

Museums and Racism

Racism is a hot topic in museums today, as well as an urgent social issue. Focused on the broad field of multicultural policy, *Museums and Racism* examines how the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia, has responded to political culture and public debate around racism.

Analysis focuses on the conceptualization of the Immigration Museum in the mid-1990s, and on the most recent permanent exhibition to be opened there, in 2011, which coincided with the publication of a new multicultural policy for Australia. The opening of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in the intervening period is also examined in some detail, as a comparative case study to provide a sense of the broader national social and political context. Message argues that each of the three episodes demonstrates the close relationship between museum and exhibition development on the one hand, and policy, politics, and public opinion on the other hand.

Including a discussion of examples from the United States and other relevant contexts, *Museums and Racism* is key reading for students and scholars of museum studies and cultural studies around the world. The book should also be of great interest to museum practitioners and policymakers in the area of multiculturalism.

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Museums in Focus
Series Editor: Kylie Message

Museums and Racism

Kylie Message

Committed to the articulation of big, even risky, ideas in small format publications, 'Museums in Focus' challenges authors and readers to experiment with, innovate, and press museums and the intellectual frameworks through which we view these. It offers a platform for approaches that radically rethink the relationships between cultural and intellectual crisis and debates about museums, politics, and the broader public sphere.

'Museums in Focus' is motivated by the intellectual hypothesis that museums are not innately 'useful', 'safe' or even 'public' places, and that recalibrating our thinking about them might benefit from adopting a more radical and oppositional form of logic and approach. Examining this problem requires a level of comfort with (or at least tolerance of) the ideas of dissent, protest, and radical thinking, and authors might benefit from considering how cultural and intellectual crisis, regeneration and anxiety have been dealt with in other disciplines and contexts.

Recently published titles:

The Disobedient Museum

Writing at the Edge

Kylie Message

Museums and Racism

Kylie Message

<https://www.routledge.com/Museums-in-Focus/book-series/MIF>

MUSEUMS IN FOCUS

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix

For Ezra

It's a summer of sequels. The culture wars are back. So is the civil rights movement	1
1 Museums	9
2 Multiculturalism	45
3 Racism	71
I feel like I belong when I am made to feel welcome	108
<i>Bibliography</i>	114
<i>Index</i>	132

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Anonymous graffiti, Athens. Image and logo by James Verdon (2017).

List of illustrations

0.1	'Who's Next Door?' tram installation, <i>Identity: yours, mine, ours</i> exhibition, Immigration Museum	2
1.1	Immigration Museum, Old Customs House, Melbourne	10
2.1	National Museum of Australia, Canberra	46
3.1	'Welcome' installation, Lynette Wallworth, <i>Identity: yours, mine, ours</i> exhibition, Immigration Museum	72
4.1	Model Fishing Boat – Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp, Malaysia, Tran van Hoang, Museum Victoria	109

It's a summer of sequels. The culture wars are back. So is the civil rights movement¹

Three-way thinking

Last year I set myself the task of trying to complete three related books in close succession. I wanted to start playing out some of the questions I was asking authors contributing to the Museums in Focus series to examine. I was motivated less by a desire to privilege any particular disciplinary approach than by the intention to test out different ideas about how we think about museums and extend processes of self-reflection to the exercise of writing about them. As short books, my rationale went, they could be more responsive to contemporary events and change, more experimental and process oriented. The quick production time and electronic publication also appealed. The books would circulate in the public sphere alongside the topics and debates upon which they were commenting. My intention was to retain proximity between the books and their context in the hope that this approach would counteract some of the concerns that critique can fetishize the expert authority who operates at a distance.² Furthermore, although the research and scholarship had to be of the highest quality, the books could be published as critical engagements with events and actions, reflections on previous thinking about a topic, they could profile moments in time, or function as works-in-progress. The links and conversations that exist and might be created *between* the books and other forms of theorizing about museums, culture, and politics – based in museum studies or not – would, I hope, become a more significant outcome of the series than any individual book itself.

It also so happened that 2016 and 2017 were flashpoint years in terms of political and cultural action in the places I was working. The culture wars returned to the United States (Cotter 2017), as they did in Australia, where they were repackaged as the wittily named 'statue wars' (Bongiorno 2017).³ Political and public anxiety and occurrences of racism grew in both countries, particularly over issues around immigration and asylum seekers. My

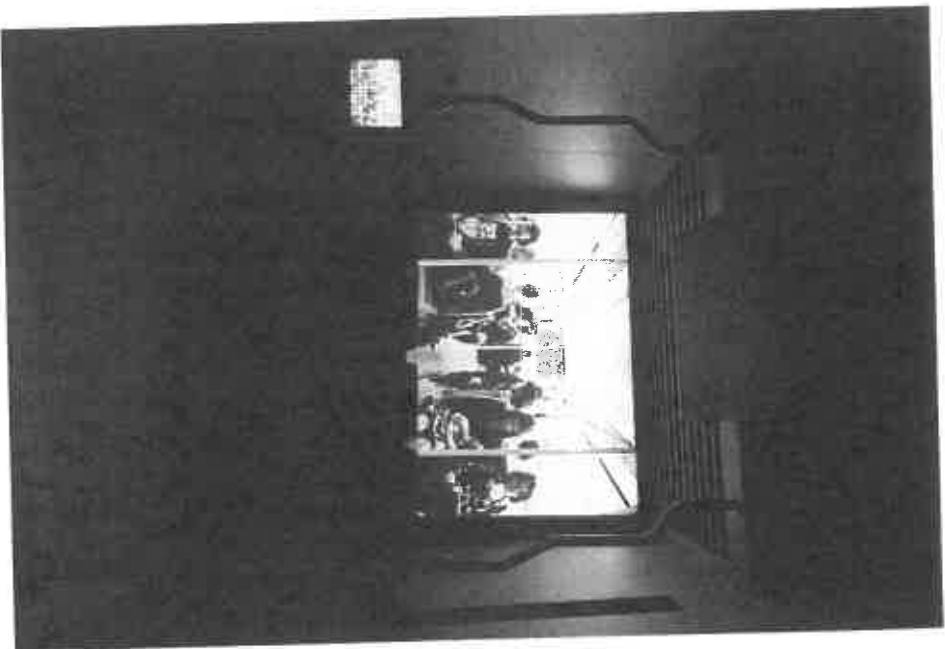


Figure 0.1 'Who's Next Door?' team installation, *Identity: yours, mine, ours* exhibition, Immigration Museum
Photograph by Benjamin Healey; Image courtesy of Museum Victoria.

project gained urgency as I reflected on the case studies I was developing and the task I had set myself, and with dwindling confidence about any prospect that the summer would yield closure, I decided to structure my books around a trilogy model. Although my trilogy may not ultimately deliver an outcome or resolution to political strife, it might, I hope, contribute to

understandings about the role of museums, culture, and critical thinking in times of political crisis.

Throughout the period of writing (which is ongoing – book three is still in progress), the trilogy model has become increasingly useful for organizing and articulating how the goals of each book link to each other and relate to the general aims I have established for the broader series. It has provided me with a framework to clearly demonstrate that each volume has a distinct purpose/case study/concern/research question/approach that relates to the other books, but that also exists independent of the others. Viewed in relation to the formula typically associated with a trilogy, the first book, *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge*, establishes 'What's wrong with the world/discipline/other contextual field' through its analysis of socio-political and disciplinary crisis and dissent. It makes a case for the research question that is being asked. The second book (this one), *Museums and Racism*, is the 'Now We Know What's Wrong With Our World, and This is What We're Going to do to Fix It' book' (Johnson 2012). It has its own 'plot' and set of problems, but its purpose is to provide the defining moment for the series. Book two of a trilogy is usually where the consequences of the overreaching concern are suddenly made clear. This means that – in fiction at least – book two is 'where the main character knows exactly what they're up against, and even how far the antagonist will go to achieve their diabolical ends. . . . The main character will often experience a profound All is Lost moment'.

In my trilogy, book two is about racism. Its concern is with the structure and the apparatus and exercise of power, specifically in relation to observations that racism is increasing in many nations, including in a Donald Trump-led USA, about which anthropologist Sindre Bangstad (2017) has made the observation that hate crimes 'tend to increase when powerful figures engage in it or provide licence and legitimacy to it' (also see Posner and Neiwert 2016). The challenge faced by book two in any three-book series is to show 'what we are up against'. This book is no different, and my challenge here is to show some elements of the experience and 'management' (Shoshan 2016) of racism and hate speech as they have been represented, examined, and in some cases counteracted by museums. I determined that focusing book two – which emphasizes the depth of a given problem – on a specific (albeit partial) institutional case study was an appropriate way to extend the aims of the series whilst utilizing the opportunities and expectations for contextualization, comparison, and extension that become available within the trilogy formula.

As I researched what trilogies do and how they work, their formula (and the ways in which people read 'across' volumes within trilogies) came to gain increasing relevance for my project. This sub-set of the Museums in Focus series was designed to be tri-partite from the get-go: a series of books

that would engage respectively with and examine the structures of writing (book one), the structures of governance (book two), and the structures of resistance (book three). While a desire to critically engage with the concept and experience of structure (be it institutional, socio-political, cultural, or disciplinary) underpins all three books, a key intention of this trilogy is to also acknowledge and explore different methodologies for exploring the functions and outcomes as well as the expressions of resistance against structure. While each book in the trilogy is bound to the others by a shared investigation of structure, and work, as such, to expand the theoretical engagement initiated by the previous volume, they also individually offer a different museological focus. Museums (and the museum-like activities and places that are included in my expansive use of the term, see Message 2018) are at the heart of my trilogy because they so frequently operate as sites that bring diverse and sometimes conflicting expressions of power and authority into contact (including in relation to internal operations, staffing, and structures, see Fischer, Anila and Moore 2017). So, while each book in the trilogy has been designed with a different goal and purpose, they have a common interest in investigating the role of museums as sites of both structure and resistance in the field of contemporary activism.

The trilogy is organized in the following way. Book one, *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* takes as its case study the process of writing about museums. It gives an overview of social and disciplinary action in the field of cultural politics pertaining to museums, and it builds a theoretical rationale for the approaches taken in the two case study-focused books that follow. The main case study at the heart of book two, *Museums and Racism*, is the Immigration Museum, a government-run public museum in the Australian state of Victoria (located in the state's capital, Melbourne) – that I investigate to consider the approach taken by one institution in dealing with a contentious contemporary social issue – racism – from within a structural perspective and political context. The third book, *Curatorial Activism, Archiving Occupy*, offers the contrasting example of an ‘anti-governmental’ case study of a working group active within the Occupy Wall Street Movement, in the United States in 2011. Its focus is a non-institutional ‘museum-like’ event (what is described in book one as a ‘context’) that aimed to create an alternately structured and non-hierarchical field of political culture. In comparison with book two’s firm focus on institutional actions within and in relation to the Immigration Museum and the National Museum of Australia, which is presented as a contextual case study, book three has an external purview. The purpose of that book is to undertake analysis of a political event (Occupy Wall Street) and the process of archiving elements of this in relation to a survey of institutional approaches, perspectives, and priorities.

A feature of the broader Museums in Focus book series is attention to crisp, politically engaged and self-aware writing and methodological excellence and innovation that challenges normative models of writing in the field of museum studies. *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* initiated this process by demanding reflection of our scholarship practices to probe the question, ‘What can writing about museums actually do?’ Another feature of politically engaged self-reflective writing is attention to the effects of what we write. We do not conduct this activity in a vacuum, and our readers (like museum audiences) are not homogenous, even within the categories that we attribute to particular cohorts. As such, the trilogy of books that I am contributing to this series has been designed with the aim of exploring what writing for different audiences can look like. This is an exploratory exercise rather than a prescriptive one, and there are many other groups that could be targeted. Another approach would, for example, be to write one single case study ‘three ways’, with each iteration oriented toward the priorities of a different stakeholder group or point of view. That would highlight the way in which different experiences and perspectives are privileged, although it might compromise the active process of negotiation and multivocality that can occur through the process of writing a single book. A further option would be to simply write a series of ‘companion books’, which are essentially books that replicate the same idea, or to look for a set of similar or familiar findings from another, usually complimentary case study. These approaches do not continually build and challenge the theoretical and pragmatic parameters of the argument that is constructed, but apply a set of pre-determined outcomes to a set of different (but not too different) examples.

There are good reasons to target books at different readers, consistent with the commitment by contemporary museum studies to be inclusive, pluralist, and multivocal in its museum-focused researches and analyses (Chapter 1). My additional reason for taking this route, however, is because of my commitment to exploring and drawing attention to the exercise of writing about museums. I wanted to test the contention that ‘[T]he first draft is for the writer. The second draft is for the editor. The last draft is for the reader’ (Ricks 2017). Whilst my first and second books are not rehearsals for a third book in which some monumental truth will be revealed (nor are they drafts!), they have been designed to demonstrate what the stages of writing can entail, and to demonstrate the point that our audience influences not just who we write for (and who we exclude or do not address) but how we go about that activity. Although Ricks’ (2017) description of revising a single book across three drafts was influenced by advice that he turned into a mantra – ‘Defer to the narrative’ . . . ‘Get out of the way and let the stories tell themselves’ – I believe it is our job as writers to illustrate how ‘the narrative’ or story will

I have, in each of the three volumes, tried to highlight some of the component parts and field of sources that make up various tools in our methodological kit so that the second and third books can build on the argument and field of knowledge explored by the previous one(s). This means that the first book's aim to represent and model the practice of writing about museums is expanded in the second book's critical examination of the role museums play as political agents within society, which in turn provides the artillery required for the third book's analysis of the way museums (and 'museum-like' sites and events) collect, represent, and potentially contribute to crisis and political change. The different foci of each book demand recognition that what 'grounded research' is will be different in different contexts and as per different research questions. For example, in some cases, research will be grounded in archives or will be primarily paper or document based. In other cases, it will focus on working with people through ethnographic methods or interview based research. Whilst a traditional length monograph would typically – and appropriately – combine these tools and approaches, I have adopted the trilogy model to separate them so as to encourage critical thinking about methods, and to argue that the process of (re)combining these tools must occur with rigorous understanding about, in dialogue with, and out of respect for, the specific requirements of the case study or idea that is being explored.

Notes

- 1 Cotter (2017).
- 2 Ignacio Farias (2011: 367) advocates for 'inquiry' over criticism, which, he says can only exist in theoretical mode, thereby running the risk of silencing heterogeneity. 'Inquiry', by comparison, 'involves a commitment to the empirical. This is the leading force. The conceptual languages we mobilize are certainly crucial for they define what counts as empirical, and should therefore be subordinated to actual inquiries. . . . In this context, "follow the actors" does not simply mean "stick to your object of study", but rather "follow their inquiries"'.³
- 3 In Australia, the period and events of the late 1990s/early 2000s are referred to interchangeably as the 'history wars' and the 'culture wars'. I use whichever term is most relevant to the particular situation See Chapters 2 and 3, and Message (2006).