Encountering Authenticity: A Case Study on the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum

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Encountering Authenticity: A Case Study on the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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INTRODUCTION:

This senior project is about living history museums. It is also about authenticity. It took me quite a while to land on this topic and it is in large part because of these two quotes that I ever landed.

“All an enduring image of modernist anxiety is that the world we inhabit is no longer authentic.”

And

“If art can't be true or false any more than statements can be blue or green, deception about 'authentic' versus 'inauthentic' artworks can only take place in attributions, labels, and stories about the objects, not in the objects themselves. It follows that fakes aren't created by artists, but rather by the experts who authorize attributions. Physical objects are never inauthentic; This is a crucial distinction.”

Fittingly, the first quote comes from a 1996 essay about living history museums and authenticity. I’ll discuss that essay in chapter one, but that’s not where I read the quote for the first time. I read that quote in a 2010 essay called, “Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves: Beyond the Deconstruction of Authenticity” by Scottish scholar of material culture Siân Jones. Jones’s essay, as you might imagine, unravels the concept of authenticity to argue that the prevailing discourses are too quick to either attempt to debunk the idea that ‘real’ objects have an aura of authenticity, or they simply equate authenticity with genuineness and leave it at that. Fittingly, I read that essay for a class on Scottish material culture while I was studying abroad in Scotland. The thing about studying abroad is that everyone expects you to travel while you’re on the other side of the Atlantic. I went to Scotland to see if my personality would remain the same if I wasn’t surrounded by the people and places that make me me, but once I was settled into my accommodation I didn’t want to leave the city. I don’t like traveling...

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too much. Half the reason is that it simply makes me tired, and I end up only eating granola bars because I don’t want to be conned into buying an overpriced ham and cheese toastie at a seaside cafe just because I want to sit down. But more importantly, I dislike traveling because I find the feeling of being a tourist kind of excruciating. Wearing a backpack. Looking like a dweeby American. Not knowing what’s a ‘real’ local shop and what’s a tourist trap. The only sense of real experience, or spontaneity, of being at the whim of life I’d get is from not having an international phone plan. But at any moment, if I were to miss a bus or get terribly lost, I could get myself out of an inconvenient (possibly character building) situation by simply pulling my phone out and paying a ten dollar fee to At&t to use it to connect to the internet in the middle of anywhere. Basically, the sense that I get, when traveling, is I never know what’s a genuinely unique experience, or what’s a possible hardship I could simply avoid by paying a little fee. My only friend in Scotland, bless her heart, was obsessed with traveling. And in a funny way that really bugged me she was obsessed with authenticity and was constantly looking for “quaint” small towns and for the best fish and chips in Scotland (in real life we did this, but also for the sake of this introduction let’s pretend that fish and chips are quintessentially Scottish food).

Anyway, one trip on our way up north to go see the house where her grandmother lived before immigrating to the U.S, I, like the spontaneous fun-loving traveler that I am, decided we should get off the bus in a coastal town because through the window I saw it had a fish and chips restaurant and a museum. Admittedly, the town had an excellent view of the ocean, and there were lots of old fishing boats to look at in the marina. And there were little touristy shops and not a lot of people around. I reluctantly joined her at the restaurant (think hamburger joint type of place), and she reluctantly joined me at the museum. I found solace in local history museums because those are the kinds of places where it feels appropriate to be a tourist, and, I thought,
they satisfied my desire for things to be presented exactly how they seem. Unlike the small towns which, in the eyes of my authenticity-seeking friend, seemed like untouched gems until she’d notice another person speaking with an American accent outside an absurdly expensive coffee shop. Anyway, the point is that on this day I was pretty fed up with quaintness and with being a tourist. And knew that the “Scottish Fisheries Museum,” was probably created because little coastal towns like this one can’t survive off the fishing industry anymore, and so that way of life of being a fisherman and his family has vanished due to industrialization. And since people have to support themselves someway, the town has leaned into tourism; and then heritage museums like this bill themselves as repositories for the ‘real’ material culture of a culture that no longer exists.4 I had been reading a little about museums and authenticity for class, and I was really feeling what Gable and Handler had said about the sort of anxiety that came not knowing which parts of the world, if any, were authentic (though I’m still not sure if I count as a modernist given that I was born in 1999). For this class, I thought the best way to write about authenticity is to write about inauthenticity and all that it takes to find an inauthentic object. I was lucky enough to find an object (which basically looks like long wicker baskets), with a label that described the story of the object: it had been donated to the museum before the museum kept good records, and it was displayed as an “eel trap” at the museum for decades, although at 2016 convention on basketry someone identified the object as “Artillery Shell Baskets” from World War Two. Basically, the story is that the object was mislabeled for years, and then later it was discovered to be something else. And one of my questions was: prior to being relabeled, was the object inauthentic? And basically, the answer I gave comes from the second quote above by Sally Price, “physical objects can never be inauthentic” because “deception about 'authentic' versus 'inauthentic' artworks can only take place in attributions, labels, and stories about the objects, not

4 Eric Gable and Richard Handler, “After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site,” 327.
in the objects themselves.”⁵ And that was all fine and good. I felt pretty much that I’d solved the problem of authenticity for myself. Nothing is actually fake or unreal. It’s all just exactly how it is. People might be trying to make things look quaint or pass reproductions off as originals catering to tourists, but those “things” aren’t “unreal.” A coastal town that looks like an untouched gem but is actually a tourist town, is not inauthentic, it’s not deceptive, and it’s not even that the people who went about making the town look quaint were fakers, rather, it’s only the things said about the town (including one’s own thoughts) that can be wrong. And that phony feeling I have when I’m being a tourist that’s trying to act like I'm not a tourist went away too because I realized that nothing/no-one can be inauthentic, they can only be misperceived.

Reassured by this I thought I’d solved it: authenticity is just about statements, not about objects or actual accuracy or genuineness. Even though I wasn’t feeling the whole modernist anxiety thing anymore, I still happened to follow Gable and Handler quote to an essay about living history museums. I read the paper, and some of their other papers too. Soon coming to the realization that living history museums posed an interesting conundrum: what if, say 18th century, objects and replicas (without differentiation) are combined to create a “re-create” a slice of life from the past. What can you say about the authenticity of that sort of thing? If there are no labels on the object, no direct claims that the whole thing is a perfect isomorphic re-creation, no clarity about restoration practices for the old object or replication practices for the new ones, and it’s all “brought to life” by a costumed interpreter, what can you say about the authenticity of this kind of place? What can you say about the endeavor to make an “authentic reproduction” of the past? “A genuine article of postmodern culture” is what Handler and William Saxton say in their 1988 essay.⁶ But what else could I say? How do living history museums complicate the notion of

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authenticity? There are many varieties of LHMs (as I’ll be calling them henceforth) that function in different ways and for different purposes, but the basic premise is that visitors can learn a whole of a lot more if they’re immersed in an environment full of objects, buildings, and people that represent a complete picture of the past. The basic downfall is that it is impossible to fully recover the past. Still, Handler and Saxton argue that living history partitioners (re-enactors, essentially), and tourists pursue this quest for authenticity within living history museums because LHMs offer people respite from the incoherence of everyday life in the postmodern era. Indeed, many rural-life living history museums tend to re-create a simpler time when the milk in one’s cereal came from the cow just outside in the barn. More than that, I was intrigued by the idea that an “authentic reproduction,” (something which is inherently contrived and incomplete) might offer people the feeling of authenticity. If the feeling that I get from touristy towns is that they’re too contrived, wouldn’t other people find “museum villages” even more artificial? Where is authenticity located at living history museums?

I should be clear here, not all living history museums claim to simulate the past. Chapters two and three of my senior project are a consideration of the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum (CFM) which is located in Central New York. I’ll discuss how the museum both does and doesn’t attempt to simulate the past. The second chapter starts off with an overview of the museum and then launches into a discussion of how the non-living section of the then CFM presents objects. You see, not all parts of living history museums have costumed interpreters, and some of them play with ways of presenting objects. Chapter three is sort of an extended vignette about the day(s) that I visited the museum, and how this experience evoked different notions of authenticity for me. Despite the fact that I chose to write about living history museums because they don’t have as many labels as other museums, you’ll notice that throughout both chapters I

7 Ibid., 256.
spend a fair amount of time writing about how “things” and places are described in labels and in promotional material. This can be attributed to the fact that I am still fixated on the idea that objects cannot be inauthentic. Another one of my favorite quotes, from a book on Scottish ethnology, reads like this: “Material culture is central to archeology, where objects have an ‘authority’ generally unalloyed by language and text.”8 I like the idea that objects could be “unalloyed” to language, that they could be taken in without any constructions applied to them. I wish that living history museums taught people what objects do, not what the objects are named. That said, I’m still uncomfortable talking about authenticity if labels aren’t involved. And now I’ve landed on a new, almost cynical, conviction about the authenticity of museum objects from a quote from a different book about living history museums.

In the first chapter, I write about four people who wrote about LHMs in the 1980s and 1990s. I’ll first discuss scholar and proponent of living history, Jay Anderson’s 1982 essay about the potential of living history museum farms to represent the lives of common people and also offer respite to contemporary people.9 Another critical scholar, Michael Wallace, who wrote “Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States” in 1981, focused on how LHMs disseminate nostalgia and eliminate politics from history.10 Indeed, many living history museums, CFM included, represent static or atemporal moments confined within a date range consequently precluding depictions of unique historical events. While Wallace’s piece is more critical and informative, I chose only to write about Anderson’s essay because he’s one of the few scholars I’ve read who advocates for LHMs. Following this, I wrote about architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable’s critiques of LHMs. Her articles on the subject range from 1963 to 1992,

but her stance remains largely the same: LHMs have promoted a devaluation of the real historically built environment and replaced it with selective fantasy. In 1993, she wrote, “‘Main Street USA’ is created even as main streets die across the country.”\textsuperscript{11} (Huxtable 1992, p 25). In her view, LHMs are another form of themed entertainment like Disneyland. Huxtable’s critiques stand in opposition to how LHMs were written about in guide books during the same period. The “Hippocrene U.S.A. Guide to Exploring the American West: A Guide to Museum Villages” book begins, “Yes, you can still see and discover American Western history. The Old West is there despite large urban centers like Denver and Los Angeles, Disneyland and ski resorts, the modern highway and housing subdivisions. The Oft-repeated comment that America destroys its past instead of preserving it simply isn’t true. You can explore sites that have carefully preserved every phase of American Western heritage.”\textsuperscript{12} I don’t write about general guide books in this essay, though I do mention how the CFM is promoted. I think it’s important to note that people in this time period seem to be afraid that “heritage” is slipping away. And that it’s possible to reconstruct the past if you parse it out, phase by phase, trade by trade, region by region. As I’ll argue in chapter two, the same kind of parsing out happens at the CFM, where the museum attempts to represent a panoramic of trades in order to fully depict the past. In chapter one, I go into more detail comparing two essays by Richard Handler (and his co-scholars William Saxton and Eric Gable), to an essay by scholar Edward Bruner. These c.1990 essays are exclusively about the authenticity at LHMs, though they present some more complicated analyses of authenticity that I don’t address in my essay. Instead, I use their essay to discuss the ways in which “authenticity” is a goal for living history museums. Both of the scholars conclude with the assertion that authenticity has to do with authority.

I happened to write about living history museums, and really I was only thinking about authenticity. Because of this, I regret that I didn’t write about the more controversial aspects of LHMs. It’s one thing to say that living history museums are inauthentic, that they present a sanitized version of the past, and it’s not that far off to say that they are racist. As one of the most popular LHMs in the United States, Colonial Williamsburg has received a lot of attention for its efforts to portray enslaved and free African-Americans starting in the late 1970s. Since then, other living history museums have redoubled their efforts to present a more accurate history that doesn’t just include white people, while others have not. While visiting the CFM this summer with my friend, she asked me, “Why does it feel wrong to be here?” The answer was obvious: everyone, tourists, and costumed interpreters were white and the museum generalized in such a way that it felt as if only white people had lived in Central, New York in the mid-1800s. There is a single exhibit at the CFM that does address slavery. However, it portrays slavery as a southern phenomenon and uses no physical objects to support panels of texts. Furthermore, the museum makes no mention of Native Americans. Several scholars have suggested ways in which to create more inclusive and accurate interpretations of the past. A 2019 op-ed by Aja Bain suggests how 3rd person living history interpreters can turn previous exclusion of diverse stories into an opportunity for discussion. Scholar Drew Swanson’s 2019 essay tracks the early history of attempts at addressing slavery in LHMs. Destination Culture by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, warns against attempts at 1st-person re-enactment of cultures as she tracks the history of putting humans and culture on display.

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Informing my case study on the CFM are several other more contemporary texts. C. H. Hughes’s 2011 essay “Is That Real? An Exploration of What is Real in a Performance Based on History” discusses the challenges and implications of “achieving” authentic representation of the past.17 In one of my personal favorite books, Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance Scott Magelssen re-frames the history of LHM to discuss it from his perspective as a historian of theater.18 Additionally, Jillian Rickly-Boyd’s 2015 case study on “Spring Mill Pioneer Village” in Indiana, and Linda Young’s 2006 essay on Australian “pioneer villages,” both go on to reveal how “museum villages” negotiate 21st-century realities with their mythic representations of the past.19 20

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CHAPTER ONE: Review of Literature on Living History and Authenticity

"Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do. It is people on the exhibition team who must make a judgment about how to tell about the past. Authenticity - authority - enforces the social contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds."\(^{21}\)

Living history museums (LHMs) are premised on the idea that an immersive reconstruction of an environment can offer contemporary individuals a fruitful understanding of the past. Whereas traditional historical museums may present objects behind glass, living history museums immerse visitors in a recreated historical context in which they can learn about the past by witnessing relics of the past displayed in large-scale period rooms and brought to life by costumed interpreters. Since their inception in the early 20th century, the primary charge against living history museums is that while they assert their authority as “museums” to authentically reconstitute the past, they instead beautify, simplify, and obscure the “real” past by creating a “fake” past. Whereas criticism has been leveled against LHMs for the consequences of their historical inaccuracy, scholars on the subject have interrogated the notion of authenticity as it relates to authority, reputation, and physical objects. Analysis of living history museums, and the literature pertaining to them, reveals the necessity of further expanding upon how notions of authenticity pervade representations of the past.

In this essay, I will assess four key authors’ takes on living history written during the 1980s and 1990s. They include Jay Anderson, Ada Louise Huxtable, Richard Handler, and Edward Bruner, all of whom have written extensively about the topic.

A preeminent scholar on living history, professor of folklore Jay Anderson’s oft-cited 1982 article, “Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums,” claims to introduce the first analysis and history of LHMs to academia.\(^22\) Anderson supports the living history movement because, he argues, it inspires engagement from the public in a way that traditional museums do not. He offers a succinct narrative of American LHMs beginning with Europe’s first open-air museum Skansen in 1881, and then Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village and John D. Rockefeller’s Colonial Williamsburg in the mid-1920s. He emphasizes the breakaway of the LHM movement from CW’s elitism toward a social history that resulted in an increase in living farms in the mid-20th century representing ‘every man’s history.’ Anderson locates the potential of living history museums to preserve folklife, including crafts and manual skills, instead of just the physical relics of the past.\(^23\) His narrative has since been contested due to its tendency toward generalization and its lack of criticism directed at how LHMs can obscure the past.\(^24\)

Anderson does not consider how interpreting objects imposes a construction upon them. Instead, he asserts that adding contextualizing elements, placing them in artificial contexts, makes objects more fruitful sources of information. Anderson identifies how LHMs fit into the continuum of historical museums: whereas curiosity cabinets presented objects for “idle inspection,” formal exhibits organized relics of the past to name, order, and make them comparable. Next, interpretive exhibits aimed to place objects into human contexts in the form of dioramas, period rooms, and historic houses. These interpretive exhibits, Anderson asserts,

\(^23\) Ibid., 29.
invoked a vital question that led to the living history museum as a revitalizing pedological tool: “how did people make, obtain, use, and value objects?” He asserts that a totally immersive environment may offer an “antidote to museum fatigue.”

Preserve a western ghost town and you have an interpretive exhibit. But, set it in motion with the addition of well-trained interpreters who go around doing what the townsfolk originally did — tend bar, shoe horses, file claims, ride around town, and so on -and you have the living museum, a life-size diorama… Once inside, you could use all your senses: see the horses, smell the wood smoke, touch the quilt, hear the cowbells, taste the gingerbread, and on and on. Living history museums increase the potential of objects to inform people about history by adding contextual information in more accessible and varied forms. A visitor could, ideally, learn not only what a broom looked like in, say, mid-19th century rural New York, but also how it was made, what sort of person would make brooms, where and how the brooms were used, how brooms were commodified, what the material they were made out of smelled like, what it felt like to sweep with a mid-19th century broom, etc. For Anderson, authority and authenticity are not an issue. He portrays the creation of a living history museum as if there is a “ghost town” waiting to be “set in motion.” Unlike Anderson who takes for granted the notion that preservation and restoration of objects and buildings will always be accurate with the correct research, Huxtable, Bruner, and Handler acknowledge that the past is constructed in the present.

Anderson focuses on the potential of living history museums to offer historical insight to people in a period of rapid social change. Though he acknowledges the potential dangers of political and financial influence over this highly lucrative heritage industry, and he cites that while living historians contend with the challenges of “realistically simulating” “everyday life” in recreated farms or village, he does not explore the inherent incompleteness or subjectivity of all representations of the past. Instead, recalling the increasing popularity of LHMs at the time his article was written, he insisted on the potential of this mode as a generative way of

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democratizing representations of the past by representing ordinary people. While Anderson does not acknowledge the notion of “authenticity” in his essay about simulating the past, Huxtable emphasizes it and rejects the notion that a reconstructed environment can be historically accurate.

Over the course of the 1960s to 1990s, one consistent critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, periodically denounces LHMs for contributing to debasing American preservation practices by blurring the lines between real and fake. Her 1963 *New York Times* op-ed “Dissent at Colonial Williamsburg; Errors of Restoration” and her 1992 essay in *The New York Review of Books* “Inventing Reality” reveal an unwavering commitment to a materialist notion of authenticity. Huxtable believes only original objects and buildings can be authentic. Most of her critiques are leveled against Colonial Williamsburg (CW) because of its enormous popularity among tourists, its claims to be “authentic,” and because of the patriotic ideology that it disseminates. As one of the first American LHMs, CW set the precedent of “preserving” a historical environment by eliminating all of the buildings that post-date CW’s c. 1800 cut off date, and “restoring” the appropriate buildings “back in time,” and by replacing defunct original buildings with facsimiles. At a time when social critics were recognizing that urban renewal, highway programs, and suburbs destroyed social networks, rendered urban communities sterile, and relocated tangible evidence of the past to outside the daily lives of people, Huxtable blamed Colonial Williamsburg. She describes CW as a “superbly executed vacuum” “in which nothing else is permitted to exist within the project’s didactic limits; a Greek Revival house or other later

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26 Ibid., 306.
28 Huxtable, “Inventing American Reality.”
structure, good or bad, on a spot once held a colonial building, must go, and a newly created colonial substitute, constructed with exquisite taste, painstaking accuracy and alarming artificiality, is put up instead.” The result, she insists, “visitors learn, by example, not to differentiate between real and fake, original and imitation, or make the essential value judgments involved.” In 1963, Huxtable warned that people are learning to accept “imitations” and “fakes” as if they have the same value as original relics. She emphasizes that the past is not “preserved” (as Anderson suggests in his mythic western ghost town brought back to life), but rather an impression of the past is created under the guise of ”restoration.”

Thirty years later, Huxtable maintains a materialist perspective on authenticity in her essay “Inventing Reality.” Huxtable expressed disdain for living history museum’s “backward” preservation interventions which recreate the past rather than keep existing relics of the past safe. Though not all living history museums employ the same methods for creating a likeness of the past in the present, most rely on some replicated objects and or buildings to create an image of the past. Facsimile objects and buildings, and reconstructed “museums villages” were often called “authentic reproductions.” In her 1992 essay, Huxtable writes,

It is hard to think of a more dangerous, anomalous, and shoddy perversion of language and meaning than the term authentic reproduction…. These are the con words of American culture. Something that is authentic is the real thing, and a reproduction, by definition, is not; a copy is still a copy, no matter how skilled or earnest its intentions. To equate a replica with the genuine artifact is to cheapen and render meaningless it's true age and provenance; to imply equal value is to deny the act of creation that was informed and defined by the art and custom of another time and place. What is missing is the original mind, hand, material, and eye. In other words, authenticity. The kindest thing you can say is that an authentic reproduction is a genuine oxymoron. Huxtable defines an “authentic” “thing” as something which is “real”, which has a significant provenance and age, and which was created from the context of a known “time and place.”

32 Ibid., 24.
Conversely, a “reproduction” can not be “authentic”; even an exact copy does not have an inherent connection to a specific time or custom. Huxtable declares the term “authentic reproduction” “dangerous” because it promotes “copies” to the same status as originals. Huxtable’s perspective can be understood as a materialist as defined by scholar Sian Jones. Jones claims authenticity is seen as an objective and measurable quality inherent in an object, artefact, art piece, or any other material form (including, say, a living history museum). To paraphrase, an authentic historical object or building is true to its origins in terms of its date, material, form, authorship, workmanship, primary context, and use.³³ Huxtable’s analysis of “authentic reproductions” reveals that she believes in “authenticity” in the materialist sense because she argues that “real things” must have “original” origins.

Huxtable’s distaste for “reproductions” is rooted in what she identifies as “the replacement of reality with selective fantasy” by the preservation movement in cities and themed historical sites like Colonial Williamsburg. In her 1963 piece, Huxtable feared that visitors were learning at living history museums to not differentiate between real and fake.³⁴ In 1992, she argued further that appearance has come to matter more than material integrity, the built world is fabricated, and people are “detached” from the process of life. She believes that the wide acceptance of reproductions replacing original art and architecture is the result of institutions like Colonial Williamsburg which promote “surface” over “substance.”³⁵ The result, she concludes, is a shift in

the way we perceive reality, a shift so pervasive that it has radically altered basic assumptions about art and life… It has instantly recognizable characteristics — an emphasis on surface gloss, on pastiche, on the use of the familiar but bowdlerized elements from history of design, on tenuous symbolism and synthetically created

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environments, a detachment from the problems and processes through which contemporary life and creative necessity are actively engaged. In the decade around Huxtable’s 1992 piece, two scholars Richard Handler and Edward Bruner took radically different takes on living history museums. While Huxtable sees no redeeming qualities in living history museums because of the inherent inauthenticity, Handler and Bruner recognize that LHMs are symptomatic of contemporary culture and thus are worthwhile to consider because they argue, the notion of “authenticity” should not be reduced to being equated with “original.” Still, they disagree in their interpretation of the value of living history museums.

Scholars Richard Handler and Edward Bruner evaluate how authenticity is constructed and considered at living history museums. These two scholars engaging in a debate starting with Handler and Saxton’s 1988 essay about how reenactors seek authentic experience in when participating in living history, “Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in “Living History.”” In a 1994 essay deconstructing authenticity at the museum Lincoln’s New Salem, Bruner responds to Handler with “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism.” Handler and Gable further the discussion with their 1996 essay “After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site,” in which they discuss how authenticity is constructed at Colonial Williamsburg. In this essay, I will explore two themes relevant to their debate: how do people understand authenticity? And why do people search for authenticity at living history museums?

37 Richard Handler and William Saxton, “Dyssimulation.”
38 Edward Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction.”
39 Eric Gable and Richard Handler, “After Authenticity.”
Handler and Bruner have different opinions about the state of contemporary culture, consequently, they propose different reasons for the value of LHMs. While Handler asserts that people engage with living history museums because they desire authentic experience that is otherwise lacking in their “alienated” lives, Bruner suggests living history museums as valuable because they provide visitors with the “raw material” to construct a sense of identity for themselves.\footnote{Richard Handler and William Saxton, “Dyssimulation” 370.} In his 1988 essay, Handler suggests that re-enactors desire to “perfectly simulate the past” reflects a desire for ”authentic experience” “[in which an] individual feels themselves to be in touch both with a 'real' world and with their 'real' selves.”. Huxtable describes the alienation that Handler alludes in her desire for the ”real” and her fear that the ”synthetic environment” has caused a ”detachment from the problems and process of contemporary life…”\footnote{Edward Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction” 411.} Handler’s diagnosis of living historians is rooted in the assumption that his contemporaries feel alienated from their lives. As Bruner points out, Handler and sociologist Dean MacCannel share the same notion that people feel their world is ”unreal.” In his 1976 book, \textit{The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class}, he writes, “For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles.”\footnote{Huxtable, “Inventing Reality,” 24.} Handler insists living history re-enactors search for authenticity in other historical periods that have been simplified and made more coherent, MacCannel indicates that tourists and all “moderns” do this because they locate “reality” as outside their everyday lives. Bruner, annoyed with the oft-repeated “alienated man in search of self” rhetoric, provocatively disagrees with both Handler and MacCannel, he writes “perhaps it is these contemporary intellectuals who are the ones looking for authenticity, and who have projected onto the tourists...\footnote{Dean MacCannell, \textit{The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class} (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) 3.}
Bruner’s direct admonishment stems from the belief that Handler and MacCannel create a monolithic portrait of living history practitioners, tourists, and “moderns.” Bruner contends that people are not searching for authenticity, but instead are looking for ways in which to make meaning out of their lives. In his case study at Lincoln's New Salem, Bruner found that visitors consume a sense of nostalgia for the vanished past, buy into the idea of progress, and commemorate “traditional American values” of hard work, honest values, and “good neighbors.” Consequently, tourists consume an “origin myth” which helps them to construct an identity for themselves. Bruner remains “optimistic” that the ideology that a living history museum, even if it is constructed in the present and not reflective of the past, can have “revolutionary potential” because it provides visitors with a utopic version of the past and thus presents a model for what the world should look like. In their 1996 essay, Handler and Gable warn that living history museums, using CW and New Salem as an example, reinforce morally uplifting myths about the past which positions the museums as an arbiter of good, honest, values. Handler and Gable ultimately warn that as institutions that claim to “authentically reproduce” the past, living history museums create mythic origin stories for Americans which they appear implicitly equally “authentic” even though they impose “American” universal values retrospectively. Their main difference is that Bruner believes an “inauthentic” “good myth” is generative for tourists to see the past painted in a positive light, while Handler believes that living history museums assert too much authority over how people understand the past.

Handler and Bruner make opposing assertions about what authenticity means to tourists and living history practitioners. Instead of proposing definitive definitions for authenticity, they

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46 Gable and Handler, “After Authenticity,” 333.
explain the concept of authenticity in terms of how tourists and living history practitioners understand it. Handler consistently remains rooted in his assumption that contemporary people feel alienated from their lives. Unlike the 1994 and 1996 essays which are case studies on two specific living history museums, Handler’s 1988 essay analyzes how living history 1-st person costumed-interpreters (at museums or in war reenactments) understand and seek out “authentic experience” by simulating the past. Handler claims, later to be refuted by Bruner, that all living-history practitioners define “authenticity” as “historical accuracy” (or in his words, “isomorphism”), and thus ”an authentic piece of living history is one that exactly simulates or re-creates a particular place, scene, or event from the past.” The goal, by the logic of this definition, would be to close the gaps between past and present, so that the re-creation is “isomorphic” with the “original.” Handler also asserts that while living historians have the goal of historical accuracy, they are also aware that the past can never be fully recovered due to scale, setting, selectivity, subjectivity, and the inability to replicate past states of mind. While Huxtable asserts a “copy” cannot be ”authentic,” living historians, according to Handler, believe that a perfect replica can be authentic and that reaching the goal of exact “isomorphism” is challenging but worthwhile.

Bruner responds to Handler’s assertions about authenticity in his early 1990’s case study at Lincoln’s New Salem, a living history museum that characterizes itself as “authentic reproduction.” Representing the town in which Abraham Lincoln lived during the 1830s, Bruner suggests that museum professionals and costumed interpreters understand multiple definitions of “authenticity.” New Salem is composed of almost entirely recreated buildings, and the objective to recreate ”pioneer life” must be negotiated with 20th-century realities. First, Bruner proposes

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48 Ibid, 245.
that museum professionals approach constructing this “authentic reproduction” with the aim of “historical verisimilitude” or mimetic credibility. They want the historical site to be believable to the public: as Bruner says, a “1990’s person would walk into the village and say ‘this looks like the 1830s.’”

Recalling Crew and Sim’s claim that authenticity is about authority not about factuality, the museum relies on its authority to create the impression for visitors that representation of the past that they present is authentic. The “factuality” or the “genuineness” of the museum's objects or the interpretations is less important for conveying authenticity than the museum’s ability to anticipate what 1990’s visitors will view as credible. Bruner gives an example:

The houses at the 1990s New Salem represent the original 1830s houses, thus they are weathered to look old so that they will be more credible... The 1830s houses, however, actually looked much newer, as the village of New Salem was founded in 1829 and abandoned by 1839, a period of only ten years. The 1830s houses were not occupied long enough to look aged, hence the 1990s houses at New Salem appear older than the originals.

The museum anticipates that visitors would discredit a newly constructed house because the visitors would expect that a reconstructed village representing the past should have old appearing houses. While Handler in 1988 asserts that living historians equate authenticity with historical accuracy, Bruner disagrees; instead, he proposes a second definition in which not all museum professionals aim to create based on genuineness, where theoretically “an 1830s person would [walk into the village and] say ‘This looks like 1830s New Salem’” as the village would appear true in substance, or real.” He proposes a third perspective that equates “authenticity” with “original, as opposed to copy.” This notion aligns with Huxtable's perspective, in which reproductions cannot be authentic. Bruner notes that New Salem, and sites like CW, promote

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50 Ibid, 399.
53 Ibid, 399.
this notion when referring to their “original” buildings and objects so the aura of authenticity of these original structures can pervade the 1990’s site and “rub[ off] on the reproductions.”

Bruner finds the fourth definition that he proposes most compelling: “authenticity” meaning “duly authorized, certified, or legally valid.” He gives the example that Lincoln’s New Salem is the only authoritative reproduction of 1830’s New Salem, and it is legitimized by the state of Illinois. He notes, authenticity merges with authority. “The more fundamental question to ask here is not if an object or site is authentic, rather who has the authority to authenticate, which is a matter of power — or, to put it another way, who has the right to tell the story of the site.”

Bruner’s proposes that once the notion of authority enters the conversation, it is clear that a materialist notion of authenticity is flawed because “authenticity” can no longer be seen as a “property inherent in an object” (or recreated villages), but rather authenticity is “a social process” “in which competing interests argue for their own interpretation of history.” Indeed, this notion deconstructs Huxtable’s claim that “copies cannot be authentic” because it reveals that Huxtable does not “authenticate” replicas, but living historians may “authenticate” a replica according to Bruner’s second definition. While Bruner’s proposition about authority and authenticity is by no means original, his application of this notion to how living history museums manage their authority provoked a response from Handler.

In his 1996 essay, Handler focuses on authenticity as “impression management,” a term he uses to describe how museums manage perspectives on the past in presenting historic material. While in his previous essay Handler asserted that living history practitioners believed authenticity means perfect replication of the past, he revised his opinion in response to Bruner’s

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54 Ibid, 400.
55 Ibid, 408.
56 Ibid, 400.
57 Ibid, 409.
assertions about “authentication.” His case study conducted during the early 1990s follows historians at Colonial Williamsburg. Handler notices a contradiction: historians themselves understand “history making itself is not simply a matter of facts and truth… [but instead] a processes shot through with hidden cultural assumptions and ideological agendas,” however, the primary discourse the museum disseminates to visitors is a total commitment to authenticity in the sense of “historical accuracy.” Since its conception, CW faced criticisms from tourists, historians, and critics like Huxtable, for presenting a sanitized, patriotic, tidy, suburban, artificial representation of a place and time which was actually rife with class oppression, slavery, disease, and stench. Still, the museum purported to be an authentic historic site. Handler explores how the museum simultaneously acknowledges that visitors know that 1990’s Colonial Williamsburg is not an exact replica of 1790’s Williamsburg while claiming to aim for historical accuracy. Interpreters at CW, according to Handler, confess that things that were at one point considered to be true were later discovered to be inauthentic and “that the business of history making involves all sorts of compromises.” Handler’s main assertion is that the museum must retain its reputation as an “arbiter of authenticity,” and to do this it must admit that its ability to simulate the past depends upon what is realistically achievable and known at a certain moment. What’s seen as authentic also depends on who is telling the story of the past. The Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum approaches living history in an open-ended way.

59 Gable and Handler, “After Authenticity,” 339.
CHAPTER TWO: An Exploration of Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum

“Step back in time at the Farmers’ Museum” reads a plaque posted in a field at the less popular, south entrance of this living history museum. A ca. 1861 gaslight sconce. A 1755 Greek Revival church. A reconstructed village. These are a few of the things you might see on a visit to the Farmer’s Museum, or at least, I can confidently tell you that these are a few of the things I saw on my visit this past July. I traveled to Cooperstown, Otsego County NY, where the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum (CFM) opened in 1943, to examine a living history museum and the concept of authenticity it presents. Exploring how the Farmers’ Museum represents 19th-century rural and village life, this essay will argue that the museum constructs a unique perspective on authenticity. The notion of authenticity has been written about in regards to all sorts of museums, however, the literature pertaining to living history museums (LHMs) proves particularly generative for complicating the concept of authenticity in immersive environments like the CFM. As previous research on the subject has revealed, LHMs approach representing the past in a variety of ways that implicitly reveal different attitudes toward authenticity.

In this essay, I’ll first provide an overview of the Farmers’ Museum using mostly information one could find from visiting the museum. Next, I’ll introduce the ways in which the museum has been written about in promotional materials. Analyzing this material should show that the public perception of the CFM, how the museum purports itself, and signage within the museum all negotiate what it is that CFM actually represents. Following this, an analysis of how the museum’s desire to represent trends from rural 19th century New York results in the exclusion of heterogeneous identities and unique events. Lastly, this essay will discuss how the
museum’s use of labels reduces objects and historical characters to what they “represent” rather than for their singularity.

Overview of the Farmers’ Museum:

The Farmers’ Museum’s unique approach to constructing a representation of the past combines relocated, collected, restored, and facsimile objects and buildings. Additionally, the museum uses texts to further explicate the displayed material culture. The museum consists of over 20 buildings relocated to a 15 acre property one mile outside downtown Cooperstown. With the exception of a few facsimile outbuildings, all of the restored historical structures were initially constructed between 1790-1840. Though this chapter will not include an analysis of the “living” aspect of this LHM, it should be mentioned that third-person costumed interpreters in period-dress demonstrate domestic responsibilities, farm work, and trades including blacksmithing and broom making. The museum is split into three sections that are connected by a gravel road: the exhibition area features 20th-century buildings, and the 2006 New York State Carousel; the area designated “Historic Village” contains historical buildings that are interpreted in a variety of ways ranging from full-scale period-room style to text written on panels describing some aspect of history; following the same road south, the “Lippitt Farmstead” contains a relocated farmhouse as well as the replicated outbuildings, relocated barns, and a host of farm animals. Throughout the museum campus, plaques, panels, and labels describe aspects of the museums. Facsimile and genuine relics of the past are displayed within and around the relocated buildings. Each exhibit, of which there might be several inside a particular restored building, explores a particular theme or person, for example, “Dr. Jackson’s office” discusses a mid-19th century doctor’s profession in the front room and the art of Joseph Whiting Stock in the back room.
Known as “The Farmers’ Museum,” I use the acronym “CFM” because there are many living history museums related to farming. However, my acronym is somewhat of a misnomer given that the Farmers’ Museum contains not only buildings and material culture from Cooperstown, but also from the 6 counties in Central New York. Local entrepreneur Stephen C. Clark, witnessing the decline of Cooperstown as an agricultural hub, expanded tourism in the town when he founded the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936. A few years later, he offered the New York State Historical Society (NYSHS) a new home on his property and the NYSHS created the “Farmers’ Museum.” Though the property on which the CFM stands today was once a farm, the only two buildings original to the site which remain today are from the 20th century. The land was once owned by writer James Fenimore Cooper; the “historic-ness” of the site does not play a significant role in informing what the museum represents. While the museum only uses some hyper-specific local history to inform visitors of a broader sense of 19th-century village and farming life, it mostly relies on relocated buildings and collected objects to inform the topics of its interpretations. This type of living history museum, in which restored historical buildings are relocated to an arbitrary site, is characterized as a “recreated museum village.” Unlike a “restored village,” CFM’s immersive “historic village” does not represent a specific place nor is it restored to reflect a specific time period. Consequently, understanding what is CFM authentic to? is complicated by the fact that the CFM does not aim to “simulate” the past.

Public Perception of the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum from 1955 to 2021:

Does this look like 1845 rural New York to you? Is this an authentic reproduction? How would you know? (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). A visit to the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum informs visitors' understanding of what the past looked like - whether that’s the intention or not.

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While the CFM’s current mission statements and promotional material do not allude to the CFM as a place in which visitors can “step back in time” to the 19th century, the literature that is written about CFM and the signs within the museum indicate “time traveling” rhetoric permeates the site. Many living history museums, especially restored and reconstructed “museum villages”, attempt, or claim to attempt, to recreate a historical moment. As is the case with Colonial Williamsburg (CW), a section of the city Williamsburg was restored and animated by costumed interpreters to represent the city during the colonial era when it was the capital of Colonial Virginia. Similarly, Lincoln's New Salem uses almost entirely fabricated buildings to reconstitute the village of New Salem during the 1830s. New Salem promotes itself as a place where visitors can “Step back in time nearly 200 years as you walk the streets of this reconstructed pioneer village where Abraham Lincoln lived and worked as a young man. See where he split rails, clerked in a store and served as postmaster, among other positions that influenced him to eventually become the Great Emancipator…”63 (See Figure 3). This approach to living history museums essentially strives to create a giant period room to create the appearance that a “slice of life” is taken from the past and reconstituted in the present.64 In both the case of CW and New Salem, the living history museum strives to reconstitute an “authentic reproduction” of a specific place and time. Consequently, evaluating these sites for their supposed “authenticity” can be reduced to a consideration of whether or not it is possible to recreate the past. Authenticity at the CFM is somewhat more complicated because of the variety of ways in which the CFM represents the past and because of the ambiguity relating to what the CFM actually strives to do. What it is that the CFM represents is negotiated both within the museum itself and in statements

64 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage, 20.
and advertisements about the museum. Considering the changes in the characterization of CFM over time informs an interpretation of the museum today.

Promotional material about the CFM reveals how the museum negotiates between recreating and representing the past. A 1955 *New York Times* article on the CFM reveals how the CFM presented itself and was perceived in the decade following its mid-1940s opening. Describing the area of the museum now designated “historic village,” the journalist writes, “Cooperstown, N. Y.--This dateline ought to read Village Crossroads, but you cannot find a town by that name on the map of Central New York. Village Crossroads is the name of the composite early American village that has been recreated at the Farmers' Museum which celebrates its fifteen acres on the edge of Cooperstown…[and] the life and times of the upstate New York farmer of a century or more ago.”65 He recalls a CFM-made brochure which describes the CFM as “a dramatic living recreation of life on the early American frontier. The village has a schoolhouse, country store, blacksmith shop, printing office, druggist's shop, lawyer's and doctor's offices, an old farmhouse where they make butter and bake bread, and demonstrations of spinning, weaving, broom making, woodworking, all as it was done years ago.”66 These two characterizations expose the vocabulary used to describe the LHM. With reference to “composite,” “recreated” and the impossibility of finding the “Village Crossroads” on a map, the journalist’s assessment emphasizes the artificial, constructed nature of the CFM’s “Village Crossroads.”67 Meanwhile, the CFM describes itself as a “dramatic recreation of life” costumed-interpreters perform quotidian activities “as it was years ago.”68 CFM’s description implies fidelity to Anderson’s definition of living history as an “attempt to simulate life of

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66 Ibid., 155.
67 “Village Crossroads” is another name for the “historic village.”
68 Ibid., 155.
another time.” This reveals that the CFM initially aimed to replicate the practices of the past in order to represent the trades and activities of a “real” village.

Since the mid-20th century, the CFM’s characterization of itself has shifted away from presenting a “recreation” of the past toward evoking an “understanding” of the past. Today, their mission statement claims to “provide visitors with an immersive experience into village and farm life of 19th-century New York through authentic demonstrations and interpretive exhibitions” and aims to “[cultivate] an understanding of the rural heritage that has shaped our land, communities and American culture.” CFM’s mission to create an “immersive experience” is reminiscent of John D. Rockefeller’s intention of constructing Colonial Williamsburg so it could be freed “entirely from alien or inharmonious surroundings…” CFM is immersive in the sense that, like many tourist sites and museums, once a visitor has paid the fee they stay inside the site’s boundaries. However, visitors are not submerged into a mimetically credible depiction of the past because labels, plaques, trashcans, and picnic tables furnishing the “historic village” preclude the possibility that visitors will forget that they are within a museum. Consequently, the CFM does not pretend that the museum campus itself is a “slice of life.” In 2021, TripAdvisor describes the CFM as a “Living history museum [that] re-creates 19th-century rural life, complete with craftspeople demonstrating rural trades and skills in the restored buildings of an 1845 village.” Meanwhile, wikipedia claims the museum “recreates rural life from the 19th century through exhibits and interactive workshops.” Both websites indicate that the CFM

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71 “About,” The Farmers Museum (blog), accessed December 6, 2021, [https://www.farmersmuseum.org/about/](https://www.farmersmuseum.org/about/).
73 “The Farmers’ Museum (Cooperstown) - 2021 All You Need to Know Before You Go (with Photos),” Tripadvisor, accessed December 3, 2021, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g47529-d102934](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g47529-d102934).
“recreates” “rural life.” Though the museum does not classify itself as “re-creating” “life, the CFM is consistently perceived as if it were “simulating the past.”

Signage within the museums contradicts the CFM’s advertisements and re-affirms internet promotional characterizations. When entering through the museums’ less popular south entrance, visitors encounter a sign reading “Step into the Past at the Farmers’ Museum.” Visitors are then guided by a path towards the farmstead. When entering through the more popular north entrance, visitors first traverse through the 20th-century buildings which offer contextualizing information about the museums and about modern-day farming; visitors then step outside, and follow a gravel path towards an archway that reads “Historic Village” (See Figure 4). Beyond this archway, visitors are immersed in an environment of restored 18th and 19th-century buildings arranged to represent a village and farm. Though not all the buildings are furnished as if they were period rooms, and contemporary plaques intercept visitors’ vision of the village, the signage indicates that visitors can step over a threshold and travel back in time. This blurs the fact that the village and farm buildings are selected specifically for the museum, and restored to represent the CFM’s desired image of the past. The “historic village” and the “Lippett farmstead” are constructed, not preserved.

The Typical Village:

A 1994 C-span video introduces the CFM with the phrase “Today the C-Span Bus visits a typical 19th-century village.” It raises the question of what “typical” means. While the CFM is not a simulation, fit with all the manure, livestock, and disorder of “real life,” it does yield the authority to represent the past because it possesses tangible relics of the 19th-century New York State. Unlike Colonial Williamsburg which collects and displays the relics of a specific place,

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CFM's broad collection of both Central NY state and American material culture affords it the authority to represent what is “typical” for the region. To be credibly authentic, Colonial Williamsburg could not ignore the fact that a significant portion of the real population of Williamsburg in Colonial times were enslaved people; in this case, erasure would be historically inaccurate. However, CFM can take liberties in choosing how to depict the past because it doesn’t represent a specific time or place and thus is not obligated to represent the actual demographics of a specific town or time period.

It’s abundantly clear that the CFM constructs and represents “rural” “village” and “farm life.” However, as evidenced in the quotes above, the location and time period that the CFM represents is referred to in general and contradictory ways: “early American village,” “central” and “upstate New York,” “early American frontier,” “typical,” “19th-century,” “1845 village.” The museum features buildings collected from “south of the Mohawk River Valley, west of the Hudson River, north of the New York-Pennsylvania state line, and east of a north-south line drawn through Syracuse.”77 In the 1955 New York Times article, the CFM brochure refers to a period before the 19th century when it claims to represent the “early American frontier.” Similarly, “Central” and “Upstate” define different areas of New York. The confusion is rooted in the fact that CFM is not a collection of buildings preserved from one particular town or farm, but instead is an assemblage of structures spanning a large area and time period.78 Consequently, the CFM’s choices about what buildings and objects to include informs what visitors will think of as the best representation of what a “typical” “19th century” New York State town might look like.

77 P. J. C. F, “Bump Tavern: Farmers’ Museum Adds an Inn at Cooperstown,”
78 Ibid.,
While all of the buildings are indeed from central NY, the CFM interprets the buildings in order to make claims about American culture in general. For example, a plaque outside of “Middlefield Printing Office built 1839, Middlefield, NY (6 miles from here)” reads, “Early 19th century printers derived income from subscription newspapers, job printing, and newspaper advertising. The 1840s Liberty job press inside was used to print the *Andes Recorder* (1867-1892) in Delaware County, NY.” Though this generalization of “early 19th century printers” is not a harmful characterization, it is representative of how the CFM can use specific facts, and tangible relics to support their authority and to make claims about the goings-on of the 19th-century trades in general (See Figure 5).

Similarly, throughout the museum references to the “19-century” and the “1840s” reveals that 1845 is used as an anchor point for many exhibits. This flexible cut-off date restricts which objects, animals, and crops should be exhibited in the farmstead and provides a central theme to compare and understand exhibits in the village. For example, “Dr. Jackson’s office,” a two-room Greek Revival style building, features photos of the original inhabitant’s 1830s “Dr. Jackson’s Day Book” in one area of the building, and on a nearby plaque makes the claim: “Most doctors in the 1840s made their own medicine from wholesale ingredients.” The office is sparsely furnished with medical equipment scattered on a desk with open drawers; a hat sits on a built-in shelf, and a long overcoat hands on a door frame. Along the barrier separating visitors from the period-room-like display, labels describe each object in the room and declare that none of the objects presented belonged to Dr. Jackson. The exhibit’s use of objects from the 19th century to represent “most doctors in the 1840s” inside of the hyper-specific “Dr. Jackson’s office,” shows how the museum uses a small collection of objects and information to make claims about broader trends in the 19th century. Additionally, this exhibit is one of many which uses the
“1840s” as a reference point. Using the relocated New York buildings and the 1840s as a departure point, the exhibit, like others at CFM, oscillates between the specific and the typical.

The danger with CFM using its authority as a museum to make generalizing claims about an entire decade, trades, and people is that the museum implicitly makes claims about what is “typical” without acknowledging heterogeneity or changes over time. Furthermore, the CFM’s choice to represent the 1840’s as a quintessential decade in the 19th century reveals the museum’s desire to represent a static depiction of the past. While the museum does depict the evolution of technology, including the transition from candle to kerosene to gas, and from hearth to stove, the museum ignored other vital social and political changes that occurred in the 19th century. With the “1840s” as a central theme, the museum ignores certain facts like how NY state did not abolish slavery until 1827, and not all rural farmers were white or American born. Indeed, the museum’s only exhibit mentioning national politics or African American people deliberately portrays slavery as a non-New York phenomenon. By choosing to devote the “Lawyer’s office” to the 1857 Dred Scott versus Sanford case, the CFM depicts the national politics just a few years before the Civil War, thus representing New York State as solidly prohibitionist. This effectively erases enslaved and free African American people from simple “rural life” which the CFM claims to represent. Additionally, the museum’s lack of obligation to a specific time or place, the CFM obscures heterogeneous identities, political changes, and unique events, in favor of a generic “recreated village” which has no obligation to represent any contradictory facts.
Presentation of Objects in the CFM's Historic Village:

“The problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie.”

At the CFM, objects are used to typify categories, consequently, the museum implicitly constructs a notion of authenticity in which interpretations become more important than genuine objects. Additionally, the CFM uses objects and historical characters to generally represent the past; as a result, the museum privileges non-specific information in the displays. Ranging from large scale period-rooms at the “Lippet Farmstead” to exhibits displaying objects behind glass, the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum presents relics of the past in a variety of ways which reaffirm the museum’s position that “objects” “are dumb.” In typical historical or art museum exhibits, as characterized in Baxandall’s “Exhibiting Intention”, objects are “offered up for inspection” and are “to some extent expounded upon” in the form of labels, catalogs, videos, plaques, tours, lectures etc. Objects remain “discrete” “lumps of the physical world to which cultural value has been ascribed.” The relationship between “lumps of the physical world” and the information offered when museums “expound” “upon” them is indicative of how the museum understands visitor’s expectations about authenticity. Does the label describe the object, or does the object exemplify the label? This essay will discuss an exhibit in “Dimmick House” to reveal how the museum constructs visitors’ positions towards objects.

“The Dimmick House,” named for its former owners, features several exhibits about “technology and domestic life in the 1800s.” Using the multigenerational family to track social and technological changes over time, the exhibits refer to the stages in the life of the family.

member to create meaningful context. For example, an information plaque in the front room claims “As children, Sophia and Hosea [Dimmick] (both born around 1810) ate food cooked over an open hearth, wore clothes scrubbed on a washboard, and lit candles in the evening. As an adult in this home, Sophia and her daughter Frances prepared dinner on a stove, used a washing machine and kerosene lamps.” The exhibit’s text about the Dimmick relies on evidence gathered from analysis of the restored house, historical documents, and also on generalizations based on historical information about technological innovation on domestic life. While the Dimmick family theme connects the exhibits to the restored house, nearly all of the objects are not original to the building nor did they belong to the family. Instead, most of the objects were collected by the museum, and are used to represent what families like the Dimmicks could have owned or used.

The exhibits in the Dimmick house reveal that the CFM locates the value of objects in their ability to support the museum’s desire to provide a panoramic impression of the 1800s, rather than the visual qualities of the objects. This is evinced in the objects’ labels. For example, in the exhibit on “New Lighting Technology” in the 19th century, the object’s labels privilege the type of “thing,” rather than the “thing” itself. In the display case featuring objects related to gaslighting technology, a wooden handle attached to a long metal rod with a heart-shaped end is expounded upon: "Gaslight key,” “ca. 1880, NYSHA Collection, Gift of C.R. Jones. NOO8.2007(4)" "Keys like this were used to adjust the flow of gas, to brighten or dim the light.” The label does not describe the significance of this individual “gaslight key,” nor does it offer definitive information about the key’s origin, maker, or primary context (See Figure 6). Similarly, the label does not invite visitors to examine the object for further information. Instead, the label refers to the last known owner of the object and the suspected year in which it was
made. Additionally, the label indicates that objects “like this” had functioned in relation to other objects represented by two “Gaslight Sconce[s]” and “Tapers” in the display case. Given the information provided by the museum, the object becomes a function of the category “gaslight key,” rather than an individually significant relic of the past. Even if an object’s date, origin, maker, and primary context are known, all of the objects displayed in the “Dimmick” exhibit are “named” in such a way that indicates the CFM cares more about representing “types of thing” rather than unique or rare things. For example, one label reads, “Gaslight sconce” “ca. 1861, Made by Archer, Panacost & Co….Formerly Installed at the Presbyterian Church, Cooperstown, NY”; even though an abundance of facts are known about this object, the CFM still chooses to primarily name it a “Gaslight sconce.” Consequently, this object becomes one of two examples of a “Gaslight sconce” at the museum, rather than a singular example of an “Archer, Panacost & Co 1861 Gaslight sconce.” By naming objects to make them into “types of things,” and by choosing to display objects with unknown makers and origins, the museum sets up a dynamic where the museum’s limited number of objects become quintessential examples of 19th century “gaslighting technology.” Baxandall captures this use of objects when he asserts, “That it has a name means it is a sort of thing.”

The CFM acts as a repository for authentic historic objects, and yet it imposes constructions onto objects and uses them to illustrate theories about the past. In the first room that visitors enter, a plaque introduces the concept of “Women, Men and Separate Spheres,” and invites visitors “as you explore their home, find out how Hosea and Sophia’s separate work was changed by technology.” Throughout the Dimmick house, exhibits divide objects according to men and women’s domestic responsibilities. In one display case representing “Toys for Girls and

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82 Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 35.
83 Gable and Handler, “After Authenticity” 312.
Boys,” toy objects are dispersed unevenly in a vitrine. The text panel about the toys claims: “Children’s play often mimicked the separate spheres and new technological advances their parents were adopting.” In the protective case, objects are only vaguely separated by possible gender use (See Figure 7). It is only in the label card that the objects are talked about as “boy’s toys” referring to the “toy soldiers” and “toy sword,” and “girl’s toys” referring to the miniature “carpet sweeper” and “washboard.” The CFM’s choice to split the toys into gendered categories is meant to be reflective of the “separate spheres” of the middle-class in the late 19th century. However, it also reflects the museum’s interest in picking objects to represent trends rather than distinct and heterogeneous events or identities. The actual biography of the individual objects is not discussed: was this toy “locomotive” created by an unknown maker in c.1880, only owned by boys? Or were all toy “locomotives” only marketed to boys? Has it been a relic for longer than it was ever used for playing? Instead of discussing the various meanings these objects may have, the museum reduces the toys so they represent the gender which they were supposedly created for, erasing the actual biography of the object. Gable and Handler argue, “Every claim to possess or represent the “real” at least implies a claim to possess or represent the knowledge and authority to decide what’s real and what isn’t.” 84 The CFM claims to possess “real” relics from 19th-century domestic life, and it claims to have the authority to authenticate these objects. Along with this, it claims the authority and knowledge to construct a framework in which to understand the objects.

The CFM used the story of the family that was living in the house as a stand-in for any family living in the nineteenth century. They emphasize two narratives: 1) entering the middle class and moving away from an agrarian lifestyle; 2) changing gender roles. Their backgrounds and where they might have come from are excluded from the story. In the same way, details

84 Ibid., 315.
about objects are erased or suppressed, the historical figures and buildings are also reduced to representing generalized characters. In the Dimmick house, the names, professions, genders, significant dates, (including births and marriages), and the original location of the house, are used to support the exhibits which track technological changes over the course of the 19th century. The story the museum presents about the Dimmicks is the “father” Hosea was a farmer who got a better job as a lock tender on the newly created Chenango Canal in 1837, and consequently, his family became middle class. This generic story excludes references to the family’s background, education, or ethnicity, and instead privileges the possibility that upward economic movement could occur for any family. By choosing to present the Dimmicks as the generic family, the CFM seems to think that visitors could better imagine life in the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER THREE: Encounters with Authenticity

When entering the Cooperstown Farmers’ Museum last summer, I first walked through the exhibition hall. In 2021, the renovated 1918 dairy barn serves as a museum gallery rather than an active milking barn (See Figure 3.1). I was introduced to the space through informational plaques and an exhibit on hops production in rural New York. I passed by objects on display like 19th-century tractors and ‘America’s Greatest Hoax’ the not-so-famous Cardiff Giant. Noting a phone charging station, interactive computer screens, and selfie-taking visitors, I found myself thinking less about farming and more about 21st-century curatorial practices.

Further down this extended exhibition hall, I encountered the first costume interpreter. Carefully avoiding eye contact — and at the same time escaping a one-sided conversation about
a subject that I was not particularly interested in, I watched a man in a red and white checkered shirt under denim overalls proceed to demonstrate how to make a broom to a family of four. I’m no stranger to broom-making demonstrations; it seems nearly every rural living history museum has a broom shop. Perhaps brooms were very important in the 19th century. Perhaps museums with broom demonstrations sell more tickets than museums with no broom demonstrations.

Such a question is beyond the scope of this paper. What I can say, is that with black and white tiled floors, computer-generated signs reading “Brooms for Sale” and “Broom Making” hanging on wire mesh, and a Formica countertop separating visitors from the interpreter, this “broom shop” was different than any I’d seen before (See Figure 3.2). Made of sticks or straw, long or short, hanging on “S” hooks, propped up in barrels, or dangling off of the interpreter’s wooden work table, the brooms themselves were the same. Gallery lights shone down from the ceiling emphasized the broom shadows cast across the white-washed gallery space. The interpreter explained retrospectively how people of the past once made, used, and relied upon brooms, and to explain how he personally creates them using “authentic” materials, techniques and tools. Other 19th-century re-created broom shops that I’ve seen at LHMs evoke the past by creating an immersive period-room reconstruction. This broom shop” features what I can only assume to be facsimile objects used for display or for sale which are organized in an evidently 21st-century gallery space. The 21st-century interpreter’s brooms are sold in the “historic village” “General Store.” I got the sense that this museum didn’t have much concern for presenting genuine objects as much as it was concerned with presenting historically accurate replicas and demonstrations and with selling the idea that facsimiles are valuable and informative.
Wide-open barn doors illuminate the exhibition hall and beckon visitors outside. Passing by another 20th-century building, and the “only museum you can ride” 2006 New York State Carousel featuring historic information about each county, I noticed an archway reading “Historic Village.” A gravel road leads visitors beneath the archway (See Figure 2.4). Following the past, I could plainly see the historic village: composed of relocated historic buildings surrounding the “village green.” This archway marked the point in which one can step from the 21st century to the 19th, or at least that’s the effect I hoped it would have.

“So if you told Mr. George Washington the reasons why you liked his time,” an aspiring time traveler is cautioned, “you’d probably be naming everything he hated about it.”

The notion that it’s possible to “step back in time” is a simultaneously ridiculous and interesting endeavor. What if you could really visit an 1845 rural New York village for a day? What would your experience be like? What would it look like there? What would you notice?

I walked under the archway, and into the “historic village.” While perusing the gravel streets surrounded only by buildings constructed before the Civil War, I didn’t feel as if I had entered the past any more than I had felt just minutes before at the broom shop. Some buildings were set up like period rooms “print shop” and ”blacksmith shop” and were apparently occasionally used by costumed interpreters who give demonstrations (See Figure 3.2). Most of the “historic village” buildings exhibited objects with informative labels and texts (as described in the previous chapter). Picnic benches and barrels with recycling insignias were placed conveniently throughout the village. Though large historic buildings were situated to block this view, I could see cars rolling by on Route 80 just beyond a short stone wall. I could enter the buildings and read about what the exhibits had to say, and sure, I could look through the

restoration glass window to see how 19th-century people would see out the windows, but I was, to say the least, a little disappointed (See Figure 3.3). You see, I wanted to write a paper about the sort of living history museum that Bruner describes, one which strives toward being an “authentic reproduction” of the past. Instead, I found a living history museum that doesn’t even try to make it possible to feel immersed in the past. How can I write about authenticity if the museum village doesn’t even aim for authenticity in the sense of verisimilitude or historical accuracy?

The “historic village” reminds me of Guilford, Connecticut, and also of a quote by Linda Young that reads, “humans understand a group of buildings as a village” Young’s full statement is not so blasé, but the point is that individually preserved buildings may be genuine, but once put into relocated artificial relationships with each other they create a picture of rural life that never existed before and may very well be inaccurate. The CFM’s relocated buildings are interpreted to represent trades, businesses, community centers, and homes, consequently fulfilling many of the things one might expect from a 19th-century rural village without any repeats (only one place of worship, one doctor’s office, one print shop, one tavern, etc.). As none of the buildings are original to the site, they’re all put into artificial relationships with each other and connected by gravel “streets” which are carved into the otherwise grassy landscape. Looming at the southern end of the village green, the tall awe-inspiring white-washed “Cornwallville church” is situated next to a small graveyard of real 19th-century gravestones and imaginary graves (See Figure 3.4). When looking out the window of the “Cornwallville Church,” supposedly built in 1795, but extensively remodeled in 1861, the restoration glass blurs my vision in the same way it would blur the vision of a 19th-century churchgoer, however, we aren’t

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86 Young uses that school houses would typically be located at convenient crossroads rather than inside of rural villages. Young, “Villages That Never Were: The Museum Village as a Heritage Genre” 323.
seeing the same sight evolved over centuries. Formerly the Methodist church in East Durham, NY, and later transplanted to CFM’s reconstructed village, the windows now offer a view of “Lippett Farmstead” where costumed interpreters, livestock, and crops animate relics of the past.

Everywhere I looked at the CFM, I looked for things related to authenticity. Everything I had seen so far felt as though it had been constructed to provide a unilateral experience for the viewer: constructed to conjure up feelings of nostalgia, rather than realism. That feeling wasn’t based on my knowledge of the past, you see, I have never visited a 19th-century rural New York village. My feeling of “this is all so inauthentic” is actually because the museum isn’t aiming to be an exact replication of a past environment, nor is it trying to be a convincing and credible representation of a village. Clearly, mimetic credibility wasn’t the goal given all of the plaques, text panels, and objects displayed in vitrines, and the weakly disguised trash cans. So I thought, in what ways is the CFM striving for authenticity in the “historic village”? Gutters. Almost all of the historic buildings do not have gutters. I only noticed this because, in Bruner’s 1994 essay, he lists historically anachronistic gutters on the replicated log cabins as one of the many concessions Lincoln’s New Salem makes for the sake of visitor comfort. The inside of the historic building is electrically lit, but they don’t have gutters on the outside. The CFM seems to be trying to make the outside of buildings look credible, while the insides are renovated. Some historic buildings, like the Dimmick house, are essentially transformed into museum gallery spaces; whereas other buildings are transformed so that they look, convincingly enough to me, what, say, a mid-19th century blacksmith shop might look like (with some accommodation for social distancing). All of the restored and relocated buildings are genuine in the sense that they are original, not copies. But many of them have been restored in such a way that obscures their age. On every building, a plaque reports the year it was built and its original location. I find these plaques quite a relief.

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87 Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction”
My favorite way to talk about authenticity is to talk about the relationship between objects and labels, and then later I’ll try to broach analyzing objects without labels. A small plaque located on stone steps leading up to the church reads:

“Cornwallville Church, 1795” “This church first served a congregation in East Durham, New York. It was then moved to serve the Cornwallville Methodist Episcopal congregation of Cornwallville, Greene County. The church is now used for museum and community events such as weddings and concerts.”

Combined with the label, the church offers me some relief that CFM is committed to some kind of essentialist authenticity, and not just to education or nostalgia production. According to a New York Times article from 1964, and a C-Span video from 1996, the church had been abandoned since 1960. In 1961, it was dismantled board-by-board and subsequently re-built in the CFM. The “historic village” only contains buildings that reflect the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Apparently, during the dismantling process, there was consternation over whether or not the Greek Revival facade actually fits into the CFM’s time period.  

"During the dismantling, several boarded-up, pointed Gothic windows were uncovered, and replaced by the present tall, oblong windows. This was at first disquieting to the association's officers, since it might have argued that the present appearance of the church dated from a much later period, even as recently as the 1890s. But internal evidence in the structure itself, and the parish records, convinced the experts that the restoration, as it now stands, was, indeed, done in 1861."

In summary, the structure was originally built in 1795 in East Durham; a few years later it moved to the nearby town of Cornwallville; 160 years later, the CFM dismantled and fully reconstructed it in a museum that only contains structures reflecting the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. For a moment, the “officers” in charge of authenticating this building questioned whether or not the facade genuinely reflected the period before the 1861 “cut off date”; ultimately the “officers” determined that the facade does indeed fit into the desired time period.

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90 Ibid.
In the end, the CFM calls the structure “Cornwallville Church” and has a label stating it was built in 1795. I find labels a relief because they tend to hide as much as they reveal.

“The older the object, the more special the simple fact of its existence.”

This quote comes from my go-to book, “Creating Authenticity: Authentication Processes in Ethnographic Museums,” featuring papers from a symposium on authenticity in 2012. In the same vein, an unmodified relic is more unique, (authentic, honest or reflective of its origins) than one which has been renovated or restored. The choice to label “Cornwallville Church, 1795,” reflects the CFM’s awareness that the building is special because it’s one of the oldest at the site. Additionally, had the museum chosen to include a descriptor saying that the facade reflects 1861, the church would feel less special, less like an authentic late 18th-century relic. That said, like the New York Times article reveals, the time period that the museum reflects clearly matters (given that it might have been a disqualifying factor had the facade been determined to be from the 1890s). Believing that the massive church, which outsizes all of the CFM’s other buildings, is also the oldest building disrupted my understanding of late 18th-century architecture. Consequently, I felt I was actually getting a better sense of the past by visiting the museum. However, subsequently learning through further online research that the church is so massive and looks like the other mid-19th century Greek Revivals at the site because it was significantly renovated in 1861, confirmed my sense that living history museums aren’t entirely concerned with accuracy. Of course, if you trust the CFM to authenticate it, then the church was built in 1795, and it is perfectly normal for a three-hundred-year-old building to be renovated over time.

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92 Richard. “Restored Church Joins Scene at Cooperstown.”
But the question could become: in a label, should a building be reduced to its essence or to what
its facade reflects?

“Authentic objects, persons and collectives are original, real and pure; they are what they purport
to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one.” 93

Above is a quote describing an essentialist perspective on authenticity. “They are what they
purport to be.” But an object cannot purport to be anything any more than a statement can be
blue or green. 94

After visiting the church, I followed the same gravel road southward and away from
Route 80 toward the so-called “Lippitt Farmstead.” On this short walk, I noticed several things:
chickens roaming free, pigs in a pen, the smell of pigs in a pen, several barns and other
outbuildings, lots of other visitors, a red salt-box style house, abundant gardens and fields, and a
few informational plaques. The farm feels exactly like the sort of place one might go with their
family to pick apples in the fall. Naturally, I read all of the plaques. One began with this
description: “The Lippitt Farmstead represents an early 1800s farm from central New York.”
After establishing what this place “represents,” I decided to look around.

Skirting a costumed interpreter, I walked into the salt-box house and entered a bedroom.
For the first time since arriving at the museum, I was faced with no labels or descriptions (See
Figure 3.5). A rather cramped room, curtain loosely draped over the one window of six over six
panes. A noticeably ajar quilt covered a lumpy-looking bed. On the dresser sat a wooden object.
I immediately identified this object as a “bed key” and that they were used to periodically tighten

93 Charles Lindholm, Culture and Authenticity (Wiley, 2008), 2.
94 Price, “Alternative Authenticities (And Inauthenticities).”
ropes on a rope bed. I only remember this fact because at two other LHMs, interpreters have said that this is where the phrase “sleep tight” comes from. Without any labels, I realized that it’s impossible to know which objects are replicas and which are “authentic.” To my eyes, the bed key appeared old and worn, but the curtain and quilt looked fresh. This room with a bed is presumably supposed to represent an early 1800s farmhouse bedroom, but how am I supposed to discriminate between objects that are evidence of the past and objects that are meant to be “representative” of the past? A better question might be, why do I want to discriminate between facsimile and “real” objects? Reflecting on how visitors become fixated on authenticity when presented with something they find hard to believe curator Laura Van Broekhoven describes the desire to experience “existential authenticity” “a state of being that, in the museum context, can be pursued only through the visitor’s interaction with an object’s ‘objective authenticity.’” Whereas people participate in staged experiences while engaged in other tourist activities, “in a ‘real’ museum setting, [people] seem to value not being lied to, and expect the museum to truly present what they claim: authenticated objects. In brief, “no one wants to cry in front of a Van Gogh, to later find out that the Van Gogh was a forgery or a fake.”

It might feel like there’s no point in going to an art museum if you’re not confident that the art has been authenticated. Similarly, what’s the point in visiting a heritage museum if the objects and buildings aren’t authenticated or if it’s unclear what is real and what’s a facsimile?

The room without labels made me uncomfortable. And I haven’t quite sorted it out yet. In a 2019 essay, scholar Marie-Ève Marchand argues that period rooms are essentially “museum-made objects.” In the same way that the facsimile curtains were likely “created” for

96 Marie-Ève Marchand, “Reconsidering the Period Room as a Museum-Made Object,” Oxford University Press Blog, March 21, 2019,
the museum, the “real” historical objects reflect the museum’s choices about what’s appropriate to select for a period room. Consequently, by lumping all the facsimile and historical objects together into one contrived “museum-made object,” the “authenticity” of individual objects feels far less relevant. Ada Louise Huxtable warns that living history museums teach visitors not to make ”essential value judgments” involved in differentiating between originals and imitations. And I’d say she’s right, but within a museum, everything is constructed by the museum. Consequently, I feel more inclined to believe Scott Magelssen’s assertion: “Articulation of the past [should] not be seen as an arrangement of artifacts from another time as much as a collection of statements in the present.”

97 Huxtable, “Dissent at Colonial Williamsburg; Errors of Restoration.”
98 Magelssen, Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance, 164.
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