

**CSCH Presidential Address 2000**

***Under the Sign of the Cross: Material Objects  
and Cultural Practice in Religious History***

JAMES W. OPP

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The Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMOC) in Hull, Quebec, embraces the shoreline of the Ottawa River; its soft, curved walls contrast sharply with those of its sister institution, the geometrically imposing National Gallery. The CMOC is also within the sight of one other notable landmark visible across the river, namely, the Parliament Buildings. Under the shadow of the copper-green gothic roofs of “High Politics” at the top of the cliff, and below the glaring glass cathedral of “High Culture,” the CMOC speaks to a visual image of integration rather than imposition. Its amorphous lines reflect its own perception of itself as a collector and interpreter of Canada’s “cultures,” a social anthropology of Canadians that would foster “in all Canadians a sense of their common identity and their shared past. At the same time, [the CMOC] hopes to promote understanding between the various cultural groups that are part of Canadian society.” As Peter Rider has noted, for the CMOC, “the presentation of history *per se* was not a major institutional objective. Rather the museum sought to present culture, for which history is one access point.”<sup>1</sup>

On 5 November 1999, the CMOC launched an exhibit entitled *Under the Sign of the Cross: Creative Expressions of Christianity in Canada* to mark the bimillennium of Christ’s birth. With nine different galleries arranged in the shape of a cross, the exhibit illustrates “the impact

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of Christianity on Canada through more than a hundred and thirty religious works, including statues, models, miniatures, stamps, bibles, war art and music.”<sup>2</sup> In light of the recent work that has explored the issue of religion and public life, it is encouraging that a national public institution has taken it upon itself to examine the material artifacts of religion. From the perspective of religious history, however, the results are far from satisfactory, and the stated aim to examine the “impact of Christianity on Canada,” apparently does not entail a serious consideration of church history.

This paper examines the *Under the Sign* exhibition from the perspective of religious history, but it also proposes to go beyond simply critiquing individual displays for their lack of attention to historical details. It is more instructive to take the example of this exhibit as a reflective springboard from which to question how religious history deals with the material objects of religion. Our narratives are built with words, sentences and texts rather than plexiglass, track lighting and particle board, but both historians and curators face the central problem of representing, reproducing and reconstructing the complex interplay between beliefs and the visible manifestations of religion. The advent of new approaches to religious history through concepts of “lived religion” and “material religion” are, in part, reactions to the vexing problem of stepping beyond beliefs as self-contained entities and developing a wider scope to account for the cultural practice of faith. If curators working with artifacts of Christianity in Canada need to take a better account of historical context, historians of religion also have something to learn by taking into consideration the material forms of religion.

Upon entering the exhibit, the viewer quickly discovers that history is deeply embedded within the Christian tradition. The first “gallery” is merely a wall display charting the history of Christianity and its many divisions over two thousand years. No visual outline of Christianity would be unproblematic, but a historian of religion could not fail to note some serious discrepancies in how church history has been represented. The Salvation Army is listed as having started as early as 1700, a contemporary of Methodism. Grouped together and springing forth from a line entitled “Anabaptist / Independent” are a diverse group of denominations, including the Baptists, Pentecostals, Alliance, Plymouth Brethren, Congregationalists and even the infinitely flexible term, “Evangelicals.”

Stepping from the first gallery into the second gallery, the viewer faces a late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century Québécois wayside cross.

Carved in wood and painted white, this anonymous piece stands at the centre of the exhibition, with the rest of the galleries radiating outward from it in a circular pattern. As wayside crosses served as reference points for prayer and meditation in the countryside, this cross serves to mark the interior of the exhibit as sacred space. Tall and easily seen from all sides, it is the only object that truly stands outside of its railed boundaries to call the viewer to something deeper than simply gazing with tourist eyes.

The wayside cross represents the opening of sacred space, but it is clear that in stepping from the first gallery to the second we have also apparently crossed the threshold of history itself. The narrative of complex church traditions that adorn the first chart remains firmly on the wall and rarely enters the small descriptions that accompany the remaining objects. The third gallery, entitled “To See and Worship God,” entombs six large, almost life-sized statues in coffins of plexiglass, with floor floodlights projecting an eerie shadows upon pale faces. From a wooden Virgin Mary dressed in the clothes of New France to a limestone St. George brought back from Europe as war booty from World War I, these objects that once graced the interior and exteriors of many different sacred spaces are suspended in time. Nowhere is their history explained, nor does the exhibit offer any sense of how these material objects that once gazed upon worshippers from pedestals and walls played a role in the cultural practice of faith. The form and size of the objects themselves is what determines their inclusion within the narrative presented by *Under the Sign*, a conclusion confirmed by the fourth gallery, “Models of Faith,” where postage stamps and mosaics share the floor with birdhouse churches and a wooden crucifix installed within a ketchup bottle. Many of the objects here are striking, and particularly compelling for the historian of religion. After all, what are we to make of the church-shaped sugar mould dated 1894? How can we not be drawn to the large, wooden wall niche that served as a home communion set for anointing the sick and giving last rites? However, these objects that once served a role in expressing faith and meaning, have been stripped of their historical context and correspondingly stripped of the sacredness that once endowed them. The majority of historical objects in the gallery were never constructed as “models” of faith, but functioned within the cultural practice of faith.

If the abstraction of visual objects decontextualizes them, what are we to say to the auditory tradition within Canadian Christianity? The fifth gallery, “To Hear the Word of the Lord,” offers a series of sound booths

to give the participant an opportunity to hear a variety of Christian music, from Gregorian Chants to folk music and contemporary gospel songs. Again, there is little to contextualize this experience and from the perspective of Canadian religious history, the lack of consideration for the musical tradition of Henry Alline, Oswald J. Smith, or even Healey Willan sings volumes. Fast-forwarding through snippets of musical selections in the curtained listening booths is an experience akin to shopping at HMV, where music is routinely sampled by the consumer, but rarely heard.

From hearing the word to reading the word, we return to the by now familiar disjunction of objects torn from history in the next gallery. Objects related to sacred writings are arranged for comparison according to form. Biblical texts sewn into aprons, rugs and cross-stitch meet a wall of Bible boxes, including one clever contraption that has a snake's head pop out unexpectedly from the side when you open the panel. It is true that one can reflect upon objects in and of themselves. It is wonderful to gaze upon the flattened penny that has been engraved with the Lord's Prayer and consider the amount of time and patience it took to complete. Such an object also invites one to contemplate the faith of the artist behind such a work, but wonderment at a faith of old is as close as one gets to placing the object within a broader cultural practice.

The nearest the viewer gets to a deeper sense of context for the objects under consideration is in the final gallery, "Christians at War and on the Battlefield." Since the grouping is roughly historical, rather than based on form, there is a deeper sense of cohesiveness to the theme. Objects here are more closely related to one another, from the paintings of church ruins on the battlefield of Europe, to the prayer books and Bibles carried by soldiers, to the objects of worship used in the field, including a harmonium and portable communion set used by chaplains. Perhaps the impact of this gallery is enhanced by the fact that most visitors have arrived here after viewing the other temporary exhibit at the CMOC, namely, the War Museum's highly publicized "War on Canvas" exhibition. Even though the descriptive plates offer only the briefest of captions on each object, and there is no central storyboard to follow, the historical relativity of the objects themselves provide a contextual narrative for the viewer that is absent for much of the rest of the exhibit. Here, the disoriented historian finds the solid ground of context and it comes as a relief. *Under the Sign* opens with a nod to history, rejects its context for eight galleries, and then finishes with a return to a particular historical

moment.

As a celebration of “creative expressions” of Christianity in Canada, *Under the Sign* is clearly more concerned with art and artistic expressions that serve a particular aesthetic than the actual practice of faith in history. The CMOC has a number of reasons why it chose this approach over one more congenial to historians concerned with context. The exhibit was drawn entirely from its own collection, and therefore it is obviously limited in the number and types of objects on display. Hence, the strong emphasis on the Eastern European iconographic tradition reflects the research interests and collection policies of the museum. Just as historians can only work with the documents that have survived, so are curators bound by the limited objects they have to display.

*Under the Sign* is also very aware of the political issues involved in putting together a national public exhibition on Christianity in Canada. The comment book reflects the wide variety of reactions to the simple display of hymn and prayer books printed in aboriginal languages. Within the contemporary debates over cultural imperialism and the public expression of religion, it is not surprising that curators might decide that less context might be better. Internal documents relating to the exhibit’s design insured that “Because many find religion to be a sensitive topic, this exhibition strives to be non-sectarian and non-political in nature and direction.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, the curators have attempted to bring the viewer directly to the artifact as a singular “creative expression,” rather than using story boards or a narrative structure to weave objects into a meaningful historical context.

This underlying philosophy of allowing the audience to come to the object in an unmediated way also serves another political purpose, namely to demonstrate that creative expressions of Christianity are continuing into the present. The seventh gallery is a working studio for contemporary iconographers and calligraphers to illustrate these continuing artistic traditions. Given the museum’s objective in promoting “understanding between the various cultural groups,” it is far safer to bring attention to the material objects of Christianity as forms of art that evoke the holy, rather than risk presenting a “history” that would be accused of being either too disrespectful towards religion or too hagiographic. Historians within the academy often forget how difficult it is to present history to the public, and how public pressure often places exhibit designers in a precarious position. *Under the Sign* was under attack even before it opened, accused of being

too politically sensitive by some critics, and under fire from others for “whitewashing” the experience of natives.

Although from the perspective of religious history the form and content of *Under the Cross* is flawed, it is too easy for historians of religion simply to issue broadside critiques. Perhaps there are other reasons why the decision was made not to place these objects within a deeper historical context. After all, how many of these material objects actually receive any in-depth consideration within the explosion of recent works on religious history in Canada? If *Under the Cross* lacks historical context, one could suggest that religious history in Canada is conversely lacking in materiality. How can the public presentation of the history of Christianity in Canada be integrated into an exhibition of material objects if our own works do not reach into the cultural practice of a faith that produces ketchup-bottle crucifixes? How do we move away from the wall chart of textual traditions to an understanding of religion as experienced through and in conjunction with corporeal bodies and material objects?

A starting point for the recovery of the material is to recognize that material culture plays a central, not peripheral, role in religious history. Religious experience is always mediated in some way through material objects. Colleen McDannell articulated this premise in her seminal work *Material Christianity*:

Religious meaning is not merely inherited or simply accessed through the intellect . . . Amid the external practice of religion--a practice that utilizes artifacts, art, architecture and landscapes--comes the inner experience of religion. We can no longer accept that the “appearance” of religion is inconsequential to the “experience” of religion. The sensual elements of Christianity are not merely decorations that mask serious belief; it is through the visible world that the invisible world becomes known and felt.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere I have argued that this understanding of materiality opens new doors for a deeper examination of the study of “culture” and religion.<sup>5</sup> It is a project that has been pursued in the United States under a variety of names, including “Material Religion” and “Lived Religion.” In short, it posits that there is a materiality to the cultural practice of religion that cannot be separated from the actual experience of religion.

Of course there are areas where Canadian religious history has been

responsive to issues of material culture. Concepts of architecture and sacred space stand out in the work of William Westfall and Lynne Marks.<sup>6</sup> Festivals, parades and Catholic lay devotional practices have also received scholarly attention. Despite these promising forays, however, the material remains an elusive concept. In general, Canadian historians have tended to use material culture as reflective of religion and belief, rather than recognizing its role as a dynamic force in shaping experience.

If religious experience cannot exist outside of the cultural practice of faith in relation to material objects, neither do objects embody meanings in isolation (or at least, no meanings beyond that of its McLuhanesque form). More specifically, the notion of the sacred as applied to material objects is itself an historical construction. As cultural practices of religion shift, so do the boundaries of the sacred, ever enclosing or rejecting spaces, articles, rituals, and time. Turning again to McDannell, "Spaces, architecture, and art do not convey information by themselves, they are activated by either their users or the scholars who are trying to interpret their meanings. The image cannot stand alone; it must be a part of a human world of meaning in order to come alive."<sup>7</sup> As part of the "human world of meaning," the relationship between material objects and the sacred is not static, but in flux, and constantly being renegotiated.

It is important for historians of religion to free the notion of the sacred from the traditional polarization of Durkheimian functionalism and Eliadean essentialism. The former, sometimes referred to as a "situational" analysis, places the sacred as the product of human practice, while the latter, as the "substantial" approach, views the sacred as that which is inherently endowed with ultimate meaning and the fullness of reality. It is this essence of the holy, the poetic of faith, that the *Under the Sign* exhibit implicitly suggests through its employment of a comparative approach to religious artifacts. The mixture of past and present, the linking of high and folk art, and the placement of objects according to form, rather than context, is intended to draw one towards the holy, or at least an understanding that the holy is being evoked within these works. Indeed, the majority of visitors are more concerned with the actual objects and how they speak to the viewer, rather than their historical contexts. It is not an awareness of past meanings, but the creation of new, present meanings between the object and the contemporary viewer that is elicited. A number of people clearly relate to the exhibit not from an historical or artistic perspective, but from the ground of their current faith. One visitor from

Halifax wrote that the exhibit has “reached into the core of my being.” Another visitor from Calgary approached the artifacts with a similar desire to relate a personal faith, but came away with a very different feeling, complaining that the exhibit “leaves me cold,” the objects and paintings were too “old-fashioned,” and not representative of how Christianity has evolved since the 1960s.

Historians, however, are not in the business of asking people to worship at the altar of their narratives. At times, the oft-repeated call to study religion for the sake of religion reveals an essentialist notion of religion as belief, rather than an attempt to understand religion as cultural practice. For historians, the danger of *Under the Sign of the Cross* is that the abstraction of the objects for the purpose of extracting a sense of the holy comes at the expense of a historical context and the multiplicity of meanings that the object may have held in another time.

To illustrate this process of de-contextualization, we could speculatively add a suitable object to *Under the Sign*, such as a wrought-iron cross from St. Philip’s African Orthodox Church in Sydney, Nova Scotia. It too could be placed in an exhibit case within one of the nine galleries, identified with a small card, and visitors would be invited to gaze upon the craftsmanship and re-imagine a sense of the holy. But the aesthetic and materiality of this single object hold historical meanings that stretch beyond the poetic of faith. What the observer would miss, and what Jennifer Reid has pointed to, is how the materials and spatial organization of St. Philip’s reflect and shape a particular religious experience for Sydney’s black community, constructed literally in the shadow of the Dominion Iron and Steel Company out of materials once used in the steelworks. Underlying the overt boundaries of the sacred are constructions of class and race, a “politics of faith” that is obscured by de-contextualizing and de-historicizing the object.<sup>8</sup>

William Westfall has made the assertion that “the sacred must be returned to the history of religion in Canada, for it is the sacred that makes religion a meaningful category of historical analysis.”<sup>9</sup> I think we can take this concept even further by realizing that the sacred is not a static concept, but a fluid one that is constantly being negotiated, disputed and reconstructed. Just as gender, class, and race are increasingly regarded as overlapping boundaries constantly in flux, so too is the notion of the sacred. Objects are not inherently sacred; they are given a ground of meaning in relation to the discourses and contexts that surround them.



The boundary of the sacred does not preclude other layers of meaning that can surround and envelop material objects. Historians need to be aware of not only the poetics of faith, but the politics of faith that can underlie the sacred. Material objects become sites where concepts of the sacred are negotiated, not only along the binary distinction of sacred/profane or religious/secular, but in relation to other discourses.

The material nature of the cultural practice of religion is not restricted to those objects which are most obviously designated as “religious”; the sacred easily spills over into far more mundane objects. To take an example from my own area of research, Protestant practices of faith healing illustrate this blending of the politics and poetics of faith within a wide variety of material sites. When Pentecostals prayed over handkerchiefs to be used in healing, the fabric became infused with divine power that was transferred from one body to another. Marie Griffith points out that as items “associated with wiping away tears or sweat or mundanely blowing one’s nose, the handkerchief’s cleansing function was easily extended into the realm of divine healing.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1913, Marion Camus requested a consecrated handkerchief to aid her in childbirth, and even though it arrived two days after the birth was over, Camus remembered “that the midwife had told me Baby’s very rapid coming had pushed out a little vein leaving a pile showing and so I placed the handkerchief where I could feel this pile protruding and instantly it was gone.”<sup>11</sup> The healing narrative and employment of the handkerchief reflect primarily devotional concerns. However, there is also an underlying politics of faith that critiques the dominant medical culture by asserting the strength and health of the woman’s body. Faith and a handkerchief provide an efficiency and harmony of natural birth that contrasts with the medical intervention of drugs and forceps, both of which were routinely denounced in such healing narratives. For her audience, Camus barely required the qualification that she employed a midwife because “I of course had no doctor.” This remark offered a gendered, political discourse that coexists with the devotional intention. Just as we cannot consign healing narratives to expressions of political ideology, neither can we only constitute them as solely “religious,” thereby reducing the category of religion to a self-referential tautology.

While the sacred infused the everyday object of the handkerchief, the opposite construction was applied to drugs and pills, which symbolized the satanic roots of sickness and the temptations of the devil. The destruction

of patent medicines and prescriptions became acts of faith that reflected by analogy the purging of sin within the heart. Although this behaviour was intended to strengthen resolve in trusting God for healing, it entailed a rejection of modern assumptions that prayer for healing was properly understood as a prayer for means. The dominant paradigm within mainline Protestantism suggested that the afflicted should ask God to bless the remedies and work of the physicians, rather than relying upon “supernatural” healing. The shifting boundaries of the sacred which surround the material object do not fill that object with its total meaning. Rather, sacredness coexists with other, multiple meanings that can be mutually reinforcing or even contradictory, but neither possible meaning negates the other.

To suggest that the practice of religion embodies a cultural politics that speaks to wider issues does not demean or displace the role of a poetic of faith. Robert Orsi calls attention to the facts that “religious objects have an energy that subverts the powers possessed by the objectifications of the social order – for example, by gender, money, or status – a counter-fetishistic energy.”<sup>12</sup> In the case of faith healing, I would suggest that it is not only cultural objects like drug bottles and prayer handkerchiefs that are sites for these negotiations, but the body itself which is reconstructed as a sacred wholeness and a receptacle of the divine. We cannot understand faith healing without understanding how the body serves as the site for multiple competing discourses. Medicalised as a collection of discrete organs by physicians, it is reconstituted as a sacred wholeness by believers. The body is imprinted with multiple discourses of gender, professionalization, medical control and a depths of faith that is practically ineffable. The energy of cultural objects to speak to discourses beyond, but without supplanting, religious concerns, is what *Under the Sign* is truly missing, and what historians of religion need to recover.

Historian and anthropologist Greg Denning, a former Jesuit, reflected upon the multiple symbols that surrounded him in the middle of a service at San Giacomo:

There is an archaeology of faith around us. The pulpit, older by centuries than anything else, is all writhing in grotesqueries. The ageless struggle of the Word with evil in human souls is caught in stone forever, or as much as earthquakes, wars, fires and architects allow. But the clutter of other signs is large. The church is a deposit

of creeping symboling and each symbol loses its staged effect in the presence of others . . . The renovators will not like the clutter. When the church is dead and becomes [a] museum for being heritage, they will strip it to some pristine simplicity, so that we can gape at it and think how beautiful it was to believe with such economy. Meanwhile, being modern and being, as Pope John XXIII said as he set us free, “at the end of the road and the top of the heap,” we have to believe in a cluttered way.<sup>13</sup>

Historians and curators alike prefer to order their narratives and objects in an “uncluttered” way. Whether bound by exhibition space or page lengths, there is a natural tendency to draw out singular aesthetic to suit our purpose. People believe in cluttered ways, and historians as much as curators, need to be aware that restoring religion to “pristine simplicity” is a fiction.

In the end, it is not temporary exhibitions like *Under the Sign* that should trouble historians of religion. It is rather the permanent installment of Canada Hall in the Museum of Civilization that deserves more careful consideration. It is here that the boundaries of the sacred are drawn narrowly, and where religion, if it appears at all, is carefully compartmentalized. Canada Hall, formerly known as “History Hall,” offers a cultural examination of the non-Aboriginal presence in Canada over the past 1,000 years. Although roughly organized in a chronological fashion (opening with the Vikings and proceeding through the early fishery and New France), the exhibit focuses upon the daily lives of ordinary people, stressing the social and economic circumstances of life. Canada Hall has felt the brunt of a considerable amount of criticism, from the general public displeasure over a lack of explanatory details relating to the objects and history to technical dismay of expert shipbuilders who claim that the ship under perpetual construction in Canada Hall would be destined to sink.<sup>14</sup>

For a visitor to Canada Hall, it would appear that religion did not hold much of a place in Canadian society. In a small section on “Loyalist Immigrants,” early nineteenth-century German and Gaelic Bibles lie under a glass showcase. In a dark building, mannequins in nuns’ uniforms attend a sickbed and pharmacy. Recently, St. Onuphrius Ukrainian Catholic Church was relocated from Smoky Lake, Alberta and reconstructed in Canada Hall, with an exterior restored to 1944 and an interior representa-

tive of 1952. To the side of St. Onuphrius, a range of Eastern Orthodox Icons are displayed, with visitors being encouraged to visit the museum's library if they want to understand their significance. It is here, within the central narrative of a social history of Canadians, that we desperately need a material history of religion in Canada, a history of the cultural practice of faith. We cannot expect Canada Hall to represent a total history of religion in Canada, but given that its focus is social and cultural, religion clearly deserves more attention than it has received. The areas relating to religion are very closely defined within set parameters. Religion is something that occurs within a church, and expressed through particular social functions, like a hospital. In Canada Hall, religion is an occasional intrusion, rather than a lived experience.

Across the street from St. Onuphrius, there is a more encouraging sight for religious historians. Although it is not yet completed, the reconstruction of a Czech print shop from Winnipeg contains a number of religious prints in its show window. Now if we could only get some of these objects of faith out of the shop window and onto the walls of homes, integrating these objects as part of everyday life, rather than segmenting them as separate from the rest of society. It is the curators who are responsible for placing the objects and explaining their significance to visitors. If historians of religion expect to find a place for their subject in Canada Hall, as a central part of the narrative, rather than the periphery, we need to offer a cultural history of religion as a practice of faith through material objects. The texts and cultural artifacts upon which we draw did not exist in an "uncluttered" abstraction of activity called "religion," they were integrated within the cluttered lives of the past. Our narratives need to reflect a concerted attempt to disentangle and make sense of the clutter, without renovating the past.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Peter E. Rider, "Presenting the Public's History to the Public: The Case of the Canadian Museum of Civilization," in *Studies in History and Museums*, ed. Peter E. Rider (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994), 84.
2. Canadian Museum of Civilization, "About the Exhibition." Publicity material for *Under the Sign of the Cross* is available online at: [www.civilization.ca/membs/traditio/croix/cxexhibe.html](http://www.civilization.ca/membs/traditio/croix/cxexhibe.html)

3. Susan Riley, "On Killing Canadian History," *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 September 1999.
4. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 272.
5. James Opp, "Revivals and Religion: Recent Work on the History of Protestantism in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, No. 2 (1997): 183-194.
6. William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989); and Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
7. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 16.
8. Jennifer Reid, "A Tool Shed from Gate #4: The Dominion Iron and Steel Company and the Formation of an African American Church," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1999): 87-97. It should be noted that Reid employs an Elidean-inspired analysis to counter what she views as excessively functional interpretations of St. Philip's.
9. Westfall, *Two Worlds*, 18.
10. R. Marie Griffith, "Female Devotional Practices in American Pentecostalism," in *Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism*, eds. Margaret Bendroth and Virginia Brereton (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).
11. Marion I. Camus, "Child Birth," *Pisgah* 1, No. 12 (April 1913): 8.
12. Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15.
13. Greg Dening, "Soliloquy in San Giacomo," in *Performances*, ed. Greg Dening (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 268.
14. Rider, "Presenting the Public's History to the Public," 98-100.