

Brenda McCullers, ARH 6930, Fall 2014

In the article “Reflections on the fate of Tippoo’s Tiger Defining cultures through public display,” authors Karp and Kratz (2000) discuss how the cultural identity of others is represented in displays through methods of “exaggerated differences or oppositions” or by “assertions of sameness or similarity” (p. 194). While the desire of some displays is to “tell stories about exotic cultures,” others may intend to present “exotic objects to a specific set of Western aesthetics” (Karp and Kratz, 2000, p. 199). Author Julie Marcus addresses the question as to “how a particular aesthetic and visual order is established to represent” the museum’s heterogeneity or homogeneity (p. 230). Marcus (2000) explains that although the exhibit’s creator is hidden, they are “the guiding hand which determines what knowledge shall be revealed” (p. 231).

Authors Karp and Kratz explain that ethnographic displays (displays of an ethnic group) are not only found in various types of museums, but are also found in shops, hotels, theme parks, and other commercial settings. These displays, no matter where they are found, are all created to address the viewer’s identity, to “create, objectify and legitimize their sense of themselves, their cultural inheritance, their differences from people of other cultures, and the relations between cultures” (Karp & Kratz, 2000, p. 221). The displays create a premise of self and other. Marcus adds to this in saying that displays must also bring pleasure to the viewer. Therefore exhibition design must take into consideration the intended viewers when creating the representational aims of the display. How will the viewer relate to the exhibit? Will the display arose pleasure within the viewer? Along with these come questions

of inclusion and exclusion. This brings into play the “truth” of the display and the authority of the exhibit. Karp and Kratz explain that curators and exhibitors use ethnographic and cultural authority to address the viewers’ questions of authenticity.

In museum displays, ethnographic authority “involves the means through which cultural others are represented” and refers to the fact that the exhibitor is “uniquely situated to read and interpret” the ethnic group because of their experience and expertise (Karp & Kratz, 2000, p. 204, 207). The museum’s cultural authority is “derived from their basic activities: collecting, documenting, conserving, displaying, researching... involves the collective research experience and expertise of the curatorial staff, and the ‘authenticity’, quality and scope of their collection” (Karp & Kratz, 2000, p. 209). It is through ethnographic and cultural authority that a display can be justified as authentic or true.

Authors Karp and Kratz provide two examples to explain how the cultural identity of others is represented in ethnographic displays: the Hall of Human Cultures in the California Academy of Sciences and the Kauai Lagoons resort hotel in Hawaii. The California Academy of Sciences exhibit attempts to describe cultural diversity on a worldwide scale. The authors explain how the exhibition was carefully planned and arranged to promote sameness and show similarities. At the same time, it presented certain cultures as having escaped the domination of nature and others that had not. The exhibit created a premise of self and other using similarities and demonstrated ethnographic authority in order to promote the message of the museum’s cultural authority.

In Hawaii, the Kauai Lagoons resort was artistically designed to create a cultural experience. By presenting a museum atmosphere through its layout, “exhibits, dioramas, selection and display of objects, and use of texts” the resort validated their cultural authority (Karp & Kratz, 2000, p. 217). The guests are made to feel as if they were “simultaneously at home and visiting a museum, a plantation and a nature preserve” (Karp & Kratz, 2000, p. 220). Again, the exhibit created a premise of self and other.

Marcus provides insight into the representation of self and other with her story regarding the Museum of Sydney. The controversy as to whether the museum would present the history of the Aborigines or the colonial families settlement rather than invasion, resulted in what Marcus (2000) describes as a “cultural, political, and aesthetic mess” (p. 241). According to her, the exhibit lacked the cultural identity of others and did not produce the pleasure described as essential for a successful exhibition.

In conclusion, Karp and Kratz (2000) confirm the importance of understanding “that all peoples, even museum curators, are members of other cultures—an ‘other among others’ (p. 221). To add to this, one learns from Marcus that people fashion their own identity and their own opinions by how they view others. Consequently, there will always be areas of concern that the museum staff must consider when constructing an ethnographic display.

#### References:

Karp, I., & Kratz, C. A. (2000). Reflections on the fate of Tippoo's Tiger Defining cultures through public display.

Marcus, J. (2000). Towards an erotics of museum.