

## Interpreting Difficult Knowledge

By Julia Rose, Ph.D.

**I**ncreasingly, public historians are talking about finding ways to interpret histories of oppression, tragedy, and violence that encourage visitors and other audiences to reflect on the roots of society today. Interpretations of traumatic histories ask audiences to acknowledge the human toll and the varied viewpoints enveloped in histories of oppression. Such social justice education demands both emotional and intellectual engagement from audiences; engagement not easily carried out. Museum workers and public historians explain that their audiences often express resistance to hearing about oppression. Why? What makes oppressive history difficult to interpret? Why do museums refer to histories of oppression and violence as “the hard stuff”? What is at stake?

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Allendale Plantation cabins on display at the West Baton Rouge Museum in Port Allen, Louisiana, document life on a sugar plantation where enslaved laborers and then wage paid laborers cultivated sugar cane. Visitors are engaged in conversations throughout their guided tour allowing visitors to ask questions and discuss slave life and the radical transitions African Americans navigated during the Reconstruction era and the Civil Rights era on south Louisiana sugar plantations.



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In the middle of the twentieth century, the rise of social history asked us to recognize the contributions and events of the common person. This paved the way for museum workers and other public historians to grapple with long held biases against researching and interpreting the histories of oppression against minorities, women, and “other” populations, and the pain these groups endured. The long-held tradition of focusing on white, male, majority populations has given way to a genuinely widespread movement to elevate, interpret, and study histories of common persons. The results include contextualized and integrated social histories that recall a complex maze of relationships among historical players, their historical times, and relevant material culture. These histories tend to reveal stories of pride and shame and stories about achievements and afflictions.

Interestingly, social history scholarship not only asks us to find out what happened to marginalized or silenced populations, but also asks us to take on the immense challenge of engaging audiences in interpretations about traumatic histories. Audiences, including museum visitors, attendees to films and lectures, museum workers, and public historians are faced with learning about historical traumas. These audiences are learners and they deserve effective strategies to engage in the learning of histories of oppression.

### Defining Difficult Knowledge

The hard stuff in museums and other public history venues includes interpretative content about histories of mass violence, racism, enslavement, genocide, war, HIV/Aids, slavery, and other traumatic events. Educational psychologist Deborah Britzman calls the hard stuff “Difficult Knowledge.” Audiences, visitors, public history workers, and learners in general who wish to avoid, forget, or ignore traumatic histories will turn away from the difficult knowledge that they cannot stand to know or bear to hear. The person faced with learning difficult knowledge that she or he cannot bear to know represses that information and returns to it through expressions of resistance that appear as negativism, irreverence, jokes, and denials.<sup>1</sup>

Traumatic histories can instigate negative responses from all types of learners making some public history presentations and museum experiences uncomfortable, confrontational, or even appear illegitimate. Responses are unique to each person. Everyone does not have the same level of tolerance for learning histories of oppression, which makes the job of developing equitable and sensitive interpretation strategies for history about difficult knowledge extremely challenging.<sup>2</sup>

Much is at stake. Interpreting difficult knowledge questions how people understand history and how they have long viewed the world. Exhibits, collec-



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum pass under this gate, a cast taken from the original entrance to the Auschwitz death camp, inscribed with the ironic phrase *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Makes One Free).

tions, and historic sites about difficult knowledge can be disruptive and can interfere with a visitor's individual reality. The history of hate or violence can be felt as a confrontation to an individual's sense of morality and pains the individual to accept the history of such horror. The immediate expressions of resistance are signals that an internal learning crisis has formed for that individual. The new difficult knowledge is in conflict with how the learner un-

derstands the history. Britzman explains the learner cannot transcend the internal conflict caused by the difficult knowledge. Instead he or she must work through the internal conflict in an emotional and cognitive process to make sense of the new difficult knowledge. The learner may exclaim, for example, "That is unbelievable!" or "That is not what I read!"<sup>3</sup>

Consider for a moment the internal risk of learning difficult knowledge. Think about the possibility of how this can put the learner at risk by disturbing his or her innermost understanding of himself or herself. Does the history of the Jim Crow South, for example, raise personal questions about how the



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The Sick House at Welham Plantation during the antebellum period served as a hospital for the sick and infirmed slaves. The Sick House is on exhibit at the LSU Rural Life Museum.

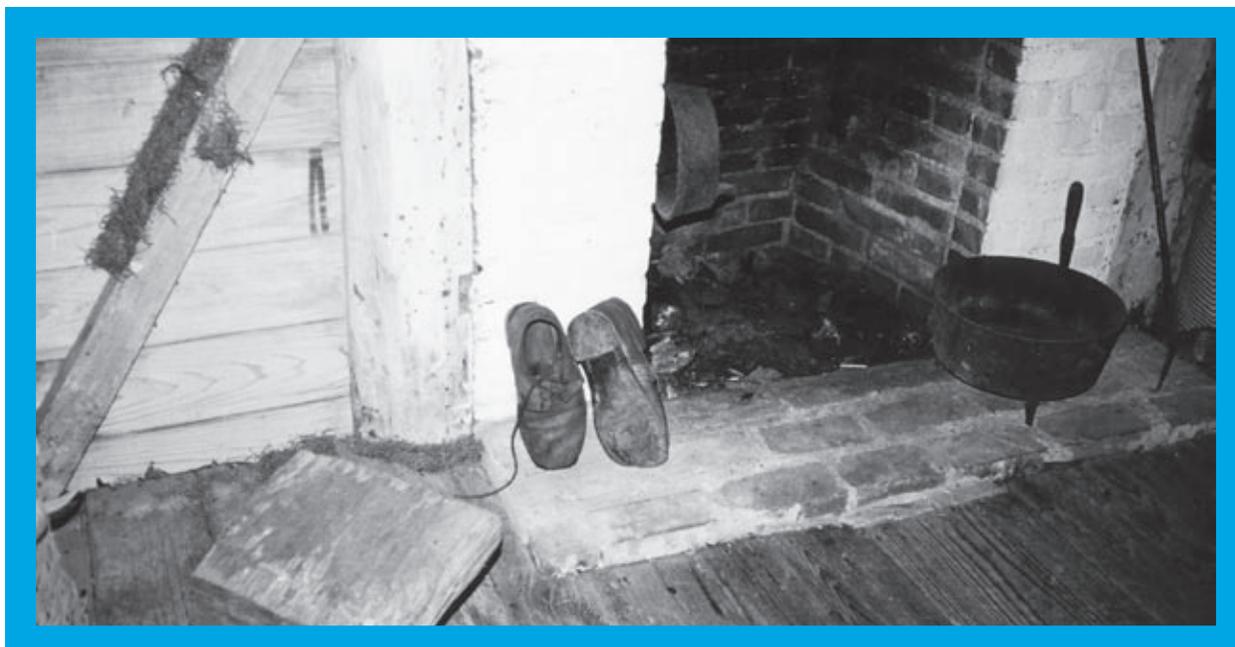
learner understands race relations and how he or she sees race relations today impacting his or her life? Does the history of preserving the gates at Auschwitz in Poland raise emotional feelings in the learner that makes him or her want to change the subject and not talk about the Holocaust? Does the learner feel implicated, self conscious, or threatened? Do some of our responses to the difficult knowledge lead us to resist a particular interpretation because it is too much to bear? At stake is "my understanding of what I believe to be true." Difficult knowledge can lead to learners resisting information in an exhibit so vehemently that he or she will just shut down and refuse further engagement with the subject, the exhibit, or the presenting institution.

A common discussion among exhibit planners and museum workers is a plea for the interpretation to provide "just the facts" and an interpretation of history that is neutral and not controversial. In reality, a historical interpretation will always come from some particular viewpoint and facts are always delineated by a history's authors. The task for museum workers and public historians, then, is to take into account the learning crisis difficult knowledge will invariably incite in some audiences. At stake is the individual learner's comfort and at risk is the individual experiencing a stressful learning crisis that is too much to bear.

How then do museum workers and other public historians approach interpreting difficult knowledge given these insights into the emotive and cognitive powers of difficult knowledge to impede learning and jeopardize an individual's sense of self?

A social scientist cannot change the data, only record and analyze it. The first few "dirty words" [referring to racial slurs used in interpreting American slavery at a living history site] elicited some nervous laughter in a room of 600 people, but we all got over it. But our issue is can our audience get over it? How can we show them hard issues honestly? Can living history do this, or are we only good for the cheery stuff?

—Association of Living History, Farms, and Agricultural Museums Member<sup>4</sup>



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Slave cabin on exhibit at Audubon State Historic Park at Oakley Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana. Shoes resting against the hearth help illustrate the presence of an enslaved man who lived in this antebellum cotton plantation dwelling.

## The 5Rs of Commemorative Museum Pedagogy Reception

One strategy for enabling learners in history institutions to engage with difficult knowledge is called “Commemorative Museum Pedagogy” (CMP). CMP provides ample time for the learning process to unfold to allow the learner to work through his or her learning crisis. CMP is made up of five stages designed to provide a sensitive learning setting. The five stages of CMP are easily remembered as the “5Rs”: *Receive*, *Resist*, *Repeat*, *Reflect*, and *Reconsider*. They are all parts of a nonlinear cognitive process for learners to make sense of a disruptive history.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Receive

Audiences are likely willing to learn new historical information when they arrive at an exhibit or public history venue. Other than school groups on a field trip, audiences choose to come and spend time reflecting on the historical content in an exhibition or presentation. At the beginning of the experience or presentation, the unknown is how committed each individual is to learning about the history presented. Also not evident is how much each individual feels he or she already knows about the subject interpreted in this venue. Museum workers and public historians can provide welcoming introduction spaces. They can include disclosure statements about the kind of difficult knowledge contained in the exhibit or presentation, and they can inform visitors that subject matter in the exhibit or presentation could be upsetting or controversial.

## 2. Resistance

Audience members are also learners who will respond to difficult knowledge in unique and personal ways. When new information is perceived as disruptive to the learner’s understanding of history, or challenges the learner’s sense of self or moral senses, he

“Some people believe that ignoring the past or whitewashing it (literally) will allow healing to occur; that we can get on with a just world by simply looking forward from today; that there need be no account of the past, no dredging up of old skeletons, no probing of old wounds. We fundamentally challenge this assertion. We believe that without a full and open discussion of the past, its relation to contemporary inequalities and oppressions, and considerations of how to respond to these historical and contemporary inequalities, true healing cannot take place. Sites that pride themselves as providing history to the masses have an important role to play in this process—either as maintainers of oppressive patterns or as teachers for a just future.”<sup>6</sup>

or she will react by repressing the new knowledge in a negative way. These negative responses are indicative of the individual experiencing a learning crisis. Resistance can be detected through individuals' verbal expressions saying that the difficult knowledge is unpleasant, uncomfortable, false, or not worth thinking about; resistance can also be heard in the guise of biases, jokes, or sarcasm.

Physical responses are also indicators of resistance such as leaving, attending to minor distractions, or moving quickly through the exhibition. Resistance is indeed a personal response and includes the healthy intellectual responses to contemplate, challenge, and research information and interpretations. Resistance occurs in degrees of internal disruption and is not always an indication of a visitor's lack of knowledge but rather an indication that the difficult knowledge presented is impacting that visitor in a new way. Resistance to difficult knowledge is part of a normal learning process. The phenomenon of resistance includes the most learned as well as the most inexperienced visitor.

### 3. Repetition

Learners will begin grappling with information they find disruptive and repeat particular parts of difficult knowledge in a variety of ways. Repetition allows the learner to consider more deeply the content he or she finds hard to accept. The learner can repeat a story again and again aloud or to himself or herself, or ask the same questions, or read a text multiple times, all as parts of the learning process for working through the difficult knowledge. Learners will likely mix expressions of resistance and repetition. It is important to recognize that the 5Rs of CMP do not necessar-

ily happen sequentially. For example, a learner can move from expressions of disbelief to explaining his or her own personal connections to the history and back to disbelief multiple times.

On one occasion, at a training session at a historical plantation site, museum workers who could not immediately accept a revised narrative that included the history of the site's enslaved community repeated out loud the new slave life information, saying it was not believable or was insignificant. Others repeated the portions of the regular tour narrative they were attached to, or portions that were in jeopardy of being edited if the new slave life histories were incorporated. These museum workers did not necessarily refuse resisted knowledge, in many instances they repeated the resisted information aloud and reread the new tour narrative and secondary history sources. They were eager for opportunities to repeat information as they reflected on the possibility of expanding the current tour to include slave life history.<sup>7</sup>

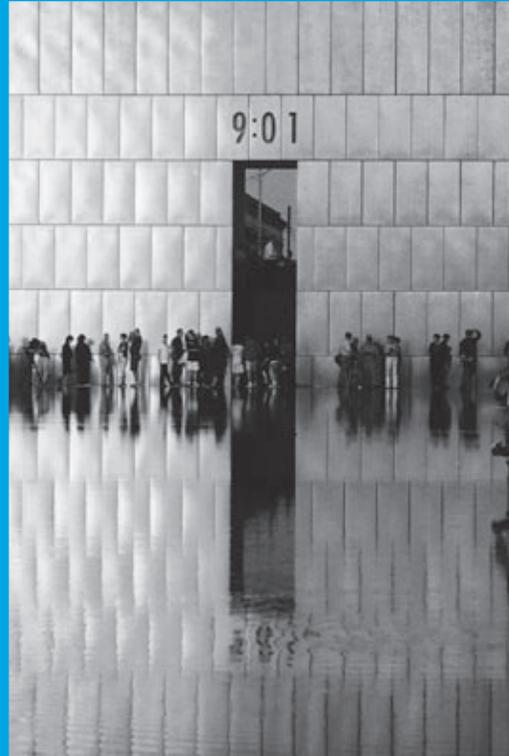
As learners work through repressed difficult knowledge by way of repetition, each new piece of knowledge has to be fit into his or her internal psychic reality. This rebuilding of the learner's inner world characterizes the successful work of learning difficult knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

### 4. Reflection

Learners are entitled to sufficient time to reflect on the difficult knowledge they are grappling with on a tour or in a presentation. Opportunities to talk

about their thoughts and ask questions are important for people to work through the information they find challenging. Reflection can be entwined with expressions of repetition when the learner continues to repeat information and questions. Not all reflection

Greater Oklahoma City Chamber & CVB



**V**olunteering at the Memorial has become one of the most meaningful experiences in my life.

During my career, I worked with people from across the United States and we would often talk about where we were on 'history changing' days and how our lives were changed. Visiting with people at the Memorial, I've seen how events have affected people not only nationwide but worldwide.

—Docent Gayle Bryan (2009)

## WHAT MUSEUM WORKERS AND PUBLIC HISTORIANS CAN DO:

1. Use CMP as a framework to more effectively engage audiences in difficult knowledge.

The 5Rs give learners time and resources to work through difficult knowledge.

a. **Reception:** Provide a welcoming introduction that includes disclosure statements that difficult knowledge is contained in the venue that could be upsetting or controversial.

b. **Resistance:** Anticipate negative responses from learners and allow them to be aired with the understanding that expressions of resistance are likely indicative of the individual experiencing a learning crisis.

c. **Repetition:** Arrange the learning setting to include avenues to revisit artifacts and displays or to reread information. Make information available to learners to review online or in print to study at their own pace.

d. **Reflection:** Ask learners if they have questions. Provide opportunities for conversation or places to sit down to encourage learners to reflect on the difficult knowledge.

e. **Reconsideration:** Offer learners opportunities to respond by providing places for them to share their ideas or comments. Offer social action information that is relevant to the theme of the difficult knowledge. Ask learners, “What do you think?”

2. **Design interpretations that encourage empathy from visitors.** Consider including

cameos of individuals or groups that recount the traumatic historical journey of one person or a group. Visitors will care about the condition of historical communities and individuals when the interpretation includes rich descriptions of real people who are recognizable as men, women, and children with familial and communal relationships to one another and to the world. Such multidimensional representations work to encourage empathy, moving learners to truly care about historical individuals; herein lay the questions about immorality and injustices that difficult knowledge raises for learners.<sup>9</sup>

3. **Avoid objectifying human experiences.** The words we use to interpret history can unintentionally create a buffer between the learner and the human suffering entwined in history. Generic and anonymous descriptions make it less painful to talk about violence and oppression. Language can lessen learners’ immediate resistances but simultaneously disengage learners from reflecting on the human consequences of the violence or oppression. Avoid words like “slave” or “troops” that objectify the people we intend to interpret by leaving out their identities and human attributes.

4. **Recognize that difficult knowledge will generate varying degrees of audience engagement.**

5. **Recognize that engagement in learning difficult knowledge is succeeding when learners show evidence of the 5Rs and demand to know more.**

## WHAT MUSEUM WORKERS AND PUBLIC HISTORIANS SHOULD NOT DO:

- Assume your interpretation is neutral.
- Believe facts are unquestionable.
- Believe your audience sees the world the way you see the world.
- Rush your audience to understand an interpretation.
- Ask audiences to “get over it.”
- Avoid histories of oppression, violence, or tragedy.



Historically furnished sugar plantation cabins from Allendale Plantation provide settings for interpreting life from the slavery era through the Civil Rights Movement. Pictured is the interior of a field worker's cabin c. 1870. West Baton Rouge Museum, Port Allen, LA.

happens immediately in the museum or lecture hall. Learners in a museum, for instance, might ask for more information from a tour guide, reread exhibit labels, purchase books in the gift shop, or pursue more information about the difficult knowledge after they have left the exhibit. Providing opportunities for conversation or places to sit down in an exhibit or presentation will encourage learners to reflect on the difficult knowledge.

“A group of high school students on a tour at Magnolia Mound Plantation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana were led inside a slave quarter dwelling on exhibit. A fifteen-year-old African American woman refused to continue on the tour and would not enter the two-room 150-year old cabin exclaiming, ‘I will not go in there, that is not me!’<sup>10</sup>”

### 5. Reconsideration

Learners will offer verbal expressions about how they reconsider difficult knowledge. For example, they might make analogies between the difficult knowledge and another point. “A-ha” moments are a part of reconsidering difficult knowledge and reconsideration is also evident when learners talk about their personal connections to the difficult knowledge. (For example, when walking along the reflecting pool at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, some visitors recount where they were that tragic day in 1995.) But not all responses are verbalized. Nonverbal evidence of reconsideration includes more subtle cues like head nodding, eye contact, note taking, lingering, and continued participation in viewing the exhibit. Reconsideration reveals an audience’s further engagement in difficult knowledge.

### Conclusion

Learners who are engaged in working through difficult knowledge respond, while others simply shut down and refuse further engagement or consideration of the topic. Indifference is one way to resist difficult

knowledge. *Each learner who is engaged will find opportunities to repeat and reflect on the information to make sense of the traumatic history, internally or aloud.* This is a key point. The learner actively engaged in learning demands more information and opportunities to think and respond to the difficult knowledge.

Successful social justice education aims to move learners to respond because responses signal that the learners care. Responses can vary widely among individuals. They range from visitors joining the museum, purchasing books, making contributions to a cause, contributing to a blog or writing an editorial, to less demonstrative actions such as discussing the difficult knowledge with others outside of the exhibition, or perhaps changing one's opinion.

Not all audiences will agree with the information on an intellectual level. That is reasonable for any project. However, the key difference between an intellectual challenge to difficult knowledge and resistance to learning is that the learner who is intellectually challenging content cares enough about the difficult knowledge that he or she continues reflecting on the subject, while the learner who shuts down is unwilling to grapple with the pain the difficult knowledge raises for him or her.

## Last Word

If we could erase memories that haunt us, would we? Attempts to forget will diminish our capacity for empathy. A challenge for museum workers and public historians is to understand how to impart the histories of oppression and violence in meaningful and sensitive ways that do not shut down audiences' willingness to learn. Historical interpretations of difficult knowledge, framed through CMP, encourage audiences to respond to the histories of oppression and violence enough to care what happened in the past and eventually to demand to know more and respond in the present.

**Julia Rose, Ph.D., is the Director of the West Baton Rouge Museum in Port Allen, LA. She is a member of the AASLH Council and serves as Program Chair for the 2011 AASLH Annual Meeting. She can be reached at [rose@wbrmuseum.org](mailto:rose@wbrmuseum.org).**

## Suggested Reading

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Rose, "Rethinking Representations of Slave Life at Historical Plantation Museums: Towards a Commemorative Museum Pedagogy," (dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> "Working through" is a part of the process of grieving first identified by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his description of mourning. See *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the 21st Century* by Michael Kahn, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> ALFHAM listserv 2 February 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Rose dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002) 270.

<sup>7</sup> Rose dissertation.

<sup>8</sup> For theoretical explanations on working through new knowledge in the context of loss in learning see works about the educational theories by Melanie Klein and Anna Freud, including Deborah Britzman *After-Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning*; and Juliet Mitchell ed. *The Selected Melanie Klein*.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Rose, "Name by Name, Face by Face: Elevating Historical Representations of American Slave Life," *Exhibitionist*, 7:2 (Fall 2008): 37-43.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Rose, observation of her students at Magnolia Mound Plantation, Baton Rouge, LA, 2003.