

Three Building Blocks for Developing Ethical Representations of Difficult Histories

By Julia Rose

Look closely at the book cover of the historical novel, *Cane River*, by Lalita Tademy. Tademy narrated her audio book and asked her listeners to look at the historical photograph on the cover. The author, a descendent of enslaved sugar cane workers, implores her audience to look closely as she explains, “The woman standing beside the oak trees staring out to the future is my great-grandmother, Emily. I think she and the others who came before her would be honored to have you hear their story.”¹

Commemoration is the act of honoring the memory of someone or some community through organized collective instruction. The key to commemorating lives lived, lost, and made tragic by extraordinary circumstances is to remember them purposefully and productively. Commemoration is one kind of pedagogy that is extolled through ethical representations that are built with three concepts called “Faces,” “Real” historical evidence, and “Narratives.” The aim of commemoration is broader than preventing the tragedy from happening again. Commemorating human experiences in museums provides present generations with opportunities to learn how particular histories are relevant today, thereby engendering courage, temperance, generosity, respect, justice, and compassion in visitors. Possibilities for increasing human virtue are located at the nexus of ethics and historical representations.²

Honor their Story: Developing Ethical Representations

Difficult histories include the recollections of trauma, oppression, and violence. The challenge for museum workers to develop ethical representations of difficult histories is finding an equitable equation for combining the three conceptual components, Faces, Real content, and Narratives. Approaches to developing ethical representations using these three components, called building blocks, are explained in the following three sections.

When the visitor decides to look at the images and artifacts that recall the history of oppression, the visitor takes on the responsibility to acknowledge the historical person's pain (the "Other's" pain) and consequently, the visitor is compelled to respond. By acknowledging the Other's historical experience, the visitor provides the world with his or her empathetic response that this history is meaningful and that the visitor cares. The visitor expresses empathy by wanting to know more and changes his or her understanding of the world in some way. Ethical representations result from putting together the three building blocks (the Face, Real content, and Narratives) that produce historical empathy in visitors. In this way, ethical representations of difficult histories help visitors shape their moral sensibilities and envision actions that they can take to encourage social justice in the present and for the future.³

Building Blocks for Developing Ethical Representations

The Face: The First Building Block

"Justice...is not an abstraction, a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt." Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*⁴

The Face: A Philosophy

The first building block, called the Face, comes from the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. Lévinas conceived of the notion of "the face" or "the face-to-face encounter" as the ethical response to recognize someone who was or is human. In this

concept, when applied to history museums, the subject, such as a museum visitor, is responsible to acknowledge the historical Other. The Face asks the visitor to "give and serve" the Other by responding empathetically. The concept of the Face is helpful to building ethical representations in museums and historical sites. Lévinas did not literally call for a likeness of the Other's image through photographs or painted portraits to acknowledge the historical Other as a real person, even though portraits might be an obvious choice for representations. Rather, the philosopher's concept expresses the necessity for the visitor to understand the personhood of the Other through understanding his or her human experience. Building ethical representations requires carefully selected components of the Real and the Narrative in order to develop the Face of the historical Other. Who was he/she the person? Lévinas explains that knowing the Face of the Other orders and ordains us. We are ethically obligated to care what happened to people in order to appreciate history.⁵

Multidimensional Representations

The Face is constructed with multiple descriptive dimensions about the Others' lived relationships to families, communities, cultures, places, and nations. Unlike one- and two-dimensional descriptions of a historical person or group that use basic identifications consisting of a job title or social position—for example midwife or slave or a person's name—multidimensional representations demonstrate how the historical group or person is fully human through relationships within society and to the world. Multidimensional representations are biographic constructions of a person's or a group's identity that connect them to a complex contextual mix of their social, familial, economic, and metaphysical relationships. In this way, multidimensional representations lead visitors to find connections to the historical persons that reveal the significance of the Other's experiences to the conditions in visitors' everyday lives.

Overly generalized and anonymous representations do not call the Face of historical persons into being. Such single dimensions can marginalize significant relationships across generations of historical Others and mask the diversity and depth of an individual's experiences, expertise, and agency. Single dimensional representations make it difficult for visitors to imagine the human story being recalled. In effect, a visitor's detached gaze regards the historical Other "only as someone to be seen, not someone make it (like us) who also sees."⁶

Expressions of empathy and responsibility in visitors emerge when visitors begin to make connections between the Faces represented and the visitors' present. Visitors responses move from disbelief and dismay

to assessments of the injustice revealed in the exhibit. Visitors contemplate new questions and might move from considering how the injustices make them feel to thinking about how the historical injustices informs their understanding of the world today.⁷

The museum experience has the potential to develop this further when visitors reflect on their biases to a history and examine the social issues that surface. Ethical representations can make museum workers and visitors more self-aware when they discover their connections to the historical Others. For example, the visitor might have many shared experiences with the historical Others, such as motherhood, faith, age, or ancestry. These realizations may leave visitors vulnerable to feeling implicated or self-conscious and exposed. Factors of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, cultural group membership, and regional identifications can combine in a complementary and contradictory ways to affect the visitor's levels of engagement in a museum experience. The visitor's level of engagement, in turn, affects the visitor's predisposition to expressing empathy, exclusion, or validation.⁸

Active Voice

The passive voice creates a buffer between the visitor and the human suffering entwined in a history. A strategy to abate objectifying human experiences is to use an active voice that demonstrates agency, while the alternative passive voice tends to erase the presence of the historical individual or group. For example:

Passive: The silver was polished.

Grammatically Active: The slave polished the silver.

Empathetically Active: Charlotte, an enslaved house servant, watched her children as she polished the silver.

With each sentence, more information is added to humanize the story of the polished silver on display. The history about the object has moved towards the history about Charlotte.

Aggregate of the Anonymous

It is challenging to bring visitors face-to-face with the historical Others of mass tragedies. How do museum workers construct a Face for thousands or millions of people who suffered? Exhibits and programs utilize tropes and sound bites that economize complex histories, for example, “six million Jews died in the Holocaust” and “there were 51,112 casualties at Gettysburg.” While useful, these are sweeping descriptions that avoid describing personhood and exclude other historical victims and agents. The complexity and overwhelming number of personal stories in mass tragedies may make ethical representations seem improbable.

However, a kind of empirical persuasion is useful to inform visitors about historical events and the extent of violence or oppression inflicted on mass populations. The “aggregate of anonymous victims” is a useful concept from Susan Sontag that speaks to the power that numbers have to help describe the scope and impact of the injustices inflicted on the multitudes of people.⁹

One approach is to describe several layers of experiences of the victims and agents that bring visitors closer and closer to perceiving the Faces of the historical Others. Descriptions of oppressed masses can be constructed from the many physical and socio-historical contextual layers of relationships, for example, the ecological, economic, ideological, demographic, political, and familial. With each layer of information, from overviews describing the geography to relationships among groups within the communities, households, families, and individuals, visitors can get closer to understanding the variability of the personhood of the victims and agents.

Another approach is to use biographic cameos of historical individuals and groups to further construct the Faces of victims and participants of mass traumas in order to initiate empathy in the visitor. How do museum workers choose the Faces to highlight from a mass trauma when there are so many stories to tell? Some cameos represent the path many victims endured within and after the historical trauma and other cameos represent unique or unusual experiences. Availability of historical content through research, collections, and connections and understanding of the difficult history influence the selections of the cameos for visitors to encounter to learn about difficult histories.

Multidimensional Representations Recall Personhood to Represent the Face

- Include histories about relationships
- Include the complexities of people's lives
- Be site specific
- Effectively use an empathetically active voice
- Express Aggregate of the Anonymous through:
 - layers of experiences
 - cameos on individuals' stories
- Move away from generic histories and regional generalizations
- Move away from one- and two-dimensional representations. Go beyond a name, a face, a job title or position

The Real: The Second Building Block

“Thus the presences and absences embodied in sources...or archives...are neither neutral or natural. They are created.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot¹⁰

The Real: Responsible Authority

Deciding whose stories to tell and what information to include to represent difficult histories is an extraordinary responsibility for museum workers. Given the authority to interpret history, museum workers need to reflectively ask, “Can I say why I am choosing this information and can I explain how visitors will interact with this information?” An essential method for developing the Real content for ethical representations is in the critical process of selecting the history fragments that will be used to represent the human experiences.

The Real includes artifacts, images, documents, numbers, dates, and a variety of other empirical evidence to construct the Face and to build Narratives that ethically recall difficult histories. The Real content includes the authentic, measured, and relevant empirical information that museums collect, assemble, and use to interpret histories. The significance of the Real content relies on the visitors’ abilities to find connections to the histories. Unlike spectacles, which are entertaining and unusual, ethical representations contain information that means something for the future.

Partial Nature of the Real

No exhibit, landscape, or building about a difficult history is large enough or complete enough to contain the extent of human suffering and sadness that it commemorates. Museum workers need to acknowledge to themselves and visitors that partial perspectives in historical interpretations are inevitable. The partial nature of historical interpretations encourages museum workers and visitors to discuss, reflect, and question the changing definitions of the past and understandings about the present that the Real collectively stands to represent.

Brush History Against the Grain

Brushing history against the grain (to borrow an iconic phrase from humanist Walter Benjamin) is a critical method to select the Real content for ethical representations. Information about and from the victims, perpetrators, ancestors, descendants, and witnesses have the potential to reveal the belief systems and influences that shaped the historical events and relate to aspects of present day society. Brushing history against the grain is about approaching the

information and current narrative in a critical way. To brush history against the grain, museum workers can tell new stories; retell and reorient well-known stories; include perspectives from the margins; consider counterpoints; and provide visitors with time and resources for thoughtful review.¹¹

Brushing against the grain is necessary because history is fluid and notions of authenticity and neutrality are organic. Museum workers and visitors commonly explain that history is factual. However, facts are subject to debate and interpretation. One can find counterpoints for every interpretation. For everything that is said and seen in historical representations, there is the unsaid and the not seen. Museum workers need to help visitors brush history against the grain and ask, “What do you think of the story?” in attempts to retrieve and give voice to the diversity of people from numerous levels of involvement in a history. Diversity is a fundamental condition of human dignity and with each divergent perspective new information, connections, and understandings about the meanings of a difficult history will surface for museum workers and visitors.¹²

So how do museum workers select facts and authentic materials to develop ethical representations? Exhibits and programs are mediated learning experiences and the Real content of ethical representations that depend, in part, upon the museum workers’ self-regulated moral controls. While museum workers need to recognize their obligations to their organization and visitors, and to the historical Others, they still need to be able to reconcile their personal views and preferences. Thus, when selecting components of the Real, museum workers can brush history against the grain in an effort to address obligations and personal moral controls.

Assessing the Real

Gauging the effects of the Real in ethical representations requires vetted scholarship and evaluation. Museum workers can employ outside historians, other professionals, and descendants of the difficult history, for example, to review exhibit drafts and help provide diverse perspectives for the representations. They can also implement formal and informal focus groups, and survey visitors who view the exhibits and tours. Visitor feedback will further inform the effects, perceptions, and impact of the ethical representations. Visitor evaluations can help museum workers design more effective ethical representations to refine the Face of the historical Others, clarify the significance of the Real content, and adjust the tone of the Narratives.

Shocking Content

Difficult histories are shocking and the power to shock visitors can range from productive to unproductive and from supportive to harmful. The Real can contain representations of horrific events. Often emotionally charged images have the potency to arouse astonishment, fear, and thoughtfulness. Shock can be a reaction to the immoral world and can provoke visitors to ask questions and critique representations. Shock can pique and sustain visitor engagement to learn about difficult histories.

The risks of using shocking materials include offending, frightening, or emotionally hurting visitors. Visitors can be dismayed or overwhelmed and foreclose on continuing their learning about a difficult history. The shocking content can be too much to bear or seem too disconnected from the visitor's understandings. When visitors give up and express, "There is nothing we can do," apathy can set in. Another risk is that museum workers and visitors can become habituated to images of oppression when an overabundance of images dulls their senses. Passive empathy or indifference will impede their ability to care about the difficult histories. Shock can wear off and viewers can become complacent.

How much shocking or graphic content is too much to bear? Consider, for example, an exhibit of extreme barbarity in James Allen's *Without Sanctuary* that featured a gruesome early twentieth-century photography collection of lynchings in the American South. The exhibit of sepia-toned souvenir photographs tested many twenty-first century viewers' tolerance for shocking images. Articles, books, blogs, and conversations were set in motion to grapple with the meanings of the violent history. Audiences and critics both applauded the exhibit and admonished Allen for bringing in the racist history from the margins, and for asking the public to remember and reconsider what the difficult history means today. Allen's exhibit illustrates the challenge in determining the appropriate use of shocking material.

Museum workers should use a critical process for selecting shocking content by asking themselves, "Why does this story need to be told now?"; "Who are you telling the story to?"; "How does this story relate to the human condition today?"; and "What is the purpose and the expected outcome of telling the story?" These questions must be weighed against the risks of visitors showing signs of foreclosure or indifference.

Museum workers need to be prepared to address visitor responses to difficult histories. Training is in the best interest of the institution's personnel, the organization itself, and, of course, visitors. Exhibits and programs should include warnings and orientations that explain the extent of shocking materials

Questions to Brush History Against the Grain

1. How are experiences to be understood? (Is the point of view from the victors, the oppressed, witnesses?)
2. What information will reorient visitor perspectives?
3. How does this information enable or constrain personal and social possibilities?
4. What is my view of the historical Others or the event? Can I find other views?
5. How did the oppressive forms of power in the history manifest themselves and what traces of the same historical oppression appear today?
6. To what responsibilities to the difficult history am I held answerable and to what responsibilities are visitors held accountable?

used in the historical representations, especially if the content includes adult themes, indecent activity, hard language, intense or persistent violence, nudity, or elements that illustrate immorality. Museum workers must be aware and vigilantly sensitive to visitors' well-being. This is more than a courtesy, it is responsible practice.

The Narrative: The Third Building Block

"[I]n dialogue, the intention is not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to explore; not to convince but to discover." Louise Diamond of the Institute for Multi-track Diplomacy.¹³

Narratives Tie the Face and the Real Together

Visitors ask, "What happened to people?" Writing narratives is the third building block for developing ethical representations to answer that basic question. Curators, educators, exhibit designers, and docents all contribute to narratives. Curators write label content, educators write tour narratives, exhibit designers place the artifacts, and docents tell the stories. An array of narratives converge from these contributors (who are responsible for articulating the multiple voices from the past), and from the voices of the visi-

tors, the community, and the museum. The institution takes the overall responsibility for equitably telling the stories that recall difficult histories.

Narratives help to develop the Face by describing personhood and tie together the components of the Real. Narratives explain how the experiences of the historical Others were the result of ideologies and organized actions in an historical context. Narratives in exhibits and programs ask visitors to consider the circumstances and limitations of the lives of the historical Others, the injustices of such limitations, and how visitors can empathetically respond.

Storytelling

Components of storytelling are inherent in the dissemination of historical narratives. Narratives are stories and descriptions that are read, seen, and heard through a variety of presentation formats. Like a story, the narrative is composed of a beginning, middle, and end, offering insights, viewpoints, and conclusions. The insights, viewpoints, and conclusions are where there are possibilities for narrow and biased perspectives. The biases in the narratives—however subtle or unintentional—possibly raise the risk of inflicting harm on visitors and disregarding historical Others, for example, by excluding voices. Narratives are carefully selected stories that do more than inform visitors. Narratives clarify meanings and reveal connections among historical events and people to explain how and why the history matters.¹⁴

Empathetic Unsettlement: Tensions

The emerging Faces of historical Others and the brushed history of the Real content in representations will likely expose new ideas and perspectives about historical claims to truth. Tensions will surface as each visitor and museum worker grapples with the new difficult knowledge that disrupts one's understandings of morality or with new knowledge that runs counter to the dominant narratives they learned in school or from familiar and well-regarded sources.

Narratives need to account for the possibility of visitors' rising tensions and to address visitors' discomfort and confusion. When visitors exclaim, "That is awful!" or "I cannot believe that!" narratives need to offer visitors interactions and information to enable them to reflect on their resistances and tensions. Spoken and written narratives can provide powerful lines of inquiry and suggest alternative perspectives to help visitors work through painful knowledge.

Effective ethical representations, however, do not resolve all visitor conflicts in learning difficult histories. The narrative can make the moral tensions visible and problematic. For example, sociologist Dean MacCannell asks, is the good of visiting Auschwitz

the way it symbolizes the dignity of its victims in the face of unspeakable cruelty, or is it in the way it symbolizes the evil of their Nazi oppressors? Institutions should acknowledge the tensions and not attempt to resolve them.¹⁵

Asking visitors to accept their unsettlement that arises from the tension is a kind of "just rememberance." Indignation would put museum workers and visitors in defensive positions making the narrative less about empathy and more about power. Nor should narratives simplify the outcomes of difficult histories suggesting harmonious ends. Attempts at resolution of the tensions can instill complacency in visitors. Narratives in ethical representations can explain how the difficult history included injustices and that particular social issues are still unresolved. Unsettlement gives visitors reasons to continue to reflect on the difficult history beyond their museum visit—and perhaps to use their experience to influence change.¹⁶

Hope

Ethical representations of past horrors, for example slavery and genocide, are possible because of the promise of a better future. Every visit to an exhibit or program about a difficult history is an occasion for social affirmation, renewal, and questioning that lead to changes of individual and communal values. History professionals accept the responsibility to commemorate difficult histories because they believe their work will make a positive difference. The museum worker and the visitor take a hopeful stance when he or she can respond to the exhibit or program by saying, "I care."¹⁷

Including expressions of hope in narratives is not a ubiquitous call to free society from all discrimination and oppression. Nor do hopeful messages or conclusions in narratives need to articulate expectations for swift transformations or universal peace. Rather, the pedagogical work of developing ethical representations fundamentally demonstrates to visitors why they should care, which is a crucial first step to social justice education.

Just Imagine

Through written labels, audio programs, or presentations, museum workers can encourage visitors to "just imagine" the historical setting of the oppression or the decisions historical Others faced. Some visitors prefer to consider difficult knowledge internally and others appreciate the opportunity to talk with others. An active imagination enables visitors to piece together ideas from the narrative and the Real content to come to personal understandings and raise new questions. Eventually, the content moves visitors to

imagine how the historical injustices can inform their actions and future decisions.

Dialog

Dialog is an open process of communication based on mutual respect in which visitors and museum workers focus on listening, talking, and working through painful and sometimes unbelievable stories and images. Ethical representations use planned strategies for dialogs to engage visitors in thoughtful interactions with the historical content. These include a series of encounters for visitors with multiple opportunities to read, view, and talk about the difficult history. Museum workers trained to engage visitors in sensitive dialogs about difficult histories provide visitors with learning opportunities to work through the information that visitors are finding hard to accept or understand.¹⁸

While there are no guarantees for reverence, history organizations are well suited to provide meditative spaces for visitors to look longer or to take temporary refuge. Crowdsourcing opportunities for visitors to contribute their responses to the exhibit or program can enlarge the learning experiences. Writing on walls and tabletops and on digital media is an inviting exhibit component for visitors to share observations and feelings about the difficult history. In addition, museum workers can be prepared to say to visitors, “There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking.” The recorded responses from the visitors provide additional perspectives and meanings to the difficult history.

Institutions can use formative evaluation methods to prepare and improve narratives that can anticipate and address visitor questions about a difficult history. The evaluation methods can identify commonly asked questions visitor are likely to ask. Examples of such questions include:

“Who was responsible?”

“How did the oppressed population show resistance?”

“Was it inevitable?”

It is a tough challenge to allow visitors to feel measured degrees of pain and discomfort. Planned narratives can make such tensions concrete and provide opportunities for dialog to encourage visitors’ empathy to take shape.

Narratives for Ethical Representations

1. Build tensions in describing the settings and conflicts.
2. Provide interactive ways to engage visitors in the story (e.g., entering spaces, handling objects, and participating in dialogs).
3. Set a purposeful tone to explain why the history matters.
4. Elicit hope.
5. Encourage the active imagination of visitors.
6. Encourage visitors to respond with active empathy.

Conclusion: Response and Responsibility

Museum workers have the responsibility to commemorate difficult histories through ethical representations built with the Faces of historical Others, Real content from history, and sensitive Narratives. Using this framework to recall difficult histories respects all people, past and present, as persons. Visitors have the responsibility to learn and empathetically respond to the difficult history, and ultimately to find connections between the histories and the conditions of everyday life.

A kind of courage emerges from museum workers and visitors who are compelled to develop and respond to ethical representations. All responses, regardless of their magnitude, are valid, even when their immediate responses have not yet changed the world. Valiant responses from museum workers and visitors begin when they acknowledge their fear or pain and become accountable for learning the history. When museum workers help visitors develop a sense of belonging to a moral culture, the power of community allows visitors to consider how they can respond and imagine how they might bring justice to others in the present day.

The implicit purpose for ethical representations is to remind adults and inform children that violence, oppression, and trauma are what human beings are capable of doing. Demonstrating empathy about difficult histories allows the present generation to make informed contributions to society. Museums take the risks to represent difficult histories to awaken a kind of passion in visitors, a desire with a particular

urgency, by challenging the taken-for-granted historical truths and revealing the struggles for a more just and compassionate moral order. Developing ethical representations engages museum workers in addressing the challenges of prompting this passion in visitors and developing the knowledge needed to direct and sustain visitors' empathetic responses to difficult histories.

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¹ Lalita Tademy, *Cane River* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), book cover.

² Throughout this leaflet, the author has used the words "Face," "Narrative," "Real," and "Other" as terms with unique definitions to understand historical representations. Each word is capitalized to connote that usage is different than the words' traditional dictionary definitions.

³ See: Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Towards a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York at Albany, 1998); Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Claudia Eppert, "Throwing Testimony Against the Wall: Reading Relations, Loss and Responsible/Responsive Learning," in *Difficult Memories: Talk in a (post) Holocaust Era*, edited by Marla Morris and John A. Weaver (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Roger I. Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1992); and Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage, 4th Edition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

⁴ Simon, ii.

⁵ Emanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 83-101.

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 72.

⁷ See Julia Rose, *Rethinking Representations of Slave Life at Historical Plantation Museums: Towards a Commemorative Museum Pedagogy* (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2006); Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain*; Richard Sandell, ed. *Museums, Society, Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁸ Rose, 204, 221.

⁹ Sontag, 61.

¹⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 45.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, ed. *Walter Benjamin Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256-257.

¹² For a discussion in the context of classroom learning see Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain*, 23-25.

¹³ Louise Diamond quoted in Bettye Pruitt and Philip Thomas, *Democratic Dialogue-A Handbook for Practitioners* (Washington, DC: General Secretariat for the Organization of American States, 2007), 20.

¹⁴ See Tilden.

¹⁵ Dean MacCannell. *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 50.

¹⁶ Eppert, 59.

¹⁷ MacCannell, 59.

¹⁸ See Julia Rose, "Interpreting Difficult Knowledge," Technical Leaflet #255. American Association for State and Local History, 2011.