

SYMPOSIUM: ARTIFACTS AND ALLEGIANCES

Response to symposium on *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*

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ABSTRACT

The author responds to the contributions to this symposium, highlighting her ideas about diversity management regimes, the urban cultural armature, global museum assemblages, the cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum, and new methods for studying the global and for engaging in constructive critique.

KEYWORDS Museums; globalization; assemblages; cultural armature; diversity; culture

I will begin my response with a brief anecdote. Last month, Wellesley College inaugurated Dr. Paula Johnson as its 14th President. Many dignitaries came to our campus to mark the occasion – Elizabeth Warren, the Senior US Senator from Massachusetts; Drew Faust, Harvard University's President; and Kathleen McCartney, the President of Smith College. They spoke movingly about the continuing importance of a liberal arts education, particularly one focused on women. Then, our new President addressed the audience. 'I want to talk to you about three goals moving forward', she told us. The first was completing the work of creating a truly interdisciplinary campus. The second was finishing the task of becoming a full-fledged research college. The third was to encourage more 'T-like thinking'. Engineers, scientists, and innovators, she told us, use their base of deep knowledge in a particular discipline to then think broadly. They springboard from the strong intellectual roots they cultivated during many years of focused research to adventurously explore a changing set of broad questions.

'Interesting', I thought. 'This sounds a lot like the methodological argument I made in the introduction to *Artifacts and Allegiances*. Let me try to find out a bit more about this'. So, like all good scholars, my first stop was the *Internet*. Sure enough, I found numerous references to T-shaped

professionals and T-shaped people who think both broadly and deeply, and who are innovative, creative, and successful because they use their deep well of knowledge in a specific area to march boldly into new territories. Clearly, many high-powered consultants have gotten rich marketing this idea to corporate executives, but I think researchers could take some cues from this playbook as well.

I wish the contributors to this symposium had taken this piece of my argument more seriously. To understand globalization, we need people who know a lot about one place – who study it deeply and intimately, with linguistic fluency, and over time. But we also need people who know enough about several places so that they can see the patterns between them; the forest for the trees, if you were. Because so many aspects of economic, social, and political life are intertwined across time and space, we need scholarship that connects the dots. We need work that explains how and why structures, systems, and norms look alike around the world, and how something seemingly very local is strongly linked to larger, broader processes.

Doing this work requires humility. It means being very clear about the questions we are asking and what we can and cannot claim with our findings – to own up to what we can and cannot know. It requires careful preparation, asking generous colleagues to guide us, and trying to read in languages that we might not speak. We cannot be ‘cowboy’ ethnographers, who gallop in on our high horses, believing it is possible to see everything quickly and easily from our saddles.

But most importantly, we need to be accompanied. ‘In music’, write Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, ‘to accompany other players entails more than simply adding new sounds to the mix. Accompaniment requires attention, communication, and cooperation.’¹ It means augmenting, accenting, or countering one music voice with another.’² For researchers, it means iterative rounds of asking questions, sharing our answers with our respondents and with scholars and students of the region, and then asking questions anew. It involves listening carefully and taking what people say seriously and respectfully, even when we strongly disagree or when they seem to be parroting back some government or institutional party line. Yes, some may give such answers out of fear or in response to pressure, but others believe strongly in the values behind their words.

What I am advocating for is a model of collaborative scholarship that stands in stark contrast to the sole author who climbs the peak to plant a flag on his own behalf and then defends his turf, come what may. It is one of several kinds of research we need to understand today’s global world and it should be judged on its own terms. Because this kind of work does not aspire to know everything about a single place across time and, in fact,

humbly recognizes that it is bound to get small details wrong (why accompaniment is so important), different evaluation metrics are needed than those we use to judge deep, narrow scholarship because the claims are different. These two ways of asking questions and answering them complement rather than compete with each other. This is another piece of my argument that I wish my interlocutors had kept more top of mind.

A book that tries to look carefully and comparatively across multiple museums in seven cities must necessarily leave things out. It paints a broad brush-stroke portrait and invites country experts or future researchers to fill in the blanks. The snapshot it produces may shift quickly, as is the case of Doha, where as Karen Excell correctly notes, many things have already changed, including the majority of the class of transnational museum professionals whom I spoke with. Brenda Yeoh, Ien Ang, and Andrew Dewdney, while admitting that 'of course, there are serious conceptual, logistical, and resource issues entailed in studying audiences in any depth and the project of the lone scholar is singularly ill equipped to undertake such research', still wish for more 'polyvocality' and for a study of what audiences get rather than what museum directors and curators want them to get. I agree that museum visitors, as well as non-visitors who never cross their thresholds, are important pieces of the global museum assemblage I describe, but I state clearly from the outset that this was beyond my scope (a point to which I will return to later).

I also made a conscious decision to write a book in the text and a book in the footnotes, which is not the same, as Andrew Dewdney suggests, as 'a lack of theoretical integration'. Readers interested in a deeper theoretical grounding simply have to make the time and effort to turn the pages. Here again, I also state my intention to model a different way of writing and analysing that is more accessible to a broader audience, something many academics fail to do, and which allows us to get away with our own insular, sometimes irrelevant conversations, remaining unchallenged.

Nor should 'theoretical disintegration' be confused with bringing together disciplinary conversations that usually take place apart from one another. Weaving together theoretical conversations from anthropology and sociology, cultural and museum studies, and art history about what goes on in and outside museums does not mean no theory. It means a different kind of theory than a stubbornly disciplinarily grounded reader would expect. I am not, therefore, just rehearsing old arguments, as Dewdney claims, but entering them through different doors and introducing additional theoretical tools with which to answer them.

For example, when we look at the cultural armature of a city, and think about how the values embraced by its founding fathers are in the DNA of its cultural institutions, we call attention to how a city's deep cultural structures and history continue to shape museum practice today. When we take into

consideration demography and how different cities respond to diversity in different ways, we produce a more nuanced account of how unequal power and colonial legacies affect how nations are displayed in relation to the world. We go beyond blanket assertions of imperialism or western-centrism to unpack how diversity management regimes – if and how difference gets talked about and measured, the words and categories that are used (i.e. racial versus ethnic versus religious categories), whether diversity is seen as an opportunity or a problem, and what the state does in response – also reflect and are reflected in museum practice. A cosmopolitan–nationalism continuum reveals that cosmopolitanism and nationalism are, in fact, not surprisingly inextricably linked. But we get a more robust answer about how and why they intertwine in a particular place at a particular moment by taking a country’s position in the global cultural hierarchy, and its subsequent contribution to and effect on global museum assemblages into account. Finally, where nations are within the arc of their nation building and regional- or world-claiming projects also helps explain how and why museums balance nationalism and globalism.

I am delighted that several of the participants in this symposium used some of these theoretical tools to think about exhibitions they have recently seen. Joane Nagel visited the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. and describes how overwhelming the ‘visual impact was of magnificent rooms full of large and small portraits and photographs of white men doing the business of the nation – making decisions, making war, making their power felt and their presence seen’. Catherine Hahn did so in her analysis of an important recent show at Tate Britain, *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past* (2015). She argues that the Tate came up short, side-stepping just how much ‘white cultural practitioners were complicit in refuting black agency’ and scolds that the museum must ‘muster the willingness to re-envisage how it tells British art history in a way that includes Britain’s multifarious population and its numerous, disparate heritages’. It is, in part, each country’s diversity management regime and its current state of nation-building and world-claiming that explains these choices. Karen Excell also finds that ‘Doha’s new museums do indeed reveal how Qatar, and other newly rich Arabian Peninsula states, manage their diversity – through a regime that consists of a strictly managed racialized hierarchy and policies of exclusion’.

Social change agents come in many shapes and sizes. I do not expect that museums with their ‘inherently conservative discourse’ are going to change the world on their own. In fact, what constitutes cosmopolitan and how much museum professionals think about it as part of their work was, for me, an empirical question. I did not begin my study with a laundry list but instead asked respondents if they felt they were contributing to cosmopolitanism through their work and, if so, how. At the end

of the day, my conversations revealed a view of cosmopolitanism that can be summed up as recognizing the need for and being willing and skilled enough to participate in a conversation about what our common ground might be.

Cosmopolitanism is not a predetermined laundry list, but a dialogue about shared visions. It has three parts that do not always come together. Sometimes, respondents talked about ideas and values, including things like empathy, curiosity, and critical thinking. Sometimes, they talked about the cosmopolitan skills and practices needed to engage with different people and experiences. The third piece of cosmopolitanism is *cosmopolitics*, or what a cosmopolitan world would actually look like and what we would have to do to create it. While many museums impart values and skills, it is this last aspect of cosmopolitanism that most institutions left out.

Some of the contributors to this symposium disagree with my embrace of cosmopolitanism. This is an age-old debate that will not be resolved here. For me, a more productive way forward is for each of us to be clear about what we mean by the term and why. We should move away from false dichotomies to ask more generative questions, such as where the work of creating cosmopolitans is being done, for whom, by whom, and who the winners and losers are. Treating cosmopolitanism and nationalism as a continuum, and asking why a particular cultural institution or nation falls where it does, reflects the inherent tension and struggle between them. It directs our attention to the political and cultural work being done when museums and states stress one side of the continuum over another.

The globalization of the museum sector, and the global museum assemblage that reflects and drives it forward, are still part and parcel of a particular geopolitical and economic order. This is not the same thing, as Dewdney correctly points out 'as finding a new global politics capable of expressing the needs of a world citizenship' – a very tall bar that museums alone are not meant to take on, and which most will certainly never achieve. But I am grateful for their small but important contributions. And, I am hopeful that these contributions will become more significant in the future. Another common thread connecting many of the museums I visited is the recognition that the people inside museums do not look enough like the people outside them. In addition to changing what gets put on the walls, the museum professionals who create these exhibitions – and the people who come in to look at them – must also become more diverse. So too, as Pawan Dhingra notes, their Boards of Directors, trustees, and donors. Museums have been an underutilized tool in the struggle to create successful, equitable societies. If they have not come willingly to the task, in places like Scandinavia and the United States they are being pushed to do so by demographic changes and budgetary pressures. In Singapore and Doha, the demands of creating world class museums that include enough

recognizable elements of the global museum assemblage are nudging the museum sector in the right direction.

Any good book should end with questions that a next group of scholars takes up and runs with. My respondents raise many interesting ones that merit further attention. The most important, as I discussed above, is audience reception. This would allow for what Yeoh calls stories from below and other narratives to be heard that 'sometimes destabilize, sometimes affirm, the dominant, official, or intended narratives put forward by museum curators and directors'. It would also tell us more about what visitors actually take away from museum displays. This is, increasingly, another important piece of the global museum assemblage. More and more, visitors are asked to comment on and evaluate their experience (much like your visit to a hotel or restaurant), although not necessarily to reflect on what they learned. I am fairly certain, however, that most museums will not share these data with outsiders.

A second and related piece of this is to look carefully at the new kinds of strategies and technologies museums are using to reach beyond their walls and to make their collections accessible to people who never enter. The October 2016 volume of *Art in America* is dedicated to 'The Digitized Museum'. 'Novel technologies', Brian Droitcour and William Smith (2016:80) write, 'can attract new audiences and excite potential donors, creating a feedback loop of engagement and financial support. Or at least that's the hope'.³

The Brooklyn Museum, for example, recently launched a new app, 'ASK Brooklyn Museum'. Visitors use it to ask questions or start a conversation with on-site art historians and educators about something on view or to get recommendations about what to see moving forward. 'ASK is startlingly different from most museum apps', reported Daniel McDermon in *The New York Times*. 'There is no audio guide, no map and no store. You can't search the collection. Nor can you use it to share your experience on social media'.⁴ At the same time, Bluetooth sensors collect information about visitor movement and interests. While these efforts are meant to broaden the range of 'visitors' who engage with museum collections, they also divert time and money away from using objects to tell more diverse stories that challenge the status quo.

A third thread that my book leaves waiting to be explored is the other sites where cosmopolitan values and practices are created. Museums are one of many cultural institutions where that work can and should be done. As President Barack Obama told novelist Marilynne Robinson, he learned to understand other people through novels.⁵ Reading develops empathy by helping us put ourselves in another person's shoes. Statistics from the University of Rochester's *Three Percent* website, show that translations are a small part of what is published in the United States and that most of these

works are by European authors.⁶ That means that American's literary tastes remain parochial, and that the tastes of the English-speaking world disproportionately influence what ends up on our night tables. Until we right yet another cultural wrong, we will not do better at alleviating social inequality either, which is something I hope that T and non-T-shaped scholars will accompany each other to study in the future.

I would like to end by returning to where I began. Just as I am arguing for a different kind of scholarship that involves collaboration and accompaniment – that complements rather than competes with traditional methods – I would like to argue for a different kind of critique. Too many times, the comments we make when we act as discussants at the seminar table, or when we review books boil down to 'Why didn't you do what I do? I am a scholar of XXX, and XXX is missing from your argument'. In some cases, pointing out the omission and what it obscured has merit. But in others, that is not what the author set out to do, and therefore, he or she should not be held accountable. Humility and generosity usually take a back seat to showing how much smarter, better, and righter our own work is. But its intellectually dishonest and counterproductive, though what graduate school training is all about. Just as we need different kinds of scholarship, so, too, do we need the kinds of critiques that open doors and raise voices, rather than try to compete with them.

Notes

1. Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, 'American Studies as Accompaniment', *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013), 12.
2. David FitzGerald, 'A comparativist manifesto for international migration studies', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 10 (October 2012), 1725–40. FitzGerald also stresses the importance of collaboration in comparative studies of migration.
3. Droitcour, Brian and William S. Smith. 'The Digitized Museum', *Art in America*, 6 October 2016. P. 78–82.
4. Who's in Charge at the Brooklyn Museum: It could be you. Daniel McDermon, 29 April 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/30/arts/design/at-the-brooklyn-museum-with-a-chatty-curator-in-your-pocket.html>, accessed 8 October 2016.
5. 'Barack Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa' *New York Review of Books*, November 2015. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/>, accessed 15 October 2016.
6. Three Percent website, About, <http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threeppercent/index.php?s=about>, accessed 15 October 2016.

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