

VISITOR INTERPRETATION OF GENDER  
WITHIN A HISTORY MUSEUM EXHIBITION

by

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Visitor Interpretation of Gender Within a History Museum Exhibition

Thesis directed by Professor Patrick Kociolek

The Western museum, because of its specific history, is an institution that has historically privileged the male experience and enforced a rigid gender binary. This study, performed at the History Colorado Center in Denver, Colorado, looked to understand how visitors interpret gender within a history museum exhibition. Eighty visitors were interviewed and asked questions about their exhibit experience, including questions about their interpretations of gender, after their visit to the exhibition *Destination Colorado*. This was complimented by interviews with the three members of the exhibit development team in order to understand what aspects of gender within the exhibit were deliberately developed. The results show that visitors do notice gender and suggest that gender is an identity that should be engaged with in future studies of visitor interpretation and by development teams during the process of creating an exhibition.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Museums have valued masculine stories over the stories of women because of their specific history as an institution within Western culture. Museums collected objects, used in exhibitions, which valued certain stories and individuals above others. Using critical theory, a history of the museum as a disciplinary institution can be used to discover ways in which the male/female gender binary has been enforced within Western museums. The gender binary is unbalanced and the disciplinary museum has also privileged the male experience in exhibition narratives over female experiences or ones that include other expressions of gender.

Feminist studies of the museum are limited because they ignore a large trend that has swept American museums during the last half century. In recent years, museums have turned their focus from their collections to their visitors, undergoing a change that noted museum scholar Stephen Weil describes as going from “being about something to being for somebody” (2002c).

This study looked to begin to understand how visitors interpret gender within a history exhibition and what messages about gender were consciously or unconsciously included in the exhibit by the exhibit development team. Eighty visitors were interviewed and asked questions about their exhibit experience, including questions about their interpretations of gender, after their visit to *Destination Colorado*, an exhibition at the History Colorado Center in Denver, Colorado. This was complimented by interviews with the three members of the exhibit



development team in order to understand what aspects of gender within the exhibit were deliberately developed. The analysis of these responses begins to introduce the visitor to feminist studies of museum exhibitions and to begin to develop an understanding of how narratives about gender are interpreted by visitors within history museums.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The museum as an institution is firmly rooted in the positivist and imperialist tradition of the development of Western knowledge. As critical theorist Edward Said writes, “there is no such thing as knowledge that is not political” (1976, p. 18). The modern museum, as is currently understood in Western society, is a product of the collecting drive that European nations began to implement to accumulate knowledge from other continents to their citizens during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During these centuries, a massive wave of exploration of the European colonies took hold and sent various researchers out to map the unknown part of the world, to document all of the flora and fauna of these lands, and to bring European civilization to the peoples of the world. In order to prove to the European population the stories of the native peoples of the colonies, and perhaps even to justify why European intervention was needed, scientists, anthropologists, missionaries, and writers of travelogues brought back objects from these cultures.

Edward Said describes the unequal relationship between Western Europe and their colonized lands as Orientalism – the idea that an idealized version of the Orient enforced the relations of subjugation between the Occident and the Orient (1976). The Occident – the West – defined itself in relation to the Orient as being all the things that the Orient was *not*. Orientalism was developed, in Said’s theory, not by politicians or military strategists, but by those

individuals who believed they were developing a pure knowledge of the Orient. One manner in which this relationship was made concrete in the Occidental mindset was through the proof of objects that were brought from the Orient by Europeans. In this way, Orientalism can also be extended to understand the unbalanced relationship between cultures that collect and the cultures from which items are collected. I contend that this model of hierarchical oppression extends to other binaries, most notably the male/female binary of gender that is pervasive through Western culture.

This is not to say that large-scale collecting had not occurred before this imperial drive developed in Europe; scholars of the museum trace the heritage of museums to the Medicis of Renaissance Florence (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). However, various factors crystalizing in Western Europe during the 1800s – including Western European subjugation of colonial lands, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of liberal capitalism, and the widespread pursuit of scientific knowledge – allowed the museum to become a center for all of these movements to have representation. A museum's uniqueness and necessity to these cultural movements was found in its collections – museums have historically justified their existence through their collections of objects. Philosopher of science Bruno Latour provides guidance for thinking about the ways in which events, places, and people are brought from foreign lands to the homelands of western Europe:

“By inventing means that (a) render them *mobile* so they can be brought back; (b) keep them *stable* so that they can be moved back and forth without additional distortion, corruption, or decay, and (c) are *combinable* so that whatever stuff they are made of, they can be cumulated, aggregated, or shuffled like a pack of cards.” (223: Latour, 1975)

Because the museum, as the repository of all the goods from over-seas expeditions, anthropological and scientific, was working to build encyclopedic collections, it became what Latour calls a “center of calculation”. Latour defined Centers of Calculation as being the imperialist countries of Europe and France, places where vast amounts of objects that represented knowledge came together to produce very specific types of knowledge. Latour expands this to explain that that university museums and zoological collections also can be considered Centers of Calculation as well because they allowed individuals in these countries to become intimate and familiar with the objects that represented true knowledge. Knowledge, to Latour, is “familiarity with events, places, and people seen many times over” (220; 1987). Located in the center of calculation that is a museum, the scholars of Western Europe were able to accumulate knowledge that ensured that “the foreigner will always be the weakest” (ibid.).

In these collections, one single object became the representation of an entire culture or scientific species. Through the three related practices of mobilization, stabilization, and combination, one flower comes to represent all versions of that flower, or one pot comes to represent the entire culture of its maker. These objects, located in Western museums, were able to be displayed in very specific ways to tell specific narratives of power. The capital-T Truth of the creation of the Other was grounded in the objects; it was an essential truth written in objects. The authenticity and the authority of the museum was rooted in its collections and the power those collections had (Marstein, 2006).

### *The cultural production of gender*

These objects were much more than just the representations of cultures and scientific specimens – museum objects also formed part of the cultural production of gender. Stories that museums told were patriarchal in nature – male specimens were seen as the scientific ideal

within natural history and great men were represented as the only makers of history in the newly developing museums of national history during the 1800s<sup>1</sup>. In natural history museums during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with dioramas of prehistoric life becoming popular, women were portrayed in a passive, maternal role, primarily depicted taking care of children. This is in contrast to the male figures, whom were often engaged in dramatic hunting poses with megafauna. Art museums assisted in the patriarchy of museums by solidifying the Western canon as nearly an exclusively male domain that portrayed the idealized feminine (Dyer, 1996).

Even though women were often excluded from museums – as contributors, curators, and also as visitors – their absence created a gendered narrative within these institutions. It has been well documented that a negative discourse about sexuality can actually serve to define sexuality (Foucault, 1978). There is no reason to believe that the discourse concerning gender is any different within museums.

#### *United States museums and their visitors*

The United States, entering on the international scene in the late 1800s and early 1900s, borrowed the institution of the museum from the European countries. American museums collected in order to document the world and disseminate the information, rather than just to create an encyclopedic museum collection. Through Latour's three principles of mobilization, stabilization, and combination, the foreign could be transported back to the United States for careful study by scientists of all kinds. The purpose of the museum was to create knowledge for the American citizenry; the purpose of the university, then, was to distribute this newly created knowledge (Conn, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway details this historical phenomenon in her article "Teddy Bear Patriarchy": "The Museum fulfilled its scientific purpose of conservation, preservation, and the production of permanence. Life was transfigured in the principle civic arena of western political theory – the natural body of man." (27)

However, as the centers of education and research in the United States shifted from the museum to the university during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the museum found itself not as the place where knowledge was created, but where knowledge was shared (ibid.). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this shift was solidified – for museums, this meant that having the Real Object, which was collected to produce knowledge, became a less powerful tool for museums (Heumann Gurian, 1999). This was especially accelerated with the introduction of types of museums that have no objects or collections in the 1960s and 1970s – science centers, planetariums, and children’s museums (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> During this era, many writers and politicians began asking why museums existed, or if museums still needed to have objects (Weil, 2002a). In an attempt to reestablish their cultural position, many institutions began to restate the claim that had, in many ways, existed as long as the institution of the museum has: the museum is an institution that exists to educate their visitors (Roberts, 1997).

Traditionally, the vast majority of museum professionals have viewed the relationship of the museum to their visitor as a one-way transmission of information (Weil, 2002a). The visitor, the unknowing subject, was thought to come to the museum to learn from the curator, the expert in their field. Little thought was given to the mode of transmission, which was usually through exhibits. Museum mission statements or charters were often filled with vague promises and commitment to “education”. Through the early decades of the American museum (1900s-1950s), the majority of museums put their focus on their collections as their primary purpose and reason for existence – museums were in the “salvage and warehouse industry” as Stephen Weil would term it (2002c).

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<sup>2</sup> I maintain that it is no accident that this change coincided with the rise of the second wave of the American feminist movement; both the turn towards non-object-based museums and the feminist movement pushed against established norms that had been in place for decades in American culture.

During the same period in museum's history, if museum staff did acknowledge their local community of visitors, they only paid attention the visitors who actually came to the museum. Many professionals were of the opinion that if one did not make the effort to visit the museum, that individual did not deserve any consideration. Similarly, if a visitor did not understand or feel welcome at the museum once there, then it was because that individual did not value museums or was not up to the intellectual challenge that museum provided, and therefore was not truly worth of consideration (Skramstad, 1999).

Not all early museum professionals believed in the apathy or lack of education of their visitors. Notably, John Cotton Dana, who was trained as a lawyer and a librarian before turning to museums, wrote a scathing critique of American museums in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century entitled "The Gloom of the Museum", published in 1917. In it, he wrote that American museums have lacked a specificity of their own cultural heritage. Instead, these institutions to attempt to bring the European museum to the United States, which involved importing a culturally specific institution (one created out of a history of the wealth of nobility, military conquest, and colonization) to a new American culture, one steeped in ideas of egalitarian democracy. This resulted, according to Dana, in a mismatch between the museum of Europe and American culture and values. Dana wrote of the American museum's primary obligation to their visitors as being to "serve its people" and to be an important part of a city's civic and cultural life.

While in the minority, some museum professionals and writers followed Dana's lead and called for the museum to have more of a focus on their communities and their visitors. However, the visitor was often an amorphous amalgamation of an ideal anonymous individual, and often assumed to be white, Euro-American, male, heterosexual, and interested in museums – a reflection of the vast majority of those within the museum profession (Haraway, 1989). Starting

in the 1960s, museums and their staff were swept up in the tide of the changing cultural landscape of America and movements that railed against the established norms and in which the voiceless demanded a place to speak. In museums, advocacy towards the visitor followed the logic that museums and their collections are democratically owned – if museums receive public funding, which nearly every single American museum does, then it is, to some extent, owned by the public. Therefore, the public should have a say in what the activities of the museum could or should be (Weil, 2002c).

A few American professionals started studying visitor behavior quite early – Benjamin Gilbert’s 1916 study of museum fatigue is a notable example (Lindauer, 2005). While there was the occasional study, including the expanding use of exhibit prototype testing during the 1950s, many writers mark the beginning of the era focusing on visitors as beginning with a 1977 Smithsonian Institution Conference on museum evaluation (ibid). The blossoming field drew primarily from marketing strategies and behavioral psychology and started to organize as a specific field within the museum practice. Other milestones in this field include the formation of the Visitor Studies Association in 1989 and the creation of the professional network Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE), a part of the American Alliance of Museums.

#### *Visitor identities and museum diversity*

With the embrace of the visitor logically comes an embrace of the identities of the visitor. Museums and their staff embraced visitor identities, though reluctantly. Perhaps this was because the majority of the staff were white males, accustomed to seeing their experiences and perspectives reflected in museum exhibitions (Barry Gaither, 1992). At first, museum professionals rejected the idea that the identities that museum visitors brought to the museum affected their interpretation of the content of exhibits. During the 1980s and 1990s, museum



professionals began to comprehend that visitors bring many interpretations to the exhibits, which are based on their lives and personal worldview (Heurman Gurian, 1999). The important part for museum professionals and museum theorists was the understanding that these various interpretations were not wrong – they were all correct to that visitor.

American museum professionals of the 1980s and 1990s focused primarily on the ethnicity and race of their visitors and of the presentation of these identities in exhibits. The new millennium brought the realization to museum professionals that the demographics of the American citizenry were rapidly changing from a society dominated by White/Caucasian individuals to the “minority majority” (Barry Gaither, 110). Museums, faced with a projected future that included a loss of their solid base of upper-middle class, educated, white visitors became consumed with “diversity” and “multiculturalism” in the 1990s, attempting to understand how to tap into long-ignored audiences that tended to be classified amongst racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic/class-related boundaries (Mesa-Baines, 1992). Gender, and to a lesser extent sexuality, were identities and subjects that museum professionals did not see a need to study or engage with in their practice.

There is an irony to this avoidance of studying gender within museums. By the 1990s, major developments in Western culture had pushed feminist thought to a central location in popular and academic culture – Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal book The Second Sex was published in 1949, The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan was published in the US in 1963, members of the women’s liberation movement had protested the Miss America pageant in 1968, the first women’s studies departments in American universities taught their first courses in 1970, and the Equal Rights Amendment was set for ratification in 1979. Museums were seemingly immune to these advances in feminism in Western mainstream culture.

I believe a large reason is the fact that museums are, by their nature, conservative institutions (Marstein, 2006). In addition, the museum professionals of the 1970s and 1980s were the first wave of staff to have been trained in university museum studies programs (Stephen Weil, 2002c). However, the vast majority of university programs in the United States emphasized conservation, curatorial, and collection-related skills over skills that involved engaging with the public, like education, exhibits, or interpretation. Curators, who have an incredible amount of power behind the scenes within museums, are trained in their respective disciplines (natural science, history, anthropology) – this, I contend, leaves them ill-equipped for the interdisciplinary practice that makes up much of what the day-to-day work in museums actually represents.

Interestingly, art museums seemed to have made progress where other realms of museums did not – utilizing feminist art history to show how female artists were excluded from the Western art canon and staging gallery shows that featured female artists (Deepwell, 2006). However, these shows and exhibitions have rarely questioned why female artists had been excluded or argued against the masculinist narratives that were inherent in the art itself. The difficulty is finding ways to understand the larger structural power of the institution of the museum.

A part of museum studies is acknowledging the difficult history of the museum, not as a neutral educational institution, but one that comes from a positivist, colonialist, white, and patriarchal origin. Museums, by and large, represented the perspectives embraced and advocated by the individuals who worked in museums or who funded the museum - upper-middle class, educated, white, heterosexual men. In the case of museums, the phrase “history is written by the victors” has been put into a literal practice.

### *Museum professionals and gender*

This is not to say that exceptions to this rule did not and do not exist in museum practice. Gender of those who work within museums is a subject that is occasionally engaged with in museum studies. In recent years, the practical aspects of museology have also embraced race and ethnicity as a subject to be engaged with in ambitious new forms of the museum.

Much of the early writing on feminism in museums takes the form of highlighting exceptional women who worked as curators in the field. For an example, the 1992 Smithsonian publication Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums, which has two sections devoted to “The Impact of Women and Museum Work” but very little information on how museums contribute to Western narratives that privilege male experience and enforce the male/female gender binary. In addition, community museums often heightened the stories of people of color, specifically African-American individuals; a commonly cited example of this is the Anacostia Community Museum (originally the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum) in Washington DC. Notable social movements, beginning in the 1970s, pushed American natural history museums to change the way in which they talked about Native Americans and displayed their artifacts (Ames, 1992). In recent years, these movements have culminated in the passing of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) by the US Congress in 1990 and the development of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian (in 2002) and the National African American Museum (due to open in 2015).

Perhaps these trends in embracing different and diverse identities are not surprising, given the social movements of American public culture combined with increasing diversity in museum staffing. These dual trends have pushed museums to embrace new audiences both from internal voices and external movements. There has been a documented rise within the

professional staffs of museums that show an increase in individuals working within museums representing various diverse identities – race, gender, and sexuality. Specifically in regard to gender, a 2014 study prepared by the American Alliance of Museums showed that, when looking at all individuals considered full-time museum employees, 66% were female and 33% were male. The study then sorted all respondents' positions into categories of positions. Of the 52 museum staff positions the study analyzed, 41 positions (79%) were predominantly female. Surprisingly, this is actually a decrease from the 2012 study, where 83% of full-time museum staff positions studied were predominately female.

Whatever these statistics seem to suggest, one cannot definitely conclude that the current statistics represent an increase in the quantity of women working as museum professionals over many generations. There is a lack of historic studies of the gendered makeup of museum staff, though conclusions can be drawn from various writings on the history of American museums. While many wives of wealthy American industrialists played a part in the founding of museums at the turn of the century, as part of the Progressive Cause, Majorie Schwarzer places the first wave of professional women “in the temple of the museum” as the Baby Boomers of the 1960s (2010, p. 20). Jean Weber writes that by 1986, “women outnumbered men as professionals in the museum field and as trainees in museum studies programs” (p. 33, 1994). Weber also chronicles the worry that an increasing “feminization” of the museum profession would mean a lack of respectability, yet counters with the idea that women’s presence in the field would mean change, as women would be uniquely suited to handle the complexity needed to change the conservative nature of museums (ibid, 34-35).

If that is the case, then why does the museum studies literature not represent this trend? Much of the early writings on gender and museums were filled with the hope and suggestion that

the more women who worked within museums, the more progressive and feminist the museum as an institution would be. This line of reasoning also assumes that every woman who works within a museum is a feminist and does feminist work, and every male within museums will only perform sexist work. That, of course, is a ludicrous proposition. There must be something that can explain this seemingly ironic conclusion. Scholars of the museum – who primarily do not work in museums, but rather in academia – borrow theories from critical cultural studies to find the grounding for their analysis of the institution of the museum. Because these scholars are disconnected from the day-to-day practice of the museum, I have found that many museum professionals find their recommendations obtuse and difficult to put into the actual work of museology. Finding a solution that helps to change practice and theory, I, like many other museum scholars, turn to the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault.

*The museum as a disciplinary institution*

The museum is best described, according to Foucauldian theory, as a disciplinary institution and the most productive theoretical writing on the institution of the museum comes from adopting this perspective. Foucault describes a disciplinary institution as such:

Methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called ‘discipline’ [...] Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).

(1975, pg. 137-138)

Disciplinary institutions are those that use specific practices to turn bodies into useful and productive beings.

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill uses the framework of epistemes<sup>3</sup>, developed by Foucault to critically look at the museum as disciplinary institution which uses specific practices which reproduce power networks in terms of what objects are valued and accepted as museum-worthy.

Do the rituals and power relationships that allow some objects to be valued and others to be rejected operate to control the parameters of knowledge in the same way as the timetabling rituals and the power relationships of teachers, governors, pupils, and the state operate to make some school subjects more valuable than others? [...] Decisions in the museums and galleries about how to position material things in the context of others are determined by a number of factors including the existing divisions between objects, the particular curatorial practices of the specific institutions, the physical condition of the material object, and the interests, enthusiasms, and expertise of the curator in question (1992).

The disciplinary function of the museum created knowledge that was specific to the logic prevailing in specific time periods. There is no inherent reason that certain objects are valued and included in the museum over others – the value of these objects developed out of political realities and historically specific rationales. Following this logic, I contend that there is no inherent reason why certain individuals have been recognized and represented in museums over others. This division also stems from political power structures that privilege the stories of individuals over others in the museum.

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<sup>3</sup> An episteme for Foucault, introduced in *The Order of Things*, is a set of assumptions and historically-situated definitions of logic which are characteristic of a specific historical period. In his words, “in any given culture at any given moment, there is always one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice” (168). Foucault describes three epistemes in Western history – the Renaissance, the classical, and the modern, though not all scholars agree with these deliniations (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

The public museum, in Hooper-Greenhill's analysis, is an institution that was used by the state to "direct the population into activities which would [...] transform the population into a useful resource of the state" (168). To develop this application to the museum, I look to the other disciplinary institutions that Foucault describes as acting upon bodies to produce and transform them into productive populations for the state: the school, the prison, and the military (1997; 137). Each of these examples utilizes a combination of architecture, training, and scheduling in order to discipline bodies into acting in specific ways towards the goals of the state.

The museum is no different. For architecture, I turn to the way in which museum architecture follows the design of a temple to mirror the ways in which the population acts in those structures. The austere façade of many museums establishes that there are treasures within and subtly dictates to the visitor the proper ways of behaving within these structures. Authors within the museum field have commented on this trend as well. Duncan Cameron writes in 1971 that "the museum, sociologically, is much closer in function to the church than it is to the school" or any other cultural institutions that museums are often compared with (66-67).

For scheduling, we can look at how museums have historically had convoluted hours that did not permit those who staff deemed less desirable people to visit the museum (Ames, 1992). As for training of the physical body, I turn to those who say that visitors need to learn how to behave in museums – voices low in hushed conversation, no touching of the objects, looking intently at what the curator wishes a visitor to look at (Rees Leahy, 2012). These behaviors seem natural to most visitors. In fact, many museum writers talk about ways in which to teach "museum literacy" to visitors unfamiliar with visiting a museum, as if there is one correct and appropriate way to "read" the museum (Stapp, 1984). This is the magic of the disciplinary

museum, that state power can be enacted on individual bodies through a seemingly natural institution like the museum, the school, the prison, or the military.

The naturalization of these disciplinary practices in the museum is no accident but something that was done intentionally through power structures. Museums are the gatekeepers of what the state deems acceptable knowledge, what its population is allowed to know. Even those privileged enough to find themselves welcome in museums are still subject to the museum's disciplinary forces. Those individuals who work within museums are subject to these forces as well. Hooper-Greenhill's chapter on the disciplinary museum demonstrates how the development of museums in Europe followed the military conquests of the state (1992). The state proved its military might by taking objects from conquered people and placing them in the museum – the ultimate show of dominance, that the objects of one culture or state became the property of another.

This disciplinary nature of museums stems from the origin of the Western museum during the end of the Renaissance era, yet was reified as new museums continued to copy their predecessors to preserve the cultural power contained in the institution. Museums began to define national narratives, scientific discoveries, and Western knowledge of the cultures of the world during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While various objects took center stage in museum exhibitions, gender was an always-present subtext to the interpretive narratives through power structures and the disciplinary museum.

#### *Museum visitors and gender*

I take a different approach from previous studies when it comes to critically looking at how museums have portrayed gender and promoted the traditional male/female gender binary.



Instead of analyzing gendered make up of museum staff, to me it is more vital to look at the larger, structural forces that reiterate patriarchal narratives.

Women's presence is often noted as an index of feminist achievement, but its impact on fundamental theorizing about and within the museum is minimal. Individual women undoubtedly do bring fresh energy and creative ideas to the museum: as museum founders, some have been prescient. I do not trivialize their individual and collective contributions, but history is not changed through infusions of estrogen. Institutional structures must be transformed as well (Hein, 2012: 56).

Similarly, it would be easy to advocate for an increased focus on gendered aspects of exhibits (or more "women's exhibits") by simply looking at demographics of museum visitors – the more of a certain type of people are in the museum's community, the more of a "draw" an exhibit that features these peoples would be for the museum. Author Mark Liddiard writes about how many museums in the UK have started embracing exhibits focusing on the history of homosexuality in their museums, often in search of the "pink pound" - the money and attention from a previously ignored audience subset, in this case, gay and lesbian visitors (26). Similar trends exist in the US currently, as the predominately white museum profession struggles to create exhibits to attract the growing Hispanic/Latin@ population to their institutions (Barry Gaither, 1992).

However, when one looks at gender, the lack of research on this issue does not correlate to the visitation trends of men and women. For example, during 2010, the Denver Evaluation Network conducted a pan-institutional study of the demographics of museum visitors in the

Denver Metro Area. The gender demographics for Denver-area museums are summarized in Table 1 (below)<sup>4</sup>.

Table 1 <i>Gender of Visitors in Denver-area Museums</i>		
Institution/Museum Name	% of Visitors	
	Male	Female
Four Mile Historic Park	23.1%	76.9%
Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave	46.8%	51.1%
Butterfly Pavilion	32.3%	67.7%
Children's Museum of Denver	29.4%	70.6%
Colorado Railroad Museum	60.7%	39.3%
Denver Art Museum	32.7%	67.3%
Denver Botanic Gardens	39.4%	60.6%
Denver Zoo	39.7%	60.3%
Denver Museum of Nature and Science	42.3%	57.4%
Golden History Museums	50%	50%
Lakewood Heritage Center	20%	80%
Longmont Museum	22.6%	77.4%
Molly Brown Historic House Museum	30%	69%

All but two museums in the Denver Evaluation Network have a visitor population that is predominantly female! This trend is matched by studies performed in other cities and nationally in the United States (Farrell, et. al, 2010). And while feminist theory and the feminist museum studies literature is not limited to a focus on exhibits about women, these studies predominately focus on exhibits that were developed to increase the visibility of women in the museum world. If we follow the logic set forth by Liddiard, then museums should actually suffer from an over-representation of women in exhibits, as women dominate the demographics of museum visitors.

<sup>4</sup> History Colorado Center, where this study was performed, was undergoing renovations when this study was conducted in 2010, and, as such, was not included in this study.

The task at hand is to understand how museum professionals can integrate changing this larger sexist institution in their day-to-day work. However, to understand the institutional structures that one is working within *while working within them*, is no easy feat.

There has been a small portion of museum studies literature that addresses gendered aspects of the museum experience. Primarily, these have been written by exhibit designers, educators, and curators reflecting on their own experience or their own practice. Gendered studies of museums have been performed where the focus is the content of the exhibits in UK museums (Porter, 1995), the gendered aspects of UK collections (Porter, 1990), the gender make-up of educators in American museums (Stanton, 1996), administrative staff in American museums (Levin, 2010), and even how children's learning is affected by gender, again in an American museum (Crowley, 2001).

#### *The visitor and feminist studies of the museum*

I believe a key missing component from these types of studies is a consideration of the visitor and their perspective. On the rare occasion that visitors are considered, it is often in terms of what experience the visitor *should* have during their museum experience or what the visitor should understand in terms of feminist methods. What is missing is what visitors *actually experience*. If museums pride themselves on having the “real” object, shouldn't studies of museum exhibits – be they feminist or not – pride themselves on having the “real” visitor experience? This is the gap in the feminist museum literature that this project aims to address.

There is no easy answer to why theoretical writing in museums has ignored visitor studies and why feminist scholars within museums have continued this trend. Perhaps it is out of a fear of being proved wrong by giving too much power to the visitor in terms of concluding whether an exhibit was successful or not. Many authors would admit, though, that the time of worrying

whether to give the visitor power is past (Weil, 1995). Much writing states that the trend within museums in recent years has shifted the authority from the curator and given this power to the visitor. If the visitor is becoming the authority on the museum experience, then I believe museum scholars must seriously engage in the interpretations of exhibits and narratives that visitors take from their time in museums.

Some authors characterize visitor studies as a marketing tool, as proof that the museum has finally sold out to the storm of Western capitalism swirling around its walls. As Harold Skramstad writes in his 1999 article, “An Agenda for Museums in the Twenty-First Century”:

Many museums recoil from [marketing]. The usual argument is that to focus on experience rather than on content is to pander to the audience and to attenuate the subtlety and nuance of what is being communicated. What is really being said in this argument is that the museum only wants to communicate to those people to whom nuance and subtlety will be an essential part of the experience.

Skramstad is not wrong in saying that visitor studies have borrowed from marketing research. While visitor studies and audience research is occasionally done to increase audience numbers and therefore increase revenue, the utilization of these theories and methodologies is often undertaken with a critical perspective. The majority of visitor studies focuses on informal learning within the museum setting<sup>5</sup>. The techniques and methods are predominately borrowed from behavioral psychology and visitor studies professionals are proud to say that they are audience advocates first, researchers second.

Amy Levin, a museum studies scholar and the editor of the only currently published academic reader on gender, sexuality, and museums, decided to not include any visitor studies in

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<sup>5</sup> For numerous examples, see [informalscience.org](http://informalscience.org).

her collection “because of the relative rapidity with which they become dated and the extent to which local variables limit their usefulness” (2010). Ironically, Levin then concludes her introduction to her feminist reader with the following phrase:

Any good work on Western museum history will demonstrate how the institution has been complicit in the construction of white male heteronormativity, whether it be through its role as an emblem of state power and repository of its heritage; its significance as the storehouse of objects gained through colonialism and the creation of empire; [or] its development of a narrative of history that features and policies traditional gender roles.

There is no reason to believe that visitor studies cannot tell us the ways in which museums contribute to a local population’s understanding of gender and its representations. Understanding how individuals understand gender can explain large-scale trends in gender representation that may seem to be naturalized.

Similarly, author Helen Rees Leahy writes in her book Museum Bodies that she did not include “institutional visitor studies” because she believes they are studies that only serve the museum administration and tell staff what they want to hear:

The reasons for this omission are simple: the kinds of questions that I explore here are not the same as those that generally interest the museum and its funders, and which underpin most visitor studies. Rather, I am intrigued by ‘problems’ that even the most reflexive institution would rather ignore, including the experiences of weary, bored, confused, and even violent visitors (2012; 11).

To investigate the messages that visitors obtain about gender is one way that museum studies can uncover the power of the normativity of museum narratives.

It should be noted that this project does involve an American museum. While many of these same trends can be seen in European museums, the history of North American museums is specific and unique, though it does borrow strongly from the tradition of European museums. North American museums also have a longer history of paying attention to visitors, beginning with Dana and the principle of the “democratic museum”.

In addition, it also needs to be noted that this study concerns the normative gender binary (male/female). While it is well documented that gender is a spectrum and that many individuals consider themselves to be of a gender that is not male nor female, this study was not able to take into account these gender identities. In order to properly and respectfully encapsulate visitor interpretations of trans and other gender identities within museum exhibitions, a separate, but related literature would need to be consulted. In addition, Western museums have struggled with gender identities that do not fall neatly into the male/female binary. Author Robert Mills writes that, for most museums, transgender representation has been so lacking that he refers to it the “silent T” in LGBT (2010).

This study also focuses on gender, not sexuality. There is a tendency among many authors to conflate gender and sexuality, though they are two separate identities that an individual has. The American Psychological Association defines gender as

The attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity (APA.org, 2015).

Gender is a set of constructions that have a specific historical and cultural context. Judith Butler writes that gender is enacted to others via performance – external markers of gender identity such as clothing, hair, and manner of speaking, amongst others (Butler, 1990).

Further, gender identity is defined as “one’s sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender” and the APA defines sexual orientation (or sexuality) as “the sex of those to whom one is sexually attracted to” (ibid.). While many studies of sexuality within museums also have a gendered component (for example, studies concerning homosexual male art and its presentation in traditional art museums [Butt, 2011]), this study how messages surrounding gender are interpreted by museum visitors, not sexuality.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Study Overview*

This study aims to address the gap in the museum studies literature between theoretical writings on museum practice and the actual practice of museum, while at the same time working to bridge the divide between theoretical writings on museums and the day-to-day work of museum professionals. Instead of assuming that a museum professional or a scholar of gender studies is the ultimate authority on how feminist messages or gender is perceived within museum exhibitions, I choose to turn to the ultimate authorities on the visitor experience – the visitors themselves. This study looks at the visitor's interpretation of narratives and themes about gender within a specific history museum exhibition. This study also seeks the input and perspective of the exhibit development team behind the exhibit. In my opinion, it is important to balance the intended messages in the exhibit with the messages that the visitors interpret.

To accomplish this, the study was designed in what I term a “book-end” fashion via those who are most intimately involved with museums – the exhibition development team and the visitors. The exhibit begins with the exhibit development team and, in my opinion, ends with the experience of the visitor. This study also works to capture the intent of the exhibit designers and understand how that intent affects the experiences and interpretations of the visitors, specifically around the topic of gender within an exhibition. Comments from both the visitors



and the exhibit development team show how gender within exhibits, whether intentionally placed into the exhibit by the exhibit development team or not, is interpreted by visitors.

*Why a history museum?*

Issues of the presentation of gender within exhibitions affect all types of museums, not just history museums. Visitors place their trust in museums to provide the real truth, based in the real objects. As Janet Marstine writes:

The expertise of the “museum man” (the expert is always a patriarchal figure) gives an assurance that museum objects are “authentic masterpieces” that express universal truths in an established canon or standard of excellence (9; 2006).

Donna Haraway’s brilliant essay “Teddy Bear Patriarchy,” published as a part of her 1989 book Primate Visions, discusses how the African gorilla diorama in the American Museum of Natural History in New York encapsulates one man’s search for the perfect (male) gorilla specimen. She also demonstrates how this exhibition represents themes of African colonization by Euro-American explorers, the progressive cause to protect American masculinity, and the assumed dominance of man over nature. Art museums have struggled with the historic construct of the difference and validity of the masculine fine art and the feminist craft – only fine art being seen as relevant to be included in museums until recently (Weil, 2002b).

For this project, I turned to a history museum because this arena of museums does deal with the stories and artifacts of individuals. These individuals all have and show their gender through external performance, including patterns of speech, choice of clothing, hairstyles, and other markers of gender (Butler, 1990). Though history museums may be the most explicit in their portrayal of gender roles, the histories we see in museums are often fictions (Gable, 2006).

They are representations of the way that the present day (or the present day when the exhibit was developed) thinks about the past.

History museums in North America primarily represent and store the collections of the great families of North America, according to Stephen Weil (Weil, 2002b). For most towns in the United States, this usually meant that the collections represented the life of a male industrialist who was seen as the benevolent patriarch of the community. The items that were valued by history museums were the exceptional and the masculine; items and stories from the domestic and feminine sphere were seen as unworthy to be included in a museum. When women were included in the narratives of history exhibitions, the individuals tended to be portrayed in stereotyped and limited ways, and with women portrayed as second-class citizens. For example, take the collection of First Ladies dresses at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History – the works and lives of these women are reduced to their clothing and their association with their husbands (Clark Smith, 2010). The ways in which label text is written can also affect gendered narratives – Martha Washington is usually written as “Mrs. George Washington”, again reducing women to their relationships to men and in a forever subordinate and passive role (Sullivan, 1994).

Even as history museums work to become more inclusive and embrace a more diverse public via their exhibition content, oftentimes they are limited by their collections. Curators and exhibits staff often point to the lack of collections that represent women's experience as a reason that an exhibition on women cannot be mounted at a museum. Many would leave the explanation there, however, one must look for the reasons and the power structures that have made it so that it seems natural to devalue these types of items and keep them out of museums in the first place. Gaby Porter, in her article “Gender Bias: Representations of Work in History Museums” points

to a few key issues that have led to the exclusion of artifacts representing women's history from museums (Porter, 1990). Technological change, which forms the cornerstone of many history museums in the United States, was often focused on public and male spheres of life, whereas women often reused and rehabilitated their material possessions; in addition, women's work was often of the unpaid, domestic variety, which has been historically undervalued both in and out of the institution of the museum (ibid).

Not only to tell the story of cities and great families, history museums also help to establish, publicize, and maintain the history of cities, states – how the present thinks about the past (Gable, 2006). Gable explains:

History museums are places where versions of the past are produced through words, pictures, and artifacts, [and scholars of the history museum...] generally assume that stories, images, and artifacts of the past which are displayed in such museums shape national identity by creating “imagine community” or a “community of memory” (ibid, 110).

History museums, along with art galleries, have noticed a decline in attendance over the past 15 years, which is stark when compared to the relatively stable audience trends of other types of museums (natural history museums, interdisciplinary community museums, science/technology centers) (Freedom du Lac, 2012). While originally this decline in attendance was attributed to the Global Economic Recession of 2009, history and art museums have not seen the same uptick in attendance other types of museums have post-2011. Many museums that

previously focused on history have moved to an interdisciplinary focus, which tends to emphasize a turn towards science<sup>6</sup>.

This interdisciplinary focus of many museums could represent a turn towards a more cohesive future for museums, but there are other factors at play that may explain this trend. Many community studies have shown that, especially for museums, “history” has a connotation that results in feelings of boredom and lack of excitement for visitors (Mundt, 2010). It also could be because of increased funding opportunities, often via federal government grants, through a focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs, primarily from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Certainly part of this is the increase in funding for science education, specifically science education that has the outcome of getting young girls and young people of all genders from “underrepresented minorities” interested in science.

However, this recent museum focus on science does not mean that science and technology centers are the only places in which messages about gender can be transformed and embraced by the public. American history museums, because of their focus on individuals, are poised in a critical spot to assist the public in understanding the ways that gender is constructed by social, historical, and cultural factors. They can also use the power of museum exhibitions in order to change assumptions and stereotypes about gender – female, male, and other expressions of gender identity. As the philosopher George Santayana said, those who do not learn their history are doomed to repeat it. And, in the case of American history related to the traditional identities involved in feminist projects (class, gender, race/ethnicity), these lessons are vital for

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, many museums focused on history have changed the name of their museum to de-emphasize history. 30 miles away from Denver, the Boulder Historical Society (in Boulder, CO) is undergoing a name change to Museum of Boulder. History Colorado is a notable exception to this trend.

our individual success and cooperation in an increasingly globalized 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The history museum is the location in which we can see how a society thinks about gender roles in both the present and the past, creating a unique space in which to develop both an understanding of how gender is represented to the visitor via the exhibit and how gender is understood by visitors.

### *Location Selection*

This study was performed at the History Colorado Center, located in Denver, Colorado in Fall of 2014 – Winter of 2015. History Colorado was selected for the research site because of the researcher’s familiarity with the institution, the genre of museum that History Colorado represents, and that fact that the museum recently underwent a redesign of the entire institution<sup>7</sup>. Previously known as the Historical Society of Colorado and located in an older building in downtown Denver, the museum was given the unique opportunity to redesign their space “from scratch” in 2010 because the state of Colorado needed the parcel of land that the museum had been located on for a new justice center<sup>8</sup>.

Instead of being defeated by the prospect of recreating an entire museum, the leadership of the Historical Society took this opportunity to critically engage with the idea of what a history museum would look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, exhibits and interpretation staff decided early on during the development of the new History Colorado Center that the exhibits would stray from the typical Western history narrative that focused on notable historic individuals, and rather focus on the stories of the average Coloradan during different times in the state’s history.

This unique situation results in the History Colorado Center representing the most recent thinking about how history museum exhibitions in America are developed – instead of

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<sup>7</sup> The researcher performed a six-month, part-time audience research internship at History Colorado Center from November 2013 to September 2014.

<sup>8</sup> History Colorado is an agency of the State of Colorado under the Department of Higher Education.

representing how exhibit developers in the 1980s or 1990s thought about the representation of gender within an exhibit, this meant that this study would look at how exhibit developers in 2010s represent gender within an exhibit. The museum has been called “the first great history museum of the twenty-first century” by the director of Smithsonian Affiliations, and challenges visitors to “step into the shoes of others” (Greigo, 2012).

Since this study was performed almost three years after the opening of the History Colorado Center, all of the staff that worked on the reopening and comprised the exhibit development teams still worked for the museum. This close timetable allowed the researcher to obtain the perspectives and insights from the exhibit development staff in order to compare these to the messages that visitors interpreted from the exhibit.

While working as an audience research intern at the History Colorado Center in Denver, CO, as required for my Master’s Degree in Museum and Field Studies, I completed a timing and tracking study of an exhibit entitled *Destination Colorado*. Timing and tracking, first developed by Beverly Serrell in the 1980s, is the summary of multiple unobtrusive observations of visitor behavior to draw conclusions about how the exhibit is used by visitors (Serrell, 1998). The Destination Colorado exhibit tested fantastically, according to the metrics developed by Serrell, becoming one of the few exhibits that could be considered an “exceptionally and thoroughly used exhibition” according to a meta-analysis of 160 studies using metrics developed by Serrell (Serrell, 2011). While conducting my observations, which involved tracking 50 individual visitors and their behavior through the exhibit, I noticed many trends in visitor behavior which interested me, but did not fit the confines of the data collection for the timing and tracking study.

Many visitors pointed at and commented on one panel that discussed how difficult women’s work was during the era described in the exhibit, homesteaders in eastern Colorado

during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This small observation lead me to develop an interest in how gender of this exhibit was designed and how it was interpreted by visitors. Were these trends in visitor behavior because of my own readings and background as a feminist within the museum field? Was there something else going on? Something in the exhibit narrative or interpretive element that allowed visitors to see gender in an exhibit that was not explicitly feminist or explicitly about gender?

### *Exhibit Background*

*Destination Colorado* was one of the first of three exhibitions that were installed in the museum during the opening of the new building in 2012, though no summative evaluation had been performed on the exhibit before this study. The description of the exhibit from the History Colorado marking department is as follows:

Visitors will journey back in time to Colorado's eastern plains, circa 1920, to the agricultural town of Keota, which served as an inspiration for James Michener's celebrated 1974 novel, *Centennial*. Visitors will meet the people who homesteaded and settled this town along Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroad line and will become immersed in this story of community.

The exhibit design is one that focuses on immersion, with a high amount of interactive exhibit elements and replicas that visitors are encouraged to touch. These include a school where visitors can take their yearbook photos, a Model T in which visitors can take a simulated car ride, a farmhouse with a cow that can be milked and chickens that lay wooden eggs, and a general store that encourages creativity and visitor interaction through play-acting exchanging.

In addition to artifacts from Keota residents, the exhibit contains videos of six town narrators. These video narrators- three men and three women, played by reenactors - are based

on six individuals who lived in Keota during the time on which the exhibit focuses. They include a young schoolgirl, a male high school student, a female school teacher, a male general store owner, a female German-born Russian farm wife, and a male farmer. The narrators introduce the exhibit and are also in the appropriate town places for their livelihoods (i.e., - the farm wife and farmer in the barn, the school teacher and students in the schoolhouse).

### *The project*

This project was designed to be a “win-win” for a researcher interested in gender and a museum that was interested in completing a learning outcomes study of an exhibit. With that in mind, a focus on gender could not dominate any of the interactions with visitors. Any question that dealt with the project of gender interpretation could not overshadow the learning outcomes questions – they must share the space of the small study equally<sup>9</sup>. The methods were chosen to appropriately answer the question of visitor perception of gender in a way that allowed a combination of a simple demographic survey and a semi-structured interview were developed in order to obtain free response quotes from visitors themselves, without predisposing participants to answers from which to choose. The demographic survey was utilized in order to see if any answers about gender correlate to demographic identities, in addition to serving to inform the institution about the demographic of their visitors.

The project was developed under the direction of a team of University of Colorado-Boulder Museum and Field Studies faculty and staff and with input from History Colorado exhibits and interpretation staff. All related materials were submitted to the University of Colorado-Boulder’s Institutional Review Board for approval. Approval was gained on

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<sup>9</sup> The focus of this thesis, however, will remain on those questions and analysis focused on gender. The learning outcomes study, combined with timing and tracking results, is expected to be compiled in a report that will be published on [informalscience.org](http://informalscience.org).



September 17, 2014. This ensured that all visitors and any information collected by the researcher would remain anonymous and protected.

### *Study Design - Visitors*

This study was designed as an exploratory data analysis that allowed the researcher to look at the main characteristics of the data obtained from actual visitors, as opposed to visitors who were cued in an experimental fashion. This means that data were analyzed with the intent of finding broad trends within this data set. An exploratory data analysis was chosen because of the unique nature of this study – no similar study exists in the literature, therefore any visitor response trends and responses were unknown at the beginning of this study. This also resulted in no control group. All data was obtained from visitors after their unobserved and uncued visit through *Destination Colorado*<sup>10</sup>.

Participants in this study were randomly selected from visitors to the *Destination Colorado* exhibit, after they had exited the exhibition area. *Destination Colorado*, while still a free-choice learning environment, does have a designated entry and exit point in order for visitors to see the entire exhibit and understand the temporal dimension of the exhibit narrative. After a visitor group exited the exhibit, one individual was approached by the researcher and asked if they would like to answer a few questions about themselves and the exhibit<sup>11</sup>. Once the researcher had obtained verbal consent to continue with the interview. If consent was not given, no data was collected from the visitor.

The visitor portion of the project consisted of a post-visit intercept paper demographic survey and a semi-structured interview, all performed by the same researcher. The demographic

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<sup>10</sup> While there were no signs in *Destination Colorado* informing visitors of the on-going studies, there was a sign visible as they entered the museum atrium. The full text of this sign can be found in the appendix.

<sup>11</sup> The full verbal consent script can be found in the appendix.

study was adapted from the demographic survey that the History Colorado Center gives to its general visitor population.<sup>12</sup> The use of a similar survey allowed for the demographic information to be compared to the demographics of History Colorado Center visitors, in order to see if the random visitor population of the study resembled the general demographics of the visitors to the History Colorado Center. One notable difference between the general demographic study and the demographic survey for this specific study was that the survey used for this program did not use a binary for options for gender (i.e., – male or female), but allowed for individuals to self-identify their gender identity.

The visitor was then asked for consent to record the semi-structured interview, and then the researcher performed the interview. The interview was recorded on a secure iPad, using Evernote Pro software, and transcribed later by the researcher.

80 visitors were interviewed and 80 demographic surveys were collected; these were paired using coding that identified the date of the interview and the interview number of the day (0101141 would mean that it was the first interview on January 1, 2014). No identifying information was collected from visitors.

#### *Study Design – Exhibit Development Team*

The three members of the exhibit development team (project manager, educator, and collections curator) were interviewed about their perspective on the development of the exhibit. Interviews were solicited via e-mail, and then conducted in-person at the History Colorado Center. The interviews were recorded on the same, secure iPad as the visitor interviews, using EvernotePro software, and transcribed by the researcher following the interviews.

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<sup>12</sup> Disclosure: The researcher for this study developed the demographic survey for History Colorado in Fall of 2013.

These perspectives were essential to the project in order to understand if narratives that seem to aim for gender equality (and equal representation of men and women) were intentionally developed and included by the museums, or were perhaps a reflection of inherent biases in their exhibit development process. The development team, while knowing that I was performing a thesis that focused on visitor interpretation on gender in this exhibit, did not know what questions I was asking of visitors.

## CHAPTER IV

### STUDY RESULTS

#### *Analysis: Exhibit Development Team Interviews*

The three members of the exhibit development team – all women – were interviewed by the researcher during three separate visits to the History Colorado Center<sup>13</sup>. The exhibit development team consisted of a curator from the History Colorado archives and collections, the director of education (who served as the lead exhibit developer, and who was the final authority on the narrative and storyline), and the exhibit project manager. None of the exhibit development team members were evaluation specialists; the audience research and storyline prototyping/testing was contracted out to People, Places, and Design Research, an independent evaluation firm.<sup>14</sup> Each member of the exhibit development team was asked the same set of questions, some of which touched on the general themes of exhibit development that would benefit the larger institutional goals that this study was supporting<sup>15</sup>. Other questions specifically focused on what demographic identities were considered in the exhibit development process, to touch on the intentionality of gendered messages within the exhibition.

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<sup>13</sup> The full text of all interview scripts can be found in Appendix I.

<sup>14</sup> While the researcher had access to the internal evaluation reports produced by People, Places, and Design Research, the evaluators who compiled the reports were not interviewed for this study because of time concerns and respect for proprietary information of their company.

<sup>15</sup> The entire interview script can be found in the appendix to this thesis.

*What story should be told in this exhibit?*

All three members of the exhibit development team stressed that their task was to use their first exhibit to talk about an ignored part of Colorado – both geographically and historically. Goals for the exhibit included a narrative with which any visitor could connect, as well as communicating historic change and conveying the strong sense of community that History Colorado staff saw as emblematic of the state of Colorado.

All three members of the exhibit development team noted that the biggest concerns with the subject matter did not involve gender, but involved the story of Keota that was being told and the fact that “this was an all-white story” (JJR Personal Communication, 2015). The concerns about Keota stemmed from the museum administrations’ concerns that opening up the new museum with a story of failure would not “go over well with audiences” (ibid).

The educator and exhibit developer stressed the importance of creating a universal narrative that visitors could connect with, while the curator focused more on telling a story of real people who did not view their lives as special or meaningful in anyway. Regardless of the primary focus of the exhibit, all three women stated that it was important for visitors to have multiple ways to engage with the exhibit narrative. Label text was considered one way for visitors to interact with Keota’s history, and interactive exhibit elements (such as driving a replica Model T or putting together a quilt square) were another. However, through audience testing and an insistence that there must be a way for visitors to connect with individuals in this exhibit narrative, the idea of the narrators (or guides, as the institutional term) was created. Audience research was used to explore the possibility of communicating the exhibit narrative through the guides, and ultimately they were deemed successful enough to be included in the exhibit.

### *Who should the narrators be?*

Once the concept of narrators or guides was chosen, the exhibit team looked to the collection of artifacts from the people of Keota to find the narrators. The curator took responsibility for finding the real stories and artifacts to match the desired personas for the narrators, though she admitted “we were limited by the objects we had” (AZ, personal communication, January 2015). The project manager also had added that they “attempted to be as diverse as they could be” – again acknowledging the issues that come with exhibiting an all-white story as the first exhibit in a new building during a decade when Denver’s and Colorado’s demographics were drastically changing (BK, personal communication, December 2014). Instead of looking for race or ethnicity to provide diversity, age and gender were the identities considered in order to allow all visitors to feel welcome.

In sum, the decision to include equal numbers of female and male narrators was not done with an idea of creating an exhibit that would advocate for gender justice or an equal expression of gender identities within the traditional binary, but was undertaken as a way for all visitors to find someone to connect to with the exhibit. Narrators were developed to give visitors a sense of personal connection to the story of Keota that is told within the exhibit. This does assume, however, that all visitors identify as either male or female within the traditional gender binary. While all three women talked about the narrators as being an innovative addition to the exhibit, both the exhibit project manager and the educator/lead exhibit developer expressed concern that the narrators were not as effective as the exhibit team may have originally hoped<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> NB: No audience research or summative evaluation of *Destination Colorado* has been undertaken by the History Colorado Center, with the exception of this study and a timing and tracking study performed by the same researcher in the summer of 2014.

*“I was dead set from the very beginning against this being a Hall of Heroes, like the Founding Fathers of Keota. That just never was the point.” – Lead Exhibit Developer*

While the exhibit was never undertaken as an explicitly feminist project, the education director – who also served as lead exhibit developer - admits that she now sees that “it’s an exhibit developed by three women with fairly strong personalities,” though she is unsure if her personal commitment to feminism – or the ideals of the other two women – affected the development of the exhibit narrative (JJR, personal communication, January 2015). She does, however, point to the fact that the interconnectedness of female kinship networks was a historical fact that allowed these small communities on the eastern Plains of Colorado to survive. Curator AZ acknowledged that women played a part in the development of Keota, but also considered the personal relationships that she fostered with the surviving residents of Keota as a reason why artifacts representing all areas of the town survived, and why the exhibit is able to represent all areas of Keota.

“[I had a personal connection with] Oriel Sansted who is the daughter of Faye Oram and the niece of Clyde Stanley. And because of my relationship with her over the years, ultimately when she passed away, her family gave us the collection, which is quite sizable.” (AZ, personal communication, January 2015)

All three women interviewed, then, did not acknowledge the inclusion of feminine spaces or women’s stories as a feminist project, nor the exhibit as a feminist exhibit. To these three women, the representation of the entire community was just an expansion of history museums and fit with History Colorado’s mission. All members of the team interviewed seem to understand that the exhibit deals with individual identities and personalities, both in its subject matter and in the ways in which visitors could potentially interact with the exhibit.

### *Analysis: Demographics*

The visitors interviewed were 65% female ( $n=52$ ) and 25% male ( $n=28$ ). That the majority of the interviewed population was female matches to many trends when looking at the gender of museum visitors<sup>17</sup>. Not only does this match with current trends in museum visitor studies, but this has also been a historic trend in museums – often explained because women were the caregivers of the family who tended to bring children to the museum (Falk & Dierking, 2013). In three other visitor studies performed at History Colorado within a year of this survey, women outnumbered men in each of those samples as well<sup>18</sup>.

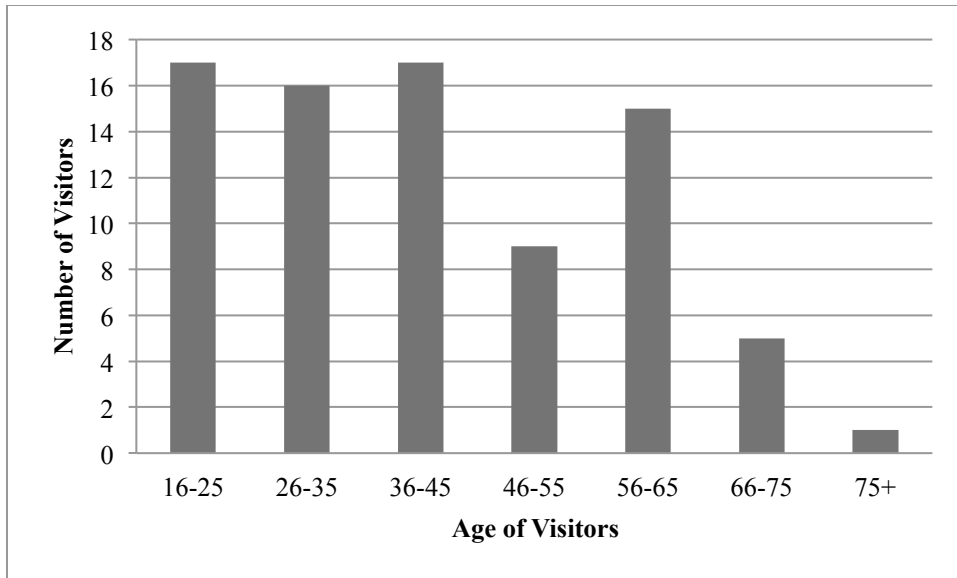
When compared to the data from the general visitor demographic survey, given at History Colorado Center two to three times a month, the gendered makeup is relatively similar. Thirty-seven percent of the visitors are male, 61% of visitors are female, and 2% of visitors identify as a gender that is neither male nor female.

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<sup>17</sup> While there was the option on the survey to write in a gender identity that was neither male nor female, no interviewed visitors indicated this.

<sup>18</sup> 58% Female, 42% Male; 57% Female, 43% Male; 58% Female, 42% Male were the gender breakdown in the other three studies. These studies were not random, however, and an attempt was made

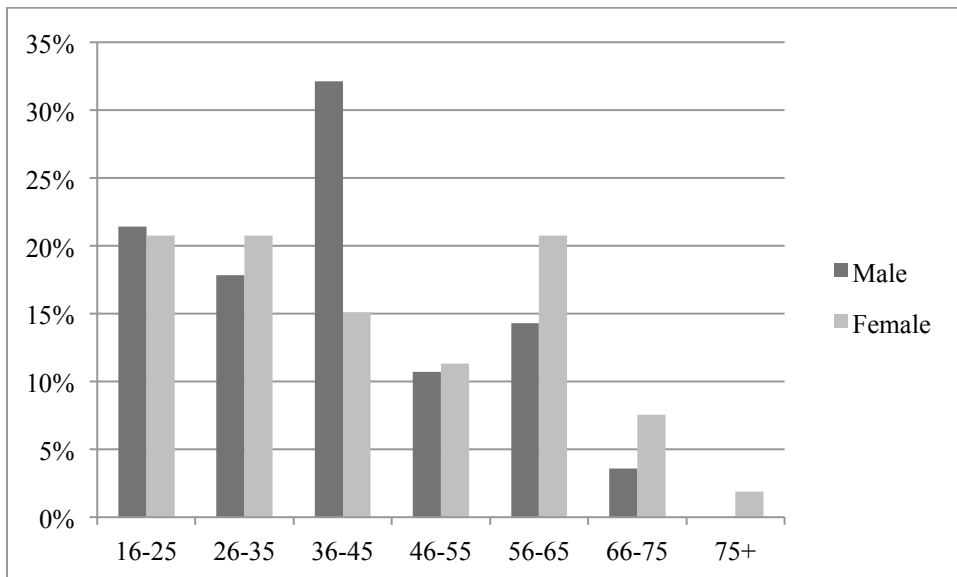




*Figure 1.* Age of visitors interviewed, this study. This figure represents the distribution of ages of those visitors to the History Colorado Center who were interviewed for this study.

The age distribution, when split by the gender identity of the visitor, is similar, but not the same.

The female population of visitors skews slightly older than the male population.

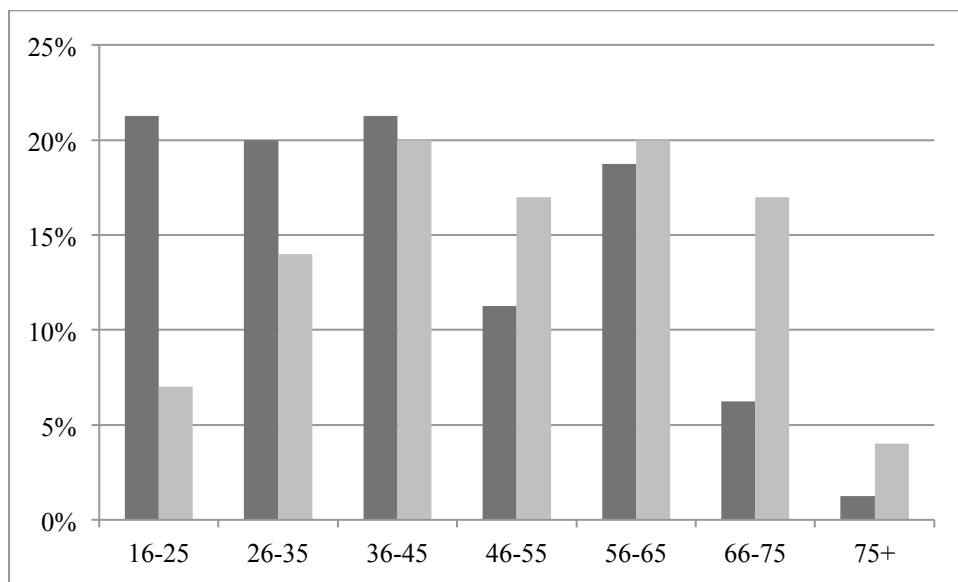


*Figure 2:* Age of visitors interviewed, this study, men vs. women. This figure represents the distribution of ages of those visitors to the History Colorado Center by gender who were interviewed for this study.

The visitors interviewed also represented a wide spectrum of ages, shown in Figure 1. For a study of gender, this is an interesting demographic trend because the popular culture ideas

about gender roles and the common terminology used to describe gender has drastically changed during the past 50 years (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

The wide spectrum of ages of visitors is not uncommon for History Colorado Center. The distribution of ages in the general visitor population, obtained from the general demographic survey, is shown below in Figure 2. The museum regularly attracts a diverse population in terms of age of visitors. The sample of interviewed visitors is slightly younger than the general visitor population, though represents a comparable diverse population in terms of age. The age distribution of the interviewed visitors is displayed with the age distribution of the general museum population below in Figure 2.



*Figure 3.* Age of visitors, interviewed visitors vs. general population of visitors. This figure represents the distribution of ages of those visitors interviewed (dark grey) to visitors to the History Colorado Center from the general demographic survey (light grey).

#### *Analysis: Semi-Structured Interview*

Instead of trying to construct a complicated spectrum of gendered messages from what the visitor would tell the interviewer, the key questions surrounding gender were simply as follows:

- What did you think about the women in the exhibit?

- What did you think about the men in the exhibit?

The order of these two questions was switched with every interview, so that the question about women did not always come before the question about men, and vice versa<sup>19</sup>. While those were the only explicit questions that engaged with the topic of gender, a few of the learning outcome questions could also be analyzed through a gendered lens. In particular, I looked towards the question about “What surprised you most about the exhibit” to provide information about if the gendered messages in the exhibit were a surprise to visitors or if it was seen as just a part of the average museum going experience. In addition, the question of “Which narrator did you connect with most or remember most?” was asked to see two pieces of data – which of the exhibit narrators (there are three men and three women) did people connect with and did that have any connection with the demographic categories selected by the visitor.

Responses were transcribed by the researcher and manually coded into categories to determine general trends. When two or more themes were mentioned by the visitor, double-coding was used<sup>20</sup>. If a visitor mentioned two trends, these were each noted, instead of finding a third theme that combined both. This was done in order to represent all subjects talked about by visitors, in order to identify all trends that visitors mentioned.

### *Results – Gendered Questions*

*“It was really well done. That’s how well done it was, and it was inclusive of men and women.” – Male, 56-65 (Interview #22)*

WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE WOMEN IN THE EXHIBIT?

WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE MEN IN THE EXHIBIT?

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<sup>19</sup> No differences in responses because of question order were noticed.

<sup>20</sup> Because of double coding, standard statistical tests were inappropriate for the analysis. Use of statistical tests in visitor studies of perceptions of gender should be investigated in future studies.

Responses to these two questions were coded as one; as discussed earlier these questions were asked in a different order as not to bias the results of the series of two questions. This was one of the last questions asked because it was the only question that explicitly mentioned gender. This question was put near the end of the semi-structured interview to allow visitors to spontaneously mention gendered ideas if they applied to earlier questions without biasing the responses of those questions (i.e.- if the first question was about gender, then the topic of gender would already be suggested to visitors as an appropriate or available response for the remaining questions of the interview).

Thirty five percent of visitors interviewed ( $n=28$ ) mentioned something explicit about the way the exhibit materials portrayed and spoke about women. 29% of visitors interviewed ( $n=23$ ) spoke about individuals in a vague or general, not gendered way (i.e. – the people were nice, they were good, etc.). 11% of visitors interviewed ( $n=9$ ) commented about the exhibit’s portrayal of traditional gender roles. 6% of visitors ( $n=5$ ) and 5% of visitors ( $n=4$ ) mentioned a female or male narrator/guide particularly. 35% of visitors interviewed ( $n=28$ ) responded that there was nothing or nothing in particular that stood out about the men or the women in the exhibit; 3% of responses ( $n=2$ ) were not relevant to the questions asked.

Visitors who commented on the depiction of gender with specific reference to women in *Destination Colorado* were predominantly female. These visitors were also of a wide variety of ages; the most common age groupings were 55-65 and 16-25. The gender and age demographic profile of all visitors who commented on the depiction of women is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2 <i>Demographic Profile of Visitors Who Commented on the Depiction of Women</i> (“What did you think of the women/what did you think of the men?”)		
Gender		Percentage of Visitors (n)
	Female	71% (20)
	Male	29% (8)
Age		
	16-25	21% (6)
	26-35	18% (5)
	36-45	18% (5)
	46-55	7% (2)
	56-65	25% (7)
	66-75	7% (2)
	75+	7% (2)

Visitors who commented on changing gender roles from the time period depicted in *Destination Colorado* were predominately younger and represented nearly equal numbers of men and women. The gender and age demographic profile of all visitors who commented on changing gender roles is shown below in Table 3.

Table 3 <i>Demographic Profile of Visitors Who Commented on Changing Gender Roles</i> (“What did you think of the women/what did you think of the men?”)		
Gender		Percentage of Visitors (n)
	Female	56% (5)
	Male	44% (4)
Age		
	16-25	33% (3)
	26-35	22% (2)
	36-45	11% (1)
	46-55	11% (1)
	56-65	22% (2)
	66-75	0% (0)
	75+	0% (0)

The questions that dealt with the narrator videos within *Destination Colorado* were as follows:

DID YOU WATCH THE NARRATOR VIDEOS?

WAS THERE A NARRATOR YOU CONNECTED WITH MORE THAN ANOTHER?

When asked if visitors watched the narrator videos during their visit, 33% ( $n=26$ ) of visitors answered that they had watched the videos. 36% of visitors said that they watched “some” or “a few” of the videos ( $n=29$ ). Therefore, 74% of visitors ( $n=59$ ) mentioned watching the narrators videos, either during their current visit or a previous one. The gender and age demographic profile of visitors who mentioned watching a narrator video, either on the current or a previous visit, is shown below in Table 4.

Table 4 <i>Demographic Profile of Visitors Who Watched a Narrator Video</i>		
Gender		Percentage of Visitors ( $n$ )
	Female	59% (35)
	Male	41% (24)
Age		
	16-25	22% (13)
	26-35	20% (12)
	36-45	17% (10)
	46-55	12% (7)
	56-65	22% (13)
	66-75	7% (4)
	75+	0% (0)

The visitors that responded that they had watched videos were asked a follow-up question to see if there was a narrator that the visitor connected with more than another. 32% of the visitors asked the follow-up question ( $n=19$ ) did not have a particular narrator that they connected with or remembered more than another. However, 68% of the visitors asked the follow-up question ( $n=40$ ) did connect with or remember a particular narrator. The most popular was Faye Oram, the schoolteacher, with 24% of the visitors asked the follow-up question ( $n=14$ )

mentioning her character either by name or by describing her career or personality. The full list of responses to this follow-up question is found below in Table 5.

Table 5 <i>Narrators Whom Visitors Mentioned As Remembered</i>	
Narrator Description/Name	Percentage of Visitors ( <i>n</i> )
Schoolteacher/Faye Oram	24% (14)
General store owner/Clyde Stanley	14% (8)
Little girl/Rose Ball	10% (6)
Russian-German Woman/ Farmer/	10% (6)
Younger boy/Ole Olson	7% (4)
House voiceovers	5% (3)
Other	5% (3)
No – did not watch the videos	32% (19)

Of the narrators that were mentioned, male narrators were mentioned less than women, with men being mentioned 34% of the time and female narrators being mentioned 66% of the time. This means that women were mentioned nearly twice as many times as men as being the narrators that visitors connected with most.

The visitors who mentioned a female narrator were predominantly female and represented a broad age range. The most common age ranges were 16-25 and 56-65. The gender and age demographic breakdown of those visitors who connected with or remembered a female narrator is shown below in Table 6.

Table 6 <i>Demographic Profile of Visitors Who Mentioned a Female Narrator</i>		
Gender		Percentage of Visitors ( <i>n</i> )
Age	Female	69% (18)
	Male	31% (8)
	16-25	35% (9)
	26-35	12% (3)
	36-45	4% (1)
	46-55	12% (3)
	56-65	27% (7)
	66-75	12% (3)
	75+	0% (0)

Visitors who mentioned connecting with or remembering a male narrator were nearly equal numbers of men and women and represented a wide range of ages. The gender and age demographic breakdown of those visitors who connected with or remembered a male narrator is shown below in Table 7.

Table 7 <i>Demographic Profile of Visitors Who Mentioned a Male Narrator</i>		
Gender		Percentage of Visitors ( <i>n</i> )
Age	Female	57% (8)
	Male	43% (6)
	16-25	29% (4)
	26-35	36% (5)
	36-45	7% (1)
	46-55	7% (1)
	56-65	14% (2)
	66-75	7% (1)
	75+	0% (0)



## WHAT WAS THE MOST MEMORABLE PART OF THE EXHIBIT FOR YOU?

By far, the most mentioned memorable area of the exhibit for visitors was the Model T Ford, with 29% of visitors mentioning that specific exhibit element ( $n=23$ ). Following that, 16% of visitors ( $n=13$ ) mentioned the schoolhouse as the most memorable part of the exhibit and 14% of visitors ( $n=11$ ) mentioned the closing video as the most memorable part of the exhibit. The full list of responses to this question is found below in Table 8.

Table 8 <sup>21</sup> <i>Memorable Parts of the Exhibit, According to Visitors</i>	
Description of exhibit area/element	Percentage of Visitors ( $n$ )
Model T	29% (23)
School	16% (13)
Closing video	14% (11)
General store	13% (10)
Barn/cow	10% (8)
Interactive elements	10% (8)
Farmhouse	9% (7)
Egg collecting	6% (5)
Personal stories/narrators	6% (5)
Other/Miscellaneous	23% (18)

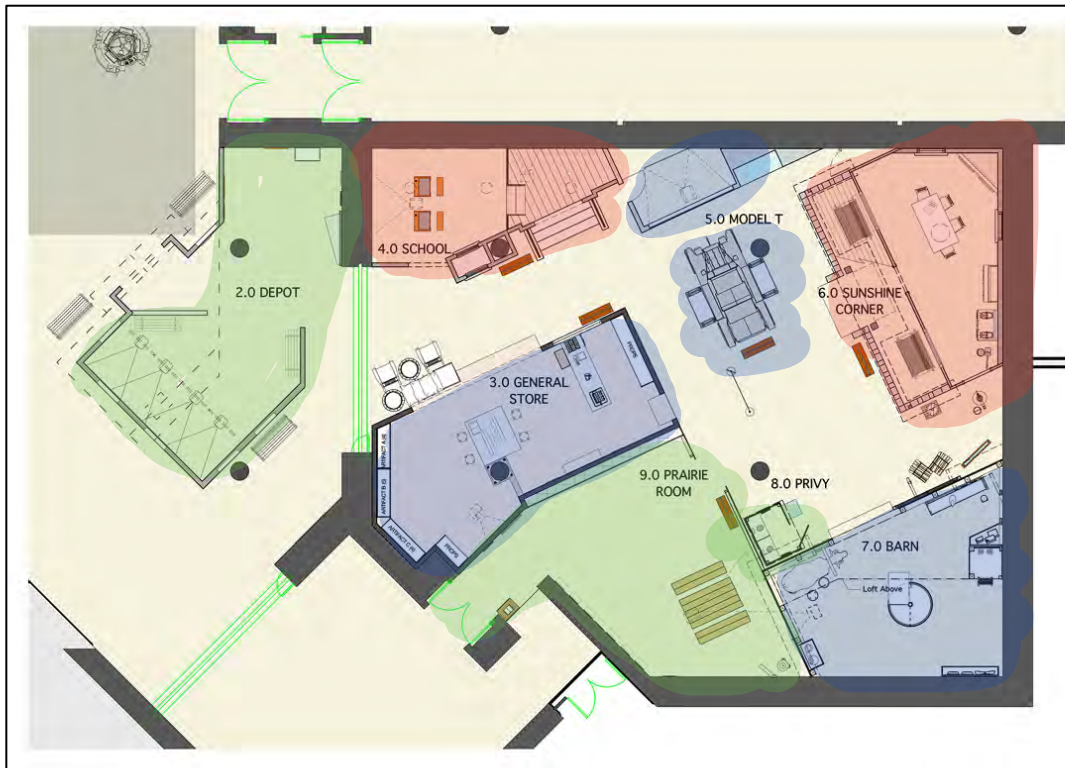
*“We were talking about that – all the things that women accomplished in a day. All the things they had to do, and that came from seeing the house.” – Female, 56-65 (Interview #17)*

These areas can be gendered, not only through the individuals who were featured in these areas, but also through the historic gendered connotations that spheres of public and private life have. For example, the school would be considered a feminine sphere, as schoolteachers of that day-and-age were nearly always female. In addition, the farmhouse, “Sunshine Corners”, would also be considered feminine as the private sphere was considered a woman’s domain and in the exhibit, only women’s voices are featured in this area of the exhibit. Masculine arenas of the

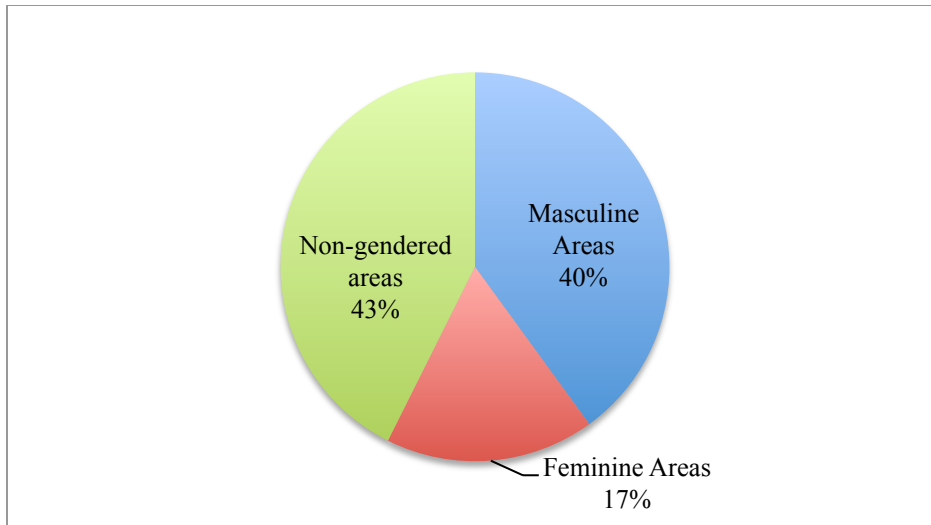
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<sup>21</sup> This was a separate question that the previously analyzed question concerning if the visitors had watched a narrator.

exhibit would include the Model T Ford, the barn, and the general store, as these public areas were considered male-dominated and for the male citizen. Some areas would not be considered either masculine or feminine because both men and women are featured in those specific exhibit areas.



*Figure 4.* Blueprint of *Destination Colorado*, gendered spaces marked. This figure shows the gender of specific areas of the exhibit space; masculine areas are blue, feminine areas are red, and non-gendered areas are green.



*Figure 5.* Visitor comments on gendered spaces. This figure shows visitor comments on memorable areas of the exhibit, coded by gender of those spaces.

While the most popular group of areas is the non-gendered areas, the masculine areas were mentioned twice as often as feminine areas.

#### *Trends of visitor responses*

Because of the restrictions on the scope of this study – all data was collected and analyzed by myself in a short time frame because of the timing of a master’s thesis – the sample size is relatively small in comparison with other studies of visitor perception.

*“I felt like there were more women. I felt like it was very pro-women.” – Female, 16-25*

*(Interview #70)*

While *Destination Colorado* featured an equal split of men and women, as well as areas representing men and women’s life, many visitors commented on the fact that women were represented more than men when asked about the men and women in the exhibit. In addition, women commented much more often on the depiction of women within the exhibit than male visitors did.

*“You see the separation. Women are in the house and cooking and doing all that domesticated stuff and men were out working and doing farm stuff.” – Female, 16-25 (Interview #43)*

*“I did find it, like stereotypical and sexist? But I don’t know how you get around that, just the women working and cooking.” – Female, 26-35 (Interview #32)*

Fourteen visitors commented on the arbitrary nature of gender roles, especially the fact that these gender roles have changed over time. These same visitors expanding on the depiction of traditional gender roles and how women can do so much more in the modern day – I believe this is an acknowledgement by visitors that the gender roles within the exhibit narrative are a historical construction that continue to change to this day.

Following this, six visitors commented on the surprise with which the women’s agency in their life was portrayed, especially considering the time period the exhibit portrays (1920s). One visitor, who was visiting the museum from the Boston area, commented on the differences between the gender roles in the Western frontier as compared to the gender roles that he saw in the Colonial American museums:

“Women - they're all very willing to stick up for what they want to do, and go for it.

Whereas in the colonial era, it was more like the man's job to do everything.”

*“Not that I can think of. I mean, it’s nice that there were a lot [of women] and a lot of their stories.” – Male, 26-35 (Interview #3)*

Thirteen visitors commented on the fact that it was rare to see a history museum that had so many women’s stories portrayed. This may be because *Destination Colorado* is not an exhibit that is explicitly about women, like the exhibits cited in many feminist analysis of museums. *Destination Colorado* makes no claims about gender, but simply purports to tell the entire story of a town. The fact that visitors acknowledged that this was not typical of history museums

means that visitors subtly understand that history museums have traditionally told the stories of male history, often leaving out women's history.

As discussed earlier, museums contribute to the cultural production of an unbalanced gender binary. And, because of their status as disciplinary institutions, museums have emphasized that visitors should expect to see stories about the male experience. I contend that the surprise that visitors expressed at seeing women's stories told in a standard museum exhibit (i.e. – an exhibit that is not explicitly about gender) is explained by the naturalization of museum exhibitions telling masculinist narratives.

*“So I thought there was a lot more talk about the women and working in the homes. They didn't talk a lot – maybe they talked more in general about what the men did – but there was more detail about the women.” – Female, 46-55 (Interview #12)*  
*“In fact, the men didn't seem as present as the women, The women were much more involved or seemed more visible.” – Male, 26-35 (Interview #75)*

When answering questions about what visitors noticed about the women and men in the exhibition, the vast majority of visitors responded that they noticed something about the women. In fact, as mentioned earlier, 35% of visitors – over one third – mentioned noticing something explicitly about how the women in the exhibit were portrayed. In contrast to this phenomenon, many visitors commented on the fact that they were surprised that they did not notice anything in particular about the men, but at the same time were able to recall specific details. Nine visitors were able to remember one or two specific text panels that mentioned aspects of women's lives, but could not remember anything specific about male livelihoods.

In critical studies of gender, marked and unmarked categories are terms originally borrowed from linguistics. Male was seen as an unmarked word, where as female – the modified and specialized form of the unmarked word – was the marked word. Critical feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway and Candace West expanded this concept to marked and unmarked

categories, used primarily to understand racial and gendered differences (West & Zimmerman, 1986). For critical studies of race, especially in Western cultures, white is the unmarked category, as it is seen as the default (Dyer, 1996). For gender, male is the unmarked category and female is the marked category – male bodies and men are considered the default person. This applies to museum exhibits, where the idealized visitor and the typical subject of exhibitions are white, male, and heterosexual (Levin, 2010). Visitors showed how this can be seen in museums by commenting the marked category of women much more than the unmarked category of men.

*“I didn’t buy the schoolteacher’s hairdo.” – Female, 44-55 (Interview #22)*

During the responses to the question that concerned what narrator that each visitor remembered most during the exhibit, there was a notable difference between the way that visitors described the female narrators versus the male narrators. The male narrators, when their names were not remembered, were described by their profession or by a characteristic that the visitor thought the possessed. For examples, see the quotes in Tables 9 and 10 below.

Table 9 <i>Examples of descriptions of male narrators by visitors</i>
<p>“There was a young man that was dressed as a storekeeper.”</p> <p>“The guy conveyed the seriousness of how hard the life was there.”</p> <p>“I guess the general store owner.”</p> <p>“For me it was the merchant. He seemed really humble and just a good man.”</p>

These four descriptions are examples of the 15 descriptions of male narrators by visitors. Of these, only 20% of them ( $n=15$ ) mentioned the physical appearance of the male narrator. Compare those descriptions with how the female narrators were described by the visitors.

Table 10 <i>Examples of descriptions of female narrators by visitors</i>
<p>“The one we saw the most of was the blonde teacher.”</p> <p>“I would have one critique on the school teacher – her hair wasn’t right.”</p> <p>“I thought the little girl was cute.”</p> <p>“He laughed at the little girl, she was cute.”</p>

Out of the 24 descriptions of female narrators given by visitors, 45% ( $n=11$ ) explicitly mentioned the physical appearance of the female narrator.

The female narrators were described by their appearance 45% of the time – the only profession mentioned was the school teacher, and she was always described by her appearance as well. Male narrators, on the other hand, were described by their appearance only 20% of the time. This speaks to how visitors remember individuals within exhibits are shaped by the societal expectations we have about men and women. Men are remembered for what they do, women are remembered for what they look like.

#### *Comparison of analysis: Visitors and the Exhibit Development Team*

Many of the “universal messages” that the exhibit designers developed for the exhibit did translate to the visitors. The most popular takeaway from the exhibit, in fact, was that visitors did get a sense of the era that the exhibit represents. Many visitors commented on the historical change the exhibit encapsulated, specifically that the town disappeared but there was a strong community connection to the geographic area. The exhibit also succeeds in bringing attention to a geographic area of the state’s history that is ignored.

#### *Women as the backbone of the community*

Many visitors commented on the community connections that were represented in the town of Keota. These relationships are also a historical reality that is drawn from female kinship networks:

Really, it was the female kinship networks that created these communities - not just that community, but all these communities. It was women, and if you look at historic homestead patterns, they cluster - these houses, they’re on these huge tracts of lands, but women create these networks, which is so cool. And when you go in that homestead

house kitchen, like it's women's voices and it's women talking. [...] I can't imagine [the exhibit] being any other way. That was the driving force of this community – it was the presence of these women (JJR, personal communication, January 2015).

In a way, the connections that many visitors commented on are a reality of a gendered nature of the eastern Plains of Colorado. And while the exhibit development team behind *Destination Colorado* was not explicit in showing the feminine networks that lead to this community, the gendered nature of the historical reality of Keota can still be seen as a contributing factor into how this exhibit resonates with museum visitors.

#### *Narrator connections*

Contrary to the expectations of the exhibit development team, the video narrators in *Destination Colorado* are watched by a majority of visitors - with nearly three-fourths of visitors reporting having watched a video either on their current or a previous visit, and with 50% of visitors being able to mention a specific narrator<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, the use of narrators in this exhibit or in any future exhibit, should be critically analyzed in terms of gender and other demographic identities.

Because these narrators are based on real individuals, there is a limited amount of leeway that exhibit developers have with the creation of the background stories of the narrators. However, exhibit designers must be conscious of the types of people that are picked because the messages surrounding the gender identity of the exhibits are important. Many adults remarked that young children – especially those visiting with young girls – connected with the little girl narrator. A future exhibit which chooses a precocious young girl to highlight – perhaps one that

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<sup>22</sup> During the timing and tracking study performed by the researcher during the summer of 2014, the average percentage of visitors who stopped at a tracked exhibit element was 47.5%, with the lowest being 4% and the highest 76%. The Introductory Narrator Videos, the only narrator videos tracked, were watched by 58% of visitors during that study.



exhibits traditionally masculine characteristics - can show young girls that socially mandated gender roles are a cultural construction. Similarly, a young boy that exhibits what are considered traditionally feminine characteristics could be utilized to undo some of the expectations that come with masculinity.

Unsurprisingly, gender was not a priority for the exhibit development team while working on the narrative of *Destination Colorado* - this maps on to the trends that have been discussed in the history of museums in the United States. However, gender was still a strong aspect of the narrative, both because of the commitment to represent the entire town of Keota – men and women – and because of the personalities of those individuals behind the exhibit.

### *Limitations*

I believe this study begins to introduce the visitor into feminist study of the museums. However, I acknowledge that it is not a perfect study by any estimation. Part of that reason is the timing – this study was designed to serve as the basis of a Master’s thesis, so the data was collected with the knowledge that the researcher must complete all data gathering and analysis in a constrained amount of time and with no help from research assistants of any kind. These constraints affected the study that was possible. An ideal study would have a larger sample size and be triangulated with at least two other forms of data collection – perhaps a series of more in-depth, unstructured interviews and a series of focus groups to elucidate other feelings or reactions about the exhibit.

There is also the issue of the timing of the interview; as an introductory text on museum evaluation states, “there is no perfect time in which to interview a visitor” (Diamond, 1999). I chose to interview visitors as soon as they had finished their experience with the exhibit because then I could ensure that they had actually visited that specific exhibit within the museum.

However, studies have shown that a visitor's full understanding of a museum visit experience is not complete when they leave a museum or an exhibit (Falk & Dierking, 2012). A more complete study could possibly involve a pre- and immediately post-visit interview and even a two weeks post-visit interview with the visitor to see if their perception or remembrance of the exhibit was affected or clarified in any meaningful way.

I also acknowledge the difficulties that come with being an "internal" researcher – I work for History Colorado under contract at the time of this writing. Another factor of the choice of this institution as a research site because of my passion for the mission of the organization, in addition to my previous research experience there. I truly believe the organization is doing great things, and I freely acknowledge this. However, I have tried my best to remain objective and critical during the study and this writing.

Finally, I acknowledge that my own gender identity as female can affect these results. As a female, I am in a marked gender category – I am "the other" to a male in the binary framework that pervades Western culture. Therefore, my very presence could potentially affect the answers that I receive. In an ideal study, perhaps the questions developed would also be asked by a male-identifying evaluator in order to see if the answers are affected by the gender of the evaluator. While I am hesitant to rely on someone's gendered appearance as an indicator of how visitors respond to the neutral questions, it may be something that drastically affects the data collected, and therefore should be considered. Another take on this could be to administer a table or paper survey to remove the influence of the researcher altogether. These possibilities should be investigated in future studies, which would look to continue the work performed by this small study.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Throughout the last three hundred years of Western civilization, the institution of the museum has actively discriminated against the representation of women and those who do not conform to the male/female gender binary. Through the promotion of patriarchal narrative norms, the museum – art, history, anthropology, natural science museums – has missed an opportunity to engage with gender within its exhibit narratives. While many professionals within museums have been working over the past 50 years to embrace identities that have previously been excluded from museums, gender has been an identity that has been overlooked by these same staff. Museums are failing to keep up with Western public culture in embracing all expressions of gender, allowing the institution to fall prey to its critics who say that museums are irrelevant to modern society (Durstun, 2013).

During the same period, museums have been undergoing another paradigm shift, in which most museums have turned their focus and goals from building their collections to engaging their visitors. Visitor studies, audience research, and evaluation have become standard practice in many American museums, primarily focusing on learning outcomes but also engaging with how visitors interpret exhibit topics. Among those are studies on how visitors engage with exhibits concerning cultural issues, racial issues, and exhibits that engage with sexuality. Notably lacking are studies that engage with visitors to understand how visitors to museum exhibitions

interpret messages about gender. When exhibits are analyzed for their gendered messaging, the authority of that interpretation is given to academic experts or the exhibit developers. Visitors are not trusted to hold this power of interpretation in the realm of gender.

A study was designed to address the gap in both arenas of museum studies; to bring a focus within the museum studies literature back to gender and to incorporate the perspective of the visitor in studies concerning gender. 80 visitors to the History Colorado Center's exhibit *Destination Colorado* were asked a short post-visit intercept survey with questions that covered learning and experiential exhibit outcomes, but also contained questions that covered visitors' response to the portrayal of men and women in the exhibition. A short demographic survey was also given to the interview participants in order to see if any responses to questions concerning gender matched to any of the commonly studied demographic identities, specifically age and gender.

While the history of museums has pushed gender as a category of analysis to the periphery because of the disciplinary nature of the institution of the museum, a conscious effort to introduce the visitor and gender as research topics can help to bring these topics to the center of study. Studies such as this can help to dismantle the oppressive and unbalanced gender binary of male/female within museum exhibits and understand how powerful the museum can be in assisting in maintain normative narratives about gender.

After analysis<sup>23</sup> and comparison to the museum studies literature, four main takeaways from this small study can be summarized as follows:

1. Visitors do notice gender within exhibits, even if the exhibit is not explicitly about gender.

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<sup>23</sup> Detailed in Chapter III.

2. Because of this, gender is something that exhibit development teams need to critically engage with during the development process.
3. Contrary to a common perception, dealing with gender in an exhibit does not just mean dealing with how women and the feminine are presented.
4. To better our understanding of gender-related interpretation in museum exhibitions, we must continue to expand the scope of visitor studies to include difficult questions.

It is important to note that while many of these conclusions can be applied to a variety of different museum exhibits, the research these conclusions are based on is only from one small research study at History Colorado. More research into these topics is needed to draw large-scale conclusions about general behavior of museum visitors.

#### *1: Visitors do notice gender*

While not all visitors to *Destination Colorado* that were interviewed commented on gender during the exhibit, a large amount of visitors did indicate attention paid to gender during their visit to the exhibit. Including those visitors who commented on the portrayal of traditional gender roles in addition to those visitors who explicitly commented on the interpretation of the women within *Destination Colorado*, nearly two-thirds of visitors commented on gender as a part of their exhibit experience, even though engagement with gender was not an expected outcome for the visitors, as planned by the exhibit development team.

Outcomes for exhibits are developed with the understanding that not all visitors will experience every learning or experiential outcome, so it follows that not all visitors would be expected to engage with gender. In addition, gender is something that all individuals in Western society have, so all visitors to a museum will be bringing their own gender identity and

experience with their gender to their visit to a museum, which can effect their interpretation of an exhibit.

This study was performed at a history museum, so the gender of individuals was quite apparent to visitors. A history museum was chosen as the research site because of the fact that gender is an inherent characteristic of historic individuals that form a part of their identity. It is much easier, because of the limitations of the timing of this study, to ask about the gender of individuals rather than the gender of objects or abstract concepts. An example from this study is the gendered spaces analysis. That is not to say that a similar study of gender could not be performed elsewhere, whether it is the culturally specific gender of objects in a museum that documents technological progress or even the gender of artists or subjects within an art museum exhibition.

Female visitors commented on the depiction of women in *Destination Colorado* more often than male visitors. Women in Western culture are the Other in the male/female gender binary; following this, women noticed messages about a binary in which they are the less powerful (gender) more often than men. This matches other studies of exhibits that focus on how visitors interpret exhibit narratives about race (Korn, 2007). In a study of the exhibit *Race: Are We So Different?*, Randi Korn & Associates found that visitors of color were much more sensitive to the messages about institutional racism than visitors who were white did (ibid.).

## *2: Gender is something that exhibition development teams need to critically engage with*

Because of the fact that gender is something that all museum visitors have and something that, in this study, a majority of visitors commented on gender within the post-visit interview, it follows that exhibit developers need to critically engage with gender during the development of

new exhibits or interpretations of old exhibits. It is not out of the ordinary for exhibit developers to work with community focus groups or academics on exhibit topics that involve portrayals of specific racial groups, ethnic and cultural groups, or sexual orientations, so why would gender be any different?

It should also be noted that when the exhibit team was asked about considerations of diversity, each member of the exhibit development team discussed race and age as their markers of diversity within the exhibit, and only mentioned gender when prompted by the researcher. This also points to a need to expand the definition of “diversity” within museums to move past and embrace other identities in addition than racial and age diversity.

### *3: Gender is not a synonym for female*

When asked if gender was considered in the development of *Destination Colorado*, the exhibit development team responded as follows:

“There were some places where we knew that stories belonged to people or groups of people. Like the school was going to be more about kids and the home was going to be more about women, so we did absolutely bring those stories to the forefront.” (BK, personal communication, December 2014)

“In our guides we tried to get different age groups as well as men and women.” (AZ, personal communication, January 2015)

“When you go in that homestead house kitchen, like it’s women’s voices and it’s women talking. And it wasn’t an intentional “oh there has to be more women than men”, but it really wasn’t until we had conversations that I look back and I think, yeah actually, women are pretty well-represented there.” (JJR, personal communication, January 2015)

The exhibit development team also spoke of gender only in terms of the male/female gender binary that mimics the Orientalist binary that assisted in European colonialism. In addition, when each of these individuals were asked about gender, they all mentioned attempts to bring women's stories into *Destination Colorado* – an assumption that without consideration of gender, the exhibit would have been dominated by male stories.

Compared to the visitor comments on the questions about gender, detailed below in Table 11<sup>24</sup>, a common thread emerges from the responses.

Table 11
<i>Examples of descriptions of gender within Destination Colorado</i>
<p>“In fact, the men didn't seem as present as the women. The women were much more involved or seemed more visible” (Interview #75)</p> <p>“Nothing about the men” (Interview #74)</p> <p>“The men seemed very traditional.” (Interview #80)</p> <p>“I felt like there were more women.” (Interview #70)</p> <p>“Not so much, more the women.” (Interview #77)</p> <p>“So I thought there was a lot more talk about the women. And working in the homes and they didn't talk a whole lot - maybe they talked more in general about what the men did - but there was more detail about the women.” (Interview #12)</p>

Men disappear into the background when women are featured. Nearly a third of visitors commented on the portrayal of the women, whereas men were only mentioned either by individual narrator or characters within the exhibit or to comment on the fact that individuals did not notice anything about the men. This, coupled with the fact that the exhibit development team did not seem to pay much attention to the portrayal of males within the exhibit, speaks to a larger issue within the museum professional community. For many professionals and visitors, gender means the representation of women. A parallel can be drawn to when museum exhibition

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<sup>24</sup> What did you think about the women in the exhibit? and What did you think about the men in the exhibit?



developers are tasked with understanding race and focus on the representations of non-white races.

This is not to say that this should not be done, because museum professionals absolutely need to engage with the representation of historically underrepresented identities within museum exhibitions. The first step for this is including women, but the profession cannot stop there. If we engage with only the representation of women and the feminine, we have only critically analyzed half of the gender binary. We must look at the stereotypes and the historical scenarios that have created the default status of male. In addition, understanding the representation of male and the creation of masculinity is not the antithesis of the feminist project that this project so strongly advocates for. For an example of how understanding the privileged default can benefit a progressive project that focuses on a more inclusive future, one only needs to look to critical racial theory, of which scholars of critical whiteness studies have developed a history of the construction of the race of White. By showing the construction of the dominant identity, all identities are shown to be constructed by the construction of that construction! While that sounds like a Russian nesting doll of constructions, it is vital to show that all racial identities are constructed, not just non-dominate ones. The same could easily be said for gender.

This book is a study of the representation of white Western culture [...] My focus is representation [...] This is about how white people are represented, how we represent ourselves – images of white people, or the cultural construction of white people, to use two standard formulations for such work [...] the study of representation is more limited than the study of reality and yet it is also the study of one of the prime means by which we have any knowledge of reality (1; Dyer, 1996).

While Dyer is not speaking specifically of museums in the last sentence quoted above, he easily could be. Museums are obsessed with representation – it is, quite realistically, the primary task of the modern museum, the collecting task of the pre-modern museum having been relegated to a historic relic.

There is a small example of a similar phenomenon within the world of academic feminist theory, which is critical studies of masculinity. In a summary of the current trends in masculinity studies, Judith Gardner Kegan details four ideas that form the basis of masculinity studies:

- 1) “Masculinity, too, is a gender and therefore [...] men as well as women have undergone historical and cultural processes of gender formation that distribute power and privilege unevenly” (11).
- 2) Masculinity represents a diversity of experiences and processes (11).
- 3) All genders “can and should cooperate both intellectually and politically” (12)
- 4) Similar to feminist theorists and practitioners, scholars of masculinity reject ideas that gender is fixed and tied to the body (12).

In addition to engaging with masculinity, museums also need to expand their range of focus in terms of gender to include individuals who identify as transgender. Often, because of the allied advocacy of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) groups, transgender individuals are often spoken about in terms of sexuality, rather than gender, if even spoken about at all (Mills, 2010).

Museums are uniquely positioned, because of their history and vast amount of representation of the male experience, to critically engage with the how masculinity and the male experience has been experienced over time. Showing that change and showing the difference across various disciplines can show the constructions that create gender. This will benefit future

museum interpretations and engagements with all genders – male, female, transgender, and other gender identities.

#### *4: We must continue to expand the scope of visitor studies*

Hallie Preskill, in her article “Museum Evaluation Without Borders”, encourages museum evaluators to “engage in courageous conversations” as a part of her imperatives to expand museum evaluation, as “it’s the only way we will move forward” (2011).

The 2014 Visitor Studies Association annual conference opened with a keynote speech from Dr. Richardo Millett, whose speech was a call to action for the visitor studies field to begin to contemplate how to evaluation museums’ role in what he calls “social betterment” (Millett, 2014). He detailed a list of internal challenges that museums face in building evaluation capacity, which included “evaluations that largely focus on visitor satisfaction and/or learning instead of higher level impacts and outcomes” (ibid.)

I can make no statement as to how the results from this study compare to how visitors at other institutions interpret gendered message from exhibitions because there are no other published studies on how visitors interpret gender. When gender is factored into visitor studies, it is primarily to study learning differences between men and women, or girls and boys. I challenge other evaluators and other institutions to push to themselves to engage in these difficult conversations in order to expand the scope of visitor studies. I believe that visitor studies, as a field within museums, must continue to study learning outcomes and experiential outcomes within museum exhibitions, yes – but we also must begin to ask questions about the identities that we portray within our exhibits.

### *Final thoughts*

Museums hold an immense amount of civic power in Western culture because of their status of a Center of Calculation (Latour, 1978). Buoyed by their collections of objects, museums are places in which political truths are interpreted by visitors as unbiased fact. Following this, museums in America have a specific history that cause narratives and objects that privilege the male experience to be included over those that do not. The task is not to remove the museum from this influential place in American culture, but to utilize the cultural power that the museum has developed to work for an inclusive and progressive portrayal of gendered identities within exhibits, to truly advocate for museum visitors.

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## APPENDIX A

### VISITOR INTERVIEW DOCUMENTS

*Notification of on-going studies, posted at entrance to History Colorado Center*

**History Colorado learns from visitors!**

**We might ask you questions or watch how  
you use the museum. What we find out helps  
us plan future projects.**

**Thanks for your input!**

*Verbal consent script*

Approach the visitor and follow the following script:

“Hello, my name is Antonette and I’m conducting audience research with History Colorado. We are trying to understand our visitor’s experiences in the exhibit Destination Colorado. **In addition, the interviews will be a part of my Master’s Thesis for a degree in Museum Studies.** Would you be willing to take a few minutes to answer some questions about yourself and your thoughts about the exhibit? **All answers are completely anonymous.**”

If no, thank the visitor for their time and note the refusal on the Refusal Log.

If yes, hand visitor demographic survey on a clipboard.

“These are some questions about yourself and the people you visited with. If there are any questions you don’t feel comfortable answering, feel free to skip those.”

Once the visitor has finished answering the demographic questions, take survey back from visitor.

“Is it okay if I record your answers to questions about the exhibit? Again, feel free to say ‘no response’ to any question that you don’t feel comfortable answering.”

If yes, start recording and ask the visitor the questions.

If no, place iPad down and take hand-written notes on the visitor's answers to the interview questions.

When interview has concluded, ask visitor if they have any further questions and provide the necessary contact information if requested. Finally, thank the visitor for their time and communicate that you wish them to have a nice visit to the History Colorado Center today.

### *Visitor interview questions*

1. What brought you to the museum today?
2. What was the most memorable part of the exhibit for you?
3. Did you watch the narrator videos?
4. Was there a narrator that you connected with more than another? Why?
5. What is your biggest takeaway from the story of Keota that was told in the exhibit?
6. What did you think about the men in the exhibit? The women?
7. What surprised you most about this exhibit?
8. Would you recommend this exhibit to a friend? Why or why not?

*Visitor demographic survey*

***Please answer the following questions about yourself. All answers are confidential and anonymous.***

What is your home zip code? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you visit with any children (under the age of 16) today?

Yes                      No

If yes, what grade(s) are the children in?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender?

Male                      Female                      \_\_\_\_\_

How do you describe your ethnic background or heritage?

White, Caucasian or European American

Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, or Latin American

American Indian, Native American, or Alaskan Native

Asian or Asian-American

African, African-American, or Black

Native Hawaiian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander

Middle Eastern, Arab, or Arab-American

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your age?

16 or under

16-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56-65

66-75

75+

APPENDIX B

EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT TEAM DOCUMENTS

*Recruitment e-mail*

Good morning [name of staff member],

My name is A\_\_\_\_\_ H\_\_\_\_\_ and I am a Master's Student in the CU-Boulder Museum and Field Studies program. I also served as an Audience Research Intern for History Colorado this past summer. I am writing my Master's Thesis on the exhibit Destination Colorado and how visitors view the exhibit in gendered terms. To "book-end" these interviews, I would like to ask the people who developed the exhibit some questions about the development process and what was considered during this process. The information from the interviews will be used in my thesis, but you can remain anonymous if you desire.

Please let me know a good time for us to meet and conduct this interview – it should take no more than 20 minutes. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or at a\_\_\_\_\_.h\_\_\_\_\_.@colorado.edu

Thank you in advance,

*Exhibit development team interview questions*

1. What were your main concerns when developing this exhibit? Why?
2. What are the "big takeaways" that you want visitors to get from the exhibit? Why?
3. What lead you to the decision to include the narrators in the exhibit?
4. How did you decide who to include as a narrator for the exhibit? Why?
5. Did you consider gender when developing this exhibit? What other "identities" did you consider during the development (age, race, ethnicity, class)? How did these categories affect the development process of the exhibit?

6. What is the most memorable part of the exhibit for you?
7. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

## APPENDIX C

### VISITOR INTERVIEW DATA SUMMARY

Table A <i>Demographic Profile of Interviewed Visitors</i>		
Gender		Percentage of Visitors (n)
Age	Female	69% (18)
	Male	31% (8)
	16-25	35% (9)
	26-35	12% (3)
	36-45	4% (1)
	46-55	12% (3)
	56-65	27% (7)
	66-75	12% (3)
	75+	0% (0)
Zip Code		
	Denver	40% (32)
	Colorado, not Denver	38% (30)
	Out of state	23% (18)
Visiting with Children		
	Yes	28% (22)
	No	73% (58)
Racial/Ethnic Background		
	White, Caucasian, or European American	89% (71)
	Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, or Latin America	11% (9)
	African, African-American, or Black	3% (2)
	American Indian, Native American, or Alaskan Native	1% (1)
	Asian or Asian-American	1% (1)



Table B		
<i>Visitor Responses to Interview Questions</i>		
		Percentage of Visitors (n)
<i>What brought you to the museum today?</i>		
	Hadn't been here before	20% (16)
	General interest	20% (16)
	Free day	19% (15)
	Another exhibit/purpose at the museum	14% (11)
	Bringing someone else	11% (9)
	Tourist/visiting Denver	10% (8)
	To learn/school related	5% (4)
	Coming back	4% (3)
<i>What was the most memorable part of the exhibit for you?</i>		
	The car	29% (23)
	The closing video	14% (11)
	General store	13% (10)
	The school	10% (8)
	The cow/the barn	10% (8)
	The interactives	10% (8)
	The kitchen/house	9% (7)
	The location (NE CO/the plains)	9% (7)
	Egg collecting	6% (5)
	Taking photos/desk interactive	6% (5)
	"Our guides"/personal stories	6% (5)
	Feeling like you're in that time	5% (4)
	Artifacts/items	4% (3)
	History lesson	4% (3)
	The slide	4% (3)
	Photos	1% (1)
	The outhouse	1% (1)
	Weather	1% (1)
	Smell interactive	1% (1)
<i>Did you watch the narrator videos?</i>		
	Yes	33% (26)
	Some/a few/etc.	36% (29)
	No	26% (21)
	Watched on a previous visit	5% (4)
<i>Was there a narrator you connected with more than another?</i>		
	n/a (respondent did not watch	30% (24)

	videos)	
	No/not really/etc	20% (16)
	School teacher	18% (14)
	Clyde Stanley/general store	10% (8)
	Rose Ball/little girl	8% (6)
	Russian/German woman	8% (6)
	Farmer	5% (4)
	Ole Olson	4% (3)
	One of the voiceover areas/house	4% (3)
	Mentioned closing video instead	3% (2)
	Car video	1% (1)
<i>What is your biggest takeaway from the story of Keota that was told in the exhibit?</i>		
	Representation of life in that time	28% (22)
	How hard life was	24% (19)
	Town note existing anymore	10% (8)
	Personal/family connection/stories	9% (7)
	Change in how life is	9% (7)
	The community spirit/the reunion	9% (7)
	Lack of water	8% (6)
	Farming	8% (6)
	Connection to the land	5% (4)
	The people who homesteaded	5% (4)
	No response/vague	5% (4)
	Not knowing about Keota	4% (3)
	Spanish flu	4% (3)
	Railroad/how people got there	4% (3)
	Interactives assisting understanding	3% (2)
	Survival	1% (1)
	The school	1% (1)
	Outhouse	1% (1)
	Car	1% (1)
<i>What did you think about the men/women in the exhibit?</i>		
	Nothing/no/not particularly	35% (28)
	Women were mentioned explicitly	35% (28)
	Comment about both	29% (23)

	genders/people in general	
	Comment about traditional gender roles	11% (9)
	Mentioned a female narrator	6% (5)
	Mentioned a male narrator	5% (4)
	Answer not relevant	3% (2)
<b><i>What surprised you most about this exhibit?</i></b>		
	Immersion/interactives/how well done the exhibit was	31% (25)
	Nothing	21% (17)
	That Keota still exists/people live there/reunion	11% (9)
	History	8% (6)
	Outhouse	6% (5)
	Familiarity with this type of town or items in exhibit	5% (4)
	The smells	5% (4)
	Artifacts	5% (4)
	How recent it was	4% (3)
	House/kitchen	4% (3)
	The slide	3% (2)
	The cow	3% (2)
	The whole exhibit	3% (2)
	Something about women	3% (2)
	General store	1% (1)
<b><i>Would you recommend this exhibit to a friend?</i></b>		
	Yes/absolutely/definitely	59% (47)
	Yes, with a reason	24% (19)
	I think so/sure	16% (13)
	No	1% (1)