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Hello Bordello: Transformative Learning through Contesting the Master Narrative of the Cathouse

Micki Voelkel

University of Arkansas - Fort Smith, micki.voelkel@uafs.edu

Shelli Henehan

University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, shelli.henehan@uafs.edu

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Abstract

Miss Laura's Social Club is a restored Victorian brothel that serves as the visitors' center for Fort Smith, Arkansas. Miss Laura's reflects the values and power structures of the community in which it exists reinforcing the dominance of privileged white males. This qualitative study analyzed the results of three previous studies about Miss Laura's—a case study, a social science portraiture study, and an embedded thematic analysis. The primary research question was What is the master narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club? The original case study consisted of semi-structured interviews with three docents and 16 visitors to the site, four site visits, and a textual analysis of online marketing materials. Using emergent coding the researchers developed three key areas in which they critiqued and contested the narrative of Miss Laura's: (1) the madams were depicted as feminist figures; (2) the prostitutes were depicted using "Cinderella" imagery; and (3) the narrative explicitly excluded the stories of those who were not privileged and white. Discussion points included the conflict inherent in Miss Laura's dual roles as a marketing tool and as a museum, the transformative learning the researchers experienced, and the responsibilities of adult educators and museum staff to represent marginalized voices.

Keywords

Adult Learning, Case Study, Cultural Institutions, Embedded Thematic Analysis, Feminism, Heritage Tourism, Narrative, Portraiture, Transformative Learning

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Hello Bordello: Transformative Learning through Contesting the Master Narrative of the Cathouse

Micki Voelkel and Shelli Henehan
University of Arkansas, Fort Smith, Arkansas, USA

Miss Laura's Social Club is a restored Victorian brothel that serves as the visitors' center for Fort Smith, Arkansas. Miss Laura's reflects the values and power structures of the community in which it exists reinforcing the dominance of privileged white males. This qualitative study analyzed the results of three previous studies about Miss Laura's—a case study, a social science portraiture study, and an embedded thematic analysis. The primary research question was What is the master narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club? The original case study consisted of semi-structured interviews with three docents and 16 visitors to the site, four site visits, and a textual analysis of online marketing materials. Using emergent coding the researchers developed three key areas in which they critiqued and contested the narrative of Miss Laura's: (1) the madams were depicted as feminist figures; (2) the prostitutes were depicted using "Cinderella" imagery; and (3) the narrative explicitly excluded the stories of those who were not privileged and white. Discussion points included the conflict inherent in Miss Laura's dual roles as a marketing tool and as a museum, the transformative learning the researchers experienced, and the responsibilities of adult educators and museum staff to represent marginalized voices. Keywords: Adult Learning, Case Study, Cultural Institutions, Embedded Thematic Analysis, Feminism, Heritage Tourism, Narrative, Portraiture, Transformative Learning

Fort Smith, Arkansas is a self-proclaimed Old West town. The city of approximately 86,000 has a heritage tourism industry that includes Victorian house museums, a trolley museum, and the gallows and courtroom of "hanging judge" Isaac C. Parker. A unique attraction is Miss Laura's Social Club—a restored Victorian brothel that serves as the Visitor Center for Fort Smith. Part house museum and part marketing tool, Miss Laura's tells the story of madams Laura Ziegler and Bertha Gale Dean and the bordello they ran from the 1890s through the 1940s.

The Fort Smith Visitor Center at Miss Laura's provides a window into the ways in which the elite members of a society attempt to control the culture of that society:

It is one thing to consider that culture is central to understanding human activity. It is quite another to consider the ways in which elites attempt to control cultural processes and means of production, which raises the question, Who has the power and authority over the processes by which culture is produced? (Guy, 1999, p. 8)

Cultural institutions such as museums, parks, and zoos are potential sites for adult education that provide "master narratives of adult identity, both individual and collective" (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2013, p. 7). These institutions are places of "cognitive change", places with a unique narrative and context, and places that have a contested narrative (Taylor, 2010, p. 6). Cultural institutions—particularly sites of heritage tourism—reflect the values and power

structures of the communities in which they exist (Sandlin et al., 2013; Taylor, 2010). The narratives told through these sites reinforce existing power structures through the stories of the dominant culture.

As adult educators we are interested in how learners construct meaning from their experiences of cultural institutions. We fear that adults take the narratives they hear through cultural institutions at face value. We are also concerned with the responsibilities of those working in and creating cultural institutions to reflect the experiences of marginalized groups in the master narratives of those sites.

While we initially focused on Miss Laura's as a site of adult education, our original informal learning case study revealed a master narrative of prostitution that elicited visceral negative reactions from us both. Through writing about the study, we explored the hegemonic master narrative that emerged and examined our own feminist perspectives toward that narrative; the study of the Victorian bordello has evolved into reflective self-portrait of the researchers. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to critically examine the master narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club as told through the exhibits and the stories told by docents. The overarching research question is: what is the master narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club? Additional questions guiding the study are:

- Whose values are reflected in the master narrative?
- What did we learn from our own negative reactions to the narrative?
- How were we transformed by our experience of studying the site?

By examining the influence of this particular cultural institution on our own lives, we hope to illuminate a larger issue for adult educators, the curators and staff of museums, and adult learners. What are the implications for adult learners who are poor and marginalized when they are inundated with messages from the dominant culture? As Guy (1999) said, "the possibility of meaningful change in the lives of learners from marginalized cultures is diminished. Change cannot be achieved because these learners continue to operate within the cultural norms, values, and traditions of a dominant culture" (p. 8).

Literature Review

Cultural Institutions, House Museums, and Heritage Tourism

Museums are cultural institutions which provide a master narrative of a society; the exhibits of a museum influence the narrative by decisions as simple as which objects to include or exclude (Taylor, 2010). Visitors to the cultural institution bring their own perspectives and contexts to the experience of making meaning from the displays. Visitors "shape and are shaped by the hegemonic structures" (Taylor, 2010, p. 10). Gender stereotypes are reinforced and shared in museums according to Levin (2010). House museums in particular are sites that may avoid uncomfortable historical fact in favor of "creation myths" that offer a more comfortable and sanitized version of incidents that occurred at the site (West, 1999).

Heritage tourism "involves metacultural displays designed to represent—typically to explain, celebrate and commemorate—a valued cultural past" (Coupland & Coupland, 2014, p. 496). The authors pointed out that heritage tourism is controversial and often considered inauthentic. Corkern (2004) noted:

the purveyors of heritage tourism ... all too often serve up a kind of lowest-common-denominator drivel that is designed to tell visitors what they already

know. Or at least what they think they know. Rarely does heritage tourism challenge or surprise. Heritage tourism does not represent a version of history that is dirty or controversial. (p. 10)

In adult education museums serve as sites of struggle; adult educators can inspire others—women in particular—to question and criticize the power structures at work behind a museum’s narrative (Barr, 1999). The controversy and criticism of the inauthenticity of heritage tourism is congruent with Taylor’s argument that cultural institutions are sites that are contested:

...considering the contested narratives that exist within cultural institutions, both explicitly and implicitly, adult educators should assist learners in common spaces to become critical consumers of information located in these institutions and to develop an awareness of the embedded agendas. (Taylor, 2010, p. 12)

Transformative Learning Theory and Cultural Institutions

Sandlin et al. (2013) associated informal learning in cultural institutions with transformative learning. Transformative learning is a theory of adult learning developed by Jack Mezirow. In 1975 Mezirow conducted a landmark study of women who were returning to community colleges. The primary finding of the study was that of *perspective* transformation. The participants changed their assumptions or frames of reference by learning to become critical of women’s role in society (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The theory developed through this research is transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000, 2009) which posited that adults make meaning of life experiences through reflection. Reflective learning depends upon assessment of prior assumptions: “Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 6). Transformative learning is the process in which an adult reassesses earlier assumptions to recreate his or her paradigm or world view (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Sandlin et al. (2013) maintained that the literature on cultural institutions “highlights adults engaging in transformational learning through interaction with/in these sites (often without the direct intervention of a critical adult educator) and explores how this learning often is enacted through noncognitive ways of knowing” (p. 14).

The Cathouse or Brothel in the Old West

In traditional historical works about the Old West women are “invisible, few in number, and not important in the process of taming a wilderness. Or conversely, their role has been sentimentalized and given a rhetorical mystical importance approaching sainthood” (Jensen & Miller, 1980, p 176). According to Jensen & Miller, when women are discussed they are depicted in one of four ways: gentle tamers, sunbonneted helpmeets, hell-raisers, and bad women. These “bad women” are depicted negatively as prostitutes and dance hall girls or in a more romanticized light as the honest, loyal, harlot with the heart of gold “revered by admirers who accorded her status as a great lady” (Jensen & Miller, 1980, p. 182). Books, cinema and folk legend romanticize prostitution although the future was typically unhappy for these women particularly as they aged from being a high end prostitute to a streetwalker (Rutter, 2012). In depictions of Old West prostitutes, Rutter (2012) maintains it is difficult to differentiate truth from folklore: prostitutes came to the profession for a number of reasons.

They were poorly educated, had sexual experience without marriage that “ruined” them for polite society, and many were desperate having lost the husbands or other family members that could support them. In a society with no welfare programs or social services, many women turned to prostitution for survival. Although books and film often show prostitutes marrying respectable men (for example in the John Wayne film *Stagecoach*), the reality was that these marriages happened rarely and often did not work out (Rutter, 2012). A contrasting point of view of Old West brothels is that prostitutes were the liberated women of their day. While respectable women were considered property, prostitutes had more freedoms, owned property, had sex outside of marriage, divorced, wore cosmetics and stylish clothing, and conducted business (Russell, 2010).

Reflections on the Literature

The literature on informal learning in cultural institutions is still developing. Most of the current literature focuses on identifying and critiquing the power structures behind the cultural institutions and/or on transformative learning. Our own research falls within that tradition. As a relatively recent focus of study, there are a number of gaps in the adult education literature. While most studies were focused on the phenomenon of transformative learning and public pedagogy, our study with its focus on the researchers’ own reactions provides an example of the mechanisms at play in informal learning in general and in transformative learning in particular.

The work of Sandlin et al. (2013) and Taylor (2010) led us to our master research question: What is the master narrative of Miss Laura’s Social Club? This research also influenced one of our guiding questions: Whose values does the master narrative reflect? The literature on transformative learning and portraiture led us to our final guiding questions (What did we learn from our own negative reactions to the narrative? How were we transformed by our experience of studying the site?).

The Site

The Fort Smith Visitor’s Center is housed in a moss green Victorian mansion, which is the site of a former brothel, Miss Laura’s Social Club. Miss Laura’s was originally built in 1896, by Laura Ziegler who operated a legal, regulated house of prostitution in the building. In 1911, Ziegler sold the house for the \$47,000.00 to Bertha Gayle Dean, one of the workers employed in the house. Dean continued to legally trade human services until 1924, when Fort Smith passed an ordinance outlawing prostitution. Afterwards, Dean continued to run the place as a “boarding house”—presumably a surreptitious house of prostitution—until the middle 1940s. For a number of years the house was vacant, until Donrey Media financed the restoration of the building. The building housed a restaurant and bar in the early 1980s. In 1992, Miss Laura’s became the home of the Fort Smith Visitor Center, and the title was transferred to the City of Fort Smith in 1996. Under the direction of the Fort Smith Advertising and Promotion Commission, Miss Laura’s continues to extend hospitality to Fort Smith’s visitors, most recently serving 13,273 tourists in 2014. Visitors represented all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with most of the visitors coming from Texas and Arkansas. In 2014, there were also visitors from 33 different countries. Visitors are greeted by docents with southern hospitality; slogans such as “Our Brothel Still Takes Care of Visitors,” and “Hello, Bordello,” are displayed on the marketing materials available.

Situating the Researchers in the Study

This study is a personal reflection on our experience as researchers. We are both adult educators who teach at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, a regional university. Voelkel works with adult learners in workplace contexts, while Henehan works with adult learners who are pre-service early childhood educators. More importantly we are both natives of Fort Smith, Arkansas. Both of us are middle-aged, married Caucasian women. Most significantly we each had previous experiences of Miss Laura's Social Club before we began the study.

Voelkel was a teen in the 1980s when the newly renovated mansion that housed Miss Laura's opened as a restaurant and bar. She remembers eating at the restaurant on a special occasion in a private dining still labeled with the name of the "girl" who had slept and done business there. While Voelkel intellectually understood the concept of prostitution, she never quite made the connection between the actual business of prostitution and Miss Laura's. Decades later as an adult, Voelkel visited the house as a member of a community leadership class. While she enjoyed the beauty and history of the house and chuckled at the tongue-in-cheek marketing slogans, Voelkel was both intrigued by the informal learning possibilities of the site and disturbed by the realization that sexual favors had been bought and sold in the house.

Henehan also grew up in Fort Smith and thought of Miss Laura's as a novel tourist site. She toured the site several times and even accompanied her children on field trips through the house. As a college professor, Henehan brought her early childhood education students to the site, and also toured as a member of the community leadership class. She became more reflective of the experience when a colleague exhibited a strong negative reaction to the site and the narrative told there.

Role of Researchers

Our research team was comprised of two people, both of whom are employed by the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith. Voelkel is an Associate Professor in the Center for Business and Professional Development at University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. Her interest in qualitative research was fueled by the case study she wrote within her doctoral dissertation, which focused on encore careers and generativity among older adults. Henehan is the Director of Early Childhood Education and an Assistant Professor for the School of Education at the University of Arkansas Fort Smith. Her passion is providing educational opportunities for adult women, with much of her research in the form of state grants funded for delivering professional development to early childhood educators. Henehan and Voelkel have collaborated on projects in the past, as their different personal/professional experiences add richness to their combined perspectives.

Methods

This study is a meta-analysis of three separate approaches to the same data: a case study about informal learning at Miss Laura's, a social science portraiture approach to the master narrative, and an embedded thematic analysis.

The Case Study

The purpose of the original case was to explore the informal learning occurring for visitors and docents at Miss Laura's. The overreaching research question was: How do the experiences of docents and visitors of Miss Laura's Social Club result in learning? The

researchers were the key instruments used in acquiring and analyzing the qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). We used three methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews with docents and visitors, observations on site, and content analysis of online and print marketing materials. Under the auspices of the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith Institutional Review Board, we prepared two interview guides to structure our interviews—one format for docents and a second for visitors. The guides included demographic questions as well as reflective questions that concerned visitor and docent perceptions of the site, historical accuracy, learning strategies, gender roles, and the portrayal of historical figures. We followed interview protocol for the protection of human subjects; each participant signed an informed consent form, stating that his/her participation in the study was voluntary. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews (n=19). Most interviews were face-to-face, so that the interviewees could react in real-time, allowing the interviewers to observe non-verbal interactions, as well as immediate reactions to their visits (Shank, 2006). Some of the visitor interviews took place via e-mail, although informed consent documents were completed for all visitor interviews. The interviewees included three docents (two females and one male) and sixteen visitors of Miss Laura's (14 females and two males). The 16 visitors were equally-divided between adult learners, 25 and older, and traditional learners, 24 and younger.

The interviews were all conducted within the city in which the visitor center resides. The interviewees represented three states and seven counties. The docents who were interviewed were chosen based on the recommendation of the site director, who trained all of the volunteers. We recruited the visitors by convenience sampling, simply interviewing those who had recently toured Miss Laura's.

Data Collection. This study was approved by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB), based on compliance with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research standards for "Protecting Human Research Participants." The interviews occurred over three months, from October 28, 2014, to January 24, 2015. The interviews ranged in length from 20 to 75 minutes, with the average interview lasting roughly 25 minutes. The data for this paper have been compiled from the original interviewee responses, and have provided enough material for several research avenues. In addition to interviewing docents and visitors, we conducted four site visits in which we toured the facility with different docents. The site director personally led one tour, allowing us access to non-public rooms. We documented our site visits through written notes and photographs of the exhibits. We collected further data by coding all of the marketing materials used by the center looking for themes in the specific wording and in the photographs.

Data Analysis/Coding. We transcribed audiotapes of each interview verbatim, dividing the work equally. Once interview transcripts were complete, we worked together to review the transcripts using emergent thematic coding. We initially reviewed the transcripts using our list of questions guiding the study as initial categories for coding. As we continued to review the transcripts, we identified new codes that emerged from the data. In addition to our coding of transcripts, Henehan ordered marketing materials from the city's official visitor's site. Upon delivery, Voelkel created a spreadsheet identifying key words and images in the marketing materials. Once the key words and images were identified, we worked together to code the key words and images using our emergent codes from the transcripts. Once all interviews, images, and keywords were coded, we used holistic analysis (Creswell, 2007) to identify five themes that emerged from the data.

The Portrait

Several months after we determined our initial themes from the case study, we decided to look at the data again through a feminist perspective identifying key areas where we could contest the master narrative. Because we knew that our own reactions were a part of the study, we chose to adopt a particular approach to narrative inquiry called social science portraiture. Sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot described portraiture as:

... a genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art. Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv)

In our work creating the portrait, we discussed the data in several intensive sessions, identifying three aspects of the master narrative that we felt were problematic. Voelkel then wrote a portrait—a sort of non-fiction short story that described the story of Miss Laura's as we understood it through the exhibits and stories told by the docents. Once the sketch was complete, we analyzed our areas of contestation once again in light of the literature on house museums and on feminist pedagogy.

The Embedded Thematic Analysis. Once a series of themes had emerged, Voelkel identified one particular theme of great interest, and then embarked on an embedded analysis of that aspect (Yin, 2003). We selected an existing article in the literature focusing on that theme, and reanalyzed our data using the framework identified in that article.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In this research we have used the qualitative research language for evaluating trustworthiness: *credibility*, *dependability*, and *transferability* (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). We have addressed issues of credibility through the following practices: (1) we have clarified the bias that we bring to the study by fully discussing our previous experiences with the study site and our roles in the community; (2) we spent three months in the data collection process; (3) we collected data from multiple sources; (4) we used multiple data-collection methods (interviews, observations, and document analysis); and, (5) we used the feedback gained from two previous peer-reviewed papers in the current study. To address dependability we compiled both paper and electronic files of our data to provide an audit trail. We also outlined our procedures for data collection and analysis. Finally we addressed transferability by using rich, detailed description known as “thick description” (Creswell 2007, 2009). We have also included detailed contextual information about the community, the site, and our own individual contexts.

Results

In sharing the results of the study, we will focus on each of the questions guiding the study: What is the master narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club? Whose values are reflected in the master narrative? What did we learn from our own negative reactions to the narrative? How were we transformed by our experience of studying the site?

What is the master narrative?

What, then, is the master narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club? To answer this question we will address the results of the first three studies, then provide a holistic description of the master narrative based on those results.

The Case Study Results. In the original case study five themes emerged from analysis of the data: (1) The madams Laura Ziegler and her predecessor Bertha Gail Dean were presented as strong feminist figures; (2) There was tension between the conservative religious values of the community and the housing of the city visitor center in a former brothel; (3) Miss Laura's fulfilled conflicting roles as both a marketing tool for the city and a house museum. Docents and volunteers saw the site as a marketing tool for the city, while visitors saw the site as a museum; (4) The lives of the prostitutes were presented using Cinderella themes of transformation; and (5) Class distinctions were emphasized; Miss Laura's was represented as an elite, privileged institution.

The Portraiture Results. In the portraiture study we re-analyzed our data through a feminist lens using social science portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman, 1997). The result of the analysis was a brief nonfiction story that described the history of Miss Laura and her business. Through this process we identified three key areas of contestation:

1. The madams were presented as feminist figures, yet docents softened and romanticized the stories by providing happy endings. For instance, founding Madam Laura Ziegler disappeared after selling the house and business to her successor Bertha Gale Dean; the site director speculated that Ziegler left her old life behind and married respectably—perhaps to one of her former clients. The madams are also presented as extensions of the dominant male authority. For example, the docents emphasize Ziegler's demanding nature and strict rules she enforced with her workers.
2. The docents discussed the lives of the prostitutes using a series of "Cinderella" themes emphasizing transformation. For example, one exhibit featured instruments of transformation such as cosmetics, drugs, clothing, and curling irons. One display case included belladonna cigarettes which the women smoked to lighten the complexion and dilate the eyes, materially changing their physical appearance.
3. The docents explicitly emphasized the elite status of Miss Laura's; the volunteers made it clear that this brothel was not for the average person. The marketing and promotional materials also reflect the emphasis on status and social position; key phrases include *respectable banker*, *refined*, *healthiest*, *prominent*, *elegant*, and *affluent*.

The Embedded Thematic Analysis Results. Because we were surprised by the Cinderella theme that emerged in the original case study, we analyzed our data using an imposed coding framework. We based this framework on a list of "Cinderella's Things" cited in Smith's 2009 study of Cinderella themes in the novel and film of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. We identified 13 Cinderella themes such as "The Ball," "The Dress," "The Fairy Godmother," and "Prince Charming" in the docents' stories and in the exhibits. We also identified pop cultural references to prostitution such as the films *Pretty Woman* or *Breakfast at Tiffany's* as a potential source of the Cinderella imagery used at the site.

The Master Narrative of Miss Laura's Social Club. By synthesizing our results from the previous studies, we have put together the following narrative of Miss Laura's:

Miss Laura's Social Club is a symbol of the Old West as depicted in literature and film. Fort Smith was the last bastion of civilization before travelers headed into Indian Territory; Miss Laura's is a part of that colorful history of outlaws, marshals, genteel city folk, and the "daughters of joy" that worked in the brothels. Laura Ziegler was a shrewd businesswoman who commanded respect from the men with whom she did business. Ziegler, and her successor Bertha Gail Dean, were tough in their dealings with men, but served as virtual fairy godmothers to the women under their care. The "ladies" who worked at Miss Laura's were sun-browned countrywomen who came to the city to leave their poor, rural roots behind them. The madam taught these women social graces, enabled them to purchase fine clothing, and through the use of cosmetics and drugs like laudanum and belladonna transformed them into elegant figures with pale skin and wide, dilated pupils. Ziegler and Dean were demanding of their "ladies"—strict codes of conduct and dress were observed at all times. Through the guidance of the madam, the "ladies" were able to escape the poverty of country life, live in comfort and luxury, and earn more than the typical working man of the era. As a result the "ladies" were able to earn enough money for a dowry allowing them to make respectable marriages (frequently with clients) and move into the middle class. Only the most beautiful and refined women were worthy to work at Miss Laura's. After all this was the "high dollar house" of The Row—Fort Smith's red light district. The clients of Miss Laura's Social Club were not the railway workers and laborers that frequented the other houses. Ziegler and Dean's clients were the prominent citizens—lawyers, bankers, judges—of the community. Miss Laura's offered the elite experience for the respectable men of the city. Today Miss Laura's carries on that refined and elite tradition by serving as the welcoming point for the city.

Whose values are reflected?

Whose values are reflected in the master narrative that we documented? According to data from the 2010 United States Census Bureau (2015) Fort Smith has a population that is approximately 70% Caucasian. Fort Smith has a median family income of \$36,618, with 25% of the persons in the city falling below the poverty level. According to 2007 data there are 8,096 firms; fewer than 12% of those firms are owned by non-whites. Data was unavailable for the number of female-owned companies in 2007; however, data from the entire state of Arkansas showed less than 25% of Arkansas firms were owned by women. Miss Laura's Social Club reflects the values and the power structure of the community—white, moneyed, and male.

The docents and volunteers at Miss Laura clearly emphasize status and social position. For example, C.J. the site director said:

This was the Queen of The Row. ...The girls would have wanted to have worked here because they made three times what they made in any of the other houses. ...All information that I have speaks to the fact that the clients here were not your people in off the boats and trains. This was more of your local affluent, and so you're dealing with local families and making sure that you have all the confidentiality and whatever to make that all work.

Negative Reactions and Transformation

We each experienced strong negative reactions to the narrative told at Miss Laura's. Our negative reactions caused us to re-examine our previous assumptions about Miss Laura's, the community, and our own frames of reference.

Negative Reactions. At the end of our first tour of the site, the docent handed each of us three souvenirs. The souvenirs were a sticker that read "Hello Bordello," a tin U.S. Marshal's star, and a photocopied reproduction of the Health Certificate awarded to each prostitute certifying their health for the month. A doctor examined each worker for "tuberculosis" and other communicable diseases each month; the worker was then required to post the certificate of health above the bed. As the docent handed out the certificates, she said, "Now you have proof you are healthy." We were horrified that the health certificate was being handed out as a souvenir.

Another incident that provoked a negative response was the tour we took with a docent who emphasized the financial status of the prostitutes. This volunteer focused on the fact that the prostitutes received more money than the typical laborer, and that they could earn a dowry and possibly marry one of their clients. This depiction of the workers as somehow being lucky or privileged was extremely disturbing to us and prompted us to look at the Cinderella themes connected with prostitution in popular culture.

Throughout the data collection process and data analysis, we repeatedly discussed our emotional reactions to the data. In the first project—the informal learning case study—we felt that our reactions were not necessarily as important so we did not formally record those reactions in field notes or journals. However, as we continued to revisit the data, we explicitly discussed our reactions after the fact. During our multiple discussions of our reactions, we began to jot down both our emotional responses and the triggering incidents that caused us to react emotionally. Eventually our discussion took the form of formally recording our previous assumptions about the study and contrasting them with the new assumptions we now held.

Previous Assumptions. For each of us, our strong negative feelings about the narrative being told at Miss Laura's allowed us to re-examine our assumptions about the site and prostitution in particular and about the power structures of our community as a whole. We re-examined four previous assumptions:

Old Assumption: *Museums tell the true story.* We each assumed that information we learned at a historical site such as Miss Laura's was accurate and objectively truthful.

New Assumption: *Museums and other cultural institutions tell the stories of the dominant culture.* To learn the objective truth, we need to ask about and look for the voices of those who are marginalized to gain a truer picture of historic events.

Old Assumption: *Miss Laura's is harmless.* Although the conservative Christian community of Fort Smith has expressed reservations about the message Miss Laura's sends visitors to our community, the site is just a fun way to honor our rather eccentric Old West heritage.

New Assumption: *Miss Laura's sends a cultural message that emphasizes existing power structures; the site explicitly excludes marginalized voices.* While Miss Laura's is a fun and eccentric site which successfully markets the tourist attractions of the city, Miss Laura's unashamedly promotes the wealthy, elite, white male power structures of Fort Smith.

Old Assumption: *Critical and feminist theory had no application to our lives.* Social reconstructionist theories were simply a part of the curriculum of our doctoral work; such works while interesting and idealistic had no realistic application to our lives.

New Assumption: *When women are depicted in false and unrealistic ways, it affects our lives today. We need to do something about it.* Our own reactions to the master narrative of Miss Laura's showed us the relevance of critical and feminist theory to our world. Our plans for future research projects fall squarely in the context of feminist pedagogy.

Old Assumption: *We are not feminists.* While Voelkel privately identified as feminist, she did not openly identify herself that way; Henehan rejected the idea of feminism.

New Assumption: *We are proud feminists.* We each now openly identify ourselves as feminist.

Discussion

Our research raises several points for discussion. First we will address how the conflict between Miss Laura's dual missions as museum and marketing tool has influenced its narrative. Next we will address the potential for transformative learning when adults interact with cultural institutions. Finally, we will discuss the responsibilities of museum curators and the responsibilities of adult educators to represent marginalized voices.

Marketing versus Museum

The most significant finding from all the iterations of our research was the conflict between Miss Laura's two missions. The site director consciously chose to use the character of Miss Laura to market Fort Smith as an Old West attraction. Each of the docents interviewed clearly communicated that they saw their job as selling Fort Smith. Significantly Miss Laura's is not called a museum but a visitor center. In contrast each of the 16 visitors we interviewed saw Miss Laura's as a museum and accepted the stories they were told without question. The conflict or tension between Miss Laura's two missions aggravates the areas of contestation (Taylor, 2010) that we found.

The Madams. Given the conservative social climate in Fort Smith, we were surprised to see the madams depicted as proto-feminist figures. Ziegler and Dean were presented as successful businesswomen but also as authority figures that strictly controlled the women who worked for them. While the madams are presented as motherly figures, or to use the Cinderella imagery "fairy godmothers", the truth is the sex workers were virtual prisoners in the luxurious house. The building was surrounded by an eight foot wall. The madams used drugs like belladonna and laudanum to control the workers and make them compliant. Although the docents at Miss Laura's supplied questionable happy endings for Laura Ziegler and Bertha Gale Dean, historically marriages between former prostitutes and their clients frequently failed:

... this is the fiction of the profession more than the reality. It usually didn't have a nice ending. For the most part, there was just too much baggage to make a happy love nest. ... While many men were willing to spend time and money with ladies of the evening, perhaps even living with them for a while, marrying was frequently out of the question. A woman of easy virtue didn't fit

the Victorian notion of a virtuous woman—the kind of woman a man was supposed to marry. (Rutter, 2012, Kindle Locations 239-245)

In addition to the historical inaccuracy we find it troubling that the narrative at Miss Laura's created the madams in the image of the men they served—smart, driven, business savvy, and powerful. Perhaps the madams are not presented as feminist figures at all but as extensions of the men. The docents' need to supply happy endings through marriage disturbed us as well; these savvy businesswomen, despite their accomplishments, are only acceptable when associated through marriage to men of privilege. In other words the women's worth is related via their relationship to a man.

Cinderella Themes. The most surprising element to emerge from the data was the Cinderella imagery and themes occurring in the docents' stories and in the museum exhibits. Initially we were shocked when this imagery emerged from the data. With further reading about prostitution in popular culture, we realized that popular culture, particularly literature and film, is filled with images of prostitutes who are transformed through the love of a wealthy successful man. Examples include the film *Pretty Woman*, the book and film of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the book and film of *Gone with the Wind*, and many others. We suspect that the influence of popular culture affected the depictions of prostitution within the site (Jenson & Miller, 1980; Kelley, 2004; Rutter, 2012; & Smith, 2009). Additionally some recent historical works take the viewpoint that prostitution allowed women more personal freedom and power than other lifestyles in the Old West (Jensen & Miller, 1980; Russell, 2010); much of the information we received from one docent echoed information found in such historical articles and books.

Elitism. We also contested the elitism that is presented throughout the site at Miss Laura's Social Club through the exhibits, the volunteers, and the docents. The wealth, the privilege, the sophistication, and the social status of the clientele are emphasized throughout the house. The docents speak so proudly of the elite status of Miss Laura's that they emphasize that this site is not like the other six houses that made up The Row in Fort Smith. While the volunteers stop short of actually saying that the social status and money of the participants makes the business of prostitution acceptable, it is clear that they differentiate between Miss Laura and her clients and the business transaction between rough laborers and streetwalkers further down the street. Taylor (2010) wrote "Cultural institutions are situated in specific contexts/settings with unique stories to tell." (p. 8). Perhaps the volunteers are focusing on the specific context and setting of Miss Laura's Social Club. Taylor goes on to say that cultural institutions are defined by and also define the communities in which they reside: "The experiences of learners in cultural institutions are shaped by hegemonic structures through stories, which often support the dominant cultural and historical narrative" (p. 10). Perhaps the master narrative of Miss Laura's reflects white, affluent, male power structures because it reflects the community in which Miss Laura's exists.

Sites of Contestation. Cultural institutions are contested sites because these institutions have to decide whose story they will tell and how to deal with marginalized voices. Financial constraints and the personal perspectives brought by the visitors to the site also contribute to the contestation of cultural institutions like Miss Laura's (Taylor, 2010). Another factor affecting Miss Laura's is the fact that the institution was developed primarily as a marketing tool for the tourism industry in Fort Smith. While the site is indeed a Victorian house museum, the conflict between the site's role as a museum and the site's role as a marketing mechanism means that this particular site will continue to be contested. Borg and Mayo (2010) research on Malta's National Maritime Museum points out a similar contestation:

there is hardly any reference to class struggle; class organization; militancy; the harsh reality of dockyard life; accidents and ensuing deaths and disabilities resulting from great occupational hazards; poor health resulting from years of exhaust inhaling, grit blasting, and other dangerous emissions; political struggles... (p. 39)

Museums often operate hegemonically sanitizing the unpleasant aspects of a phenomenon for easier public consumption. If Miss Laura's truly is a museum, its narrow narrative is apparently not uncommon among museums in general and house museums in particular.

Transformational Learning

Sandlin et al. (2013) focused on public pedagogy of cultural institutions as a mechanism for transformational learning. The authors concentrated on how adult educators can work within cultural institutions—particularly informal popular culture—to facilitate transformational learning.

Our Perspective Transformation. Mezirow and Associates (2000, 2009) identified ten phases or steps in the transformative learning process (1) a disorienting dilemma, (2) self-examination, (3) critical reflection on assumptions, (4) connection of personal discontent to the process of transformation, (5) exploration of potential new role, relationships, or action, (6) a plan of action, (7) acquisition of new knowledge and skills, (8) experimentation with new roles, (9) building competence in new roles, and (10) reintegration of new perspectives into regular life. In our work researching learning at Miss Laura's we each experienced a disorienting dilemma. Voelkel's disorienting dilemma occurred when she received the Certificate of Health reproduction as a souvenir; Henehan's disorienting dilemma occurred when her colleague reacted strongly and negatively while touring the site. We each went through a period of reflection and self-examination (Mezirow step two) in which we questioned our assumptions. Was Miss Laura's just an example of Fort Smith's Old West history, all in good fun? Didn't the site reflect the history of prostitution in Fort Smith accurately? Wasn't prostitution, at least at Miss Laura's, a glamorous, fruitful lifestyle that led to wealth, romance and happy endings? Through our various research and writing projects about Miss Laura's we have critically reflected on our initial assumptions as in step three of Mezirow's transformative learning process. By working on our second paper—the feminist study of the narrative at Miss Laura's—we connected our emotional reactions (discontent) with the changes we were experiencing in our own attitudes (Mezirow step four). Through working on that project we each began to see potential new roles for ourselves both ideologically (feminists) and as adult learners (helping adults to question the narratives they are told (Mezirow step five). Our work on the paper required us to create a plan of action on how we would change in our work with adults (Mezirow step six) and acquire new knowledge and skills by learning more about feminist learning theory and re-grounding ourselves in that theory (Mezirow step seven). As we continue to work with our data we are “experimenting with new roles,” “building competence,” and “reintegrating” our new perspectives into regular life (Mezirow steps eight, nine, and ten).

Reflections

Through writing, reflection, and perspective transformation our simple case study about informal learning at an unusual, fun, attention-getting site has become a study about ourselves and our journey into a better understanding of what it means to be a feminist and an adult educator. While we enjoy and appreciate the eccentric history of our community and its

Old West heritage, by contesting the master narrative of the Cathouse we have learned to see the world in a new way. We hope to go on to examine other cultural phenomena and women's issues through a critical feminist perspective.

We are left, however, with some important questions. As adult educators we wonder how we can best help visitors process and learn from visits to Miss Laura's Social Club. Is it our place and/or responsibility to step in when the site is clearly successful in its primary mission to attract visitors to Fort Smith tourist attractions? We have concluded that all we can do is to encourage adults to question what they learn via cultural institutions. On the other hand what is the responsibility of those who operate cultural institutions to represent marginalized voices and alternate narratives? While we would, of course, like to alter or expand the narrative told at Miss Laura's Social Club, we cannot. We can only use our influence to tell the stories of marginalized persons—particularly women—in our future research.

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Author Note

Micki Voelkel, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor in the Center for Business and Professional Development at University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. She earned her doctorate in Workforce Development Education from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. She has a master's degree in Adult Education from the University of Arkansas and a bachelor's in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. She teaches undergraduate courses computer applications, personal effectiveness, project management, time management, and quality processes. Her research interests include cultural institutions, displaced workers, encore careers, generativity, and narrative inquiry. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: micki.voelkel@uafs.edu.

Shelli Henehan, Ed.D., is the Director of Early Childhood and an Assistant Professor for the School of Education at the University of Arkansas Fort Smith. She earned her doctorate in Workforce Development Education and her Master's degree in Education from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Arkansas Tech University in Russellville. Shelli teaches education courses each semester, and is the administrator of grants for providing professional development for adult learners who teach in the field of early childhood education. Shelli's research interests include cultural institutions, early childhood curricula and transformative learning strategies. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: shelli.henehan@uafs.edu.

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