

Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power.* Viv Golding. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing. 2009. 246pp.

Reviewed by Vivian N. Halloran

Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power is a full-length exploration of what it means to take the museum's mission as an instrument of public education seriously. Writing from the perspective of a museum educator situated at a specific institution, the Horniman Museum in London, Viv Golding shares her experiences working with children in classrooms both at the museum and at the local schools, as well as collaborating with adults as part of the Caribbean Women Writers' Alliance. Golding is as knowledgeable about academic debates surrounding postmodern museology as she is passionate in her conviction about the applicability of pedagogy to the museum in its intersecting missions of entertaining and educating the public. Golding's conviction is admirable, and her enthusiasm is infectious. Her strong first-person narrative voice makes Golding's arguments compelling because she draws upon her own experience as an educator, visitor, and workshop participant to round out her frequent references to novelists like Toni Morrison, museum scholars like James Clifford, French philosophers such as Michel Foucault, and authorities on pedagogy (Paulo Freire) and feminism (bell hooks). This book infuses its readers with a sense of optimism and enthusiasm about the many possibilities the museum offers as an educational resource for community groups, school age children and college students alike, and individual visitors out for a nice time.

Using the critical framework of Black feminist hermeneutics, Golding ambitiously sets out to prove that the museum can challenge entrenched social prejudices about the Other and facilitate the construction of empowering identities for its visitors, all through the combined power of thoughtfully curated exhibitions and an active program of "audience-focused learning." For the most part she succeeds—the Afrocentric museum case studies included in parts one and three of this book, which she worked on while at the Horniman, seem to have been quite successful. Of particular interest here is Golding's account of her participation in the Caribbean Women Writers' Workshop and the struggles that individual members faced when attempting to establish a safe space to meet within the museum walls. Golding tempers the tone of her description of how the group helped Horniman confront its own lingering institutional racism, evident in its housing the group in a rather inhospitable space in the basement early on in their tenure at the institution. She successfully avoids sounding either defensive or riled with righteous indignation.

It would be interesting to see if Golding's Black feminist hermeneutics approach to museum education and administration works as well when the exhibitions in question have nothing to do with Africa. Would it be a productive framework to use in the context of showcasing the culture or heritage of Pakistan as experienced in the United Kingdom, for example?

The specificity of the theoretical approach that she advocates raises the question of whether all her collaborators at the museum shared Golding's ideology and whether developing such a strong pedagogical model would be applicable or necessary for departments other than education

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within larger museums. The Horniman's commitment to education is unusually strong; its website even includes a tab specifically dedicated to "Schools." This is one small drawback of the first-person narration—other perspectives about the museum's mission are not included within this work.

Golding broadens the scope of her inquiry in part two by including a detailed analysis of how museums beyond the United Kingdom, such as the National Museum of World Cultures in Sweden and the District Six Museum in South Africa, incorporate similar pedagogical and museological approaches within their permanent and new exhibitions. The chapters in this section discuss some of the history behind the establishment of these museums, as well as a thorough examination about controversies that each of them have faced. While the information discussed in this section is at times fascinating, Golding does not always draw strong connections between what has worked for these museums and how it may be adapted or incorporated into museums elsewhere.

Part three focuses on the educational and experiential program Golding and her colleagues took to local schools—successfully conveying the various learning goals that their creators hoped would be present. Golding's account of the program's successes as well as the unexpected roadblocks she faced, such as one artist's explicit homophobia, balances what in lesser hands might have deteriorated into self-congratulatory praise. Her matter-of-fact discussion of the interventions necessary at such junctures, as well as the acknowledgement that try as they might, the museum cannot fix all the social ills that affect the surrounding community, bring some necessary pragmatism to anyone contemplating carrying out such an ambitious program of reform.

While it is easy to celebrate the intellectual and political daring of these educational endeavors, quantifying the net effect of these is a much more difficult task that neither this book, as a combination of theory and praxis, or the museum, as an informal educational outlet, can fully carry out. I raise the issue of assessment of learning outcomes only because it has become the prevalent mode for discussing the perceived quality or worth of the education being provided by social institutions, such as schools. Since Golding so adamantly stresses the value of museum education to counteract prevailing social ills like racism, sexism, and homophobia, among others, it is reasonable to point out that the long-standing impact of such intervention is difficult to measure.

The one consistent problem with this book was the lax copyediting. Words are constantly misspelled, capitalization is uneven throughout, and there are too many run-on sentences. While small, the frequency of such mistakes proves distracting to the reader.

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