

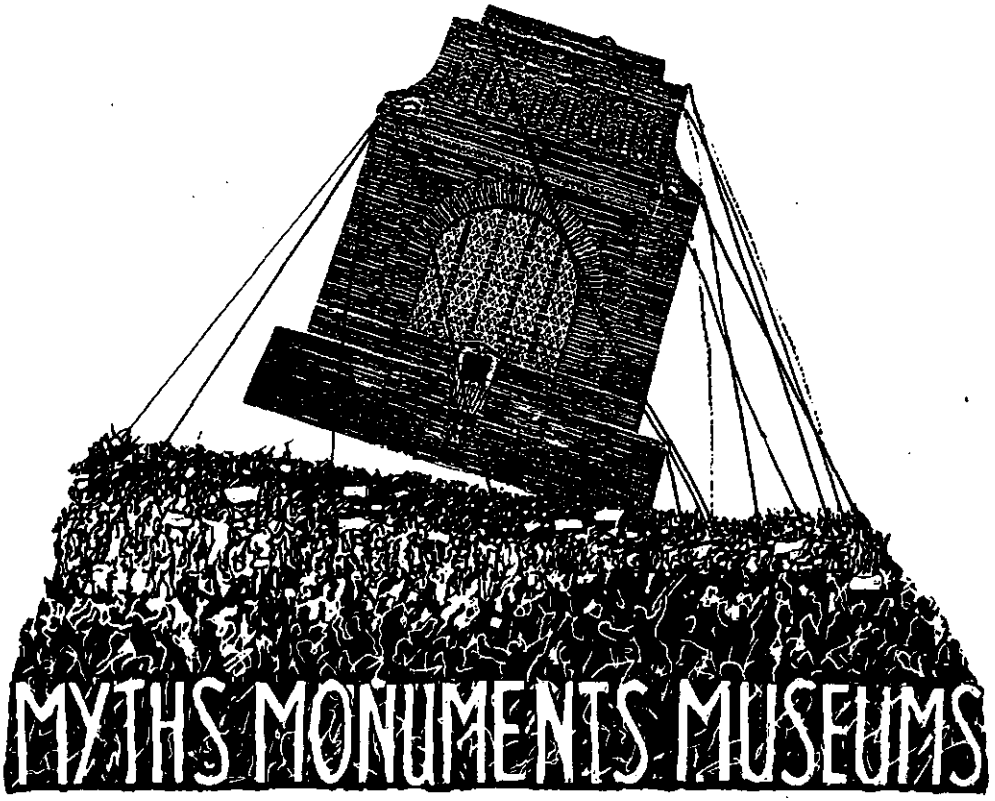
https://dspace.org/

# Subverting 'multiculturalism': an example from the United States

**Root, Dolores**

**1992-07-16T06:06:53Z**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8070

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/




# NEW PREMISES?

## 16 - 18 JULY 1992

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

Subverting 'Multiculturalism':

An Example from the United States

Dolores Root

Massachusetts Foundation for
the Humanities.



AFRICANA

# Subverting "Multiculturalism": An Example from the United States

Dolores Root, Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities

Discussions of the role of museums in constructing the "other" focus primarily on people living in faraway places as represented in collections and exhibitions (for example, Durrans, 1988; Karp and Lavine, 1991; Stocking, 1985). Usually, little attention is given to living communities and to invisibility as a powerful construction of the "other". Typically, program planners differentiate and separate audiences, identifying "traditional" and "non-traditional" audiences, in other words "Us" and "Other." It is illuminating to examine some of the ways American museums create and maintain the "other" and to consider the implications for realizing multicultural programming and multicultural institutions.

Put simply, multiculturalism means being more inclusive, broadening the representation and participation of people of color and other minority groups and addressing cultural differences in all museum acitivities. The seemingly dramatic demographic shift that is taking place in the United States creates a call for action: for some the response is fear and for others it is an opportunity. The White majority will become the minority population sometime early in the next century, and people of color, Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics and Asians, will become the majority population (Loth, 1991)). Cultural groupings previously rendered invisible are challenging this status (Gaither,1992:56).

In this climate of urgency, museums are drafting cultural plans and outreach strategies which define and target underserved audiences. In one frank discussion, fear was expressed that "non-traditional" audiences will dilute the quality of museum services and compromise the contemplative and personal museum experience. More subtly, museums raise the question, how to expand and diversify the audience while maintaining continuity with "established" audiences. Embedded in these fears and concerns are implicit cultural values and attitudes about the role of museums and who they should serve.

Since the 19th century, many American museums have assumed the responsibilities of shaping the public taste and of teaching "traditional" American values and American heritage (see Ettema, 1987; Harris, 1990). Typically, museums embrace the ideal of America as a melting pot in which diverse cultures blend into one homogeneous culture. Integral to this view of American society is the conviction that everyone who comes to this land is eager to discard their indigenous culture and adopt American values and culture. The melting pot model promotes a social order organized by consensus. From this perspective, cultural differences and pluralism threaten the social order; they are un-American. It is not surprising, then, that many museum practioners' response to multiculturalism is simply to add a few ethnic programs without integrating them into the structure and function of the museum.

Many of the soon to be majority population actively resist

cultural assimilation. In challenging the authority of the dominant culture, they are exposing the racism and the social, political and economic inequalities that permeate American society. Furthermore, they recognize the political significance of being visible on the cultural landscape. In this context, museums are important arenas for the contest of cultural values and representations.

In the remainder of the paper I will talk about a pilot project called "Special Places" which illustrates how museums continue to create and perpetuate notions of the "other" at the same time that cultural pluralism and diversity are espoused. "Special Places" was a collaboration with five historical museums and the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. I was the project director and actively involved in the overall conceptualization of the pilot project. Each pilot site planned and produced a program series in their community. I will discuss three of them. In order to talk about these museum programs, I must first briefly consider the origins of historical societies in New England, the social institutions behind the museums.

Historical societies are the guardians and often the only interpreters of a town's history. Many local historical societies were founded in the mid and late 19th century. This was a period of rapid growth for industrial capitalism and when large numbers of southern and eastern Europeans immigrated to New England. During these economic and social changes many local histories were written, mainly by men, "whose careers, wealth and social standing were directly linked to the growth of capitalism" (Handsman and Lamb Richmond 1992:4). In these histories, the Yankee elite glorified the colonial past and made explicit their geneological claims to it. Often these men fostered the development of historical societies whose purpose was to collect artifacts and documents - tangible evidence - that demonstrate this geneology.

Today, members in town historical societies tend to be the white middle class, women, and usually the old guard. However, as town demographics shift and as more middle class women join the workforce there are seemingly fewer people interested in local history and historical society activities. These changes create a potentially fruitful power vacuum in which historical societies could become more inclusive institutions, functioning as a forum for community issues, using the past to inform the present. In taking this role, historical societies would expand and diversify their audience as well as their notions of history. "Special Places" was conceived to foster these new directions.

I intentionally chose a topic that would seem safe to the "gate-keepers" and that would appeal to diverse audiences. My objectives for the pilot project were to actively engage people in dialogue about the meanings of specific places in their community. More deeply, sense of place brings up who belongs and who doesn't, and raises issues of power, social control, race, class, gender, ethnicity, among other things. It exposes different cultural values, attitudes and perceptions of the physical and social landscapes. However, it is also a topic that easily can be used to promote an ongoing hegemony.

While the Special Places project was not framed explicitly in the current language of multiculturalism, it was intended to promote pluralism. The ultimate outcome of the project is to develop a package program series which emphasizes collaboration with local groups and program formats that give the audience ownership of the ideas and permit multiple perspectives. Below, I discuss the programs organized by the Old Colony Historical Museum in Taunton, the Lynn Historical Society, and the Northfield Historical Society, all in Massachusetts, drawing attention to the disjuncture between the rhetoric of multiculturalism and practice. While all but one of the pilot sites undermined the aims of the project, the Northfield programs suggest some tools for validating cultural differences and fostering exhanges that breakdown cultural barriers.

Taunton was a colonial village founded in 1636, had flourishing iron, silver and copper industries which attracted large numbers of Portuguese who today make-up the majority of the population. The Old Colony Historical Museum staff chose the town green (common) as the special place and planned their program series around this choice. They felt the Green was the only place in Taunton that the many different groups experienced. Today, Taunton Green is a one acre island with a fountain and war monuments surrounded by roads radiating in all directions. The project was titled, "Taunton Green: A Common Ground," which established consensus as the agenda.

The local planning team in Taunton comprised museum staff and community people, although there were no representatives from the Portuguese community. The project director felt it was important not to single out any one of the ethnic groups and to draw attention to social differences in the town. The Taunton group produced a slide show on the history of the Green focusing on its physical attributes and big events. It was presented to a number of business, veteran, ethnic and senior citizen clubs and used to prompt memories and anecdotes about the Green. The concluding program was a series of vignettes performed by actors, highlighting specific memories drawn from the conversations and interwoven with songs about the Green and Taunton.

Although the performance was well publicized, it only attracted historical society members. The slide show was shown to only one ethnic club and it was Gaelic. When I inquired about these circumstances, the project director commented that Portuguese-Americans were present in all the clubs except the Gaelic club. She was unreceptive to the idea that people talk differently about their experiences in different social contexts.

The outcome of the Taunton programs was to make the Portuguese participation and their presence, today and over the past 100 years, completely invisible which is another way of making them "other." The programs referenced businesses named Sawyer, Cobb, Dean, Bates, but there were no Garcia, Pinto or Nelia. However, by walking down Main street one sees stores with Portuguese names and the Taunton Green Bakery which is owned and run by a Portuguese family and used to be called Garcia's. Catholic churches identified in Portuguese and English, Portuguese variety stores, and gardens with grapevines and statues of Our

Lady of Fatima and the three children can all be seen within several blocks of Main Street and the Green.

From the organizers point of view, they were being inclusive by framing the project in terms of consensus. From a different perspective, the premium placed on creating a unified voice is a way of marginalizing dissenting voices and experiences. Moreover, promoting consensus, or a sense of place, seems to be in the interest of the founding anglo population as represented by the Old Colony Museum which is, now, the minority population in Taunton.

The Lynn Historical Society also had a clear agenda, and it too was not seen as exclusive. Lynn is a depressed post-industrial manufacturing center which has a diverse ethnic population, the most recent arrivals are African-Americans, southeast Asians and Latinos. The Historical Society made Lynn Woods the focus of study, a 2200 acre natural woods which lies within two miles of the downtown. They forged an alliance with a special interest group called the Friends of Lynn Woods who advocate passive recreation as the only use of the Woods. The collaboration reinforced existing memberships and lines of communication between both organizations.

Historically, Lynn Woods has been used by many different groups, but since World War II it has been neglected and seen as an unsafe place by many residents. This neglect coincides with the decline of manufacturing in Lynn. In an effort to create a more positive image of the city, the Friends have been cleaning up and patrolling the Woods, giving them a proprietary interest.

In order to reach a more diverse audience, the Historical Society decided to reach out to the African-American community through the local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). By the time they invited the NAACP to participate in the project, they had already planned the three-part program series: a touring slide show on the history of Lynn Woods, public forum and walking tours.

The public forum comprised community members from different generations who stressed the importance of preserving the Woods in their natural state and the Woods as a safe place. The walking tours focused on the flora and the fauna of the Woods and emphasized activities that were solitary, quiet and appreicated the natural beauty of the Woods.

The extremely limited participation of the Black community in the planning of the programs never allowed perspectives to surface that might challenge the White middle class ideals and values that framed the program series. The presentors at the public forum seemingly were unaware that some groups might feel more entitled and inclined to use the Woods than others, depending on the degree to which they feel welcome or feel like they belong. The Friends' insistance on passive recreation makes other forms of recreation inappropriate, thereby excluding people who do not share the same ideas about the uses of open space in an urban area, cleanliness, rowdiness and so forth.

When asked about the absence of any noticeable members of the NAACP at the programs, the project director's explanation was that "Virginia Barton did not get HER people out." In his evaluation of the project, the project director concluded that the Lynn Woods project was not the right one for initiating a relationship with the NAACP and Black community; this is another way of saying they are not like us.

In contrast to the other pilot projects, the Northfield Historical Society made identifying special places a participatory process. The divisions in this rural town in the Connecticut River Valley were more along class lines than racial or ethnic: working class and professionals, old timers and newcomers. Northfield has five distinct neighborhoods, although the Main Street with its superlative examples of New England house architecture tends to overshadow the other neighborhoods.

The Northfield project was co-directed by a member of the old guard and by a newcomer. The planning committee comprised representatives from each neighborhood and only some were members of the historical society. Neighborhood conversations became the principal forum for discussing Northfield's special places.

The program series was kicked-off with a lecture by a scholar who gave an outsider's view of Northfield's special places and encouraged residents to think about everyday places and places where they have accumulated memories and experiences. Each of the five neighborhood groups shared memories and told stories about where they lived, what they missed, how things have changed and how they see their neighborhood in relation to the rest of the town. The final program was a community forum at which each neighborhood highlighted their special places and the scholar underscored shared as well as different values about the physical and social landscapes.

In Northfield, as with the other pilot sites, there was considerable resistance to sharing ownership and cultural authority with "non-traditional" audiences. However, the Northfield Historical society gave up its priveleged place. It is instructive to look at some of the internal dynamics of the Northfield project toward thinking about its wider applications.

The co-directors of the project represented two different interest groups and their different agendas became apparent in the planning stage. Initially, the relationship was an unequal one with the representative of the old guard viewing the newcomer as her protege. However, the newcomer was not interested in being subordinated to the old guard's established ways of doing things nor to their perception of the town. She saw the neighborhood conversations as a way of inviting broader participation in historical society activities as well as in town issues.

The old guard tried to insure a unified voice in the neighborhood conversations by having a scholar, an authority introduce and summarize each conversation. However, this idea was aborted, and instead the neighborhood host assumed the role of moderator and facilitator. Members of the planning committee were given the task of noting similarities and differences in the

experiences shared at each conversation, and of using this information to shape the community forum. At this juncture in the project, the old guard receeded into the background.

The opportunity to be active participants rather than spectators had a broad appeal to the residents of Northfield. Some participated by showing photographs of special places and some participated by drawing a map of their neighborhood, debating and discussing its boundaries and the location of landmarks. Discussions of spatial boundaries prompted examination of social boundaries and their meanings in terms of who is in and who is out. The conversations also involved qualifying memories and perceptions and through this process some critical insights emerged: for example, in one neighborhood some people spoke with pride of their association with a major employer of townspeople, a prep school, while others acknowledged the exploitation inherent in that relationship; and residents of another neighborhood expressed resentment that a private utility could take their valuable farmland by eminent domain. For the most part, the conversations validated peoples' senses of place and feelings of belonging.

The community forum was structured to give all five neighborhood groups an equal voice in the discussion; there was no single authority. It was a forum for hearing different perspectives, recognizing shared perceptions and values, and negotiating sense of place. Moreover, the planning committee did not view the community forum as an end-product, but rather as a vehicle for expanding the neighborhood conversations and for continuing them in the context of the master plan review process.

The "Special Places" project in Northfield challenged the status quo: neighborhoods that had been invisible became important features on the landscape and voices that had been silent were heard. Sharing ownership of programs, connecting programs to live community issues, collaborating with groups so as to insure a diversity of perspectives, dialogue and negotiating differences are ways museums can begin to realize a plurality of voices. More fundamentally, museums might view their role as building community in a multicultural society.

**Acknowledgements** The Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities funded the "Special Places" project. I appreciate their support for this project and for contributing to my travel to the Public History Workshop Conference in Johannesburg. Special thanks to Rachel Weiss for her helpful insights on the project and to Robert Paynter for commenting on an earlier draft.

**References Cited**

Durrans, Brian
1988 "The Future of the Other: Changing Cultures on Display in Ethnographic Museums," in The Museum Time Machine, edited by Robert Lumley, Routledge, London, pp 144-169.

Ettema, Michael J.
1987 "History Museums and the Culture of Materialism," in Past

Meets Present edited by Jo Blatti, Smithsonian, Washington, pp 62-85.

Harris, Neil
1990 Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America, University of Chicago, Chicago.

Gaither, Edmund Barry
1992 "Hey! That's Mine: Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums," in Museums and Communities, edited by I. Karp, C. Kreamer, and S. Lavine, Smithsonian, Washington, pp 56-64.

Handsman, Russell and Trudie Lamb Richmond
1992 "Confronting Colonialism: The Machican and Schagticoke Peoples and Us," essay prepared for "Making Alternative Histories," School of American Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Karp, Ivan and Steven Lavine (editors)
1990 Exhibiting Cultures, Smithsonian, Washington.

Loth, Renee
1991 "The New Big Mix," Boston Globe Magazine, October 13.

Stocking, George (editor)
1985 Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture, University of Wisconsin, Madison,



TOTAL P.09