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Making Heritage and Creating Diversities in Swedish America

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In the Shadow of the Dalahorse: Making Heritage and Creating Diversities in Swedish America

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ABSTRACT: Heritage has always been an important vehicle through which the past has been mobilized in the present in the name of specific cultural identities and communities. Or more specifically, as Barbro Klein taught us, “heritage is phenomena in a group’s past that are given high symbolic value and therefore, must be protected for the future” (Klein 2000:25). In what ways have contemporary political processes, neoliberal market forces, and identity politics of the 21st century affected understandings of Swedish heritage in American contexts? Has this changing context affected the manner in which people invoke heritage? This paper analyzes tensions that emerge at the nexus of vernacular expressions and institutional heritage management.

(TOM) The museums we will discuss today are part of a larger ongoing study that deals with how museums feature aspects of what many visitors would recognize as Swedish heritage or Swedish culture, striving to understand how cultural heritage is staged, performed, displayed, packaged and ultimately sold to the public.

The main question that we have focused on is, “When budgets are tight, whose heritage counts most?” In what ways have contemporary political processes, neoliberal market forces, and identity politics of the 21st century affected understandings of Swedish heritage and the manner in which people invoke heritage? In order to approach this issue in our paper today, we shall draw upon two empirical cases from our research: The Hallwyl Museum in Stockholm and The American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis.

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(Lizette) For this talk today, which is dedicated to Barbro Klein, we shall take our point of departure in one of the more recent texts she published before passing away. It is, "Cultural Heritage, Human Rights and Reform Ideologies: The Case of Swedish Folklife Research" from 2014. In this text Barbro made a series of highly interesting, poignant, and at times provocative (as Barbro never shied away from provocation) points about the manner in which ethnology and folklore in Sweden had been complicit in the formation of images of Swedish heritage as they were staged in Swedish museums over the course of the late 19th century and 20th century. However, her interest in this article is more than just Heritage, it is the relation between heritage and diversity that concerns her.

Barbro's article focuses on three periods of folkloristic and ethnological engagement in this time frame. The first focuses on the late 19th century and Arthur Hazelius' work to build-up Nordiska Museet and Skansen in Stockholm. And she writes:

Hazelius and other intellectuals did not aim to erase cultural differences when they made peasant culture a part of the urban public sphere... Hazelius thought that if he could open the eyes of all Swedes (particularly the urban middle classes) to the beautiful diversity in the country, their feelings for the fatherland would be

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awakened...//... Maintaining difference was simultaneously an act of unification (2014:115).

She then moves on to the period spanning 1930-1950 and contemplates the role folklore and ethnology played in facilitating and supporting the development of the *Folkhemmet*, the Peoples' Home, enacted and propelled by Sweden's Socialdemocratic leadership. She notes how these scholars strove to participate in ongoing reforms of the time, and argues:

...it is not far-fetched to view the discipline during this period as a reform project aiming to create citizens of a modernizing welfare state in which differences in income and social class were to be erased. The "folk" discipline went hand in hand with political efforts to shape a homogenous "folk" home, and differences in terms of language, religion, or culture among such minorities as Sámi, Roma, Jews, and Finns who were hardly recognized (2014:118).

The third period she focuses on spans from 1970 to 2000, but a strong emphasis is on the late 1990s. This, she points out is when the term "kulturarv" (heritage) first comes into play within academia in Sweden. It is an interesting coincidence, or actually no coincidence at all that the concept of "cultural heritage" on the one hand and "cultural diversity" on the other both begin to

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appear in the official language and publications of the Swedish state. However, even here, her focus is perhaps more to critically reflect upon than to celebrate.

Barbro explains:

Often “diversity is celebrated” while real “difference is shunned” and a sort of “feel-good” diversity is established (Kurkiala 2002). Many museums (including the Nordic Museum) have been reluctant to single out or highlight distinct cultural or religious differences that are an outcome of the intense immigration during the last few decades. The reasons for this can be laudable: curators may wish to avoid stereotyping, essentializing, or exoticizing other people. Yet, the upshot can also be that other cultures, religions, and languages stand out as something disagreeable that must be avoided (2014:122f.)

Now, this has been a very concise summary of Barbro's text, but even in its entirety, one would be hard pressed to describe the tone of this text as upbeat and optimistic. It is critical, and contemplative. And her closing reflections are where we would like to begin ours. She writes:

BILD 2

Is the preservation and protection of cultural heritage always morally good and valuable? Could it also be a liability or a smoke screen

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preventing the highlighting of other even more pressing issues

(2014:124)?

Let us turn to some observations we have made at Hallwyl & ASI over the past few years.

(Intro 4:30)

(TOM) *Hallwyl Museum: Diminished Diversity in the Shadows of the Politically Correct*

BILD 3 When Wilhelmina Kempe (1844-1938) and her husband, count Walter von Hallwyl (1839-1921) from Switzerland created the Hallwyl Palace in Stockholm, they brought in craftsmen from across Europe and they shaped a home with the intention of converting it into a museum. Today, the Hallwyl museum holds a collection of 30 000 accession numbers, items ranging from Asian bronzes and ceramics from China to European silver, and fine art. Kept side by side with collections, are everyday household objects such as brooms and buckets, toys and teeth (baby teeth as well as dentures). Wilhelmina explained:

SLIDE 4

I want everything to be included, such as brooms, dust brushes and such, because one day, when everything is being done by electricity,

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these will be the most remarkable things of all" (Wilhelmina von

Hallwyl's annual notes 1844-1930)

On display are also not-so-every day pieces such as the cast in which her arm was fixed after a car accident on a trip to Gripsholm's castle in 1911, and clippings from Walter's moustache.

The Museum opened in 1938. However, it did not thrive as a museum during its early years. As the current director explained,

Staff opened the door at certain hours, sold tickets and gave a limited guided tour of the salons and social areas. In the first decades, the curatorial effort was focused on completing the catalogue.

BILD 5

And the spirit of the times of the 60s and 70s with their countercultural and leftist winds did little to improve the museum's public appeal. As the museum director went on to elaborate:

In the 1970's the entire aristocratic lifestyle was brought into question in Sweden. Why did the palace become a museum, why build a monument of affluence? Wilhelmina was interpreted as a bit crazy. Stories how she moved about Stockholm in patched clothes flourished. She was portrayed

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as eccentric and the museum had an air of the bizarre, almost scary. You know, the saved sponges, toilet paper, and baby teeth. Still in the early 1990's, we just opened the doors, sold tickets and gave a short tour. In the late 1990s, we introduced thematic tours and the museum staff worked to dramatize both family members and servants.

In tours, docents emphasize the attempt to collect and catalogue "everything" by highlighting the wastebasket in the smoking room, **SLIDE 6** which holds Walter's discarded letters, and the wine cellar stocked full with the empty bottles of wine that the Hallwyls and their guests drank through the years. Wilhelmina von Hallwyl curated her home for future visitors. But for decades the museum was haunted by the figure of the extraordinarily wealthy but eccentric, hoarder in tattered clothes.

The lore around Wilhelmina and the Hallwyl Museum has been successively changing since then. Assembling the collection and cataloguing it was a collective effort involving Wilhelmina, the Hallwyl professor of European ethnology, Nils Lithberg as well as young museum workers and numerous students. Although the making of the Hallwyl museum was a huge collaborative undertaking that was completed in the 1950s, more than a decade after Wilhelmina's passing, docents often highlight Wilhelmina's sole effort, but say little about the role of Lithberg, the curators, or the students. Instead it is Wilhelmina's work which is highlighted. As one curator explained:

Wilhelmina is at the center of every tour still. The visitors want to hear about her and her family. They are fascinated by her as a person and ask questions about her personality.

And although the museum leadership today underscores that the Hallwyl Museum is not a biographical museum, in the same way that museum scholars have tended to describe the Strindberg museum or Thiel gallery, curatorial staff continuously refers to Wilhelmina von Hallwyl by her first name. **BILD 7** The first name basis demonstrates an interpretative shift, where the protagonists of the story are at the narrators, at curatorial staffs', disposal. This is most apparent in the dramatized guided tours in which staff members take on the roles of unnamed servants, curators, and scholarly figures working under the ironhand of Wilhelmina to organize the collections and establish the museum. In the voices of these protagonists, the current curators and long gone owners of the Hallwyl palace co-inhabit the museum on an equal footing as professional patrons of heritage.

BILD 8 In May of 2018 when the curatorial team prepared an exhibition celebrating the Hallwyl Museum's 80th anniversary, they decided to bring Wilhelmina von Hallwyl's role as a career woman and museum maker to the fore, and went on to emphasize her role as benefactor for major museums such

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as Skansen and Nordiska museet, Gotlands Fornsal, Kulturen in Lund,

Nationalmuseum, and Schloss Hallwil in Switzerland. As the museum website says:

The exhibition emphasizes the cataloguing of the collection that Wilhelmina initiated and then supervised for decades, and which made her preservationist attempt unique ...//... A new film shares the story about how she in her role as cultural benefactor left a legacy far beyond the museum.

In this exhibition Wilhelmina was cast as the protagonist in the professional development of not only her own museum but also in the story of museum history in Sweden more generally. Beyond this, the Hallwyl Palace took center stage in a story of feminist heritage making. The contemporary story about Wilhelmina is presented as a progressive herstory, pointing out that her contributions were crucial for Artur Hazelius' and Georg Karlin's work as museum founders. At the time when the role of cultural heritage (and museums) was to provide a collective identity for emerging nations, by providing them with origin stories and a folklife sphere, the exhibition positions Wilhelmina von Hallwyl as the "Other" (a woman in a man's world) in a Swedish context. Archival materials are mobilized and put on display. Here are letters to employees giving them clear instructions on how to go about their work, and firm orders for those employees to follow her wishes and ignore the directions

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and agendas of male colleagues such as Professor Lithberg. If Wilhelmina von

Hallwyl was once perceived to be bizarre and scary in the heritagelore of the

museum, that image is here erased and replaced by that of a determined woman

leading a squad of employees scattered around Europe with the determination of

a general. (5:52) 10:22 total with intro

(LIZETTE) *The American Swedish Institute*

Bild 9 ASI's states its mission to serve "as a gathering place for all people to share experiences around themes of culture, migration, the environment and the arts, informed by enduring links to Sweden".^[1]

When putting this mission into practice ASI offers to the public a collection of 7,000 artifacts, as well as exhibitions from Sweden and the Nordic region, programming for youth and family. And in recent years ASI has expanded its programmatic offerings to include concerts, outdoor festivals, cocktail hours, performing arts, and food events.

BILD 10 The story of the organization starts in 1929 when Swan Turnblad donated his large three story castle-like home the Turnblad Mansion to the Swedish community of Minneapolis.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the American Swedish Institute was

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experiencing a gradual decline in membership, and interest. As the institute's current director explained:

BILD 11

Attendance was never terribly robust, no matter what we tried to do. It was pretty much flat. Attendance was primarily, historically comprised of 75 % members and 25 % non-members. **BILD 12** And that just never changed. And with the declining membership, that's ¾ of your attendees, you know.

In order to avoid a further downward spiral a decision was made to update the institute with a new multi-million dollar wing, now called "The Nelson Cultural Center". **BILD 13** Temporary art and design exhibitions were brought in to fill the gallery spaces, and programming was expanded from Swedish to Nordic, and re-oriented towards younger groups of professionals and families. With joy in his voice, ASI's director explained the consequences these changes had, "Our revenue from admissions has gone up from 20,000 dollar a year to over 300,000 a year!"

The development of the gallery brought with it a renewed interest in the museum, which the leadership acknowledged was spurred in part by the modern architectural form of the building, but which was even reinforced by investments made in developing and fortifying a number of professional

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categories including, human resources, pedagogy, marketing, and retail

management. **BILD 14** Indeed, while curatorial staff complained about

shrinking resources, leadership enthusiastically pointed to the growing role the programming department had in attracting visitors by working in a trend sensitive manner.

In order to meet external demands to be more relevant to the community, ASI set out to build a core audience that was financially robust, culturally interested, socially active, and well connected, as the leadership explained. In order to do this, ASI leadership focused its efforts on targeting five audience categories whom they defined as: **BILD 15**

Heritage Brokers:

- Interested in Swedish, Nordic, Scandinavian-American cultures
- Swedish nationals living in or visiting U.S.

Visitors with Children:

- Seek out fun, inviting activities to do as a family or as a group visiting with children

Socially Active Adults:

- Frequent museum galleries, exhibitions and openings
- Go out often
- Socially active, network-minded, A-listers
- Mix of nightlife, museum, theatre and performance art

Makers:

- Craft enthusiasts – actively pursue art & craft activities as a hobby or profession
- Heritage craft and contemporary craft
- Foodies and co-ops

Neighborhood:

- Mix of residents and employed in Phillips and Whittier
- Early childhood education and whole student learning
- Bike By, But Never Been
- Mix of New Immigrant / Elder Care / Social Service / Community Arts
- Active community members

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Emphasizing the significance the changing role of programing has had, a senior board member reflected on the museum's expanded work:

Our children's programing is held in the mansion, and usually includes exploration of the mansion. The kids have a scavenger hunt, they have to go find something. So that families and children are becoming familiar with the mansion, not as an austere museum where you can't touch anything, but as a place that is alive and is possible to explore. And I think that has been very cool.

Members of the curatorial department, however, had a different understanding of the situation. They recounted with horror coming to the museum to find throngs of children running around, in, over and through exhibitions and artifacts, moving items around looking for "treasures" on their treasure hunt. And while one curator appreciated the museums' attempt to engage the public, he shook his head and described the time he found a group of children having a birthday party under programing supervision playing dodgeball on the third floor of the mansion. Sculptures on exhibition had been so badly battered and damaged by the balls being thrown around that they had to be removed from the exhibition, and he concludes, "I mean, what were they thinking?!".

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Another staff member in the curatorial department reflected upon some of the effects of changes made to accommodate the expansion. With locks on the cupboards in the kaffestuga and price tags on every meeting room, clubs, groups and older members didn't feel welcome.

Because it was this idea that all we have is younger people here. But younger people may come for the big events but not for day-to-day volunteer work and programs. And becoming members...they might not even live here in six months. So why would they ever engage in a membership. But there are all these older people. *This was their second house!*

Whereas leadership and curatorial staff present divergent perspectives on how to use the mansion, staff in programming find themselves caught in the middle, when trying to measure up to the anticipated needs of the new audience groups. As one manager in education explained:

I think for us it really comes down to our mission. To serve as a gathering place for all people. It doesn't say to preserve, interpret and share the history of *the Turnblad Mansion*. /.../ Kids that come here, do they really need to know about the Turnblad mansion. No, they don't. /.../So what we

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do in that case is we start with the child and we say what does the child need and then we build up from there.

Continuing our discussion, the education manager emphasized an awareness of revenue measures and that the goals of curatorial and programing departments did not always align:

20 minutes

Curatorial and I recently had a conversation about birthday parties because birthday parties are something that happen here at ASI. How is it that you are gonna get families involved and engaged in your institution? What can we do to get them in the door that makes them happy? **So I would say it is a very complex web that we are looking at when looking at programs and how we best meet the needs of the audiences that we have identified.** Can we serve everyone at the same time? Absolutely not! Nor do I think we need to. But what we need to do is to be very practical and realistic about things.

The ambition was not necessarily to bring people together. As the educational manager emphasized “Can we serve everyone at the same time? Absolutely not! Nor do I think we need to...” Keeping folks segregated was in a sense a more sure way of keeping them happy, feeling comfortable and coming back to the institute. Dodge ball in the morning, cocktails in the evening, with a temporary

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exhibition of a local Somali artist somewhere in between - this might sound like a smug way of summarizing the situation, but not entirely off the mark either. It also falls in line with Laurajane Smith's recent research that points out that most people do not go to museums to have their world view challenged, but to have them confirmed (Smith 2015, pp. 459-484).

Reading time 8.37

Conclusion:

(TOM) Both of the museums we have presented here are striving to broaden their appeal and attract larger and more diverse groups of visitors. Interestingly, these are both museums that were not only founded by immigrants but also built by craftsmen and artisans many of whom were migrants themselves.

Nonetheless both museums currently offer a cultural heritage of emplaced identities: Hallwyl currently emphasizing a place created by Wilhelmina, and ASI emphasizing Swedish and Nordic linkages. However, had these museums been seen through the lens of migration and mobility, very different stories would emerge out of them.

20 minutes

Weaving together a story that appeals to a gender conscious Swedish middle class the Hallwyl Museum consciously under-communicates Wilhelmina von Hallwyl's unusual, at times almost obsessive, focus on preserving the details of her life and of putting a museum together. Where there once stood a woman

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who attracted the derogatory comments and behind the back whisperings of her contemporary peers, there now stands a determined female leader. She is a woman who not only built a museum over herself and her class. She is now positioned as central to the development of many of Sweden's largest heritage institutions. Meanwhile, the cadre of university based scholars, and trained curators who worked extensively to help make the museum a reality, are all but forgotten. It is a narrative that, on the one hand, fits very well with the gender politics of the day, but on the other hand fits less comfortably with the Swedish government's call for national museums to more strongly embrace a norm critical view. Where there once stood a woman who seemed to chafe with many of the norms of the Swedish middle (and upper) class, there now stands a driving force in the establishment of a cultural heritage that the Swedish middle class can easily accept and digest.

(LIZETTE) And as ASI works to attract a diverse audience, its activities and budget priorities are slowly shifting from curatorial educational initiatives to programing initiatives with a stronger emphasis on entertainment in the form of treasure hunts, cocktail parties, and art exhibitions that speak to the educated and endowed middle class. In their attempt to build audience, ASI is dividing people up into segregated groups. The museum becomes a place where all events and activities come with customized content as well as price tags - where Kulturtanter meets kulturtanter, hipsters meet hipsters, families meet families,

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young active adults meet young active adults, *und so weiter*. By working strategically with target groups for audience development, the museums, in their efforts to be inclusive to increase visitors numbers, simultaneously characterize, organize, divide, and separate communities, an act that demonstrates whose heritage matters most when numbers count.

What we have observed at all of the museums we have studied is how strategic heritage making strategically re-fashion museums, museum staff and museum audiences, and how such forging of select audiences is financially driven. Thus the impact of official Swedish and American cultural politics, that advocate an inclusive audience development, proves to have its limitations. We opened with Barbro Kleins question of whether the protection of cultural heritage might be understood as “a liability or a smoke screen preventing the highlighting of other even more pressing issues”. We can't speak for museums in general, but in the museums we have studied, market forces, the attempt to attract larger audiences and appease stakeholders, seems to work in a mainstreaming manner that resists pressing issues more than it embraces them, and that strives in the direction of attracting more visitors from established market segment groups than yearning for greater inclusion.

23:04

BILD 16

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