concentration on particular ethnic and cultural communities--and in the passion of our employees and volunteers. Our field is ready to serve.

My third point concerns steps we can take toward achieving greater appreciation for an inclusive American history. One way is to promote discourse leading to interracial understanding, tolerance, and respect. The need for such understanding was eloquently stated by Cornel West, head of Princeton's African-American studies program, in a *New York Times Magazine* article (August 2, 1992). West decried the presence of an "us versus them" rhetoric prevailing in discussions of the riots in Los Angeles which followed the televised beating and arrest of Rodney King. The article urged "new frameworks and languages" for discussions based on "the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us." Arguing that all Americans have a common destiny and interdependency, West called for new leaders who could deal with our complex issues and times and "imagine a future grounded in the best of our past." Of course, West's message applies far more widely than to black-white relations; it has real implications for the interpreters and sustainers of society's memory, we, who--of all others--should be able to help articulate what West referred as the "best of our past."

The challenge to us is to have the courage and initiative to lead our communities in discussions of race and other complex issues facing today's society. One way to do this is to participate and take the lead in what National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman Sheldon Hackney calls a "National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity." The endowment has suggested several modes of participation and provided a "conversation kit" and possible grant assistance. I urge you to act to provide forums for community discussion.

One such forum was created recently for younger people by the Brooklyn Historical Society, using a photo panel exhibition as a catalyst. Entitled "Crown Heights: Perceptions and Realities," the exhibition encouraged young people to examine life in the occasionally explosive neighborhood of the Crown Heights section of the city, where tensions have existed between African-American, Jewish, and other communities. Through previsit discussions, young people compared perceptions and knowledge of the people of Crown Heights. In the exhibition they learned of the diverse

communities and conditions and produced newspaper format articles in response to questions prompted by the exhibit. Opinions and viewpoints were shared, left for others to read, and discussed. Reaction was keen. A staff member observed in the Society's newsletter "that for children, it is not so overwhelming consider how to change the world." Perhaps adults can be reached as well through programming possible at most institutions. Why not try? Simple exhibits, public programs, film showings, and events can be arranged to stimulate discussion.

Exhibitions are important catalysts for helping the public look at history in new and broader ways. Let me cite two examples. The first of these was an exhibition called the "Smithsonian's America which opened in Japan this summer as part of the American Festival," sponsored by NHK Television and Yomiurmi Publications, two Japanese media giants. Housed in Japan's largest convention center, the size of the festival was equivalent to three football fields, the exhibit was approximately one-third that amount, or 60,000 square feet. When first approached by the Japanese negotiators four years ago, the National Museum of American History (NMAH) was determined to develop a script that would counter the proposed approach based on Japanese stereotypes of American history and "icons" from the Smithsonian collections. The Japanese planners wanted to avoid mention of conflict and diversity and rather emphasize "Hollywoodized" versions of our past. After considerable negotiation, NMAH prevailed with a script developed by project director Lonnie Bunch and his exhibition team based on the "contested promise of America." It was a compelling and comprehensive story of America. Sections on peopling America, including Native Americans; politics and protest; exploration and transportation; popular culture; and home and fashion were supplemented by "Meet an American" profiles that helped reveal the multiple peoples and human experiences of our past.

NMAH hoped the exhibition would plant intellectual seeds and begin to change minds and attitudes about who Americans are and how our society works. By dealing with the complexity of America and presenting an inclusive picture of our national history, I believe the exhibition had a stronger public impact than would have been achieved with the originally proposed routine script. The seven-week exhibition had 1.4 million visitors and was heavily documented by Japanese television.

A second example of revealing a more inclusive American history through the exhibition medium is seen in the recently opened suite of exhibitions for the National Museum of the American Indian's George Gustav Heye Center in New York City. In keeping with its mission, the museum has involved Native people directly in the exhibition development and added Native voices--for the most part missing in earlier museum exhibitions of their cultural materials. The first exhibition, "Creation's Journey: Masterworks from the National Museum of the American Indian," demonstrates the western hemispheric scope of the collection while examining how the term "masterwork" is viewed from various perspectives--those of curatorial and academic disciplines, as well as Native people. Cultural contexts provided throughout the installation help audiences comprehend the life views and patterns integral to the creation and use of the materials presented.

The next exhibition in the sequence, "All Roads are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture," takes the inclusion of Native voice much further, in that it is based entirely on selections from the museum's collections by twenty-three Native selectors drawn from communities throughout the Western Hemisphere. From over 1,000 objects selected and commented on, the museum, working with the individual selectors, chose over 300 items (including 120 pairs of moccasins) and presented them in groupings arranged by selector with additional commentary by the selector provided through visitor-activated media programs in each section.

The third exhibition, "This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity," is a collaborative product of fifteen contemporary Native artists. Through expositions of four themes--"the creation of the Indian world," "the sacred transitions of people, animals, and places," "the profane intrusions into sacred thought," and world view of the future"--the artists reveal the continuity of traditional cultural ideas as affected by contemporary conditions and views.

Together the three exhibitions provide multiple insights into Native American culture and experience and, by incorporating Native viewpoints throughout, they create a direct dialogue with contemporary audiences that will inevitably broaden the perspectives of the visitors. This result was only possible through the sustained inclusion of Native participants as primary partners and leaders in the interpretation of their cultural legacy. The inclusive planning

and first-person presentation approach used here can inform exhibits and other products attempting to present the experience of other cultures and ethnic groups as well. Our collecting function offers yet another forum for increasing public awareness of the contribution and presence of multiple participants in our society. Elements of the process being followed by museums in response to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) provide apt models for organizations to follow in regard to the development and use of collections of various cultural communities. The process involves publishing listings to notify tribes of the existence of collections, and then holding dialogues with tribal representatives regarding significance, disposition, and use of various categories of collections. The process is mandated, with required targets for completion.

Initially viewed with anxiety by the museum community, the repatriation process will, I am confident, be seen as a milestone in the recalibration of relationships between collecting institutions and cultural groups whose history and traditions are involved. At the National Museum of the American Indian, we are gaining new insights regarding the meaning, use, care, and interpretation of collections. By developing inclusive relationships in determining use of cultural collections, we are able to present a more honest and respectful educational product, and, importantly, we help communities protect sacred materials and practices while using previously inaccessible collections for the revitalization and continuity of cultural traditions.

Much can be done to make collections already assembled more accessible to communities whose story they tell, as well as to assist in collecting and documenting existing and past communities whose experience has been overlooked. By identifying manuscript, visual, text, or object holdings within our collections that pertain to particular cultural or ethnic experiences and inviting use of those collections by the relevant communities, we can encourage greater participation and understanding of diverse communities. The NAGPRA experience is pointing the way to values of opening access to existing collections.

We can also take initiative to lead our Communities in identifying materials and experiences important to be saved and documented. This would involve working within the community to identify important concerns, existing collections, and gaps to be filled; discussing approaches to collecting and documenting materials deemed significant; and producing mechanisms to sustain the programs. Such an effort, tailored to local area needs and resources would help identify and preserve significant cultural materials, assure well-documented educational products in the future, and broaden trust and respect between historical organizations and their many community constituencies.

Finally, I want to discuss the Association's role in helping history organizations and practitioners build nationwide appreciation for an inclusive view of American history. The Association's great advantage lies in its broad mantle covering organizations and individuals; historical societies, museums, and sites; archives and artifacts; public history and preservation. There is strength and potential in its breadth and inclusivity. We need to build on it and look beyond to new partners and participants. I am reminded of the founding of the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington in the early 1970s, when Washington impresario and cultural leader Patrick Hayes proclaimed its motto to be "Everybody In, Nobody Out." We pronounced the acronym "eeeno" and it became a rallying cry for shaping a metropolitan area-wide organization including performing and visual arts, individuals and institutions, federal, county, local and private groups, union and non-union, libraries and schools, and virtually every other claimant to the cultural community. I believe in the same inclusive approach for the history field and in the Association's capacity to bridge the full diversity of the history, community.

The Common Agenda Conference held at the National Museum of American History in 1987 was prompted by a desire to identify issues that cut across the diversity of the history field and develop strategies to address them. Developed in close cooperation with the leadership of AASLH, the conference explored areas then of particular concern: collecting strategies and plans; developing methods of sharing collections information; strengthening interpretive exhibitions through closer links between museums and academics; and increasing collaboration and involvement of relevant communities, organizations, and disciplines in our work. Proceedings were published by AASLH, and recommendations were pursued under an AASLH grant from NEH leading to various technical reports in History News. While formal AASLH activity ceased with the end of the NEH grant, numerous projects in the spirit of Common Agenda and focusing on issues identified at the conference developed at the local and regional level and were documented through AASLH publications. The idea then was to identify common concerns and convene partners or

allies to work with to address those issues.

These concerns and approaches continue to be valid today as the Association's focus is on education and training for the history organization field for the early twenty-first century. To build, deliver, and sustain a wide-ranging education and training curriculum, embracing issues relevant to our work and era, AASLH will need to work collaboratively, act inclusively, and communicate effectively with partners across the spectrum of history organizations. It will need to continue to help define the common agendas and approaches, catalyze demonstration projects, publicize model and exemplary activities, and promote and advocate the importance of history.

Our greatest societal challenge today is to sustain a unified nation made up of diverse people sharing a commitment to human freedom and equality. Our generation needs to provide leadership in helping our society appreciate its historical experience and value. I believe that AASLH is well positioned to be a lead organization in that work--helping all those who want to "do history" better and in building society's appreciation for the importance of history and the role of all members of our society in shaping it. I appreciate the privilege of serving as president and pledge my effort to supporting the Association's important work in the years ahead.