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HNRS 2100: Historical Analysis & Perspectives

September 26, 2016

Cultural Production and Subculture as Advocacy

If the birth of our nation was the signing of the Declaration of Independence, then America went through its adolescence between the late 19th and early 20th century. As agricultural America transformed into industrial America, the modernization that it induced was a cultural, economic, and political powerhouse that fundamentally changed American society. Within this ambiguous context of a changing nation, several groups of Americans, frustrated by a society which denied full access to their rights as citizens, used the new cultural spaces to advocate for their rights. Meta Warrick, an African American sculptor, challenged the derogatory depictions of African Americans popularized at expositions and world fairs through creating a series of dioramas that re-told African American history as a history of progress, from the perspective of an African American. At around the same time in which Warrick's dioramas used *cultural production* in the form of an artistic display to advocate for the African American community, in the neighborhoods of New York, a creation and flourishing of a gay *subculture* was another strategy by which a group advocated for their rights. Enabled by emerging commercial establishments in New York in which gay men lived, gathered, and built community, the gay community advocated for their rights by directly participating in their ideal world, albeit under constant pressure to remain "underground." The case study of Warrick's artistic production at a world exposition in Jamestown and the gay subculture in New York during America's period of industrialization and modernization reveals that the success of advocacy

methods is undeniably challenged by the difficulties of representation and complicated by the structures of class and race.

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 marked the beginning of a long road for African Americans to claim the full rights of American citizenship. Deeply rooted racism suppressed African American rights at both the cultural and institutional level, and was reinforced through an ideologically charged visual representation of African Americans. From the perspective of the white male, African Americans were popularly depicted as subservient, dull-witted, and unfit for the roles and responsibilities of American citizenship, through the visual medium of minstrel shows and displays at world expositions and fairs. World expositions in particular became popular in the late 19th and early 20th century as spaces for countries to not only display cultural and technological advancements, but also reinforce imperialistic goals through systematic categorization and cultural subjugation. However, at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition, Meta Warrick's series of dioramas, the "Negro Tableaux," portrayed African American progression in a novel way—as a linear narrative from enslavement to civilization—in the very setting used to historically marginalize and "other" African Americans as primitive, lesser members of society.[1] Warrick's dioramas shifted the representational paradigm of African Americans from black exhibition to black representation,[2] placing African Americans as actors in their own dramas of civilization and progress. By aligning African American history with the larger narrative of progress that these world expositions strove to celebrate, Warrick's dioramas used the power of artistic expression as a powerful advocacy tool. Its audience, both white and

[1] Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. "Meta Warrick's 1907 "Negro Tableaux" and (Re) Presenting African American Historical Memory." The Journal of American History 89, no. 4 (2003): 1370.
[2] Brundage, 1371.

black, were presented with a novel depiction of African Americans that challenged the negative racial stereotypes that perpetuated the suppression of African American rights.

Warrick took on the role as both an artist and a historian to realize the two-fold goal of reimagining African American imagery free of racist depictions and synthesizing a narrative of African American history true to the black experience. Through a series of thirteen dioramas, Warrick parsed more than fifty years of history from ancient Africa to contemporary America in a visual narrative of progress in which blacks advanced from primitive to civilized to free people.[3] A survey of these dioramas reveal some of the careful representational choices Warrick had to make to appeal to both an African American and white audience. Warrick's dioramas begin with scenes of slavery in the South, to position the beginning of African American history with the history of slavery in America. Through the first diorama of slaves arriving in Jamestown in 1619, in positions of "powerlessness and abasement," and a later scene of slave catchers attempting to capture a runaway slave, Warrick clearly represents the slave as discontent in the state of bondage, challenging popular depictions of slaves as an inferior race well suited to enslavement.[4] Warrick also brings into visual discussion the complexities of the slave/master relationship. By lightening the skin color of slaves, Warrick alludes to the growing miscegenation in the South, emphasizing "the nation's long-standing history of biracial intimacy."[5] Another scene of a slave protecting his master's family clearly speaks to a dual audience, as white viewers may have viewed this diorama as a "comforting image of black

[3] Brundage, 1382.
[4] Brundage, 1386.
[5] Brundage, 1386.

loyalty," whereas "blacks may have seen it as a confirmation of black heroism."[6] Warrick's later dioramas celebrate the achievements of African Americans, and their active role in American modernization. Scenes of black domestic life and a celebration of academic success in a college commencement scene, directly challenge the racial stereotypes of blacks as an inferior race unable to achieve the advancements of the dominant race. Warrick's new narrative of African American history challenged the "visual structures of white supremacy,"[7] breaking down barriers of racism which limited the full expression of African American rights.

Advocacy by means of cultural production is complicated by the tension between representation and homogenization, and the fundamental level of abstraction that cultural production has in relation to reality. Meta Warrick's privileged middle-class background provides insight into some of the limitations that her dioramas faced. The interpretive freedom in the diorama's abstraction from reality, gave Warrick space to project her concerns as a member of an elite black middle-class, on the people she claimed to represent.[8] Using the ideological forces of her narrative of black linear progress to civilization, she envisioned a particular version of destiny for her subjects—a destiny of black middle-class respectability, manifested in her later dioramas which depicted scenes of domestic life and academic achievements. Warrick faced the challenge of the interpretive tension that comes with the opportunity to re-envision history to broadly represent and unify the African Americans of her past and future under a single narrative. Yet, this is a limitation inherent to the use of cultural production as an advocacy effort. Since a certain level of homogenization must be allowed to define and represent a group and

[6] Brundage, 1388-1389.
[7] Brundage, 1400
[8] Brundage, 1371.

their demands, Warrick had to make certain representational choices, although these choices were influenced by the concerns and hopes of her middle-class background.

In America's North, another group advocated for their rights in the context of an industrializing, modernizing society, but through the power of participation in subculture. A unique combination of historical circumstances in the late 19th and early 20th century allowed for the establishment of a thriving and robust gay subculture in New York. Industrialization attracted young, unmarried men by the masses from their rural hometowns to urban centers, most famously, New York City, to work in the factories and industries that enabled the advancements of the industrial revolution. A need to provide young men with affordable housing and community spurred the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to build large residential complexes for the working men.[9] However, YMCA establishments such as the enormous Slone House on West Thirty-fourth Street, and the West Side Y, on Sixty-third Street, soon became mega-centers of gay life—factories themselves that attracted young men, who often came to the city full of questions about their sexualities, introduced them to a community of predominately gay men, and cultivated gay expression through a growing network of gay spaces.[10] Gay men constructed a gay New York through slowly repurposing the restaurants, bars, and clubs of the heterosexual world, claiming these spaces as places in which they could build community. Although homophobia was largely embedded in the larger social and political landscape, social reformers in this period, alarmed by the multitude of social vices enabled by urban life, focused their efforts on the eradication of prostitution in new neighborhoods.[11] Additionally, prior to

[9] Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940*. Basic Books, 1994. Pg. 155.
[10] Chauncey, 155.
[11] Chauncey, 160.

1923, in which for the first time, a law was passed that formally criminalized homosexual conduct, arrests of gay men on the basis of "degenerate disorderly conduct," were sporadic, as businesses often used a system of bribes and connections for law enforcement to turn a blind eye on public expressions of homophobia.[12] Thus for some time, gay life was able to thrive and grow, albeit under a growing cloud of repression.

The establishment and flourishing of the gay subculture was a form of gay rights advocacy, enabled by the social opportunities that newly commercialized urban centers offered. The market is a powerful place to affirm one's rights as citizens, and free participation in commerce is a deeply held value of American society. During this period, there was a push and pull to the limits to which gay men in New York could freely participate in these commercial spaces. Although the degree to which gay men vocalized and publicized their homosexuality in these spaces ranged from highly publicized drag shows to weekly gatherings in the back rooms of restaurants and cafeterias,[13] gay men advocated for their rights by simply participating in their ideal gay world. The gay community leveraged the push back that stemmed from cultural and institutional efforts of homosexual suppression through the sheer economic importance they established with these businesses. Some restaurants in gay neighborhoods, "were simply taken over by gay men, who were allowed to remain so long as they increased business without drawing the attention of the police."[14] Even when homosexual activity was discovered by law enforcement, management of these businesses would often lobby on behalf of their gay clientele through bribery. In the case of Hotel Koenig on East Fourth street, upon discovery that social purity groups were investigating the homosexual activities at the Hotel Koenig, the manager,

[12] Chauncey, 172.
[13] Chauncey, 176.
[14] Chauncey, 165.

George Koenig, extended an invitation for the investigators to watch a burlesque show and party all night at the hotel, an arrangement that ultimately allowed the hotel to temporarily continue operation.[15] Through assimilation of heterosexual places to homosexual places, the gay community claimed their rights to homosexuality through living and building a social in this ideal gay world, albeit a bounded world that often pushed social and institutional limits.

New York's gay subculture was marked by the theatricality and eccentricity of their world, a representation that the gay community leveraged to claim space in the city, but at the same time a representation that threatened gay rights activism. Stewart's and the Life Cafeteria were famous dining establishments that allowed gays and lesbians to gather by the masses, in order to entice viewers to see the spectacle of their establishment.[16] Gay men became exotic objects for visual consumption, as tourists to New York City were advised by guidebooks such as the *WPA Guide to New York City* to observe late night "fairy hangouts."[17] The gay community used the theatricality of their gay world to "turn the Life and other such locals into the equivalent of a stage, where their flouting of gender conventions seemed less objectionable because it was less threatening."[18] Although some simply gawked at the unusual sight, others were less tolerant of the homosexuality they witnessed. One man, after being exposed to fairy life on the recommendation of a guidebook in New York, wrote of gay men in a medical journal as "exhibitionists and degenerates of all types."[19] Further, in tandem with public displays of homosexual behavior in such commercial establishments was the risk for gay men to be harassed

[15] Chauncey, 170-171.
[16] Chauncey, 167.
[17] Chauncey, 167.
[18] Chauncey, 168.
[19] Chauncey, 167.

by other patrons, get evicted by the management, and even be arrested by the police.[20] Even the Hotel Koenig, which bribed investigators in the spring of 1920, was subsequently raided in July of 1920 in which thirty patrons, the manager, and the waitress were arrested and charged for participating in or encouraging "degenerate disorderly conduct."[21] Although gay men regularly tested the boundaries of these social and institutional ideas of homophobia, they never forgot that there were laws that clearly criminalized their gay expression—clouds of repression that contextualized the limits of their gay expression.

The dilemmas of representation not only complicate the aims of Warrick's dioramas and the New York gay subculture in the historical context of industrialization and modernization, but also complicate cultural production and subculture as viable structures of advocacy from the mid 20th century to today. The challenges that Warrick faced in crafting a visual narrative of African American history that represented the broad African American experience, are similar to representational challenges that advocacy based documentary makers face through the modern medium of the cinema. In the finite space of cultural production, whether through diorama or documentary film, representational decisions must be made to homogenize the group in question and their demands for visual consumption, and is often biased by the motivations and background of the artistic director. Following the rise of the gay subculture in New York in the industrial era, subsequent large subculture movements such the hippies of the 1960s, electronic dance movement (EDM) ravers of the 1980s, and fan fiction subcultures in the 2000s, faced similar repression due to the "spectacle" that subcultures tended to create. Like the gay world built in the enclaves of New York, each of these groups built and participated in their own ideal

[20] Chauncey, 168.
[21] Chauncey, 171.

versions of society to advocate for their rights to express themselves through subculture, yet these flourishing of these ideal worlds was at odds with repression, as the groups' ideals came into conflict with the ideals of the "mainstream culture." While implementations of subculture and cultural production as methods of advocacy fluctuate with the tides of the time, the complexities that these methods present in being effective forms of advocacy remain, and the limitations and successes of Warrick's dioramas and the gay New York of the early 20th century inform activist movements of generations to come.