Unflinching and Unvarnished: Curating “Hard” History

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HISTORY

- hard
- tough
- marginalized
- traumatic past
- discovered
- sensitive past
- woke
- difficult knowledge
“Hard history”: challenging and uncomfortable aspects of the past that also make implications on the present

- What topics are classified as “hard”?
- Who classifies them?
- For whom are they hard?
- Why are they hard?
A history of “hard” history

**Education**
- Late 19th century: “modern history” becomes school subject
  - Connected to nation-building and patriotic efforts
  - Shared vision of cohesive national past
- 20th century events (world wars, genocide, and other mass violence, imperialism, and the lingering effects of colonialism) and empowerment of women, as well as ethnic, religious, and other minorities
  - Expand narratives and challenge national histories
- “History Wars”

**Museum**
- Pre-Hellenic roots
- Europe’s Kunstkammers, or cabinets of curiosities
  - Encyclopedic collections, wide in scope
- 18th century: move into North America
  - Bring objects and learning together in a space
- 19th century: attempts at democratic spaces connected to nation-state building
  - Society is not democratic at this time (e.g., segregation)
Museums are considered “significantly more trustworthy than researchers and scientists, NGOs generally, various news organizations, the government, corporations and business, and social media.”

“Museum Facts and Data,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed 2023
- The Neutrality Principle (National Museum of African American History and Culture)
- The Both Sides Now Doctrine (North Carolina Museum of History)
- The Erasure Maxim (Greensboro History Museum)
The Neutrality Principle

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
"We’ve got to tell the unvarnished truth" – Historian John Hope Franklin, 2005

“We set out to be an activist museum. [...] Our job is to illuminate all the dark corners—doing things that are controversial not for controversy’s sake, but doing things that matter, that give people help, that give people knowledge as they grapple and debate these things.” – Founding Director Lonnie Bunch, 2017
“At a certain moment, you’re likely to come across this jarring conflict between the claims of universality and the reality of this display of white supremacist, European power, Euro-American power that’s being enacted there in the name of the universal. The universal falls apart.”

- Charles Esche, Director of the Van Abbe Museum in the Netherlands
Slavery and Freedom “explores the complex story of slavery and freedom, which rests at the core of our nation’s shared history. The exhibition begins in 15th-century Africa and Europe, extends up through the founding of the United States, and concludes with the nation’s transformation during the Civil War and Reconstruction.”
William Hodges, *A view of the Cape of Good Hope, taken on the Spot, from on board the Resolution, Capt. Cook*. Oil on canvas, 1772. Near here, in 1794, the slaver São José Paquete Africa sank with her human cargo.
Iron Ballast
Ballast was used to offset the lighter weight of the human cargo. The inventory for the São José indicates that 1,400 iron ballast bars were ordered for the voyage.
We had about 12 negroes did wilfully drown themselves, and others starved themselves to death, for 'tis their belief that when they die they return home to their own country and friends.

CAPTAIN THOMAS PHILLIPS OF THE NATURAL GENTRY

Left Lisbon on 27 April 1724, embarked in Lisbon, set sail to touch at a cargo of slaves which was lost on the way. Arrived in Brazil.}

Voyage to the coast of South Africa in the month of September 1724.
Neutrality in language

Holding onto Humanity
The weeks aboard ship tested the humanity of everyone held captive. Men shackled two-by-two, on many mornings found their selves bound to a corpse. Stored in separate quarters and free to move about, women were constantly subject to rape and other physical violence. High child mortality rates were attributed to deadly disease and starvation. While many souls were lost during the Middle Passage, those who survived did so through courage, strength, and the will of the human spirit. (coloration, mine)

Slave Shackles
Jefferson understood that his African American slaves produced his wealth and provided him the leisure to read, write, and govern. Slavery was woven into his daily life, as were its contradictions. Most notably, Jefferson had enslaved children, the product of a long relationship with Sally Hemings, a woman he enslaved. (coloration, mine)

Enslaved at Monticello
The names on this wall identify many of the 609 people held in bondage by Thomas Jefferson over his lifetime. The people remembered here include six of Jefferson’s children whom he fathered with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman. Children inherited the status of their mother, so Jefferson’s children were born and kept enslaved. (coloration, mine)
Color-coding
“The problem with neutrality as a claim for a museum is that it fundamentally neutralizes any criticism, dissent, or alternate history that it might present, which contradicts its very claims to education and free and open exchange of ideas [...] because the institutions’ very power structures, historically and operationally, nullify concepts of civics to maintain a neutral position.”

- Laura Raicovich, Culture Strike, 2021
The Both Sides Now Doctrine

North Carolina Museum of History
“The Division of State History Museums collects and preserves artifacts and other historical materials relating to the history and heritage of North Carolina in a local, regional, national, and international context to assist people in understanding how the past influences the present.”

North Carolina Museum of History, Mission Statement, 2023
“His methods were sometimes regarded as unorthodox, but his overall purpose was to entertain as well as to instruct. His greatest delight was ‘to weave around each object displayed a romantic halo’ that pleased those who heard him, even if it became necessary, as at least one newspaper suggested, for teachers to clarify historical discrepancies” (coloration, mine).

- Beth Crabtree, 1991
“Signs of the Times is an exhibit that showcases signs and objects (political, protest, and social) from various time periods, including 2020. Connecting signs and objects relating to 2020 issues (Black Lives Matter, Covid-19, the election) to signs and objects from past, often similar, issues will show that history is happening now.”
Katherine Johnson of Durham was one of hundreds who rallied and marched in downtown Raleigh Friday, June 24, 2022 in opposition to the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to overturn its landmark Roe v. Wade ruling.
Signs of the Times

- How do Protests Happen over Time?
- In What Forms Do Protests Occur?
- How Do People Capture the Spirit of Protest?
- How Are Protests Part of Everyday Life?
- What Do Protests Sound Like?
- Where Do We Go from Here?
“There is a level of advocacy that we can accept in our role as a state institution [...] [this] material is inherently provocative, we have always owned that that was part of it.”
Censored topics

- Confederate and other monument removal or destruction
- No profanity, even in abbreviation (e.g., “F12”)
- No materials that name sitting politicians in NC at any level
“Gay Rights Are Human Rights”
For most of North Carolina’s history, it was illegal and dangerous to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and laws criminalized members of the community. The 1969 Stonewall riots in New York set into motion the modern gay rights movement.

Since the mid-1970s, the North Carolina LGBTQIA+ community has become more visible. Pride marches, protests, and community organizing have helped raise awareness of social issues, laws, and legislation that infringe on basic human rights. LGBTQIA+ groups continue to pursue equal rights for all community members. (coloration, mine)
Passive Action Protest
Passive action protests serve as a way of seeking change through smaller, often daily, actions. They can be individual: one person passing out flyers, circulating petitions, displaying yard signs, or wearing stickers. Or they can be larger, with groups participating in silent vigils and sit-ins that don’t disturb the environment around them.

In North Carolina, members of the LGBTQIA+ community have distributed flyers and circulated petitions to raise awareness of social issues, laws, and legislation that impact their lives. Groups pursuing their civil rights created and circulated newsletters highlighting issues but also telling the story of the movement through the voices of those who participated. (coloration, mine)
The Erasure Maxim

Greensboro History Museum
A collection of 174 Confederate longarms that represent “the largest collection of this type anywhere in the world.”

- Former Director William Moore, 1998
“The overall thrust of the exhibit is about the increasing importance of Greensboro during the Civil War. The reasons why this was so are examined and interpreted through text and material culture. [...] Dr. Murphy’s collection helps to illustrate and inform the individual parts of the story.”
Through Collector's Eyes: the Murphy Collection

Nov 7, 1999 - June 4, 2017
The Virginia Historical Society “used to have [their] collection [of weapons] beautifully exhibited in cases where you could see both sides of the gun. All of a sudden, they had a change of administration, and the whole business went into the basement. I sure hated to see that.”
- Dr. John Murphy, 1998

“I was reminded of my own reaction to the Virginia Historical Society’s ‘political correctness’ in consigning the Fuller and Stewart Collection to the basement. In the late 80’s [sic], I underwent their procedure of filling out a request form and waited for thirty minutes to be led down to see one piece, especially when I remembered the previous lovely display on the first floor!”
- Ralph MacDonald, 1998.
Green Hill Cemetery, Greensboro

July 4, 2020
“Exhibitions perform in the ‘present time.’ Meanwhile the institution is a heritage machine bearing and asking questions around unresolved, ignored, absented, and obscured stories from the past, and also negotiating, fermenting, testing out, in the best case, possible futures.”

Vasif Kortun, 2018
The John M. and Isabelle Murphy
Confederate Long Arms Collection

Over 150 years ago there was a place

These are their stories.

weapons man place
“One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive, an example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.”
- W.E.B. Du Bois, 1935
Thank you!

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