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MAKING SPACE FOR WOMEN'S HISTORY: RHETORIC, DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY (CYBER)MUSEUM

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This paper investigates the rhetorical processes through which feminist activists in the United States "make space" for their work via digital media technologies. Using the National Women's History (Cyber)Museum (NWHM) as a focus, this paper explores the significant shifts that history museums in the United States have recently undergone within the cultural imaginary, shifts necessitated by a booming digital entertainment industry, social media and mobile devices. Museums have long held a venerated place in U.S. culture – we look to our history museums to provide us with information about the past, connecting us to carefully curated ideological and cultural narratives that live on in the public memory as artefacts live on in museum displays (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). In this sense, the history museum engages in a critical form of rhetorical agency, one that contributes to and shapes public memory in very specific ways (Blair, 1999). But does this agency also shift as the history museum shifts from physical form to digital form, or vice versa? Can a "cyber" museum like the NWHM perform the same rhetorical work accomplished by more traditional history museums? Such questions hold critical implications for current and future museum projects that seek to address—and correct--longstanding national historical narratives that obscure, stereotype or erase the contributions of women and people of color from an otherwise collective past.

In tandem with the rise and spread of new media technologies and the internet, the place of the history museum within the cultural imaginary has undergone a radical change. As museum scholar Antonio Battro (2010) has argued, the emergence of the "virtual museums" that digital technologies have made possible marks a significant ideological and cultural shift in the way that the American public engages with their own imagined past. Building upon Malraux's concept of the imaginary museum, Battro further claims that "the virtual museum has ceased to be a simple reflection of the real one; it has developed a life of its own, no longer satisfied with informing and exhibiting but challenging to action and discovery" (146). Philosopher Hilde Hein (2000) describes this shift as one that has moved "away from object centeredness" and toward "an emphasis on the promotion of experience" (ix). Such conceptual shifts have, of course, been accompanied by material changes as well: challenged to adapt or become

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obsolete, museum projects in recent years have attempted a broad range of digital integration that includes everything from “interactive” displays in physical museums to “virtual” museums that a visitor can move through via their computer and internet connection (Kidd, 2014). In today’s increasingly digital culture, museums face the critical challenge of continuing to provide their visitors with cultural and educational encounters that “feel real” –and thus, create “real meaning”—in the midst of an increasingly virtual reality (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

This challenge is perhaps most salient for museums seeking to correct existing national narratives of historically misrepresented groups. The digital incarnation of the NWHM continues a long tradition of U.S. women’s movements that work initially to generate activist rhetorical spaces and then expand them into claims for material presence and physical, often commemorative space (Mattingly, 2008). At the same time, museums have been under intense scrutiny from special interest groups that seek equal and accurate representation in their exhibits and archives. This scrutiny has led some, including the NWHM, to use the institution of the museum as a staging ground for challenges to existing discriminatory power hierarchies in the United States.

Founded in 1996 by Karen Staser, the National Women’s History Museum has been dubbed a “cybermuseum” (Fitzmaurice, 2014) because, at the moment, it exists entirely online: its website features an array of “digital exhibits” that allow visitors to scroll through photographs of artefacts from women’s history, scans of images and documents, and more. It is national in scope as well as in its mission, which is to address the way in which “women's contributions and accomplishments for the most part have been overlooked and consequently omitted from mainstream culture…Rather than rewriting current exhibitions at other history museums or having to decide what to omit elsewhere to ‘fit in’ women's history, the NWHM will serve to place women's history along side current historical exhibitions” (NWHM.org). This is necessary, the NWHM claims, because of the way that women are currently represented in our national history museums, institutions that reify power hierarchies by building exhibits around the activities, contributions and accomplishments of elite white American men (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). It seems that if women are to recreate a “mainstream” past that honors their intellectual, creative and political contributions to their nation and communities, they must create their own.

That such an activist project began online is no surprise; scholars have noted a steady increase in the number and forms of activist projects that utilize digital space to achieve specific, often material, ends (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Still, the mission of the NWHM is hardly unproblematic. From a cultural-political standpoint, the existence and mission of a women’s history “cyber” museum calls into question the traditional role that history museums have played in the United States. But, at the same time, it also relies upon that role to legitimate itself as an organization deserving of national (feminist) support. Further, the mission of the NWHM to build a physical museum in Washington, D.C. points to a distinct hierarchy of power in U.S. culture that emphasizes materiality and presence, thus linking legitimacy with control over certain physical, not digital, spaces (Tuan, 2001). In today’s digital culture, such power dynamics have a profound effect on a range of social activism(s), an effect that prompts questions that, so far, too few scholars have been asking.

By assuming the inadequacy of digital space to fully realize its goals, the mission of the NWHM necessitates a re-examination of how space is “made” for feminist projects in the U.S. Because it is both virtual and “real” in the cultural imaginary, a thorough investigation into the questions and issues raised by the National Women’s History Cyber(Museum) inevitably opens new fields of inquiry in internet research, digital humanities, and activist and feminist discourse.

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