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Slavery and Justice: What Brown University has Taught Me about Public History

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Abstract

In the post today, I want to add to that debate by discussing [Brown University's Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice](#). John recently turned me on to this, and while I still haven't read the whole report ([available in pdf](#)), I'm really impressed by what I've read so far. For those of you who are not familiar with the report, I highly recommend it - it is very insightful. The Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice report documents Brown University's *public* struggle with its historic foundations which, are tied inextricably to the economics of slavery and the slave trade. The committee's report seeks to reconcile with Brown's historic past and find where the present lives in the past. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Theory

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

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TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 2011

Slavery and Justice: What Brown University has taught me about Public History

John and I have often written posts for this blog describing what we feel to be good standards and examples of public history. I first questioned what public history meant in one of my [first posts](#), and more recently, John added his thoughts about [Sam Richard's TED talk on empathy](#) and how it relates to the field of public history.



In the post today, I want to add to that debate by discussing [Brown University's Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice](#). John recently turned me on to this, and while I still haven't read the whole report ([available in pdf](#)), I'm really impressed by what I've read so far. For those of you who are not familiar with the report, I highly recommend it - it is very insightful. The Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice report documents Brown University's *public* struggle with its historic foundations which, are tied inextricably to the

economics of slavery and the slave trade. The committee's report seeks to reconcile with Brown's historic past and find where the present lives in the past.

The report seeks to answer the question:

How are we, as members of the Brown community, as Rhode Islanders, and as citizens and residents of the United States, to make sense of our complex history? How do we reconcile those elements of our past that are gracious and honorable with those that provoke grief and horror? What responsibilities, if any, rest upon us in the present as inheritors of this mixed legacy? The Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice represents one institution's confrontation with these questions.

The Steering Committee is doing public history. It asks people to consider, "What does our history mean to us today?" and, "What should we do about the parts of the past that aren't so honorable?" The goals of the committee were not only to present the, "University's historic entanglement with

slavery and the slaver trade and to report the findings openly and truthfully,” but also to, “reflect on the meaning of this history in the present, on the complex historical, political, legal, and moral questions posed by any present day confrontation with past injustice.” The committee’s goals were to acknowledge the past, and recognizing that it can’t be changed, ask and foster the debate today on what could be done going forward. The committee is actively engaging the community and the country with the past, and what it means to us today. It’s practicing public/civic engagement. As the president of the University stated, it was, “an effort designed to involve the campus community in a discovery of the meaning of our past...Understanding our history and suggesting how the full truth of that history can be incorporated into our common traditions will not be easy. But, then it doesn’t have to be.”



Why would an institution do this, you might ask? What does it accomplish? Why open chapters of the past that are controversial and painful? Brown University faced the same questions while undergoing this project. Their answer was simple – “Brown is a University.” Even today, the institution recognized that it was part of that past, it was a descendent of that past, and that it was forever connected to that past. Historically and morally, Brown is forever connected to its history and slavery.

Reading the first half of the report, I’ve loved every minute of it. It’s great public history. Along with fostering [empathy](#), this is where public history needs to be headed. Brown University becomes *human* through the report. The institution, struggles with difficult problems, and they are the first to admit, that they don’t necessarily have all the answers – none of us do. Hopefully, by engaging the community and greater public, they can foster a discussion, that while it may never furnish the perfect answer, it might at least encourage debate and maybe a consensus.

Could this sailor have scraped together \$11
(the 1863 equivalent value) to attend
the opening of the museum?

[CC / WallyG](#)



DC is the land of the free museum. The Smithsonian museums are free. They collectively reach millions of eyes each year. Rich and poor alike can see the Apollo capsules, Lincoln's hat and the majestic dinosaurs. The National Archives is free. Rich and poor alike can read the promise that they, too, are heirs to the American dream of, "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Library of Congress is free. Rich and poor alike have unfettered access to the wealth of the ages in the greatest treasury of human knowledge since Alexandria. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the White House and Ford's Theatre all are free to all, regardless of how much spare change they have in their pockets.

Who cares if I, a short, fat white boy from New York, can see the African-American Civil War Museum? I can afford the price if I tried hard enough. If there is an admission fee for the museum, I'll eventually pay it. I care about black history. I see black history as my history too. But I don't need to learn those lessons which can be taught by these men who risked all for freedom. I already have.

I want to see the public history profession preaching to the congregation and not simply the choir.

I want a poor mother of a few kids barely scraping by in some obscure corner of DC to take her family to this place and draw strength from it. I want a homeless man to stumble in off the street and draw inspiration to try again at bettering his life because that's what these men did, again and again, in the face of insurmountable odds. I want a penniless college student, working minimum wage jobs to put themselves through school to think that if those men could face such cruelty and unfairness, maybe they might be able to continue on too. I want everyone, white or black, rich or poor, young or old to have access to this story everywhere it lives in America because it's their history. Anything short and I think we've failed as a society and as public historians.

So, I won't be taking a day off for the grand opening of the museum. I'll be sitting at my desk instead, probably listening to the soundtrack of *Glory* and daydreaming about those men who inspire me everyday to keep moving forward. They'll be marching across my consciousness. I'll make it to U-Street to see the museum soon, after the expensive hullabaloo is all over. And you can bet there will be a review right here. I hope against all else it will be a positive one.

Next week, I'll try to bring this question of who should have the right to lock up history a bit closer to home. Sometimes it's not cash that stands in the way, but a simple iron gate.

