

AAD 630: Literature Review on a Research Topic

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Literature Review on a Research Topic

My collection of sources grows and changes with each assignment. This paper focuses on five individual literature reviews, looking primarily at the way that museums intersect with authority, authenticity, representation, and misrepresentation. For these purposes of research inquiry I have chosen to review the chapter “Museums and Controversy” from Mike Wallace’s book *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, “The 95 percent solution: school is not where most Americans learn most of their science” by Lynn D. Dierking and John H. Falk, “California’s Sites of Conscience: An Analysis of the State’s Historic Mission Museums” by Deanna Dartt-Newton, and *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and the Museum* by Kate Sturge. An outlier exists in the form of “Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork” by Diane L. Wolf, wherein I hope to gain a more solid foundation for practicing ethnographic research through a feminist lens.

“Museums and Controversy” by Mike Wallace

The book that this chapter comes from, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, is almost 20 years old. Nonetheless, it provides a foundation for understanding the role of museums historically in the United States of America. This book focuses specifically on history museums, but there are many questions, theoretical insights, and case studies that are valuable across thematic categories. I chose the chapter “Museums and Controversy” specifically because I am interested in looking at his critiques and carrying them forward for other applications.

Wallace describes a shift in the 1970s and 1980s, where curators smashed open museum doors and started creating exhibitions that shifted focus from object veneration (an

old spoon!) to explaining social relations of communities and classes (who used the spoon, how is it different from other spoons around the same time, what is the complex framework surrounding spoon-use and how does that fit in with and reflect the social relationships therein?). Prestigious institutions like the Smithsonian contributed to this shift, creating exhibitions like *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and World War II* to facilitate public learning about Japanese internment camps in America. Other museums followed suit and tackled exhibition themes involving racism, civil rights, class relations, and wartime. Wallace, keeping in mind that this is in 1996, goes on to critique the list of exhibition themes that are still taboo. Where are the exhibits about abortion and rape? “And what museums discuss the production of poverty and unemployment?” (Wallace, p. 121). Wallace thinks that museums can do better.

Wallace offers solutions in a suggestion-based format. He suggests that museums increase their audience and avoid getting bogged down in preconceived limitations of exhibition potential. Museums should, he continues, respond to issues of popular concern and “demystify and democratize museums by sharing authority with communities” (Wallace, p. 127). He draws the line at sharing too much authority, however. Wallace still believes in the super curator who is necessary in instigating community and museum cross-participation. He cautions against relinquishing too much control to the community. His final note is inspiring, however, and a vision worth striving for regardless of the twenty-year gap between when it was published and today. He says, “If museums continue to think imaginatively about new ways of saying things, and boldly about new things that are worth saying, I think they will find that their greatest contributions to the American past still lie in the future” (Wallace, p. 128).

Wallace uses case studies and a theoretical approach to make his arguments. I would critique his wariness about sharing curatorship authority, especially in a history museum. Once authority of representation is shared, the museum space becomes a greater foundation for shared history and representation of necessary, especially uncomfortable, narratives.

“The 95 percent solution: school is not where most Americans learn most of their science” by Lynn D. Dierking and John H. Falk

History and science are often paired together in the museum world, but this scope is still a departure from my previous example. Museums often have varied focuses, the big ones namely being art, science, natural history, and history. Despite this differentiation that often occurs, I find that museums often have a common purpose and goal. The content may change with each institution, but the idea of sharing an experience, knowledge, or simply an interest remains constant. This article uses science as a base point, but ties these ideas together with a clear purpose:

by challenging the assumption that school is the primary place where Americans learn science, our goal is not to diminish the importance and value of schooling, but rather to suggest that what does on in the other 95 percent of a citizen’s life may be equally important, and possibly more important to increasing science literacy among the public (Dierking and Falk, p. 491).

The focus here is on “free-choice” (informal) learning. Loosely defined, free-choice learning is what takes place outside the classroom. Deicing and Falk advocate for this process as a cost-effective way to “improve public understanding of science” (Dierking and Falk, p. 486), but also admit to access as a problematic issue. Museums in the United States often cost money and an assumed amount of free time, which falls on a spectrum of privilege. A family

needs to have the necessary funds, time, and energy to embark on a museum visit, something that is not attainable for a great many people.

The authors use primarily quantitative methods to approach their research question. They site several studies and statistics, relying on data provided by these numbers and the continuing research of leading organizations in the field. Their findings are clear, however, as they state that “our research shows that free-choice learning experiences represent the single greatest contributors to adult science knowledge” (Dierking and Falk, p. 488). Characteristics that museums can bring to free-choice learning include a noted absence of the scholastic framework, which is integral for the free-choice model’s success. It is clear through Dierking and Falk’s article that an expectation exists for museums to act as socially responsible institutions with an agenda of community support.

“California’s Sites of Conscience: An Analysis of the State’s Historic Mission Museums” by Deanna Dartt-Newton

Deanna Dartt-Newton’s article contains a critical investigation of the California Historic Mission Museums and how they present history. Her overall takeaway is positive; she is arguing that there are many possibilities for the Mission Museum system to use their given authority for purposes that benefit communities and contribute to a healing of historic injustices. There is a separation, Dartt-Newton argues, between scholarly critique of misrepresentation and how public history venues continue to represent the past.

As Dartt-Newton’s article shows, representation is about authority, not authenticity. Of the 21 California Mission Museums, 17 are owned and operated by “the local Catholic diocese of the area or the Franciscan Order and have active churches with parishioners and

attending priests” (Dartt-Newton, p. 98). The church is not likely to use its authority over these historic sites and museums to critique itself. This is problematic, because a falsified image of California history is being shared instead of an accurate, inclusive picture of what really happened. Dartt-Newton sees this in the way that exhibitions are designed, with limited information about Native Americans and usually either an erasure narrative that falsely depicts Native Americans as a disappearing culture, or a progress narrative that starts Californian history at the point of European contact.

Representation is problematic, partially because it denies an authentic narrative but also because it teaches thousands of K-12 visitors a wrongful image of the past. I was one of those visitors. I grew up in California and went to several Mission Museums, and I remember being surprised as a child when I saw a dungeon in San Diego’s Presidio. I could not wrap my head around why it would be necessary. It was my mother, not a label, plaque, or docent, who told me why. The identity of “Californian” is not inclusive, and Mission Museums have perpetuated the historic pattern of excluding and hiding uncomfortable history from their visitors.

Dartt-Newton uses site visits, ethnographic observation and participate observation, and theoretical and literature review and analysis as research methods in her article. She also proceeds to offer suggestions to the Mission Museum system, feasible ways in which they can move away from misrepresentation and towards an authentic narrative. Dartt-Newton explicitly called for “mission museums can (and have the ethical responsibility to) alter this grim narrative with a commitment to work as a source of community cohesion. This article is a call to action” (Dartt-Newton, p. 106).

“Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork” by Diane L. Wolf

Diane Wolf edited an entire book on feminism in fieldwork but I chose to look at her essay in the first chapter, “Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork.” Feminism is a theoretical foundation that has grounded my research in the past, and the feminist toolkit is one that I hope to continue using. Feminism is an integral part of who I am, and so the feminist perspective will apply to my research in some way no matter what I choose to focus on. Wolf’s questions regarding feminist dilemmas in ethnographic fieldwork are listed clearly: “What kinds of dilemmas, quandaries, and contradictions have feminists confronted and grappled with in the process of fieldwork or its aftermath? What kinds of contradictions have feminists uncovered during fieldwork? How have these challenges and contradictions changed over time, and what do these changes imply...?” (Wolf, p. 1). Wolf takes a standpoint of feminism (and feminist anthropologists in particular) as corrective, and argues that power is the issue. Power and “the unequal hierarchies or levels of control that are often maintained, perpetuated, created, and re-created during and after field research” (Wolf, p. 2). Power differentiation always exists between the researcher and the researched.

Wolf supplies her reader with a plethora of theoretical tools and frameworks from which to approach ethnographic fieldwork. She uses case studies and ethnographic fieldwork to talk about current quandaries in the field of feminism as it relates to ethnography, and provides her own theoretical analyses of the many pitfalls that occur. Her analysis is so extensive that I lack the space to even summarize it, except to say that she pulls heavily from the work of others to build a foundation of feminist ethnography that can be referenced time and again. She addresses questions of navigating power differentials,

reciprocal ethnography, positionally, positivism, research contributors as friends, building relationships with communities and individuals, and more.

***Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography, and the Museum* by Kate Sturge**

Kate Sturge's book looks at how museums represent the cultural "Other", arguing that every representation is a translation of culture into the museum framework. In particular, I would like to focus on her chapter "Museum Representations", in which she considers museums, exhibitions, and displays through a textual lens. Museums creating meaning through objects, and this meaning-making often goes through a translation process. Sturge is primarily interested in ethnographic museums, and that is where she focuses her lens. Ethnographic museums practice cultural translation, she says, "by virtue of their job of representing cultures through the medium of objects—a translation from the originating world of the objects into a new network of meanings and interpretations" (Sturge, p. 131). She also advocates for a greater critical approach to textual information within the museum.

Sturge uses a number of research methods, from case studies (the Pitt Rivers Museum specifically) to literature review and theoretical analysis. She uses large theoretical concepts as sections of her greater argument, briefly touching on authenticity, contact zones, and political contextualization. Her method of tackling one idea and separating it into smaller, more edible chunks will be helpful to note in my own pursuit of research.

References

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