Getting Intersectional in Museums

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Abstract: Museum professionals have long grappled with the problems of identity-based exclusion within museum exhibits, programs, and collections. Considering the diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in our communities, including the stories of all the identities that make up our communities has proven to be a challenge. The idea that identities do not operate alone but intersect with each other in dynamic and complex ways—that identities are intersectional—presents new possibilities for solving the challenges of identity-based inclusion. This article briefly introduces the foundations of intersectional theory and how this theory addresses challenges faced by museum professionals. Specific examples of how this critical feminist approach might function in museum spaces are presented. Building on these examples, this essay investigates the practical possibilities for addressing the challenges of identity-based inclusion in museum work.

Museum professionals have long grappled with the problems of identity-based exclusion within museum exhibits, programs, and collections. Considering the diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in our communities and including the stories of all the identities that make up our communities have proven to be a challenge. In many large museums there have been efforts to address broader exhibit topics through the temporary installation of exhibits that focus on a particular identity, such as women artists or African American histories. Some museums have chosen to tackle the topic of identities in general, like the 2007 exhibit *RACE: Are We So Different?* At the same time, marginalized groups have established their own identity-based museums; examples include the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the GLBT History Museum, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. While these interventions in historical narratives occur in separate or temporary spaces, visitors to large mainstream museums continue to find primarily Euro-centric heteronormative[1] collections and narratives.

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[1]This article uses the term heteronormative to refer to the normalization of a lifestyle that recognizes male and female gender categories as absolute, confers specific qualities upon each gender and grounds community structure around a family founded on heterosexual marriage. This definition draws from Michael Warner's use of the term heteronormative, and is used here to refer broadly to the assumption of heterosexuality that underpins cultural structures in Western society, and the accompanying racialized, gendered and classed assumptions that are part of these structural foundations.

The resulting approach to inclusion in museums has been both additive—adding in missing information—and fractional—focusing on a single identity. However, this approach fails to consider how these identity-based exclusions overlap, presenting museum professionals with the daunting task of fitting an ever-expanding rainbow of identities into existing museum archives, programs, and exhibits. The very idea that identities do not operate alone but *intersect* with each other in dynamic and complex ways—that identities are intersectional—presents new possibilities for solving the challenges of identity-based inclusion. This article briefly introduces the foundations of intersectional theory and how this theory addresses challenges faced by museum professionals. Specific examples of how this critical feminist approach might function in museum spaces are presented. Building on these examples, this essay investigates the practical possibilities for addressing the challenges of identity-based inclusion in museum work.

Theories and Methods of Intersectionality

Queer and women of color feminists have produced deep bodies of work that address both the imperative and the means for taking an intersectional approach to identities. Barbara Smith, Cherie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and many more than can be named here, spoke powerful truths about their experiences at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Their works have shaped much feminist and queer thought. Many felt limited by the focus on a singular identity. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, 1242) articulated one such limitation of single-identity politics, specifically the failure to recognize the differences amongst a particular identity group. For example, within identity politics we may advocate for an improvement in the lives of all women, without considering how the lived experiences of women from different racial, class, and geographic locations will vary dramatically and require different kinds of improvements. Intersectional identity politics, in contrast, was theorized as dynamically related, functionally and systemically co-constructed. Many authors, such as the Combahee River Collective (1982, 13), Cathy J. Cohen (1997, 440) and Valerie Smith (1998, xii), spoke from their own positions on the margins and called for recognition of the ways that racial, gender, sexual, and class oppressions operate together. Smith even warns that by focusing on one identity, such as race, we obfuscate the complex realities of the worlds in which we live (1998, xv). Rather than making visible the histories or cultures that were once excluded, we make invisible both the lived experiences of the people we seek to include *and* the systems that continue to exclude those on the margins of society.

All of these authors are cautioning against the simplistic prioritizing of one identity over others. But they, and others, are also advocating a systemic analysis of the ways that oppression operates. The foundation of applied intersectional theory in museums, I propose, is in this analysis of cultural structures and the ways that those structures shape our understandings of the world. Feminist Hazel V. Carby, for example, models the analysis of cultural structures, such as the nuclear family and reproduction, to show how these ideals have been created over time based upon Euro-American cultural values. Carby (1996, 63) demonstrates how the

creation of these values privileged white families while at the same time devaluing black women's choices, overlooking the historical structures that formed very different opportunities for black women. Karen Mary Davalos (2001, 59) is also critical of how institutional values operate in her analysis of U.S. museums, urging an approach to museum practice that views systems and hierarchy with a critical lens. She finds, for example, a devotion to heroes of war and capital in the content of history museums that centers a simplistic misogynist narrative of U.S. history (Davalos 2001, 40). All of these authors are united in their recognition of identities as intersectionally and dynamically related, functionally and systemically co-constructed. They emphasize, in different ways, the importance of analyzing the institutions and social structures which shape and regulate identities. An applied intersectional approach within museums requires reflecting critically on the structures and systems that museum professionals rely upon to shape their work.

It is through this kind of critical reflection that museum professionals become aware of existing power dynamics within daily choices and accepted practices. This act of reflection permits recognition of the ideologies at work within chosen systems of practice. By developing the deconstructive skills to decode and re-think those systems—a practice Chela Sandoval calls oppositional consciousness—museum professionals can respond intersectionally and effectively to marginalization within museums (Sandoval 2000, 55). But how does one actually *do* this in museums?

Consciousness in Practice

This section analyzes existing museum practices, reflecting critically on the systems employed in order to invoke consciousness of the values that are embedded in those systems. This reflection on the practices of museum work begins with systems that recreate exclusions and moves to examples of critical consciousness at work in museums. By reviewing existing practices, museum professionals can bring theory into action and explore the praxis of intersectional theory in museum. The application of an intersectional critical analysis relies on recognition of the structures we use in museums that both organize our institutions and regulate social identities, such as race, class, and gender. The following reflections build consciousness of these organizing structures and how they operate.

Organizing Structures: Temporality

The way that museums conceive of time, or temporality, is an organizing structure grounded in cultural assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. Many exhibits rely upon a temporal chronology that begins in the past and moves progressively to the present. By exploring one such presentation at the Experience Music Project (EMP) in Seattle the analysis can unravel the ways that narrative chronology upholds exclusions based on race, gender, and sexuality. The *Northwest Passage* exhibit, which told the story of popular music in the Northwest, was on display at the EMP for over a decade from 2000 to 2011. The narrative device of chronological temporal progression used to organize *Northwest Passage* successfully

reinforced several cultural ideas that themselves structure dominant exclusions. Temporality is deceptive, as Judith Halberstam (2006, 7) explains, "because we experience time as some form of natural progression, we fail to realize or notice its construction." In fact, the chronological timeline of life that we use in Western society is framed around "[w]ork and birth [which] become the logics of those bourgeois and reproductive life narratives that seem to unfold naturally but are actually pushed along by eager families and friends and strategies of capital accumulation and investment" (Halberstam 2007, 53). James Clifford (1988, 232) similarly described Western temporality as linking time with concepts of civilization. This Western temporality constructs time as "progress and modernization," leaving non-Western cultures in the timeless past (Erickson 2002, 16). Grounding the *Northwest Passage* exhibit narrative in Western concepts of chronology grounds the narrative in concepts of progress and financial success. The exhibit description indicates this teleological directive, tracing the development of the Northwest music scene "from its beginnings as a small isolated community to its status during the grunge years as the center of the rock universe" (EMP 2011). This narrow chronology focuses on development of a singular musical expression— "the scene"—that incorporates cultural notions of success, from "its beginnings as a small" scene to its perceived pinnacle as "the center of the rock universe." Building the narrative on commercially accomplished musicians recreates the marginalizations that occur within economic power systems, privileging the stories of white men over other Northwest musicians. Of the 441 non-video images of musicians and fans that I counted in the exhibit, 92% represented men and 8% represented women. Of those 441 images, 75% of them represented white people. The remaining 25% were images of black musicians and fans. Like the economically-motivated music industry,[2] *Northwest Passage* renders Native Americans invisible in current music productions, placing them in the "timeless past" (Erickson 2002, 16). Black musicians were included exclusively in the music genres of jazz and rap, genres that have become racially naturalized as African American music scenes despite their containment of multi-racial musical influences (Rodman 2006). Also reflective of the commercial music industry, women are included in *Northwest Passage* in very small numbers. The dearth of female musicians is not representative of the facts of local music history generally, or even the grunge scene in particular (Bauck 1997, 233). The resulting narrative of the exhibit portrays a musical history of the Northwest which features white, male commercially successful musicians.

The uncritical selection of temporal chronology as the organizing structure of *Northwest Passage* led to the reinforcement of Western cultural values of progress and financial success.

This critical reflection on the organizing structure of temporality reveals unconscious exclusionary choices. By building an awareness of the cultural values embedded in temporal progression, a deceptively simple structure—in this case, temporality—reproduces specific and exclusionary cultural values in the content of the exhibit.

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[2]For an excellent discussion of the racial and gender ideologies at work in commercial music in the U.S. see Maureen Mahon (2004).

Organizing Structures: How Do We Define Success?

As seen in *Northwest Passage*, how museums define success or achievement has a huge impact on who or what is included in museum work. Cultural norms around hallmarks of success within institutions impact the very process of exhibit development. Many museums evaluate the success of exhibit development by the quality of the display that is presented on the opening date. Major museums have opening dates for exhibits scheduled years in advance. The necessity of having completed images, text labels, and displays in the exhibit space drives a focus on creating an end product, leaving little time for critical reflection on the process of exhibit making.

One institution that flips this paradigm is the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific Experience (WLMAPE), an institution where I spent over 18 months volunteering with the Exhibits Development department, under Michelle Kumata. The WLMAPE uses a community advisory board to design the content and visual elements of their exhibits. This process requires a significant release of control by the institution, as the final display depends upon community members showing up to meetings with some regularity and bringing their personal objects or images to the museum for display. At the grand opening of the new museum space in May of 2008, the culmination of significant fundraising and building efforts, the WLMAPE opened with an incomplete permanent exhibit and several empty exhibit spaces. These empty exhibit spaces were designated as community galleries intended to rotate displays that focused on different groups within the larger Asian Pacific Islander communities, but for this most significant of days the space was empty. Success in this museum was not judged by the product on display on opening day, but rather by the process of community engagement that is the priority for the WLMAPE. This process was developed consciously with the goal of "fostering broad-based participation in the development of exhibitions and programs" (Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience 2013). Aware that the curatorial model of exhibit development—with a focus on exhibit product—did not meet the goal of community engagement, the WLMAPE intentionally created a new system that focused on exhibit process. This choice to be more inclusive in their practices could only be made with recognition, or consciousness, of existing practices that worked against inclusion. Critical awareness, like this, creates the possibility for systemic changes that prioritize inclusion.

Organizing Structures: Exhibit Labels

Unexamined cultural values are at work in another common museum practice: the application of a text label. Labels frequently identify the artist, the donor, the collections number, and sometimes additional information, like materials used to make the object, or some information about the object. The kinds of information included in the label reflect cultural assumptions about what is valuable. Fred Wilson, conscious of this practice, called the visitor's attention to the structuring power of the museum exhibit label in his exhibit *Mining the Museum*, shown from 1992 to 1993 at the Maryland Historical Society (Stein 1993, 112). "'Ou est mon visage?' reads Wilson's label accompanying nineteenth-century painter Joshua Johnson's portrait

of a white family. An artist of African American and Carib Indian ancestry, Wilson identified with Johnson, who was black, and of whom there are no known portraits" (Stein 1993, 112). In another section of the exhibit, Wilson created labels that "provided identities for hitherto anonymous black figures. For example, a Benjamin H. Latrobe watercolor previously titled 'View of Welch Point and the Mouth of Backcreek' (1806) is here called 'Jack Alexander in a canoe'"(Stein 1993, 114). The re-naming calls visitor attention to the black man in the canoe, centering a representation of a black person. This re-naming and re-centering brings awareness of the rarity of historical representations of black experiences and at the same time exposes the power of the exhibit label.

Another way that Wilson called visitor attention to museum labeling practices was by naming a case of "chiseled arrowheads 'Collection of numbers 76.1.25 3–76.1.67.11; white drawing ink, black India ink and lacquer, c.1976.' In these small details Wilson [kept] reminding [visitors] that the content of the installation is not merely the meaning of objects, but includes how the museum deals with them" (Stein 1993, 113). This label shows the value placed on the date an object is collected, and how it is tracked within a museum specific numbering system. The seemingly innocuous practice of following collections naming conventions on museum labels in fact holds larger consequences. The names applied indicate assumptions about who is important and who is excluded, reflecting larger cultural biases that normalize certain kinds of raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies.

Organizing Structure: Authority and Transparency

The naming practices employed in museum labels reflect the uncritical assumption of authority that is frequently seen in museums. In contrast to the academic conventions, which require that authors provide citations for our source materials, museum exhibit texts rarely indicate from where they are getting their information. Even beyond citing source materials, museums rarely provide viewers with a context of the exhibit formation process. Understanding who curated the materials and the knowledge system in which these curators are grounded provides valuable information to the viewer. The knowledge systems upon which research and exhibitions are grounded have deeply political and moral implications (Harding 1987, 32). For example, viewing Native American artifacts at a Native American museum is a very different context than viewing those same artifacts in a museum memorializing colonial settlement. As a viewer, understanding the context of the presentation provides valuable information for understanding the content itself. It is for this reason that feminist methodologies have moved away from an "invisible, anonymous, disembodied voice of authority" (Harding 1987, 32) and called for a self-reflexive consciousness on the part of the researcher, or in this case, curator.

The lack of authorial transparency can even obfuscate innovations in museum exhibitionary authority. The innovative community exhibit development process employed by the WLMAPE and discussed above invites community members to participate in a several month process of reflecting upon a community narrative and collaboratively deciding the details and representations of that narrative. However, a visitor to one of the WLMAPE's exhibit galleries would not know that its exhibits

are community-curated. The exhibits, presented with texts, objects, and images, appear so similar in form to other museum exhibits that this important distinction in authorship is invisible. The context provided by this information is lost to the viewer, and it is important to understanding the particular narrative presented. As a gallery volunteer during the museum's 2008 re-opening event, I encountered multiple questions from visitors who sought understanding of the particular details included in the exhibit. All of their questions were seeking context for the important narratives presented that day.

This lack of transparency makes it difficult for the museum visitor to contextualize information received in exhibits. Few visitors will launch an investigation into the validity of a museum's claims leaving most visitors to rely upon the information presented in determining whether to accept the authority of the museum.

Consciousness Creates New Possibilities

This section draws from the examples discussed to consider the practical possibilities of addressing identity-based inclusion in museums. The critical analysis of just a few organizing structures of museum practice shows how cultural assumptions guide many of these systems. Assumptions of racial and gender superiority form the foundation of practices like temporal chronologies, definitions of success, institutional authority, and transparency. Because of these foundational assumptions, utilizing these practices unconsciously reproduces the exclusion of the very same raced, gendered, and sexualized peoples that the museum profession seeks to include. Becoming conscious of these assumptions is an important first step to making sustainable changes that truly create inclusion. With this awareness, new possibilities become visible.

An example of this re-framing process discussed earlier in the article is Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society—an exhibit with which many readers will be familiar. Wilson used a collection that valued the objects and narratives of white men to a double purpose. He not only highlighted this value, exposing the degree to which narratives of African Americans had been excluded, Wilson also created an exhibit that centered African American experience. He did this not by adding objects to the collection but by reframing the objects already there. In one gallery, Wilson arranged portrait busts of Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson none of whom had ever lived in Maryland—alongside empty pedestals "that bore only small plaques proclaiming the names of celebrated African Americans who were Marylanders: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Benjamin Banneker" (Stein 1993, 113). The juxtaposition of the busts of white men who were not part of Maryland history next to the missing busts of African American individuals who were significantly part of Maryland history reveals the biases at work in this collection. This revelation brings a level of consciousness to the museum visitor, creates space to include those that have been excluded and addresses the significant gaps in the museum's collection.

Another example of reframing is found in Chicana artist Yolanda M. Lopez's installation, *The Nanny,* a physical display that conveys the experience of Chicanas

through what is present—the uniform, the cleaning supplies—and what is absent—the person. The experience and frequent representation of Mexican Americans as the invisible domestic help is portrayed by an empty maid's uniform, hanging on a partition screen above cleaning supplies and a basket of laundry (Pérez 2007, 53). The relationship between "Indigenous Latina women and European-identified and Euroamerican women" is further illuminated by two large reprints of advertisements that portray barely-seen women of color next to European women that are the focus of the advertisement. The European women look happy and excited while wearing clothing that references Latin culture. In both cases, "the women of color are vendors, as the domestic worker is of her labor, and are made to represent racialized relations of subservience" (Pérez 2007, 54). Lopez draws on media images found in print publications at different time periods to illustrate the historical continuity of the symbol of Chicanas as servants. Lopez used both images and objects to create a physical environment that calls attention to the missing person, highlighting the invisibility of domestic laborers as people. This juxtaposition creates consciousness in the visitor about a system that values some bodies more than others, based on class and ethnicity. Again, the artist is consciously reframing existing objects, exploiting the gaps to illuminate hidden ideologies.

These artists engaged in a process of critical reflection that allowed them first to be aware of what was missing—in these cases, the inclusion of material that reflected the experiences of Mexican Americans or African Americans. They used this awareness of what was missing to re-frame what was not. Museum professionals in all areas can engage in a similar process of critical reflection. What standards of practice are utilized in the daily work of a particular museum area? What cultural assumptions underpin those practices? How might those practices be re-creating the exclusions that museum professionals seek to change? Responding to these questions based on each museum's goals and practices allows each museum professional to be an active participant in the process of addressing identity-based exclusions. With the awareness of how museum practices create exclusion, museum professionals can apply the same re-framing process as these artists to our existing standards. When we realize how exclusion is created in our daily choices, we can effectively strategize new choices that move our work towards inclusion.

Conclusions

An intersectional approach to museology is grounded in critical consciousness. Museum professionals must first recognize the structures of power that shape our personal, professional, and institutional lives. This critically-reflective approach to museology can be utilized to re-imagine every level of professional museum work, including the organizational structure of museums, the naming conventions used in collections management, the processes of curation and exhibition, the physical structures of museum spaces, and even the educational preparation of museum professionals. Though I am unable to address all of these areas in the space of this essay, the examples discussed above model an application of critical feminist museology that is applicable to the range of spaces and processes utilized in museum work.

By reflecting critically and intersectionally on the variety of systems museum professionals employ, we develop conscious understanding of the organizing structures that create marginalization and exclusion. Opening these spaces for change allows the museum professional to access ideational resources: ideas previously unseen, opportunities within gaps, re-framings that expose exclusions, dissonance that highlights ideological formation, partnerships previously unimagined. Long-term systemic changes may not happen immediately or even address all those who are marginalized. Rather, consciousness brings new awareness, allowing museum professionals to acknowledge our roles within power structures and to acknowledge the repercussions and limitations of our deployments. Based on this understanding, we can re-imagine intersectional and egalitarian approaches to museum work.

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