

Crying at the Museum

A Call for Responsible Emotional Design

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Living in a society accustomed to emotional manipulation—by social media, nonstop news feeds, and the barrage of pings, beeps, and swooshes that keep us tied to our devices¹—how can we be sure that we are not manipulating our museum visitors' emotions, especially when content addresses human violence and suffering? How do we navigate complex emotional landscapes to create compelling and pedagogically sound experiences? Harnessing emotion for learning in exhibitions can, after all, be a double-edged sword. Cut one way and we can inspire meaningful engagement, deep investment in subject matter, and long-lasting impressions. Cut the other way and we risk manipulation, stunted learning, cynicism, and especially in cases of content about violence, vicarious or direct trauma. Even how museum designers and educators define emotion has implications for the types of experiences we create for visitors. It's not enough to focus only on surface emotions;

¹ Bill Davidow, "Exploiting the Neuroscience of Internet Addiction," *The Atlantic* (July 18, 2012), <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/07/exploiting-the-neuroscience-of-internet-addiction/259820/>.

we must also consider more complex emotions, as well as the perceived absence of emotions—such as feelings of numbness.

The choice to explicitly design *for* emotion is not one to be taken lightly. We must create spaces that allow visitors to respond naturally, resist the urge to push visitors toward predetermined emotional responses, and support visitors as they process the intellectual content of an exhibit as well as the emotional effect it may have. As learning scientists, human rights educators, and experience designers, Stacey and Danny have been exploring the impact of emotion on learning—with a focus on human rights education design—since 2008. Although we value the potential emotion has to enhance learning, this article reflects our concerns for protecting audiences, especially young learners, from overt manipulation or vicarious trauma through the presentation of materials designed—often unintentionally—to elicit emotional responses. Based on our research into emotion, pedagogy, and design, we advocate several distinct methodologies that exhibition developers and designers can



"Crying Giant," created by artist Tom Otterness in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, sits in the Copeland sculpture garden at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington, Delaware.

use to allow visitors to manage their own emotional states and respond on their own terms.

The Virtue of “Natural” Emotional Responses

Content is not intrinsically emotional. It is our response to it that dictates its *emotional resonance*—its ability to elicit deeper engagement with, or interest in, a given story, object, or point of view. For example, images of refugees in a photography exhibition can evoke sadness and anger, but also hope and relief, or numbness and shock. Or, they can prompt any combination of emotional responses, depending on each visitor’s unique lens, which is forged by their own lived experiences.

Visitor response to those same photographs can be influenced by curation (which images do we display?), interpretation (what story and context are we providing?), and environment (how is the material presented?). To create spaces for visitors to respond naturally, we must push against enduring cultures of misrepresentation. These include, for example:

- sentimentalization—overemphasizing content or underplaying complexities with an aim to pull at heartstrings and elicit tears, especially when we talk about human rights and social justice;
- sensationalism—magnifying content to provoke shock, especially when we talk about war and atrocity; and
- romanticism—our tendency to seek out hopeful yet misleading (or even false) Hollywood-like endings.²

2 Cynthia Ozick, “Who Owns Anne Frank?” in *Quarrel and Quandary: Essays by Cynthia Ozick* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 74–102.

We must avoid the urge to manipulate our visitors to feel specific emotions. This can prohibit learners from experiencing a holistic response to content, and may stand in the way of critical thinking about the artifacts and ideas on display.³ Responsible exhibition design gives learners the opportunity to respond to content in natural, authentic, and complex ways and, in turn, supports visitors in their idiosyncratic responses. When developing an exhibition, as with any form of storytelling, we are building emotional and intellectual trust with visitors. If that trust is broken, it remains difficult to win back.

Leveraging Emotion in Exhibition Design

The upside of leveraging emotion is that we can establish strong personal connections with our visitors, connections that can foster deep and meaningful engagement. An estimated 98% of our reasoning is reflexive and unconscious as we make sense of the direct and indirect information around us.⁴ Immersive or sensory experiences within exhibitions can leverage this *cognitive unconscious* to offload—through color, texture, sound, scenery, or visual mediasome of the storytelling work so critical to exhibitions. Moreover, emotional resonance affects how memories are formed and stored.⁵ Using emotional hooks within a narrative can help visitors build empathy, or forge personal pathways to their working memories. Our emotions, combined with our bodies’

3 Phyllis Lassner and Danny M. Cohen, “Magical Transports and Transformations: The Lessons of Children’s Holocaust Fiction,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, vol. 33,2 (2014): 167–185.

4 George Lakoff, *The Political Mind* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 9.

5 Isaac Getz and Todd I. Lubert, “The Emotional Resonance Model of Creativity: Theoretical and Practical Extensions” in Sandra W. Russ, ed., *Affect, Creative Experiences, and Psychological Adjustment* (Ann Arbor, MI: Braun-Brumfield, 1998); James R. Averill, “Emotions as Mediators and as Products of Creative Activity,” in *Creativity Across Domains: Faces of the muse*, eds. J. Kaufman and J. Baer (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005), 225–243.

physiological responses (hormones, adrenaline, dopamine, etc.), imprint memories and later recall them via cognitive or sensory triggers.⁶ Sounds, smells, sights, and tactile experiences can help us tap into our memories in very real and personal ways.

Yet, the same mechanisms that allow us to forge personal connections and recall memories of joy and pleasure—and potentially enhance a museum experience—can also anchor memories of sadness, fear, and trauma.⁷ Furthermore, exhibitions that depict emotionally-charged events of human violence and suffering can trigger a series of emotions—anger, relief, frustration, hope, solidarity, cynicism, sympathy, confusion, embarrassment, anxiety, disbelief, cynicism,

traumas or deeply personal connections to the specific content on display. Here is where, as designers, educators, developers, and curators, we need to be cognizant of the choices we make and their potential implications for audiences.⁹

Prepare Visitors Appropriately

By preparing visitors for what they may experience and their potential need to check and regulate their emotions, we can clear a pathway for learning. When people are able to anticipate and identify possible emotional responses, they are better able to manage those responses and reflect on them in a productive way, one that promotes rather than stifles learning.¹⁰ In staffed exhibitions,

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revulsion, shock, numbness, and even apathy—or any combination of these complex emotions, sequentially or at the same time.⁸ We have no way of knowing what kinds of life experiences, hardships, or sensitivities visitors carry with them when they walk through the door. Even with the most carefully conducted evaluation, we cannot presume how visitors—especially young people, who may not be developmentally ready—will engage with content. And, of course, some visitors walk in with existing

for example, we can train guides to help prepare visitors by checking for prior knowledge and managing expectations for what visitors will see or experience. Furthermore, guides can be trained to support visitor experiences by monitoring responses to content throughout the visit and redirecting conversations in response to visitors who appear overwhelmed.

6 Ian Neath, *Human Memory: An Introduction to Research, Data and Theory* (California: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002); Joseph E. LeDoux, “Emotion, memory and the brain,” *Scientific American* 7, no. 1 (1997): 6–75.

7 LeDoux, “Emotion, memory and the brain,” 6–75.

8 The “Commemorative Museum Pedagogy” outlined by Julia Rose in *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) provides a rich overview of psycho-emotional risk and remediation when addressing potentially traumatic events and materials.

9 When discussing audience in our exhibition planning, we often fail to include the museum staff members whose job it is to interpret these events and materials for visitors. When they work with emotionally difficult subject matter on a daily or even intermittent basis, they can suffer vicarious trauma, putting their own mental health at risk. Support for museum staff should be considered as part of the exhibition planning process.

10 Anne Bartsch, Peter Vorderer, Roland Mangold, and Reinhold Viehoff, “Appraisal of Emotions in Media Use: Toward a Process Model of Meta-Emotion and Emotion Regulation,” *Media Psychology* vol. 11, no. 1 (2008).

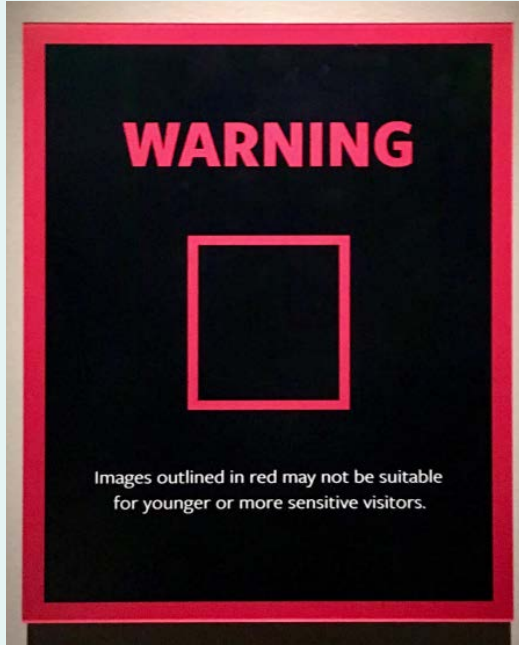


fig. 1. The National Museum of African American History and Culture uses visual signage at the entrance to the *Jim Crow Era* galleries and bright red labeling within the exhibition displays to warn visitors of potentially upsetting content.

In the absence of interpretive staff, advisory signage and exhibition layouts can help visitors self-regulate by giving them opportunities to opt in or out of experiences. At the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City, images of individuals who jumped or fell from the burning towers are displayed in a walled alcove off to the side of the main exhibition. Advisory signage warns visitors about potentially upsetting materials: “ADVISORY: This area of the exhibition includes content that may be particularly disturbing.” In addition, directional signs clearly indicate early exits from the exhibition to help visitors manage their own experiences and know that they can physically disengage from the material if they need to. At the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, a sign (fig. 1) hangs at the entrance to the *Jim Crow Era* galleries to warn visitors about potentially disturbing content: photographs of lynchings. The photographs are integrated into the galleries but outlined by bright

red frames to make them easy to identify. Again, this approach provides visitors with a mechanism for managing their expectations and engagement with content that they may perceive as emotionally charged.

Allow Room to React and Reflect

While we don’t want to shield visitors from critical content and conversations, we do want to provide them with spaces to process new information and complex feelings as they try to make sense of a given event or experience. At the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, as visitors move into the main museum, they pass through a dimly lit passage where multimedia displays project images and feature written and audio testimonials from the day of the attacks. The installation grounds the experience in personal memories—individual and collective—a technique that can help build an empathetic connection with the material. At the end of the hallway, a warm glow draws visitors towards Foundation Hall, a cathedral-like architectural space punctuated with artifacts that are presented like pieces of art (fig. 2).¹¹ Here, lighting, expansive architecture, and a slow descent via ramps and stairways to the exhibition floor below provide an opportunity for visitors to take in the magnitude of the event, process complex emotional responses, and make decisions about how prepared they are to engage further with the material. This approach provides room for conscience reflection, an important mechanism in cognitive processing.¹² It not only helps

11 Explore the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in more detail via their website (<https://www.911memorial.org/museum-space>) or via Google Street View of the museum (<https://goo.gl/maps/WGwFrwBpHEz>).

12 Ann L. Brown and Joseph C. Campione, *Psychological theory and the design of innovative learning environments: On procedures, principles, and systems* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1996); Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*, 87–90.



fig. 2. At the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, large, open, architectural spaces like Foundation Hall (approximately 15,000 square feet with 40- to 60-foot ceilings) provide visitors room to reflect without ever entering the more traditional *Memorial Exhibition* and *Historical Exhibition*.

visitors make sense of new information, but also gives them time to recognize and manage emotional responses.¹³

Use Art and Objects as Mediators

Art installations afford learners the opportunity to wrestle with critical questions through the lens of an artist's interpretation, which, by reframing confrontations with realities of violence, can minimize extreme emotional responses, such as sheer shock. In *The Last Supper*, a traveling art exhibition, artist Julie Green paints the final meal requests of U.S. death row inmates onto white plates (the prisoners' names and identifying details of their cases have been omitted).¹⁴ Introductory signage orients visitors to the carefully curated sea of painted plates they are about to explore and

asks them to think about what each meal—pizza, a home-cooked dinner, a request of no food, the gift of a birthday cake, the denial of choice—means against the backdrop of capital punishment. For Green, “final meal requests humanize each death row inmate”¹⁵ and the use of anonymity combined with the sheer number of plates on display (Green has created some 700 so far) redirects visitors away from the individual toward asking broader questions about—and responding emotionally to—the death penalty as public policy. This abstraction creates space for visitors to contemplate and process potentially difficult subject matter.¹⁶

15 Julie Green, “Statement—*The Last Supper—Final Meals of Death Row Inmates*,” accessed January 28, 2017, <http://greenjulie.com/the-last-supper-final-meals-of-death-row-inmates>.

16 Stacey Mann and Danny M. Cohen, “When a Boxcar Isn’t a Boxcar: Designing for Human Rights Learning,” *Exhibitionist* 30, no. 2 (2011): 26–31; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted beauty: Aesthetic pleasure in Holocaust representation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

13 Bartsch et al., “Appraisal of emotions in media use,” 7–27.

14 Explore Julie Green’s *The Last Supper* at: <http://greenjulie.com/last-supper>.

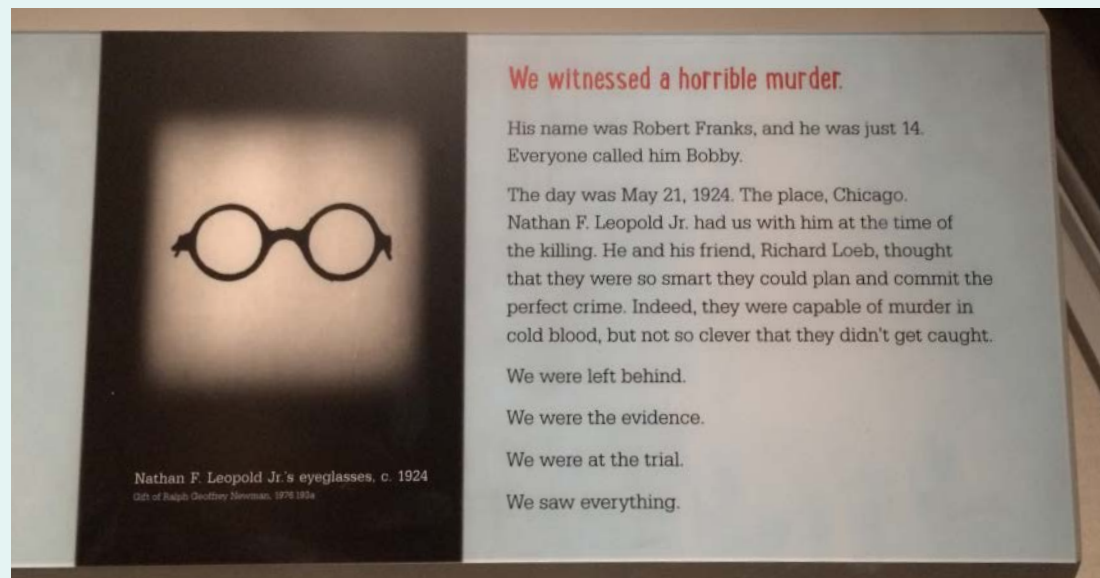


fig 3. The eyeglasses dropped by Nathan F. Leopold, Jr. at the site of Robert Franks' murder are accompanied by text written as the object's first-person testimony, which provides historical context and gives voice to the artifact itself as part of Chicago History Museum's *Secret Life of Objects*.

Similarly, objects can ground exhibition subject matter. Objects—artifacts, documents, photographs, and so on—provide intellectual anchors to larger contextual narratives within an exhibition. Even when objects that represent violence trigger extreme emotions, they can situate visitors’ emotions as pedagogically relevant responses to content. Within the Chicago History Museum’s *Secret Lives of Objects*, select objects from the collection are given the opportunity to tell their stories. Among the artifacts is a pair of eyeglasses that served as key evidence in the 1924 trial of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb; the two were tried and convicted of the kidnapping and murder of 14-year-old Robert Franks in an attempt to commit the “perfect crime.”¹⁷ The exhibition pairs the glasses with a poignant label (fig. 3): “We witnessed a horrible murder... We saw everything.” Although the artifact alone does not necessarily elicit emotion, the exhibition narrative imbues it with meaning and creates a focal point for reflecting on the historic and tragic event it represents.

Remember That Words Matter

As explored by Rose Kinsley, Margaret Middleton, and Porchia Moore in the spring 2016 issue of *Exhibition*, “The Power of Words,” the words and tone we choose are key to how museums relate to visitors.¹⁸ By extension, the language we use is also critical in designing for visitor learning. When we soften the language we use to talk about events and periods of violence in our history—for example, using “souls lost” in place of “people murdered”—we risk devaluing the lives of victims and minimizing

17 Leopold and Loeb were defended by Clarence Darrow who successfully argued against capital punishment, resulting in their sentences of life imprisonment.

18 Rose Kinsley, Margaret Middleton, and Porchia Moore, “(Re) Frame: The Case for New Language in the 21st-Century Museum,” *Exhibition* 35, no. 1 (2016): 56–63.

Using passive voice and failing to name those responsible for violence skews events in such a way that reality and truth become distorted.

the role of perpetrators.¹⁹ Using passive voice and failing to name those responsible for violence skews events in such a way that reality and truth become distorted. “He died in a shooting incident” omits the truth of “the police shot the unarmed black man.”²⁰ Slogans and clichés—such as “Never Again” and “their sacrifice”—can trivialize a lived experience or substitute a platitude for real action. For some visitors, any combination of these linguistic triggers may threaten their specific identities—including national, religious, or community identities—and may limit their ability, in those moments, to connect with core interpretive messages.²¹

The words we employ will be interpreted, and potentially internalized, by visitors in the absence of docents or designers who can clarify meaning or intent that is not immediately perceptible. At the Henry Ford Museum, the *Freedom and Union* exhibition

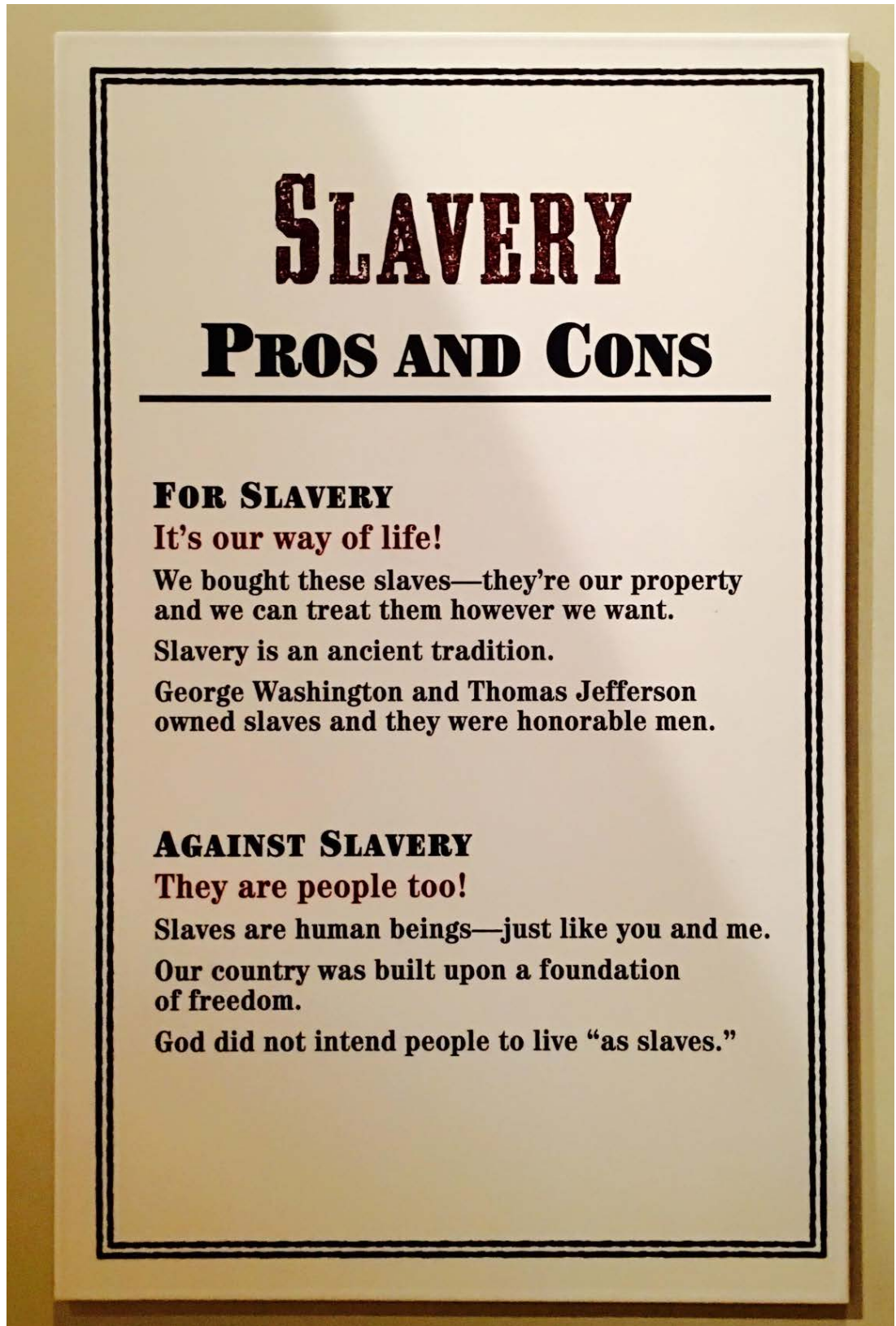
19 Danny M. Cohen, “Dead Ends,” in E. Jilovsky, J. Silverstein, & D. Slucki, eds., *In the Shadows of Memory: The Holocaust and the Third Generation* (London: Vallentine-Mitchell Publishers, 2015).

20 Vijith Assar, “An Interactive Guide to Ambiguous Grammar,” *McSweeney’s*, September 3, 2015, www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/an-interactive-guide-to-ambiguous-grammar.

21 John C. Turner and Henri Tajfel, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior” in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1986): 7–24; Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, “Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797.

fig. 4.

The "Slavery: Pros and Cons" text panel hangs in the *Freedom and Union* exhibition about the United States Civil War, which is nested within the *With Liberty and Justice for All* gallery at the Henry Ford Museum.



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features a text panel that outlines the “Pros and Cons” of slavery (fig. 4). Although likely unintentional, the notion that there are, or were, “pros” to slavery is troubling, potentially distracting from the larger lessons of the exhibition. Alternatively, this same content could be presented as factors that contributed to the persistence of slavery in the South while avoiding the positive value statement about the practice.

People Will Never Forget How You Made Them Feel

As museum professionals, we must remember that we serve an educational mission. We have a responsibility to make content compelling, but we must be explicit in our planning about our choices, our intentions, and what they will mean for our visitors. If we manipulate learners into experiencing certain responses, at best we risk losing their trust and at worst triggering potential trauma. If we make assumptions about how visitors will likely feel about content, we prevent them from experiencing holistic emotional and intellectual responses. If we oversimplify, sentimentalize, or sensationalize content, we risk misrepresenting the stories we are entrusted to tell, and alienating visitors who identify with those narratives. We must keep visitors at the heart of every design decision to ensure that, while the experiences we create are engaging, visitors’ responses and their learning remain natural and authentic. ■

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