
Comments / Commentaires

Applying Anthropology: Another View of Museum Exhibit Development

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As a long-standing member of the museum anthropology profession, I feel compelled to respond to Laura Jones' article, "Technologies of Interpretation: Design and Redesign of the Tahitian Marketplace at the Field Museum of Natural History" in *Anthropologica* (Jones, 1999). In the article, using her personal involvement with the Tahitian marketplace exhibit as a launching pad, Jones takes aim—at museum anthropology as a profession, as well as at several museum and academic anthropologists who have written critically about the exhibit.

In the main body of the article, she submits her perspective on the development of the Tahitian marketplace recreation (according to Jones, an "exhibit ahead of its time" in having no curator, no artifacts, no labels, no explanations). The Tahitian marketplace is one section of a much larger exhibit, "Traveling the Pacific," which itself is one of three components (together with "Pacific Spirits" and "Ruatepupuke: A Maori Meeting House") that make up the Pacific Island exhibits at Chicago's Field Museum. After "Traveling the Pacific" opened to the public in 1989, the exhibit, and especially the Tahitian marketplace component, were the target of much criticism (although Jones often misreads critiques leveled at "Traveling the Pacific" as comments about the Tahitian marketplace). As a result of the criticisms, the Tahitian marketplace underwent various redesigns, first in the form of minor tinkering in 1991, and then in a more major fashion in 1994-95.

The article concludes with a list of lessons Jones learned from her museum experience. She calls for more innovation and risk taking; less conventional interpretive approaches; an abandonment of permanent installations and expensive renovations; greater use of new electronic media and technologies; the inclusion of a wider range of educators and artists in the exhibit design process; and, most importantly, a breakdown of elitist, classist, racist, colonialist, patronizing hierarchies of "expert" control over truth.

Jones correctly states that museum exhibits comprise a special genre of anthropological communication

that allows for creative opportunities in the practice of applied anthropology. Her labeling of the exhibit process as applied anthropology is an insightful observation. She requests that exhibits be seen as the popular media they are, and not simply as another academic genre. Pursuing this argument, however, she encourages a greater separation of the popular from the academic, which raises serious concerns. Indeed, it is precisely because exhibits have important and unique qualities to contribute to the business of public education, and because they reach such a wide audience (according to a recent *New York Times* article [Tucker, 1999], Americans now visit museums more than they visit sports events), that exhibits need to present information in a manner that is accurate, sensitive and inclusive—as well as fun.

Rather than drive a wedge deeper between the popular and the academic, why not bring these two modes of educating into closer, mutually beneficial dialogue? Popular venues for the dissemination of knowledge about people and cultures, and even about the profession of anthropology itself, appear in many other forms, such as popular literature, videos and films, and not only in museum exhibits. The concerns raised by Jones' recommendations ripple further afield and raise parallel concerns for these other genres as well.

One of the greatest measures of success of any educational enterprise is the way in which deeper, more accurate understandings are reached by a constant working back and forth between purely intellectual theories and the testing of these in the "real world." In other words, between what museum anthropologists theorize in their academic studies and what museum visitors see and do and think and feel when they move through an exhibit. The continual give-and-take between knowledge gained by academics and the need to present this to the public in accessible and interesting ways was exactly what first attracted me to the field of museum anthropology. Thirty years ago, much like Jones, I was given the rare opportunity of being part of a team that helped install an exhibit. And, like Jones' situation, the exhibit was about the South Pacific. (I was hired to work on the American Museum of Natural History's "Peoples of the Pacific Hall" under the guidance of Margaret Mead, the very guru of popularizing the academic.) Neither Jones nor I is unique in attending to the divide between the theoretical and the popular. It is the underlying bedrock and predicament of museum anthropology. The difference between us is that, whereas Jones' approach leans towards creating a wider gulf, mine aims to lessen the gap as much as possible.

This dialectical relationship between anthropological theory and museum practice has a long history. It was

the very well from which, over a century ago, both academic anthropology and museum anthropology arose as disciplines. Boas, known as the "father of American Anthropology," had his passion for understanding human diversity sparked, and his career propelled, when, as an employee at the Royal Ethnographic Museum of Berlin, he witnessed a troupe of Bella Coola Indians perform in Berlin in 1886. The following year, he published his series of theoretical articles about the relationship between ethnological museums and systems of classification (Boas, 1887a, 1887b), already then applying anthropological theory to the practice of museum exhibitry. Now, a century later, the heated dialogues between postmodern, reflexive theorists, on the one hand, and museum employees with practical interests in appealing to diverse audiences and in staying financially afloat, on the other, lie at the core of these "new" types of exhibits. Recent innovative exhibits, like the Pacific Island exhibits at the Field Museum or the "Pacific Voices" exhibit at the Burke Museum (see below), do not spring from intellectual voids, but are consciously molded by anthropological theory of the 1980s and 1990s.

My understanding about the Tahitian marketplace exhibit is that it was the very imbalance between an over-reliance on popular media and an under-utilization of informed anthropology that triggered the critiques of the exhibit and, indeed, informed Jones' decisions about how to redesign it. In stark contrast, a different component of the Field Museum's Pacific exhibits, "Ruatepupuke: A Maori Meeting House," which opened a few years after "Traveling the Pacific," was profoundly influenced by anthropological theories at the time, specifically those about involving indigenous peoples. A Maori scholar, Arapata Hakiwai, was hired as the co-curator to work alongside John Terrell, Curator of Oceanic Archaeology and Ethnology at the Field Museum. Several Maori artists and conservators (Phil Aspinall, Hinemoa Hilliard, Hone Ngata, for example, all of whom are from, or have kin ties to, the community where Ruatepupuke was first built) were intimately involved in the exhibition process. To the best of my knowledge, this exhibit has sparked little, if any, serious critique, either from academics, museum visitors, or Maori individuals.

Not only does Jones display a lack of understanding about the history and complexities of the academic/popular conundrum as played out in museum anthropology, but her specific discussion of the Tahitian marketplace shows a naiveté about contemporary museum anthropology. One of her main pleas is for an end to "elite patronage." The irony of her situation escapes Jones. While calling for an end to elitism in the museum profession,

she seems oblivious to the fact that the Field Museum's choices about the constitution of the decision-making exhibit team was a classic example of the elitist, classist, colonialist hierarchy she claims to want to eradicate. Phyllis Rabineau, the exhibit developer from the Field Museum, while visiting French Polynesia, met with Manouche Lehartel, the Director of the Musée de Tahiti et des îles, who introduced Rabineau to Laura Jones, an American graduate student who happened to be doing research in Tahiti at the time. This triangle—an American exhibit developer, the director of the Musée (a museum controlled by the French colonial government), and an American graduate student—is a far cry from a non-elite solution which would have highlighted Pacific Island community involvement. Why, for example, is the Director of the Tahitian museum the only “native” to be flown to Chicago to participate in the exhibit design process? Where were the Tahitian market vendors, the people who sell flowers, fruit, vegetables, fish, meat and hand-crafts? If Tahitian market vendors, crafts people and carpenters had been on hand in Chicago to help make the ersatz market look more like the market in Tahiti, maybe the time and energy-consuming redesign and re-redesign could have been spared.

Another of Jones' recommendations is for the involvement of more educators and artists in the exhibit design process (seemingly unaware that this is exactly what is done in most museums), and for less conventional interpretive approaches that are not afraid of shocking the visitors. During the design process, Jones spent a one-week stint on-site at the museum. As she admits, it was her “first experience” working side-by-side with museum educators and artists (an eye-opening opportunity during which, for the first time, she noticed “how creative, intellectually sophisticated, compassionate and open-minded” the educators and artists were). Although she advocates for more creative involvement, she stifled their input at a moment when they could have truly contributed to the business of public education. For example, when the exhibit team wanted to put a poster of an atomic blast at the entrance to the market and talk about (although difficult, I would imagine, in an exhibit with “no labels”) French nuclear colonialism, Jones vetoed their idea. Why? Because her “Tahitian colleagues” (presumably Manouche Lehartel, whose salary is paid directly by the French government) would be “upset.” Had her colleagues been less “elite” (people who might very well have scrawled anti-nuclear graffiti on sidewalks and buildings in Tahiti), some of them might have cheered this “less conventional” and “shocking” interpretive approach.

The “most sensitive” of the criticisms were about the lack of involvement of Pacific Islanders. Once the Tahitian marketplace opened to the public, as Jones notes, flaws were not only pointed out and published by museum professionals but were also made evident from comments by the public. Visitors failed to see the marketplace as a representation of contemporary life and instead thought it portrayed Tahiti of the 1950s. This ghost-town quality was due to the lack of “people” in the exhibit, both in the planning process and in the finished product. But what, then, did the museum do to remedy this? They involved, once again, the Director of the Musée de Tahiti et des îles, who decided to bring in the more human presence of the residents of Papeete, the capital of Tahiti and location of the market. Over the next few years, life-size photos of people, photo murals and videotaped interviews were produced and, in 1994-95, added into the exhibit. (But still no poster of the bomb. Or, for that matter, no photos of the burning and looting of Papeete during the anti-nuclear protests that were going on in 1995, the same year that the re-renovation was completed in the museum.)

In Jones' denunciation of my (and others') criticism (Kahn, 1995) of the “absence of Pacific peoples, their voices or images” (yet, is this not the problem she herself acknowledges and then attempts to fix?), she accuses me of not practising good scholarship and doing my research. Yet, the main reason I said that Pacific Islanders had not been involved in “Traveling the Pacific” was because Phyllis Rabineau, the exhibit developer, told me so. When, at the 1990 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums, I asked Rabineau about the level of Pacific Islander involvement with “Traveling the Pacific,” she replied that there was little participation because “no Pacific Islanders live in Chicago.” Obviously, airfare was an option available only to some.

I would like to conclude with a brief mention of a different Pacific exhibit, namely, the “Pacific Voices” exhibit at the Burke Museum in Seattle, which opened in 1997. “Pacific Voices” addresses almost all of the lessons learned by Jones: innovative interpretive approaches, greater use of new electronic media and technologies, the inclusion of educators and artists, and a breakdown of hierarchies of expert control in favour of community involvement. As the lead curator, I can attest to the fact that the exhibit was shaped by recent anthropological debates about representation and by academic and indigenous critiques of curatorial authority (as is almost any recent anthropological exhibit). The seven-year period during which the exhibit was conceptualized, designed (and redesigned and re-redesigned)

and installed was an intense and continuous collaborative process, involving—in addition to museum curators, academic advisors, educators, exhibit designers, artists, carpenters, video producers, photographers, editors, etc.—over 150 members of Seattle’s Asian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander and Native Northwest Coast communities (many of whom were themselves the artists, light technicians, musicians, label editors, sound-producers, carpenters, photographers, etc.). I do not intend to hold “Pacific Voices” up as a model exhibit. Far from it. For, no matter how well informed by theory, how noble one’s intentions, how collaborative and inclusive the process, or how many perspectives are presented, the pervasive problem of representing dynamic peoples and ideas in confined static spaces is difficult, if not impossible, to resolve. And the gap between academic theorizing and popular education, no matter how lessened, is never erased.

Jones should be pleased to learn, however, that a recent review of the “Pacific Voices” exhibit states that “all museum anthropologists, regardless of the profiles of their institutions, can learn from this exciting experiment in *applied anthropology*” (Dobkins, 1999). Although none of us involved in the creation of “Pacific Voices”

had ever thought of labeling our task in this way, I agree that this is what museum anthropologists do, and have always done. For this insight, but this alone, I am indebted to Jones.

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