

Particularly interesting, because they move from more academic structures and language into the realm of popular culture, are the last two parts. Discussions of disc jockey Art Laboe, the punk musician Jeffrey Lee Pierce, the lesbian bar the Sugar Shack, and the story of the Zumba ladies provide windows into little-studied aspects of the community. The quintet of “literary cartographies” that conclude the volume are highly personal vignettes about place and memory and, in the case of Salvador Plascencia’s “Durfee Avenue,” a head-spinning, stream-of-consciousness essay that is an apt reminder that the logic of interpreted history is not always in sync with the often unpredictable and disordered manifestations of our lives.

The editors and some of the contributors are very clear that *East of East* is a “radical” project, so the reader has to decide whether statements such as that gangs are “sometimes necessary” social organizations or that the Mexican Revolution “radically transform[ed] world history” are more reflective of political ideology than evidence-based interpretation. That said, the sheer whitewashing of the history of the El Monte area for so long has been not only undeniable but a gross disservice to people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, and others whose places in history are still a struggle.

This is what makes the achievement of the editors and contributors of *East of East* so impressive and important. It can and should be an inspiration for like-minded collaborative and multi-disciplinary projects seeking to redress the many wrongs of exclusive historical memory. As stated in the epilogue, localized areas like greater El Monte are often active in national and transnational operations of many kinds “in broader networks of trade, work, kinship, culture and migration” (304). This book provides a solid grounding in better understanding these interrelationships, even as “the rest of its stories have yet to be told” (304).

Paul R. Spitzer, Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum

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*Exhibitions for Social Justice* by Elena Gonzales. New York: Routledge, 2019. xvii + 194 pp.; illustrations, index; clothbound, \$128.00; paperback, \$36.96; eBook, \$19.98.

Can public historians build empathy? With whom, for whom? Elena Gonzales’s *Exhibitions for Social Justice* is exhaustively researched and replete with examples, surveying over twenty institutions using a hybrid ethnographic and archival methodology. Part of the *Museum Meanings* series, edited by Richard Sandell and Christina Kreps, the book’s four chapters take readers on a journey from “empathy to solidarity” (15) by examining exhibition design, visitor impact, content development, and constituent engagement. Each section is helpfully organized by clear subheadings and summaries, punctuated with illustrative examples, and clarified by ample footnotes. Several tables at the end of chapter 4 help codify Gonzales’s complex classification systems for space-making.

Despite its comprehensive approach and structure, *Exhibitions for Social Justice* lacks critical analysis, often taking institutions’ methods and messaging at face

value. Gonzales operates under the assumption that museums already work for social justice, citing the scholarship of several established academics (each of whom have written for the *Museum Meanings* series) (3, 13110). Gonzales acknowledges communities are often marginalized by bureaucratic attempts to “share authority” (163). But she considers the Chicago History Museum’s *Out in Chicago* exhibition successful because it received awards from the Committee on LGBT History and National Association for Museum Exhibition.<sup>1</sup> Gonzales does not address whether constituents’ perspectives were factored into these professional associations’ assessments.

Furthermore, Gonzales’s use of terminology is often confusing and imprecise. Her introduction initially divides social justice into two categories—distributive and retributive (2). A third category is mentioned in a following paragraph—transitional—and a fourth is acknowledged in the footnotes—generative (1311). Restorative and transformative justice models are glaringly absent. Gonzales misleadingly defines retributive justice (punishment) as “the redress of wrongs” (2), while dismissing generative justice as more applicable to labor issues than public history (1311). Countless grassroots storytellers would likely disagree. Labor accounts for the (un)ethical conditions of knowledge production—from unpaid advisory board members to underpaid staff, from racist work environments to institutions’ performative advocacy. Labor is essential to determining whether exhibition content is truly working for social justice, or merely a stunt designed to reform the museum’s public image.<sup>2</sup>

Empathy takes center stage in Gonzales’s thesis, treated as the starting point for enacting change (16). She notes some folks may “react negatively” to the term because it centers the needs of predominately white institutions (15). However, Gonzales reaffirms the idea that museums can and should encourage their (white) visitors to empathize with marginalized people and support things like immigrant rights and prison reform. She claims “it is difficult for people to empathize with those they feel are outside their group [but] museums have a special ability to demonstrate to visitors that they actually do share a group with supposed others” (16). Similarly, Gonzales characterizes compassion fatigue as the burnout faced by people who bear witness to oppression (31)—something one experiences on the path to becoming an “upstander” (36). She fails to acknowledge that “compassion fatigue” takes the form of everyday lived experiences for marginalized people—for people of color, it is known as racial battle fatigue. By centering allies’ feelings, the

1 The Committee on LGBT History is an affiliate of American Historical Association, and the National Association for Museum Exhibition is an affiliate of the American Alliance of Museums.

2 Holiday Phillips, “Performative Allyship Is Deadly (Here’s What to Do Instead),” *Forge*, May 9, 2020, <https://forge.medium.com/performative-allyship-is-deadly-c900645d9ff6>; Kaisha S. Johnson, “Enough Already with the Statements of ‘Solidarity,’ Arts World,” *Medium*, June 5, 2020, [https://medium.com/@kaijohnson\\_54513/enough-already-with-the-statements-of-solidarity-arts-world-cad1ee03e899](https://medium.com/@kaijohnson_54513/enough-already-with-the-statements-of-solidarity-arts-world-cad1ee03e899); Joi-Marie McKenzie, “Guggenheim’s First Black Curator Calls Museum Out For Institutional Racism And Hypocrisy,” *Essence*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.essence.com/entertainment/chaedria-labouvier-guggenheim>.

question of whether the museum can be a supportive or uplifting space for marginalized people ceases to exist.

Gonzales goes so far as to reduce empathy (and, with it, social justice) to a science by sporadically employing neurological concepts. She encourages curators to modulate presentations of violence for an optimal amount of “short-term stressors”—stimulating visitors’ “pleasure pathway[s]” to form “effective memories” (77). Gonzales acknowledges the ways exhibition content can trigger traumatic experiences in visitors, as with the Illinois Holocaust Museum (67). Meanwhile, the Chicago History Museum compares and contrasts “lynching and racial violence” with narratives of resistance to “avoid doubly victimizing people” (79). Demographic divisions between victim and perpetrator, ally and constituent are not addressed. “Difficult histories” and “difficult conversations” are also never defined (70, 90n45, 96, 182). Which visitors experience victimization? For whom are these histories and conversations difficult?

In chapter 3, engagement with museum programming is often conflated with civic participation. For example, President Lincoln’s Cottage is characterized as “a home for *brave ideas*” by the museum’s strategic plan, crediting its own pastoral setting with improving Abraham Lincoln’s “ability to reflect and take action” (107, emphasis mine). Gonzales praises this description, thus obfuscating Abraham Lincoln’s racism and taking an institution at its word. This approach is mirrored in chapter 4’s discussion of decolonization. Gonzales suggests that “the claim to being a decolonized or decolonizing museum is a *bold one* . . . Simply setting the process in motion by claiming to decolonize the museum helps the museum to actually do the work . . . Once the museum takes that *brave step*, others—perhaps those who suffered from subjugation—will be eager to help” (147, emphasis mine). This argument blatantly ignores a long history of institutions claiming to decolonize (or otherwise commit to diversity and inclusion) in order to conceal their exploitative practices (past and present).

Gonzales opts for reassuring museum professionals that “there’s nothing wrong with [a museum] protecting its institutional interests,” and that sharing authority will not “make museums or the expertise of specialists obsolete” (154). Using the example of *The African Presence in México* exhibition at the National Museum of Mexican Art (which she helped curate), Gonzales credits the inclusion of a steering committee and diverse content with changing audience demographics from majority Latine and white to majority Black and Latine (155). She considers the “large turnout of Afro-Mexican artists whose work was featured” an indicator of the exhibition’s success—“they had to travel more than twenty-five hours by bus to the event, a testament to the importance the artists saw in viewing their work in this nationally significant venue” (157). Was this a testament to the importance of the event, or to the incredible inaccessibility and lack of organizing around those whom the exhibition claimed to uplift? After all, no Afro-Mexicans were decision makers in the project (157). Similar examples of institutions only “sharing authority” on their terms are glossed over (143, 162).

Too often, museums exploit the stories and labor of marginalized people to craft their own reputations. *Exhibitions for Social Justice* endorses wokewashing in lieu of real change. The text is littered with puzzling stylistic choices, such as the capitalization of white in order to “call attention to it as a social construction [and] a racial category rather than an unmarked ‘normal’ state from which other races diverge” (14n39). This intent could have been carried over into the actual analysis and arguments presented within the text—such as more explicit acknowledgement of demographics when discussing dynamics between curators, constituents, and “subjects.”

After reading this book, I am reminded of writer Arielle Iniko Newton’s wisdom—“Think of all the possibilities that exist should we invest in one another and divest entirely from the practice of curating white ‘empathy.’”<sup>3</sup> Exhibitions can discuss social justice, but can they truly *work for* social justice? Not if they are produced under exploitative conditions, for the benefit of select audiences. Readers are asked to believe that building empathy will lead to solidarity which, in turn, will lead to action and, ultimately, social justice. As such, the book overstates its purpose and might be better served by a title like “Exhibitions for Empathy.”

GVGK Tang, Independent Scholar

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*Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites* by Gretchen Buggeln and Barbara Franco. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. xvi + 223 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$101.00, paperback, \$45.00.

The American Association for State and Local History has published a series of edited volumes geared to provide guidance for public historians working at museums and historic sites. *Interpreting Religion* is the sixteenth title in this admirable collection. Although other volumes certainly include references to religious America, this book fully embraces the goal of helping history professionals consider both the practical and theoretical challenges of displaying religion. The editors and the article authors acknowledge the critical role that religion has played in the United States while admitting that “rare is the interpreter who goes about this work without some trepidation” (xi). What *Interpreting Religion* offers is reassurance that yes, religion is complex and often controversial, but it can be successfully integrated into historic sites and museums. In addition, for scholars of religion, the essays provide provocative case studies of what public historians have come to understand, represent, and value in religion.

The bulk of the book is made up of case studies written by museum and historic site professionals. Buggeln and Franco divide thirty articles into the sections of

3 Arielle Iniko Newton, “The Stories of Our Struggles Are Not for White People to Consume in an Effort to ‘Do Better,’” *Black Youth Project*, April 4, 2018, <http://blackyouthproject.com/the-stories-of-our-struggles-are-not-for-white-people-to-consume-in-an-effort-to-do-better>.