Museum Metamorphosis

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, America’s history museums drowsed happily on the margins of a go-ahead culture, tending their genteel artifacts, perpetuating regnant myths in which African Americans, women, immigrants, and workers figured as supporting actors or not at all.

But then came rude poundings at the door. In the 1970s and 1980s a new generation of curators—inspired by movements in the streets and leagued with youthful colleagues in the academy—entered these institutions and began to revamp their agendas. Museums shifted from enshrining objects toward using them to explain social relations. Novel exhibits tackled issues of race, gender, class, imperialism, and ecology.

The results can be read in the current museum landscape. A quick survey of work displayed in recent years suggests the scope of the transformation.

Consider race. Colonial Williamsburg, which long elided even the existence of black slaves, now has African American guides interpreting the lives of the once thousand-strong slave labor force at Carter’s Grove plantation. In the old capitol building in Jackson, where 1950s lawmakers once yahooed segregation bills into law, the Mississippi State Historical Museum displayed Klan paraphernalia of intimidation in telling the story of Reconstruction and Its Aftermath. In Richmond, former capital of the Confederacy, the Valentine Museum has produced a series of shows like Jim Crow: Racism and Reaction in the New South and Race Relations in Richmond, 1945–85. And the same city’s Museum of the Confederacy, long a sanctum of the Lost Cause, mounted Before Freedom Come: African-American Life in the Antebellum South.

116
Explorations of America’s racial experience have become almost routine, from the Chicago Historical Society’s A House Divided: America in the Age of Lincoln, featuring living history performances about black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to such Smithsonian shows as Field to Factory: Black Migration 1915–1940 and A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and World War II, which recounted the story of the internment camps.

Turning to imperial expansion, which in the United States took the form of conquering the continent, the National Museum of American Art (in The West As America) examined how painters of iconic frontier scenes unwittingly or unwittingly contributed to the process of appropriation. At historic sites (like the former Custer battlefield, now renamed Little Bighorn), and at institutions like the National Museum of the American Indian in New York, indigenous peoples contribute to their own representation. Hidatsa Indians helped create the Minnesota Historical Society’s complex portrait of their forebears’ response to invasion, The Way to Independence; Cherokees welcomed a Trail of Tears Commemorative Park, recalling the forced deportation march in which four thousand died. The National Museum of American History’s [NMAH] American Encounters presented a complex story of conflict and compromise between Native Americans, Africans, Asians, and Europeans, showing how these interactions changed each of the participants and constituted the region’s identity.

Perhaps most amazing is the way the Columbus myth—a stunningly obdurate fairy tale of flat earth, hocked jewels, and benign “discovery”—was vanquished. Museum shows like the National Museum of Natural History’s Seeds of Change included the perspective of those for whom his advent prefigured pestilence, servitude, and death. Some exhibits, like First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States at the Florida Museum of Natural History, faced protests from American Indian activists; when First Encounters traveled to the Albuquerque Museum, its host offered a handout embodying alternative points of view. Such U.S. protests were only a faint echo of those in South America, where indigenous peoples demonstrated from Mexico to Peru. Even at the Seville World’s Fair and the Barcelona Olympic Games, Columbus proved an embarrassment. As the New York Times noted, Christopher Columbus’ fall from grace in 1992 was even steeper than that of George Bush.

Consider museological treatments of class. In sites across the country, often housed in abandoned factories, museums address the lives of vanished laborers, recall their skills and sacrifices, and confront management-labor conflicts. A Valentine exploration of the history of Richmond’s tobacco and iron workers treated issues of race and ethnicity, examined Knights of Labor organizing, and connected home life with work life. At Homestead, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania laid out the context of the great

Class analysis has not been limited to workers—Rochester's Strong Museum put on *Neither Rich Nor Poor: Searching for the American Middle Class*—though unfortunately, after being the primary focus of attention for so many years, upper-class lives are now scanted.

Consider gender issues. The National Women's Hall of Fame, which opened in Seneca Falls in 1968, has been joined by the National Park Service's Women's Rights National Historical Park in chronicling feminist history. Though institutions devoted specifically to women's history are still rare, museums like the Mark Twain house, Lindenwald, and Greenfield Village have reinserted domestic servants into their settings, and major institutions have produced substantial exhibits incorporating new historiography. Curators at NMAH put up *Men and Women: A History of Costume, Gender, and Power*, and *Parlor to Politics: Women and Reform, 1890–1925*, but perhaps most remarkable was their redoing of the First Ladies' gowns exhibit. This long-time semisacred site, to which Hillary Clinton's violet confection was quickly whisked, was completely remodeled. Now the dress graveyard is preceded by rooms that present the women as political and cultural actors, and interpret presidential couples as emblematic of the gender relations of their era. It is hugely popular. I heard one woman remarking to her twelve-year-old daughter: "You know, dear, the last time I was here they only had the gowns. They said nothing about the First Ladies themselves. It was so insulting."

On the ecological front, recent exhibits have admitted the ambiguous impact of progress on human and natural ecology. *Engines of Change* at NMAH salted its portrayal of an essentially beneficial industrialization with accounts of worker setbacks and environmental destruction. The Grand Rapids Public Museum provided insights into the impact of technology and industry on the local ecosystem. The State Historical Society of Iowa explored the impact of expanded agricultural productivity on forest, wetlands, and prairie. *Seeds of Change*, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History show, compared the 1492 and 1992 ecocapes, brought the Mexico City story down to its festering present, and argued for renewable resources.

*Tropical Rainforests: A Disappearing Treasure*, an exhibit organized by the Smithsonian's Traveling Exhibition Service, not only described the forests' decimation over the past century, but ascribed responsibility to specific
agents—developers, loggers, ranchers, agribusiness, international banks, and consumers of rainforest commodities. It also provided visitors with names of organizations working to solve the problem. The design was the product of a collaboration between a politically committed academic—a tropical ornithologist/conservationist—and professional curators.

Museums have also taken up issues of recent history rather than restricting themselves to a more safely distant past. In Memphis’ former Lorraine Motel, the National Civil Rights Museum places Martin Luther King’s assassination in broader context, setting portions of a charred freedom rider bus and a replica of King’s Birmingham jail cell right next to the balcony where he was felled. Interactively inclined visitors can board a 1950s era segregated bus, and get told by a driver-mannequin to “Go to the back”; or sit down next to sculpted protestors at a lunch counter sit-in. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute displays King’s actual cell along with segregation artifacts like separate water fountains against an audio backdrop of gospel and crowd sounds, sirens, and speeches. And a civil rights memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, honors victims of the movement. Malcolm X’s legacy has proved tougher to museographize, with major battles being fought over the preservation and interpretation of his assassination site, New York’s Audubon Ballroom.

In the former Texas State schoolbook depository, the Dallas County Historical Foundation offers The Sixth Floor: John F. Kennedy and the Memory of a Nation. It introduces the various assassination theories and commission reports, as well as audioaccounts by witnesses. Kent State University plans a memorial to the students shot there. More official versions of recent events can be found at presidential mausoleums, including those of Eisenhower, Nixon, Kennedy, and Johnson (the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum is the second most popular tourist attraction in Texas after the Alamo). George Bush was hard at work on his the first day out of office.

Some exhibits have provided historical perspective on contemporary issues. The National Park Service’s bicentennial show at Philadelphia, The Promise of Permanency, explained how the Constitution’s development was shaped over centuries as much by citizen action as judicial decision. Using touchscreen and video techniques it invited reflection on the document’s applicability to aid to parochial schools, birth control, compulsory flag salutes, gay rights in the classroom, and other controversial questions. It presented exponents on different sides of these issues and allowed visitors to vote for the arguments they found most compelling. By jettisoning the conventional omniscient narrator stance, the exhibit also helped teach that historical perspectives—like court cases and current politics—are open to various interpretations.
Taboo Topics

If history museums have embraced a far wider range of subjects, objects, and issues than ever before, distinct limits remain on what can be said. Some politically volatile topics—delicately referred to as “controversial”—can be addressed only if the discussion is not brought down to the present; others are entirely taboo. Let us look at exhibits that can not yet or are just beginning to be mounted.

Although it has been decades since America first intervened in Indochina and the last helicopters lifted off from the roof of the Saigon Embassy, there has not been a single substantial museum exhibition on the causes, course, or consequences of the war in Vietnam. To say nothing, literally, of the antiwar movement. Despite a huge and burgeoning body of reflection by participants, historians, novelists, moviemakers, and playwrights, and the erection of hundreds of memorials, the closest we have come was the Smithsonian’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection. This was a fascinating collection of objects left at Washington’s Vietnam Memorial, ranging from personal memorabilia of the fallen, through tributes to gay soldiers, to rejected Congressional Medals of Honor accompanied by letters protesting Reagan’s support for the contras. It was poignant, and powerful, but it eschewed any commentary whatever.

Exhibitions dealing with issues of sexuality and gender remain problematic. There have been some recent shows that treated the household as a workplace, in a way that broke with the seemingly ingrained nostalgia of historic house museums, with their butter churns and home-baked cookies for visitors. But topics like divorce, prostitution, birth control, abortion, and domestic violence—though abundantly written about and highly salient to people’s lives—linger in the realm of the undoable.

So, until quite recently, did homosexuality. Though the subject had spawned a vast historical literature, and been represented publicly in institutions created by the gay and lesbian community, it seemed impossible to treat in mainstream museums. A group of major institutions (the Museum of the City of New York, the Brooklyn Historical Society, the New York Public Library, and the New York Historical Society) launched an ambitious attempt to treat the history of homosexuals in New York City, but potential funders in the corporate and public sectors shied away. Finally, in the summer of 1994, the New York Public Library went ahead on its own with a major exhibition, Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall. After a section devoted to the 1969 riots at Stonewall Inn, visitors found imaginative and provocative treatments of the history that led up to it. Supported entirely from private foundations and contributions—the National Endowment for the Humanities refused to back it—the excellent show broke all first week
attendance records for the library, pulling 17,258 visitors, and an average of one thousand per day thereafter from June through September.¹

In the arena of labor and the economy, for all the particular exhibits about nineteenth-century artisanal and industrial workers, no major museum treats twentieth-century white collar or public employees. Nor has there been a show—much less an independent museum—that covers the history of organized labor. A few pioneering exhibits have tackled homelessness in historical perspective, but for all the fierce debates over welfare recipients and the “underclass,” who has examined such populations historically in a museum setting? And what museums discuss the production of poverty and unemployment? Most Americans are well aware of the current hard times, the crises of the 1970s, and perhaps the Great Depression of the 1930s, but few realize that busts have alternated with booms on virtually a clockwork basis since the early 1800s.

Nor, for all the defunct mines and mills recycled into museums, is much attention paid to what most visitors want to know when they enter these spaces: Why did the jobs leave town and where did they go? An exhibit presenting a global perspective on deindustrialization, perhaps arranged by a multinational museum collaboration, might track the flight of factories from New England to North Carolina to Singapore and China—noting the simultaneous impact on American cities and Asian countrysides. Indeed, the connections between “deindustrialization” and “immigration” demand exploration in their own right. Ellis Island does a wonderful job on the earlier twentieth century but, despite some nods towards recent arrivals, it fails to remind us that “immigration” is hardly finished business, and that the political battles that animated earlier Americans continue today.

Ecological concerns have made great strides in museums, but institutions have been more comfortable talking about tropical rain forests in Brazil than toxic dumpsites in their own back yard. In 1994 a New York Public Library exhibition—Garbage!: The History and Politics of Trash in New York City—made an important breakthrough on this front. It explored the sanitary conditions of urban life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the work of public health reformers, the contemporary debates over the dumping of oil and chemical wastes, and suggested ecologically responsible ways of restructuring production and consumption.

A green perspective might illuminate other historical issues. At Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, the Automobile in American Life exhibition examines the social historical aspects of our car culture, a great improvement over earlier installations. But it avoids exploring the decision to opt for gasoline-based private autos over mass transit, or reckoning with the social and ecological consequences of that decision, or tracing contemporary contests over auto-based pollution. Nor are there shows on the history of the
energy industry that discuss issues of public versus private ownership, or that delve critically into the debates on nuclear power.

Our living history farms might profitably concentrate a bit less on sowing and reaping and a bit more on those developments—tenantry, migrant labor, foreclosures, agrarian movements, commodity exchanges, and world markets—that help explain how the old farms, whose values they celebrate, succumbed to the corporate agri-businesses that dominate American agriculture and account for much of the damage done to the countryside.

I could go on. Indeed it is disconcerting to contemplate how numerous and varied are the contemporary issues, routinely given historical attention in the academy, the media, and in politics, that history museums simply do not touch at all.

I am not saying—let me be clear—that “controversial” or presentist subjects are the only ones worth talking about. But I do think they should be strongly represented in an institution’s mix of presentations over time. Studies show that people who do not go to museums believe them to be irrelevant as well as intimidating; dealing with issues germane to people’s lives might help overcome their resistance.

**Objections**

Some people oppose this approach on principled—or definitional—grounds. Museums don’t do these kinds of things, they say; they never did before, and they should not start now. Museums have gone too far in exploring controversial matters; certainly they should not, or cannot, press on farther in that direction. Such exhibits are in the domain of politics not history.

My rejoinder is that history, and history museums, are inescapably political, and always have been. In the old days, people were a good deal more explicit about it. The museological giants and house museum pioneers all presented narratives linking the past with present-day concerns and prescriptions for the future. Usually museums were handmaidens of power, and they set the present in a continuum in such a way as to ratify present arrangements. But the (Carl) Beckerite and (Dixon Ryan) Foxite progressives who contested traditional establishments in the name of a people’s history were equally straightforward. They wanted citizens to grasp where they had been so they could better assess where they might go. Only relatively recently did museums and scholars profess to be “objective,” or apolitical; such preachments seldom governed museological practice.

Other criticisms are more pragmatic than principled. They note that controversial exhibits are less likely to find sponsors to fund them. That is true. Sponsors usually represent established power; they tend to balk at presenta-
tions that contest the way things are. They also dislike being associated with any controversy, whatever its content. Cities, unions, corporations, or local townsfolk tend to favor uplifting optimism or blandly judicious balance—exhibits fit for prime time, family viewing.

Gerald George, former director of the American Association for State and Local History, offered an allegory about a would-be reforming curator, Eddie Gibbon, who tried to turn the Hickory City Historical Society upside down. Dismissing the museum’s filiopietistic inspirational approach, young Gibbon scrapped the Hall of Pioneers, the Victorian Period Gallery, and the Civil War cannon, and sold off George Washington’s wig at Sothebys to fund social history exhibits on Chinese restaurant operators, baseball games, Baptist conventions, slavic miners, and analyses of urbanization and industrialization. For his pains he got himself blown away by a pioneer rifle in the hands of the society’s outraged president.

An apt parable, but perhaps too intimidating. It can lead to overhasty self-censorship. Museums sometimes adhere to an unwritten understanding that there are limits on what can be said, even if they have not been laid down explicitly. Often prudence is justified. But sometimes it is not. Recent experience suggests that determined pushing can be rewarded. If the Mississippi State Museum can interpret the Ku Klux Klan, it is conceivable that institutions can garner more support from properly cultivated patrons than they might expect.

One way to make critical material more palatable to powers-that-be, and to audiences as well, is to present different interpretive points of view. Running two alternative approaches to the same material, side by side, would reveal that historians differ amongst themselves, and teach museum visitors not to accept any presentation as the gospel truth.

Another point. Gerald George’s slaughtered curator was acting on his own. There are now signs that a critical professional community is emerging, one that includes academics, which can be mobilized to provide support to beleaguered colleagues. Academic historians used to get hired and fired by railroad magnates until the establishment one hundred years ago of the American Historical Association, which set limits on the power of autocratic university managements. Historian Al Young’s proposal of a Museum Bill of Rights that would put “curatorial freedom” on a par with “academic freedom” merits further discussion.²

Professional collaboration can also take the form of an alliance (perhaps with academics and librarians) to increase the amount of government funding available for public education outside the school systems. If the sources of funding can be diversified, the influence of individual donors can be reduced.

It is also important to identify new sources of support, groups that might
be interested in more critical presentations—labor unions, socially responsible businesses, women's clubs and groups, and environmentalists. The MacArthur Foundation contributed one-half of a million dollars to the rain forest show.

In the end, however, the power of donors is a fact of life. They will continue to shape and alter agendas. This is true both for house museums in tiny towns and for giant technology museums dependent on aerospace corporations for costly machinery. The best one can do is to keep pushing at the boundaries of the possible.

**Demand Dilemmas**

A different reservation concerns potential visitors, not potential funders. People want to be entertained, goes this objection. They do not want to be lectured, upset, or offended, nor do they want to hear about conflict. They do not want to think, they want to have fun. Museums have many competitors in the cultural marketplace; if their offerings are unattractive, shoppers will go elsewhere.

And even if people can be enticed to critical exhibits, museums (it is said) are not an appropriate venue in which to raise difficult and substantial issues. Few visitors track through a show from beginning to end; most race past expository prose. Besides, who can think about anything serious when they are standing on their feet, especially with two kids asking for hamburgers or the nearest bathroom.

These are strong arguments, based on hard-won experience, but perhaps a little too dismissive of actual and potential audiences. It may be that most visitors are uninterested in controversial issues. But a contradiction lurks in this assessment. If people are drawn to history museums by a nostalgic urge to escape the present, perhaps they are not utterly enamored of their contemporary situation. If so, might they not be receptive to presentations that explain how the glorious past (which, alas, was probably not quite so wonderful on close inspection) evolved into the wretched present (which, in fact, turns out to have redeeming qualities)?

More often than not, I suspect, audience conservatism is pre-presumed. The cry that something "won't sell" is often used as an excuse by those who want to kill a program on other grounds. Conventional wisdoms are fluid things. Audiences change with the times; when challenged, they often respond favorably. Like all producers for the cultural marketplace, museums must listen to their customers. But I also think they have a responsibility, as educators and professionals, to propose new ways of seeing things. They must both listen and lead—admittedly not an easy balance to sustain.
And why assume that controversial presentations can not be done in entertaining ways? Especially as such subjects are usually far more dramatic and gripping than many of the issues museums usually deal with? As I have suggested, a fair number of such shows have received notices that are overwhelmingly (and unexpectedly) favorable. The Holocaust Museum’s spectacular drawing power is only the latest evidence that even the most difficult and disturbing material does not automatically alienate potential visitors. 3

Certainly we should not overestimate what museums can do. There are limits on how much information and analysis people can absorb on their feet. But modest goals are surely attainable. Curators can raise issues and perspectives for people’s consideration so the next time they confront the topic they have the gist of the presentation in mind (along with the experience of the exhibit). Museums can enhance visitors’ skill at historical analysis—probably of more lasting value than imparting specific information about any particular issue. Nor does an exhibit have to be the last stop: It can be supplemented with take-home videos or publications that allow for more leisurely (and child friendly) reflections.

Broadening Constituencies

A more profound version of the audience objection suggests that museums are akin to religious institutions, with curators as keepers of the nation’s relics. Museums nurture the myths that provide a culture’s moral scaffolding, so this argument goes; people attend them as they might a church service—to nourish and undergird their spiritual identity. The last thing such congregants want are exhibits that dismantle the mythic dramas that give meaning and value to their lives.

I have problems with this definition of museums. I prefer Robert A. Baron’s careful distinction between theme parks like Disney World, where visitors are encouraged to live inside mythic metaphors, indeed to reenact in a ritual way the (putatively) essential events in American history; and history museums, where visitors are asked to stand outside these metaphors and to reflect on them both as participants and disengaged critics. 4

But even if we accept the notion of museums as temples of myth, I would say that there are myths and myths, congregations and congregations. If curators are priests and priestesses they have to decide whether or not they approve of the spiritual values they have been promulgating. If they do, and their visitors do, there is not much motivation for change. If, however, they or their visitors do not so approve—and this, I submit, has been the case at many institutions over the last generation—then it behooves them to submit other historical narratives for popular consideration. They do not have
to smash old ones—mere iconoclasm—but can affirm values they think merit retention, while presenting new alternatives, with all the power of their craft, thus turning temples into public forums.

There is another way to come at the issue. If traditional audiences will not support innovative programming, perhaps new ones will. Recent experience suggests that bold approaches to unusual subjects attract new audiences and increase revenues. The Smithsonian’s *More Perfect Union* show brought in over five thousand Japanese Americans in the first week, some all the way from the west coast; that group’s ongoing attendance has increased. The Valentine Museum was at the point of going under in the early 1980s, but when its shows reached out to new audiences, it tripled overall attendance. African American walk-in attendance went from less than one to more than fifteen percent, which in turn helped garner funding from the black city council and the black mayor. In Wilberforce, Ohio, the National Afro-American Museum’s treatment of black history has been facilitated by the involvement of AME bishops and black Ohio legislators; in turn, its pioneering show on the civil rights movement, *From Victory to Freedom*, has generated new involvement in the African American community. The Plains Indian Museum has established a similarly strong and organic relationship with its constituency. People, it seems, are willing to attend museums if institutions speak to their experience.

Reaching out to new audiences can also help museums overcome the limitations of previous collections policies. For the *More Perfect Union* show, the Smithsonian worked with the Japanese American Citizens League to solicit the loan or donation of objects needed to tell the story. Advertisements in newspapers brought hundreds of people, bearing artifacts, to temporary offices set up in malls and civic centers. The Baltimore Museum’s Rowhouse exhibit generated the same kind of grass roots support, and the Brooklyn Historical Society established strong connections with the borough’s Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, Italian, and Hispanic communities through similar campaigns.

Institutions that embrace community outreach programming are quite different from those that see themselves as purveyors of historical commodities, seeking to expand “market share.” The former will often respond to issues of popular concern, while the latter, less driven by principle or passion, are no more likely than corporate sponsors to tackle difficult but interesting issues. The post-sixties transformations in museums were not “market-driven” but political phenomena. Black (and many white) parents wanted representations in schools and museums that broke with racist stereotypes; committed curators pushed for these transformations and, in turn, the new exhibits attracted new audiences and generated political support from elected officials. The show on Japanese internment was defended against attack by powerful senators responding to new constituencies.
There are, of course, dangers in targeting new audiences—of provincialism, or particularism, or ghettoization. Museums can fall prey to the fragmentation of the magazine racks, where specialty journals, one for every conceivable taste and interest, allow readers to immerse themselves in their chosen world to the exclusion of others. But this is a potential, not an inherent drawback.

There are also efforts underway to demystify and democratize museums by sharing authority with communities. I applaud efforts to involve formerly passive audiences in planning, collecting for, and evaluating exhibits. Exemplary work includes the Brooklyn Historical Society projects with AIDS victims; the Chinatown History Museum’s neighborhood collaborations; the Valentine’s assembling of advisory groups to help plan public programming, and its holding of “public editing sessions” with community spokespeople to critique completed shows; and the extensive consultations with local reminiscence groups and the incorporation of oral histories into work at the Springburn Museum in Glasgow, the Museum of London’s Peopling of London, and The People’s Story in Edinburgh.

I also applaud barefoot-historian projects whose members facilitate local communities in collecting, preserving, presenting, and interpreting their own past, producing exhibits that could have not have been generated by either the professionals or the community acting on their own.

But I part company from those who propose that curators de-professionalize themselves altogether and transfer power to “the community.” Aside from being utopian, the historical record suggests that abuse of power is not inevitable. In the United States, activist curators, linked to committed scholars, were vital agents of change. And the strong professional communities they forged have been crucial in raising issues that transcend (but involve) particular communities, and in establishing an apparatus of critical commentary (notably the many journals that now review exhibits) that is indispensable to future progress.

A strong public historical community will also be crucial in defending and sustaining recent gains. Some have wondered what difference these changes have made. Advancing a Marxist analysis—Groucho Marxist that is—they suggest that if African Americans and others have gotten into museums, museums can not be much worth getting into. The even more cynical say that museological alterations are sops—substitutes for changes in power relations; that blacks, women, and Indians have fared far better in exhibits than at workplaces, in homes, or on the streets. While the new historians were restocking museums and colleges, Reagan and Bush were restocking the judiciary and bureaucracy.

I disagree. While it is true that transformations in representation have outstripped those in reality, curators and scholars have made real contribu-
tions to shifting the terms of America's public discourse. And language counts. Proof comes from opponents. The West as America show's challenge to mythic pieties provoked a furor of complaints from conservatives incensed at its deconstruction of fables. The Wall Street Journal called it "an entirely hostile ideological assault on the nation's founding and history." To be sure, some of the exhibit's captions, humorless and bludgeoning, afforded tempting targets. But the real objections were to its having advanced critical theses amidst the yellow-ribboned frenzy of Operation Desert Storm, an exercise President Bush had explicitly cast as an opportunity to get beyond the historical self-doubts engendered by Vietnam. Critics had already attacked schools and universities that revised the traditional canon and fashioned multicultural curricula. Now museums, too, were accused of imposing stifling standards of "political correctness." These outrages serve as reminders of the fragility of recent gains, of their potential reversibility.

I urge history museums to press on in the direction they have been going, seeking not simply customers but constituents; becoming partners with communities in effecting change; serving as centers of civic debate and organization (with modest expectations about how much such forums can achieve); helping visitors develop their historical sensibilities, strengthening their ability to locate themselves in time, and enhancing their capacity as citizens to be historically informed makers of history. 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.

Notes
This is an amalgam of a keynote address, "The Future of the Past," presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Association for State and Local History on September 17, 1988; and a second keynote address, "Changing Media, Changing Messages," for Museum, Media, Message: The Third International Conference in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester in 1993.

1. For a review, see Lisa Duggan, "'Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall,'" New York Public Library, June 18–September 24, 1994," Radical History Review 62 (spring 1995), 188–94. The Oakland Museum of California, it should be noted, had already included, in its permanent exhibit, information about a legendary local drag queen.

4. Robert A. Baron, "Why People Go To Museums," a posting on the MUSEUM-L email bulletin board, 11 April 1995, accessible through LISTSERV@UNMVMA.UNM.EDU

5. The Valentine may have been too successful. See note 3 to "Razor Ribbons" in this volume, 54.

6. I would like to see more institutions taping their presentations and pooling them in a videolibrary, available to the curatorial community.