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# Do History Museums Still Need Objects?

BY RAINEY TISDALE

It started with a simple enough question: should someone review Steven Conn's new book *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* in an upcoming issue of *History News*? It turns out Conn's work is fairly theoretical and focuses mainly on art, ethnographic, and science museums, not on the specific attributes of history museums. So while *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* is an interesting read, it's unlikely to help AASLH members with their day-to-day work in the trenches. The decision was made to scrap the review; one simple question answered.

But it left in its wake other much more complicated questions. Indeed, do history museums still need objects? And if so, what are the issues and challenges we are confronting today as we seek to interpret artifacts effectively for a public audience? What's our 2011 "state of the union" regarding the cultural value of our collections? With an ear to the ground, surveying colleagues in the field as well as recent writing by some of our best thinkers, I set out to shed some

light on this topic. I'll be upfront with you, I do think we still need objects. But I also think it's much more complicated than that. So what follows are seven statements that not only unpack this topic but also pose additional questions, questions for you to answer. Some of what I put forward may be controversial; you are unlikely to agree with all of it. But that's kind of the point. These are complicated issues that we need to continue to discuss in the months to come, both online and at water coolers throughout the country. Take a read, and then share your thoughts with your colleagues and with the *History News* online community at <http://aaslhcommunity.org/historynews>.

**1. We need objects now more than ever.** In the digital age, Americans long for authenticity. A survey of 5,000 visitors to living history sites conducted in 2008 by Reach Advisors (and reported in this journal by Susie Wilkening and Erica Donniss) determined "respondents felt that their lives had become so crazy, so complicated, so unreal that they were seeking something real and authentic in their lives" by visiting these museums.<sup>1</sup>

A subsequent Reach Advisors study of twenty-some-things found: "[S]eeing stuff online only made them want to see the real objects in person even more. Furthermore, their

comments revolved around how important authenticity was to them because real authenticity is increasingly hard to find in our crazy world. Yet they felt that museums were inherently authentic, largely because they have authentic objects that are unique and wonderful.”<sup>22</sup>

And a 2008 study commissioned by the Institute of Museum and Library Services found a positive correlation between Internet use and in-person visits to museums. While not everyone agrees, many museum professionals have come to believe that the increase in digital versions of objects actually enhances the value of in-person encounters with tangible, real things. Curt Miner at the State Museum of Pennsylvania has called them “cultural palate cleansers for a digitally-saturated general public.”<sup>23</sup>

For history museums, our objects aren’t our only authentic attributes—we also have historic buildings, meaningful stories, and repositories of intangible cultural heritage like music, dance, and foodways—but objects are a crucial element of our approach to authenticity. Moreover, not only

Although Steven Conn doesn’t really address these issues, I believe he would agree. Conn’s title is provocative but a little misleading. He argues that museums exhibit far fewer artifacts than they did a century ago, and he makes much ado about new, experience-based history museums that use objects barely (if at all) to tell their stories. He is not, however, advocating that objects disappear altogether, or that they don’t have a place in the contemporary museum. He writes: “Museums—some of them anyway—might not need objects anymore, but without objects we all may miss the delights and surprises that come with looking.” So we need to keep thinking about how we can create environments in our museums that maximize encounters with real objects, offering visitors more intense “delights and surprises” and further setting us apart from other forms of culture.<sup>5</sup>

**2. We don’t need objects unless we do something great with them.** We all know that preserving museum collections is a costly business. The current imperative to “green” our museum practices only serves to underscore this point—we consume enormous amounts of precious resources to maintain appropriate environmental controls and to house objects in archival materials. So what’s the point of expending our resources preserving these collections if we’re not doing something imaginative, experimental, or amazing with them? We are indeed now in the business of serving our audiences, and we can’t do so effectively with the same formulaic approach, repeated in history museum after history museum, around the country.

Sure, we all can probably name a few institutions that are breaking new ground with their collections, but these are exceptions. What’s more common is to see the same pleasing but innocuous groupings of artifacts in case after case, with titles like “On the Home Front” and “Changing Times”—the same interpretive labels with the same measured curatorial voice, the same nineteenth-century historic house parlor repeated in town after town. There are good reasons for sticking closely to what’s been done before—when you’re under-resourced and struggling just to keep the doors open, risks of any kind are hard to stomach. But maybe that’s one reason art and science museums so often outpace us, in both funding and visitation: we all look and feel too traditional and too similar. Ken Yellis has said, “If exhibitions resemble each other too closely, it becomes dangerous—for the individual museum, for the field, and for the culture.”<sup>26</sup>

I believe conventional wisdom is that if you’ve seen one history museum you’ve seen them all. From the tiny historic house to the large state historical society, we need to develop object-centered historical experiences for visitors that are not only educational but also unique, memorable, moving, provocative. We talk about this a lot but we aren’t doing it enough.

Let me be clear, I don’t believe doing great things with our collections necessarily means bringing in a lot of technology or expensive exhibitry—such techniques can drown artifacts just as much as illuminate them. Sometimes the simplest ideas are the best ones. Can we write our text in a radically different style? Turn everything upside down (literally and



Rainey Tisdale

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More objects on display at the Elsewhere Collaborative.

are our objects a mark of authenticity, but they set museums apart from other forms of culture. In his essay “Creampuffs and Hardball,” Stephen Weil makes the point that each museum must find things it can offer the public that no other type of institution can—its community must perceive it to be “both valuable and incomparable.”<sup>24</sup>

A hundred years ago objects were our *raison d’être*. Museums were in the acquisition-and-classification business. In the twenty-first century, however, museums are in the serving-our-audience business. Because of this shift in approach, museums now rely on all sorts of interpretive tools to tell their stories—we need everything in the arsenal to do our new job well. But that doesn’t mean we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. Objects may no longer be our *raison d’être*, but they are still an important—and incomparable—part of what most history museums do.



figuratively)? Change up the standard chronology? Paint history a new color? Tell completely new stories with the same old artifacts? Create an emotional—not just an intellectual—experience? And if these steps seem daunting, there are even smaller ones: put an artist and a writer on your board of directors. Redo one exhibit case. Tell an intern to think big. Put up a bulletin board and ask visitors for their ideas.

It would be nice to live in a world where preserving our collections for future generations is reason enough to fund history museums. But the reality of twenty-first-century America is that every cultural institution has to justify its existence, to its funders and to its community. Preserving the stuff just isn't enough of a justification anymore. We need to make history matter through creativity and vision. And maybe if we can finally figure out how to do that well, it will actually make sense to the public why we're saving all this stuff in the first place.

**3. We may not need the ones we've collected.** In 2000, Gretchen Sorin wrote in this journal about her experience guest curating the exhibition *Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and Jewish Americans*. Most of the artifacts used in the exhibition were loaned from private collections because they were hard to find in the collections of museums. She wrote, “The contents of most history museum storage rooms do not reflect the full record of the nation’s past. History museums need to go further to identify artifacts related to groups whose history is not part of the written record.”<sup>7</sup>

Ten years later, our field has not made much progress in addressing the problem Sorin described, even though diversity in the United States has continued to increase. By the 2040s America will be a “majority minority” country, and the Center for the Future of Museums has predicted that this demographic trend is likely to have a profound impact on museum visitation. Non-Hispanic whites who have traditionally constituted the core museum-going audience will become a smaller and smaller percentage of the population, and museums run the risk of becoming less and less relevant to American society as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

**M**ost of America’s history museums are still struggling to adapt nineteenth-century collections to a twenty-first-century world. We have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to Chippendale chairs and embroidery samplers, but embarrassingly few mezuzahs or intact pieces of colonoware. Sometimes this challenge can be addressed by thinking creatively to change the context for particular artifacts—a nineteenth-century silver service can illuminate the life of the maid who had to keep it polished—but too often we simply don't have the objects to tell the stories we need to tell. Our collections aren't diverse enough to help us connect with the broad audience we want to, indeed we must, attract to the museum. And it's not just an issue of racial or ethnic diversity, or even class and gender. Do we have objects to document the shoe shiners, plumbers, and hair stylists, or just the firefighters? (If you wanted to develop an exhibition on the history of mental illness in your town, for example, would you have the artifacts you need to do it justice?)

Kentucky Historical Society



As museums continue to be under increasing pressure to do more with less, how many spinning wheels, and in what condition, do individual institutions need?

There are some real challenges that have tied our hands in building diverse collections. For historical organizations—particularly the smaller ones—acquiring a broad, systematic, and representative collection at this late stage in the game, let alone storing and preserving one, is an incredibly expensive proposition. It also requires a thoughtful plan and a lot of community organizing. Many institutions simply take what falls in their laps each year and call it a day. But nonetheless, we need to find a way to untie our hands if we're going to build institutions that truly reflect the communities we serve. I was heartened to learn last year about a collaborative project that involves the Minnesota Historical Society and several institutions abroad, including the city museums in Helsinki and Luxembourg. These museums are documenting poverty in their communities. For these institutions, the poverty project is an investment in ongoing cultural relevance.

If we started over in 2011, building our collections from scratch (practicalities aside), what would they look like? And in the interest of building 2.0 museums, should we let the public in on that conversation? What do our visitors (and maybe more importantly, the millions of Americans who don't visit museums) wish they were seeing on our walls and in our exhibit cases that they're not?

**4. We don't all need the same ones.** Back in the old days, each museum collection was an island. We didn't know what our sister museums had, and we collected accordingly, as if our museum was the only institution preserving anything. But our landscape is changing. Online collections databases are finally allowing us to see what everyone else owns, and we're finding out that we weren't the only ones acquiring all these years. It is now possible to envision the day when you'd be able to type something like “spinning wheel” into an online search engine and pull up most of the pieces that are out there in public collections. Meanwhile, museums are under increasing pressure to do more with less. So how many spinning wheels, in what condition, do we need to



The Museum of London's *Streetmuseum* program brings geotagged historical street views to a mobile device.

expend resources preserving? Does every institution need two or three, or could we share?

I understand it will be hard to share our most rare and precious stuff—the spinning wheel George Washington slept next to, or the invention that put a town on the map. That's fine, the top tier artifacts we can treat as we always have. But what about the middle tier, the examples that represent what life was like in the past but aren't associated with famous people or events, the stuff that comes out of storage rarely if at all? It's impractical for museums to coordinate and pool objects on a national or even statewide level, but could it at least be done on a regional level? Is it time to devote more energy to the concept of regional storage centers? If we combined our resources in this way, could we work together to build more representative collections (see number three above), upon which we all could draw? And would knowing what other museums own help each of us focus our own collections, so we can devote precious resources to the objects no one else has?

#### 5. We need to restore the links between objects and places.

So much of history is place-based. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the process of collecting and preserving history meant rounding up artifacts from miles around and consolidating them in museum buildings, under one roof. In many cases this process severed the relationship between the object and the place where it was created or had meaning. But in the twenty-first century, geo-tagging and other digital tools allow us to restore these links.

Over the past five years, projects that map historical content have become more and more prevalent on museum websites—the Peabody Essex Museum's Samuel McIntire project and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's PhilaPlace are two examples. But more recently, mobile devices have progressed to the point where members of the public can experience geo-tagged historical content while walking around, out in the real world. This year, for example, the Museum of London launched a mobile application, *Streetmuseum*, based on geo-tagged historical street views from their collection. *Streetmuseum* allows you to walk around London with your mobile device, pulling up images from another era to compare then with now.

Meanwhile, websites like HistoryPin, SepiaTown, and

WhatWasThere are creating global Google maps of historic photographs that can be viewed alongside their contemporary counterparts using Google Street View. Anyone, anywhere in the world—including museums—can upload images to these sites for free. WhatWasThere has an iPhone app, and it's likely just a matter of time before the others create versions for mobile phones. So imagine if all of our collection databases included a field for GPS coordinates, and we either made our own mobile apps or uploaded photos of our artifacts into sites like WhatWasThere. Then members of our communities could understand where these objects came from, and perhaps better visualize the layers of history under their feet.

But of course reestablishing the links between objects and places begs the question, why stop there? Can we use technology to restore the links between objects and people (post collection items by associated names on genealogical websites or track object owners and makers through multiple museum collections)? Can we restore the links between objects and time periods (use digital tools to look at all objects from a given era at once, regardless of which institution owns them)? The Information Revolution allows us to establish meaning and context for our collections on a completely new level.

6. We need a different model for access. In the span of a century we have gone from cabinets of curiosity, to period rooms, to carefully curated thematic exhibitions, to open storage, to digital surrogates. Are we meeting the access needs of our visitors any better today than we did in 1911? In some ways we are but in many ways we are not. Members of the public have more tools for understanding the objects in museum collections, but more objects are held behind glass, velvet ropes, or closed doors.

Meanwhile, demand for interactivity has risen exponentially. Trend-watching by the Center for the Future of Museums points to the generational divide between those of us who grew up in an analog world and those who were born into new technologies and social media (digital immigrants and digital natives respectively). As younger generations become a larger and larger percentage of our audience, history museums face an increased expectation that visitors will be able to interact with objects in a variety of ways—tagging, voting, commenting, and even user curation. Not only have we been slow to adapt to these new demands for participatory learning, we still haven't worked out what to do with the demand for good old-fashioned touching.<sup>9</sup>

Sandra Dudley from the Museum Studies Program at the University of Leicester recently edited an interesting volume of essays titled *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. In the introduction to this volume Dudley calls for an object-centered approach to museums, where sensory engagement with artifacts is just as important as the information (historical, cultural) they provide. She also points out the limitations of a plexiglass-and-velvet-ropes approach that favors the visual over other senses: "Museums' privileging of the visual does not allow the viewer to replicate their real-life, synchronous, and direct use of several senses in engagements with the physical world of which they are a part." I recently visited the Elsewhere Collaborative in Greensboro, North Carolina. Elsewhere calls itself a



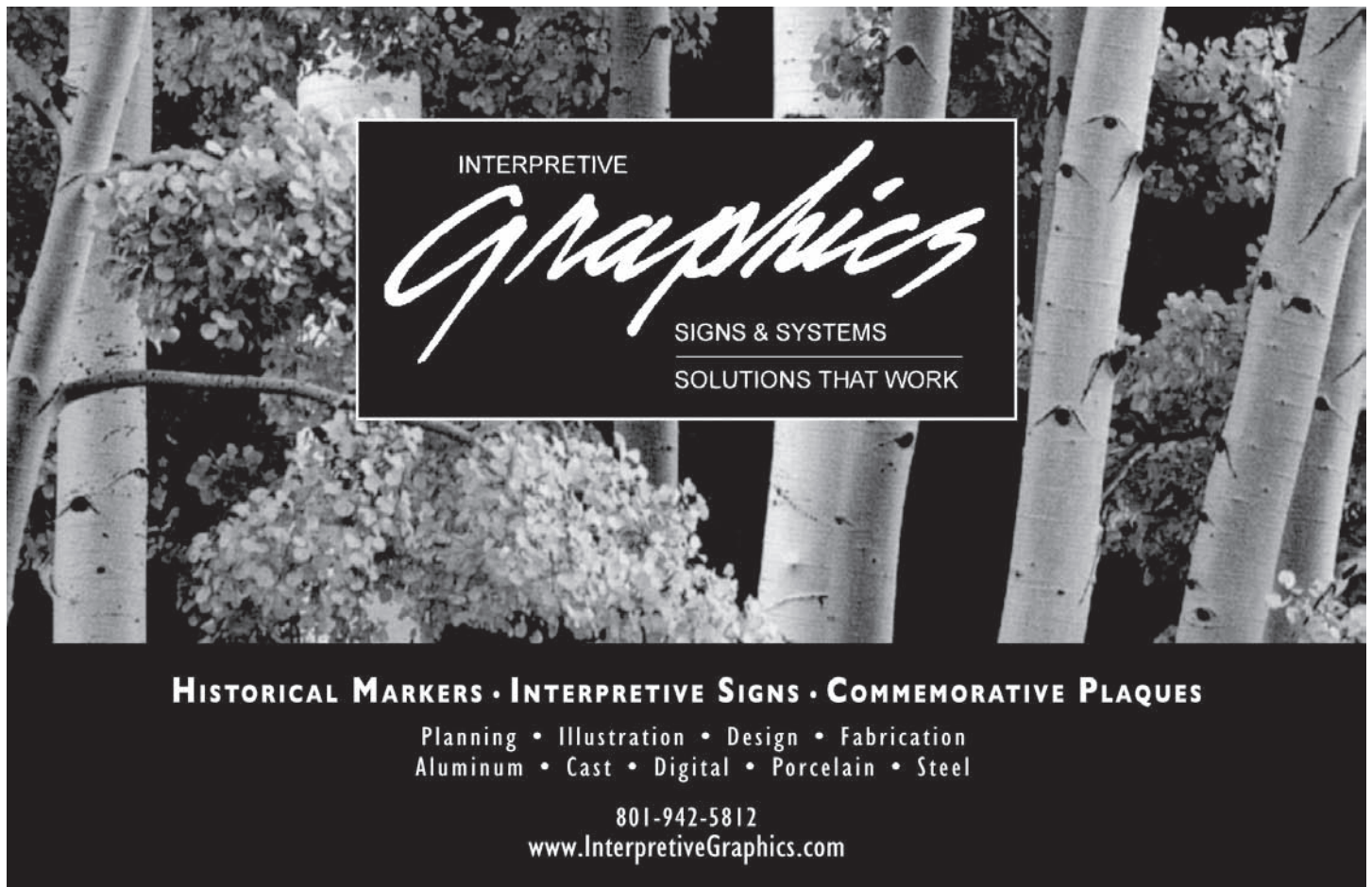
museum, although many of us would not consider it one because there you can touch any and all of the objects, and even move them around to make your own arrangements, as long as nothing leaves the building. Risk to objects aside, it was a powerful experience, not just for me but also for the other members of my multi-age visitor group. Meanwhile, across the field many of us have been intently following the debate arising out of Jim Vaughan's widely circulated *Museum* article, "Rethinking the Rembrandt Rule," in which he calls for, among other things, "a middle category of 'limited use'" that would allow more objects in historic house museum collections to be handled by the public<sup>10</sup>

Dudley, Vaughan, and the Elsewhere Collaborative have me questioning whether our preservation/access pendulum may have swung just a tad too far to the "P" side. Can we make some room for the kind of access that only comes from smelling, hearing, and feeling? Like so many of you, I was taught the golden rules of collections care, among them Barbara Appelbaum's "We owe it to their makers and users to keep these things looking as close as possible to their original as-used condition, and physically intact." But if a frugal approach to visitor access prevents the public from passionately appreciating the value of our collective material heritage, do the golden rules matter? Is there a third way that provides the unmediated, participatory experiences people crave and also an acceptable level of risk to long-term collections health? We need to keep discussing and experimenting until we find it.<sup>11</sup>

**7. Do history museums still need curators?** Recent developments may have led you to believe that it's actually the curators we need to worry about, not the objects. New technology is allowing the general public to behave more and more like curators themselves. There were the crowd-sourced exhibitions *MN150* at the Minnesota Historical Society and *Click!* at the Brooklyn Museum, of course, and several science museums are now experimenting with opening their entire exhibition development processes to public participation. Still other museums are providing open access to their collections database programming interfaces so independent programmers can use them to integrate collections data into digital applications.

Even outside the museum, members of the public are taking advantage of new tools to curate their own objects. An online project developed in the United Kingdom, *TalesOfThings*, allows users to upload information about their personal possessions—cataloging of sorts—and not only share this information with other users but also print out QR codes (object tags) so that the information stays with the object over the course of its lifetime. The team behind *TalesOfThings* even launched a pilot project where QR codes were affixed to the price tags of items for sale in a Manchester thrift shop, so that potential buyers could learn about an object's "provenance" before deciding whether to purchase it.

Not only do members of the public have more options for curating objects, they also have more options for curating



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everything else. If you spend any time in the blogosphere you've no doubt noticed the ongoing debate over the term curation. As Americans look for ways to sift through the enormous amounts of information flooding our lives, suddenly everyone thinks they are a curator, which has ruffled the feathers of some

[real] curators. (For a summary of this debate, see Elizabeth Schlatter's 2010 article in *Museum* titled "A New Spin: Are DJs, Rappers, and Bloggers 'Curators?'"<sup>12</sup>)

What's the end result of this trend? If everyone can curate, does the traditional curatorial role of museums become pointless? I believe that just as Americans yearn for authenticity in a digital world, they also still want quality information from sources they can trust, and they trust us. But we're going to have to let people in and cede some of our control—not all of it, but some. The process of creating Wikipedia was messy, but I think most of us would now agree that it's a net gain, despite its imperfections. Public curation has the potential to have the same result: we could harness a lot of enthusiasm and expertise to learn more about our collections, if we're willing to share them. Dan Spock (and others) have suggested that museums are shifting from a position of authority to one of mediation, that our new model "is more conversational, more a set of negotiations and interactions, than a set of mutually exclusive ideologies." In other words, today's curator is a subject expert who facilitates the process of creating a collective history by convening the conversation, asking interesting questions, suggesting trusted sources and methods for exploration, gently guiding the discussion, and checking for factual errors. But curators no longer provide the actual answers. Are you comfortable with this new role, and what kind of retraining do you need to take it on?<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

I'll end with some words from one last heavy hitter in our field, Robert Archibald: "Collections are still the bedrock of our work, but now we look to them as centerpieces for

dialogue about what we have done well and what we have done poorly, and, implicitly, how we might do better. Our collections are evidence of burdens and legacies as well as ambiguity. In them, the choices made by those who shaped our present are revealed, and we are reminded that failure is shaped by what we do—or don't do—here and now."<sup>14</sup>

You may be looking up, here at the end of this article, hopeful and excited about the possibilities for objects as we continue to make our way forward into the twenty-first century; or perhaps instead a wave of anxiety is mounting in the pit of your stomach at the thought of yet more items for your to-do list—regional collections centers, mobile apps, increased access. The world is rapidly changing, and so is museums' role in it—that's a blessing and a curse. But objects are worth the extra effort, as centerpieces for dialogue and as loci of meaning; as delights and surprises, as enigmas, as touchstones, as treasures. Yes, history museums need them. We also need passionate and imaginative professionals who will make tough but inspired choices about the collections in their care. Are you up to the challenge? America is counting on you, and so am I. ●

*In the coming weeks, AASLH hopes to engage members in dialogue around the issues raised above through Your Turn, the History News online discussion community. Add your two cents at <http://aaslbcommunity.org/historynews>.*

**Rainey Tisdale ([raineytisdale@gmail.com](mailto:raineytisdale@gmail.com)) is an independent curator who has worked in history museums since the late 1990s, most recently for the Bostonian Society. She teaches material culture in the Tufts University Museum Studies graduate program.**

<sup>1</sup> Susie Wilkening and Erica Donniss, "Authenticity? It Means Everything," *History News* (63:4): 18.

<sup>2</sup> Susie Wilkening, "Community Engagement and Objects—Mutually Exclusive?," *Museum Audience Insight*, 27 July 2009. [http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum\\_audience\\_insight/2009/07/community-engagement-and-objects-mutually-exclusive.html](http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2009/07/community-engagement-and-objects-mutually-exclusive.html).

<sup>3</sup> Jose-Marie Griffiths, *Conclusions Summary, InterConnections: The IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet* (Institute of Museum and Library Services: February 2008), <http://interconnectionsreport.org>; Curt Miner email to author 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Weil, "Creampuffs and Hardball: Are You Really Worth What You Cost or Just Merely Worthwhile?," in *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries into Museums and Their Prospects* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1995), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Yellis, "Cueing the Visitor: The Museum Theater and the Visitor Performance," *Curator: The Museum Journal* (53:1): 96.

<sup>7</sup> Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, "Why Museums Need to Continue the Discussion about Race in America," *History News* (55:4): 11.

<sup>8</sup> Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums* (Washington, DC: Center for the Future of Museums/American Association of Museums Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Dudley, "Museum Materialities: Objects, Sense and Feeling," in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, ed. Sandra Dudley (London: Routledge, 2009), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Appelbaum, *Guide to Environmental Protection of Collections* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>12</sup> N. Elizabeth Schlatter, "A New Spin: Are DJs, Rappers and Bloggers 'Curators?'," *Museum* (February 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Spock, "Museum Authority up for Grabs: The Latest Thing, or Following a Long Trend Line?," *Exhibitionist* (Fall 2009): 10.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Archibald, "Reaching In: The Community and the Museum," *History News* (56:3): 9.