Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power

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CONTENTS

Symposium: Artifacts and Allegiances
1 What are museums for? The enduring friction between nationalism and cosmopolitanism
   Ien Ang
6 Museums, scholarly enterprise and global assemblages: a response to ‘Artifacts and allegiances: how museums put the nation and the world on display’
   Andrew Dewdney
13 A cultural approach to culture
   Pawan Dhinagra
19 Doha’s cultural armour on display: a response to Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums put the Nation and the World on Display
   Karen Exell
26 Nailing One’s Colours: Tate Britain’s Artist and Empire
   Catherine Hahn
34 The sensory museum: affective experience as the new pedagogic norm
   Nikos Papastergiadis
41 Manhoods and museums
   Joanne Nagel
48 Museums and the cultural politics of displaying the nation to the world
   Brenda S. A. Yeah
55 Response to symposium on Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display
   Peggy Levitt

Articles
62 Culturally tailored workers for specialised destinations: producing Filipino migrant subjects for export
   Geraldina Polanco
82 Recalling the ‘Islam of the parents’: liberal and secular Muslims redefining the contours of religious authenticity
   Nadia Fadil
100 Moroccan women in Madrid: between change and continuity
   Christof Van Mol
119 List of Reviewers
SYMPOSIUM: ARTIFACTS AND ALLEGIANCES

What are museums for? The enduring friction between nationalism and cosmopolitanism

Ilen Ang
Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Parramatta, Australia

ABSTRACT
This response to Peggy Levitt’s book Artifacts and Allegiances argues that, as cultural institutions, museums are too deeply embedded within the nation state to be able to present cosmopolitan narratives that go beyond the biased particularities of the nation. Rather than conceiving nationalism and cosmopolitanism as a continuum, the relationship between the two should be seen as one of enduring friction, creating a major challenge for museums around the world to tell stories suited for our mobile, global times.

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Museums have changed a lot in the past few decades. While in the past they were popularly known as lofty, rather aloof sites where dead objects are collected and exhibited for the pleasure and contemplation of cultural elites, today they present themselves as inclusive centres for human knowledge and achievement and as fora for public reflection and debate. Museums have embraced ‘society’, and as such they have attracted wide scholarly attention. As Tony Bennett (2015, 3) has observed, one of the reasons for the enormous growth of interest in museums is that they have proved ‘good to think with’. Since the emergence of the so-called new museology in the late 1980s (see, e.g. Vergo 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991; Bennett 1995), museum researchers have understood museums as politically charged sites, ‘where themes of power, citizenship, and democracy have played out in (...) officially sanctioned spaces of representation’ (Message and Witcomb 2015, xxxvi). Here, museums have been analysed either as governmental apparatuses embedded within a network of power relations that support dominant interests, or – redemptively (Dibley 2005) and informed by post-colonial theory – as possible sites for social change by virtue of their capacity to represent the interests and concerns of minority groups. Either way, the role of museums in the representation of ‘the nation’ and its
constituent communities has been a central concern in museum studies scholarship.

But scholarly interest in museums goes beyond the specialist field of ‘museum studies’, for which ‘the museum’ as such is, of necessity, the central object of study. Peggy Levitt’s *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (2015) is one prominent example of a scholarly work focused on museums by someone who is not identified as a museum studies expert. Levitt’s interest in museums is similarly motivated by the question of how museums represent the nation. However, as a non-museum specialist her primary emphasis is not on the institution of the museum as such, but on the different ways in which museums in different cities around the world go about representing the nation. Levitt has obviously found museums ‘good to think with’, but the focal concern of her thinking is not museological; rather, it is on museum displays as possible tools for the creation of more cosmopolitan nations. In other words, she uses museums as a convenient case study for an analysis of the travails and dilemmas of nationalism in today’s interconnected, globalized world. Here, her approach is informed by the problematics of migration and transnationalism, for which her work is most known (e.g. Levitt 2001, 2007). In this regard, her political passion is directed squarely to the need for us to go beyond narrow, exclusionary conceptions of national citizenship and to embrace more open, diverse, and worldly understandings of who we are. ‘Driving this book was a quest to contribute to ongoing efforts to find new words and new methods for understanding the world at this global moment’, she writes (2015, 138), and for her ‘the world at this global moment’ is one in which transnational migration has made it increasingly impossible for nations to think about themselves without simultaneously thinking about the world. *How* they do this, however, varies from place to place, as articulated in particular museum practices, and Levitt’s main goal is to untangle this ‘how’.

The result is a fascinating whirlwind tour through museums in three different parts of the world – the United States, Scandinavian Europe, and the newly prosperous non-western cities of Singapore and Doha – to describe the complex intricacies involved in the production of museum exhibitions, and the ways in which they are inextricably linked to particular, more or less cosmopolitan styles of imagining the nation. As Levitt puts it, she is interested in ‘how nationalism and cosmopolitanism come together under museum roofs in different cities and nations’ (2015, 2).

Of particular significance – especially in light of the refugee crisis that is currently overwhelming Europe – is Levitt’s careful and insightful comparative analysis of Sweden and Denmark. What she depicts is a subtle but decisive difference in the ways in which these two neighbouring nations construct their national identities vis-à-vis the world at large. For complex historical reasons, Sweden has developed into a nation that tends to look outwards to the world, a civic nation that sees itself as a global citizen embracing global responsibilities. In terms of museums, this is reflected in the very existence of Gothenburg’s Museum of World Culture, which expressly aims to tell global stories to provide deep insights into Sweden’s place in the world. In Denmark, on the other hand, a more ethnically formulated understanding of the nation results in museum exhibitions which steadfastly prioritize the nation over the world. As Levitt (2015, 29) observes: ‘The National Museum of Denmark (…) is concerned about globalization as a way to understand Danishness. The Museum of World Culture creates cosmopolitan Swedes, which eventually strengthens the nation’. In other words, in Denmark, cosmopolitanism is interpreted in nationalistic terms; while in Sweden, cosmopolitanism and nationalism seem to complement and fortify each other.

At the same time, however, the immigrant experience does not receive much attention in the museums of either country; and if it does, observes Levitt, it tends to be done in separate institutions, as in the new Danish Immigration Museum in Copenhagen, established in 2012, or the Multicultural Center in Stockholm, both located away from the city centres in immigrant neighbourhoods. This tendency to isolate the story of immigration from the main national story – and to marginalize it – is a common representational strategy in the museum landscapes of many countries, including avowedly immigration nations such as Canada and Australia (see Ang 2011). In Europe, which has seen a boom in immigration museums in the past decade or so, it is symptomatic of a continent which struggles to come to terms with the reality of transnational migration, as we have seen in the inimical responses of most European nations to the recent refugee crisis. Even in Sweden, which – in line with its embrace of global moral responsibility – has taken in more asylum seekers per capita than any other European country, anti-immigrant forces are sharply on the rise as the number of refugees knocking on the country’s door skyrocket (Traub 2016). In other words, no matter how cosmopolitan Sweden’s style of imagining itself as a nation, the nation’s self, or Swedishness, is still defined in homogenous and exclusionary ways. There is thus a limit to how cosmopolitan a nation can be.

Throughout Europe, we have seen nation states scrambling to erect walls on their territorial borders – both physical and procedural – to keep refugees out in the name of the nation’s integrity and sovereignty, even as nation state sovereignty has been challenged by global movements of capital and by the growing power of transnational legal, economic, and political institutions, not least the European Union (Brown 2010). This brings into stark relief that cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not just a continuum, as Levitt suggests, but are ultimately in tension with each other.
While cosmopolitanism, in its ideal form, endorses a borderless, global world, nationalism inevitably establishes boundaries, and the separating out of ‘us’ and ‘them’. It is hard to imagine how we can overcome this fundamental friction between cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

Based on her empirical analysis of museums around the world, Levitt discerns as much. While she stresses the interdependence of the nation and the world, she concludes that, overall, the national narrative holds sway: ‘Global stories are refracted through national lenses. The national story and its regional variations, whether they are told in Brooklyn or Doha, are the building blocks with which the global story is narrated’ (Levitt 2015, 136). What we could ask here is whether, as long as the national story retains its primacy, we might ever be able to build a global story which isn’t chained to some particularist national interest or perspective. Are we not living in a world, we might ask, where the friction between nationalism and cosmopolitanism has become paralyzing, steeped in an impasse, a stalemate from which we are unable to emerge?

By the same token, asking these questions can clarify the role of museums. As cultural institutions, most museums around the world are, directly or indirectly, bound by their national contexts, as Levitt shows. As place-based organizations rooted in the legacy of the nineteenth century and intimately linked to the rise of the nation state, they are necessarily embedded within a national environment (and this is the case even for those museums which present themselves as ‘universal’, such as the Louvre), and they are often enlisted as authoritative representatives of national culture. How then would they be able to operate as vehicles fundamentally to unsettle the nation, which a genuinely cosmopolitan ethos requires? As I have argued elsewhere (Ang 2011), genuinely transnational, multilocal, and mobile representations of heritage and identity that transcend the structures of national particularity, often informed by deterritorializing notions of ‘diaspora’, are very rare indeed.

Levitt ends her book by arguing strongly for the need to instil such a cosmopolitan ethos in a world of increasing transnational mobility. ‘We need new kinds of institutions that respond more effectively to this reality’, she says, concluding that ‘Museums are just one of a range of cultural institutions that can help’ (2015, 142). Quite so, but the case studies she presents seem to suggest more how little museums are actually helping, as they persist in prioritizing the national story.

And this brings us back to the specialist concerns of the field of museum studies. At several points in her book Levitt asks: ‘Are museums places for creating citizens?’ She does not provide an answer to this question herself, but refers to the diverse views expressed by museum professionals, some of whom believe that ‘museums can and should encourage empathy, curiosity, tolerance, creativity, and critical thinking’ (2015, 8). Whether they actually do so, however, is debatable: What impact do museum representations have on their visitors? Or on those who do not visit, for that matter? After all, despite their relatively recent emphasis on inclusiveness, museums tend still to be places frequented predominantly by the educated middle classes. These are not questions that Levitt engages with, but they are crucial if we are to have a more comprehensive critical understanding of the role and place of museums in contemporary society. Museum audiences, however, are still exceedingly understudied, even in the proliferating field of museum studies. Levitt’s compelling book shows that this needs to change.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

The book is based upon 183 interviews with museum professionals in seven cities within the US, Sweden, Denmark, Qatar and Malaysia. The key analytical concept, or conceptual axiom applied to this comparative study of museums, is that of a cosmopolitan–national continuum. At one end of the continuum, museums display their collections within traditional historical narratives of singular national unity, imagined or not, whilst at the other end, collections are used to construct new narratives, which emphasize and celebrate world histories, cultural difference and interconnectedness. However, as the book points out through its detailed comparisons, cosmopolitanism can be rendered as a quality of the national, as much as the national remains entailed in perceptions of cultural difference. In this sense, it is possible to ask of the book whether nationalism and cosmopolitanism aren’t just two sides of the same coin, rather than alternative currencies. The question such a view raises is whether or not cosmopolitanism can be a significant challenge to the inherent conservative discourse of museums. The book’s working definition of cosmopolitanism is offered as ‘the willingness, curiosity, critical thinking, and courage needed to engage, openly and respectfully, with people who are different’ (p. 136).

This is by no means the first time that national museums in Europe and North America have been subjected to a critique of their unexamined narratives of nation, empire and colonialism implicit in their collections and continued in representational displays. Museums have been in the sightlines of postcolonial studies for over two decades. The resulting critique of Eurocentric and imperialist world views, contained by what has and has not been collected and displayed in national museums, is well known to more than one generation of students of museums studies. If change were only a matter of critical reason and sound argument, then the postcolonial critique would have already transformed most liberal museums in Europe and North America, given the relatively small-scale and connected community of museum professionals. But then Levitt knows all this, recognizing that the cultural assemblage (her term) that is a museum is a result of complex interactions between curatorial knowledge, cultural policies, financial models and even direct state intervention. Change, especially radical change, is no easy matter in the organizational hierarchies and cultural imperatives of the museum assemblage, as Levitt points out, like the giant oil tankers, museums need a lot of distance and time to turn.

What can the cosmopolitan perspective, now seen in a global context, usefully offer that is not already current in the liberal end of professional museology discourse? Reluctantly, one can’t help thinking that the necessary political re-socializing of the economic and military forces unleashed by late capitalism’s voracious appetite for accumulation calls for a more radical perspective on whether the museum can play a progressive role. As Levitt points out, the question which comes into view, raised by Bruno Latour
amongst others, is what kind of cosmos is under consideration and how the museum, whose organization and practices still owe more to the 19th and 20th centuries, is configured within it. Again Levitt rehearses the problem of this situation, citing Mark W. Rectanus, whose analysis recognizes that the globalization of museums has been achieved by a standardization of marketing and merchantizing, globalizing tropes of national culture, as state instruments of democratization and reaching new audiences and of trying to entertain and enlighten at the same time (p. 154-55). Of course, cosmopolitanism is entailed in the globalization of museums by virtue of the international mobility of museum professionals, who, more than many other groups, personify the values, outlooks and practices of the cosmopolitan. It is this international group of museum professionals, who as Levitt says, can be parachuted in, who are busy reshaping the cultural capital of museums according to global demand and the book is essentially a conversation with this group. Reciprocity, it is argued, is the paradigm shift in museum practices and upon which the promise of a new form of international critical enquiry rests. But worryingly, this reciprocity might just as easily be the necessary currency of an accelerated trading of objects and ideas being used to establish the newly commodified global museum.

Levitt recognizes the tensions and contradictions contained by the very idea of cosmopolitanism in citing Hiro Saito’s view of cosmopolitanism as containing three parts: cultural omnivorousness, ethnic tolerance, and cosmopolitics. Whilst the account of the new global museum culture contains abundant reference to the first two of these qualities, it is cosmopolitics, defined by Saito in Levitt’s words as ‘the collective project of forming a transnational public and debating global risks as citizens of the world’, which is lacking in the majority of examples of museum practices discussed in the book. In the conclusion, Levitt acknowledges that cosmopolitanism is a flawed term, which ‘sidesteps the intractable for the sake of the possible’ but argues that ‘we have no choice but to bet on cosmopolitanism’s promise in the face of global economic crises and heightened inequality’ (p. 142). Is this the case?

In accepting the given limits of what is possible in the global museum assemblage, Levitt’s analysis falls short of engaging with other possible debates through which the museum is being reimagined for the 21st century. The problem with setting out the material of the book along a cosmopolitan–national continuum is that it treats all the elements of cosmopolitanism as equally contributing to the same ultimate political goal. This is clearly not the case. The cultural internationalism of the emerging world museum phenomenon represents a specific geopolitical axis and alignment of economic and political interests, which is not at all the same thing as finding a new global politics capable of expressing the needs of a world citizenship.

The book looks at how museums put the nation and the world on display by examining the practices of museum directors, administrators, curators and educators. It is particularly illuminating in examining in detail how policy and practice play out in relationship to specific historical collections, exhibitions and museum locations. The book is eloquent about relating the entanglements of policy and practice in specific museum practices to the discourses of nation, but it stops short of integrating a third strand of the assemblage, which is theory itself. In the introduction, Levitt makes the point that the book is two books in one, the main narrative account is intended to reach a readership beyond academic borders, whilst the extensive notes, notably equal in length to half of all of the chapters, addresses a readership knowledgeable about and engaged with academic theory. It is hard to disagree with the laudable aim of writing to engage a general and wider readership, but treating theory as a footnote to the main account comes at a cost to the analysis. What is theory if not the application of critical and analytical concepts to real situations? or the abstraction of broader truths from concrete lived situations. The global cultural assemblage under scrutiny is of course itself a theoretical construct, just as much as is the main analytical axiom of the book, the cosmopolitan–nationalist continuum. Theory in both of these conceptual deployments is a way of articulating a politics, a politics the book seeks in part to explain. The author’s humility towards her subjects, her desire for an ethnography that ‘sees both the forest and the trees’ is a rightful corrective to the time and world of grand theories. However, in the real cultural assemblage of the globalized and globalizing museum, policy, practice and theory are all equally entailed in professionalizing relations. The book is well aware that scholarship does not sit on the sidelines, but takes sides, as the book does in supporting those museums that are grappling with the articulation of a cosmopolitan approach and values. But in disengaging theory from the main narrative the book it is less reflexive than it might otherwise have been about its own position and context. The scholar, like the international museum professional, is, after all, part of the mobile class that shapes the narratives of the museum and the academy is part of the global assemblage that is the museum. Without an integrated theoretical narrative, the scholar is at a disadvantage in being able to steer the course of research itself, i.e. the choices of what to study, as well as subsequently being able to act back upon the course of the narrative. Reflexivity entails the struggle to see fully and articulate the world out of which we write, as well as the world we seek to write towards.

In considering the outlines of the emerging global cosmos of which museums and received notions of liberal cosmopolitanism are a small historical part, we now have to consider the movement of capital and labour, the continuation of the military-industrial complex, climate
change and the human relationship with other species. This is the new
global assemblage and, as in any network, we should be able to discern,
as in the manner of fractals, the elements of the whole within specific
networks or sub-assemblages. One of the problems with the way the
ethnography of the book treats the movement of people is as a social
reality external to the museum. This has a number of consequences for
how the museum assemblage is constructed.

The impact of the migration of people is seen as something museums
have to adapt to, rather than as part of the assemblage of the museum
itself. Levitt is right in pointing to migration as a crucial factor in the
future of human habitation, culture and communication: why then leave
the movement of people within the museum, the museum’s audience,
out of the account? 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. But without some way of considering the practices of audi-
ences, we know little of the cosmopolitan outlook or otherwise of the
museum’s visitors. Even more salient in terms of migration, the book
can tell us nothing about the cultural and political outlook of those
sections of the population in cosmopolitan centres or their monocultural
hinterlands, who, for a complex variety of reasons, don’t visit museums at
all. In the cultural assemblage of the museums in the study, it is as if they
are empty or that the exhibitions exist only for those who fashioned
them. In a network view, an exhibition without an audience would not be an
exhibition. In the discussion of museums in the US, Levitt points out
that the AAMI’s Centre for the Future of Museums Project’s first report,
‘Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures’, discussed
changing population demographics in which the museum’s audience
was made up of only 9% of minorities against their standing as 34% of
the population, a figure which is due to rise to 46% by 2033. A similar
story can be told across most museums in Europe, in which the core
audience for the museum remains white, educated and broadly affluent.
Of course, such a demographic hides a greater diversity and raises one of
the museum’s biggest problems of how to know, understand and engage
with their audiences. However, without a significant change in audience
demographics, only the spectacular global museums, located in major
tourist destinations, will have an audience. Whatever the reasons, the
absence of the museum’s audience, both actual and potential, imbal-
ances the idea of the museum as a cultural assemblage, or network. It
is the visitors to the museum whose performance in and beyond the
museum is central to its assemblage and to defining global cultural value.
The book tells us that 3.2% of the world’s population are international
migrants and that 232 million people are now estimated to live outside
their country of origin. How audiences encounter museums, how they
make sense of the narratives they are offered and the connections
museums make with everyday life is an important and practical way of
linking the museum to the politics of global migration.

The absence of audiences in the book leads to a further limit upon the
network of practices, which make up the museum assemblage. In most
museums, whether permitted, encouraged or not, increasing numbers of
visitors record what they see and hear using digital cameras and mobile
phones. During the Ai Weiwei exhibition at the Royal Academy in London
(10 September-13 December 2015), it was the majority of visitors who were
mediating their experience of the exhibition in some technical way.
Museums are having to recognize that they cannot retain their monopoly,
let alone copyright over the reproduction of images of their objects and
displays which now circulate on the Internet. The Internet is part of the
same global cultural phenomenon as migration and is producing virtual
forms of transnational communication, and museums are attempting to
work out how to relate to this new global networked culture. This sense
of the museum as distributed also has to be added to the cultural assem-
blage which is the museum. As Levitt recognizes about transnational migra-
tion, the new technologies of communication create hybrid communities
and this impacts upon traditional notions of identity and belonging. It also
impacts upon the cultural authority of the museum, placing its objects in a
transmedial flow, which disrupts the representational narrative and repre-
sentation itself.

Early on in the book the reader is presented with three possible
perspectives on the museum’s role. The first is given by the stark and
iconoclastic view of Hans Haacke, who sees museums as instruments of
social control, which act in the interests of capital and power in main-
taining the status quo. A second view, expressed by James Cuno, holds
that museums stand outside of politics acting purely to collect, classify
and present facts. A third view is that museums must reinvent them-
selves as socially relevant institutions for the 21st century and that they
can do this through the project of cosmopolitanism. In the cultural
assemblage of the museum, or the museum ecology, all three of the
above positions are present and active. It is not a choice between them,
but a recognition of the hybrid, if not paradoxical, state of the museum
in network culture. Levitt’s book, especially in its extensive notes,
rehearses many of the academic and professional arguments of progres-
sive museology; however, seeing the museum as part of a much large
assemblage makes the task of reassembling the museum for the 21st
century more extensive, unknown, risky, but exciting.
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References


SYMPOSIUM: ARTIFACTS AND ALLEGIANCES

A cultural approach to culture

Pawan Dhingra

Department of Sociology, Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display takes a global approach to how museums make sense of increased globalization and migration. Museums construct narratives that link their locality to the nation and to the world. Peggy Levitt’s major book explains how museums imagine themselves and how they work towards composing a kind of visitor experience. It is about museum visions, missions, and exhibitions as told through the eyes of those who create and are responsible for them, namely, top administrators, curators, politicians, and more. Her analysis explains why museums only a few hundred miles apart can have such different conceptions of how to create the proper citizen. As such, the book illuminates the power of a cultural sociological approach.

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At a time of mass migration and increased globalization, how nations and cities present themselves to their citizens, newcomers, and other nation states takes on increasing importance. Peggy Levitt poses the question of how nationalist or cosmopolitan such representations are. To come to the answer, she looks not at political speeches, immigration and trade policies, or public opinion polls but to the cultural sphere. Museums are more than where high art gets crowned. They also are where national identity is debated and displayed, and where cultural citizenship is defined. Levitt is drawing our attention to one of the most obvious but simultaneously forgotten institutions.

Can museums help us understand our place within a time of heightened globalization? Should they be expected to? My answer to both questions is I certainly hope so. I grew up thinking of museums as both cultured and culturing, that is, as spaces that were of high cultural status and which would help the engaged visitor reach that status. As an adult, I worked as a Museum Curator at the Smithsonian Institution from 2011 to 2012, taking a leave of absence from my university faculty position. As a curator, I came to...
appreciate museum exhibitions in a much more complex manner than ever before. Here, I first explain what I see are the main arguments of the book, and then I elaborate on Levitt’s use of cultural sociology as her analytical approach to this cultural institution. In addition to an insightful take on global museums in a time of globalization, Artifacts and Allegiances more generally offers a sophisticated cultural sociological perspective to social institutions, one which scholars can learn from regardless of their interest in museums.

Museums and citizens, the global and the national

According to Levitt, museums are a space for nations to work through their relationship with the global. This is a fair expectation of museums, one that suits museums’ current sense of mission of being responsive to diverse constituents. In the USA and elsewhere in the West, museums have adopted a ‘new museology’ framework. Museums historically too often have portrayed Western societies as having moved towards a modern, enlightened set of organizations and practices in contrast to Eastern, traditional societies. Objects and art of non-Western cultures have been appropriated and displayed without sufficient historical context and depth. As a way to repudiate the imperialist practices of the past, museums today team with ethnic, often local communities and empower them to construct their own public narrative. Immigrant groups are no longer simply objects of study but are subjects who help define what their story is and who they are today. In fact, one key measure of an exhibition’s success is whether it makes the portrayed community members proud.

Museums have various incentives to make their exhibitions reflect positively on the group portrayed. Ethnic communities often live within the area and can donate time, insights, objects, and money. External funds are commonly necessary for a museum to afford an exhibition, and local elites within the relevant community are a key source. Appeasing them, or at least not offending them, becomes a taken-for-granted expectation. It is practically a sociocultural right for ethnic groups to be recognized by the public as having a proud history and place within the nation. This national trend explicitly filters down to the practices of museums. This commitment to serving the community(ies) is not limited to the United States or to the West. For instance, an exhibition on Jewish Singaporeans by the Singapore History Museum in Singapore avoided any mention of Jews growing up with and playing with Chinese Singaporeans to avoid ‘anything racial. ... Curators exercised much self-censorship in this regard.... In this sense, the presentation of Jews was very static and plain’ (Kong 2005, 503). This new museology is a dominant framework for many museums as they try to engage with the local and global in more sensitive ways.

Artifacts and Allegiances elucidates what guides this framework and how it is enacted (or not) differently across museums. This book sets out to answer not how museums fashion citizens but instead what kinds of citizens they hope to create. That is, it does not try to quantifiably measure museums’ effectiveness in creating narratives on citizenship, for there is little attention to how visitors actually engage museums. Instead, it is how museums imagine themselves and how they work towards composing a kind of visitor experience. It is about museum visions, missions, and exhibitions as told through the eyes of those who create and are responsible for them, namely, top administrators, curators, politicians, and more.

So, how do museums understand their efforts? Museum officials interviewed by Levitt almost all say that they want to show that no one culture is completely separate from another. They want to teach visitors about linkages across groups or nations in a respectful way (as fitting the new museology), while making it clear how their own museum fits within their nation. Most want to show that their national art and culture have been influenced by immigrants and international encounters. Museums vary in how they go about this, how much they stress the cosmopolitan versus national ends, if they use more art or more artefacts, and how they define cosmopolitan. For instance, does cosmopolitanism involve politics as in Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden, more values and skills as in Peabody Essex Museum outside of Boston, USA, a respect for religious authority as in National Museum of Qatar, or a commitment to Asian cultural hybridity in Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore? Museum curators often want to push the boundaries more than they feel they can to tell a more global story.

The role of culture in shaping culture

What guides and constrains museums in how they imagine the citizen relative to the world? For Levitt, the answer has to do primarily – not only – with the broader culture of the museum’s place. As she writes, ‘What is it about each city’s armature and its nation’s history, culture, and geopolitical standing that helps explain these differences?’ (29). Later she continues, ‘[E]ach institution is constrained by its history and holdings; its architecture; whether it began life as an art, cultural history, or constituency museum; and by the city’s cultural armature’ (83).

Levitt’s answer positions the book as both a sociology of culture and cultural sociology text. Regarding the former, it takes as its subject the world of museums, a prime cultural sphere that sociologists have a tradition of analysing. This book excels in its breadth of cases, its inclusion of curators, administrators, and politicians, the author’s personal observations of exhibitions, and illustrative plates. Regarding the latter, this cultural sociological
Ultimately, this book is an account of how an organization functions. And like most strong organizational accounts, there are more practical factors influencing decision-making than a broad narrative will capture.

For instance, what receives less attention, although is by no means absent, are the financial matters of the museums. What are their annual budgets, and are they growing or declining? Where does most of the revenue come from (e.g. public funds, foundation grants, a few donors, a base of long-term members, or large numbers of visitors for a few popular exhibitions), and how does that source incentivize certain kinds of exhibitions? Levitt quotes curators who refer to their sense of constraint given that their donor base is elderly women who have been in the area for generations. Yet, what exhibitions have been shelved or altered in response to that base, how is the museum pivoting towards new donors, etc.? I bring up these sample questions not to nit-pick what could be elaborated upon. It is natural for a book with such breadth to lack complete depth in any one case. Instead, my point is to illustrate how a cultural sociological approach leads to one set of questions over another and to show what becomes downplayed in the process. My own experience suggests that issues of institutional culture and finances are intertwined. Museums have their own cultural expectations that guide exhibition formulation, such as to be non-controversial, to highlight the successes of the group being profiled, to rely on a mixture of art and artefacts, to incorporate the local population (or not), and the like. These expectations are influenced by the assumed nature of the financial base of the museum, whether that be a multicultural audience or the U.S. Congress (in the case of the Smithsonian Institution).

Another topic difficult to include within cultural sociological accounts are fissures within the cultural narrative. If the story is a linear one in which geopolitics aligns with the museum mission/vision, which aligns with the exhibitions, which aligns with visitors expectations, then there is little room for conflict. Where is the conflict within the museum? When are there fights over resources? We see that at times, when the curator of Chinese art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts says that the museum must appeal to Euro-American visitors and so downplays the collection of world objects, but is that a sign of conflict or a benign recognition? What influence does a museum’s board of directors have and who makes up the board of directors? Cultural sociological accounts often construct narratives that are too neat and without fissures. Fortunately, this is not the problem of this book, for we hear directly and can infer tensions between curators and museum representatives. More attention to those fissures might illustrate how museums will conceive of citizenship in the future apart from their locations and geopolitics.

Finally, more information about the staff of the museums would be helpful, although again it is not absent. As museums debate what kinds of
citizens to create and how to incorporate diversity, it would be helpful to know more about the curators and top administration in this regard. What percentage of them are women, are religious minorities, have had significant exposure abroad, etc.? Where in the organizational hierarchy are different social groups located? The book explains if a top staff person is from another country (e.g. in Qatar), but similar information on the range of decision makers would illuminate how staff engage with the cultural and political expectations around them.

*Artifacts and Allegiances* deserves to be widely read by multiple audiences. Academics of the arts will learn how a key cultural institution operates at both the macro and micro levels. Social scientists committed to the cultural turn within their disciplines, regardless of whether interested in the arts or not, also will learn from a sophisticated approach to understanding organizational practices. I can imagine this book widely assigned in undergraduate and graduate courses in the sociology of culture, in social science courses on the arts, in sociology of organizations, and in courses on globalization and citizenship. Yet, the academy is just one audience for this book. It is written in an approachable style meant for the general public. Kudos to Levitt for accomplishing such an insightful and rigorous analysis without resorting to unnecessary jargon and hyperextended phrasing. Those who enjoy museums as a cultural space rather than analytical subject will see the institution in a new light. Museum goers will better appreciate what guides programming and exhibitions. Museum curators and staff in particular will recognize much of their own assumptions and motivations in the book, which gives a useful context through which to understand one’s daily work. This daily work has implications beyond museum walls as nation states come to (re)define themselves in this age of increased migration and globalization. Levitt opens up a new lens into this pressing topic beyond that of politics, economics, immigration, and everyday cultural practices. Elite institutions matter too, and here we realize their inner workings.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Reference**

the research) much has changed in Doha’s museum world, and many of the projects that Levitt discusses, such as the Orientalist Museum, are paused, and the cut backs and job losses in the museum sector are becoming well known (Kinsella 2016). Levitt writes about the period of booming museum and international cultural investment in Qatar prior to and on the cusp of the change of emir from Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his internationalizing agenda to his son, the more conservative Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who came to the throne in 2013, and the subsequent falling oil prices. This internationalization policy included the establishment of Education City and its US university branch campuses, Al Jazeera, and Qatar Museums and its plans for numerous museums. Not only have many projects now been paused, almost all of the Qatar Museums staff that Levitt interviewed have now left Doha, or moved on from Qatar Museums. These include Jean-Paul Engelen, the then Head of Public Art, Michelle Dezember and Grace Murray, then of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Thalia Kennedy and Aisha Al Khater (the only Qatari national in this roster), then of the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), Emin Balcoglu, then of the new National Museum of Qatar, and Scott Cooper, then of Msheireb Museums. The Doha section therefore reads as a snapshot in time, almost a period piece, in the fast-changing Arabian Peninsula museum world.

Levitt presents the rhetoric of museum development in Doha, often from interviews with museum staff who can only repeat state agendas in a country where criticism is not acceptable, balancing this in the concluding chapter with the reality from her own observations – the almost empty museums, the dominant foreign (=western) influence, and the engagement with the global rather than the local; however, there is sometimes a slippage where the rhetoric is presented as the reality. Statements such as the assertion made on p.115 that the new museums are part of an ‘agenda for engaging the West as an equal partner while remaining true to Qatar’s own culture and traditions’ reflect the official rhetoric in circulation rather than any reality. There is little of Qatar’s culture or traditions in these new museums, in terms of collections, curatorial practices and programming, staff or visitors, something overtly acknowledged in Qatar in recent years in the local criticisms aired in the media and on social media on museum projects seen as having no local relevance (for example, Al Marzouki 2013) – this is an example of the ‘local talking back’ that Levitt mentions in her introduction (p.2) but does not explore for Qatar. The lack of the Qatari voice in the book is indicative of the international nature of its new museums, which were intended to give Qatar a place in a regional and global conversation as a state branding exercise rather than as a form of local representation – and the local is complex in Qatar when 88 per cent of the resident population are from elsewhere and do not have citizen status, or rights. These museums were also constructed with an agenda to shift the cultural centre of the Arab world to Qatar, something else not overtly discussed in the book: Levitt notes on p. 6 of the Introduction that in constructing the nation museums have displayed artefacts from other countries to ‘collect and control the world beyond their borders’; this is in fact what MIA and Mathaf do – they collect Islamic Art and Modern and Contemporary Arab from beyond Qatar’s borders to demonstrate the emerging status and power of Qatar in the Arab and Islamic world; not all that happens in Qatar is in relation to the West.

Doha’s cultural armature

Levitt’s argument that interests me most is her positioning of museums within a cities’ cultural armature as a reflection of how cities manage diversity. She states that ‘urban cultural armature figures prominently in both stories [of Singapore and Doha]’, going on to give a specific example for Singapore – ACM’s architecture replicating the ethnic division of city space. Levitt is absolutely correct in her argument, and 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 (nationals on top, migrant construction workers predominantly from South Asia on the bottom) and policies of exclusion. Levitt points out (p. 131) the new residential patterns that mean Qatari nationals do not need to mix with the rest of the population, termed here the ‘nation’ but as none have residence status or any rights I would avoid this inclusive definition: in Qatar only nationals, according to their own definition, are citizens and therefore make up the nation. She goes on to quote Miriam Cooke’s argument (2014, 170, 172) that, for example, the state-controlled museum spaces enable the state to act as if large scale migration were new, and therefore needs to be controlled, rather than presenting the region as historically diverse and multi-cultural, or acknowledging that the region’s contemporary culture draws on cultural influences from India, Iran and Africa and that foreign populations have been present for hundreds of years (see Gardner 2010; MacLean 2016; Thabit Willis 2016).

In my forthcoming book, Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula (Exell 2016), I discuss what I term the ‘Arabization’ discourse which has emerged in recent years as a defence mechanism against increased inward migration and concomitant perceived threats to the Arabic language and Arab and Islamic culture and values. This discourse legitimises the defence of contemporary cultural purity, failing to reference the foreign populations and their cultural and material contributions to the past, present and future Arabian Peninsula societies. In museological terms, the discourse is constructed through official narratives of the nation which imagine an idealized ‘time before oil’ focusing on Arabian Peninsula Arab family life and traditions – for example, regional national museums, such as
those in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Dubai and Al Ain in the UAE, present dioramas of timeless traditional places and activities such as souqs, weddings and Qur’anic schools, populated by Arabs. Museums are therefore overtly utilized as a tool in this strategy of exclusion, rather than as part of a strategy of supporting engagement with difference, as Levitt proposes for museums elsewhere in the world (p. 5).

Qatar’s new National Museum is not yet open and its narrative not available for discussion, but recent activities in neighbouring Sharjah provide an illuminating regional example of this process of protection and exclusion at work, and the Msheireb Downtown development’s museums in Doha a Qatari example. In December 2013, Sharjah Archaeological Museum held a conference entitled The Role of Museums and Cultural Institutions in Strengthening Identity, with papers and discussions in Arabic focusing on the protection of national identity presented to an audience consisting predominantly of nationals from the region. The conference was introduced with the following (unpublished) outline, quoted in part here:

The world’s countries have experienced a dramatic increase in globalization woes over the past two decades. With limitless political, economic, social and cultural impacts on both urban and rural communities, cultural and social structures are affected worldwide, including our Arab communities. As today’s challenges and negative impacts become ever greater, there has never been a bigger need for protecting our Arab culture from the adverse consequences that have endangered our cultural identity.

Recently, there has been growing interest from researchers in museums as they showcase heritage, history and civilization exhibits, which are main components of our identity. The researchers are endeavoring to create an active role for museums based on a comprehensive plan to promote and develop museums. The attempt seeks to introduce the right definition of our cultural identity and the concept of belonging for generations to come.

It is a great opportunity to share experience with other nations with racial minorities who have managed to preserve their own identities amid a diversified community. Appreciation is given to the museums.

In this outline, the potential and significant role of museums in developing the ‘right definition of our cultural identity and the concept of belonging’ and in preserving the identity of ‘racial minorities’, that is, Emirati nationals, is stressed, and this national community, which is demographically in the minority, is regarded as marginalized – while its dominant social, economic and legal status allows it to retain the ability to create and elide histories.

In Doha, the Msheireb Downtown Doha urban redevelopment project and its four Heritage House museums, which opened in September 2015 (after the publication of Levitt’s book), further demonstrate the discursive construction of the pure Arab past, present and future. Mobilizing the rhetoric of regeneration and a return to a ‘pure’ past, the website of the Msheireb Downtown Doha project describes it as ‘... a regeneration initiative that aims to unite the Doha of yesterday with the vision of Doha tomorrow, restoring old ways of life, the traditional sense of community, and a strong sense of culture and heritage.’ Since the 1960s and the increasing wealth of Qatari nationals as a result of the oil industry, families have moved out of the downtown areas of cities to the suburbs where they have built large villas and can maintain privacy away from the large foreign populations (Nagy 1998, 295). The Msheireb area was then populated by low-income, predominantly South Asian, migrant workers who rented rooms and apartments from Qatari national landlords who did little to maintain the properties. The $5.5 billion redevelopment project covering a 35-hectare site began in 2004, driven, according to Khalil and Shaaban (2012, 682) by the realization that the area, once the heart of Doha, had lost its historic character. In 2011, the South Asian inhabitants of the area were re-homed in a purpose-built village some distance from downtown Doha (King 2011), an event that articulates elements of the impact of Qatar’s nationalizing vision and non-citizens’ lack of rights. Msheireb is also an example of an urban redevelopment that re-shapes the city, creating zones of inclusion and exclusion, relegating weaker social elements to less desirable environments – in this case, the South Asian populations to the outskirts of the city.

Within the Msheireb Development are four museums located in restored heritage houses: Mohammed Bin Jassim House (MBJ House), Radwani House, Company House and Bin Jalmood House: The International Slavery Museum. The narratives in these museums are central to the nationalism and nationalization project – Msheireb Properties is a subsidiary of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development established in 1995 by the Father Emir, Sheikh Hamad, and his wife, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, that is, Msheireb Museums are a national project. The role of MBJ House is to narrate the history of the Msheireb area in a sequence of displays that locate the evolution of the area within the wider history of Qatar and its economic development, with an emphasis on Qatari habitation and use, suppressing the period of South Asian habitation. In Radwani House, traditional Qatari lifestyles are presented in a series of ‘pre-oil’ period rooms reminiscent of the dioramas of the national museums mentioned above, while Company House narrates the early oil industry focusing on the Qatari ‘pioneers’ that, according to the museum, forges the immensely successful oil industry that has transformed Qatar into the wealthy nation it is today. According to Jill Crystal (1995, 141–145), early Qatari oil industry workers in the 1930s demanded that the oil company, Petroleum Development Qatar (Ltd.), known as PDQ, give preference for hiring to Qatars over foreigners, increasing numbers of whom were immigrating from South Asia for employment reasons. In 1951, strikes occurred over this issue and a subsequent coalition of Qatars of diverse status (from sheikhs to slaves – slavery was abolished in 1952) was formed, united only
by their national identity, and in 1956 protective nationality laws were initiated. A consciousness of national identity, and its legal protection, can therefore be regarded as produced by the oil industry, with a long association of definition against the other, the foreigner, as central to this identity. This historical narrative is not one narrated in Company House, which gives no overt space to foreign involvement in the oil industry as either leading the industry’s development, or working in a skilled capacity alongside the Qatars, and is unlikely to figure in the new National Museum of Qatar; on the contrary, the message is that the past was Qatari, as will be the future.

The only variant note in the discourse of Qatar as endogenous is to be found in Bin Jalmood House, subtitled the International Slavery Museum. Here the narrative locates the regional kafala system, by which all foreign workers must have a citizen sponsor, and abuse of which – through low or non-payment, retention of passports and poor living conditions – has received much international media attention, deep within a broad story of ancient and contemporary slavery and people trafficking, focusing on the Indian Ocean world. This is the careful start of a different kind of conversation, in the public space of a museum, about foreign involvement in the nation and the relationship between citizens and foreign residents; it is the only variant note in the dominant discourse of necessary protection against the other in Qatar’s nation building project, and reflects a more nuanced conversation circulating at the edge of Qatar’s contemporary consciousness, initiated by Qatar’s increasing global presence and resulting relentless international scrutiny. The local impact of this museum will be of interest.

Doha’s museums are therefore indeed central to the city’s cultural armour, reflecting how Doha manages diversity through the elision and careful management of elements of Qatar’s past that might challenge the current orthodoxy that foreigners are a recent and temporary necessity, to be tolerated but not for long, an orthodoxy found across the Arabian Peninsula states (see Gardner 2010 for a discussion of this issue in relation to Bahrain; Foley 2010 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). Identity preservation and promotion of the national population in the space of the museum while excluding or silencing the dominant foreign resident population is part of the discursive construction of the foreign populations as illegitimate and profane. Levitt’s volume presents very contemporary debates around cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, and through the examples she selects, reveals just how much these ideas are a production of the west when they fail to map onto new nation states. Instead, new nations such as those in the Arabian Peninsula utilize the authority of the museum to validate unequal power relations as the natural order, much as European museums did for generations prior to decolonization and the emergence of post-colonial critique. The transnational museum class working in Qatar and the region, trained in the long history of western museology, are familiar with the myth-making potential of museums and their use as a technology to produce the nation state. As Donald Preziosi argues in his discussion of national museums, ‘The social management of memory and desire is the central business of the modern museum’ (2010, 58).

In this response, I have aimed to expand on Levitt’s excellent arguments around cultural armour in relation to one of her case studies, Qatar, a country I am very familiar with.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

SYMPOSUM: ARTIFACTS AND ALLEGIANCES

Nailing One’s Colours: Tate Britain’s Artist and Empire

Catherine Hahn
Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT
Taking the view that national art museums should represent the multifarious populations they serve, this article explores racial material in Tate Britain’s high-profile exhibition Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past (2015). The exhibition gave extensive coverage to two aspects of empire: hybrid fusions and the myth of white heroism, but gave limited attention to colonization as a maximally coercive system built on racist imaginings and abuse. Through cross-examination of the exhibition’s content and absences, I explore whether Tate Britain is setting out the ‘building blocks’ for more diverse practice.

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There is a destiny now possible to us – the highest ever set before a nation to be accepted or refused. We are still undegenerate in race; a race mingled of the best northern blood ... [England] must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able.
– John Ruskin, extract from his inaugural lecture as The Slade Professor of Fine Art, Oxford, February 8th 1870

On 25 November 2015, Tate Britain unveiled a high-profile exhibition, Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past, which explored the legacy of empire through the history of its art. The exhibition received a positive response in the national press, which described it variously as ‘stunning’, ‘mesmerising’, and ‘provocative’, while barely noticing its absences.

I examine how race and racism were mediated and obscured in Artist and Empire with Peggy Levitt’s Artifacts and Allegiances (2015) in mind. Levitt explores how museums have begun to tell their stories in relation to expanding notions of nationhood, more diverse publics and global concerns. Her message is one of cautious optimism. She perceives projects that emerge in response to museums’ quests for redefinition as ‘building blocks’ for ‘seeding more successful diverse and worldly communities’ (2015, 142). According to Levitt, museums have facilitated their development by sidetracking ‘the intractable for the sake of the possible’ (2015). Here, I consider whether the gaps in Artist and Empire’s story were too wide for the exhibition to serve as a ‘building block’ to more inclusive practice. The exhibition gave extensive coverage to two aspects of empire: hybrid fusions and the myth of white heroism, but gave limited attention to colonization as a maximally coercive system built on racist imaginings and abuse.

In the display, empire was elucidated through hybrid relationships, orientalism and transcultural cross-dressings, which introduced the ‘complex fusion and intermixture of cultures’ at play across the territories in which Britain was a colonial power (Gilroy 2015, 8). Multiple viewpoints were sanctioned through a plethora of images and objects, including architectural drawings, prints, photographs, sculptures, carvings, cloth-works and paintings. The inclusion of works produced prior to colonization, such as the second-century ‘Eliot Marbles’ from South-eastern India, and recent work that spoke to the empire’s legacy encouraged the audience to see empire as a passage in a longer, richer global history.

The other aspect of empire covered in detail in the exhibition was the creation of the white heroic subject as propaganda for the expansionist cause. Stephanie Barczewski, Heroic Failure (2016), describes how, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Britain’s acquisition of 5 million mi² of territory led to criticism of its aggressive expansion (2016, 114). Out of this disapprobation, a moral agenda was born that replaced the mercenary self-interest of imperialism with a myth of British white men ‘noblely sacrificing themselves’ in an effort to bring ‘morality, justice and spiritual enlightenment to the “dark places” of the world’ (2016, 114–115). In room three, ‘Imperial Heroes’, the ‘moral cause’ was illuminated through four epic oil paintings of The Last Stand, in which white male colonizers were portrayed nailing their colours to the mast through their refusal to surrender to the enemy in the face of death.

The heroic images of white men were unsettled through accompanying texts that noted their construction as myth-making ideal. However, the visual impact of romantic depictions of whites ‘under attack’ overrode these interventions – illustrated in the epic battle scene To the Memory of Brave Men: The Last Stand of Major Allan Wilson at the Shangani, 4th December 1893 (Allan Stewart 1897). The painting was created in commemoration of members of the British South African Company who were killed in an ambush by Ndebele warriors in Matabeleland (in present-day Zimbabwe). Stewart staged the work as an eyewitness account through closely observed details of army clothing and impressionistic energized brushstrokes that evinced the atmosphere of the unexpected and the speed of the assault. The khaki foliage and the stark realism of the beleaguered fighters evoked a
boys-own image of war. The storybook tension was heightened by know-
ledge of the black presence, hidden in the smoke and darkness of the forest,
alluded to in the scared expressions of the white men and the carcasses of
their slaughtered horses. The focus on white British deaths in Artist and
Empire proffered a visual reversal of the empire’s effect.

Discussing the earlier period of empire, the exhibition’s lead curator,
Alison Smith, describes the transatlantic slave trade as its most ‘emotive
issue’ (2015, 12). In the catalogue she provides the estimation that Britain in
the eighteenth century transported 2,600,000 slaves from Africa to the
Caribbean and America (2015, 25). Yet, concrete information on British
slavery was missing from the extensive gallery text and there was only
one image in the exhibition that made a direct reference to the slave
trade, the monochrome print A View of the Jason Privateer (Nicholas
Pocock c.1760). In the catalogue, Smith explains the lack of images of slavery
in Artist and Empire by stating ‘with few exceptions, it was simply not
represented – the brutalities of the slave trade being shameful even to its
perpetrators’ (2015 12). With notable exceptions, slavery did not fall within
the auspices of the heroic subject. Nevertheless, white imagery depicting
the degradation of the subject races was a central component of the
imperial project, which required degenerate subordinates to perform as
the antithesis of the civilized British white.

The most celebrated cartoonists of the Georgian period, James Gillray
and George Cruikshank, encouraged the development of essentialist, racist
ideas of black people in the white British psyche through cruel and grotesque
 caricatures (Donald 1996, 180–183; Hamilton and Blyth 2007,
290–292). In his infamous cartoon, The New Union Club (19 July 1819),
Cruikshank ridiculed the abolitionist movement, by representing its white
members at a dinner party alongside black characters who were reduced to
simian phenotypes and depicted in various forms of debauchery, including
sexual acts and violence. 7 Other subject races, including the Irish, were
typecast through similarly racist iconography (McClintock 1995, 53).

Racialized imagery also appeared in the works of the abolitionists and
other concerned parties who used counter-propaganda to signal the abuses
inflicted on slaves (Wood 2000; Gibbs 2014). Although their imagery dis-
rupted repugnant stereotypes, it frequently upheld the assumption of black
incapacity for self-rule. Stuart Hall has argued that the representation of
black people as victims was closely aligned with the concept of black
dependence (Hall 1997). The double signification of the slave as victim
and possession was present in William Blake’s Flagellation of a Female
Samboe Slave (published in Sedman 1796, 327 plate 36) – a salacious
depiction of a half-naked woman bound by her hands to a tree balancing
on her toes, her body covered in lacerations. Blake created this image, and
two others of tortured slaves, to accompany his friend John Sedman’s

memoir Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of
Surinam (1796). Though vaunted by the abolitionists, Sedman on the one
hand castigated Dutch slavers for their brutality and on the other cham-
pioned British slavery, based on his assumption that Africans ‘when they are
free to act by their own will’ are ‘perfectly savage’ (1796, 203). In the context
of Sedman’s text, Blake’s slave imagery confirmed white authority over the
black body and sanctified British rule by ascribing it with a false humanity.
The works were displayed at Tate Britain in 2007, in an exhibition designed
to mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act: Blake,
Slavery and the Radical Mind (2007), but were conspicuously absent from
Artist and Empire.

The absence of more extreme racist and abusive imagery in Artist and
Empire meant the audience was not given access to the discriminatory visual
culture that came to frame white British perceptions of black people, and
other subject races, during the period of empire. A salutary reason for not
showing offensive images is that they risk repeating harm. Martin Berger,
Sight Unseen (2005), cautions against exploring more overt forms of racial
visual culture, such as caricature, arguing that their obviousness makes them
dangerous, as they argue ‘subtly but persistently to individuals belonging to
the dominant culture that certain classes of people differ from themselves
and, more ominously, that those people are less than human’ (2005, 133).
The truth of this statement suggests that art museums may not be appro-
priate vehicles for negotiating past abuses.

Yet, images that are complicit in the erosion of agency can fabricate
complex stories that serve as important modes of evidence. For example,
Cruikshank’s The New Union Club exposed the cartoonist’s racist viewpoint
and at the same time offered a portal to black involvement in the politics of
the day. In the cartoon Robert Wedderburn (1762–1835/6), the mixed-race,
Jamaican born Radical preacher, was staged as the protagonist, standing on
a table as if to address a meeting while seeming to expose himself to a
white guest. Wedderburn’s central role in the sketch thereby signalled the
singular threat he posed to the pro-slavery lobby of 1819, which went
beyond that of most white abolitionists to actively champion slave revolt
(Hochschild 2005, 320; McCalman 1986, 99–117). Artist and Empire included
limited accounts of physical and cultural resistance to imperialism, but the
lack of unequivocally racist images, like The New Union Club, meant it did
not reveal the extent to which white cultural practitioners were complicit in
refuting black agency.

By not displaying, or acknowledging, painful imagery, the exhibition
threatened to create a faux-reciprocity and to smooth over the horrors of
the past. This danger was partially realized in the final exhibition space,
room six ‘Legacies of Empire’, which represented the works of ‘artists from
the former Empire’. In the exhibition space, the titles of Judy Watson’s quiet
works on white paper, *Our skin in your collections, Our hair in your collections* and *Our bones in your collections* (1995), witnessed the harm done to Australian Aboriginal culture through western appropriations of the Aboriginal body. Ethereal allusions to microorganisms and flowers etched in charcoal grey on translucent waxy paper bore traces of the artist's hand in broken line. In the catalogue, we were told Watson included 'remains' within her images, below a chine-colle layer, which served like a skin to 'subtly frustrate the consumption of traditional art by collectors' (Thomas 2015, 232). The act of 'covering up' referred to the desecration of Aboriginal heritage, not just by theft and loss of life but through its consumptive display. Serving as containers for sacred artefacts, Watson's artworks echoed the vessels used in *Keeping Places* in Australia where indigenous communities preserve objects for future generations in private memorials (Simpson 2008, 167). The secretive nature of the work appeared to support the exhibition's discreet handling of acts of harm.

However, looking at Watson's wider oeuvre, one finds her dealing with the 'blood and bone memory' of her forefathers' abuse in far more graphic ways. For example, Watson describes an act of defilement by a white settler in her ancestors' region of the country as the stimulation for one of her better known works, *Salt in the Wound* (2008). She relates how the settler having shot 'blacks' cut off their ears as trophies and nailed them to his wall. The graphic physicality of this act was reworked by Watson through her casting of her children’s, mother’s and other people’s ears in wax, which she then nailed to the gallery wall (Queensland Art Gallery, 2012).

The exhibition's failure to give vision to empire, in terms of trauma and loss, left a vacuum at the heart of its study, it being impossible to tell a tale of empire that seeks to face the past without laying bare its negative impact. The historic involvement of white British artists in constructing racist lexicons that supported the imperial project also required further attention, as did the seminal role of black resistance in instigating change. Nevertheless, the multicultural and hybrid connections that *Artist and Empire* made were pertinent and important. Smith rightly points out that the synthesis of images in the exhibition relayed the possibilities of a polyglot visual culture (2015, 13). It would follow that Tate Britain would be enriched by integrating the mosaic of voices that *Artist and Empire* pointed to into its permanent historic collection – as a reflection of what Britain represents now and its multiple ancestries. It is therefore regrettable that having been requisitioned for *Artist and Empire*, it can be anticipated the artworks in the show would be returned to their respective fine art, natural history and 'specialist cultural interest' homes. Looking at *Artist and Empire* in the context of *Blake, Slavery and the Radical Mind* raises a fundamental concern that Tate Britain continues to distinguish black and minority ethnic cultural practice and experience from (white) art history. John Ruskin's belief in British-European ascendency has unfortunate echoes in the historic halls of the gallery where art by white male artists predominates.

Returning to Levitt, one finds similar limitations in museum access across the globe. In her ethnographic 'snapshot', Levitt emphasizes instances of 'partnership and collaboration' and cites reciprocity as a key 'paradigm shift' (2015, 141). Yet, she identifies that these practices of mutuality are occurring in a museum world that continues to rely heavily on 'enlightenment principles' and preservation (2015, 139-141). She further finds that the enthusiasm for diversity in museums has been tempered by constraints, such as the 'logic of the market'; 'organizational ecology'; institutional mandates and established collections (2015). Though Levitt presents these structural factors as significant impediments to change, she has found that in instances where museums have been willing to transform they have managed to find the way (2015). It would thus appear incumbent on Tate Britain to 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. Otherwise, it fails to illuminate the rich diversity that surrounds it and does a disservice to artists, like Watson, who are prepared to nail their colours to the mast by telling challenging stories that need to be told.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes**

1. Ruskin's equation of empire with racial destiny had a direct influence on Cecil Rhodes who emulates him in his 'Confession of Faith' where he contends that the English 'are the finest race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race' (Cecil Rhodes 2nd June 1877 quoted in Wheatcroft 1985, 140).
5. The only review that I came across that discussed the exhibition's multiple absences, including slavery, from a critical perspective was on an online platform, *Media Diversified*, set up to promote 'skilled writers of colour': Zariana

6. J.M.W. Turner’s Slave Ship (1840), Boston Art Museum, is a rare example of a romantic image of slavery, in which slaves are shown shackled arms raised, as if to heaven, in a tempestuous sea.

7. A copy of the print is available to view in the Michael Graham-Stewart Slavery Collection, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

8. Wedderburn reportedly smuggled copies of his Radical Journal to the slave plantations in Jamaica. In one example ‘The Axe Laid to the Root, or a Fatal Blow to Oppressors, being an address to the Planters and Negroes of the Island of Jamaica’ he warned the planters ‘prepare for flight … the fate of St. Domingo awaits you’ (no.1, col. 12 [1817], referenced in Hochschild 2005, 320–321, 404).

9. This description of the artists and display was used in the exhibition text, room six.


11. Ibid.

12. Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013) describe how Blake, Slavery and the Radical Mind (2007) attempted to retrieve a British cultural history of radical artistic production that engaged, but was not defined by slavery, but paradoxically reproduced marginalization through its cooption of slavery with the wider contemporary black and minority experience (2013, 67). In their opinion, Tate Britain continued to rely on the ‘colonialist logic’ of centre and periphery: ‘with tribute flowing from the (colonial) margin to the (imperial) metropolis’ (2013, 233).

References


SYMPOSIUM: ARTIFACTS AND ALLEGIANCES

The sensory museum: affective experience as the new pedagogic norm

Nikos Papastergiadis

School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

Museums are complex cultural institutions that have been forged amidst contradictory social and political forces. The representative function of museums in terms of capturing the breadth of national culture and their potential as a platform for citizens to develop a more worldly engagement has already been a subject of considerable contestation. In the current context of neo-liberal economic integration and the heightened mobility of people, the function of the museum has undergone even greater challenges. This article explores the shifts in the pedagogic function as it focuses on the impact of new modes of perception and interaction in cultural institutions and proposes that a wider conception of cosmopolitanism is necessary to grasp the contemporary opportunities of diversity and mobility.

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The function of the museum

Museums are places for cultural encounters and containers of valued objects. Museums are also complex places. They deliver a wide range of competing services and perform a variety of divergent functions. They also change at different speeds and are driven by a combination of inward and outwardly focused directives. Very few are either sufficiently slow in their evolution or consistent enough in the public profile to match the generalizations and claims that are often made in their name. By seeking to discover the nature of transformation in the museum complex through conversations and interviews with key stakeholders and museum professionals, Levitt’s book makes a welcome contribution to not only museum studies, but also steps into a wider terrain as it probes some of the challenges that confront our wider understanding of contemporary culture. It is both bold enough to make generalizations that will provoke resistance and ethnographically scrupulous in its revelation of lifeworlds that are more complex than the institutional rhetoric that pervades this field.

CONTACT Nikos Papastergiadis n.papastergiadis@unimelb.edu.au
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At the outset of the 18th and 19th century, the museums of Europe were key institutions in the nation-building project. While the primary scope of representation was to tell the story of origin and achievement of the nation, and in some instances, such as the British Museum it also situated this narrative in the encyclopaedic framework of world culture. Through their display of cultural, historical and artistic artefacts, museums provided an explanation of how civilizations evolved, and most importantly provided vital reference points for positioning the citizen in the nation and the world at large. It was designed to create a new kind of citizen—the citizen of the nation state. However, in relation to France this notion of the national citizen was blurred with a universal form of citizenship. At the centre of these imperial and universalist visions is the belief that all humans are part of a single family in the world, and the visitor who enters the museum is granted the opportunity to pay homage to, and learn from, this collective world culture. Promoters of this outlook were motivated by contrasting goals; some insisted that the aim of stimulating the imagination was to refine the aesthetic interest of the citizen, while others believed that it also had more instrumental effect; it could generate social cohesion and enhance democratic engagement. These benign views of universal humanity and world culture have been subjected to critique from both feminist and post-colonial perspectives. They have questioned not only the shortcomings in the execution of this goal, but also exposed the ideological masking of biases that favoured masculinist and Eurocentric values.

In the contemporary context, the function of the museum and its relation to its audience has also extended and reconfigured. The museum’s linkage to the project of nation-building has been spliced with the entertainment industry and is forced to compete for a public that is composed of both local communities and transient audiences. In turn, the local communities of museum can rarely be defined in terms of a homogenous and settled ethnic group. Hence, the conventional ideal of a national community with shared historical memory, common cultural value and unique belief systems runs against the grain of the multicultural formations that increasingly shape most metropolitan contexts. Museums are also increasingly governed by competing corporate and civic agendas. The role of sponsorship, patronage and private investment into the museum system has also reconfigured the power relations and expanded the cultural frame. In short, if the museum once served to reflect the cultural heritage and inform its national citizenry, it is now increasingly concerned with the challenges of addressing diversity.

Levitt enters into this field and is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between the museum and the formation of a citizen. However, the contemporary museum is not directed to an audience that is exclusively composed of national or local citizens. Increasingly there is pressure on museums to speak to and attract global tourists and temporary
residents. What kind of audience does a museum respond and in turn how does it have a hand in shaping this audience? Does the museum function as a site of power that dominates over its subjects or is it a more transformative, benign and non-coercive space for education and inspiration? Can the same space function in the former manner for one community, but also in the latter for another? How does class and cultural capital shape one’s disposition and competencies within the space of the museum? These political and moral questions have come to the fore with the expansion of sociological investigations into the function of the museum.

Within this sociological framework, two perspectives dominate: one that highlights the determining force of social structures, and the other that stresses the agency of individuals. The structuralist view would tend to suggest that museums have the power to construct and control the mentality of the citizen, whereas the voluntarist view stresses that museums merely present opportunities for individuals to interpret according to their own interests and capacities. The former stresses the power and responsibility to determine a dominant narrative, whereas advocates of the latter claim that the museum is not a tool for activism and it is merely a space that presents individuals the opportunity for cultural interpretation and personalized understandings. Many of the directors that Levitt quotes in her book stress that the function of the museum is to collect, preserve and interpret the object of the past according to the enlightenment principles (Levitt 2015, 139). This suggests that the role of the museum is defined as an objective process of classifying world culture. There is a counter view that puts greater emphasis on the power of the museum. In compelling formulation of an ‘exhibitionary complex’, Tony Bennett claimed that the citizen was not just alienated as they witnessed power that is not directly theirs, but also subject to a view which is presented as if it is for the common good: ‘this was the rhetoric of power embodied in the exhibitionary complex – a power made manifest not in its ability to inflict pain but by its ability to organize and co-ordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order’ (Bennett 1995, 67).

Increasingly a third view is adopted, in which there is an emphasis on the function of museums as platforms for dialogue, translation and transculturation (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Clifford 1997). From this perspective, there is both a more nuanced understanding of the agency of the public and, as Levitt puts it, an acknowledgement of the ‘tremendous power museums wield in shaping public views’ (Levitt 2015, 8). This third view is increasingly associated with a shift in institutional orientation. It encourages an outward view that is aligned with the pursuit of cosmopolitan values such as openness towards difference, empathy with others and critical thinking. However, two problems make the execution of this third way more problematic; firstly, the transition from a normative pedagogy that is central to the nation-building project, to a sensorial and experience-based ambience in the globalizing assemblage of museum practices, there is not necessarily a continuous flow of engagement with cosmopolitan values; and secondly, the emergent artistic and curatorial strategies for widening the sphere of cultural engagement through sensorial apprehension have been matched by developments of new critical apparatus that can identify and measure the impact of multi-perspectival viewpoints and immersive interactions. There is an undisputed tendency within the rhetoric of many museums to move between national and cosmopolitan values, and the development of new aesthetic techniques for public engagement has extended the outreach, but apart from discourse analysis of the gaps and contradictions in globalizing practices, this process has not been fully registered in the critical discourse within museum studies.

The cosmos in cosmopolitanism

This tension is evident in the contrasting agendas that have been identified in museums. There is the museum that ‘teaches’ cosmopolitan values by reflecting the diversity in its own community and presenting the value of other cultures in an equal and respectful framework. The representation of diversity that is within and beyond the context of the museum is thus taken as a sign of cosmopolitanism. However, as is also noted by Levitt, this aspiration can have contrasting motivations. The same goal can be pursued as a means of seeing the diversity of the world through the prism of the nation, and by contrast, the multiple perspectives that are generated by representing diversity can have effect of fragmenting and repositioning the national viewpoint as just one among many. The former view retains the centrality and privileged status of the national perspective onto the world, whereas the latter requires a mode of translation between multiple perspectives that decenter all perspectives. The perspective from which the cosmos of cosmopolitanism is gained is a topic of research that has so far been glossed both by sociologists and art theorists. While there has been due attention to the contrast between view of the global from the point of nation and the affirmation of the national by means of embedding it in the global, this discussion has not touched the more complex question of a necessarily spherical perspective to grasp the cosmos in cosmopolitanism (Papastergiadis 2012).

This omission is particularly glaring when we consider the emphasis on sensory experience and the construction of multi-perspectival and ambient spaces in contemporary installation art (Papastergiadis 2013). A closer exploration of the capacity for art as a world-making activity would immediately point to the friction points between aesthetic and economic orientation and help to dismantle the conflation between globalization and
cosmopolitanism. Consider this pithy distinction first formulated by Kostas Axelos in the 1950s. In the most banal uses of globalization, there is very little significance given to the key term globe. The world is treated as a flat square surface upon which everything is brought closer together and governed by a common set of rules. Globalization has an integrative dynamic, but a globe without a complex ‘ecology of practices’ (Stengers 2011) would not have a world. A world is more than a surface upon which human action occurs. Therefore, the process of globalization is not simply the ‘closing in’ of distant forces and ‘coordination between’ disparate elements that are dispersed across the territory of the world. As early as the 1950s, Kostas Axelos made a distinction between ‘mondialization’ and globalization. He defined mondialization as an open process of thought through which one becomes worldly (Elden 2006). He thereby distinguished between the empirical or material ways in which the world is integrated by technology from the conceptual and subjective process of understanding that is inextricably connected to the formation of a world view.

It is routine in the arts marketing discourse to assume that being global goes hand in hand with being cosmopolitan. In the emerging sites of cultural production such as the Gulf States and South East Asia, there is an attempt to leapfrog the local and regional status by investing in grand new arts infrastructure. Pinned to this new hardware is the assertion that the institutional software also has a global status and cosmopolitan orientation. The aim here is neither an ethnic nor an aesthetic horizontal outreach, but merely an upwardly oriented marketing branding exercise that appeals to global tourism and softens the environment of resident elites and the transient corporate sector. Hence, in these cases the relationship between globalization and cosmopolitanism goes hand in hand only in the most restricted sense. From the perspective of Axelos, this kind of branding exemplifies the gulf between the global and the cosmopolitan.

Similarly, Levitt’s account of the contrasting orientation between Danish and Swedish museums also opens deeper questions about the relationship between nationalism, globalization and cosmopolitanism. In Sweden, the citizen is encouraged to be both a cosmopolitan and a nationalist because to a worldly citizen will also enhance the viability of the nation, whereas the emphasis seems to be reversed in Denmark, where the cosmopolitan and humanitarian values are inscribed in and are seen to be subordinate to Danish values. Hence, the Swede can be categorized as a cosmopolitan national and the Dane a nationalist cosmopolitan. In both cases, the conception of cosmopolitanism is rather narrow, and its distinction from globalization incomplete. Appiah has described these tensions as examples of ‘partial cosmopolitanism’ (2006). Levitt is less concerned with contradiction implicit in these divergent outward perspectives, but more focused on explaining the sociocultural factors that shape the development of these outlooks. The difference of geopolitical perspective in these two case studies could be explained by reference to the civic armature that had evolved in the respective national contexts; however, they also open further questions about the adequacy of a critical perspective that is structured by an inside-outsider binary.

This failure to distinguish between globalization and cosmopolitanism has serious consequences for the clarity and strengths of Levitt’s conclusion. In my view, there is a rift in the relationship between place and cosmos and place and globe. Levitt holds onto a view that the relationship to place is held along the cosmopolitan–nationalism continuum. The problem with this continuum is that it does not sufficiently address the disjunctive force of globalization. Levitt quite rightly observes that there is a new transnational cadre of curators, artists and directors. The flow and organization of these professionals is usefully apprehended by the concept of the ‘global museum assemblage’. From this Levitt draws the conclusion that within this assemblage there is an inherent trend for standardization. While I would draw the opposite conclusion from the evidence that has been amassed in this book, nevertheless there is still the problem of situating this trajectory on the continuum that spans the nation-building project and world-claiming journey. The global museum assemblage, in Levitt’s view, is both detached from the national public sphere and only produces a very narrow and consumerist vision of the world. So while Levitt is right to insist that the museum is embedded in a complex social matrix, that its aesthetic and cultural agenda is invariably intertwined with a political framework and that museums, ‘therefore, cannot help but be part of the creation of citizens’, the question remains, what kind of citizenship emerges from the global museum assemblage?

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Manhoods and museums

Joane Nagel

Sociology Department, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

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Peggy Levitt’s *Artifacts and Allegiances* led me to recollect some of the displays of national identity and culture that I have seen in US museums over the years. The Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Museum in Abilene, Kansas traces Eisenhower from his modest boyhood in small-town Kansas to the helm of a victorious military in the Second World War to his Presidency of a triumphant superpower after the war. At the Eisenhower museum there is a seamless optimism linking the local and the global: America is the world. Nothing in the museum reflects the tension between the national and the cosmopolitan that Levitt observed in the museums she visited around the world. Levitt’s account of museum curators’ efforts to engage museum visitors’ sense of their place in a world of diversity also stands in contrast to what I saw last year when I visited the US National Portrait Gallery (NPG) of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC.

I had not yet read *Artifacts and Allegiances* when I visited the Portrait Gallery, but nonetheless, my reaction surprised me. My first stop was the ‘American Presidents’ Collection. All white men. Next I visited the US Civil War – a set of exhibitions commemorating the 150th anniversary of the war. Almost all white men. There were other exhibits, some with African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latino men, some with women of colour, and some with white women. But the overwhelming 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. The others – who shared their beds, served them, joined as their comrades in arms, or opposed them in politics and on the battlefield – were auxillary figures, diverse, but secondary characters in the racially pure, masculine saga of the Nation. Like the unified imaginary on display in the Eisenhower
museum, the exhibitions at the NPG did not reflect a primary mission to illustrate or adjudicate difference.

What I saw at the NPG did not sit well. As a sociologist, I am very familiar with the gendered character of US history and its traditional narration. So, as I walked through room after room of the Gallery, I did not expect to have such a mounting visceral reaction to the displays of men’s importance and women’s irrelevance. My NPG visit reminded me that, like nations, museums are mainly manly spaces – especially when they are tasked with representing the nation. Much of what is exhibited in fine art museums around the world (including the NPG) – the paintings, sculptures, photographs – is made by privileged men whose vision and positionality colour their creations (Cowan 1996; Parker and Pollock 2013; Elderton 2013). The exhibitions of mostly men’s work are curated primarily by men whose perspectives and interests shape their presentations. The buildings that hold the male-dominated collections and curators also are designed by men whose prominence can be seen in their historical portrayals. For instance, a current NPG exhibition, ‘Temple of Invention: History of a National Landmark’, displays photographs and archival materials relating to what Walt Whitman referred to as ‘that noblest of Washington buildings’, the Patent Office building (Robertson 2016). The curatorial notes describe the building as a ‘masterpiece of Greek Revival design’, commissioned by President Andrew Jackson in 1836, and completed in 1868. The Patent Office building’s exterior is reported to have been planned by William P. Elliot, and the interior designed by Robert Mills whose displayed photograph is carefully credited to Jesse Whitehurst (1819–1875). The Mills photograph is labelled ‘Robert Mills 1781–1855 and his Wife’. The latter remains unnamed, unborn, and undead...even in an online exhibition in 2016.

Despite such omissions, women are gaining admittance to the ranks of both collected artists and art museum curators. For example, in 2013, Kim Sajet was named director of the NPG (Boyle 2013). Women’s numbers and sensibilities are constrained, however, by the masculine weight of the institution of art and its institutions (Salz 2007; Reilly 2015; Sheets 2014). In an analysis of the gender gap in fine art, Kopf (2015) notes increases in the number of women artists whose work was being newly collected by the US National Gallery of Art. By his count, the number of women artists debuting in the National Gallery’s collection approached gender parity in the 1990s, but because of the long history of gender imbalance in the museum’s collections and exhibitions, he predicted a persistent ‘exclusive dominion of male art’.

If art keeps being added to the National Gallery at the current rate, and debut female artists continue to keep their [current] 60% share, we estimate that it will be a little after the year 2600 before half the paintings you see in the Museum’s collection are by women. (Kopf 2015)

Kopf’s calculations both recognize and minimize the power of museums’ institutional histories, particularly national museums tasked with representing nations. He sees the arithmetic possibility of women’s eventual inclusion in a museum like the National Gallery of Art, but even his projected slow march of progress towards gender parity likely underestimates the extent of institutional resistance to women’s art or, more importantly, to women themselves ever signifying the nation.

In her 1971 essay, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists’, Nofchlin (1971) referenced John Stuart Mill’s essay on the subjection of women, agreeing with him that what is customary comes to be seen as ‘natural’ especially by those whom custom privileges. Writing a century before Nochlin, Mill (1869) asked, ‘was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?’ Nochlin argued that the paucity of great women artists in history lay ‘not so much with the feminists’ concept of what femininity is, but rather with their misconception – shared with the public at large – of what art is. Building on her analysis, we can understand that the overrepresentation of men as artists, subjects, curators, and designers of national museums lay not so much with the absence of skilled, talented, and historically influential women, but rather with a long-standing, entrenched misconception of what is the nation and its proper representation.

Max Weber defines a nation as ‘a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state’ and which holds notions of common descent, though not necessarily common blood (Gerth and Wright Mills 1948, 172–179). Layoun (1991, 410–411) concurs: nationalism ‘constructs and proffers a narrative of the “nation” and of its relation to an already existing or potential state’. By these definitions, nationalism not only is a goal – to achieve statehood, but also is a belief – in collective commonality. Nationalists seek to accomplish both statehood and nationhood. The goal of sovereign statehood – ‘state-building’ – often takes the form of revolutionary or anti-colonial violent resistance. The exercise of statehood vis-à-vis other nation-states often takes the form of armed conflict or war. As a result of processes associated with the creation and maintenance of states, nationalism and militarism tend to go hand in hand. This is an important gendered feature of nations and states since the military is a preeminently masculine institution. The goal of nationhood – ‘nation-building’ – often involves ‘imagining’ a national past and present (Anderson 1991), inventing traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and symbolically constructing community (Cohen 1985). As Gellner (1983, 49) argues, ‘it is nationalism that engenders nations, and not the other way around’. The task of inventing the nation is the work of creative, typically militarized nationalism busying itself with the production of heroic narratives, literature, music, art, and artefacts – the his-stories that are the mainstays of national museums.
There is a close historical and modern connection between gender and nation-building. This bond can be seen in artistic, literary, cinematic, and rhetorical depictions of patriotic manhood and exalted motherhood as icons of the nation. There are designated places for women and men in national politics and nationalist ideologies. The gender-nation nexus is most intimately imbedded in the link between manhood and nationhood. Enactments of nationalism typically involve displays of masculine activities and interests, especially those emphasizing the military and warfare. There is an interplay between manly and national virtues of honour, bravery, and loyalty – virtues which are indistinguishable as either masculinist or nationalist. National moral representations often are characterized by gendered and sexualized militarism including constructions of ‘our’ men as virile and disciplined, and ‘enemy’ men as simultaneously oversexed and undersexed (rapists and wimps) and ‘our’ women as virtuous and desirable, and ‘their’ women as promiscuous and treacherous ( sluts and seductresses) (Nagel 2003).

While gender has a particularly important place in the nation-building enterprise, all genders are neither created as equal partners in building the nation, nor do they occupy the same positions on national stages. The idea of the nation and the history of nationalism are intertwined with the idea of manhood and the history of manliness. This is not to say that women do not have roles to play in the making and unmaking of states: as citizens, as members of the nation, as activists, as leaders. It is to say that nationalist scripts are written primarily by men, for men, and about men. In these national dramas, women are relegated to mainly supporting roles – as mothers of the nation, vessels for reproducing the nation, agents for inculcating national culture into new members, and national housekeepers responsible for maintaining home and hearth for the nation’s men who are out and about on important official business – fighting wars, defending homelands, representing the nation abroad, manning the apparatus of the state. The real actors in nationalist productions are men defending their freedom, their honour, their homeland, and their women. Variations on these themes can be seen in national museum exhibitions around the world and in Washington, DC.

Mosse (1996) notes that masculinity and nationalism articulate well with one another, and the modern form of Western masculinity emerged at about the same time and place as modern nationalism – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Both grew up around the spread of national museums in Europe and North America (Aronsson and Egenius 2014). In light of these concurrences, the conflation of manhoods and nationalisms in museums is inevitable and may be inescapable. Historical studies of the United States indicate that contemporary patterns of US middle-class masculinity arose out of a late 19th century renaissance of manliness motivated by fear of impotence and anxieties about declining masculine vigour (Bederman 1995). Scholars document a preoccupation with masculine ideals of physique and behaviour which became institutionalized into such organizations and institutions as the modern Olympic movement which began in 1896 (MacAlon 1981, 1984), Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘Rough Riders’ unit which fought in the Spanish American War in 1898 (Morris 1979; Rotundo 1987), a variety of ‘boys’ and men’s lodges and fraternal organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus and the Improved Order of Red Men, which were established or expanded around the turn of the century (Preuss 1924; Kauffman 1982; Carnes 1989, 1990), and the Boy Scouts of America which was founded in 1910 2 years after the publication of R.S.S. Baden-Powell’s influential Scouting for Boys (Warren 1986, 1987; MacKenzie 1987). These organizations embodied European and American male codes of honour (Nye 1993) which stressed a number of ‘manly virtues’ including willpower, honour, courage, discipline, competitiveness, quiet strength, stoicism, sangfroid, persistence, adventurousness, independence, sexual virility tempered with restraint, and dignity, and which reflected masculine ideals as liberty, equality, and fraternity. These descriptors rarely are heard in the lexicon of femininity, but they do speak in the language of nationalism.

While American men were red(ish)covering their manliness in the 19th century, US museums were growing in number and size. Congress established the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 with a small collection of art, books, and artefacts. In the half-century following the Civil War, the US museum landscape and collections expanded to include the Library of Congress, Corcoran Gallery of Art, National Zoological Park, National Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among others (Smithsonian Institution 2016). In light of the concurrent revitalization of manliness and the celebration of nationalism, US national museums at the turn of the 20th century became staging sites for commemorations of American manhood and nationhood. As my visit to the NPG reminded me, the party has continued well into the 21st century.

Like the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Museum, the US NPG may not be the best place to look for evidence of curators balancing nationalism and cosmopolitanism as described by Levitt. By my analysis, the major challenge faced by the NPG is to renegotiate the terrain between masculinity and femininity in the museum’s retelling of America’s national story. There is no question that women are absent from history as it is portrayed in many books, films, and museums. But, following Nochlin, perhaps the question is not where are the women in history and its narration, but what is history, and how is it being told in our national museums?
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Museums and the cultural politics of displaying the nation to the world

Brenda S. A. Yeoh

Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the way nationalist imperatives and cosmopolitan ambitions fold into each other in the making of museum spaces in seven cities across the globe, *Artifacts and Allegiances* provides an intriguing comparative narrative of museum practices which takes into account the broader differences in social, demographic and historical contexts. Based primarily on interviews with museum professionals, academics and policymakers, the approach favours the production of meanings and representations from above, as opposed to the telling of stories from below. A consideration of multiple readings, appropriations and contestations across different scales would afford us a more dynamic view of the cultural politics that animate the ways in which museums display the nation to the world and draw the world into the nation.

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Cosmopolitanism; cultural politics; nationalism; museums; identity

In April 2016, when visiting the Museo Histórico Regional Casa Garcilaso, Cusco, Peru, I came across the words of Julio C. Tello, regarded as the father of Peruvian archaeology, imprinted on a large banner right at the start of the exhibition:

The museum is the democratic education institution par excellence; it is the most effective means to vulgarize the teachings of history. If we are aware of our duties for the destiny of the homeland, we are obliged to work strenuously on the great task of educating people, arousing spirit of group solidarity, and thus contribute to the national consciousness. (1924)

Falling more squarely at the nationalist end of the ‘continuum of cosmopolitan nationalism’ (p. 3) that Peggy Levitt writes about in *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*, this museum takes a chronologically arranged approach to its display in ‘vulgarizing’ the lessons of history in order to evoke ‘national consciousness’. Yet, as Levitt notes, no museum ‘told an entirely national or global story’, and

instead ‘the nation always reared its head in depictions of the cosmopolitan, and cosmopolitanism always came with something of the national’ (p. 3). As cultural institutions ‘born out of a need or desire to create order out of the material debris of culture contact ... [since] the Age of Discovery’, museums in the contemporary world of nation states are now charged with the need ‘to represent themselves to themselves’ as well as ‘to represent themselves to others’ (Steiner 1995, 4). The cultural politics at play amidst the ‘fascinating permutation in the puzzle of representations’ (Steiner 1995, 4) lies at the heart of *Artifacts and Allegiances*.

Travelling through three continents, five countries and seven cities, Levitt provides a richly variegated account of ‘how global museum assemblages interacted with national and urban cultural politics to produce certain kinds of museum practices’ (p. 139), which she draws together by following ‘ideas, things, or groups across sites, and [observing] the connections between them’ (p. 12). Her key argument is contained in the observation that what museums put on display is conditioned by ‘where a country is in the arc of its nation-building and global claims-staking projects, and the kinds of citizens it believes it needs in order to reach its goals’ (pp. 3–4). This argument is developed using evidence collected primarily from interviewing museum professionals, academics and policymakers in the seven cities, rather than by drawing on visitor encounters that continually animate the contact zone in new ways. None of the chapters give significant space to the views of the people, including non-visitors, who pass through or inhabit these cities but whose biographies may or may not be included in museum narratives. By restricting the discursive space to elite voices and the accounts of powerful producers of museum spaces, what seems missing is the telling of stories from below, the groundswell of often disparate and fragmentary accounts that may sometimes destabilize, sometimes affirm, the dominant, official or intended narratives put forward by museum curators and directors. This is a point I will return to later.

Treating museums as sites of encounter where ‘global approaches bump into regional and national history, culture and demography’ (p. 8), Levitt argues that cosmopolitan values and nationalist imperatives intertwine in the making of museums in complexly different ways along a continuum. In turn, museums tend to reflect, rather than challenge, prevailing approaches to issues of immigration and diversity, on the one hand, as well as national identity and citizenship ideals, on the other. In other words, museums are microcosms signalling how ‘others’ who gain a somewhat slippery foothold in the national geobody are viewed, as well as how the ‘national self’ is projected onto a global stage and exhibited to others, including those coming from beyond its borders.

With respect to ‘others in our midst’, in the case of Sweden and Denmark, Levitt writes that ‘[b]oth countries took on internal diversity reluctantly.
Museums showcased the immigrant experience subtly, as part of larger exhibitions with broader messages or in separate museums’ (p. 42). In contrast, museums in Boston and New York tend to embrace the idea of America as a nation of cosmopolitan diversity, where ‘American’ is considered not so much as ‘a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other land, of many threads of all sizes and colors’ (p. 89, quoting Randolph Bourne). At the same time, such plural diversity is interpreted through the prism of American exceptionalism, where an unquestioned ‘vision of the world’ too readily assumes that the US features as its very centre, and ‘where the world still needs to come to America rather than the other way around’ (p. 90). In the case of relatively new nation states of Qatar and Singapore, its museums ‘tell a clear story about the nation, its place in the region, and its connection to the globe’ but is silent about ‘the assumptions underlying its diversity management regime in place and of the absence of human rights [where low-skilled migrant workers are concerned]’ (p. 93). Internal social differences are also sometimes glossed over, as in the case of Doha museums where differences within the Qatari category with respect to ‘tribe, denomination, or descent from hadawas (desert nomads) or from hadaras (village dwellers)’ are officially downplayed in order to preserve the salience of the dividing line between Qataris and non-Qatars. This provides a different twist to the more familiar tale of a ‘contest of identity’ within ‘the group [i.e. the nation] itself about the nature and content of self-images and national identity’ suitable for museum displays, which could take precedence over the battle lines drawn ‘between self-representations and outside representations’ (Steiner 1995, 4, quoting Nancy Marie Mithlo).

While ‘global stories’ that signify connectivity to elsewhere are important as a means of securing for the museum a more influential and prominent place on the world map and in human history, Levitt argues that these stories are often ‘refracted through national lenses’ (p. 136). Thus, museums in Denmark, and elsewhere, ‘use the global primarily to explain and reassert the national’ (p. 136); and national museums in particular are treated as citizenship-making institutions where ‘citizens of Denmark ... explore what our place is in the world’ (p. 28, quoting a Danish curator). In Sweden, while there is a stronger focus on projecting its people as global citizens who have played a significant role on the world stage, cultivating a global orientation also allows museums to sidestep ‘black spots’ in the nation’s own history (p. 136). Across the Atlantic, a different sense of the global pervades, as ‘the national gets cosmopolitanized through its internal diversity’ (p. 11). Museums in Boston and New York tend to have ‘something to say about immigrants, Native Americans, and people of color’ and ‘use the diversity within their communities as a bridge to the world beyond’ (p. 137). The stories of diverse peoples are woven into the national tapestry, but as Levitt observes, the overall effect is clearly framed by the assumption that ‘being global means being American’ (p. 137). Turning to the younger nation states of Qatar and Singapore where nation-building tasks are accorded high priority even as they aspire to global prominence, museums are used ‘to build their nations and rescale them, rather than to reimagine them’ (p. 130). As nation-building tools which also serve to extend the global reach of the nation state, museums conform to an ‘Asian’ or ‘Arab’ version of cosmopolitanism which is predicated on a strategically selected set of values and aspirations such as economic nationalism, communitarianism, ‘Asian values’ or Islamic principles.

Artifacts and Allegiances is a highly readable book which shows us ‘why particular histories and culture, institutions, and demography combine to produce different versions of cosmopolitan nationalism’ (p. 12). The pairing of cities in each substantive chapter, and the multiple facets of contrast across the three different pairs in the volume as a whole, provides an effective comparative device, yielding a narrative with fascinating twists and turns in similarities and differences which, as Levitt insists, must always be appreciated in the larger spatial and temporal context. At the same time, the narrative spun tends to draw on elite accounts provided by those in positions of power and/or authority, and lacks a certain polyvocality. As such, the book does not give full attention to the view that as a memoryscape, the museum is ‘polysemic and ... in process of construction and reconstruction, never inert as people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it’ (Bender 1993, 3).

Levitt argues that museums order objects in such a way as to legitimize ‘particular social and political hierarchies, privileging some ways of knowing while excluding others’ (p. 7). Locating museums and their representative power along a continuum of cosmopolitanism-nationalism is a useful framing device, but this somewhat dualistic approach does not give full play to scalar politics. As Randles and Dicken (2004, 2012) observe, taking scale into account puts the spotlight on ‘processes of negotiation and compromise’ and how meaning-making is ‘contested and fought over, the temporary, transient, sometimes fragile, sometimes stable outcome of political tensions’. A consideration of multiple scales in the way museums make sense of immigration and globalization would afford us a more dynamic view of conflict and coexistence across scales, providing a language that makes possible a more substantive and tangible spatialized politics (Smith 1993).

Museum narratives and practices do not only respond to state agendas or professional expertise that circulate the world as part of ‘global museum assemblages’ (p. 8), but they are subject to multiple readings, appropriations and contestations on the ground. As cultural institutions that ‘collect and assemble fragments of the past and carefully re-contextualize them into a narrative of the present’, museums ‘play a crucial role in the production of
national identity, 'shaping the manner in which the nation creates its history, imagines its boundaries, and constitutes its citizenship' (Kal 2008, 1). Museums established in times of postcolonial ambiguity often become contested terrains where questions of national identity and belonging are subject to divergent interpretations. In this vein, Seo (2014) discusses the multiscalar politics involved in the case of the Moluccan History Museum, established in the Dutch city of Utrecht, with the aim of narrating the Moluccan story in Dutch society. In the 1970s, following a series of terrorist attacks by Moluccans living in Dutch society, the museum was established as a gesture of reconciliation, redefining 'the relationship between the Moluccans and the Dutch as brothers-in-arms, not as former colonizer and colonized' (Seo 2014, 380). Drawing on the intricate interplay of 'nation' and 'transnationalism', the museum’s displays were designed to propagate the message of Moluccan integration into Dutch society, while confining the fraught narrative of how the Republic of South Maluku came to be established in the Netherlands as a government-in-exile as an episode of past history. Seo (2014, 387) complicates the museum’s endeavours to reframe the past by a close reading of the multiplicity of visitor interpretations, ranging from older-generation Moluccan Dutch who found affirmation of their history of transmigration and Moluccan identity in the exhibitions, to the younger generation who interpreted museum artefacts and messages in terms of the integration of the Moluccan community into Dutch society. By including the views of ‘Moluccan Dutch’ of different generations, and by taking into account variegations in ethnicity and citizenship (Dutch-Moluccan, Dutch-Indonesian, Dutch, Indonesian, etc.), Seo (2014, 381) builds upon a cultural politics of remembering and forgetting at different scales to make the point – not unlike Levitt’s – that museumising is a process which ‘reinforce[s] the conceptual categories as to who should – or, more importantly – who should not be included in the nation’.

Turning to a different set of examples, war commemoration museums such as the War Memorial of Korea and the Yushukan, a Japanese war memorial museum attached to the Yasukuni shrine, ‘play symbolic and socially significant roles in the construction of nationalism ... for today’s generation, who are experiencing forces of globalization’ (Kal 2008, 2). While Korea and Japan – the once colonized and the colonizer – have ‘mutually antagonistic historical trajectories’, their respective museums in similar fashion claim the heritage of ‘military patriotism based on a common bloodline and shared ancestry’ as a major ingredient in the construction of ethnocentric nationalism (Kal 2008, 12). As Levitt also notes in proposing a transnational dimension in the construction of nationalism, Kal (2008, 12) argues that ‘the process of making a national subject is closely associated with the making of Korean “others,” namely North Korea, Vietnam and Japan’. Turning to the Yushukan, Kal (2008, 13–17) makes the point that by celebrating Japan’s military past while erasing any reference to the multi-ethnic nature of the war dead (which included Koreans and Taiwanese who were mobilized to serve the Japanese empire), the museum not only looks backwards to the glories of Japan’s imperial past but also forwards ‘to reconstruct[ing] the nation on foundations of empire and war’. This pressing need to strengthen the connection between the individual and the national subject by ‘staging ethnic nationalism against “others” from inside as well as outside’ to gain legitimacy for the nation state is part of the scalar politics engendered by ‘the growing visibility of postcolonial Asia ... [that] threatens to disrupt the putative wholeness of the citizenship project that neonationalists attempt to maintain’ (Kal 2008, 12 and 18).

The production of a highly ethno-conservative national identity through strategies of representation centred on the war dead has not gone unchallenged in both nation states. Campaigns for alternative ways of remembering the war past include citizen-organized demands for ‘peace museums’ in both countries. At a more individualized level, some people, including citizens and non-citizens, have ‘resisted official representation by consuming [these museums] in ways different from [their] intended meanings’ (Kal 2008, 17). These forms of more personalized meaning-making at the individual scale demonstrate the way that people engage, rework, appropriate and contest dominant messages scripted into museums by elite producers. The framing and reframing of meanings that inhere in museum artefacts over various scales take place in interlocking ways, prompting us to ‘avoid thinking of the range of scales as a hierarchy, with particular scales being more privileged than others’ (Devasahayam et al. 2004, 136).

As identities and meanings are made and unmade over contested terrains, allegiances within and across nation states are continually reworked and cannot be entirely contained by the inertness of artefacts. At the same time, as Steiner (1995, 5) notes, there is ‘something uniquely unmalleable about material artefacts’ in museums that places limits on the spectrum of possible interpretations. Museums therefore offer a particular vantage point to understand the multiscalar logics at work in nation-building in a globalized age. Levitt’s book takes us through a multi-sited ethnographic journey that opens up key questions relating to whether museums hosted by a broad continuum of nation states are capable of creating global citizens who exhibit ‘an openness to difference, whether it be next door or across the world’ (p. 2). It is a journey that takes us more deeply into the interior world of museums as perceived and constructed by curators and commentators, more than one that shows us how the ‘identity work’ (Macdonald 2003, 1) that museums do can become the subject of contestation and controversy, or marginal and irrelevant, when seen from the perspectives of ordinary people to whom museums aspire to display the nation and the world.
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References


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

Peggy Levitt

Sociology department, Latin American Studies at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, USA

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.’ It means augmenting, accenting, or countering one music voice with another. 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-centricism 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 globalization.

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-envision 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 Dewardn 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 Yeh 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 (2016:680) 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 McDermont 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 it’s 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

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