

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Gender And Generative Argument: Locating The National Women's History Museum In The Landscape Of Public Memory

Abstract: Historical memory is mediated through public argument that determines which histories are celebrated or silenced. This essay examines the effort of the National Women's History Museum [NWHM] to establish a significant physical site in Washington, D.C. by exploring in close detail how the case for women's history that NWHM addressed to the U.S. public developed by focusing in particular on the initial arguments that circulated when the Museum was founded in 1996.

Keywords: commemoration, generative argument, National Women's History Museum, public memory, women, women's history

1. Introduction

Among the questions relevant to how historical memory is mediated through public argument, examining whose story is articulated as important, what aspects of history are deemed to deserve a monument or museum at a given time, and why certain aspects of a cultural history are commemorated are significant points of inquiry. In essence, public argumentatively negotiates what constitutes our "public memory," designating people, events, and actions that are deemed worthy of remembrance. In particular, the intersection of gender ideologies with the processes of commemoration is a primary locus of rhetorical controversy.

In 1996, Karen Staser envisioned that a museum devoted to women's history could be built on the National Mall in Washington, D. C. With a small group of volunteers, she founded an organization called "The National Museum of Women's History," dedicated to making her vision a reality. In 1997 they accomplished a lasting achievement by leading the effort to raise the "Portrait Monument" to the Capitol Rotunda from the basement, where the massive marble

tribute to women's suffrage had been consigned since it was given to the U.S. Government by in 1920. In subsequent years, the Museum mounted several small exhibitions and launched its "cyber museum" that features several curated exhibits about various topics such as women in espionage, woman suffrage, women in sport. What this young non-profit organization, now renamed as the "National Women's History Museum," did not foresee is that nearly 20 years after it's founding, they still would be seeking the required approval of the U.S Congress to lease, buy, or build a physical site that would house a women's museum on or near the their targeted area of the Mall.

This essay is part of a larger project that analyzes the public argument associated with the prolonged effort of the National Women's History Museum [NWHM] to establish a significant physical site in Washington, D.C. The organization has been successful in raising the necessary private funds to sustain the organization's efforts and in amassing bi-partisan supporters in the U.S. Congress, which ultimately must approve the NWHM's request to locate a building on or near the National Mall, but these overtures repeatedly were blocked by members of the Washington D.C. community or stalled in Congressional committees. My forthcoming larger study explores in close detail how the "case" for women's history that NWHM addressed to the U.S. public developed through several stages of argument and debate, as various sites have been considered, efforts blocked, and multiple legislation initiatives introduced. The portion of the NWHM engagement with public memory addressed in this essay focuses on the initial arguments when the Museum was founded and how it argued its case for the significance of women's history.

2. Public memory and sacred places

Monuments and museums function as material evidence of the public debates to designate people, places, and events as important. The absence of certain individuals and their experience in such spaces indicates by implication the relative lack of significance placed upon them by those who have the power and means to control commemorative processes. As John Bodnar (1992) explains, public memory must be understood as an ideological system, "a cognitive device to mediate competing interpretations and privilege some explanations over others" (p.14). As a process that inescapably denotes the dominant values and perspective, critics who analyze these argument processes must "ponder the tensions between past and present - or more accurately, the tensions between

historical fidelity to the past and contemporary political motives in the present” (Reyes, 2011, p. 597). Public memory studies focus attention on the remembering and forgetting that swirls around public museums and memorials, an analytical process involving evocation of recursive and reflective processes. The contemporary studies of space and place invite contemplation of “preferred readings, undesignated space, and the ideological nature of the signifiers that become objects of desire, identification, movement, and authenticity” (Dickenson, Blair, and Ott, 2010, p. 33).

Consequently, public memory is a rhetorical process. As arguments circulate in the public realm, disputes arise especially over what should be commemorated, and where. Specific locations designate for public audiences particular notions about what is most worthy of memory, and these geographies are marked with conflicts. In particular, spaces deemed especially “sacred” become sites for public memory negotiations. These debates within publics can be identified by how their shared interpretations are represented in their discourses about a disputed site and by how those share interpretations evince traces of other discourses that they have pulled into their encounter with the these spaces. This is what Robert Aden (2012) refers to as “centripidal and centrifugal force” in the negotiation of memory. NWHM’s campaigns to shape public memory, engage battles on two such sacred grounds in Washington, D.C.: the Capitol Rotunda, specifically, the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Gender and race also are particular arenas of contention regarding who will be remembered and in what ways. Relevant to this study, entry into public memory has been particularly difficult for women on the National terrain of U.S. history and memory. For example, no comprehensive museum devoted to women’s history exists in the U.S. In Washington D.C., the Smithsonian Institution includes specific museums regarding American Indian history, African American and Asian Art, and a future museum devoted to African American history, but the only permanent exhibits in the Smithsonian that relate women’s history are devoted to the First Ladies’ gowns. Additionally, no statue of woman was installed in U.S. Capitol Rotunda until 1997. Consequently, the arguments undertaken by NWHM to claim a space for women’s history in the National Mall challenge ideological assumptions related both to sacred political space as well as the legitimacy of women to enter into these realms.

3. Generative argument

The theoretical frame defining “generative argument” that is employed in this analysis of the Museum’s early arguments is derived from several linguistic and rhetorical theories. The “generative” most commonly is defined as capable of production/reproduction, from the Latin *generare*, to beget. A specific usage of the “generative” concept comes from generative linguistics that is related to the application of finite rules to produce all items generated from a specific starting point, formulated by Noam Chomsky (1965) to emphasize the association between deep structures and surface structures. This idea of generative as related to structures that are produced from root concepts provides a useful frame for thinking about the function of generative arguments.

A second useful conceptualization comes from Kenneth Burke from his book *Counter-Statement* where he discusses the function of the symbol as a generating principle. Burke states:

As the symbol is ramified, Symbols within Symbols will arise, many of these secondary Symbols with no direct bearing upon the pattern of experience behind the key Symbol. These secondary or ramifying Symbols can be said to bear upon the underlying pattern of experience only in so far as they contribute to the workings of the key Symbol. In essence, the foundational symbol generates others, but always within a range that is limited by the meanings in this root symbol. (1968, p. 157)

Considering how, in particular, generative argument functions in relation to questions of gender and identity politics, the key symbol or principle can be powerful if grounded in gender experience, but also limited by the cultural definitions associated with it. This makes appeals to gender as a root inherently evocative but also constrained. Gender, therefore can be a paradoxical root symbol, as generative symbolic action provides a means to identification and difference; its invocation as symbolic root also limits and defines rhetorical action. As Burke notes,

Symbols will be subtilized in ways not contributory to the pattern. The weak King cannot be too weak, the manly Peasant cannot be too manly—thus we find the Poet “defending” to an extent the very character whom he would denigrate, and detracting from the character who is to triumph. Such considerations arise with the adoption of the Symbol, which is the conversion of an experiential pattern into a formula for affecting an audience. (1968, p. 157)

For the generative arguments grounded in gender identities and experiences, this means that the discursive case generated from the root cannot stray too far from cultural roles and categories that are familiar to audiences; following Burke, the case for women's history cannot be too radical and cannot deviate too far from the cultural meanings embedded in the symbol itself. Hence, the NWHM finds itself bound by the very symbols that they must employ to argue the case for the importance of women's history and the need for such a commemoration in the National sacred spaces of Washington, D.C.

4. NWHM'S generative symbols

The NWHM encountered multiple debates over sacred terrain that emerged just after its founding. First, the Museum continues to meet with opposition from the U.S. Congress over its desire to locate its permanent building in the National Mall area. Second, the first campaign undertaken by NWHM regarded the relocation of a statue commemorating three women suffrage advocates from a basement room to the precious civic real estate of the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. NWHM hoped to use the relocation of the statue, known as the "Portrait Monument," as a way to establish legitimacy within political and philanthropic realms. Significant symbolic choices made by NWHM in relation to both public campaigns are found in the organization's early documents that make the case for women's history, where the root principles of the arguments emerge. The key generative root symbols are the definition of "woman" and "women's history."

Quite significantly, the Museum chose for its initial logo a visual representation of a sculpture of a woman. The figure is labelled on its base as being from 2500-4500 B.C., and is a very abstract representation, conveying a universal and ancient grounding for women's history. The image often formed the left border on the letterhead initially used by the NWHM and also was reproduced in other publications as a small logo next to the Museum's name. The Museum's early brochures also evoke symbols and descriptions that use an inclusive and universalizing narrative to define the key ideas of "woman" and "women's history"

First, the definition of woman reflects traditional cultural dictates. For example, an early brochure from 1996 states that: "The Museum's exhibits will showcase the specific achievements women have made in every area of human endeavour and celebrate their contributions as wife, mother, sister, daughter, healer, teacher, scientist, artist, entrepreneur, and leader" (NWHM, 1996a). Notably

absent from this list is any specific reference to political activity. Moreover, the term “contributions” functions to foreground women as always defined in relation to what they do for others.

The case that the Museum makes for what constitutes women’s history and the practice of commemoration also is broadly defined, apolitical, and celebratory. An early brochure states: “The Museum enjoys strong, nonpartisan support from congressional officials, women’s groups, political and business clubs, corporations, and individuals who share the vision for an institution that showcases women’s achievements” (NWHM, 1996b). Here, the word “showcases” indicates that women’s history is to be celebrated and seen, but not that it is an active dynamic force of change.

The Museum likewise depicted its supporters and its mission in similarly broad, yet circumscribed ways. One of its brochures claims that women’s groups “of all racial, ethnic, and political backgrounds support a museum that values women’s contributions in the home, work place, classroom, laboratory, and hospital – indeed, all places where women serve the nation on the earth, under, the sea, and in outer space.” (NWHM, 1996b). Certainly, the NWHM cast its definition of ‘women’ and ‘women’s history’ quite wide, but notably absent from these early statements is any direct mention of arenas related to political change, social protest, social justice, and cultural transformation.

Rather, the Museum’s traditional sense that women are mothers, wives, sisters, and healers, but not politicians, agitators, or legislators, reveals the way that the subsequent symbols generated from the initial symbolic invocation of “woman” in a universal sense served to limit the Museum’s articulation of scope and purpose. Hence, early brochures promote the Museum with the slogan, “Sharing Women’s Rich Cultural Heritage with Current and Future Generations” as opposed to “confronting, correcting, or repudiating.” An early fundraising letter also articulates what the Museum will do to address the need to recognize women’s history. In this set of statements, the generalized, yet also limiting, definition of “woman” and “women’s history” is implied in the actions that it will undertake: “exploring and celebrating the *contributions* women have made to community and civilization in their many roles such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, healer, teacher, and leader” (NWHM, 1996c).

In all, the Museum’s early promotional statements reflect a positive and

nonpartisan rhetoric of “celebration” and “valuing” rather than correction or accusation. Both the promise and the pitfalls of the symbols generated from the root definition of woman can be seen in the debate over the suffrage monument. In becoming involved in the campaign to raise the suffrage statue and install it in the “sacred” spaces of the Capitol rotunda, NWHM found itself engaged in two different disputes over the question of who belonged in those hallowed halls.

5. *Women enter the rotunda*

The 1920 Portrait Monument sculpture was commissioned by the National Women’s Party to commemorate the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gave women the right to vote. The 13-ton sculpture, which bears the likenesses of suffrage advocates Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott, was completed by Adelaide Johnson and given to Congress in 1921, which first refused it, then yielded to pressure from women’s groups and brought it into the Rotunda, held a gala for 5000 people, then banished it to a basement closet. Later it was installed in the Capitol Crypt, a passageway in the basement, and finally available to public view in in 1963. Four previous attempts to move the statue to the rotunda had failed (“Adelaide Johnson,” 2014; “Portrait Monument,” 2014).

After the NWHM initiated its campaign to move the statue, debate ensued over whether it “deserved” a place among the other all male statues in the sacred space of the Capitol rotunda. *Washington Post* columnist George Will, for example, stated: “Unfortunately the supply of greatness is, it seems, infinite, and the supply of choice Washington spots for homage to greatness is not. The supply of greatness long ago exceeded the supply of space for statues in the rotunda” (Will, 1997, p. C7). As Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci (1991) in their study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial noted, such places are not closed texts: “these structures are not only symbolic of the conflict over appropriate commemoration; they constitute the actual historic residue of that conflict” (p. 277). In NWHM’s drive to move the Portrait Monument, deep cultural rifts regarding gender and race became visible.

The first dispute regarded making the claim for women’s place in the Capitol Rotunda. As anticipated, there was significant opposition to the legislative efforts to relocate the statue both within the Congress and in the press. As a marker of things to come in the persistent resistance it would encounter in its legislative campaigns to garner the necessary approval to locate the Museum on the

National Mall, both houses of the U.S. Congress had to approve a bill that allowed for the suffrage statue to be moved to the Rotunda of the Capitol. An additional barrier the statue advocates encountered was the increased costs for the actual raising resulting from a delay in this Congressional approval process. Still, by September 1996, the U.S. Congress had approved moving the statue, as long as the coalition of women's groups paid for the costs of the move.

This fundraising effort is where the National Museum of Women's History played a central role. By becoming involved in the campaign to raise the suffrage statue, the Museum hoped that it would generate interest and establish a base of support for its efforts, as later explained in a letter to members: "We chose the project to see if we could assemble a group of individuals who could not only move the statue and correct that piece of history, but also bring together people who would make possible a national Museum celebrating all of women's history, both nationally and internationally, from the dawn of time" (Staser, 1997). The universalizing language here indicates an optimistic, sweeping vision for the Museum's scope and definition of "women's history". Such broad strokes created a generative paradox for the Museum when a second, more focused controversy emerged during their drive to raise the suffrage statue. The mission statements and early case made for the museum is not overtly political, nor does it feature race, class or other distinctions. Hence, when a dispute emerged that brought the issue of race into sharp relief, it exposed the inherent problems in the rhetoric that the Museum had adopted.

When the Museum first entered into collaboration with other historical and Women's organizations to raise the statue, the effort encountered little opposition from these constituencies; in fact, universalized language of "woman" served to bind these groups in their efforts to allow the suffrage statue serve as the symbol for women in the prime political territory of the Capitol Rotunda. Much to the surprise of the Museum's board members, however, the most significant and sustained challenge to their Raise the Statue campaign came from another women's group, the National Political Congress of Black Women [NPCBW]. The group's president, C. DeLores Tucker, began circulating letters in October, 1996 that opposed moving the statue, arguing that any monument in the Capitol that commemorates women's suffrage must include a likeness of Sojourner Truth. Tucker's group proposed that the unfinished portion of the suffrage monument should be carved with Truth's likeness.

Tucker's insistence on Truth as the symbolic carrier of black women's history, requires a brief background. Truth, named Isabella, was born a slave in upstate New York, 1797; after she was freed, she lectured in east and Midwest regions, speaking at forums with other abolition and women's rights advocates. Truth frequently is invoked as a symbol for contemporary black feminists to depict their exclusion, especially the angry Sojourner Truth who reportedly interrogated her audience of White women with the question "ain't I a woman?" Although now widely disputed, this characterization comes from Frances Gage's 1863 account of a speech given by Truth in 1851. According to this report, Truth faced a hostile audience of women who did not want her to speak because they feared that the cause of women's rights would be harmed if mixed up with the issue of black rights (Gage, 1867, p. 4). This image of the angry Sojourner is the most widely known, having been anthologized in collections of speeches and frequently referenced by historians. It is the one most likely to be adopted by contemporary rhetors in search of an image of defiance (Mandziuk & Fitch, 2001). Hence, deeply embedded identity politics are at play between white and African American feminists.

The Museum board members who served as spokeswomen for the coalition to raise the statue were caught in the generalities of the universalizing rhetoric they had adopted, and consequently had little specific grounds from which to respond to the challenge from Tucker's group. As Museum Vice President Joan Meacham stated, "it has been very surprising that all of these problems have come up. It's just amazing" (Merida, 1997, p. A1). The Museum worked diligently both publicly and behind the scenes to resolve the conflict, but Tucker remained unmoved from her resolute stand, founded on a rhetoric of difference and defiance, for which the discourse of inclusion had no answer. Tucker's initial letter from October 18, 1996 sharply critiqued the politics of exclusion that marked the history of white and black women. After two pages in which she argues for Truth's historical importance and recounts how African American women were asked to defer their interests and made invisible by white women, she states: "when you raise the Woman Suffrage statue, we want to stand tall and proud with our children so that they will not receive a distorted and divisive image of history. But that will not be if Sojourner Truth is not sculpted into the space that is so rightfully hers" (Tucker, 1996a). Tucker ends the letter with a strong critique of the universalizing rhetoric that the Museum espouses: "There is the adage 'those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it.' Likewise, women who do not know their history

are doomed to repeat it, too” (Tucker, 1996a).

In her letter responding to Tucker’s missive detailing the NPCBW protest, the Museum’s president, Karen Staser, first argued from circumstance: The contracts were signed, the Congress was in recess, and no evidence, as Tucker had claimed, existed that the unfinished portion was intended by the sculptor to be filled in with an African American woman’s likeness. Instead, Staser offers the idea that “a similar campaign to raise public awareness of the injustice suffered by Sojourner Truth should be undertaken” in the next congressional session (Staser, 1996). Second, Staser summoned the universalized sense of women’s history and echoed the positive tone of the early documents when she stated: “The one immutable fact that ties all women together is our history. Regardless of our rich and diverse causes, we all share the common need to bring that history to light” (Staser, 1996).

Despite some behind the scenes meetings with Tucker and the NPCBW, no resolution was reached; in fact, opposition to the raising of the statue accelerated even as the Museum and other advocates made plans for a June 1997 dedication. Tucker addressed a second letter directly to Sen. John Warner, chair of the Senate Rules and Administration Committee, under whose jurisdiction the statue legislation resided, in March 1997, in which she emphatically wrote: “when schoolchildren come to the Capitol Rotunda to see the statue....We do not want them to wonder why SOJOURNER TRUTH was not a part of the statue when she was a *leading* voice of the movement” (Tucker, 1997a). Interestingly, this account of history is itself a reconstruction of Truth’s importance that many historians would dispute, yet constitutes a recasting of the Truth narrative that white women excluded her and were hostile to her. Tucker ends with an emphatic statement: “We fully support the idea of the statue being raised, but only if it includes SOJOURNER TRUTH. OUR FIRM POSITION IS THAT NO STATUE SHOULD BE PLACED IN THE ROTUNDA WITHOUT SOJOURNER TRUTH!!!” (Tucker, 1997a).

As the conflict progressed, *Washington Post* reporter Kevin Merida noted in April 1997 that the dispute “is so vigorous it is beginning to divide women who normally are allies” (1997, p. A1). Merida’s article quotes Staser as stating, “This is a mess.... We are trying to heal our country and bring people together, and I am just heartsick over it.” In the same article, Tucker is quoted as responding to this unification language with an insistence on difference: “We just feel that the

bottom line is that it does not represent the suffragette movement....It's wrong and we are going to do everything we can do to stop it. We have been left out of history too much and we are not going to going to be left out any more" (Merida, 1997, p. A1). By May, the NPCBW was circulating a list of over 100 organizations that endorsed it efforts to block the statue. Even into June, as invitations had been issued and the statue was prepared for its relocation, The NPCBW protest continued; a June 6 memo contains a call for a meeting about the "Sojourner Truth issue" in which Tucker rejects the idea of a separate statue of Truth as akin to a re-enactment of the Plessy v. Ferguson separate but equal doctrine (Tucker, 1997b).

Clearly, the Museum and the NPCBW stances were irreconcilable because they were generated from two different root principles. For the National museum of Women's History, honoring Truth separately or later fit easily within its universalizing definition of "woman." However, because Tucker and the NPCBW started from difference and discrimination as root principles, there was no meeting point that would not leave them feeling demeaned. The opposition to the Museum's efforts exposed the contradictions in the notion of women's history and the difficult politics of race. As Dickinson, Blair, and Ott note, public memory debates are not necessarily comprised of pre-constituted opposing constituencies; rather, "publics emerge in relationship to discourses, events, objects, and practices" (2010, p. 15).

Ultimately the Portrait Monument was dedicated on June 26, 1997, and still resides in The Capitol Rotunda. In 2009, a bust of Sojourner Truth was installed in the Capitol Visitors Center, the culmination of the efforts begun by Tucker. Consequently, Truth does reside in the Capitol, but in arguably a less prominent "neighborhood". Somewhat ironically, the Museum obtained a bust of Truth in 1998 that it had planned to travel to different states as part of their commemorative efforts; the husband of one of its board members was the sculptor. Clearly this effort to showcase Truth was a response to the Tucker conflict, but the plan ultimately gained little traction, perhaps because the Museum's ownership of the bust was not quite absolute. After the bust travelled to the state Capitol in Georgia, and resided briefly in a few Congresswomen's offices, it was revoked by the artist and resides in his home.

6. *Conclusion*

Overarching this dispute over the Portrait Monument and the role of the NWHM

loomed the larger issue of commemoration in the sacred space, and questions about who deserved to be granted entry into that realm. Clearly, when the NWHM encountered a challenge to its universalizing definition of women and its inclusive view of history, it had difficulty responding to a specific challenge based in race and difference. Currently, the Museum, now known as the National Women's History Museum, continues its efforts on the second battle to bring women into the sacred space of the National Mall by building a permanent museum. Their legislation has been introduced during every session since 1996, but has yet to be passed by both legislative branches. As of September 2014 the NWHM legislation was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives, with the remainder of the year to mount a successful vote in the U.S. Senate. If approved, this legislation would establish a commission to study the need for the museum and an appropriate site.

The history of women may yet come to Washington, D.C., but the symbolic outlines of that history remain to be determined. The early arguments set out by the NWHM indicate how powerfully constraining the initial root concepts chosen can be for later rhetorical appeals. Given the generative constraints set out by its initial definitions and symbols, and their problematic generality, it is evident that the NWHM's rhetorical challenges will continue.

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