Definitions

- **Difficult stories:**
  - are “...histories of oppression, violence, and trauma”
  - “...describe memories of pain, suffering, oppression, and grief...”

- and they are undertold because they:
  - *they evoke strong emotions*
  - *incite “anxiety, resistance, and stress for their audiences”*

Examples of Difficult and Undertold Stories

- Enslavement of African Americans
- Climate change
- Confederate monuments
- Evolution
- Discrimination against members of LGBTQ community
- Environmental injustice and racism
- Disparate access to resources (transportation, economic, educational, natural, etc.)

Why Are These Stories So Difficult?

These stories are difficult – evoking strong emotions and creating anxiety, stress, and resistance – because they challenge our core beliefs about the world, society, history, and, by extension, ourselves.

That creates a crisis moment where the audience has to decide between two options:

1. Accept the information and be forced to adapt, question everything
   OR

2. Reject the information and maintain the status quo

Difficult Stories in Action

Adapted from The Oatmeal, “You’re not going to believe what I’m about to tell you,” http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean
Difficult Stories in Action

What if I told you George Washington had another set of false teeth?

What if I told you this other set wasn’t made from wood, ivory, or any of the aforementioned materials?

Adapted from The Oatmeal, “You’re not going to believe what I’m about to tell you,” http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean

Difficult Stories in Action

What if I told you it was made from the teeth of slaves?

(in all likelihood)

Adapted from The Oatmeal, “You’re not going to believe what I’m about to tell you,” http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe_clean
Why Are These Stories So Difficult?

- These stories are difficult – evoking strong emotions and creating anxiety, stress, and resistance – because they challenge our core beliefs about the world, society, history, and, by extension, ourselves.

- That creates a crisis moment where the audience has to decide between two options:
  1. Accept the information and be forced to adapt, question everything
     OR
  2. Reject the information and maintain the status quo

Adapted from Julie Rose, Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)

Examples of Difficult Stories:
The Interstate Highway System

- “The greatest public works project in history.”
- “An integral part of the American way of life.”
- One of President Eisenhower’s top five achievements while in office.

(Courtesy of U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration)
Examples of Difficult Stories:
The Interstate Highway System

Navigating the Crisis Moment

1. Accept the information and be forced to adapt, question everything

OR

2. Reject the information and maintain the status quo
Put a Name (and a Face) on It

Remember the UpStairs Lounge by Skylar Fein (Courtesy of New Orleans Museum of Art)

Put a Name (and a Face) on It

Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Courtesy of Yav Hashem)
Put a Name (and a Face) on It

Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Courtesy of Yav Hashem)

Put a Name (and a Face) on It

Yav Hashem, The Holocaust History Museum, Hall of Names (Courtesy of Yav Hashem)
Signals to Visitors: Transition Spaces

National World War I Museum & Memorial (Courtesy of Ralph Applebaum Associates)

Signals to Visitors: Transition Spaces

National World War I Museum & Memorial (Courtesy of Ralph Applebaum Associates)
Signals to Visitors: Warnings

Open Floor Plan

Open Floor Plan

Climates of Inequality traveling exhibition by the Humanities Action Lab (Courtesy of Humanities Action Lab)

Reflection Spaces

Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile (Courtesy of Nico Saieh)
Reflection Spaces

Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile (Courtesy of Nico Saieh)

Reflection Spaces

National Museum of African American History and Culture (Courtesy of Brad Feinknopf)
Reflection Spaces

“On the Texas Homefront,” Bullock Texas State History Museum

Reflection Spaces

“On the Texas Homefront,” Bullock Texas State History Museum
Reflection Spaces

“The Enclave,” Portland Art Museum

Reflection Spaces

“Reflection on THE ENCLAVE

I saw the bombs fall in Ireland, over land rather than the people. We still fight to be free, and one day everyone will be.

I saw... I heard... I felt...

“The Enclave,” Portland Art Museum
Join us next week for:

Made You Look!: How to Select Visuals That Will Keep Visitors Engaged with Your Exhibits
Thursday, August 20, 2020, at 10:00 a.m.

Find this week’s resource sheet at:

https://www.thc.texas.gov/local-exhibits

This training was made possible by: