

MUSEUM EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

Together - Realizing Connections on the Pathways to Best Practices

Journal of Museum Education Reader Guide

Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Curating Controversy

Keri Watson

The missions of many museums are to enhance and inspire our communities. Often this includes addressing relevant and sometimes controversial issues through our exhibitions, programs, and partnerships. The questions below were developed in conjunction with the author and are intended to foster conversations and dialogue among colleagues and community partners.

Discussion Questions:

1. As a museum educator, what strategies or ideas from the article did you find relevant for your practice, your institution, or your community?
2. The project described in this article focused on a social issue of concern to its community. Are there local, national, or global social issues that might be relevant for your museum to address? What might they be?
3. Do you see the engagement of college students in “curating controversy” as described in this article a possible model for your museum? What might be some of the “real world” issues such a project might encounter -- such as persuading decision makers to tackle controversy - - and how might “real world” issues be addressed?
4. Beyond developing an exhibit, how might engaging your community in exploring social issues be increased? Some examples are provided in the article. What other ideas for programs or interpretive strategies might further engagement and foster dialogue or participation.
5. This article provided examples of “what went wrong” during the project. Were these examples helpful and if so, how?
6. Besides a college or university, can you identify other possible community partners for exploring social issues or topics with conflicting perspectives?
7. Do you think a “curating controversy” project could be effectively adapted for other audiences, such as advanced placement high school students, pre-service teachers, seniors’ groups? How might such a project be relevant for these or other audiences? What changes might have to be made?

Reader Guide Volume 2, 2014. “Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Curating Controversy” by Keri Watson is published in the *Journal of Museum Education* Volume 39.1.

Find out more about the Museum Education Roundtable and the JME at our website: museumentation.info

8. How do you as an educator acquire a level of comfort with confronting controversy personally? How do you gird yourself to navigate disagreements and minefields? If you have direct experience with the topic, how might you both protect yourself and use your insights?
9. What research resources on museums and social issues are you aware of? What additional topics would you like to see examined?
10. What would you like to ask the author?

Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Curating Controversy

Keri Watson

Abstract Prompted by the passage of Alabama House Bill 56, I organized the museum studies course I taught for Auburn University at Montgomery in the 2013 spring semester around an exhibition on immigration. The course offered the opportunity to engage students, faculty, and the community in discussion of an important, timely, and controversial topic. Collaborating with an upper-level communications course and funded by a School of Liberal Arts Community Outreach Grant, the class designed and curated "Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama," which was exhibited on campus to coincide with AUM's Diversity Week, 22–26 April 2013. This article outlines the successes and failures of the project, including issues associated with teaching and presenting a controversial topic, working within a limited budget to curate historical objects, collaborating with others, and engaging the community.

Part of Auburn University at Montgomery's mission, as the urban branch campus of a land-grant institution, is to blend the traditional view of the university as a community of scholars with the contemporary view of the university as an integral part of its locality. Within AUM, the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs supports this mission by promoting institutional diversity, awareness, inclusion, and tolerance, whereas the School of Liberal Arts contributes through its Outreach Grant, which funds engagement with the broader community. Prompted by the 2011 passage of the Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act (Alabama House Bill 56), which is widely considered the strongest anti-immigrant legislation in the country and requires police to ascertain immigration status from anyone detained, prevents undocumented immigrants from receiving public benefits, and prohibits

citizens from harboring or transporting undocumented people, I organized the museum studies course that I taught for AUM in the 2013 spring semester around an exhibition on immigration. This course offered the opportunity to engage students, faculty, and the community in an examination of a controversial issue while also supporting the mission of the University. Collaborating with an upper-level communications course taught by Silvia Giagnoni, the class designed and curated “Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama,” which was exhibited on campus during AUM’s Diversity Week, 22–26 April 2013. Although the specifics of this exhibition were driven by local circumstances, the class’s structure can be adopted by others interested in using their exhibition space for civic engagement and social justice.

The course was described on the syllabus as “providing a survey of the history, function, and organizational structure of museums” and offered students the opportunity to “research, develop, design, fabricate, and install an exhibit.” The class visited and evaluated local museums, studied museum controversies, and considered debates surrounding the politics of visual display. Theoretical and methodological readings provided a basis for a hands-on section of the course during which students collaboratively created a museum-quality exhibition. On the first day of class I explained that the primary goal of the course was to have students work together to conceptualize, research, design, and install an exhibition on immigration in Alabama. The students worked as a class to explore the many and diverse elements of museum exhibitions including planning, concept and design development, examination of educational goals, problem solving, physical and intellectual accessibility, interpretation, and evaluation. The project required students to conduct primary research at the Alabama Department of Archives and History and to select accessible objects to effectively tell the story of Alabama’s immigration history. Students worked in small groups to take on specific tasks, including research and writing, education and outreach, and exhibition/graphic design. Students kept a log of their activities and wrote a final reflective paper that evaluated the exhibition and compared it to the best practices they had studied over the course of the semester.

The class spent the first five weeks of the semester studying museum history and theory and going on field trips to the Museum of Alabama at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA).¹ Readings worked in conjunction with the fieldtrips. For example, after reading “Creating Museum Experiences for Casual Visitors” and “‘An Elite Experience for Everyone’: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural

Literacy,” students met with museum educators at the MMFA and discussed inquiry-based learning.² Similarly, readings on the history and structure of museums prepared students for a visit to the ADAH, during which they observed various exhibition styles including a more traditional, passive installation of war memorabilia and a newer interactive exhibition on Native Alabamians.³ The students then debated the relative values of contemplative and active viewing and decided that they wanted their exhibition to include some interactive elements. Moreover, I instructed students to do further research at the ADAH and to use its online digital database to look for high resolution images that could be reproduced to present a visual history of immigration in Alabama.

The next five weeks of the semester were spent reading about the history of immigration and issues related to immigration including identity, belonging, racism, and globalization.⁴ One of the first steps in putting together the exhibition was to give an overview of the history of Alabama and to encourage students to begin thinking visually about the “big idea” that would structure their exhibition.⁵ The class discussed the Chinese Exclusion Act as well as prejudices faced by immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe. This, in conjunction with an activity that required personal genealogical research, helped students to better understand racism in the United States, to appreciate civil rights issues associated with HB 56, and to confront their own prejudices.⁶ Although there was some initial discussion of dividing the exhibition thematically by industries, including agriculture, steel, hunting and fishing, and tourism, the students ultimately decided to focus on the lives and contributions of individual people.

Having read Homi K. Bhabha’s “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” students decided on the title “Before We Were Us, We Were Them.” The students concluded that many Alabamians identify as Southerners and love their heritage, but that those same feelings of pride could engender prejudices. The students noted that as the “us” of today, they had an opportunity to view others empathetically and to help visitors realize that immigrants should not be viewed as Others, but welcomed as the newest additions in a long line of immigration of which we are all a part. Therefore, they decided to emphasize the ways in which individuals of varying heritages have been crucial to creating the social fabric of the state. The students found photographs of Cudjo Lewis, one of the last African slaves brought to Alabama, Kate Cumming, a Scot who worked as a Confederate nurse during the Civil War, Theodore T. Thorson, the Swedish founder of Thorsby,

Alabama, and Ralph Cohen, a Sephardic Jewish settler in Montgomery, at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. They borrowed a photograph of a German family from the Cullman County Museum, and photographs of Norwegian immigrant Erik Overbey and Japanese immigrant Kosaku Sawada from the Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of South Alabama. They requested digital files and the rights to reproduce images, which were then printed at eight-and-a-half by eleven inches in a similar sepia tone (Figure 1). Color reproductions of murals from the rotunda at the Mobile Museum that feature early settlers, pioneers, and stevedores and that were found in the Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Online Catalog filled out the historical section of the exhibition.

Interpretive labels related to the visuals, provided historical context, and posed questions. For example, the label accompanying a color photograph of a mural of the Le Moyne brothers read:

Although the first Europeans to explore Alabama were from Spain, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville and his brother Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne



Figure 1 Installation view, "Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama," Goodwyn Gallery, Auburn University at Montgomery. Photo: Courtesy of Keri Watson.

de Bienville of France established the first permanent settlement in Mobile in 1699. It quickly became an important immigration port for the area. This mural shows the excitement of the French founders as they make plans to build Fort Louis de la Mobile. *How do you think your ancestors felt when they came to Alabama?*

This was the first label and image in the exhibition and helped reinforce the idea of seeing oneself in the faces of others. Midway through the exhibition, the label accompanying Ralph Cohen's photograph read:

Although German and Eastern European Jewish immigration was fairly common in the United States during the 19th century, Montgomery is among a small group of cities that enjoyed a third wave of Jewish immigration from the Mediterranean. The pioneer of this group was Ralph Cohen, a Sephardic Jewish man from Greece, who immigrated in 1906. Others followed and formed the congregation of Etz Ahayem. *How does religion contribute to your understanding of identity?*

Finally, the Overbey label, located near the end of the historical section of the exhibit, read:

Photographer Erik Overbey emigrated from Norway to Mobile in 1903. He then enjoyed a 45-year career during which he took over 100,000 pictures of his adopted city and its inhabitants. *How do photographs contribute to your understanding of personal and national identity?*

This label led to the next section of the exhibition, which featured images of contemporary immigrants placed next to labels that featured interview excerpts (Figure 2).

The focus on personal stories manifested itself in three other distinct ways. One was the inclusion of student reflections in the catalogue. These reflections were divided into four sections: ancestry, identity and belonging, us and them, and racism and immigration policy, and provided students a forum for their opinions. Student reflections ranged from, "Who dictates personal identity? Do you self-identify through your skin color, religion, heritage, or do you choose who you are through the choices you make?" to "I was born and raised in Alabama, and I feel very Southern because my family is all from



Figure 2 Installation view, "Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama," Goodwyn Gallery, Auburn University at Montgomery. Photo: Courtesy of Keri Watson.

here ... I love to hunt and fish, cook barbecue, drink sweet tea, and watch Auburn football." Other reflections included:

I think being born into a military family has impacted what "feeling like an American" means to me. I was born in Alabama, but wasn't raised here. I spent the early years of my life in Okinawa, but we moved back to America when I was in middle school, and this is the time where I guess I had a chance to really discover what "being an American" meant ... I didn't feel like I belonged at all. As an African American living in the South, there were certain things I was "supposed" to identify with, certain stereotypes I guess, and I didn't, so it was difficult at first.

and

The first thing that comes to my mind when I think about inequality in Alabama is the 1960s and how people like Rosa Parks stood up for their own rights in this very city. That was a sad time for the state

we all call home, but even today these feelings still seem to affect our society ... Maybe we have evolved from slavery and forcing each other to use separate water fountains, but in many ways HB 56 is just as bad.⁷

The second area that emphasized personal narratives was the inclusion of an interactive element. We purchased a Polaroid camera to take photographs of the visitors who attended the opening. Markers were provided so people could write their name and/or heritage on their photograph and pin it to a silhouette of a map of Alabama that hung near the entrance to the gallery (Figure 3). This element allowed visitors to become part of the exhibition by adding their own impromptu portraits and inviting them to think about their ancestry. This



Figure 3 Installation view, "Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama," Goodwyn Gallery, Auburn University at Montgomery. Photo: Courtesy of Keri Watson.

participatory, personal meaning-making activity proved popular with visitors, and it was interesting to see what people wrote on their pictures and to witness the resulting dialogue. It also demonstrated the diversity of the visitors and supported the exhibition's sub-theme that identity is fluid and constructed in multivalent ways. The third area focusing on personal narratives was the multimedia presentations created by Silvia Giagnoni's class. These documentary films featured interviews with present-day immigrants including footage of "Dreamers" shot during a March 2013 trip to Washington D.C. (Figure 4).

Although the exhibition presented a personal and compelling narrative of immigration, there were challenges. The undergraduate museums studies course was cross-listed as an elective in the master of liberal arts program, and of eight undergraduate and four graduate students initially enrolled, three students dropped. One undergraduate student dropped the course at the beginning of the term, but two graduate students withdrew mid-semester. One of these students was frustrated by the student-driven process and asked several times when I was going to tell them exactly what to do. Although I led the class through the selected readings, I allowed the students to drive the



Figure 4 Installation view, "Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama," Goodwyn Gallery, Auburn University at Montgomery. Photo: Courtesy of Keri Watson.

exhibition's big idea and its mode of presentation. The class may have been easier had I pre-selected objects, but I felt that that would have compromised the course's experiential learning component. The other student was frustrated by the changes made to the exhibition over the course of the semester, especially when the class shifted from a thematic approach to one that focused on portraits of individual people. I think collaborating with other students, including undergraduates, required a degree of patience and flexibility that challenged her preferred learning style. The loss of these students, who desired more specific direction, has caused me to question whether or not I included adequate educational scaffolding. Nonetheless, I believe strongly that the student-driven process helps develop critical thinking skills, and I am reluctant to introduce too much structure.

Collaborating with another class was both challenging and rewarding. We were not able to schedule the classes for the same time, so getting the classes to meet was difficult, especially as many of AUM's students live off campus and work full-time jobs. There were twelve students in the multimedia storytelling class, but that class did not begin working on the immigration project until after spring break. This did not give these students as long to adjust to the concept, which for some was problematic. Several were resistant to putting together a project about HB 56, which has enjoyed widespread support in Alabama. Many of AUM's students commute from surrounding rural areas and are from conservative backgrounds. Although I felt like most students wrestled with the issues and confronted their prejudices, every student may not have had a transformative experience. Reflecting on the course as a whole, however, many student comments were positive. One student noted, "It feels great to aid in the completion of a significant project," whereas another said, "This class and exhibit has given me [the] opportunity [to] reassess my views on issues like racism, discrimination, values, and immigration."⁸ A third student wrote:

I realize now how much things definitely need to be changed in our state and in our country... Most of us have done nothing of our own accord to earn citizenship here. We were born into privilege. It makes me think that many of these people that we call "illegals" appreciate America more than we do, and probably more than we ever will.⁹

In conclusion, I believe that the goals of the course and the student learning objectives were met. The students conceived of, designed, and named the

exhibition, selected the objects, wrote and made the wall labels, produced a catalogue, advertised the show, hosted the opening reception, and created an exhibition webpage (<http://aumgallery.wordpress.com/>). Over 100 people, including students, faculty, staff, and community members, attended the opening and many more visited throughout the week. Most of the guestbook comments reflected appreciation for the quality of the exhibition, which will have a lasting value to the community as it is now on permanent loan to the Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice (AJIC), which is exhibiting it in their new cultural center in Montgomery's Old Alabama Town (Figure 5). The ACIJ is also incorporating the exhibition into their "Alabama Immigrant Stories Project" available online at <http://www.acij.net/get-involved/the-alabama-immigrant-stories-project/>. Although the federal courts have struck down the most egregious aspects of HB 56 and the U.S. Senate continues to debate immigration reform, the degree to which a more progressive attitude toward immigration will take hold in Alabama (and across the United States) remains to be seen. Yet, I believe "Before We Were Us, We Were Them" engaged the students and community and demonstrated how a public



Figure 5 Installation view, "Before We Were Us, We Were Them: Immigration and Alabama," Alabama Coalition of Immigrant Justice, Old Alabama Town, Montgomery, Alabama. Photo: Courtesy of Keri Watson.

university gallery in a conservative state working with a limited budget can curate a timely and controversial topic effectively.

Notes

1. Assigned readings on museum theory included: excerpts from Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996); excerpts from Janet Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); excerpts from Ross Parry, *Museums in a Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2010); Lois H. Silverman and Mark O'Neill, "Change and Complexity in the 21st-century Museum," *Museum News* 83 (2004): 37–43; and excerpts from Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996). In addition to discussing these readings in class the students were required to write a 10-page paper on the history and theory of museums.
2. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, DC: Whalesback, 1992), 135–150; and Vera L. Zolberg, "An Elite Experience for Everyone: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy," in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 49–63.
3. Jeffrey Abt, "The Origins of the Public Museum," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon McDonald (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 115–134; and Michaela Giebelhausen, "The Architecture is the Museum," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* ed. Janet Marstine (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 41–63.
4. Assigned readings on immigration included: excerpts from Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfeld, Rosie Castañeda, Heather W. Hackman, Madeline L. Peters, and Ximena Zúñiga, *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2000); excerpts from Beth Frankel Merenstein, *Immigrants and Modern Racism: Reproducing Inequality* (Boulder, CO: Lynx Rienner Publishers, 2008); excerpts from Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); excerpts from Donna R. Gabaccia and Vicki L. Ruiz, *American Dreaming Global Realities: Rethinking U.S. Immigration History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Regina Branton, Erin C. Cassese, Bradford S. Jones, and Chad Westerland, "All Along the Watchtower: Acculturation Fear, Anti-Latino Affect, and Immigration," *Journal of Politics* 73 (2011): 664–679; excerpts from Pyong Gap Min, *Mass Migration to the United States: Classical and Contemporary Periods* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002); Mary C. Waters and Tomás R. Jiménez, "Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 105–125; Katharine M. Pruett and John D. Fair, "Promoting a New South: Immigration, Racism, and 'Alabama on Wheels,'" *Agricultural History* 66 (1992): 19–41; Robert S. Davis, "The Old World in the New South: Entrepreneurial Ventures and the Agricultural History of Cullman County, Alabama," *Agricultural History* 79 (2005): 439–461; Dino Cinel, "Italians in the South: The Alabama Case," *Italian Americana* 9 (1990): 7–24; Jamie Winders, "Representing the Immigrant: Social Movements, Political Discourse, and Immigration in the U.S. South," *Southeastern Geographer* 51 (2011): 596–614; Mary Bauer, *Alabama's Shame: HB 56 and the War on Immigrant*, A Report by Southern Poverty Law Center (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012); Margaret Newkirk and Gigi Douban, "Alabama Immigration Law Has Surprise Result," *Business Week* (24 September 2004); Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, "Alabama Immigration Law Leaves Schools Gripped by Uncertainty," *Christian Science Monitor* (2 October 2011); Campbell Robertson and Julia Preston, "Appeals Court Draws Boundaries on Alabama's Immigration Law," *New York Times* (21 August 2012). In addition to discussing these readings in class the students were required to write a ten-page paper on immigration policy.
5. Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*, 1–8.
6. Students were asked to interview their family members and then post to the course's discussion board on the topics of heritage, identity, and belonging.

7. Introduction to Museology student Laura Bocquin; Introduction to Museology student Kile Pointer; Advanced Multi-Media Storytelling student Morghan Prude; and Advanced Multi-Media Storytelling student Chad Underwood.
8. Introduction to Museology student Shaquille Harris and Introduction to Museology student Amanda Brunson Tucker.
9. Introduction to Museology student Jonathan Felton.

About the Author

Keri Watson is Assistant Professor of Art History and Museum Studies in the Department of Art History at Ithaca College. She has published in *SECAC Review*, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, *Florida Without Borders: Women at the Intersections of the Local and Global*, and *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race*.

Support the JME.

Join MER today!

Did you know that the *Journal of Museum Education* is published by the **Museum Education Roundtable**?

Museum Education Roundtable (MER) members receive:

- a full-year subscription (3 issues) to the *Journal of Museum Education* (JME);
- access to online resources including the JME digital archive; and
- invitations to in-person forums and events.

By becoming a member of MER, you support the production of the JME. *And*, you demonstrate your commitment to advancing the field of museum education, to the scholarship cultivated and advanced by the JME, and to the millions of visitors who enjoy our cultural institutions.

Your membership is a direct investment in museum education and the JME. Join today at:

www.museumeducation.info/join

MER is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization that has served the field of museum education since 1969.

Learn more at: www.museumeducation.info

