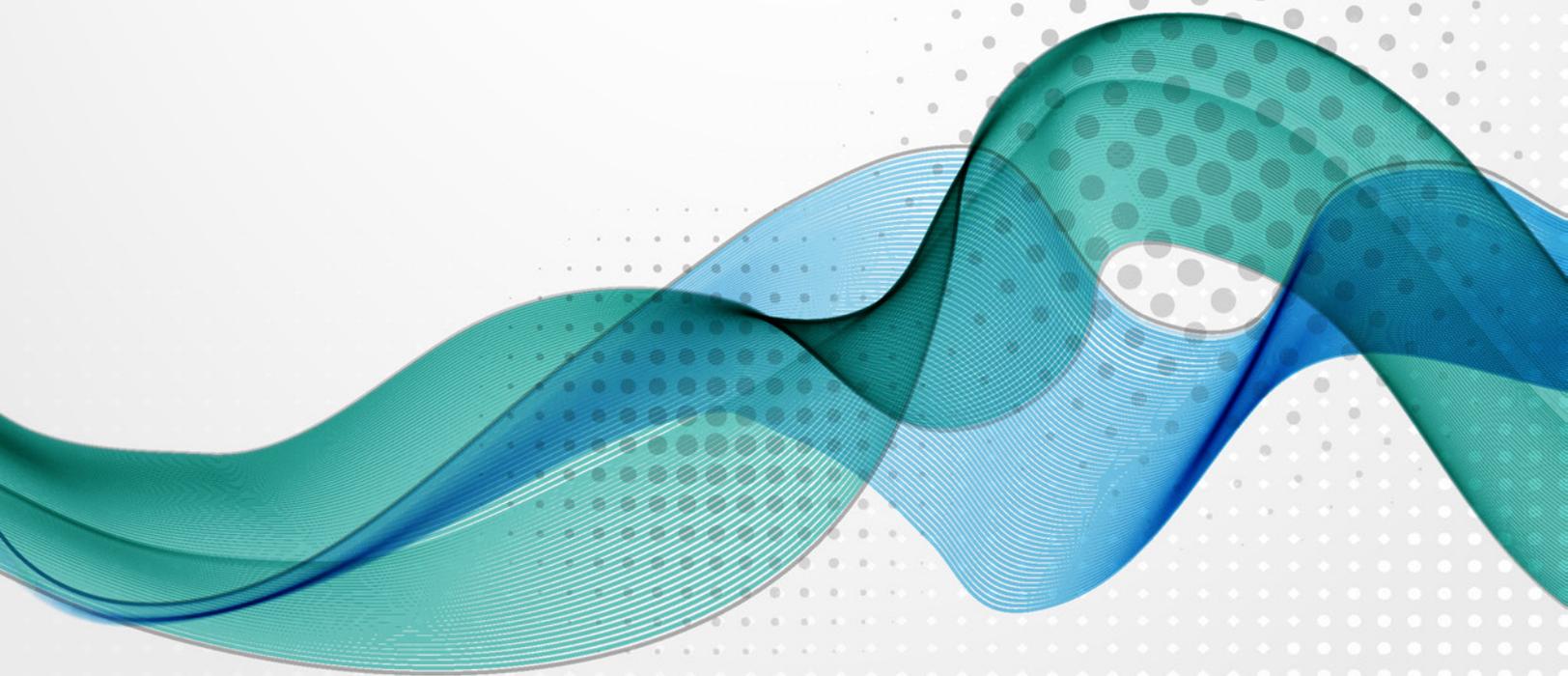
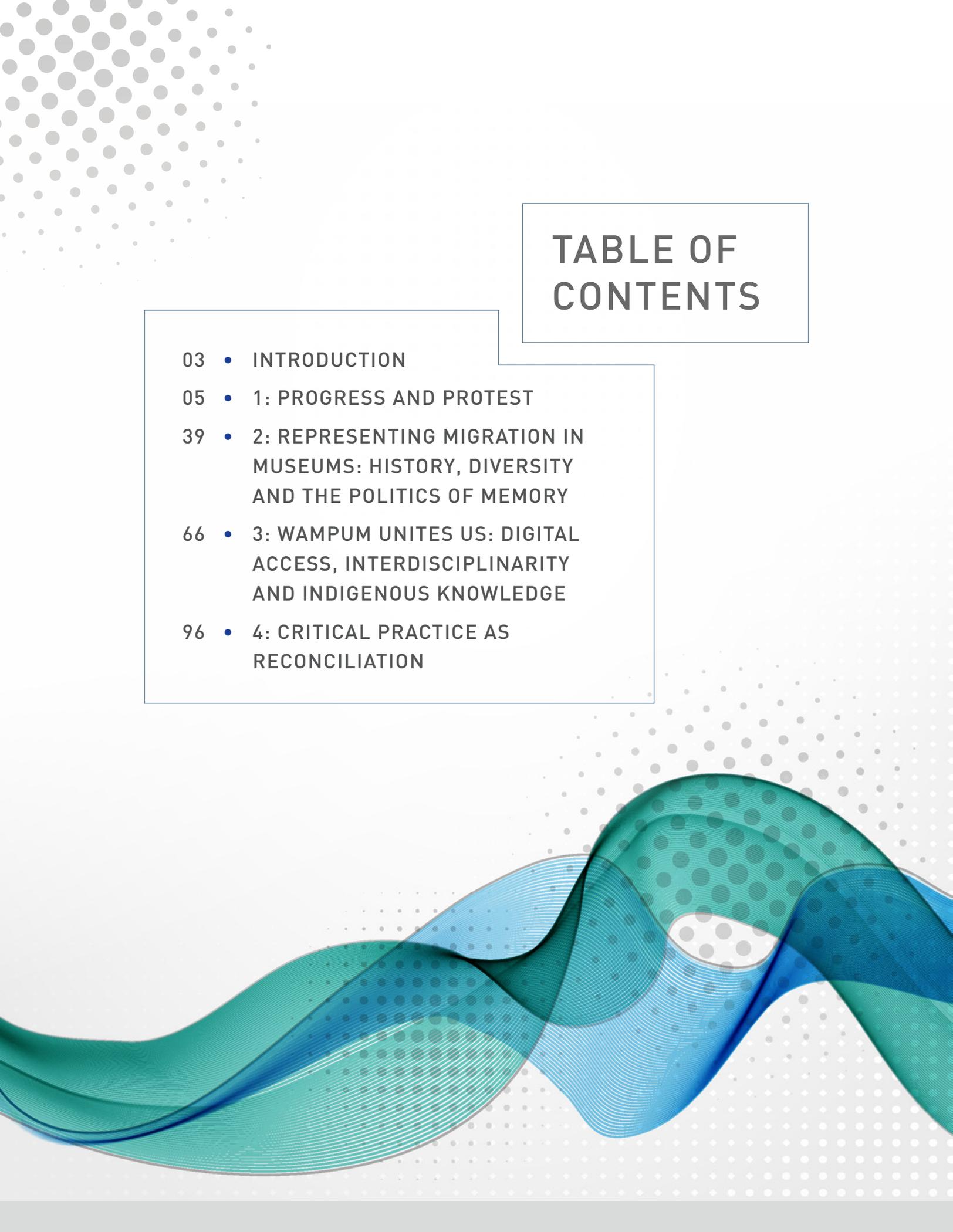


A **Routledge** FreeBook

# MUSEUM MEANINGS

A SELECTION OF CHAPTERS  
FROM THE SERIES





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 03 • INTRODUCTION
- 05 • 1: PROGRESS AND PROTEST
- 39 • 2: REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS: HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY
- 66 • 3: WAMPUM UNITES US: DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE
- 96 • 4: CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

# INTRODUCTION



## Richard Sandell

is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK, where he actively works closely with museums and galleries in the UK and internationally to develop research and teaching initiatives.



## Christina Kreps

is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of Museum and Heritage Studies and Museum of Anthropology at the University of Denver, Denver, Colorado USA.

Series Editors: Richard Sandell (University of Leicester, UK) and Christina Kreps (University of Denver, USA)

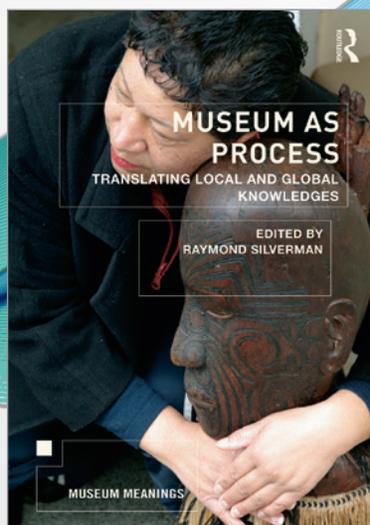
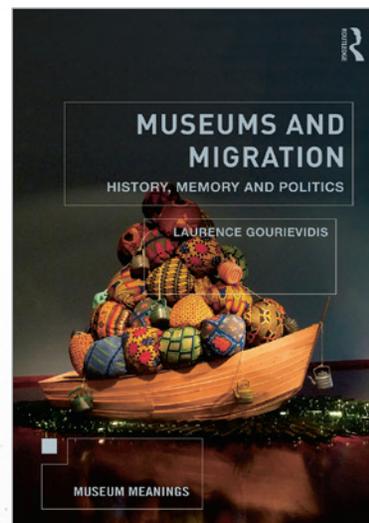
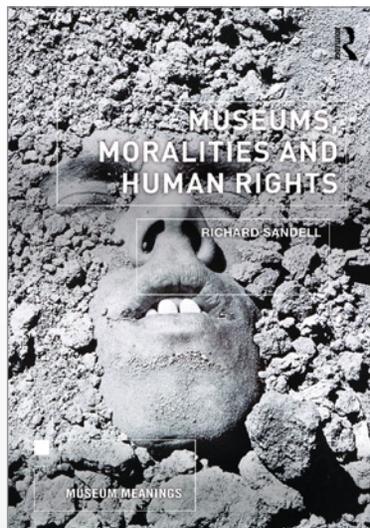
The role of museums in the twenty-first century – and their relationship with diverse audiences and with society more broadly – continues to evolve in often surprising ways. A dynamic and ongoing process of renewal and transformation brings with it changes in priority and practice, as well as new expectations, imperatives and tensions that continue to attract attention from both practitioners and researchers working in, and drawing upon, wide-ranging disciplines.

*Museum Meanings* presents provocative new thinking, grounded in rigorous research, which explores diverse aspects of the shifting social, cultural and political significance of museums and their agency beyond, as well as within, the cultural field. Theoretical perspectives are drawn from fields including anthropology, cultural studies, learning and communication, media studies, architecture and design and material culture studies amongst others. Museums are understood very broadly – to include art galleries, historic sites and other cultural heritage institutions – as are their relationships with wide-ranging constituencies.

As the selection of chapters included here amply illustrates, the focus on the relationship of the museum to its diverse publics opens up new ways of understanding the museum in society, grounded in the analysis of bodies and sites, identities and communities, moralities and politics.

**Note to readers:** As you read through this FreeBook, you will notice that some excerpts reference other chapters in the book – please note that these are references to the original text and not the FreeBook. Footnotes and other references are not included. For a fully referenced version of each text, please see the published title.

# ESSENTIAL READING FROM THE MUSEUM MEANINGS SERIES



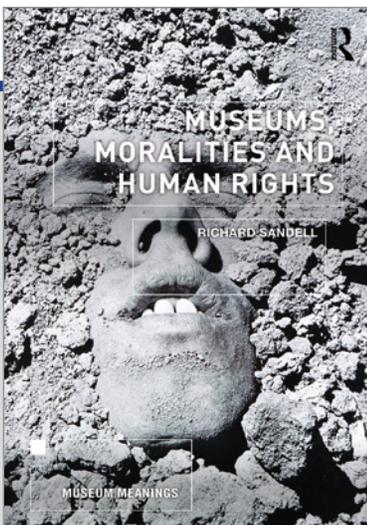
**SAVE 20% WITH DISCOUNT CODE MM20**

[www.routledge.com/museummeanings](http://www.routledge.com/museummeanings)

CHAPTER

# 1

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST



This chapter is excerpted from  
*Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*  
By Richard Sandell

©2017 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*



### Richard Sandell

is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK, where he actively works closely with museums and galleries in the UK and internationally to develop research and teaching initiatives. His research and practice over the past twenty years has explored the museum's capacity to address social inequalities, focusing in particular on issues around disability, sexuality and gender. He is currently collaborating with the National Trust on their national public programme – Prejudice and Pride – which explores the Trust's numerous connection to LGBTQ heritage.

### THE IPAD PROTESTORS TAKE A STAND

On Saturday 4 December 2010, Michael Blasenstein and Michael Iacavone entered the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, to protest the removal, a few days earlier, of a film by artist David Wojnarowicz – entitled *A Fire in My Belly* – from the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. The 'iPad protestors', as the media later referred to them, positioned themselves within the exhibition galleries, close to the entrance. Blasenstein played the four-minute video – removed by the Smithsonian's Secretary, Wayne Clough, in response to a sustained campaign mounted by opponents including the Catholic League and Republican House Speaker, John Boehner – on an iPad, hung around his neck. Intrigued and sometimes bemused gallery visitors were handed flyers explaining the motivation behind this attempt to reinstate the censored artwork (Figures 1.1–1.3). Iacavone stood nearby, filming events as they unfolded amidst the visible and growing unease of the gallery's security guards, until police officers arrived to remove the protestors<sup>1</sup> (Capps 2010).

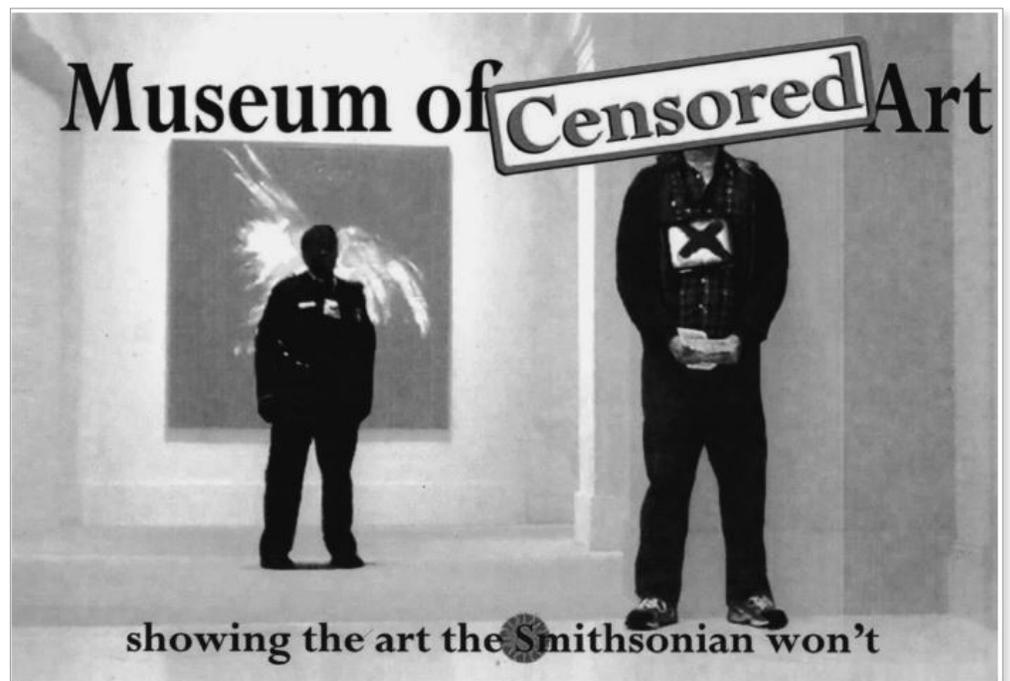


FIGURE 1.1 • Postcard for the Museum of Censored Art. Source: Image courtesy of Michael Dax Iacavone

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

As Iacavone (2016) recalls:

Mike Blasenstein was smart enough to come up with the idea of putting the video back where it belonged, and he asked for my help. Living in D.C., you become numb to protests, they happen all the time. I didn't think that marching in the street and yelling at a building was going to accomplish anything. Putting the video back in the museum is exactly what needed to happen and, if the Smithsonian wouldn't, then we would. We figured that this would get media attention, and that would lead to public awareness and that was what we wanted.

*Hide/Seek*, featuring more than one hundred artworks and spanning a century of portraiture, was the first large-scale exhibition in the Smithsonian's history to explicitly explore gay and lesbian themes (Sullivan 2010). The exhibition had attracted critical acclaim and proved popular with visitors to the gallery since its opening on 30 October. However, when *Hide/Seek* attracted the attention of the Catholic League,<sup>2</sup> which focused its objections on an eleven-second scene in Wojnarowicz's film of ants crawling on a crucifix, describing it as 'anti-Christian' (Catholic League 2010),<sup>3</sup> reporting by conservative media soon prompted open and wide-reaching criticism of the gallery as well as questions from members of Congress over the gallery's funding:

'Absolutely we should look at their funds', Georgia Rep. Jack Kingston, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, told Fox News. 'If they've got money to squander like this – of a crucifix being eaten by ants, of Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, men in chains, naked brothers kissing – then I think we should look at their budget.' (Fox News 2010)

Pressure quickly mounted for the Smithsonian to respond. 'Secretary G. Wayne Clough', *The Washington Post* later reported, 'immediately capitulated, overruled his own curators and forced the video's removal' from the exhibition, a decision later described as 'tactically, strategically and historically a disaster for the institution' (Kennicott 2010). Clough's decision, in turn, provoked anger from members of the public, the art world and LGBT activists, prompting a series of high-profile protests. Less than twenty-four hours after the video was removed, artist Adrian Parsons picketed the steps of the gallery with a handmade placard on which he had written 'National Censor Gallery'. Soon afterwards, the nearby independent, artist-run Transformer Gallery showed *A Fire in My Belly* in their storefront window, followed by

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

a silent protest march to the National Portrait Gallery (Figure 1.4) where Parsons projected the video on its façade (Trescott 2010).

## I am standing here with this iPad around my neck...

...because politicians and pressure groups **don't want you to see** this work of art

...because this work's detractors **have every right** to interpret it any way they want

...because **so do you**

...because I'm tired of **people who know better** caving in to the hysterics of the misinformed

...because the time our politicians waste vilifying a dead man is time they should be seizing to **fix the problems of the living**

...because I never believed that the same forces that marginalized this artist **twenty years ago** would try to silence him today

...because I was **wrong**

...because by marginalizing the work of the marginalized from an exhibition about marginalization, **the censors themselves** have provided the **ultimate validation** of the artist's work

...because too many gay people—myself included—too often forget that any acceptance we enjoy today was paid for in **blood, bruises, and unimaginable suffering** by those who came before us

...because suffering is **human**

...because we are **human**

...because there are those who will **stop at nothing** to suppress that truth

...because I **refuse** to let them

...because **silence still equals death.**

FIGURE 1.2  
Flyer (front) handed to visitors to the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, by the 'iPad protestors'  
Source: image courtesy of Mike Blasenstein.

## A Fire In My Belly, 1987 (excerpt). David Wojnarowicz. Music by Diamanda Galás.

### The Images

David Wojnarowicz created this video in 1987 as a tribute to his colleague and lover, Peter Hujar, who died of AIDS that same year. The video contains some grisly images: Mummified bodies, bloody icons, lips being sewn shut, and 11 seconds of ants crawling on a crucifix. These images represent Wojnarowicz's feelings of isolation and marginalization as an openly gay man living with AIDS in the 80s — an era in which carriers of the virus were demonized. They are a *memento mori*, or a reminder of our mortality.

Adapted from <http://www.tbdc.com/blogs/tbdc-arts/2010/12/national-portrait-gallery-censorship-controversy-who-was-david-wojnarowicz-5383.html>

### The Music

The music heard on the video is an excerpt from *The Plague Mass* by Diamanda Galás, which she composed in response to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. The words for the piece heard here, "This is the Law of the Plague," are taken from chapter 15 of the biblical book of Leviticus:

When any man hath an issue out of his flesh,  
Because of his issue he is unclean  
Every bed whereon he lieth is unclean  
And everything whereon he sitteth, unclean.  
And whosoever toucheth his bed shall be unclean,  
And he that sitteth whereon he sat shall be unclean.  
And he that toucheth the flesh of the unclean becomes unclean.  
And he that be spat on by him unclean becomes unclean.  
And whosoever toucheth anything under him shall be unclean.  
And he that beareth any of those things shall be unclean.  
And what saddle soever he rideth upon is unclean  
And the vessel of earth that he touches, unclean.  
And if any man's seed of copulation go out from him, he is unclean.  
Every garment, every skin whereon is the seed, unclean.  
And the woman with whom this man shall lie with will be unclean.  
And whosoever toucheth her will be unclean.  
This is the law of the plague,  
To teach when it is clean and when unclean.  
And the priest shall look upon the plague.  
For a rising and for a scab and for a bright spot.  
And the priest shall shut up he that hath the plague.  
He shall carry them forth to a place unclean.  
He shall separate them in their uncleanness.  
This is the law of the plague:  
To teach when it is clean and when it is unclean.

Adapted from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diamanda\\_Galás](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diamanda_Galás)

FIGURE 1.3  
Flyer (reverse) handed to visitors to the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, by the 'iPad protestors'  
Source: image courtesy of Mike Blasenstein.

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

Several weeks later, the iPad protestors returned having raised \$6,000, this time with permits from the city's authorities granting them permission to park a trailer outside the National Portrait Gallery that would house the *Museum of Censored Art* which, as the banner strapped to the side of the trailer prominently proclaimed, would be 'showing the art the Smithsonian won't' (Capps 2011). The temporary museum remained in place until the closure of *Hide/Seek* in the adjacent gallery and featured, once again, the removed Wojnarowicz video accompanied by information detailing the story of the censorship, a time line and discussion of the roles played by the Smithsonian Institution and various pressure groups. The opening panel that greeted visitors inside declared the temporary museum's purpose and the position of those who had created it:

What is the Museum of Censored Art?

This museum exists to:

Restore the art censored by the Smithsonian to the exhibit from which it was removed

Keep art censored by the Smithsonian visible and accessible to the public

Hold the Smithsonian accountable for its actions. [. . .]



FIGURE 1.4 • Protestors walk across town and gather outside the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC Source: photograph by The Washington Post. Getty Images.

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*



FIGURE 1.5 • Visitors inside the Museum of Censored Art Source: image courtesy of Mike Blasenstein.

We feel that Clough made a wrong and shameful decision to marginalize the work of an already marginalized gay artist from an exhibition whose very theme is marginalization. We are showing the video here so visitors to 'Hide/Seek' will still be able to see the exhibit in it's entirety. We also encourage you to see the rest of the Hide/Seek exhibit in the National Portrait Gallery right outside this museum.

The tiny but prominently positioned Museum of Censored Art attracted many visitors (Figure 1.5) who had heard about the controversy in the media. On 6 February 2011, the Museum's Twitter feed stated:

Smithsonian info desk guy came in to find out where the 'trailer art' is, b/c museum visitors keep asking where to find us!

And, on the day the exhibition closed, further announced:

Feb 14 was our last day – we were thrilled to have welcomed 6,476 visitors over 4 weeks. Thanks for the ride everyone and stay tuned!

News reporting was extensive throughout the run of *Hide/Seek* (and the Museum of Censored Art) as regional, national and subsequently international news journalists

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

followed the numerous twists and turns in the tale and continued long after it closed in Washington in February 2011. The story received renewed impetus when *Hide/Seek* later opened at the Progress and protest Brooklyn Museum in November 2011 (with the Wojnarowicz video work reinstated)<sup>4</sup> and again when Clough's departure from the Smithsonian in 2014 was announced (Scott 2013).

Reflecting on the long-standing silence within US museums and galleries on the topic of same-sex love and desire and the many obstacles he faced in developing *Hide/Seek*,<sup>5</sup> the exhibition's co-curator, Jonathan David Katz, lamented the Smithsonian's censorship in an interview in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, shortly after the video was removed. 'When', Katz asked, 'will the decent majority of Americans stand against a fringe that sees censorship as a replacement for debate?' (Logan 2010).

Ironically, while those who called for and sanctioned the removal of Wojnarowicz's film may have hoped to contain the controversy, the events surrounding *Hide/Seek* – fuelled by the extensive media coverage – stimulated and animated public debate. News websites reporting on the events were host to extensive, often heated, discussions among audiences. The comments posted after some news articles ran into several thousand in number and page after page of commentary as readers, viewers and listeners argued (with varying degrees of passion and eloquence) about the exhibition's perceived merits and failings, the dangers of (and need for) censorship and were prompted to share their own thoughts on such topics as gay and lesbian equality and the rights of religious groups to freedom of speech.

The scale and tenor of the discussions between participants in these online forums, it might be argued, is suggestive of the strength of public feeling surrounding the issues posed by the *Hide/Seek* censorship. It might also be argued that these extensive debates are evidence of the museum's capacity to reach, engage with and stimulate responses among much larger and more diffuse audiences than those who visited the exhibition in person. This potential for the museum to potentially influence audiences beyond those who visit – to ignite debate and inform public opinion – is an important issue and one to which I will return.

## MUSEUMS, MORALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

My argument throughout this book is that museums, heritage sites and galleries are entangled with human rights in ways that are often unacknowledged and poorly understood. Through their displays and exhibitions, their interpretation, promotional

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

activities, educational programmes, events, tours and other forms direct engagement with visitors, they construct, publicly present and disseminate narratives that have implications for the ways in which human rights are experienced, continually sought and fought for, realised and refused. These narratives are encountered not only by visitors but by diverse constituencies beyond the institution's walls, circulated through the media, informing public opinion and stimulating debate. By bringing together the perspectives and experiences not only of those who work in, govern, fund and visit museums but also those of rights activists and campaigners, I show how these museum narratives have influence on human rights processes and impact the lives of those engaged in rights struggles. By tracing the social and political consequences that stem from decisions made in every day museum work, I argue that museums, galleries and heritage sites of all kinds have opportunities and obligations to support the advancement of human rights for all.

Recent decades have seen significant advances in LGBT rights in many parts of the world and museums have become increasingly open to including narratives of gender diversity and same-sex love within their exhibitions and interpretation. At the same time, the issue has very often inspired fierce opposition, frequently, though not exclusively, from groups who base their resistance to greater rights for LGBT people on the basis of their religious beliefs. As a result museums increasingly face situations in which competing moral visions of the good society must be negotiated. Where human rights claims revolve around these fundamentally clashing moral positions, it is no longer appropriate, I conclude, for museums to operate as impartial observers or spaces for dialogue in which alternative viewpoints are respected, aired and debated. Rather they must, as far as is practically possible, be prepared to take sides and speak out unequivocally against attempts to justify unequal treatment of people on the basis of gender or sexual differences.

In the remainder of this opening chapter, I explain the particular ways in which I am using key concepts – activism, human rights, moralities and ethics – that underpin my overarching aims, arguments and approach as well as present a rationale for the methods and cases I have used in my investigations.

## ACTIVISM AND THE MUSEUM

I chose to open with *Hide/Seek* since it vividly illustrates many of the key concerns of this book. While the exhibition – and the controversy surrounding it – represents an especially high-profile and well-known case, the challenges experienced by the staff

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery will nevertheless resonate with many practitioners in museums across the world who have, over many years, been involved in projects (addressing diverse themes and topics) that have proved challenging to either locally defined normative moral values or to powerful interests with competing agendas. Although more than twenty years ago, I vividly recall the anxieties my colleagues and I at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery experienced surrounding the lead up to the opening of an exhibition of work by contemporary artists exploring the impact of HIV when local news journalists contacted conservative church leaders and politicians in a purposeful, though ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to prevent the exhibition from opening to the public.

As museums have increasingly sought to take on contemporary, social justice-related issues – and to (explicitly and implicitly) take up particular moral standpoints in place of seemingly neutral and objective commentary (Janes 2016) – so these kinds of experiences, in which staff find themselves at the heart of moral dilemmas and negotiations marked by controversy, contestation and sensitivity, have become more commonplace though, for those caught up in them, no less difficult to deal with (Bruce and Hollows 2007; Hollows 2013).

This book then, investigates how museums – through the decisions that are made regarding the narratives they construct and publicly present – play a part in shaping the moral and political climate within which human rights claims and entitlements are continually negotiated, secured and denied. Museums, I argue, have moral agency as sites within which the ethical norms that frame human rights negotiations are articulated, continually recast and disseminated – a capacity to contribute to broader processes of social and political change that is relatively underexplored and poorly understood in both museum studies and the field of human rights.

Through an empirical focus on gender variance and sexual diversity – specifically the ways in which museums have presented (as well as overlooked, marginalised, erased and misrepresented) the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people – the book has two overarching and interlinked aims.

1. First, it seeks to shed light upon the complex negotiations through which narratives pertaining to gender variance and same-sex love and desire have come to be constructed and presented in museums; and
2. Second, it attempts to trace the social, moral and political consequences of these portrayals for both those engaged in attempts to secure LGBTI rights and for society at large.

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

While a number of the cases explored in this book have generated intense media and public debate, the starting point for my inquiry is not controversy per se (although, as we shall see, news reporting and public engagement with media reports are important for thinking through the ways in which museums might be understood to exercise and extend their social and moral agency). Rather, I am interested in examining how museums – through the decisions that are made regarding the narratives that are constructed and publicly presented – can reinforce, challenge or potentially reconfigure prevailing normative ideas about right and wrong, good and bad, fairness and injustice.

Such decisions are frequently made in museums of all kinds, whether they concern which social groups are included and highlighted in the museum's collections and displays and which are (purposefully or unwittingly) omitted or marginalised; how groups engaged in attempts to secure equal rights are portrayed; or how competing claims between groups are acknowledged and mediated. Although the consequences that flow from these decisions are diffuse and challenging to capture and measure, museums – I aim to show – are nevertheless caught up with and importantly *contribute* to a complex mix of human rights talk and processes. These contributions constitute a form of social and moral agency through which museums play a part in shaping societal values, normative ideas about fairness and the political conditions in which marginalised and oppressed groups' attempts to secure equal rights can be negotiated, enacted, granted and denied.

I am interested then in exploring the idea of the museum as a site for activism, a staging ground for efforts by a range of different groups with wide-ranging (sometimes conflicting) agendas and interests, to bring about social and political change or to advance and seek to elicit broader support for a particular standpoint. Understood in this way, activism – in the case of the *Hide/Seek* exhibition – might be used to describe not only the actions of the iPad protestors (whose creative interventions sought to both highlight censorship and to assert the rights of LGBT people to recognition, respect and fair and equal representation in the public realm) but also the Catholic League (whose actions might be understood – depending on your personal and political standpoint – either as an attempt to protect the rights of Catholics or a determined strategy to undermine gay rights). Importantly, I also include in this definition of activism, the actions of the staff of the National Portrait Gallery. The efforts behind the decision to mount the Smithsonian's first major exhibition that highlighted and celebrated same-sex love and desire can also be understood as activist – part of a broader trend within museum thinking and practice

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

to purposefully deploy the resources of the museum to effect positive social change (Sandell and Dodd 2010; Orange and Carter 2012; Janes 2016).

As we shall see in the examples that are threaded throughout this book, it is not uncommon for all parties involved in controversies, whichever side of the argument they support, to view themselves as occupying the moral high ground – as fighting to maintain or advance that which is inherently and unquestioningly right and for the collective good. One of the challenges for museum staff engaging with social justice and human rights issues concerns the process of arbitration in situations where rights claims are competing and where different constituencies hold conflicting visions of the good society.

For many museum professionals and commentators, the term 'activism' has unwelcome associations with bias, campaigning, advocacy and forms of direct action that are perceived to be entirely at odds with the museum's position as an institution trusted for its balanced and non-partisan presentations. However, I have found the concept helpful for understanding and analysing the processes at play in contemporary museum practice and, particularly, for shedding light on the multiple influences that inform the narratives shaped and publicly presented by museums. The concept of activism highlights the inherently political character of the processes through which moral standpoints – on a variety of issues – become embodied in museums. It directs us to examine not only the finished product – the exhibitions, displays and galleries that ultimately open to the public – but also the complex of 'behind the scenes' negotiations inevitably bound up in the messy process of exhibition-making (Macdonald 2002; MacLeod et al. 2012).

Finally, understanding certain events and episodes as forms of activism encourages us to look behind the anonymity of the authoritative institution to see the individuals that participate in those processes as purposive agents. It enables us to begin to understand how these individuals' personal values, beliefs and agendas intersect with broader structural and social forces in shaping the exhibitions – and the moral standpoints those exhibitions embody – that visitors (and larger secondary audiences reached via the media) subsequently encounter, engage with and respond to

## THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND MORAL AGENCY OF MUSEUMS

Over the past few decades, a growing number of museum and heritage organisations and projects throughout the world have developed exhibitions and experiences that individually and collectively 'make a resounding appeal for the protection of human

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

rights' (Duffy 2001: 10). In varied ways, these sites have deployed a discourse around human rights, equality and social justice to frame their approach to, and interpretation of, wide-ranging contemporary and historic events, including the Holocaust, the transatlantic slave trade, South African apartheid, periods of political oppression in Argentina, Taiwan, Chile and other topics inspired by the experiences of individuals and groups active in the new social movements that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. As Jennifer Carter observes, a new form of museum has taken shape comprised of institutions that, 'make human rights concepts, stories and practices the core of their institutional mission, curatorial praxis and exhibition and programming initiatives' (2015: 208). These new museums have appeared in many different parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> The global interest in the potential for museums to explore human rights themes (and to potentially lend support to human rights causes) is reflected in the rapid growth in membership of networks such as the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Federation of International Human Rights Museums.<sup>7</sup>

Against the backdrop of these newly emerging museums, it is also possible to discern increasing interest among existing diverse museums of art, science and history in projects or practices that reflect a more active engagement with rights-related issues – a trend that suggests a growing openness, at least in some organisations, to developing narratives that take account of contemporary rights struggles (Sandell 2007; 2012; Message 2012, 2014). Exhibitions and displays, purposefully designed to engage audiences in debates around rights-related issues pertaining to women, indigenous and minority ethnic communities but also to faith groups, disabled people, sexual minorities and, more recently transgender communities, have appeared in wide-ranging museums.

The potential of museums to operate as sites for presenting human rights and social justice-related themes and material, and engaging audiences in debates related to these, has been subject to considerable professional and academic attention, including conferences that have provided opportunities for reflecting on the challenges inherent in such work and a growing body of empirical research that has analysed the ways in which audiences respond to such initiatives (Cameron 2007; Dodd *et al.* 2010).

While numerous accounts have revealed the inherently political character of museums (Karp and Levine 1995; Macdonald 1988; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Luke 2002) and the capacity for museums to inform visitors' thinking and attitudes related

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

to contemporary social issues (Sandell 2007; Dodd et al. 2010), relatively less attention has been given to exploring the relationship between museums and contemporary social movements and, more particularly, the potential for museums to not only reflect but also *to act upon* – to influence – the moral, political and social climate within which human rights struggles unfold.

More recently, research attention has begun to shift away from an internally-focused concern with museum practice (the processes and inherent perils of contemporary collecting, exhibition-making and visitor engagement around social justice themes) towards a greater concern for understanding the political, ethical and moral work of the museum within a broader social and political landscape (Barrett 2011; Carter and Orange 2012; Gouriévidis 2014; Message 2014). Sandell and Dodd (2010), for example, through their analysis of the ways in which museums have sought to respond to shifting conceptions of disability arising from a global disability rights movement, highlighted the emergence of an ‘activist practice’ in museums – an increasing awareness among practitioners that museum activities have social effects and political consequences coupled with a growing concern to harness the museum’s agency to lend support for a range of human rights-based causes. Dodd *et al.*’s empirical study of audience responses to a range of museum projects intended to influence attitudes towards disability found that, while visitors engaged with the ideas they encountered in diverse ways, it was nevertheless possible to discern patterns in how visitors were prompted to speak about physical and mental differences, informed by the rights-based narratives they found in the museum. Studies such as this support the notion that museums can not only be sites that host and stimulate conversations among and between visitors pertaining to human rights themes, but they can also shape and inform those discussions (Sandell 2007).

A small number of studies have attempted to draw links between museums and the potential for their practices to impact broader rights-related activities by marginalised groups. For example, anthropologist Howard Morphy’s (2006) analysis of exhibitions at the National Museum of Australia reveals the ways in they are tied up with claims by Aboriginal groups for basic rights including access to the land and sea. Similarly, Marzia Varutti’s (2012) account of Taiwanese museum practices considers their relationship to broader attempts by indigenous groups to secure governmental recognition. Kylie Message’s ground-breaking study of the National Museum of American History (2014) is a further example of this recent interest in exploring the entanglements between museums and political life beyond the institution. Her analysis reveals the story of curatorial activism within the Museum’s

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

Division of Political and Reform History that evolved in response to the African American and American Indian civil rights and social reform movements that took place on the Mall in Washington, DC in the 1960s and 70s. Her historical analysis of change within the Smithsonian (and of shifts in museum thinking and practice more broadly) offers new insights and suggests new lines of inquiry into the contemporary political significance of museum and heritage institutions. Indeed, Message argues that while museum studies has been increasingly preoccupied with the relationship between culture on the one hand and politics on the other, the field has never theless struggled to 'identify and then conduct research at the actual interface between politics and museums' (ibid.: 23). In other words, while there is widespread agreement that museums are inherently political, there is rather less understanding and consensus around their political agency and significance – the ways in which museum activities *actually impact social and political life*.

This book seeks to contribute to this emerging area of investigation through interdisciplinary analyses of a series of empirically grounded cases. I am concerned with both the ways in which ideas about human rights are negotiated and realised in museum exhibitions and other forms of public communication and, crucially, in tracing and seeking to understand the effects and consequences of these negotiations *beyond the institution*. I aim to understand how activists, visitors and audiences more broadly perceive and engage with museums and to trace the moral, social and political implications that flow from decisions made in museums that pertain to ideas about right and wrong, fairness, equality and justice.

## THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Sometimes museum staff make these decisions with an awareness of their larger significance and import, with an appreciation of their potential to confront widely held and deeply entrenched values and beliefs. The staff of human rights museums, sites of conscience and other heritage sites linked to contested histories, for example, must generally consider their actions with full awareness that the institutional context within which they operate brings with it a degree of scrutiny by governments, interest groups and the media (Busby *et al.* 2015). For this reason, they have also attracted increasing attention from researchers interested in exploring the museum's engagement with human rights themes and issues. However, the danger with focusing on the specialist and unusual is that it directs attention away from the everyday and ubiquitous.

Human rights museums, heritage sites of conscience, and museums that tell the stories of marginalised and oppressed groups are undoubtedly experimenting with

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

some of the most exciting approaches to audience engagement in the museum world internationally. However, I have chosen to focus my research on the human rights implications bound up with the daily practices of art, history and science museums that do not have a specific human rights mandate – institutions ranging in size, presenting diverse collections and stories and located in a variety of political and cultural settings. Through the particular blend of case studies and examples I explore throughout the book, I aim to show how it is not only those institutions that are directly engaged in addressing histories with clear social justice and equality-related implications whose actions will impact upon groups and individuals engaged in contemporary struggles for equality. Rather, as we shall see, museums of all kinds are engaged in ‘human rights work’ irrespective of intention and institutional mandate.

## UNDERSTANDING AND INVESTIGATING HUMAN RIGHTS WORK IN THE MUSEUM

To assist with the considerable challenge of tracing and analysing the social and political effects and consequences of museum actions, my approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on and synthesising theory from social anthropology; philosophy; cultural, media, social movement and museum studies. I bring together concepts and methods from these fields that, I propose, hold rich potential to illuminate and critique the moral and ethical work of museums. In conducting the research for this book, I have been particularly inspired and heavily influenced by social anthropological studies that have generated grounded, richly detailed investigations of the complex ways in which global and local conditions combine to shape how political struggles are framed and human rights are claimed, including the relationship of these processes to localised moral norms (Wilson 1997a; Wilson 1997b; Cowan, Dembour and Wilson 2001; Wilson and Mitchell 2003). Borrowing and adapting the methods used in these social anthropological studies of human rights I attempt – through a variety of case studies and contextual examples – to unravel and make sense of the myriad forces and factors that shape the museum, to better understand the institution’s significance in social and political life.

Museums of all kinds, I argue, are part of the political and moral apparatus through which human rights claims and entitlements are continually sought and fought for, realised and refused. Their significance, however, as places within which the moral and ethical norms that frame such negotiations are forged, continually recast and disseminated, has been largely overlooked in the broader human rights literature.

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE EVERYDAY

Recent decades have seen the development of a vast literature on human rights emerging from a variety of disciplines from philosophy to education, political science to law. This body of work engages with human rights through a variety of lenses generating, for example, historical accounts of the emergence of conflicting visions of rights across time and space, analyses of how such visions have come to be translated into national and supra-national legislation and policy, and sociological perspectives on the new social movements of the last sixty years. Across this extensive interdisciplinary field, rights have often been treated as abstractions; decontextualized from the settings in which they are negotiated, applied and experienced. The macro-theoretical and legalistic accounts that have predominated in the field have tended to focus attention on the instruments (conventions, treaties, laws and policies) and institutional apparatus (for example, nation states and supra-national agencies), through which rights are formally conferred. Such approaches, as Wilson (1997a: 15) has argued, have a propensity to obscure 'the untidiness of everyday life', neglecting to grasp the complex ways in which rights are negotiated and realised 'on the ground' and overlooking the lived experiences of individuals and groups whose rights are denied and violated.

A focus on the ways in which rights are formally articulated and conferred (for example, in legislation or policy) neglects the everyday experience of social groups for whom such formal recognition constitutes only a part of the struggle for equal rights. For example, while rights regimes at a supra-national level and in many nation states have evolved to formally recognise the entitlements of women, indigenous groups and minority ethnic and religious groups, such formal recognition does not, of course, preclude rights violations, the denial of opportunities for individuals to exercise and enjoy the full range of rights, and the myriad manifestations of discrimination that mark the lived experience of members of these groups on a daily basis (Wilson and Mitchell 2003).

In response, over the last two decades some social anthropologists have set out to generate new insights through studies that attempt not only to capture the complexity of rights talk and processes in specific settings but also to recover real-life experiences of everyday struggles. These 'ethnographies of rights' have sought to generate rich and nuanced accounts of the ways in which rights are negotiated, drawn from multiple sources and feature a plurality of voices and perspectives. As Wilson states, these accounts '[show] humans replete with feelings, engaged in their brute material existence and enmeshed in the complexities of their

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

social world...’ (1997a: 15) and, in doing so, they powerfully reveal how rights are not simply abstractions, codified in a variety of legal instruments, but rather can be understood as ‘grounded, transformative and inextricably bound to purposive agents’ (Wilson 1997b: 155).

In-depth studies of rights processes within specific settings are valuable, as we shall see, for their capacity to reveal the ways in which human rights are *experienced in everyday life* and how they are produced out of a process of ongoing negotiation between local agendas and interests on the one hand and, on the other, a global rights discourse that transcends local and national boundaries (Cowan *et al.* 2001). Grounded, in-depth investigations, as social anthropologist Richard A. Wilson (1997b), has argued, are both helpful and necessary for capturing the richness and complexity of rights talk and processes that legalistic accounts have tended to neglect (1997: 170).

The field of anthropology has also proved useful to my analysis in other ways. The contradictions and tensions within human rights as a set of ideas – that have provoked and sustained fierce debates among anthropologists for more than half a century (including, for example, the tensions between universalism and cultural relativism, and between individual and collective rights) – have proved to be valuable tools with which to explore how museums have operated, how they have been viewed by different groups engaged in rights work and, importantly, how they might arbitrate in situations involving competing rights. I should make clear at this stage that despite their prominence within the arguments I present in this book, I am not wedded to the notion that human rights are the only way of achieving fairness. Discussions with students and practitioners from many different parts of the world have served as frequent reminders of the cultural specificity, the limitations and flaws of the human rights project. As Marie-Benedicte Dembour (2001: 70) points out:

We must accept that there are a number of worthwhile visions of how to achieve human dignity. The problem is that the human rights discourse tends to think of itself as the only one.

However, despite the limitations of the human rights project and mindful of the presence, in every culture, of alternative ways of conceiving of justice,<sup>9</sup> I have found myself repeatedly drawn back to the concepts, frameworks and language of rights as a productive means of making sense of the moral imperatives caught up in museum work.

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

## UNIVERSALISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Over the past few decades, human rights have become 'one of the most globalised political values of our time' (Wilson 1997a: 1). Imbued with an 'emancipatory aura' (Cowan *et al.* 2001: 1) and capable – at least at an abstract level – of engendering remarkable levels of support among diverse social groups, political constituencies and agencies at local, national and supranational levels, the language of human rights has found its way into almost every aspect of daily political, social and cultural life throughout the world. At the same time, although the language and idea of human rights can be found virtually everywhere, it is worth remembering that human rights violations are similarly ubiquitous (Lukes 1993).

The abstract idea of human rights – as a set of values, norms, beliefs and an ethical frame – work through which equality, respectful co-existence and fairness can be pursued – enjoys almost universal support (Mahoney 2007), with explicit denials of the value and importance of supporting human rights appearing with relative rarity in the public sphere. However, despite this support, efforts to claim or confer rights at the local level are invariably fraught with complexity and rarely proceed uncontested. Attempts to redraw the boundaries that distinguish those on whom rights are conferred and those from whom they are denied – whether formal and explicit (for example, in equality legislation and government policy) or tacit and implied (for example, in the decisions made regarding whose histories, cultures and lives are publicly celebrated in cultural institutions) – frequently provoke fierce debates. The tactics and counter-strategies employed by staff within the Smithsonian Institution, the Catholic League and LGBT activists around the *Hide/Seek* exhibition – and the public and media attention they generated – reflect the (often overlooked and underestimated) significance of settings – such as museums, galleries and heritage sites – within which rights might be *symbolically* or *implicitly* conferred.

For political theorist Jack Donnelly, the broad appeal of human rights across cultures and their capacity to generate support between groups with potentially competing moral value systems is explained in large part by their 'moral universality' (2003) – the idea that a shared set of universal rights are naturally held by all human beings irrespective of the conditions in which they live and the institutional structures (legal, political and social) which may govern their lived experience. This universal appeal is, no doubt, an important factor in explaining the global proliferation of museums and heritage projects that explicitly adopt the human rights frame to present their diverse subjects (Sandell 2012).

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

While claims regarding the moral universality of rights have undoubtedly wielded considerable influence, they have also prompted vehement debate among rights activists and researchers. Within social anthropology, sustained support for a cultural relativist position – one that advocates a respect for cultural differences and insists that moral standards and values only be judged within their own particular context (Donnelly 2003) – has been used to challenge the universal human rights project. Indeed, during the second half of the twentieth century, many anthropologists explicitly argued for a relativist standpoint – understood as an ethical position that expressed ‘solidarity with the weaker populations of the globe’ (Hastrup 2003: 18) – one that privileged respect for cultural differences and rejected the very idea of universal standards of justice. Some proponents of cultural relativism further argued that efforts to assert the universality of human rights and advocate their global application could, in fact, be viewed as an imperialist project; an attempt by the West to present – as natural and morally superior – a highly particular set of values and to impose them onto other cultures<sup>9</sup> (Rapport and Overing 2000; Wilson and Mitchell 2003).

More recently, however, the last two decades have seen growing criticism of cultural relativist standpoints. Increasingly high-profile instances of human rights abuses in many parts of the world, accompanied by growing global interest in social justice, has fuelled support among anthropologists for the view that a pure relativist position is morally indefensible. Critics have argued that attempts to maintain a cultural relativist perspective on situations in which rights (as understood from a universalist standpoint) are being violated, ‘has morally nihilistic, politically conservative and quietist consequences’ (Rapport and Overing 2000: 166). Indeed, critics of cultural relativism have highlighted numerous instances of appalling rights violations to support their argument that ‘the noble anthropological goal of seeking to understand others in their own terms’ (ibid.) cannot and should not be used to sidestep the making of moral judgements regarding the cultural and social practices of some groups that unquestionably oppress, harm and disadvantage others.

More recently, developments within social anthropology have challenged the binary of universalism versus relativism that has typically divided researchers into two polarised camps. Progress has been made to move beyond the impasse created by the view that these positions are inherently irreconcilable and instead to view the tension between them, ‘as part of the continuous process of negotiating ever-changing and interrelated global and local norms’ (Cowan *et al.* 2001: 6). As a result, even the most ardent supporters of the idea of rights as universally held must acknowledge, engage with and attempt to understand the basis of localised moral

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

value systems that potentially work against the securing of rights and which influence the local conditions that shape both the process and outcome of political struggles. Similarly, supporters of a relativist position must recognise the value of seeing equal rights for all as an ideal standard towards which efforts can be directed, even where such claims inevitably clash with local traditions and long-established norms.

This constant interplay between universalism and relativism is important for our understanding of the part that museums might play in the processes through which rights are claimed and resisted. Indeed, many of the controversies examined in this book can be explained, at least in part, by attempts made by museum practitioners to align their institutions with a progressive understanding of rights (shaped by support for the idea of universal values) which confronts local (typically more restrictive, sometimes discriminatory), normative moral standards and prevailing ideas about which select groups are deserving of full and equal rights.

## RIGHTS AS MUTABLE AND DYNAMIC

Enshrined in numerous laws and international conventions, human rights possess an aura of enduring immutability; an impression of relative stability, an uncompromising resistance to negotiation and a rhetorical capacity to reject any efforts that threaten to question their intrinsic value or undermine their claim to universal relevance and application. However, despite the rhetoric of universalism and immutability, human rights – as experienced by those engaged in everyday struggles to secure them – are, of course, shifting and dynamic, continually shaped and reshaped by an ongoing interaction between a global discourse of shared and inalienable rights for all, on the one hand and, on the other, local interests, agendas and moral norms. Indeed, on a daily basis throughout the world, attempts by marginalised groups to claim rights that have previously been denied frequently stimulate counter claims and protests. For example, soon after supporters of the LGBT rights movement in the United States were celebrating the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that awarded same-sex couples the right to marry, news soon emerged of a backlash and a suite of efforts that questioned the validity of the ruling and sought to undermine it. This is but one example; we only have to look at the news every day for situations that reflect this constant push and pull of rights negotiations. Human rights, for some at least, are always in play and never to be taken-for-granted. As Theodore Downing (1988: 13) states:

At every level, people continuously codify and modify, clarify and obscure, adopt and reject, interpret and reinterpret propositions concerning what ought to be proper human interaction.

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

This understanding of human rights, as not cast in stone but rather as subject to shifting negotiations and interpretations, highlights the situated and contingent nature of rights processes and language. Although the abstract idea of rights as held universally by all human beings across space and time represents an alluring *ideal* – which nation states, individuals from differing backgrounds and groups with diverse value systems can potentially support – any attempt to claim, inscribe or exercise rights is necessarily both temporally and geo graphically situated (Donnelly 2003). Donnelly's historical account of the evolution of specific rights regimes<sup>10</sup> helps to illustrate their shifting character:

women and nonwhites were until well into [the twentieth] century widely seen as irreparably deficient in their rational or moral capacities and thus incapable of exercising the full range of human rights. These racial and gender distinctions, however, were in principle subject to moral and empirical counterarguments. Over the past several decades dominant political ideas and practices in Western and non-Western societies alike have been transformed by national and international movements to end slavery and, later, colonialism; to grant women and racial minorities the vote; and to end discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and gender. A similar tale can be told in the case of Jews, non-conformist Christian sects, atheists, and other religious minorities.

In each case, a logic of full and equal humanity has overcome claims of group inferiority, bringing (at least formally) equal membership in society through explicitly guaranteed protections against discrimination. Signs of difference that previously were seen as marks of moral inferiority and grounds for justifiable subordination have been excluded from the realm of legally and politically legitimate discriminations (228).

## THE LOGICS AND LEGITIMATION OF RIGHTS

The 'logic' to which Donnelly refers – the basis on which rights claims are made and the means through which such claims gain ground – is another important concept and one that, I would argue, holds relevance to our investigation of the moral work and ethical agency of museums. Legal scholar, Richard Falk (2009), identifies a number of 'competing normative logics' that form the basis for identifying and conferring rights. Under a statist logic, for example, individual nation states assert the right to their own

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

sovereignty in determining how rights are applied and to whom. Under a 'supra-national' or transnational logic, the power to determine rights is claimed by or placed with institutions that cross national boundaries, such as the European Union or United Nations.<sup>11</sup> A 'populist' logic, on the other hand, 'rejects the necessary authority of states – if not all such self-perpetuating institutions – and seeks to derive rights instead from "the people"' (Rapport and Overing 2000: 163). Finally, there is what Falk refers to as a 'naturalistic' logic of rights, which bases its authority on the claim that rights are integral to human nature and should, therefore, be universally applied and recognised. The interplay between these various competing logics can be detected in several of the cases explored throughout this book.

Understanding these various logics – the foundational basis for authority that each makes – is helpful in thinking through how museums in different contexts might justify their standpoint on contested rights claims. How might an exhibition exploring sexual diversity and gender variance navigate between rights formulations produced out of statist and supranational logics where, for example, the former excludes transgender people and the latter includes them? What challenges and opportunities are presented by attempts by a museum to lend support for the rights of a group that may be recognised by national or transnational laws but which might not enjoy popular support at a local level? Such distinctions direct our attention towards seeking to understand the relationship that particular museums have with public opinion – mainstream, popular or dominant moral values and sentiments. What importance, in deciding which groups are granted rights and which are denied, should institutions engaged in rights processes place on public opinion? To what extent might museums be understood to reflect these populist values and in what circumstances might they seek to challenge and reconfigure them? Such questions are highly pertinent to our discussion of museums – and the positions they adopt on human rights issues – at a time when more consultative, democratic, participatory and co-creative ways of working are increasingly highly valued and pursued by professionals in the cultural sector.

If (as I have previously argued) museums might sometimes seek to adopt a position of ethical leadership on rights-related issues (Sandell 2007) – one which attempts not to reflect dominant public opinion but rather to build support for rights struggles that may enjoy limited popular support – what forms of authority and legitimacy can potentially inform such a position? How might museums arbitrate where human rights claims clash? How might a seemingly arrogant position – one that rejects a populist logic of rights – be defended and how, in very practical terms, can it be

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

reconciled with genuine attempts in many institutions to move away from didactic modes of presentation and to build more participatory relationships with visitors? I return to these difficult questions throughout the chapters that follow. First, however, it is necessary to consider how the museum's role in relation to the negotiation of constantly evolving rights language, discourse and processes might be empirically investigated.

## MORALITIES AND EVERYDAY ETHICS

Rights, as we have seen, are always in play, contested and emergent. As ethnographic accounts reveal, the processes through which rights are negotiated are not confined to or solely governed by those institutions that have the capacity and status to formally confer, deny or withdraw rights. Rights processes are framed not only by the apparatus of national and supra-national rights agencies (through equality laws, conventions, policy statements and the like) but also by the far less visible moral codes and ethical norms; the everyday claims and counter claims through which notions of fairness and equality are negotiated by individuals in daily life. It follows, therefore, that to understand the effects of human rights (and their absence), we must direct attention not only to legal, governmental and public policy arenas (where equality laws and policy statements can be readily identified) but also to the lived experiences of those for whom rights are denied, contested or uncertain.

As Richard Falk (2009: 8) has argued:

It has always been important to distinguish the discourse of law from complementary discourses of politics, culture, ethics and religion. The legal architecture of international human rights has been established by formal legal texts negotiated and ratified by governments and sovereign states, as well as by the institutions and procedures for implementation that have been given an intergovernmental role within the United Nations or elsewhere. Politics and culture plays a large part in exerting pressures for and against implementing particular norms contained in these texts, as do ethical standards and religious attitudes.

It is necessary here to briefly clarify my use of the overlapping terms 'morality' and 'ethics'. While efforts are sometimes made (notably within philosophy) to use the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' in rather different ways, these distinctions are rarely applied in a consistent manner, leading to considerable confusion (Lambek 2010: 9).

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

For some, morality is more closely associated with rules, conventions, prescriptions and propriety – with how people *ought* to behave. In contrast, ethics has tended to have a greater association with freedom of individual thought, action and conduct – with ‘the good’ rather than ‘the right’ (ibid.: 9–11). This distinction is sometimes extended to associate ‘ethical’ with the emancipatory work of progressive thinkers and activists while ‘moral’ is linked with the hegemonic and the oppressive domain of political institutions (Dave 2010: 370–1). While mindful of these associations, for the most part I follow Lambek and others who use the terms interchangeably to refer to the multiplicity of ways in which notions of right and wrong, fairness and injustice are imagined, expressed and enacted.

I have found Signe Howell’s use of the term ‘moralities’, in its uncommon plural form, particularly valuable in framing my approach to the cases, settings and situations explored in this book. If morality can be understood to refer to the ‘the moral order, values and practices [in a] particular given socio-cultural setting’ (1997: 11), use of the term moralities, points to the presence of multiple (sometimes conflicting) ways of understanding and expressing right and wrong, good and bad, just and unfair that co-exist in any society. These different visions of the good society and the correct way to live can be detected in not only the instruments and apparatus through which human rights are formally determined but also in the everyday acts of individuals trying to do what they believe is right. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the ways in which these moralities come together, interact and collide in and around the museum are illuminating for our understanding of the role that museums play in human rights processes. Identifying and making sense of these competing ideas of fairness, Howell acknowledges, presents significant methodological challenges, that no doubt help to explain the relative dearth of in-depth empirical studies of moralities in different settings.<sup>12</sup>

As Wilson (1997a, 1997b) has argued, explorations of the ways in which rights come into being might productively resist a narrow and discrete focus on legal or political domains (for example, assessing how rights are inscribed in anti-discrimination laws or government policies), where their ethical rulings are relatively explicit, highly visible and easy to access. Rather, as Michael Lambek and Signe Howell have both persuasively argued, it is necessary to appreciate the ways in which ethics and morality are also profoundly *ordinary* and *pervasive*, stitched into our everyday lives. If we seek to understand the ways in which morality is constituted and brought to bear on the circumstances in which human rights struggles take place, then it is necessary to look not only at those domains within which ethical ideas are explicitly

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

and formally articulated but also to attend to those everyday settings and interactions that are often overlooked, to examine 'the ethical entailments of speech and language, to the fine discriminations among, and weighty consequences of, what we say and do' (Lambek 2010: 6).

In the museum settings I explore, therefore, I am less concerned with the formal ways in which the moral and ethical is inscribed by the institution (ethical codes of conduct, mission statements, policies and so on) and instead focus attention on the informal, sometimes intangible, ways in which moralities are exercised. Responding to Lambek's call for an acknowledgement of 'the ubiquity of the ethical', I explore the everyday interactions, utterances and pronouncements that occur in and around the museum to examine their ethical implications. I attend to the things that individuals (museum practitioners, activists, visitors and so on) say and do in their everyday lives and attempt to trace the consequences (sometimes slight, sometimes profound) that flow from these words and actions. Placing the spotlight on the everyday is also useful for its potential to reveal 'underlying moral assumptions and premises' (Howell 1997: 4); tacit and dynamic understandings of right and wrong that may be hidden from view and harder to capture than those moral positions and values that are formally, explicitly and publicly expressed.

I look behind the frequently anonymous institutional façade of the museum and expressions of morality embodied in policy, public programmes and exhibition narratives to better understand the multiple moral positions that come together to influence such formal articulations. This concern with the myriad ways in which human rights potentially imbue daily working life in the museum reflects Falk's call for 'personalizing the practice and protection of human rights by locating freedom and responsibility in the countless daily decisions each of us makes about the treatment of others' (2009: 8).

My intention is to investigate the ways in which expressions of rights take shape and come to be publicly communicated in the museum, for example, through decisions made about exhibition programming, object selection and placement, the words used in labels and interpretive panels, public and media engagement and so on. Similarly, I look at the ways in which diverse constituencies engage with and respond to these expressions of rights. By including the perspectives, experiences and personal testimonies of individuals within and outside the museum I aim to shed light on the ways in which museum actions impact lives. Including and making use of these highly personalised accounts, as we shall see, also begins to open up the possibility

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

for understanding the role of emotions in human rights processes. As Craig Calhoun (2008: 291) has argued, attending to the sometimes highly emotive language such accounts contain, enables us to better see how 'moral norms and injunctions come to have force' and how, in some settings, efforts are made to utilise and appeal to emotions to make certain ethical and moral positions more compelling and persuasive than others.

### TRACING INFLUENCE BEYOND THE VISITOR

Any attempt to understand the potential influence of the museum on human rights processes, and the conditions within which rights are continually negotiated, cannot be restricted solely to studies of exhibition visitors. As Corinne Kratz has argued, the ideas embodied within exhibitions are widely disseminated beyond those who visit and experience them first hand, 'through visitors' interactions, conversations, press reviews, influences on future exhibitions, and other traces that stretch far beyond the exhibition itself' (2002: 96).

In response to one of the first hostile news stories to be published on the *Hide/Seek* exhibition – an article on conservative news website, CNSnews.com, entitled 'Smithsonian Christmas-Season Exhibit Features Ant-Covered Jesus, Naked Brothers Kissing, Genitalia, and Ellen DeGeneres Grabbing Her Breasts'<sup>13</sup> – readers were quick to respond and comments (reflecting wide-ranging opinions) soon numbered more than 3,000 as views were heatedly exchanged:

this is what our taxpayer dollars pay for??? It sucks ... and it's not art ... it's satanic! I wish Americans could fill out a ballot every year and vote on which organizations we REALLY want to fund with our tax dollars. Can you imagine our politicians having to vote exactly as the majority says! Now THAT would be a miracle!

(Narniagirl55)

I can say as a fairly conservative individual that I find these controversial images fairly disturbing. However, as a citizen of a democratic, non-totalitarian nation, I can say that I do not believe it should be censored. The artist was trying to make a point about society and to raise concerns about an invisible group of struggling people with AIDS. Ironically, while his film has become widely known for its pornographic and religiously offensive

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

portions, it seems that all of the people who are reacting so violently to it are forgetting its point and continuing to not notice the group he's trying to bring awareness to. Do I think this film should be shown on TV? No. Do I think that it is inappropriate for children? Absolutely. However, that is no reason to suppress it from a museum or to criticize it in a blatantly homophobic and fundamentalist fashion.

(UW)

The culture wars have returned! I'm SOOO excited!

(Bee)

The extent to which audiences took up opportunities to discuss the Smithsonian's actions is a reflection of the enormous changes in the mediascape that have taken place in recent decades. A proliferation of media forms arising from digital innovation has produced mediasaturated environments offering myriad, seemingly limitless opportunities for audiences to access information (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). At the same time, our understanding of media–audience relationships – of how people experience media – has undergone dramatic transformations. In our media-saturated world, it would be misleading to situate audiences as bombarded by media and passively consuming whatever they encounter. Rather, we know that audiences are selective in the way that they attend to different media, paying close attention to some sources while ignoring or questioning others (ibid.).

Moreover, audiences are increasingly active in their engagement, expecting and sometimes demanding opportunities to participate; to not simply read, watch or listen but to interact with media, sharing their own responses and exercising their own (sometimes morally loaded) judgements of events as they unfold. These shifts in media–audience relationships and, in particular, the turn towards more participatory, co-created media experiences through which audiences are encouraged to contribute as much as they consume, as we shall see, have considerable implications for our understanding of the part that museums might play in shaping the climate within which human rights are claimed, challenged and denied.

For most museums, audiences are understood to comprise not only the people that walk through their doors but also those visitors who access their experiences through the museum's website. What is perhaps less well understood are the ways in which more diffused audiences encounter the museum and engage with the moral

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

standpoints embodied in its narratives, for example, those hearing about an exhibition through word-of-mouth via friends and family or through media reports on television and radio as well as the online discussions these encounters might prompt. Individuals who may have never visited the National Portrait Gallery nevertheless have easily accessed opportunities to participate in online discussions debating the Smithsonian's first exhibition in its history devoted to the theme of same-sex love and desire – and the subsequent decision to bow to conservative opposition to the exhibition. It can be argued that the museum's influence – the institution's capacity to stimulate and potentially inform individual conversations and the tone and content of broader public debate – extends beyond visitors to the gallery to larger and more diffused audiences.

These online forums offer a potentially fruitful data source for exploring audience responses to museums and the moral positions they adopt, capturing and making publicly available conversations that might otherwise be lost or difficult to elicit by researchers. At the same time, a degree of caution is required. While we have a good understanding of the ways in which museum visitors respond to and engage with the moral positions embodied in the exhibitions they *physically* encounter within the museum (Cameron 2007; Sandell 2007; Kelly 2010), we know rather less about the museum's capacity to inform the ways in which these more diffused audiences (who hear about and engage with museum projects remotely through word-of-mouth, news reports and so on) perceive, think and talk about moral issues. Nevertheless, the public discussion boards of internet-based media offer a tangible glimpse of the many ways in which museums' morally invested practices become stimuli for both media and public debate.

## QUESTIONS AND CHAPTER OUTLINES

My central concern is to explore what role museums might play in the advancement of human rights, in contributing to the good society – one based on principles of equity, fairness and justice for all. The more specific questions I aim to address throughout the chapters that follow are ones that have come to increasing prominence in museum practice in recent years. Some concern the internal workings of museums, heritage institutions and galleries, for example:

- What factors shape the processes through which rights are negotiated and made publicly visible in cultural institutions through displays, exhibitions, events and other forms of communication?

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

- How do museums respond to the differentiated (morally invested) interests of diverse groups in society and, more particularly, the grievances and conflicts that can arise from these?
- Should museums attempt to assess the relative merit of different moral standpoints and choose between competing rights claims? If so, on what basis might such decisions be made and defended?
- How can museums negotiate the difficult territory between globally framed (often more inclusive and cosmopolitan) understandings of social justice and locally inscribed (frequently more exclusive and conservative) rights regimes?
- Why, at a time of increasing visibility in the public realm, are some LGBTQ lives and experiences less visible than others in museums, particularly those of Black and minority ethnic gay and transgender people who continue to experience some of the most pernicious forms of discrimination? What might be the implications of these biases and how might they be addressed?

Other closely related questions that have received relatively less attention are concerned primarily with exploring the impact, implications and consequences of museum practices beyond the institution.

- What social effects and consequences stem from the ways in which different audiences engage with the moral positions they perceive and encounter in the work of museums?
- What influence – if any – can museums be understood to have on public opinion and debate, on the kinds of conversations that society has about equality, fairness and justice?
- More concretely, how might museums contribute to the reconfiguring of boundaries that distinguish those who enjoy full rights from those engaged in contemporary, everyday rights struggles?

These questions are pursued through a series of grounded, in-depth investigations. I use a variety of sources – archives, interviews and audience responses – to explore the agency of museums, galleries and heritage sites not only from the perspective of the institution (staff, governing bodies, funders and visitors) but also, importantly, from the perspective of activists and community members engaged in efforts to advance LGBTI rights, whose perceptions of museums, and experiences of engagement with them, have rarely been examined.

Chapter 2, 'I am he that aches with love', looks in depth at a small museum in the United States – the Walt Whitman Birthplace in Huntington, Long Island. I focus on

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

the events leading up to the controversy that surrounded the opening of a new interpretive centre in 1997 and, in particular, a single exhibition panel that considered Whitman's personal life and relationships. I use this case to develop my argument that it is not only specialised institutions with an explicit and purposeful concern for human rights that find themselves caught up in – responding to and impacting – broader struggles for equality. Rather, as the case study reveals, numerous acts, choices and decisions that have social and political implications for human rights are sometimes tucked into the daily working lives of practitioners in museums with diverse collections, locations and purposes.

Chapter 3, 'Coming out stories', considers the changing ways in which museums, galleries and heritage sites have treated LGBTQ experience and identity. I am interested here in exploring how decisions come to be made in museums regarding whether and how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lives are disclosed and discussed in their displays and public programmes and in understanding the factors that influence such decisions. Through this discussion, I also attempt to draw out the political implications that potentially stem from different interpretive treatments, for LGBTQ communities and rights activists as well as for museum visitors.

In 'Taking sides', Chapter 4, I turn attention to institutions that have explicitly sought to explore – and lend their support to – LGBTI rights. I look, in particular depth, at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, Scotland and a major project intended to stimulate and shape public debate around the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersex people to explore how globalised ideas of human rights were appropriated, resisted and recast by the museum's staff in relation to (and through negotiation with) more conservative, locally situated, moral norms and conventions.

Chapter 5 – 'Museums and the transgender tipping point' – opens with the example of a recent exhibition at the Museum of Liverpool in the North West of England – *April Ashley: Portrait of a Lady* – that represents a still-rare example of a museum project that attempts to offer visitors a nuanced and substantive exploration of transgender lived experience; one that takes full account of the contemporary struggle for transgender visibility and awareness.

Although such progressive representations of transgender lives – told from the perspectives and through the voices of trans people – remain rare in museums, there have been a small but growing number of examples in recent years, reflecting an increasing trans-visibility across many areas of public life. How might these positive portrayals of transgender lives within museums be understood in relation to broader

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

efforts to secure the rights of transgender people? How might museums be viewed and utilised by activists seeking to bring about change? To what extent might such representations be understood to not only inform the ways in which visitors perceive, think and talk about transgender phenomena, but also to act, more broadly, upon coercive and restricting gender norms that are deeply rooted in the everyday contexts within which transgender people attempt to claim and exercise their rights as equal members of society?

This chapter addresses these questions by drawing on the perspectives, insights and lived experiences of transgender individuals during a period that, many have argued, has been especially critical in the ongoing battle for trans equality. This attempt to privilege trans perspective and experience constitutes an attempt to resist a narrow, museum-centric concern with matters of representation (how people and groups are portrayed) in favour of a perspective that is grounded in the lived experience of those engaged in a struggle for rights (how individuals might perceive and use museums in their broader efforts to secure equality). These highly personalised narratives – so often absent from legalistic accounts of human rights struggles – are important for understanding how rights are negotiated and experienced.

This chapter reveals how museum actions can involve the drawing of symbolic boundaries, marking inclusions and exclusions, legitimating the rights claims of some groups and potentially occluding or denying those made by others. As the chapter shows, museums have a unique capacity to lend weight and legitimacy to highly personalised narratives and to give them visibility within the public sphere. Moreover, an analysis of visitor responses reveals the capacity for such personalised life accounts to prompt emotional responses in museum visitors, responses that as theorists are increasingly arguing – are important means through which new social movements gain ground.

The final chapter, 'Museum work as human rights work', draws together the insights generated by the case studies in previous chapters to discuss the ways in which museums are implicated in the construction and ongoing negotiation of moralities. Museums emerge as institutions with particular features – including high levels of public trust and visibility within the public realm – that shape the climate within which equal rights for all can be envisioned, enacted and realised. Museums do not simply reflect and respond to normative ideas about rights-related matters. Rather, the narratives they present through their exhibitions and displays are generative – capable of shaping the conversations that society has about difference and also

# PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

helping to establish and challenge the ever-shifting moral and ethical climate within which actions and behaviours towards minority groups engaged in human rights struggles are sanctioned and permitted.

I focus in on questions posed by museums' increasing engagement with and attempts to support LGBT rights. How should museums respond to situations in which moralities clash where, for example, LGBT rights are contested by religious groups? What principles might be used to navigate such situations and how might these be applied in practice? How is museum practice reconfigured by collaborations with activists and the development of purposeful attempts to build public support for new ways of seeing and thinking about gender variance and sexual diversity?

## CONCLUSION

Across the diverse cases I explore, I aim to show how it is not only those museums with a specific mandate to address human rights whose actions have implications for groups and individuals engaged in struggles for equality. Rather, as we shall see, human rights are implicated in the work of *all* kinds of museums – of different sizes, with diverse collections and operating in a variety of social, political and cultural contexts. In these numerous museums of history, art and science, everyday decisions made in the course of museum work have social consequences – effects that may be unanticipated, perhaps less apparent and, in some situations, less likely to be scrutinized by rights activists but are nonetheless as powerful as those made in high-profile human rights museums, memorial museums and historical sites of conscience.

## NOTES

1. A film of the events, later posted online by the iPad protestors, began with the following introduction; 'On Nov 30, 2010, the Smithsonian removed a video by gay artist David Wojnarowicz from the National Portrait Gallery, caving in to pressure from anti-gay groups and threats of "budget scrutiny" by incoming House speaker John Boehner. We believe that Americans should be free to form their own opinions about art – and everything else – without the "help" of politicians or pressure groups. On Dec. 4, we brought the now-censored art back into the museum so people could make up their own minds about it. This is what happened ...'
2. The Catholic League describes its purpose as defending '...the right of Catholics ... to participate in American public life without defamation or discrimination' (Catholic League 2016).

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

3. The Catholic League's decision to base their protest around the inclusion of an artwork they deemed to be anti-Christian, rather than to explicitly oppose an exhibition themed around (and sympathetic towards) same-sex love and desire, was widely viewed as a strategic move to enhance support for their campaign. In a press release issued on 30 November 2010, the Catholic League President, Bill Donohue, stated:

According to Penny Starr of CNSnews.com (2010), David C. Ward, co-curator of the National Portrait Gallery, says the video, "A Fire in My Belly," is one of the "masterpieces" of this exhibit. We call it hate speech. Perversely, there is a plaque at the entrance to the exhibit that says the gallery is committed to "the struggle for justice so that people and groups can claim their full inheritance in America's promise of equality, inclusion, and social dignity." Somehow Christians didn't make the cut.

4. Writing following the opening of *Hide/Seek* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2011, Culture Critic for the Washington Post, Philip Kennicott, contrasted the exhibition's reception in Washington, DC and New York and reported the ultimately failed attempts by opponents to have the Wojnarowicz work once more removed.

What a difference a year, and 230 miles, makes. On Nov. 18, "Hide/Seek" reopened at the Brooklyn Museum, with the Wojnarowicz video reinstated ... The usual people made the usual noises before the Brooklyn opening, but the drama played out very differently. A backchannel effort to censor the show by Brooklyn Catholic Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, who wrote a private letter to the museum's board president asking that the video be removed, failed to gain traction. The Catholic League issued increasingly vitriolic statements about the show, saying that Wojnarowicz, who succumbed to AIDS in 1992, "died of self-inflicted wounds." But unlike Clough, the Brooklyn Museum's Director, Arnold Lehman, refused to take the bait.

(Kennicott 2011)

5. For example, Katz reported that securing exhibits for loan to the exhibition has been especially difficult 'because neither museums nor collectors want their artworks associated with homosexuality – which would (it is assumed) detract from their dollar value' (cited in Logan 2010).

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

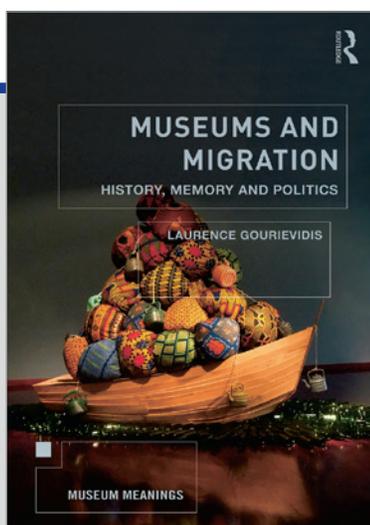
Excerpted from *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*

6. As Carter identifies, 'There are now institutions either newly inaugurated or in the planning stages, that self-identify as human rights museums in Chile, Paraguay, Belgium, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Pakistan and Indonesia, in addition to a Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) in Liverpool, United Kingdom, with an even broader membership base' (2015: 208), which includes major national museum institutions such as Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand alongside a rich mix of smaller sites across the world (Federation of International Human Rights Museums 2015).
7. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience was formed in 1999 with nine members and, by 2014, had nearly 200 members – historic buildings, heritage sites, museums and initiatives concerned with memory and remembrance – in fifty different countries. Members sign up to a collective vision that states; 'We are sites, individuals, and initiatives activating the power of places of memory to engage the public in connecting past and present in order to envision and shape a more just and humane future' (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience 2014). The Federation of International Human Rights Museums, 'encourages museums which engage with sensitive and controversial human rights themes ... to work together and share new thinking and initiatives in a supportive environment. The ethos underpinning the FIHRM initiative is that all types of museums within these fields of work, regardless of size or resources, share similar challenges in dealing with difficult, politically-loaded, and controversial subjects' (Federation of International Human Rights Museums 2015).
8. See, for example, Pannikar (1982).
9. For a fuller discussion of this argument see, for example, Mutua (2002).
10. Such regimes are comprised not only of the formal apparatus through which rights are constituted such as legal frameworks and government policies but also, for example, the cultural and social norms that frame the ways in which minority interests and perspectives appear in and are excluded from museums, galleries and heritage sites.
11. As Rapport and Overing (2000: 163) point out, 'there is also a "transnational" logic pertaining to non-state, non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or the Worldwide Fund for Nature, which yet claim the right to monitor behaviour on a global scale whoever the protagonist'.
12. A notable exception is Arlene Stein's (2003) extraordinarily rich account of the conflict over sexuality, faith and civil rights that emerged in a small US town in the late 1990s.
13. See Starr (2010).

CHAPTER

# 2

## REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY



This chapter is excerpted from  
*Museums and Migration*

Edited by Laurence Gouriévidis

©2014 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*



### Laurence Gouriévidis

is Professor of Modern British History at Clermont Auvergne University (UCA), Clermont-Ferrand, France. Her research interests concentrate on the interaction between history and memory, exploring the way societies and individuals construct their past and their heritage. She has written on museums and heritage, with a particular focus on Scotland and the Scottish diaspora and is the author of *The Dynamics of Heritage: History, Memory and the Highland Clearances* (2010).

The destiny of migrations is intercontinental: again and again space and time, geography and history, geopolitics and comparative cultural history are made to intersect.<sup>1</sup>

(Ricoeur 2000a: 15)

Migration is no longer, in the phrase coined by Noiriel (2004: 17), a '*non lieu de mémoire*'.<sup>2</sup> Public sites increasingly harbour the memories of migrants in their diversity and specificity, making audible and visible versions of the past that had been occluded or simply neglected. If the integration of migration history in museum spaces and narratives is an increasingly notable feature of the international museum landscape, it also raises a host of questions. Some are linked with museums' intimacy with processes of identity construction and memorialization of the past, the changing nature of museums in society, and the changes which have affected the societies that produce them, one of which is their ever more diverse character. In an age of globalization, intensifying human movements and flows, multifaceted transnational networks, along with cheaper and fast-evolving means of communication, museums are encouraged to reflect the socio-cultural implications of such changes and the increasingly plural face of the populations composing modern states. Museums, their locations, constituencies, origins and contents are revealing of museological thinking and practices as well as the advance of scientific knowledge – for instance, historiographical orientations and developments. They also disclose societal changes, social processes, policy developments and models, as well as political priorities – at local, national and international levels.

Whilst museums, particularly since the 1980s, have been theorized through the prism of different disciplinary practices and approaches, the representation of migration in museums in particular has recently become the locus of a fast-growing body of research and critical enquiry. That research in the domain should, in some cases, be sanctioned and sponsored by supranational structures and organizations, most notably the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)<sup>3</sup> and the European Union,<sup>4</sup> often with a view to promoting 'an acceptance of culture-in-difference' (Bennett 2006: 66) and tolerance, testifies to the strong belief, in the political sphere, that public culture, and museums in particular, can effect change at a social level in the face of socio-cultural mutations often twinned with the emergence of antagonisms – frequent signs of 'colonial fracture' (Bancel *et al.* 2010). Ethnic and racial tensions or overt conflicts are recurrently capturing media headlines,<sup>5</sup> as are the debates and legislation changes regarding the award of

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

citizenship rights – tests and ceremonies – alongside measures passed at the national or international level to control and regulate immigration. If an *idea* of immigration is wielded as a powerful instrumental weapon in political discourse – not exclusively by right-wing groups and parties fanning a sense of panic at times of economic insecurity – migration as a process is a fundamental feature of the post-modern and post-colonial world, and one whose implications historians and social scientists are currently unravelling.

In this introductory chapter, I shall examine some of the issues which have been addressed in the museum literature exploring such developments and their contexts.<sup>6</sup> Those selected frame the chapters featured in this volume and structure my presentation. Following a short discussion of the ways in which heritage has variously embraced the pluralization of society, I will concentrate on three main, closely interrelated, issues: the impact of public discourses and policies related to diversity on the way museums engage with migration and its history, in particular examining the resilience of the national paradigm; the role of museums used as agents of social change; and, finally, the memorial function of museums seen as mediators of recognition. Whilst examples of museological developments throughout the world will be featured and those presented in this volume introduced, special attention will also be paid to the French case, which is not covered in the remainder of this book.

### HERITAGE, MUSEUMS AND THE MAKING OF PLURAL IDENTITIES

One key function that the past performs, through its use in heritage sites and venues, is the production of a sense of belonging and collective identity through the representation of place (Ashworth *et al.* 2007: 1). Heritage is not an existing place, an artefact or an intangible element but, in the words of Smith (2006: 3), 'a constitutive cultural process', constitutive of meaning, values, shared memories and experiences, and ultimately social identity. It is the process of moulding and negotiating social, cultural and moral values which takes place when decisions are made and actions taken to commemorate and interpret selected events, figures or processes; to preserve material or immaterial features; in short to define what must be transmitted and imparted. It is a 'discursive practice shaped by specific circumstances' (Littler 2005: 1) as the meaning and significance of selected aspects of the past and narratives are reconsidered, redefined or re-endorsed according to present ends and needs. Heritage is an activity; it is 'doing' and 'making' rather than 'being' and reflects present concerns, anxieties and ideals. Some of these are

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

brought to the fore when it is made to translate the increasing cultural diversity of contemporary societies – when ‘pluralising pasts’ (Ashworth *et al.* 2007) is the goal.

Heritage also often serves to ‘shap[e] socio-cultural place-identities to support state structures’ (Ashworth 1994: 13), mirroring particular ideologies or policy orientations. Just as it has long been used by authorities and elites as a tool to serve and legitimize ideological purposes and programmes, it has also – and increasingly so in the 1980s and 1990s – been resorted to by social actors such as minority groups to contest, challenge or reposition (de-centre) dominant interpretations and as a means of gaining recognition. One critical aspect brought to light in heritage literature is the notion of ‘dissonance’ intimately linked with present-day uses and interpretations of the past (Turnbridge and Ashworth 1996) and seen as ‘a condition of the construction of pluralist, multi-cultural societies based on inclusiveness and variable-sum conceptualizations of power’ (Ashworth and Graham 2005: 6). Through heritage, the conflicting claims, aspirations, histories, memories and expectations of diverse communities meet and compete.

‘Museum frictions’ is the expression coined by Karp *et al.* (2006: 9) to describe this museological ‘moment’. It evokes not only the often tense and discordant relations that museums in the transnational and global age generate, but also their own condition or predicament as, with new practices, methodologies and theoretical frames, they strive to articulate the multiple visions of disparate communities and individuals – a mosaic of criss-crossing destinies – whilst adhering to democratic ideals and conveying a unified narrative of shared experiences. The moment is fraught with anticipation and challenges, and the grammar used to describe it in heritage and museum literature is one which recurrently underlines the complexity of multi-vocality, multi-layering and fragmentation (Macdonald 2003: 1) – a complexity which may well be heightened in the case of national museums whose task had long been to act as a centripetal force and erase difference.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts dedicated to buttressing Enlightenment and modernist classification and order and projecting grand national and imperial narratives, museums are now seen as places of contest, where master narratives can be unsettled and questioned and where alternative viewpoints can be projected.<sup>8</sup> Yet they ‘remain powerful and subtle authors and authorities whose cultural accounts are not easily dislodged’ (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996: 4). As a result, museums come in many guises – in terms of scale, subject, content, methodology, and source of funding, to cite but a few of their distinctive traits – and their missions and functions

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

are as diverse as their creators and audiences. They can be

temples of civilization, sites for the creation of citizens, forums for debate, settings for cultural interchange and negotiation of values, engines of economic renewal and revenue generation, imposed colonialist enterprises, havens of elitist distinction and discrimination, and places of empowerment and recognition.

(Kratz and Karp 2006: 1)

This list neatly encapsulates the shifts which the museum world has witnessed and is currently undergoing. If the present character of museums has to be linked with the history of their own development and that of museological practices and thinking,<sup>9</sup> they are also spaces 'inscribed with dominant discursive practice' (Message 2006: 18) and with the stamp of wider socio-political relations and societal variations with their own history.

### MUSEUMS, DIVERSITY AND PUBLIC DISCOURSES

Undergirding the orientations and work of museums – and, more widely, heritage – are the actions and policies of the states in which they are located. The political and administrative structures as well as the political cultures and doctrines that condition their existence and development stem from the different historical routes that national states have followed. It is a truism to speak of the instrumental role that national museums have played in the construction of unified and homogeneous national imaginaries, in projecting shared values and in the forging of citizenship with its cohort of rights and duties, notably through their Representing migration in museums 3 showcasing of supporting scientific material evidence (Bennett 1995, Macdonald 2003, Aronsson 2012: 68–9). Closely meshed with unifying agendas was the erection of boundaries exclusive of 'others', reflected through collecting policies linked to the display and interpretation of material culture. This process of 'othering' differed according to geopolitical situations and national trajectories, but it is inseparable from the emergence, shaping and reshaping of nation-states. It is also inseparable from the experiences of colonialism and decolonization, resulting in hierarchical and alienating categorization, and later in their reappraisal (Healy and Witcomb 2006, Amundsen and Nyblom 2007, Aronsson and Nyblom 2008).

Changes in political configurations and state boundaries consequent on annexations, unions, Home Rule, autonomy, dis-unions and independence are commonly

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

associated with mental re-mapping. These breaks also implicate (re)definitions of citizenship, influencing group categorization and feelings of belonging, difference or exclusion. Goodnow and Akman's volume (2008) offers compelling examples of the ways in which the museum world in Scandinavian countries has responded, over time, to such socio-political shifts in its representations of indigenous peoples, national minorities and more recent migrants. It ends on analyses unravelling the links between cultural heritage and national identity, underlining the critical role of museums. Throughout, museums are shown to be operating as mobilizing tools for nascent or rising nationalisms and for the integration, within the national narrative, first of regional differences – internal to nation-states – and more recently of cultural diversity related to immigration. There are parallels between the changing cultural and political perception and the exhibition of such indigenous groups as the Sámi in Scandinavia (Goodnow and Akman 2008) and the Ainu in Japan, long eclipsed in the national heritage by settler narratives (see Chapter 15).

Given the potency of museums' messages, discourses on cultural diversity, when set against aspirations for autonomy or even separatism that tend to heighten and politicize cultural distinctiveness, often have to be fused with competing agendas in migration exhibitions. The case of Spanish regional museums highlights their function 'as emblems and engines driving Spain into democracy' (Holo 2000: 12), following years of relentless centralization and dictatorship under Franco, but also as powerful agents in the formation and development of regional identities. In Catalonia, where the promotion of a Catalan identity had long been suppressed and where separatism is a burning issue, Van Geert (Chapter 12) argues that, since the 1980s, museums have appeared as crucial tools in the construction of 'Catalanness', yet in the face of significant historical waves of in-migration from other parts of Spain and abroad, they have not been used to the same degree and in the same fashion in the promotion of pluralism and tolerance. In the case of devolved Wales,<sup>10</sup> Giudici (Chapter 13) probes the extent to which the Welsh policy of inclusion has been integrated in memorializing strategies, inclusive of museums and memorials, through a focus on the Italian migrant community. In the Republic of Ireland, where independence from the United Kingdom was achieved in the early twentieth century, Crooke's essay (Chapter 11) – which contrasts the Republic with Northern Ireland – shows that the inclusion of artefacts and stories emblematic of immigration in recent exhibitions marks a symbolic shift in the representation of a 'mono-cultural past' and long-standing discourse on identity and belonging. North of the border, where devolution is intertwined with the peace process, museums' discourse of inclusiveness increasingly marries sectarian and racist concerns, as shown by Crooke and Bigand (Chapter 8).

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

National ideologies weigh heavy on museums and, when the promotion of cultural diversity enters national discourses, in museum spaces it often means collisions with older systems of classification and collecting practices, and with a murky inheritance of fiction, prejudice or silence with respect to indigenous populations and minority groups. Reformulating national narratives along more inclusive lines which encompass cultural differences and hybridity means that '[t]he nation becomes something that is not so easily mapped as it transcends its own frontiers and creates new ones inside its political limits' (Lleras 2008: 293). In Central and South America, cultural constructions have long borne the imprint of taxonomies lingering on from European colonization. Lleras (2008) has shown how, in Colombia's National Museum, they filter through stereotypical representations of Afrocolombians that are not so easily dispelled. In Argentina, they still condition the invisibility of Latino immigrants brushed out of a narrative that gives pride of place to European populations at the National Immigration Museum in Buenos Aires, inaugurated in 2001 (Blickstein 2011: 96– 106). Glas (Chapter 10), focusing on the case of migrants from the countryside to the Bolivian city of Sucre, looks at how identity and hybridization of culture are addressed in four very different heritage institutions in Sucre, underlining their influence in processes of social recognition. As Lanz (Chapter 2) also demonstrates in this volume, in distinctive locality and circumscribed places, such as cities, it might be easier to undertake successful experiments promoting alternative expressions of belonging (see also Chapters 5, 7, 12 and 14).

Much has been published on the effects of cultural diversity and social inclusion discourses and policies on museums' representations of migration in settler countries such as Canada, Australia, the United States and New Zealand (Ashley 2005, Williams 2006, Rabinovitch 2007, Ang 2009), leading to exhibitions experimenting with multi-vocality and the layering of viewpoints, inclusive of minority and indigenous self-representations. For instance, the multicultural agenda pursued by the Australian government in the 1970s and 1980s is adduced to explain changes in public culture, resulting in the founding of two migration museums in Adelaide (established 1986) and Melbourne (established 1998) and greatly influencing the shape and development of the exhibitions of the National Museum of Australia (2001) (McShane 2001, Szekeres 2002, Message 2009a, Trinca and Wehner 2006, Witcomb 2009). In this volume, Hutchison and Witcomb (Chapter 14) choose to explore the ways in which changes in Australian public policy have, over time, affected the nature and curatorial strategies of migration exhibitions, identifying two core approaches: history and culture. Meanwhile, Message (Chapter 3) considers how those changes have impacted on museums' engagement with

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

such issues as racism by analysing the recent *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition in Melbourne.

In settler countries where immigration lies at the very heart of national identity, it has been incorporated into the national narrative along with a recentring of aboriginal voices, a process described by Ohliger (2010: 22) as the 'nationalization of immigration history' that he warns 'can only serve as role model for Europe or the various European nation-states to a very limited degree' as they draw their founding myths from different sources.<sup>11</sup> However, in Europe, in the broader nationalization of migration history, emigration has been far less problematic and conflicting than immigration (see Chapters 5, 8 and 11), and museums – local, regional and national – located in nations with heavy emigration flows have long engaged with the phenomena of out-migration and settlement abroad, often foregrounding the contributions of expatriates to their new homelands without necessarily revisiting colonial visions (Gouriévidis 2010: 79–88). In European history emigration is a striking feature and emigratory flows could be considerable, not least when famine struck or when new territories were secured and colonies developed – the two dovetailed in the British case. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, whilst many European nations (such as Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom) were witnessing heavy emigration, France was an exception: 'a country of immigrants in a continent of emigrants' (Blanc-Chaléard 2001: 9).<sup>12</sup>

In many European countries, diversity discourses have led to the reappraisal of ethnographic collections whose intellectual and political underpinnings were unequal power relations. They are now frequently revisited, reinterpreted or relocated in the light of postcolonial approaches and new conceptual models, as in France, where the reorganization of national museum collections has been aptly described as a game of 'musical chairs' (Grognet 2007: 29). This reorganization shattered the paradigm that had buttressed the exhibitions in Parisian 'civilization' museums since the 1930s, and erected a hermetic boundary between the heritage and identity of the self – metropolitan French – and those of others. Under President Chirac's impetus, a museum dedicated to the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas was established in 1995 in Paris (Musée du Quai Branly), bringing together the collections found in the Musée National des Arts Africains et Océaniens and those of the ethnological section of the Musée de l'Homme. If it sacralized and aestheticized the notion of 'otherness', this move also set in motion a process of rethinking national collections – both existing and forthcoming – and national self-image. The Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (CNHI) in Paris, inaugurated in October

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

2007, was one outcome; the other was the Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM) in the Mediterranean port of Marseille, opened in June 2013 (when the city was European Capital of Culture). Both museums epitomize France's repositioning of her cultural and memorial<sup>13</sup> policies, and her attempt to reframe national identity as 'transcultural' rather than 'bounded and coherent' (Macdonald 2003). As the first *national* immigration museum in the European museumscape, the CNHI has been the object of much academic interest and it is worth briefly examining its case in relation to French cultural and social policies.<sup>14</sup>

In 2003, the French Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin (2004: 5), envisaged the CNHI as a means of 'giving a new lease of life to the French Republican model of integration', and of rekindling national cohesion.<sup>15</sup> The museum's website echoes his words, presenting the museum as a 'major element of social and republican cohesion', adding that it must rise to the challenge of inscribing the history of immigration within the national narrative, making it an integral part of the national heritage and 'immigration into a legitimate cultural theme'.<sup>16</sup> Its task was to alter the perception of 'immigrants', a term invariably used to refer to populations originating from former French colonies – notably North and sub-Saharan Africa – in the social imaginary, and to create a broader perspective encompassing all immigrant groups (Toubon 2004: 7 and 2007: 8–9, Murphy 2007: 70). The CNHI, however, as a cultural and memorial site, cannot be interpreted as the hallmark of a significant shift in French social policies related to issues of identity and nationality. In fact, by the time it was inaugurated, President Sarkozy – who failed to attend the opening – was in power, heading an administration whose policy orientation was symbolized by the creation of a new flagship department – the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development – eloquently shortened in common parlance to 'Immigration and National Identity'. It underscored a return to traditional French Republican values and a tougher approach to immigration, in particular illegal immigration (*Le Monde* 2009), in a move partly meant to win over some of the far-right electorate. The lack of political endorsement at the time of the museum's opening, and its illegal but peaceful occupation by some 500 undocumented workers backed by the CGT (one of the French union confederations) between October 2010 and January 2011,<sup>17</sup> give weight to the conclusions put forward by Stevens (2008: 68). She underlined the 'nebulous relations between politics and culture', adding that 'whilst [museums] may appeal to policy makers as a (relatively) cheap and highly visible fix, the diversity of actors they engage means their ideological destination is hard if not impossible fully to determine'. Initial intents do not prefigure later uses and perceptions (by visitors, members of civil society, museum actors and new heads

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

of state or governments). The museum's occupation ostensibly turned it, at least for a while, from an instrument with which the French state hoped to promote a reformist agenda into a site of contest for members of civil society. Yet, reflecting on those events, which the museum documented, the museum's director deplored the general lack of media attention and more specifically the minimal attention that was paid to the undocumented migrants themselves, perpetuating the sense of their 'invisibility' in French society and politics (Gruson 2011: 20–1).

Whilst the CNHI was a museum without objects or an initial collection (Lafont-Couturier 2007), and still envisions itself as a work in progress, dedicated to collecting tangible and intangible traces of the history of immigration rather than to a 'collection',<sup>18</sup> Marseille's MuCEM illustrates more strikingly France's turn in museological and memorial policy orientation – with geographical and cultural decentring lying at the heart of the project. Importantly, the MuCEM is largely erected on the ashes of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (MNATP), opened in Paris in 1937 and closed in 2005.<sup>19</sup> The MNATP had focused on the ethnological research of French rural and folk culture with a cross-sectional display of French regional diversity, and spearheaded a network of regional museums. In its heyday, it had stood as a landmark in French museology, linked with the work of Georges Henri Rivière, whose name is associated with pioneering museographical and museological concepts that transformed the French museum and heritage landscape, such as the ecomuseum movement (Poulot 1994). The MuCEM intends to mark a rupture from the nostalgic and strictly French metropolitan gaze of its forebear and articulate a new approach to 'the dialectics of identity and alterity, of the local and the global', characteristic of the modern digital age (Suzzarelli 2013: 9). With a focus on the Mediterranean and European worlds and no longer solely on the French nation, French culture and identity are to be understood from a dialogical and intercultural perspective, with the museum capturing ideas of intersection and exchange. In the words of Frédéric Mitterrand, former Minister for Culture and Communication, who laid the foundation stone of the building in 2009, it stands for

a new approach to our shared history, a novel way of constructing our memory ... It follows in the footsteps of Popular Arts and Traditions, which it will both maintain and transform through its openness to the diverse Mediterranean and European worlds with which our national memory will be set in a dialogical relation.

(Mitterrand 2009)

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*



FIGURE 1.1 The Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (Paris) occupied by undocumented workers, October 2010. Photo Laurence Gouriévidis

The CNHI and the MuCEM both strive to articulate transcultural identities and introduce multiple perspectives, without necessarily breaking away from the national paradigm and, in the case of CNHI, the ideal of Republican integration.

They also epitomize a trend found in many European member states, where museum collections or remits are being rethought to reflect the changes unleashed by the globalization and internationalization of cultures. A similar reassessment of the national museumscape in the mid-1990s in Sweden led to the opening, in 2004, of Gothenburg's Museum of World Culture (MWC), whose collection stemmed from former ethnographic and archaeological displays. Interdisciplinarity, dialogue and multi-vocality are its core values, condensed in the expression 'glocality' (Lagerkvist 2008: 90–1). The ideological foundation of the MWC is said to stem from UNESCO's 2001 *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* and previous policy documents on the issue (Sandhal 2006; Lagerkvist 2008: 92). The discourses surrounding museums that engage with migration are indeed often threaded with global and supranational policy statements. Global cultural policies, such as those advanced by UNESCO, have impacted on museums' reorientation towards social inclusion and diversity; the notion of cultural diversity had long been debated (it was presented as early as the 1982 *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies*<sup>20</sup>) before it was enshrined in

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

UNESCO's 2001 Universal Declaration and 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*.

Similarly, and understandably, given its origins and *raison d'être*, the European Union has also played a crucial role in promoting intercultural dialogue and cultural projects that reach beyond nation-statism. Its influence on museum development and exhibitions can be related to a variety of actions and incentives, as demonstrated in many of the chapters in this volume. Cultural diversity has been advocated in policy documents such as the 1995 *Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*. Work on Scandinavian museums has shown its significance on the countries that ratified it and how this translated in the museum sphere, raising the issues of recategorization, collecting and interpretation that were alluded to above (Niemi 2008, Aarekol 2008, Silvén 2008).<sup>21</sup> Beyond policy documents, the promotion of themed years singling out focus issues is tied in with transnational, national and local initiatives, often giving rise to temporary or more permanent exhibitions. Following EU enlargement, 2008 was chosen as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue and was aimed at 'increasing mutual understanding, exploring the benefits of cultural diversity, fostering active European citizenship and a sense of European belonging'.<sup>22</sup> Many exhibitions were produced on that theme, as Van Geert highlights with respect to Barcelona (Chapter 12). Themed and commemorative years are occasions for venues to reaffirm established discourses on identity, belonging and shared values, but also, and importantly, to revisit these topics from new perspectives and challenge existing models. In particular, temporary exhibitions can turn into innovative and stimulating experiments in museological and museographical terms, a point illustrated by many of the contributors to this volume (see also Poehls 2011: 338). Critically, Europe acts as an enabling mechanism, offering funding opportunities for cultural projects from a variety of sources. Structural fund programmes, for instance, offer a range of instruments and can promote culture as a tool for local and regional development. One of them, PEACE III, which ran from 2007 to 2013 and aimed to promote peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border region, was used by the Mid-Antrim Museums Service to fund a variety of projects related in the main to indigenous, but also to ethnic minority, groups (Chapter 11). The European Social Fund, whose purposes are job creation and a more inclusive society, has assisted several of the MWC's projects in Gothenburg, such as its exhibition on the global human trafficking industry and its work with migrants from the Horn of Africa who face obstacles in the labour market (Lagerkvist 2008: 95, 97–8). The availability of financial support from socio-economic funds for cultural projects actively engaging with social issues and combating prejudice speaks volumes about the acknowledged significance in the public sphere of culture

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

and more specifically museums as vehicles for change and 'places of leadership' (Lohman 2008: xxxv).

### MUSEUMS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Museums' influence in the promotion of a more tolerant, equitable and inclusive society, as 'engines of social transformation' (Bennett 2006: 57), is widely accepted. This societal role is imbued with the notion of social responsibility (Sandell 2002), a concept which relates to their more traditional remit – to educate and inform through their collections and their interpretation – and their perceived status as sources of authority – as sites of meaningmaking and validation. As already seen when engaging with the history of migration and the representation of minority groups, museums are inevitably implicated in 'issues of power, inequality and access to resources' (Small 2011: 119) through the narratives they construct. Whilst this has meant methodological changes, such as reassessing collections from a postcolonial standpoint so as to correct misrepresentations, and formulating new collecting strategies, it has also raised questions of practice, museum staffing, audience development and participation, access and positioning (Hooper-Greenhill 1997). In many cases, the museum profession has led the way in instigating change and envisaging new agendas and approaches – at times in contrast to governmental policy. This impetus also closely intermeshed with a force for change originating 'from below' – from social groups actively wishing to enter museum narratives and spaces.

The socially engaged museum does not simply aim to reflect society and its diverse character, but actively seeks to transform ways of thinking and perceptions of others, with a view to confronting prejudice, provoking dialogue and debate and fostering understanding. Inclusiveness is applied to audiences and the need to reach out and appeal to a new public, such as ethnic minorities, through the reframing of narratives, through the organization of activities and events occurring in tandem with exhibitions, and through community consultation, cooperation and participation. In Britain, *The Peopling of London* exhibition, which ran from November 1993 to May 1994 at the Museum of London, has been hailed as a forerunner of this type of exhibition. It was devised to illustrate new practices and approaches, and has served as a template for other museums (Merriman 1997). Running through the literature exploring museums' dealings with migration history are the central importance placed on the targeted individuals' input and the need for museums to adopt mechanisms and working practices that enable consultation and negotiation with various communities. This may involve collaboration with minority groups in devising

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

an exhibition, appointment of temporary or permanent curatorial staff with ethnic minority backgrounds, partnership with organizations working with the focus groups, and the implementation of educational activities, workshops and outreach programmes (Hooper-Greenhill 1997, Goodnow 2008, Skartveit and Goodnow 2010; see also Chapter 7, this volume). Several of the chapters in this volume present the personal experiences of practitioners and activists, who critically examine the methods employed by the institutions where they worked to promote ideals of participation, inclusion and engagement (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Broadly strategies adopted differ according to museums' constituencies, objectives, means, and national museological traditions. In Australia, where the community approach was favoured, the Migration Museum in Adelaide opted for a community-access gallery – The Forum (Szekeres 2002: 147–8).<sup>23</sup> In France, where community, when linked with migrant groups, is equated with communitarianism (Rautenberg 2007) – a highly contentious notion connoting cultural alienation (*repli sur soi*) and contradicting the Republican ideal – the CNHI, whose purpose it is to engage with civil society, did not develop a dedicated community exhibition space. Instead, it has placed a network of partners – from immigrant associations and firms to public institutions and administrations, national and international, public and private – ‘at the very heart of the project’ (Arquez-Roth 2007: 86), making it a ‘federating place for initiatives, cooperation, diffusion and innovation’.<sup>24</sup>

Such museums become sites where groups long absent or misrepresented in museum narratives are made visible and audible, where their viewpoints and experiences are brought to light and enter museums' collections of archives and objects. The process mirrors what, since the 1960s, historians writing social history sought to achieve when they first addressed the history of the ‘common people’ – those who had been hidden from history because of class, gender, race or age (Tosh 1996: 7–10, 96–102). In both cases, the recourse to oral history, to the voice of the people, is fundamental as it gives ‘social history a human face’ (Tosh 1996: 211), and compensates for the lack of records. Whilst the use of oral evidence has had a crucial influence on the development of immigration and Black history (Thompson 1988: 98–99), oral testimonies and personal experiences are privileged museographical approaches in exhibitions tackling immigration, and many chapters in this volume speak of their importance as a strategy for inclusion, whilst also analysing the challenges they present (in particular Chapter 6, as well as Chapters 5, 7 and 11). If oral history was envisaged as a ‘democratic alternative, challenging the monopoly of an academic elite’ (Tosh 1996: 212), many historians researching immigration also understood their role in terms of civic engagement and action; such is the case of

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

French historian Gérard Noiriel, who envisages his scientific contribution not simply in pedagogical terms, but as a means 'to help citizens and governments better fulfil their roles' and to posit different ways of problematizing social issues from those propounded by the press and sectors of the establishment (Noiriel 2004: 20). He long campaigned for a site – a *lieu de mémoire* – dedicated to this aspect of the national past, enabling 'the breakdown of stereotypes, in such a way as to retrieve the reality and infinite diversity of people often obscured by administrative categories and public discourses' (Noiriel 2007: 16). His resignation from the Historical Committee of the CNHI in 2007 (along with seven other historians) marked his opposition to the newly formed Ministry of Immigration and National Identity, whose appellation and purpose, in his view, could only reinforce existing stereotypes (Poinsot *et al.* 2007: 100, Coroller 2007).

In the journey to democratization, participation and empowerment are seen as closely entwined. Just as the socio-political implication of oral history was that the groups concerned became part of the production process which acted as a means for them to repossess and affirm their collective identity, the same was true of the work undertaken with marginalized groups by museums (Nightingale and Swallow 2003; Chapter 10, this volume). The contributions of socially excluded or disadvantaged groups to decision-making and production processes, allowing them the opportunity for self-representation in public spaces, have the potential not only to be empowering for such individuals, but also to alter prevailing images and discourses, such as those of a racist and xenophobic cast that are peddled and trivialized in the press. Exhibitions involving the participation of refugees and displaced persons are a case in point (Goodnow 2008, Skartveit and Goodnow 2010).<sup>25</sup> Sandell (2007: 102) takes the view that, since museums stand as 'resources' which can be enlisted to deploy interpretive strategies that challenge prejudices, they should consider doing so 'in ways which privilege a particular and unequivocal moral standpoint, one based on concepts of social justice', and jettison positions of neutrality and objectivity.<sup>26</sup> Aware of the critiques levelled against such an approach, he argues that all museums signify specific moral stances (Sandell 2007: 196). Message's research (Chapter 3) has also shown that museums as venues for debate and protest can assist reform movements. Underpinning the critiques of the positionality of museums lie two closely intertwined factors: governments' long-standing use of museums for ideological purposes; and the deeply politicized and polarizing issues associated with immigration as a generalized, non-specific and blurred notion, connoting immigration quotas, citizenship rights, legalization of undocumented migrants, the status and rights of refugees, to name but a few. The reformist agendas of

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

twenty-first-century museums – based on principles of equity, human rights and democracy – are viewed by some as just as moralistic as the nationalistic programmes of their predecessors, particularly when they respond to guidelines and policies issued by government bodies; and heritage and museum studies, along with the museum profession, are tasked with fully exploring the ideological bases of contemporary endeavours and their implications for minority groups, power relations and the perception of difference (Klein 2008: 155–60).

More specifically, notwithstanding its usefulness and relevance, concerns have been voiced with respect to the emphasis and use, in public policy and museum practice, of the protean and complex notion of ‘community’, which, as a socio-cultural construct, requires critical assessment (Karp *et al.* 1992, Crooke 2007, Watson 2007). In museum and cultural studies literature, Britain – particularly since New Labour came to power in 1997 – often exemplifies the governmental policy orientation that places the onus for social change, such as social inclusion, tolerance and reciprocal respect, on the cultural sphere (Message 2009b, Black 2010) and makes community engagement and participation an imperative for local museums, linked with funding support and opportunities (Crooke 2007: 41–63). The nature and effectiveness of such an orientation, as well as its funding mechanisms, have been challenged by a report commissioned by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, *Whose Cake is it Anyway?* (Lynch 2011). This study argues that, in spite of laudable efforts in many large organizations, the development of communitarian strategies remained peripheral to their core work; community partners felt that they were still cast in the role of passive beneficiaries or products rather than active participants, a situation described as ‘empowerment-lite’ (Lynch 2011). In this volume, Bernadette Lynch (Chapter 4) furthers her argument, challenging museums to eschew consensus and relinquish their ‘coercive cultural authority’ in order to become genuine places of contest and ‘creative struggle’. Interestingly, her report also concluded that community agency was more easily implemented by smaller organizations that were clearly embedded in their local communities (Lynch 2011). Much of the museum and heritage studies literature has long stressed this point.

One of the central innovative aspects that the new museological movement ushered in was to address community needs, moving museums’ focus from objects to social issues and encouraging a participatory approach to museum work (Harrison 2005), in particular through small-scale local initiatives. Whilst in France the deafening silence of social and history museums with respect to immigration was reportedly filled by

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

the creation of a national institution, it had been sporadically broken, mainly in the 1990s, by the trickle of a few pioneering temporary local exhibitions, often organized in collaboration with immigrant associations (Joly 2007: 70–2). Among them were those run by the ecomuseum at Val de Bièvre, situated in the southern Parisian suburb of Fresnes<sup>27</sup> (Wasserman 1998), and Grenoble's Musée Dauphinois (MD)<sup>28</sup> in the French Alps (Stevens 2007, Duclos 2006). Others were organized by museums focusing on the industrial development of particular localities (Joly 2007). Many of these museums drew their inspiration from the shift in museological approach attributed to the emergence of eco-museology<sup>29</sup> from the 1960s, with which Hugues de Varine, director of ICOM from 1964 to 1970, associates community museums throughout the world. Eco (or community) museology – often subsumed into 'new museology' – was the symmetrical development within the museum sector of societal movements seeking to recast society and politics. They comprised, for instance, struggles for the recognition of civil rights, for democracy in Latin America and the Iberian peninsula, and for national recognition in newly independent colonies. In de Varine's words, the eco or community museum is identified with a clearly defined territory and

must begin as, and remain, an expression of the community, an endogenous product, to be recognized by the community as its own property and instrument ... [It] must at the same time remain open to the rest of the world in order to be able to receive selected useful inputs from outside and to be a tool for adapting the community and its culture(s) to a changing world.

(Varine 2006: 228)

Democracy and the empowerment of local communities feature prominently in the list of criteria defining these museums, as do the innovative use of and attitude towards sites and multidisciplinary (Boylan 1992b, Corsane *et al.* 2007: 102). Central to one of the Bolivian projects examined by Glas (Chapter 10) is the notion of 'ethno-development', whose ultimate objective is community empowerment and control through the preservation and commercialization of traditional skills. In the eco or new museum movement, participative museology and grass-roots initiatives are given pride of place and are used as tools to foster self-confidence and development. Ashley (Chapter 9) analyses two examples of 'self-made' immigrant museums in Canada and concludes that the process of production itself provided the communities with valuable 'cultural toolkits' as regards identity, citizenship and belonging, even

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

though different versions of citizenship were expressed. The issue of recognition in the public sphere can also be addressed from a memorial perspective.

### MUSEUMS, MEMORY AND RECOGNITION

Museums as *lieux de mémoire*<sup>30</sup> are 'not what is remembered, but sites where memory is at work; not tradition itself but its laboratory' (Nora 1997a: 18). The word 'laboratory' conveys the contingency of their existence dependent on favourable contexts and pressing needs; the process of adaptation and reassessment which they may undergo over time; and the fact that the 'experiments' they conduct may founder or even backfire, as well as raise hopes or objections.

*Lieux de mémoire* are *lieux* (sites) 'in three senses of the word – material, symbolic and functional but simultaneously and only to varying degrees ... The three aspects always coexist' (Nora 1997b: 37). This volume contains numerous examples of the diversity of material forms that migrant *lieux de mémoire* can take (Chapters 9, 13 and 15) and museums themselves can inhabit reinvented or reconfigured sites, one striking example being the CNHI, which is contentiously housed in a building that was erected for the 1931 Colonial Exhibition and was the former location of the defunct Musée National des Arts Africains et Océaniens. Choosing a site that embodied the apex of French colonialism was read, by postcolonial historians, as blatant exploitation of a memorial site to serve political ends (Bancel and Blanchard 2007). As previously highlighted, the changing functional role of museums from pedagogical tools to socially empowering is attested by the increase in the number of projects emanating from civil society. Nonetheless, one of their permanent and crucially significant functions has been to forge a sense of belonging among human groups. As specialized institutions that articulate and shape collective or cultural memory (Misztal 2003: 19, Erll 2010), they crystallize ideas of origin and historical journeys, projecting and transmitting socially shared representations of the past and fostering cohesion and togetherness. Through their choice and unpacking of foundational events, dates and processes, they are markers of collective identity, contributing to its formation and reformulation (McLean 2005). In this respect, as symbolic sites, they are important instruments in the process of recognition, a process on which social respect (*estime sociale*; Ricoeur 2004: 294–6) is founded and which power relations underlie (Ricoeur 2004: 311, Radstone 2005: 145).

Recognition is closely bound up with the perceived role of museums as spaces of authority that confer legitimacy on and endorse selected versions of the past. It

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

frequently underpins the avowed aims associated with museums that engage with migrant voices, be they local or national, particularly in their varied uses and recentring of minority visions – the recognition of difference. It might manifest the will of a state – the ultimate recognizing authority – to inscribe migrant or minority memories in a master narrative and incorporate them in a common national imaginary. Alternatively, it might express the desire of diverse communities to achieve validation and social valorization by giving their forgotten, suppressed or distorted memories visibility in the public arena. As *lieux de mémoire*, museums are implicated in the recovery, rehabilitation and legitimization of social groups, and the dissemination of their image and status with the view, in many cases, of eventually strengthening the social fabric. Yet, in the case of once marginalized memories, the resulting effects may well be the emergence or resurgence of tensions and discord, symptomatic of lingering social malaise. As Hodgkin and Radstone (2005: 132) commented: ‘the belonging that comes through shared and recognised personal and public memory is complex and fragmentary, and subject to change’. Unsurprisingly, as they are media of recognition, museums are prominent catalysts in memory wars.

The study of their symbolic and recognizing function is threaded with fundamental questions surrounding the social foundations of memory work, questions first advanced by M. Halbwachs (1997) in his pioneering analysis of the social frameworks of memory and, since the 1980s, explored and reconfigured by scholars working in the broad and multidisciplinary field of memory studies. They involve looking at the social actors who are implicated or consulted, such as memory brokers, who, according to Noiriel (2004: 19), speak in the names of the groups to which they belong and give homogeneity to the disparate memories of each member. Recurrently, studies underline the necessity to consider the complexity of social relations and to factor in issues and divisions internal to minority groups, such as gender, age and class, alongside external factors relating to similar groups or society at large. Such social issues also pertain to the structural and organizational environment of museums, for instance the place assigned to and taken by migrant communities and individuals conditioning the privileged narrative strategies (Lagerkvist 2008, Møller and Einarsen 2008; see also Chapter 9, this volume). As pointed out by Torres (2011: 19), the place conferred to and taken by migrants in museum production conditions whether their contribution has a long-lasting effect and becomes institutional. This distinction is drawn from Assman’s use of Halbwachs’s concept of ‘collective memory’; ‘cultural memory’, formalized and stabilized through institutions of preservation is distinguished from ‘communicative memory’, more diffuse, with limited time depth and span, and based on interaction (Assman 2010). Another aspect

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

concerns the modes of articulation through which discourses or narratives of and about the past are produced, reused or recast, alongside those they provoke. Not only do factual content or data require unpicking, but so does the manner in which they are communicated. This could involve emphasis on personal testimonies or witnessing and use of oral history; focus on policies or political history; and use of symbolic, mythical or religious images – recognizable and evocative tropes – such as exodus or rebirth. Memories, once publicly projected, might trigger a new awareness, fire the imagination or generate conflict, particularly since memory work is intimately linked with the present interests and objectives of the social groups involved and is heavily predicated on power relations and levels of agency. In some cases exhibitions reproduce racialized social relations, reflecting long-ingrained issues of power, and prevent any break from past memorial and narrative strategies (Chivallon 2008).

If, according to Chaumont and Pourtois (1999: 3), the specificity of the contemporary social sphere is that recognition occupies centre stage and has become the foremost objective of group mobilization, it follows that the very nature of recognition related to museum work needs to be scrutinized. French museums, notably the early exhibitions at the Musée Dauphinois (Grenoble) and the more recent CNHI, have recurrently featured in arguments dissecting the process (Dufoix 2005, Cohen 2007, Stevens 2007). Such terms as ‘truth’, ‘reparation’, ‘debt’ and ‘justice’, all pertaining to the fields of ethics and social justice, saturate the discourse surrounding the CNHI and similar endeavours. The mission statement of the CNHI is used by Dufoix (2005: 142–7) to test what he identifies as the ‘eight Rs’ – eight dimensions in the politics of recognition, either granted or requested: repentance, reparation, rebalancing, restitution, requalification, recollection, reconstitution and reconciliation. Five of these may, in my view, directly apply to museums.<sup>31</sup>

- Rebalancing involves the endorsement of social policies aimed at redressing continuing discrimination (i.e. positive discrimination). Although Dufoix’s definition mainly hints at the social sphere, cultural policies can also be part of the process, as evidenced in the case of the Kanak, the indigenous inhabitants of the Pacific island of New Caledonia – one of France’s overseas territories. Both the agency created in 1989 for the development of Kanak culture and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre opened in Nouméa, the island’s capital, in 1998 were meant to achieve ‘cultural rebalancing’ (*Ethnologie française* 1999: 437, Message 2006: 159–60). They followed from the Matignon Agreements (1988) and a period of often violent confrontation between Kanak and Caldoche (settlers).
- Requalification concerns the past and social actors and entails redefining past events as traumatic and some groups as victims or guilty parties. The cases of the

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

rehabilitation of indigenous voices in museums in multicultural societies and national minorities in Scandinavian countries and Japan (see Chapter 15) come to mind, as does the case of the Harkis<sup>32</sup> (Baussant 2006: 172).

- Recollection centres on the formal act of remembering the past. Museums are akin to sites of commemoration where selected past events and people may well become sacralized. Centenary exhibitions, such as those celebrating the abolition of slavery, constitute critical occasions for enhanced historical research, state apologies and collective remembrance.<sup>33</sup>
- Reconstitution relates to the writing of history or providing access to the past through historical or historiographical knowledge.<sup>34</sup>
- Finally, recognition has a bearing on reconciliation in that it influences the future relations between groups who might differ on the meaning of the past, and yet share the same social space. In post-conflict situations, museums can play a crucial role mediating between communities, as Crooke's research (2007 and Chapter 11, this volume) has shown.

The planned CNHI responded to 'a duty of justice and recognition' (Toubon 2004: 149)<sup>35</sup> and combined the dimensions outlined above:

The centre must be a place of truth and reparation. A place of truth: no history can develop in the long term without the support of the rule of law ... A place of reparation: the history of immigration does not start after the Revolution. France, from its origin, gathered several nations. Truth consoles, repairs humiliations.

(Toubon 2004: 189)

Central to its project, in Cohen's view (2007: 403), was 'the elaboration of an ethics of recognition' seeking to help migrants and their descendants to regain their dignity, do them Representing migration in museums 15 justice and heal moral wounds. In acknowledging the memory of discrimination, the museum uses this past to put forward a vision for the future in the hope that its work might contribute towards a better and more equitable society. Similarly, Jean-Claude Duclos (2006), former director of the Musée Dauphinois, emphasizes the centrality of recognition of past suffering in the museological experience developed by the museum, one which gives pride of place to oral testimonies and personal memories and was deemed best suited to groups such as migrants from the Maghreb region, for whom, in contrast to previously exhibited groups, material artefacts were not relevant memory carriers (Duclos 2006: 22). The Musée Dauphinois also centres on affect through the evocation

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

of sensory experiences and, in some cases, the use of olfactory stimuli to convey a sense of place and elicit emotional responses in visitors – empathy and often malaise or compassion (Pico 2007). Witcomb (2013) has analysed how affect can prompt historical understanding or lead to questions and a desire to discover more. Duclos (2006: 25) concludes that if these exhibitions, notably those focusing on migrants from the Maghreb region (*Pour que la Vie Continue – D'Isère et du Maghreb, 1999–2001*) and returning settlers from colonial Algeria (*Français d'Isère et d'Algérie, 2003–4*), brought memory conflicts to a head – at times brutally – the preparatory work, surrounding programme of events and actual museography all contributed to creating a dialogic and intersecting space and initiated the grieving process.<sup>36</sup> Stevens (2007: 37), in her study of these exhibitions, reached a similar conclusion. She linked differing modes of reception to the differing forms of recognition at stake, pointed out that groups seeking recognition did not necessarily wish to be recognized as 'victims', and stressed the need to take into account the response(s) of audiences – a critical component of the process of recognition. This process also has to be envisaged in the longer term, as it may occur through stages (Stevens 2007: 37). In Duclos's view (2006: 25), the experience could also generate a sense of closure. He cites the case of Greek migrants,<sup>37</sup> many of whom originated from Asia Minor and were forcibly expelled from the city of Smyrna following the 1923 convention. During the preparatory phase of the exhibition, future projects were contemplated by participants (films, publications, and so on), yet none materialized: 'memory had been heard, the need for history satisfied, the page could be turned' (Duclos 2006: 25). Similarly, in her work with refugees, Lynch (2011) underlines the importance for participants of 'giving testimony', a motivation which she fears might not be shared by curators.

Whilst museums are used to combat prejudice and reverse misrepresentation, as *lieux de mémoire* and media of recognition, they are also tasked with the responsibility of healing deeply etched social wounds or reducing and attenuating social cleavages. As the above examples show, the tensions that surface around migration memories are frequent signs of a post-colonial fault line, and colonization and slavery have been identified as two of the four major sources of memorial conflicts or 'memory wars' world-wide. The other two – 'the end of dictatorships' and 'the Holocaust, genocides and massacres' (Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson 2008b: 16) – also imply population movements, either forced or voluntary. Through recollection, reconstitution and requalification, heavy baggage can be verbalized and acknowledged in the narratives featured in migration exhibitions, and reconciliation frequently stands out as the cornerstone buttressing the museum projects engaging with migration. According to

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

Ricoeur (2000b: 645), recognition is key to a soothed memory which arises 'in some favourable circumstances, such as the permission granted by another to remember, or better still, the help accorded by another to share a memory'.

### STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This volume presents the multifaceted forms, objectives and challenges that exhibitions staged by museums engaging with the history of migration can offer. In the book's structure, the global examples featured are not organized in terms of historical experience – that is settler countries as opposed to non-settler countries – as the aim was to highlight similarities and contrasts with respect to practice, weight of public policies and discourses, as well as museological and museographical developments. After a first section introducing issues and challenges (Chapters 2–4), the chapters are grouped into two main themes. Part 2 (Chapters 5–10) considers how and to what effect a range of museum spaces and types have engaged with issues of diversity, citizenship and belonging through migrant narratives. Part 3 (Chapters 11–15) focuses more closely on how national narratives have accommodated migration history.

Overall, the book combines articles that foreground the practical experiences of members of the museum profession with academic analyses focusing on a wide range of geo- and socio-political issues. It aims to inform thinking and practice for museums concerned with narratives of migration and more widely offers reflections on the memorialization of migration in contemporary societies.

### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are my own.
2. Noiriel, who was amongst the first historians to address the history of immigration in France, was commenting on the French situation (see also Candau 1996: 101). In this respect, the French case has recurrently been contrasted to that of the United States both in historiographical and memorial terms (Noiriel 1988: 19–26, Green 2007).
3. See the Museums and Diversity series, details available at [www.museumstudies.uib.no/index.php/publications-section.html](http://www.museumstudies.uib.no/index.php/publications-section.html) (accessed 9 July 2013). Much of the work undertaken by museums addressing migration is embedded in UNESCO's policy documents and statements regarding cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. The Migration Museum Network, which was formally set up in 2006

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

under its auspices and that of the International Organization for Migration, identified three key functions of such museums: acknowledging the contribution made by migrants to their host societies; fostering their inclusion and integration within nation-states; and building awareness of their experiences and promoting empathy amongst the wider public. See [www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/projects/unesco-iom-migrationmuseums-initiative/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/projects/unesco-iom-migrationmuseums-initiative/) (accessed 9 July 2013). The same view motivates the International Council of Museums (ICOM), one of the NGOs closely associated with UNESCO (Vinson 2007).

4. The European Commission has funded a number of humanities research projects related to issues of identity formation within Europe through successive Framework Programmes (FP). Two might be singled out, both part of the seventh FP: EuNaMus – European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen (2010–13) and MeLa\* – European Museums and Libraries in/of the Age of Migration (2011–15) (Aronsson 2012, European Commission 2012, Lanz and Postiglione 2012). Lanz and Cimoli (Chapters 2 and 5, this volume) are involved in the MeLa\* FP.
5. The promotion and development of cultural projects, or their redefinition, have often been triggered by socio-political events associated with social exclusion or mounting racism, for instance the refugee crisis in Australia in 2001 (see Chapter 14, this volume), the banlieues riots in the north-east of Paris in 2005, and the recurring attacks on immigrants in Italy in 2008.
6. 'Migration' is used in its most comprehensive definition: from migration internal to states or continents to international and transcontinental migration, from recent migratory flows to historic moves, from legal to undocumented migrants and refugees, from voluntary to forced migration, although distinctions are outlined whenever necessary.
7. The predicament is captured in McShane (2001). See also McLean (2005: 1); on the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration as a project see Viet (2005). Representing migration in museums 17
8. In this respect, the notion of 'contact zone' has been a useful model for practitioners and in the research of many scholars working on museums engaging with migration (see Chapters 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10, this volume). First developed by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* to depict 'the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations' (cited in Clifford 1999: 438), it was expanded by Clifford beyond colonial encounters 'to include relations within the same state, region, city' and to describe 'social' rather than

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

- 'geographic' distances (Clifford 1999: 445).
9. For analyses of the historical development of museums, see Aronsson (2012: 68–70) regarding national institutions; for analyses of the 'new museology', see Vergo (1989), Ross (2004) and Message (2006).
  10. In Britain, devolution describes the transfer of some powers from central government (Westminster) to regionally elected assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Devolution Acts were passed in 1998.
  11. Ohliger draws on Baur's comparative study (2009) of three museums in 'classical countries of immigration' – Ellis Island Museum in New York (1990), Pier 21 Museum in Halifax, Nova Scotia (1999), and the Immigration Museum in Melbourne.
  12. See also Noiriel 2002: 8.
  13. In French political and academic discourse, memory is a potent notion (see Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson 2008a, Michel 2010) and the gestation of the CNHI occurred in the context of intensifying memorial conflicts.
  14. For details on the genesis of the CNHI, see, for instance, Green (2007) and Stevens (2008, 2010). *Hommes et Migrations* (2007, issue 1267) was entirely devoted to the CNHI whilst *Museum International* (2007, issue 59 (1–2)), *Hommes et Migrations* (2011, issue 1293) and *Human Architecture* (2011, issue 9 (4)) all feature articles on the CNHI and more broadly on museums and migration.
  15. Although issues of social exclusion and racism had been smouldering since the 1980s, the sociopolitical context of the new millennium acted as a wake-up call to the political class (left and right) and gave a strong fillip to the project. In particular, the 2002 presidential elections saw the far-right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who had stood on his usual anti-immigrant ticket and defensive identity politics, overtake the Socialist candidate and reach the final round.
  16. [www.histoire-immigration.fr/la-cite/le-projet-de-la-citeLeprojet](http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/la-cite/le-projet-de-la-citeLeprojet) (accessed 20 March 2013).
  17. Undocumented workers were demonstrating against governmental procrastination in implementing legislation regularizing their status; the event was carefully recorded by the CNHI. On the occupation of the museum, see Gruson (2011: 20–1) and Torres (2011: 20).
  18. [www.histoire-immigration.fr/la-cite/le-projet-de-la-citeLeprojet](http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/la-cite/le-projet-de-la-citeLeprojet) (accessed 20 March 2013).
  19. The MNATP had been built from the collections of the Museum of Ethnography,

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

## HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

- created in 1879. Details from MuCEM website: [www.mucem.org/en/leprojet](http://www.mucem.org/en/leprojet) [accessed 22 March 2013].
20. See [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org).
  21. Incidentally, France, in keeping with its unifying Republican ideal, was not among the signatories of this convention.
  22. [www.ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/the-story-of-the-european-year-of-intercultural-dialogue\\_en.htm](http://www.ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/the-story-of-the-european-year-of-intercultural-dialogue_en.htm) [accessed 26 March 2013].
  23. See also the strategy adopted by the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (Sebastian 2007: 155–8). Message summarizes the failings of the community approach in this volume (Chapter 3).
  24. [www.histoire-immigration.fr/la-cite/le-reseau](http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/la-cite/le-reseau) [accessed 20 March 2013]. See also Innocenti (2012: 111–19) on this aspect.
  25. See in particular the article by Jones (2010: xi–xxiv) analysing *Belonging: Voices of London's Refugees*, which ran from October 2006 to February 2007. See also [www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Get-involved/Collaborative-projects/Belonging/](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Get-involved/Collaborative-projects/Belonging/) [accessed 23 April 2013].
  26. See also Viv Szekeres (2002).
  27. Exhibitions held: *Rassemblement: un siècle d'immigration en Ile-de-France* (1993), *Paroles de femmes tunisiennes* (1998), *Insaisissables voyageurs – tsiganes* (2000), and most recently *Pieds-noirs ici, la tête ailleurs* (2012–13), on returning settlers from colonized Algeria.
  28. *Corato-Grenoble* (1989) on Italian migration, *Des Grecs de Grenoble* (1993), [1997–8], *Pour que la Vie Continue – D'Isère et du Maghreb* (1999–2001), *Français d'Isère et d'Algérie* (2003–4), and most recently *Un Air d'Italie* (2011–13).
  29. For a definition and analysis of ecomuseology, see Boylan (1992a, 1992b) and Davis (1999, 2008).
  30. See Erll and Nünning (2010) for a discussion of the concept.
  31. Definitions of the other three are: repentance (public apology from those responsible for discrimination or trauma); reparation (financial payment for prejudices incurred); restitution (political or judicial recognition of acts of despoilment).
  32. Algerians who fought in the French army during the war leading to Algeria's independence.
  33. See Lynch (Chapter 4, this volume) for a critique of Britain's commemoration of

# REPRESENTING MIGRATION IN MUSEUMS

HISTORY, DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Excerpted from *Museums and Migration*

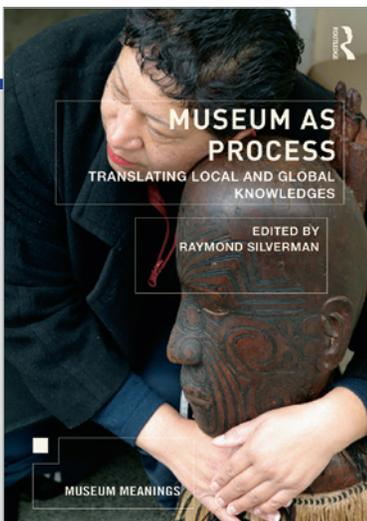
the abolition of the slave trade in museums, which failed to address its implications in contemporary racism.

34. The French word reconnaissance (recognition) contains *connaissance*, meaning knowledge. *Reconnaissance* hence also militates against *méconnaissance* (lack of awareness) of the past. See Ricoeur (2004) for an analysis of the polysemy of the word and its implications.
35. See also Poinot (2008).
36. Memories of the migration from Algeria are shot through with those of the war of independence and are deeply fractured. They are carried by diverse groups and individuals, including: Algerian migrants; Harkis; Pieds-Noirs (returning settlers not all of whom were originally from France); members of pro-independence groups in Algeria and France; members of groups in favour of keeping Algeria French; conscripts; and so on.
37. *Des Grecs de Grenoble*, 1993.

CHAPTER

# 3

## WAMPUM UNITES US DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE



This chapter is excerpted from  
*Museum as Process*

Edited by Raymond Silverman

©2015 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*



### Heidi Bohaker

is Associate Professor of Aboriginal History in the Department of History at the University of Toronto, Canada. Her research interests include Indigenous writing systems and literacies, treaties and treaty-making practices, and the political significance of kinship networks. Bohaker explores the use of digital technologies to foster collaboration in research and knowledge exchange, and is a founding member of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures.



### Alan Ojiig Corbiere

of the Ruffed Grouse Clan, is an Anishinaabe historian and language researcher from the M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island, Canada. He has written on Anishinaabe history and heritage, served as executive director of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, and is now Anishinaabemowin Revitalization Program Coordinator at Lakeview School in M'Chigeeng. Much of his work is dedicated to utilizing every available resource to assist in the revitalization of the Anishinaabe language.

On a wintry December day in 2007 a group of people clustered around a table in the study room of Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum, gazing intently at a woven rectangle of purple and white shell wampum beads (**Figure 3.1**). In the group were the museum's North American curator and members of its collections and conservation staff, the directors of two Ontario cultural centers serving Anishinaabe (Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi and Algonquin) and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) communities, two Canadian doctoral students, and three academics—a historian, an art historian and an anthropologist.<sup>1</sup> The wampum belt puzzled them. The line of white beads extending across the middle of the purple field was intersected in two places by paired lines and "L"-shaped motifs. Since geometric and figurative images on wampum belts serve as mnemonics for important political agreements and treaties, these motifs must mean something, but what? (Jennings 1985). Why did the belt's aesthetic qualities seem somehow diminished by the apparent illegibility and asymmetry of its woven images? And what techniques had been used to make it—were the vegetable fiber warps and wefts hemp or another plant?

Talking through various possibilities, the anthropologist said suddenly, "I think it's a date ... 1766." And there it was, as plain as day, a precise location in time that had not previously been recognized. The historian soon began to consider other questions. What councils had been held in the tumultuous years following the Seven Years War and Pontiac's rebellion? Could the belt be one of the many commissioned by Sir William Johnson for exchange with his First Nations allies? Could Henry Nottidge Moseley, the Oxford anatomy professor who donated the belt to the museum in 1887, have acquired it during his visit to Montreal three years earlier, and might it therefore have come from Mohawk at the nearby communities of Kahnawake or the multinational Catholic community of Oka, which was home to Nipissing, Odawa,

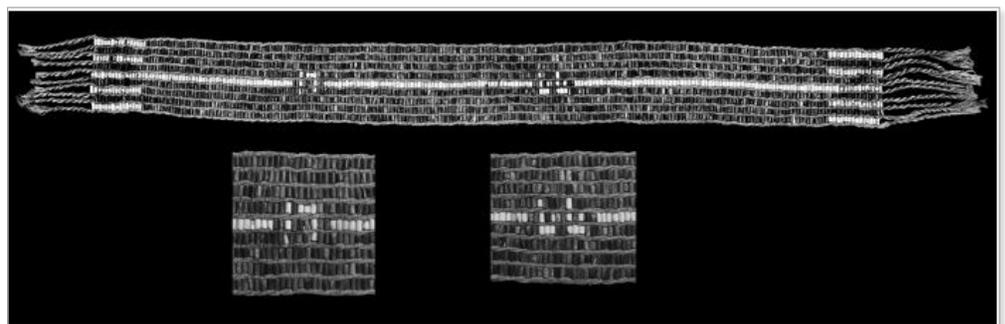


FIGURE 3.1 • Wampum Belt (with detail), Pitt Rivers Museum, 1887.32.2, 76.5 cm x 7.7 cm. Donated by Henry Nottidge Moseley, 1887. Reproduced courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*



### Ruth B. Phillips

is Canada Research Professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. A specialist in the visual arts of the Aboriginal peoples of the Great Lakes region, she has also served as director of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. Phillips researches visual and material culture as aspects of larger processes of culture contact and colonization, in order to contribute to the development of new approaches to museological and academic representations of First Nations art.

Algonquin and Mohawk people? All were potentially fertile lines of inquiry that might lead to the recovery of meanings that have typically been lost when wampum belts left their communities and entered museums. In the early twenty-first century these meanings continue to have important political implications for contemporary negotiations over land and sovereignty. In Canada, in recent years, for example, wampum belts borrowed from museums have been presented in courts of law as evidence in land claims cases.<sup>2</sup>

The conversation that took place around the Pitt Rivers' table can be viewed and heard by clicking on the video box attached to the record that the researchers made that day in the GRASAC Knowledge Sharing database (GKS), created by members of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Art and Culture (GRASAC) (Figure 3.2). The record also contains conventional information about the wampum belt's physical properties and provenance, but its format and contents differ from the growing number of online collections databases developed by anthropology museums and other researchers in recent years. Typically, these very welcome resources digitize selected fields from the records in their internal catalogues and "clean them up" so that they can be presented in a clear, simplified, authoritative and elegant form. In contrast, GKS record makers are asked to provide their reasons for attributing undocumented pieces to particular groups and time periods, bringing to the surface rather than omitting or glossing over the gaps in information and the contradictory opinions that surround many attributions in museum records. It thus deliberately puts on view the uncertainty and messiness that characterize the real-world state of knowledge about Great Lakes and many other ethnographic collections.<sup>3</sup> A second key difference is the regional scope of the GKS, which contrasts to the more usual focus on a single museum's holdings, an artistic genre, or the heritage of a specific community or tribe.<sup>4</sup> The GKS assembles cultural materials from the large geographic region that is the traditional homeland of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee (also Onkwéhonwe or Iroquois), Wendat (Huron), Menomoni, Hochunk (Winnebago), Mesquakie (Fox) and other peoples.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, the GKS is multi-disciplinary, bringing together record sets for material culture, archival documents, historic photographs and language in order to reveal the interrelationships of these different forms of expressive culture.

We believe this approach to be necessary and valuable in the early twenty-first century because it promotes criticality and generates new research questions. On one level, the need for a renewal of research on Great Lakes Indigenous cultural heritage arises from a history of relative neglect during the twentieth century.

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

The screenshot shows the GRASAC website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for Home, Search / Find, Projects, Members, GRASAC, and a dropdown menu for GRAS Phase 3. Below the navigation bar, the page title is "Detailed Item Display - Record Status: REVIEW IN PROGRESS". The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Item Identification:** Full Member with Editorial Responsibility: Ruth Phillips, Stacy Lover, Laura Peers, Cory Willmott. Last Edit: 2012-01-22 BY Ruth Phillips. Item Type: Material Culture. Item Name: wampum belt.
- Description/Summary:** A wampum belt, with "1766" beaded into its design field. Anishinaabe or Haudenosaunee. Donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum by Henry Nottidge Moseley in 1887.
- Source of Description/Summary Text:** Pitt Rivers Object Catalogue entry and observations made by the GRASAC research team.
- Current Location:** Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), Oxford, United Kingdom.
- Catalogue or Unique ID Number at Current Location:** 1887.35.2
- At Current Location, Part of Collection:** None
- Link to Item at Current Location's website:** None
- Data From Institution:** Computer Catalogue: Catalogue Record. Catalogue Cards: No Catalogue Cards. Register Page: No Register Page.
- Additional Resources:** Audio Clips, Video Clips.
- Comments:** A comment by Michael Galban discussing the technique of "loom" weaving and the use of two-ply basswood fiber.

On the right side of the page, there is a vertical list of expandable sections: Dates and Times Related to this Item, Makers and Places, Physical Description, Inscriptions or Alphabetic Text, Use History, Exchange History, Collection & Acquisition History, Exhibition & Publication History, Citation Information, and About This GRASAC Record.

FIGURE 3.2 • Partial view of the GRASAC record describing the 1766 Wampum Belt shown in Figure 3.1. Drop down menus under fields such as "Dates and Times," and "Makers and Places" request rationales for attributions. Additional drop down menus contain detailed fields for Physical Description, Inscriptions or Alphabetic Text, Use History, Exchange History, Collections and Acquisition History, Exhibition and Publication History, Citation Information, Information about the GRASAC record, including the context of creation. GRASAC Record ID 69.

During the four centuries of contact between Great Lakes peoples and Europeans, missionization, dispossession, displacement, and official policies of directed assimilation have been all too successful in silencing Indigenous languages and interrupting the trans-generational transfer of historical memory and cultural traditions. During the twentieth century, academic researchers tended to focus on other regions where the integrity of pre-contact ways of life and systems of belief was deemed to have been better preserved. In the absence of publications, exhibitions and other projects, the Great Lakes collections made during the "museum age" of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries lay largely unstudied in museum

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

storerooms, aggravating Indigenous people's loss of connection to their historical heritage.<sup>6</sup> During the last decades of the twentieth century this situation began to change, stimulated both by the renewal of Indigenous land claims negotiations in Canada and applications for federal recognition in the United States, which made it possible for communities that had lost legal status as Indian tribes during the nineteenth century—most of these in the east—to have it restored. Indigenous projects of cultural recovery and language preservation initiated in recent years have also increased research on museum and archival collections. In parallel, a marked renewal of scholarly interest in the Great Lakes has been stimulated by our consciousness of interconnections associated with globalization. This contemporary awareness has generated fresh interest in processes of culture contact, transnational exchange, mixing and hybridization in earlier periods of history. By the beginning of the twenty-first century these factors had prepared the ground for a new research initiative such as GRASAC.

Yet since 2008, when the GKS was launched, some deficiencies have come to light, and new challenges have been identified. For example, although our database is designed as a collaborative project, a relatively small number of people have been actively contributing. We have also come to realize that the resource we have developed could and should serve a wider range of user communities that includes students, teachers, artists, and members of the general public, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. For these groups, other interfaces and formats for presenting data would be more effective. It is a good moment to ask how well the strategies of the GKS are working and whether its lofty goals are being met. How has it functioned as a site for digital access? Has new knowledge emerged from the “transparent” approach to knowledge creation embedded in the record structure?

In this chapter three founding members of GRASAC look back more than a decade to the origins of the project to review its progress, successes and failures, and also look ahead to outline future plans. We use wampum as a test case study because these belts, strings and discs of purple and white shell beads demonstrate especially well the potentials and difficulties of the GKS's key strategies of collaboration, multi-disciplinarity and regional scope. Historically, wampum served peoples throughout the northeast and Great Lakes regions as a technology for healing social and political rifts, sealing alliances, uniting for war and preserving the historical memory of important transactions and agreements (Willmott and Brownlee 2010; Willmott 2012). Because the essence of wampum's effectiveness was intergroup communication, a regional approach serves as a corrective to the strong tendency

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

of modernist anthropology and art history to occlude historical patterns of movement, interaction and cultural exchange by conforming to the colonially imposed borders of reserves and reservations. Because the recovery of the histories to which specific wampums are related requires contextualization through archival documents, this choice of case study also tests the value of our multidisciplinary and relational approach. Because some Indigenous people categorize wampum as sacred, the case study also opens up the question of cultural sensitivity in digital repositories. Lastly, Alan Corbiere's discussion at the end of this chapter of changes that have occurred over time in the terms and discursive forms Anishinaabeg use to refer to wampum highlights the potential of the language module currently being added to the GKS to illuminate both the interpretation of material culture and Indigenous intellectual traditions.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF GRASAC AND THE GKS

Both GRASAC and the development of the GKS began in 2005 with the support of grants from Canadian federal research agencies.<sup>7</sup> The collaboration brings together researchers from three primary sectors—Aboriginal communities, universities, and museums and archives—who share two central goals. On a cognitive level they seek to advance research on the history and expressive culture of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat by combining knowledge developed within Western academic disciplines with Aboriginal knowledges. On an ethical level, they endeavor to create new forms of access to Indigenous heritage for members of originating communities. The need for access was stressed in two major Canadian reports issued during the 1990s. The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples was commissioned by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association to study existing museum processes and programs and develop new guidelines for equitable participation by Aboriginal people. One of the main recommendations of its 1992 report stated: "There is wide agreement that enhanced access to collections related to First Peoples is appropriate and needed. Inventories of existing collections should be carried out as soon as possible and made available to the appropriate First Peoples communities" (Canadian Museums Association and Assembly of First Nations 1992). Four years later the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996: 554) reiterated this need:

Although some change is under way, much remains to be done.  
Collections of Aboriginal artifacts, collection notes, and sound

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

and photographic archives in museums are often not fully inventoried. Aboriginal people cannot easily gain access to these materials or, in some cases, even get information about them. As with sacred and historical sites, establishing inventories is an essential first step in developing repatriation policies and collaborating with Aboriginal peoples in the conservation, display and eventual return of heritage materials.<sup>8</sup>

For GRASAC's Aboriginal partner institutions, the cognitive and the ethical goals are fundamentally interconnected because the creation of access to heritage removed from Indigenous communities years ago is an enabling condition for restoring historical memory and stimulating the articulation of traditional Indigenous knowledge. For the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, for example, learning of the locations of key pieces of Anishinaabe heritage can lead to the goal of securing temporary loans—of “bringing items home for a visit,” as Corbiere puts it. When this happens, more nuanced cultural information and perspectives based on the oral traditions known to local elders are articulated and added to the records that become available through the GKS to the museums where the items are housed. A related goal, which can also be accomplished to a certain degree by electronic access, has been to acquaint community members with Anishinaabe heritage from which they have become alienated, not only by its physical removal years ago, but also by the governmentally imposed system of residential schooling that prevented the normal trans-generational transmission of Anishinaabe forms of knowledge.

The structure of the GKS is currently multi-disciplinary, combining records of different kinds of records in a single database. Our ultimate goal, however, is to foster transdisciplinary understandings by creating a tool that allows researchers to assemble heritage items whose meanings were interdependent in their original cultural contexts so that they can again become mutually illuminating.<sup>9</sup> In practical terms, GRASAC's multi-disciplinarity has its origins in a fortuitous meeting of Ruth Phillips, Heidi Bohaker, and Cory Willmott at the 2004 Rupert's Land Colloquium in Kenora, Ontario.<sup>10</sup> Like others in her small field of Great Lakes art history, Phillips had spent many years studying historical collections from the region in museum storerooms, taking her own slides (since the vast majority of the items were unpublished), researching documentation in museum archives and storing it all in her office file cabinets. Having recently initiated a virtual database project for Northwest Coast art and material culture with staff at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, she was beginning to plan a similar resource that could

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

support research in her own field and ensure that specialized knowledge gathered over decades of research could be shared with other researchers (Phillips 2011). Willmott, too, had been documenting museum collections of Great Lakes Indigenous clothing and textiles and had developed her own database of museum collections.

Bohaker, a historian, had been thinking along parallel lines. She and legal historian Darlene Johnston had been exploring the possibility of creating a database of treaty and other archival documents for research on Great Lakes Indigenous history that would support communities engaged in ongoing treaty and land claims negotiations with the Canadian government. Although the word “treaty” is usually understood to connote a single agreement recorded and codified in one document, in reality the First Nations documentary record is highly complex and considerable expertise is needed to assemble it. Researchers, for example, must search beyond the transcripts of Canadian treaties published in the federal government’s compilation *Indian Treaties and Surrenders*, for treaty documents tell an incomplete story.<sup>11</sup> Additional and crucial information about what was negotiated between the parties is also found in the council minutes taken at the treaty proceedings and in correspondence between colonial officials typically located in other collections within the archive, in completely separate archives, or in the private papers or government records associated with the colonial officials who undertook the negotiations. It is in these sources that the details of gift exchanges involving wampum strings, pipes, medals and even clothing are noted, revealing the role that material culture played. They are thus critical to an understanding of how collections research in museums can assist in understanding historic diplomatic relations and inform modern political relations between Canada and First Nations.

Furthermore, Great Lakes people historically operated in a world without nation state borders, and signatories to treaties can and often do appear on both sides of the United States–Canada border. In addition to their appearances in colonial documentary records, the direct interventions of Great Lakes First Nations can be traced in the archive through the petitions and other indigenous-authored documents as well as through research into First Nations’ own record-keeping practices. Bohaker and Johnston witnessed these practices first hand at an October 2002 gathering of Anishinaabe chiefs from communities that were signatories to the 1850 Robinson–Huron treaty. The meeting was hosted by the Garden River First Nation, located on the Canadian side of St. Mary’s River where the waters of Lake Superior flow into Lake Huron. Johnston had been invited to make a presentation of evidence from archival documents to the council. During the day-long meeting which began at

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojjiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

sunrise, Bohaker and Johnston watched as the descendants of the treaty chiefs representing the signatory communities took their places in the circle and discussed issues of common concern. Johnston made a presentation of her research on the importance of doodem (clan) identity on treaties related to her community of the Chippewas of Nawash on the Bruce Peninsula. She showed images of otters drawn on these documents by her grandmother's grandfather Kegedonce. These and many other such images on most Great Lakes treaty documents articulate a relationship between particular lands and Anishinaabe ways of representing their own identities (Johnston 2003; Bohaker 2010). Doodem images on treaties are an Anishinaabe-authored presence in the colonial archive that was ignored when treaty manuscripts were transcribed for publication and the images replaced in the printed copies with the word "totem."

At one point in the proceedings, the chief of Garden River opened and displayed a wampum belt that the community had just purchased at auction from Sotheby's in New York City. This belt had once been given by Shingwauk, chief of the Garden River First Nation to Sir John Colborne, a former Lieutenant-Governor of the colony of Upper Canada, and had ended up in private hands.<sup>12</sup> At another point, Alan Corbiere stood and held out a replica wampum belt of the Treaty of Niagara of 1764 and recited its meaning, based upon the minutes of the council proceedings and a letter written in 1862 by the Chiefs of Manitoulin that explained the treaty's importance to the diplomatic agreement between the Crown and the Western Confederacy, which included the signatories to the 1850 Robinson-Huron treaty. While there is no known wampum belt for that later treaty, the Treaty of Niagara is the essential precursor to the later agreement, as it was there that Anishinaabe chiefs from the Great Lakes region entered into the formal alliance with the British Crown that legally enabled it to enter into the Robinson-Huron treaty nearly 90 years later. Both presentations were vivid demonstrations of the important political significance that wampum belts continue to have for Great Lakes First Nations in the twenty-first century.

To Corbiere, reciting the "talk" on the belt was an act of re-incorporating into his community's present-day life knowledge that he had recovered from archives. The experience led him to consider the value of harvesting this information and retaining it in one database. The trip to the 1850 Robinson-Huron Treaty Nations assembly caused Bohaker and Johnston to think along the same lines, and they drafted a grant proposal for an "Indigenous-Authored Documentary Record Archive" (IADRA) that would focus on treaties and link them in cyberspace to related wampum belts, medals, treaty texts, doodem images and council minutes. When Bohaker met

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

Phillips in May 2004 the advantages of combining the two database projects became evident, as did the benefits to researchers of the ability to access the complementary skills and knowledge bases of collaborating researchers. While Bohaker and Johnston knew archival sources well, museums, where wampum belts were held, were areas of expertise for Phillips and Willmott. In addition, many of the wampum belts in museums had long been severed from their reading communities and their meanings lost. It had also become increasingly apparent to Bohaker, Corbiere and Johnston that other genres of material culture had diplomatic and treaty significance.<sup>13</sup> Recovering those meanings would thus require a combination of approaches specific to textual, artifactual and oral sources.

In 2005, Bohaker and Phillips brought together a larger group of colleagues based in Indigenous communities, universities and museums and archives at Carleton University to discuss the feasibility of a collaborative project. Those in attendance affirmed their shared interest in developing a digital platform for collaborative research. The input of Alan Corbiere and Keith Jamieson, representing, respectively, the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation on Manitoulin Island and the Woodlands Cultural Centre at Brantford Ontario—the two oldest and largest Ontario Aboriginal cultural centers—was of particular importance, as was the participation of their organizations in the subsequent phases of development. Bohaker's expertise in computer technology, Willmott's experience with data bases, and Johnston's conceptual insight into the needs of Indigenous knowledge research enabled Bohaker to create the initial design document for the GKS. Idécléc, software developers in Gatineau, Quebec who specialize in cultural websites and digital collections, first implemented this design as a pilot project, building the software, as requested, out of open-source components in order to allow maximum flexibility in bringing in new users and partners.<sup>14</sup>

Bohaker and other GRASAC members wanted to be able to test and demonstrate the feasibility of linking related items from different institutions along multiple possible axes of connection. We therefore set out to gather together as many different types of data as we could to better understand what it was that we were attempting to model. We populated the pilot project with test data generously supplied by the National Museum of the American Indian and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in combination with records that were produced during our first collaborative, multidisciplinary and intercultural research trip to Scotland in December 2006. A brief collaboration between Bohaker and Corbiere the previous year served to model the relational work to be accomplished. Corbiere, a historical researcher who works both in archives and with Indigenous language and oral traditions had located a wampum

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojjiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

belt bearing the initials “W.C.” in the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) collection. The NMAI accession card identified it only as the “George III wampum belt given to the Ojebway.” Corbiere suspected that the W.C. initials referred to the British Indian agent William Claus. Bohaker then searched historical records and confirmed Claus had commissioned the belt. In 1807 tensions between the new United States and Britain were rapidly escalating in the wake of the Chesapeake affair, when the British navy boarded an American ship in Chesapeake Bay, taking three American sailors prisoner as British “deserters.” War now seemed likely. Britain had neglected its alliance relationship with Great Lakes First Nations and sought in the summer and fall of 1807 to ensure that Aboriginal allies would fight any conflict on Britain’s side (Horsman 1958; Cruikshank 1927). We envisioned an ideal GRASAC record for this item that would include images of the belt and its original museum accession record, links to scans of related archival documents and transcripts of the speeches given in council; a diachronic listing of all documentation and entries related to this entry and the renewal of the agreement that the belt represents; links to other wampum belts related to this particular belt by reason of date, provenance or imagery; links to biographical records for William Claus and the Aboriginal leaders mentioned in those councils; and public comments posted by members speculating or suggesting other possible interpretations. Where such data was missing, we wanted to create placeholders that would indicate the nature of the gaps and hold open a place to record it if such information became available in the future.

During the first GRASAC research trip to Scotland in December of 2006, participants also began to work out the collaborative research protocol that we have used on subsequent visits to other museums, such as the Pitt Rivers, Cuming, and British Museums in 2007, the Royal Ontario Museum in 2008, the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2010 and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 2011, among many others. At the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and the Kelvingrove and Hunterian museums in Glasgow, our team photographed, measured, discussed and debated the meanings of the items laid out on the tables of the research rooms. To capture these conversations and the questions that emerged, we videotaped the research sessions. Both the value of these video clips as research tools and the considerable time, expense and graduate student labor required for editing and attaching the video footage to the records became apparent during the pilot project phase.<sup>15</sup> We have learned that we need to factor these expenses into future budgets and provide pre-trip training, but at the same time we have also understood that the value of the video clips lies not only in their presence on the database but also as a teaching tool for the students employed. Future students will be helped by the standards document

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

for video editing written by GRASAC Research Assistant Lisa Truong (2011) and the practical advice it includes. Video clips, she found, work best if they are no longer than two and a half minutes long and if each focuses on one key teachable point. Theoretically, the GKS allows for an unlimited number of such clips to be attached to each record.

As with the video process, our early site visits taught us the importance of standardizing our practices for photographing, measuring, and describing museum artifacts. Willmott (2011) used her expertise in material culture research to develop standards and manuals for photography and data entry. We have also improved our ability to estimate what we can accomplish in a day and how to balance the need to schedule against the value of more freeflowing dialogue. Before a trip we request lists of the institution's holdings and try to make a realistic assessment of the number of items we can study in a day—an estimate that must, of course, respect the practical needs and protocols of each institution, the number of staff they can make available and the accessibility of their storage area. Depending on the type and complexity and interest of an individual item, we may need anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour to properly study and create a record for it in the GKS. Deviating from the schedule means that we sometimes have to abandon the possibility of seeing all of the items that we wished to. On the other hand, as the opening vignette to this chapter indicates, we know we will run across significant puzzles or problems that require more time.

When items have deep personal and cultural significance for the Indigenous members of the research team, still other considerations can arise. One young research assistant described her trip to the British Museum as an experience of coming face to face with her ancestors— as a meeting of “beings.”<sup>16</sup> Those of us coming from non-Indigenous cultural traditions have come to appreciate and value the much richer understandings we have been able to generate about individual heritage items when we have taken a slower approach. Sitting with an item of material culture, in dialogue with it and with the other researchers, is, we realize, a legitimate and valuable research methodology that better approximates the holistic nature of Indigenous knowledge (Figure 3.3). In the context of traditional approaches to the being-ness of objects, it can be rude and disrespectful to handle heritage items that might have qualities of personhood in a rushed, assembly-line like manner.<sup>17</sup> Yet despite the best laid plans, on the last day of a field trip we are invariably rushed, frantically attempting to catalogue and photograph as many items as possible before we have to depart. Such pressures can affect Indigenous and non- Indigenous

## WAMPUM UNITES US

DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND  
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC  
KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*



FIGURE 3.3 • At a GRASAC study visit to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in November 2011, Henrietta Lidchi, Adriana Greci-Green, Elder Lewis Debassige and Alan Corbiere discuss an eighteenth-century bag prior to making a record for the GRASAC Knowledge Sharing database. Photo: Lisa Truong and Crystal Migwans, courtesy GRASAC.

participants alike, for all our team members, regardless of ethnicity, world view, or cultural tradition have wanted to maximize the number of items we can see and study on each trip because all are fully aware that the opportunity may not come again.

Not least, these GRASAC site visits and discussions have facilitated future loans for our Aboriginal partner institutions and supported future exhibition development both for them and for museum hosts. The museums we have visited have been extraordinarily generous not only in contributing valuable staff time, but also in their willingness to do what was necessary to accommodate requests from First Nations colleagues to smudge or make offerings to items of a sensitive or sacred nature and perform other appropriate ceremonies on site. At the National Museums Scotland, staff obtained a “Hot Work Permit” that allowed them to shut down the ventilation systems and fire alarm detectors in part of the building so that smudging could take place. At other institutions, collections management staff have moved items to a

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

loading dock with covered access to the outdoors. The Royal Ontario Museum now has a specially ventilated room in the storage vaults for the ceremonial treatment of items in its collections. Non-Aboriginal members of the team did not always participate in ceremonies or view the items involved.

We also take advice from our Indigenous partners, who typically consult knowledgeable members of their communities as to whether culturally sensitive objects should be included in the GKS. Where differences of opinion arise, we respect the authority of the cultural center, which in Canada is normally funded and authorized by elected band councils. We have designed our software so that the viewing of specific images and related information can be restricted to named individuals, although we do not, at present, have a way to indicate items for which we have decided not to make records. Here again, wampum offers an interesting test case. Some Haudenosaunee have argued that these items should not be publicly displayed because of the sacred quality inherent in the medium of white shell—a gift, according to Haudenosaunee beliefs, to the culture hero Aiyenwatha (Hiawatha) from the Creator. Yet since these belts were originally made for display at treaty councils or other meetings—and in many cases commissioned by Europeans—they can also be considered public documents par excellence. Guided by GRASAC's Indigenous partner institutions, we have thus far decided to include them in the GKS.

The data contributed to the pilot project by the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) also offered opportunities to experiment with the creation of relational tagging. The two museum partners provided images and digital copies of existing catalogue records for related eighteenth-century collections that included outfits given to two British army officers, John Caldwell (CMC) and Andrew Foster (NMAI), during ceremonies of ritual adoption that were performed during the period as tools of alliance formation. They also contributed data from two ethnographic collections made in the early twentieth century at the Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario by Frederick Waugh and Mark Raymond Harrington, which contained similar kinds of artifacts. Here our aim was to find ways to link pages in Waugh's notebooks in the CMC archives to the photographs he took of informants and the items they made and discussed at CMC, as well as to records of items in the Harrington collection for which no field notes exist.

Bohaker worked with our software developer Idéeclit to complete the pilot project software and enter the initial data for a second meeting of GRASAC collaborators in 2007. Time and budget constraints meant that we could only implement enough of the design to provide our members with a prototype that included the initial test data,

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

sample video clips and a very crude method of linking one record with another. After GRASAC members had tested and evaluated the software, it became apparent that Bohaker's first design was neither scalable, nor adequate to the goals we had set. While the database did make it possible to search for and link related items, the separation of information into discrete tables based on item type was limiting. Testers had difficulty using the links and making comments. Overall, as Johnston noted, we had simply replicated in digital form standard ways of cataloguing and organizing information and we would only be able to ask conventional questions of the items we had entered. The record fields for documents, for example, privileged the text inscribed on the paper, but did not invite questions about other historically important features such as the materiality of the paper or the presence of seals and ribbons. The record fields for material culture, on the other hand, privileged the materiality of the item, but did not consider ways in which the item might have functioned as text. While these multiple forms of signification are particularly true of wampum belts and strings, we have come to understand that they also characterize many other items of Great Lakes material culture in which the designs and motifs may function as mnemonic devices for stories, or may indicate the specific uses of an item.<sup>18</sup> As Bohaker concluded, however, the pilot project had pointed the way toward the next phase of conceptualization and development.

Bohaker and Johnston again put their heads together and roughed out a new table structure that would ask the same questions of all items in the database, whether items of material culture, historical photographs, paintings, or documents. Johnston also argued that GRASAC should move away from use of the terms "object" and "artifact," with their pejorative historical connotations of scientific objectification and implied denial of the personhood that might be associated with some objects, and adopt a more neutral and inclusive term. On the advice of Johnston and Bohaker, GRASAC adopted the phrase "heritage item" to encompass all the genres then included. It proved possible to create a generic form that contained almost all the fields needed for texts, artifacts, photographs and paintings. The field "item type" tags each item as belonging to one of these groups. This solution allowed Bohaker to design filters for the forms to provide the few type-specific fields that remained, and it also allows users to refine their search by item type if required. The standard set of questions and categories on the "new item" data entry form would, designers hoped, prod researchers to think about possible links to other genres of expressive culture for the items they were entering into the database.

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

### ADDING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE

The redesigned database was launched in February 2008 as a password-protected web-accessible resource. The decision to create a closed site was determined by the copyright requirements of museum contributors and the need to preserve the privacy of Aboriginal elders who had in the past received unwelcome approaches from strangers when their names appeared on open websites. Several categories of membership were established: full members can make new records and add information and make comments or corrections to records made by others in the comment field at the bottom of each record, research assistants can make or edit records while working under the supervision of full members, and guest members can read records and make comments. GRASAC offers membership to any legitimate researcher on request. A member might be anyone from an academically trained specialist to an Aboriginal community member interested in learning more about heritage, a museum curator working on an exhibition or a student working on a class assignment. At this writing, the GKS has more than 3,900 records, and more than 75 full members.

When the second iteration of the GKS was launched in 2008 it still lacked several capacities that had been part of Bohaker's second design document: tools for creating private and collaborative research space and the critical component of Indigenous language, which all GRASAC collaborators had identified from the beginning as a key component. The collaborative module is undergoing testing at the time of writing, prior to being launched, and the Indigenous language module is currently at the design stage. More than any other type of expressive culture, language inscribes and reveals traditional Indigenous knowledge about the world. Both funding realities and the internal logic of the project dictated that the GKS language module be added after the database had been established because the records it now holds can provide a valuable stimulus for the research of language specialists. The endangered status of most Great Lakes Indigenous languages lends urgency to the creation of such a tool for research and preservation; a number of languages became extinct in the early contact period, while Wendat has already lost its last mother-tongue speakers and efforts of revival are now underway. Out of the six Haudenosaunee languages, only Cayuga and Mohawk are the focus of current preservation projects, and fluent speakers of Anishinaabemowin are decreasing in number.

In conceptualizing the language module, we have extended the concept of the heritage item to include "language items," defined as a single idea expressed in a specific Indigenous language, English or French. In designing this module, Bohaker

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

and Willmott brought together a group of academic linguists and speakers at a meeting that defined twin objectives for the module: it would provide labels in Indigenous languages for heritage items already in the GKS and it would constitute a database of Indigenous languages that could be used by language researchers. The challenges, however, are formidable; not only do Great Lakes languages belong to three completely separate language families, but many historic items in the database (such as prisoner ties, wampum belts, and gorgets) have not been used in source communities for more than a century, and their removal to distant museums has meant that they are largely unknown to community members.<sup>19</sup> What vocabulary terms would people use?

To find answers for such issues in Anishinabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabeg, Alan Corbiere has been searching archival documents and early dictionaries produced by Jesuits and other missionaries. Among these items are wampum belts and strings, and his work on the terms used for them across time illustrates how the language component of the GKS will engage Indigenous discourse about historical heritage. Anishinaabemowin, like other Algonquian languages, is verb based. Eighty to ninety percent of its vocabulary comprises verbs, and of the nouns only a small number are true nouns as opposed to neutered verbs. Both verbs and nouns are divided into animate and inanimate classes so that everything, in effect, is spoken of as being either “alive” or “dead,” or, in another sense, as having or lacking agency. To enter Anishinaabemowin terms in the GKS, we must grapple both with explaining the word’s etymology and with the epistemological ramifications of a language item’s ontological status.

Such analyses also reveal the historical engagements of Indigenous and Western intellectual traditions that were stimulated by contact with Europeans. When Anishinaabeg encountered new kinds of objects and technologies through trade with Europeans, the names they gave them evidenced their versatility and their capacity for innovation. They employed a number of different strategies that included the creation of a new name, the use of an old name that referred to an item no longer in use, or more rarely, the borrowing of a word from the European language. A shawl, for example, became mooshwen from the French mouchoir, while a diaper became aanziiyaan, the archaic word for “breech cloth.” The word for “gun” was a new invention, baashkizigan, “that which bursts or explodes.” Corbiere’s tracing of the words that have been used to name wampum indicates both its own complex uses and the ways in which Anishinaabeg have addressed ruptures in historical customs through language.<sup>20</sup> A brief explanation of the linguistic complexities of this historical

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

terminology will suggest the importance of the Indigenous language module and the role of the GKS as a site for digital access.

Once the struggles among the French, British and Americans for political dominion over North America came to an end after the War of 1812, Europeans and settlers abandoned the practice of presenting wampum strings and belts to seal political agreements. The “talks” they contained and the agreements they represented were forgotten by colonial officials. Although those wampums that had been presented in earlier periods continued to be preserved and read within Indigenous communities as records of important agreements, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries many were bought by private collectors and anthropologists working for public museums. With their removal from communities and the other imposed disruptions of traditional systems for the communication and transfer of traditional knowledge, many of the “talks” embodied in wampum were forgotten by the communities themselves.<sup>21</sup> By 2002, when Corbiere began to research the wampum history of his own community, he discovered that many people did not know their ancestors had used wampum and thought of it as “just a Mohawk thing.” Even fluent speakers of Anishinaabemowin did not remember the word for wampum in any form. The term they use today is gjipzowin, the generic word for belt, which refers to girdling one’s waist rather than to political and diplomatic functions. In contrast, the French term *collier de porcelain*—“necklaces of wampum/ porcelain”—retains more of wampum’s original usage, as it suggests the way that the orator or speaker often wore or draped the “belt” over his shoulder when speaking (Willmott and Brownlee 2010). Yet if a modern Ojibwe speaker were to translate the French term as *naabkawaagan* or “necklace,” the term would still fail to translate the primary uses of wampums. Thus, in the twentieth century, in the void created by the erasure of Anishinaabe customs and language through colonization and forced assimilation, the English language had imposed itself on Anishinaabe consciousness through the indirect route of literal translation. Even when Anishinaabe language terms are reinvented, in other words, they often translate European understandings of Indigenous traditions and overwrite Indigenous knowledge.

Through his historical and archival research Corbiere found that the earlier term for wampum was *miigis*, a true animate noun that is made into a verb in various ways. Speakers today have been inclined to use this term in combination with the word for “belt” to create a literal compound noun, *miigis-gjipzowin*. In old dictionaries such as that written by the nineteenth-century missionary Bishop Frederick Baraga (1880: 234), the term is, however, given as *Migissapikan*, which is glossed as a “Wampum strap, a

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

large strap richly ornamented with beads of porcelain, used in Indian messages of great importance.” Baraga’s dictionary, however, does not indicate the length of the “a” vowel, which is critical to recovering the correct terminology used by the Anishinaabeg during treaty negotiations.<sup>22</sup> Any items referring to strings utilize a medial morpheme “-aabiig-” which is evidenced in the word *inaaabiiginaan* (“string something a certain way”) (Nichols and Nyholm 1995: 260). If the first “a” is long in Baraga’s *Migissapikan* then the word could be *miigisaabiigan*, “wampum strung together.” This interpretation is supported by the Jesuit Martin Ferard, who wrote an unpublished Ojibwe dictionary which expressly indicates vowel lengths in order to correct what he saw as a shortcoming of Baraga’s work. Ferard’s spelling is *migisâpikan*, which should mean the word is *miigisaabiigan*. There is also a case for the word being a compound noun “*miigis-apikan*.” If the first “a” is short, then the word could be *miigis-apikan*, which would mean the “portage strap (or tumpline) made of wampum.” The historic term for “wampum belt” could thus be *miigis-apikan*, a conclusion supported by Abbé Cuoq, who wrote in his 1882 *Lexique d’Algonquine*, “*Mikis-apikan*, collier de wampum employé dans les messages diplomatiques.”<sup>23</sup>

While Corbiere has used *miigisaabiigan* to date, he can see the rationale for *miigis-apikan* “the tumpline of wampum,” which carries a connotation of burden. Carrying messages faithfully required mental work. Being a wampum keeper was a responsibility, and as the tumpline assisted in carrying heavy loads, a wampum belt with mnemonic symbols on it could be viewed as a burden strap used to lighten a load. This interpretation is given more credence when considering the stories collected by Mesquakie linguist and anthropologist William Jones in 1911, in the Lake Superior area. In one story, entitled, “An Ottawa obtains medicine,” an Odawa is solicited by a Mohawk for assistance to steal medicine and wampum from a giant bear. “*Miigisapikan onaabikaan, mii imaa dakobideg i’iw mashkimod. Giishpin nibaad mii iw gedizhi-naazikawag; ninga-giitabiiginaan i’iw miigisapikan.*” (“A tump-line [studded] with wampum beads he has about his neck, and from there hangs the bag. When he falls asleep, then shall I go to him; I shall remove from him the tump-line of wampum beads.”)<sup>24</sup> Jones seems to dispel the confusion and suggests that the French collier was a better translation than the English “belt”.

Both Baraga and Wilson listed the word *miigis*, referring both to the bead itself and the shell of which it was made, as animate, and the term for wampum woven into a strap or belt as inanimate. This appears counterintuitive, especially when we consider how chiefs referred to the belts and the manner in which they spoke with wampum. For example, in retelling the promises the British made to the Western

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

Confederacy, the nineteenth-century Odawa chief Assiginack quoted Sir William Johnson as having said, “My children, I clothe your land, you see that wampum before me, the body of my words, in this the spirit of my words shall remain, it shall never be removed.”<sup>25</sup> By speaking of the wampum belt as containing “the spirit” of his words, a kind of agency is implied which would lead us to conclude that the ontological status of the wampum belt was animate, yet this is not so. The word *miigis* is included in some contemporary dictionaries as “Mide shell, pearl,” but there is no English entry for wampum in the same dictionary (Nichols and Nyholm 1995: 89). The English word—like wampum itself—has been alienated from cultural practice for so long that it is no longer included in modern dictionaries. This is indicative that the wampum belts have been out of collective Anishinaabe consciousness, but are making a comeback as historical memory is restored by making this research known.

In a similar vein, Huron-Wendat linguist John Steckley has traced the complex vocabulary related to wampum. He discovered two principal categories of terms: one that refers only to wampum, and the other category of terms that can both refer to wampum and to something else. It is this latter category particularly that gives insight into Huron-Wendat worldview about wampum belts and the materials of which they were made. The diversity and extent of wampum vocabulary unique to the Wendat leads Steckley to think that “much of their wampum-related cultural forms were developed after they split from the other Northern Iroquoian peoples and moved to southern Ontario” (Steckley 2007: 182). In this way language research can contribute directly to historical research.

Corbiere’s research on the problem of “wampum” and Steckley’s discussion of Wendat concepts underscore the difficulty of creating a capacity in the GKS that can adequately model the complexity of Indigenous languages, as well as the tremendous challenges and rewards of the work that lies ahead. It is, however, necessary work. Our initial design, still under discussion as this chapter is written, provides for a separate language item database for discrete concepts in the different Great Lakes languages. For each concept we will aim to capture the following data: variant forms (including plural, gender, inflections), variant spellings, other terms that speakers might use in place of this term (hyperlinked), a definition, and semantic relationships such as synonymy (like), meronymy (parts-whole) and hypernymy (kind of). A series of linked tables will contain other important data, including written attestations (discourse examples linked to documents), media attestations (discourse examples in audio/visual format), language in action (discourse examples that users add), and exemplars from the GKS heritage item database that serve to visually define the

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

concept. To create our specialized glossary for terms in English, such as “reticule,” we will also create entries in English using the same database table. Users creating heritage records will then link to the appropriate entry in the language item database. This will create a bi-directionality between heritage items and language items. As a basis for completing this design, we have already identified the single biggest challenge ahead: finding the time to locate and enter the language item entries. This will require highly specialized knowledge and much training of student assistants. The costs will be significant but the rewards great, for with the language module we will literally be translating knowledge.

As the heritage items in the GKS reconnect material culture, documentary art, historic photographs and archival documents with their communities of origin, the languages module will perform a similar service. While existing digitization projects such as Early Canadiana Online have made a number of printed texts in Anishinaabemowin available to many more readers, they are still relatively inaccessible without specialized knowledge and access to subscribing libraries.<sup>26</sup> Some of the oldest recorded examples of Indigenous languages remain in manuscript, notably manuscript dictionaries and training aids produced by seventeenth-century missionaries. These sources provide rich insight into seventeenth-century thought worlds but require advanced skills in paleography, as well as knowledge of Indigenous languages and the ability to read seventeenth-century French and church Latin.<sup>27</sup> The language item database will help us solve a broader problem of nomenclature that has emerged in relation to English language terminology and the different ways in which record makers assign words for similar items. The “item name field” will allow for the creation of a specialized glossary that will help users coming from different backgrounds to understand the terminology used in the records. By adding in terms from Indigenous languages we want to be able to answer more than the question “what’s that?” in Anishinabemowin, Wendat, Cayuga, or Mohawk. We want to provide information that illuminates the item’s current ontological status, while tracing etymological changes that stimulate discussion about Anishinaabe or Haudenosaunee epistemologies related to specific items in the GKS. The goal is to provide a window into Anishinaabe or Haudenosaunee world view that privileges language as the key to an item’s history and historically layered meanings. The completion of the Indigenous language module will mark the beginning of an exciting new phase of research possibilities.

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

### RECONCILING USER WORLDS

GRASAC records, in their ideal forms, are labor-intensive to create. As mentioned earlier, key data fields for time and place of origin are twinned with a rationale field that asks record creators to state their reasons for these attributions. The record creation process asks many other questions that can also be difficult to answer: What is it? What is it made of? How was it made? How was it used? Who created it? When and for what purpose? Has it been modified since its original creation and, if so, by whom? How did the item end up in its current location? What is its collection history and original provenance? What does the repository know about the item? We answer this last question by including digital images of museum registers or card catalogues, in some cases successive versions over decades or centuries that reveal changes in museological practices and understandings. We answer the question, “what does it look like?” with high quality digital photographs that capture the item as a whole from all directions, with specific photographs that provide details and with video footage where possible. For a few items, thanks to Cory Willmott’s innovative work on Anishinaabe soundscapes—we can answer the question “what does it sound like?”<sup>28</sup> Several other records have video commentary on their meaning by Anishinaabe elders who have shared their knowledge and expertise. For most items, however, we can answer only some of the questions. By structuring so many fields and requesting rationales, we want to flag what we don’t know as well as what we do know. We hope that, over time, these empty spaces in the records will stimulate more research and result in more answers.

The association of knowledge with named individuals is also an important aspect of the GKS. After hearing our early plans for a user-contributed and collaborative repository, colleagues frequently suggested that what we were creating was a “wiki.” We explicitly rejected this model because it enables a user to change, alter, and overwrite another user’s contribution without the original creator’s permission. Instead, our design requires that contributors identify themselves clearly so that others will know the source of the information or opinion. Each heritage item has a creator who retains the right to edit the record, as well as a designated editor who has “write” permission and is the only person who can change a record’s content—the creator and editor can be the same, and records can have multiple editors.<sup>29</sup> We provide for the addition of information and opinion through the comment fields, to which any member, full or guest, can contribute or query. The email addresses on the members’ page also enable participants to send private messages to record creators if they prefer. One wiki-like feature that we did incorporate into the GKS

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

design was a changes log. Every change made to the heritage item record since its creation is logged. By simply clicking on the “Change History” tab the viewer can see who made the change, on what day, in what field and see what the previous contents of that field were. As we imagine the GKS 50 years in the future, we envision researchers using the change log to understand how GRASAC contributed to new understandings about particular items and how thinking has changed over time.

The major problem we face is that at this stage of GKS development very few people have taken real responsibility for undertaking the review of the records, and the authors of this chapter are no exception to this criticism. Most records in the GKS thus still bear the status stamp below the title bar of “DATA NOT YET REVIEWED,” meaning that the data has not been re-examined since the original field trip or record creation. Many others have the label “REVIEW IN PROGRESS,” which is the flag to indicate that at least some attention is being paid to the record. Very few bear the status flag “REVIEW COMPLETE.” The system of collaborative record creation for the archival documents, historic photographs and documentary art included in the data base is thus far less well developed, and most of these records have been entered by a single GRASAC member, probably because team site visits have not been involved. In the future, we hope that GRASAC and the GKS will invite a new, transdisciplinary way of working with these types of heritage items as well. Bohaker and Johnston, for example, envision visits to the National Archives in Ottawa with members of First Nations communities whose ancestors were signatories to Great Lakes treaties to examine and discuss and consult on original manuscript treaty documents, which most First Nations people have never seen.<sup>30</sup>

Records have been created at a rapid pace since the revised database was launched in 2008, and members reported using the database for both teaching and research almost from the start. The potential of these records to support new research on specific genres or problems is, however, only just beginning. The new collaborative research module will allow members to create projects, invite other members to join the project, save records and associate new items. A group of GRASAC members working on a particular wampum, or on any other genre or problem, will have a digital workspace in which they can discuss it, create research notes, share images, word and PDF files, and examine a set of GKS items related to their project research. The collaborative research module promises to turn the database from a passive repository of standardized information to a digital space in which new knowledge is generated, lost knowledge recovered and both added back into a shared knowledge pool that can change and enrich understandings of Great Lakes cultural heritage and

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

history. The collaborative research module will also serve as the space for the development of digital exhibits planned for a public GRASAC website in future years.

After the technical complexity of the language module, the biggest challenge for GRASAC at present is how to make the database more accessible to the members of source communities as a site of connection to historic heritage. In 2009 Willmott organized two workshops in two partner First Nations communities (the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa in Harbor Springs, Michigan, and M'Chigeeng, home of the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation on Manitoulin Island). Their purpose was to introduce community members, including students, artists and language teachers, to the GKS and to provide training in its use. Willmott also designed an evaluation form so that she could collect and analyze user feedback. The workshop revealed that source community members searched in very particular ways, looking first for their family or community names or for cultural items which they used themselves such as dream catchers, or items of dance regalia worn in pow wows. These searches are almost always disappointing, since few names of makers or users were recorded for historic Great Lakes items in museum collections and since dream catchers, like pow wow regalia, came into use in the later twentieth century and are barely represented in the GKS.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, as most people were familiar with "Google like" search tools, they preferred the basic search (which only accessed the item name, title and description fields) over the much more powerful advanced search feature.

Subsequent field studies undertaken by M'Chigeeng community member and GRASAC research assistant Crystal Migwans in other Anishinaabe communities have confirmed these findings. The studies have also revealed that users who are not trained researchers find the amount of detail and the length of the records on each item exciting but also daunting, and that the text-heavy presentation doesn't meet these users' expectations. As Migwans has pointed out, up to seven clicks are required by the GKS to access the detailed images of the items. By June of 2011, when Migwans (2011) presented the result of her research to the first GRASAC research conference, it was obvious that while the GKS could serve researchers, it needed to be significantly reconfigured and the data presented in a different way in order to make it accessible and useable for most First Nations community members and the general public. Willmott's and Migwans's findings have helped GRASAC to plan for the development of a more accessible format that will allow the GKS to reach a broader audience and thus encourage them to contribute comments to records. This redesign is being undertaken in tandem with planning for a public website that will draw on records of the GKS database to present information in a visually

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

appealing and less text-intensive way. The public site will address the larger problem of education through a series of virtual exhibits that draw on GKS records on various topics ranging from quill boxes to treaties. It will engage users with GKS record sets and at the same time introduce them to the specialized vocabulary that has emerged around those items.

We have come a long way since GRASAC began as the germ of an idea in 2004, and our first research trip in 2006. While we have envisioned and designed the GKS as a conduit through which knowledge flows between museums and communities, we have not yet met that goal. So far, the numbers of academic and museum members are much greater than the Indigenous community researchers, and we very much want to increase the number of First Nations members and collaborators in the future. Yet, the database has begun to permit knowledge sharing among GRASAC members, and to break longstanding disciplinary and intercultural barriers. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, while difficult, challenging and time-consuming, has already resulted in new insights. And although there has not yet been the community interaction we identified as a primary goal, there have been some highly significant exchanges that hold a promise of what is to come. As part of our commitment to digital access, GRASAC members returning from research trips have travelled to a number of First Nations communities to present what they found.<sup>32</sup> These have been poignant, powerful, and immensely rewarding occasions. On a snowy December night in 2008, Bohaker and Phillips presented some of the early findings of the first GRASAC research trips to Britain, along with Corbiere, to a small but interested group at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation. As the images flashed up on the screen, the excitement at seeing these beautiful works of Anishinaabe art was palpable. In the discussion which followed, one man expressed his appreciation for our work and his deep and profound sense of loss that this knowledge and this history had been denied to him. He had not realized, he said, until that night, how much residential school had really taken away.

\*\*\*

We began this chapter in the Pitt Rivers Museum, and we end it by returning to the GKS record for the wampum belt we looked at there. Checking the record for that belt while working on this chapter, we found that two more comments had been added in the past year. Those additions suggest the dynamic potential of the project as a whole. A staff member from the Ganondagan State Historic Site in New York who joined GRASAC in 2011 had added a comment identifying materials and techniques.

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

(The warp fibers, he has informed us, are two-ply basswood and the weave is a simple straight weft.) An art historian added further information about the donor, Professor Moseley, after researching a Mohawk-style embroidered hide bag he had sold to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leiden. Might the belt and the bag have come from the same collection? Does this make it more likely that both are Mohawk? More questions, more promising lines of enquiry.

### NOTES

1. The plural of Anishinaabe is Anishinaabeg (or Anishinaabek). The GRASAC participants were Laura Peers, Janis Monture, Alan Corbiere, Stacey Loyer, Anne De Stecher, Heidi Bohaker, Ruth Phillips and Cory Willmott, ably assisted by Pitt Rivers Museum staff.
2. For example, an eighteenth-century wampum belt from Oka presented by a British official to record a land agreement was borrowed from the McCord Museum of Canadian History by members of the Kanasetake community to support a land claims case. See also Borrows 1997.
3. Such reflexivity is not, of course, unknown in the museum world. An outstanding example was presented in a section of the exhibit, *Exhibition-ism*, shown at New York's Museum of African Art in 1994. Cases in the "What the Museum Knows, What the Museum Shows" section put the usual tombstone label on the front of the case but, walking around to the back, the visitor saw another label revealing the lack of certainty about attribution, date and other issues (Roberts and Vogel 1994).
4. In Canada the term "reserve" is used and in the United States, "reservation." Individual political units recognized by the two governments are termed "bands" in Canada and "tribes" in the United States. The terms "Indigenous," "Aboriginal," and "First Nations" are used as collective terms in Canada, while "Native Americans" and "Indians" are more common in the United States.
5. See for example the Bishop Henry B. Whipple Photograph Collection at the Minnesota Historical Society, [www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/sv000032.xml](http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/sv000032.xml). Further research on the Beltrami collection is also being conducted by Tilly Laskey of the Science Museum of St. Paul together with members of originating communities and a web based repository for the research is planned.
6. On the idea of a "Museum Age," see Sturtevant 1969. For a recent project that addresses this kind of disconnection from heritage see Brown, Peers, et al. 2006.

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

7. The infrastructure was funded by the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Ontario Innovation Trust and Carleton University, while software development and on-site research was made possible by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Current funding is provided by the Premier's Discovery Award from the Province of Ontario. GRASAC researchers have also gained support from the British Academy and their own universities. Partner museums have made extensive in-kind contributions of staff time and facility use.
8. The mandated provision of "inventories" reflects the influence of the United States federal law, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990, which made this a legal obligation of museums receiving federal monies.
9. Choi and Pak (2006) usefully distinguish multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity as, respectively, "additive, interactive, and holistic."
10. This is a biannual conference of scholars and independent researchers interested in the social, cultural and political histories of the fur trade. It is sponsored by the Centre for Rupert's Land Studies at the University of Winnipeg in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The colloquium locates its meetings in sites of significance to the fur trade. Past conferences have met at Rocky Mountain House in British Columbia, St. Louis, MI, Stromness in the Orkney Islands, Scotland and Churchill, Manitoba. For more information, see <<http://uwebpro.uwinnipeg.ca/academic/ic/rupert/index.html>>.
11. Canada, Indian Treaties and Surrenders, from 1680 to 1890 (Ottawa: Chamberlin, 1891). This publication reproduces many, but not all, of the manuscript original agreements related to Canadian jurisdiction in the Library and Archives of Canada (LAC) that have been organized into a special Treaties and Surrenders collection. Similarly, the United States National Archives and Records Administration has its own treaty collections of both ratified and unratified agreements.
12. The band council voted to spend up to \$50,000 USD to acquire the belt. In the end, they were able to purchase it for \$34,000 USD. Shingwauk gave the belt to the Lieutenant-Governor as part of Anishinaabe efforts to secure support to establish a school in the community. The belt has recently been reused to establish Shingwauk University, a parallel institution to Algoma University already operating in Sault Ste. Marie. The two institutions will share infrastructure and will offer educational opportunities drawing from Anishinaabe and Western traditions respectively. While students will be formally enrolled in one or the other institution, they will be able to take courses from either (Martin 2006).

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

13. Although British colonial land surrender ‘treaties’ stipulated a cash price for the land purchased, in most cases, especially before 1830, indigenous signatories to the agreements were paid in goods equivalent to the cash value given in the document.
14. The GKS was originally developed in PHP using MySQL as the database engine. We subsequently migrated to PostgreSQL to allow the GKS to use geographic information tools being developed at Carleton University. In 2014 the GKS was converted to the Drupal content management system.
15. It is not unrealistic to expect to spend the value of one Canadian research assistantship (at \$13,500 CDN per academic year) to process the footage from a single trip, at which more than 200 items were examined.
16. Lindsay Borrows, a volunteer research assistant then studying for her BA at Dartmouth College, discussed her responses in a course paper entitled “Nanabush in London: Context, Life, Words, and Cultures in the British Museum,” written after the trip for one of her courses, and generously shared it with the participants on the trip. See also Phillips 2011: 293.
17. On personhood and Anishinaabe material culture see Hollowell 1976, and the research of Maureen Matthews and Roger Roulette discussed in Matthews 2009.
18. Chiefs’ medals functioned similarly to wampum belts and could be closely associated with them. In a petition by the Grand General Council of Indians held at Garden River in 1879 to the government of Canada to restore past treaty promises, the chiefs stated, “They were told by their Great Father, then the King of England, [ ... ] if they [were] ever so unfortunate as to lose them [presents], all they would have to do would be to present the Treaty [wampum belt] and the medal which I give them, to my successor in the throne of England, and both the covenant and the promise would be speedily and faithfully carried out” (Library and Archives Canada RG 10, Vol. 2092, File 15434).
19. Wendat and Haudenosaunee languages are Iroquoian, Anishinaabemowin is Algonkian, and Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) is Siouan.
20. Conversations we have had with Huron-Wendat linguist John Steckley reveal similar problems in attempting to encode that language in the GKS, magnified in fact because although the language is in the process of being revived, the last living mother tongue speakers died in the 1960s.
21. Although many wampum belts “left” the Six Nations reserve in the late nineteenth century, traditional knowledge keepers did preserve and transmit the content of the talks contained in at least some of these belts (Fenton 1989).

# WAMPUM UNITES US

## DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

22. Written in the current double vowel orthography as Miigisaabiigan or Miigis-apikan. In the dictionary written by the Anglican Reverend Edward Wilson (1874: 265), who was influenced by Baraga, the term given is “megisáhpekun (pl.-un) wampum strap (used by the Indians in making treaties).” Unfortunately, Wilson used the accent over the “a” followed by the “h” inconsistently. Wilson’s use of accents seems to indicate that the ‘a’ is long, therefore the word he recorded should be pronounced as “miigisaabiigan.” This seems to be supported by the fact that Reverend Wilson glossed this term “Portage strap: uhpékun (pl.-un)” (as in burden strap) and did not write wampum belt as megisuhépkun (ibid.: 368).
23. Cuoq did not place any accents to indicate vowel length but did include the hyphen to indicate that the word was a compound noun. See Cuoq 1882: 221.
24. Truman Michelson ed., *Ojibwa Texts, Collected by William Jones, Part II*, Publications of the American Ethnological Society (New York, G.E. Steichert, 1919), 278–85. Jones, William. *Ojibwa Texts, Part II*. Publications of the American Ethnological Society. (New York: AMS Press, 1919), 278–285. AMS version published 1974. Transcribed into Fiero orthography by Alan Corbiere. Cory Willmott, using Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s version of this story “Mishe-mukwa,” hypothesized that the stealing of the wampum belt was symbolic of the stripping of the bear clan’s chieftainship. Personal communication to Alan Corbiere.
25. Library and Archives Canada, RG 10, Vol. 613, 440–43.
26. See [www.canadiana.ca/](http://www.canadiana.ca/). Housed at the University of Toronto, its lofty goal is to digitize all works printed in Canada and/or related to Canadian history and heritage prior to 1900.
27. Darlene Johnston’s research on unpublished Anishinaabemowin sources for language will require the ability to upload images of manuscript originals and transcripts in a document viewing gallery within the heritage item record for the manuscript itself. Language items can be linked to these documents, providing an invaluable resource for community language researchers and scholars seeking to understand historic changes in indigenous languages.
28. Willmott (2010) received permission from the Royal Ontario Museum to record several jingle dresses and dance rattles that have not been identified as sacred. The audio files are linked to the item records in the GKS.
29. 29 To accommodate working practice, in which much of the record entry and editing is done by students working under supervision, we use a special membership category called “research assistant;” records created by these students can be edited by the students’ supervisors although the identity of the student creator remains on the record.

## WAMPUM UNITES US

DIGITAL ACCESS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND  
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE—SITUATING THE GRASAC  
KNOWLEDGE SHARING DATABASE

Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojiiig Corbiere and Ruth B. Phillips

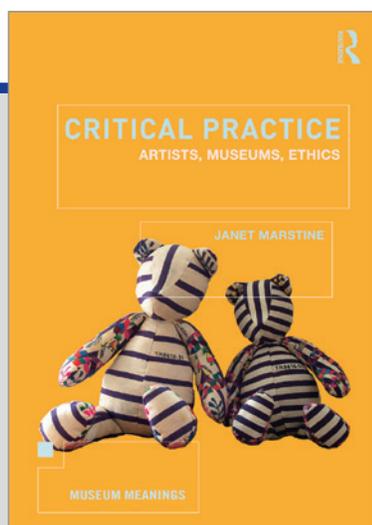
Excerpted from *Museum as Process*

30. From July to October 2011 the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation hosted an exhibit to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the 1836 Manitowaning Treaty (#45), enabling the people of Manitoulin Island to see their treaty.
31. In the rare cases where names appear, as in several quilled birch bark baskets in the Christy collection at the British Museum, both family and place names are spelled differently from contemporary orthography and do not show up on a search.
32. Heidi Bohaker, “Mississauga First Nation in Great Lakes History: Sources for Anishinaabeg/Mississauga History,” an invited public lecture and discussion at Mississauga First Nation, Blind River, Ontario, May 24, 2011; Ruth Phillips and Heidi Bohaker, “Anishinaabe Art & History,” Community presentation to M’Chigeeng First Nation, at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, Manitoulin Island, December 3, 2008.

CHAPTER

# 4

## CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION



This chapter is excerpted from  
*Critical Practice*

By Janet Marstine

©2017 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*



## Janet Marstine

is Associate Professor in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. She is the co-editor of *New Directions in Museum Ethics* (2012), and editor of *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics* (2011) and *New Museum Theory and Practice: An introduction* (2005).

### THE POLDER CUP AND THE MORALITY PROJECT

On 4 September 2010, on a stretch of low-lying land intersected by dykes in Ottoland, South Holland, an unusual series of football games took place. In this landscape, known in the Netherlands as a polder, four football pitches of different sizes were marked out in white (Plate 1). As in a conventional game, flags and goalposts further articulated the boundaries of the fields. Referees stood over the pitches to facilitate fair play. A master of ceremonies read out the schedule of quarter-finals, semi-finals and finals and announced the scores. Each team settled on their own name and shirt design. Fans cheered on the athletes (van Rijn 2011: 16, 18).

As soon as the games commenced, however, it became clear that the dykes criss-crossing the fields made it impossible to follow accepted international football rules; because players were not allowed to jump across the water channels, defenders were unable to reach the opposite side of the pitch (**Figure 1.1**). This situation challenged teams to generate new strategies of play. And because the pitches were each unique in size and in relation to the dykes, every time a team switched fields, they had to renegotiate these strategies. Over the course of the day, the players devised innovative systems of kayaks, oars and nets to retrieve balls from the water (**Figure 1.2**). They also recalibrated their steps as they found that the tall grass and muddy ground of the polder prevented quick and graceful movements. The landscape disrupted the game, whilst the game itself disrupted a landscape commonly described as quintessentially Dutch (van Rijn 2011: 16, 18, 20).

**FIGURE 1.1**  
*Between You and I – Intervention 3: Morality Exhibition series, Witte de With (Center for Contemporary Art) Polder Cup by Maider Lopez June – September 2010 Courtesy of the artist, SKOR (Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte) and Witte de With (Center for Contemporary Art), image copyright: Bob Goedewaagen*



# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

This day of football games and its supporting structures is a socially engaged artwork entitled *Polder Cup*, envisioned by Spanish artist Maider Lopez and commissioned by the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam in conjunction with SKOR (Foundation for Art and Public Space). *Polder Cup* is one of four projects, together called 'Between You and I', commissioned by the two organisations to 'reimagine and renegotiate the limits of public engagement with the institution' (Gad et al. 2014) through interventions in the facade of the Witte de With. In the case of *Polder Cup*, Lopez designed a monumental banner that enveloped the facade with a colour photograph of the marked-out pitches, along with text offering details of the project and how to get involved. Like an advertising billboard, the banner recruited the participation of both players and spectators.

Interested parties could sign up in the gallery or online. Lopez aimed to draw from both the arts and sports communities.

How did *Polder Cup* reimagine and renegotiate the limits of public engagement with the art gallery? By uniting people who might not ordinarily interact with one another – gallery-goers and football enthusiasts – through group problem solving as play, Lopez demonstrates the potential of artistic practice to strengthen the social agency of museums. Whilst on the surface the teams may only have been collaborating towards a trivial goal – winning a game – the symbolic value of their synergy, as harnessed by the Witte de With, underscores the capacity of art to recognise and advance the penchant of museums for addressing social problems. And by taking the project outside the gallery walls and into the larger public sphere, Lopez creates the conditions for a critique of institutional bureaucracy as rote adherence to rules, not just in the domain of football but also in the world of museums and galleries and in the wider domain of political entanglements.

With its site-specific spatial identity and demands for continual renegotiation among teammates, *Polder Cup* evokes the convergence between the long Dutch histories of fighting against water and of making decisions through consensus (Gad et al. 2014). The sodden terrain of the polder serves to personify the state; in fact, the bureaucratic insistence on consensus to the point of stagnation in the Netherlands is frequently referred to as the 'polder model' (van Rijn 2011: 20). By making it impossible for the footballers to play by accepted rules, Lopez's project expresses the need for creative, transgressive thinking through dissensus; only through nonconformist resistance to the rules can *Polder Cup* participants meet success. Lopez planned the tournament to occur at the same time as the 2010 World Cup and to contrast the official game of

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

football with its spectacle of consumption and international rivalries (van Rijn 2011: 18). *Polder Cup* asks: can resistance against consensus politics open up new solutions to diplomatic stalemates and create opportunities for reconciliation?



FIGURE 1.2 • *Between You and I – Intervention 3: Morality Exhibition series*, Witte de With (Center for Contemporary Art) *Polder Cup* by Mainer Lopez June – September 2010 Courtesy of the artist, SKOR (Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte) and Witte de With (Center for Contemporary Art), image copyright: Bob Goedewaagen

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

*Polder Cup* and the three other projects of 'Between You and I' were part of a year-long programme at Witte de With on the theme of 'Morality', as conceptualised by then director Nicolaus Schafhausen. Schafhausen commissioned a diverse range of artists' projects that would engage complex ethical issues from multiple perspectives. As former Witte de With curator Amira Gad (2012) explains, 'The Morality project came from an idea of wanting to present the grey zones of ethics, to show that ethical decision-making depends on context and time; something can seem right at one point and wrong at another moment'. By demonstrating that ethics concerns much more than following rules but instead entails grappling with the limitations and silences imposed by those rules, *Polder Cup* aptly embodies the aims of the 'Morality' project.

## *POLDER CUP* THROUGH THE LENS OF CRITICAL PRACTICE

### INTERVENTIONS

*Polder Cup* also encapsulates the primary conceptual strands of this book. It is an intervention, a term that, broadly speaking, signifies the act of interceding to create change. In the social arena, for example, a family might stage an intervention to confront a loved one who has a substance abuse problem in the hopes that they will accept treatment. In the cultural sphere an artist might stage an intervention to interrogate the systems and underlying values of an institution, whether a museum, political organisation, educational concern or some other entity, to transform existing conditions. From an art historical perspective, the advent of the intervention is often traced back to twentieth-century movements from Dada to conceptual art and institutional critique (Robins 2013: 47–83). From a museological perspective, the intervention is an artistic strategy that encourages self-reflective museum practice. Over the last few decades many museums and galleries, including the Witte de With, have commissioned artists' interventions to help these institutions renegotiate their relationship with their publics. At the same time, some artists have come, uninvited, to intervene in museums' policies, processes and structures of power. In both scenarios artists contribute to a developing discourse about museum ethics.

In the Witte de With intervention that became the *Polder Cup*, Lopez asks: How do museums, like the institution of football, follow rote rules for conduct without questioning common assumptions? And how are these rules fundamentally undemocratic or underpinned by outdated values and hierarchies that perpetuate inequalities? How does consensus politics in museum and gallery decision-making,

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

like consensus politics in the 'polder model' of Dutch democracy, hinder the engagement of diverse stakeholders with revolutionary potential to create change? And how can co-creative practices between museums and their publics, like those of Lopez's gallery-goers and sports enthusiasts, forge new relationships based on reciprocity? Lopez's banner across the Witte de With facade both literally and metaphorically frames the ethical questions elicited by the *Polder Cup* project within the context of the Art Center itself.

*Polder Cup* is an intervention with ethics at its core. It also represents the growing body of work which I call critical practice, appropriating the term from artist Neil Cummings (2012) to encapsulate the convergences between institutional critique and socially engaged practice. Some of the artists I consider have been pigeonholed as part of the institutional critique 'camp' whilst others are typically described as enmeshed in socially engaged artistic practice, but most of them fall somewhere in between, as they have been shaped by both yet have their own distinct approach to practice. For the purposes of this study, these identifiers are not particularly relevant and will be used infrequently, in favour of the term 'critical practice'.

This book is the first monograph on institutional critique and socially engaged artistic practice informed by current debates in museum ethics. Through international and intergenerational case studies identifying and analysing key themes in critical practice – from collections stewardship to community engagement to the efficacy of democratic forms of governance – the volume demonstrates the capacity of artists' interventions to advance ethics discourse towards reconciliation between museums and publics. Whilst these are certainly not the only themes of ethically informed discourse emerging from critical practice, they represent particularly significant and fruitful strands for negotiating new relationships. And whilst the study is by no means an encyclopaedic survey or historical account of institutional critique, socially engaged practice or critical practice, it does illuminate the ethical focus of much of the cultural production that falls within the remit of critical practice. Blurring the boundaries among the fields of art history, museum studies, political science and applied ethics, the book scrutinises the complex positionings of artists engaged in critical practice as both museum insiders and outsiders that facilitates the process of reconciliation. And it will look at how and why museums are drawn to critical practice as reconciliation at pivotal moments in institutional and social history as a means to map the past in order to chart the future.

The research design is based upon extensive semi-structured interviews with artists, curators, museum/gallery directors, museum/gallery educators and assorted other

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

art world figures, including an archivist, a collector and an assistant director of academic programs at a university museum. These categories somewhat oversimplify the complex and unstable array of museum job titles and self-identifiers, however, which themselves are shaped by the self-reflective nature of critical practice and include positions that straddle multiple spheres of practice, including curator of social engagement, researcher and director/curator.

I mine the data from these interviews to build a series of case studies from both internationally recognised and little known artists, working primarily in the UK, US and Europe but who engage ethical issues with repercussions in diverse parts of the world from Iraq to China. I examine interventions commissioned from a range of institutions, from small university galleries and public art presenters to large municipal museums and biennials, though I sometimes use the terms 'museum', 'gallery', 'institution' and 'arts organisation' interchangeably. I also look at interventions that were not commissioned by any arts organisation. Most of the projects that I discuss date from this century, though a few were conceived in the 1990s. Many of them were developed since the economic crisis of 2008 because, as Critchley (Critchley and Hernandez- Navarro 2013: 36) notes, 'the crisis has . . . forced people to reflect on questions of ethics and ethical responsibility at the basis of their practice'. As my research concerns contemporary museum practice I have chosen to focus on projects carried out only after 1990.

The volume does not discuss interventions such as those in the Museum of Modern Art's 'Artist's Choice' initiative or the Louvre's Department of Graphic Arts' 'Parti Pris' (or 'Taking Sides') series, in which artists or thinkers from other disciplines such as philosophy are commissioned to curate exhibitions from an institution's permanent collection that facilitate engagement with the collections but which are not in and of themselves engaged with ethics issues (T. Smith 2012: 120–121; Robins 2013: 4–6). Nor does the research concern artists that test the boundaries of ethical practice – for example, Santiago Sierra who interrogates the exploitation of human labour by employing vulnerable individuals such as sex workers, asylum seekers and homeless people to engage in degrading and often repetitive activities (Montenegro 2013; Montmann 2013). My study looks instead to artists who believe that museums have an important social role to play and who provoke difficult but important ethical conversations to further this social role. This caring for, and even love of, museums is what curator Dieter Roelstraete (2012b: 36n4) refers to as 'institutional desire' as a central component of institutional critique. Roelstraete's term rightly refutes the notion that critique implicitly signifies opposition to or withdrawal from and rather

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

situates critical practice within a feminist framework of the ethics of care (Clement 1996; Robinson 1999).

Referencing *Polder Cup* as an example, Chapter 1 argues for the museological usefulness of the term critical practice by introducing readers to the tenets of institutional critique and socially engaged practice from which critical practice draws. The chapter also defines the concept of reconciliation from a political and museological perspective; it discusses critical practice as an ethical venture; and it proposes that critical practice can empower organisational change. In addition, Chapter 1 examines how and why museums and galleries might need to engage in a process of reconciliation with their publics and what the literature of reconciliation studies offers to facilitate mutual understanding. Finally, it explains how the museological process of reconciliation is, at heart, an ethical project. It looks at a range of theories of and approaches to institutional critique and socially engaged practice through a framework of museum ethics and links a changing museum to a changing history of artistic interventions.

## INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

### DEFINING INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Institutional critique, the systematic inquiry into institutional (often museum) structure, policy and practice, is widely recognised as a key strategy of engagement for artists since the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that turbulent moment, the civil rights movement in the US and Europe and a related growing mistrust of institutions led artists to turn to the precedent of Marcel Duchamp, whose early twentieth-century readymades challenged the veil of neutrality in museums and galleries (Buskirk and Nixon 1996). Artists who had experienced oppression due to race, gender, class, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation developed skills in reading institutional codes that maintain exclusionary practices and in generating strategies to subvert those codes. Feminism was hugely influential in its exposure of and challenge to patriarchal systems (Graw 2006: 143–144; Deutsche 2009: 66–67). And philosopher Michel Foucault's interrogation of institutional bodies from prisons to hospitals to schools as modes of discipline inspired artists to probe the powers and limitations of the museum as institution (Wallenstein 2006: 114–115). As Cummings (2012) explains, institutional critique 'created an understanding of what an institution is, something which is not a physical structure but a set of protocols, procedures, habits and behaviours'.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

Those protocols, procedures, habits and behaviours that together constitute an institution carry heavy ethical responsibilities. Philosopher John Searle (2006: 34) notes: 'Human institutions are, above all, enabling, because they create power, but it is a special kind of power. It is the power that is marked by such terms as: rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions, empowerments, requirements, and certifications'. Institutional critique probes what those ethical responsibilities are and how institutions might respond.

The term 'institutional critique' was first introduced by Mel Ramsden of the collective Art and Language in a 1975 essay (Ramsden 2009: 176) challenging the hegemonic power of New York art systems. It was used by artist Andrea Fraser (2005a: 18) as early as 1985, and, as Fraser (2006a: 126–127) later recounts, it became shorthand for the phrase 'the critique of institutions' among students in New York's Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program and the School of Visual Arts during the 1980s. The designation gained common currency when art historian Benjamin Buchloh (1990: 137) employed it to discuss conceptual art of the 1960s (Zelevansky 2006: 173nn3, 5). Many practitioners of institutional critique think of themselves as conceptual artists for whom ideas – which cannot be possessed and, at least theoretically, circulate freely in the public domain – define the work, rather than a physical object (Wallenstein 2006: 116). This is clearly the case with Maider Lopez in *Polder Cup*.

Institutional critique is practiced both from within the museum, in which an artist is commissioned to create an intervention that comments on the institution, oftentimes with staff as collaborators/learners, and as a guerrilla tactic, where the artist, lacking an invitation, interjects a counter-discourse into institutional narratives. Academic and curator Simon Sheikh (2012: 368) underscores the museological implications of institutional critique: 'The very term "institutional critique" seems to indicate a direct connection between a method and an object: the method being the critique and the object the institution.' Some artists involved in institutional critique even adopt a tactical approach of mimicry, recreating museum space or structures askew and often performing the role of curator, educator or archivist, in what artist/activist Gregory Sholette (2011: 152–185) refers to as 'mockstitutions' which illuminate the ethical flaws and/or potential of museums.

As a method, critique is fundamentally an ethical project, for it represents a departure from normative thinking. Andrea Fraser (2012a) says, looking back, that she used to assume that the primary thrust of institutional critique was on the institution, but now she understands that it is the critique that really matters and that

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

is most difficult to come to grips with. Gender theorist Judith Butler (2002) remarks that critique is 'a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgment in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint'. Museum director and curator Maria Lind, acknowledging Foucault's (1997) essay 'What Is Critique?', defines critique as a strategy to challenge institutional constructions of truth. 'Critique is a certain way of thinking and acting, a particular relationship to everything around us. It means to doubt and to challenge the politics of truth', Lind (2011: 25) states.

Drawing on Butler and Lind, I conceptualise institutional critique as both an ethical questioning of the systems of power underpinning institutions and an ethical gesture towards reconciliation between museums and their publics. Within the domain of art museums, institutional critique interrogates the elitist underpinnings that have shaped and continue to shape its very fabric. As curator Jay Sanders (2012) asserts:

Institutional critique showed us that aesthetics – the canon – ignored the social and economic conditions of works and euthanized its production and reception. Art was too grandiose in its claims for impact and critique while it disregarded the realities of art's social conditions, for example, class privilege and the hierarchies within education and culture. Institutional critique showed us that aesthetics distances us from the ethical and sows our complicity in economic domination.

But institutional critique also signals efforts towards a process of reconciliation rooted in the political transformations of the late 1960s. Artist Liam Gillick (2008: 322) explains:

[The year] 1968 was the last instance of major change within the art context, supplying us with the critical tools we still use today. ... The most established museums have education programs dedicated to reaching out to multiple publics. Indeed, even the troubled recent discussions about art markets are rooted in debates initiated some forty years ago.

Art historians have identified two main 'waves' or generations of institutional critique, as they developed in Western Europe and the US, the first dating to the 1960s and 1970s with a focus on the institution of the museum and gallery, and the second associated with the late 1980s and onwards in which the institution being critiqued came to include a range of others beyond museums, from the political to the financial

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

and to the 'institution' of the artist as situated within the museum or gallery (Sheikh 2012: 368).

The first generation of artists involved in institutional critique commonly positioned themselves as outsiders to the art world committed to what artist Jonas Staal (2012b) calls 'moral cleansing'. The Guggenheim Museum's cancellation of Hans Haacke's (1971) retrospective marks what art historian Terry Smith (2012: 108) calls 'a turning point in artist-museum relationships in the U.S.' This occurred because Haacke refused to withdraw his work *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1972*, which exposed the unethical business practices of a New York real estate agent and simultaneously implicated the ethics of Guggenheim trustees, who were real estate developers.

Some early practitioners of institutional critique conceived of museums in monolithic terms. For instance, Robert Smithson (1972) famously characterised museums and galleries as sites of 'cultural confinement' and chose to develop an alternative platform through earthworks. However, most institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s was not as oppositional as it is sometimes supposed and many artists recognised that they were complicit in institutional systems. Artist Daniel Buren (quoted in Griffin 2005) recounts:

Many people got the feeling in the early '70s that I was one of the very virulent opponents of the institution. But even at that time, when I spoke or wrote on the subject, I always said take great care, for the artist and the institution are linked together; we're part of the institution.

Moreover, as art historian Alexander Alberro (2009: 3) argues, a position of opposition does not mean that the first wave was not interested in possibilities of organisational change and processes of reconciliation: 'Its aim was to intervene critically in the standing order of things, with an expectation that these interventions would produce actual change in the relations of power and lead to genuine reconciliation', he states.

The second generation of artists involved in institutional critique was more grounded in specific policies and practices of museums as well as those of a range of other institutions, and engaged in projects to reform unethical systems within them and in the larger socio-political arena. Fraser (2006b: 305–306) asserts:

Institutional Critique can only be defined by a methodology of critically reflexive site specificity. ... To say that this reflexive

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

engagement is critical is to say that it does not aim to affirm, expand, or reinforce a site or our relationship to it, but to problematize and change it. To the extent that a site is understood as a set of relations, Institutional Critique aims to transform not only the substantive, visible manifestations of those relations, but their structure, particularly what is hierarchical in that structure and the forms of power and domination, symbolic and material violence, produced by those hierarchies.

Many of the resulting interventions by Fred Wilson, Fraser and others were performative and participatory. As philosopher Boris Groys notes (2008: 23), this move to post-studio work was central to the critique of institutions as it challenged the fetishisation of museum objects.

The art historical trope of a generational shift that focuses on the art world in the US and Western Europe, however, fails to acknowledge many of the complexities of institutional critique as it developed in diverse regions and in response to a host of urgent political concerns. For instance, in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe in the 1980s, as Basis voor Actuele Kunst (BAK) artistic director Maria Hlavajova (2012) explains, where there was little hope of impacting official museum culture, young people committed to change created their own underground institutions:

I am Slovak, coming from Czechoslovakia. I come from an environment where what you probably call in the west 'institutional critique' would cohere around dissident movements, the Communist movement, perhaps even the leftist critique of Communism. The impulse came from knowing that state institutions were inaccessible, but also knowing one did not want to access them in the form they were. But it was not a resignation; there were exhibitions in private apartments, there were lectures in cellars of various buildings. So it was in a way a parallel culture that developed to the official institutional system without ever thinking that any interference would come to place. We were never even interested in critiquing national galleries. That was never our point of reference. Rather than relating our practice to some official institutions, it was to create our own world.

In other contexts, institutions beyond those of or impacting the art world took priority. For instance, the performance artist and mental health advocate who calls himself

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

the Vacuum Cleaner (2012), as a means both to convey the concept of the moral cleansing of institutions and to maintain anonymity when engaging in actions in the public sphere that might be considered vandalism, such as his 2007 spray-painting black the yellow letters D, I, S and D on a disabled parking space in Glasgow so that the word ABLE looms powerfully (Figure 1.3), is more interested in the psychiatric institution and its system of control than in art museums and galleries:

I had this period of my life from nineteen to about twenty-three where I was heavily institutionalised. My day was structured around institutional care, around medication, around psychoanalysis. I had contact with social services, psychiatric nurses, and homeless persons units. Somehow, I learnt about the anti-psychiatric movement in this country and I started doing performance because it was a way of regaining that space that I needed to survive. I think institutions have played a massive part in increasing and intensifying my mental illness but they've also kept me alive. The thing that I've learned is to not allow these institutions to take away my neurodiversity.

Over the years, institutional critique has adopted many diverse shapes and motivations.

FIGURE 1.3  
The Vacuum Cleaner,  
*Able*, Glasgow, 2007,  
courtesy of the artist



# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

## THE PREMATURE BURIAL OF INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Museums and galleries are commonly motivated to commission projects of institutional critique as a means towards self-reflective practice and evidencing a progressive sensibility. Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson (2003: 102–103) declares:

To a large extent, the museum has embraced such critiques because it believes its mission to be in accordance with progressive art practices and even politics. It does not think of itself as neutral, but highly receptive and open to criticism.

This leads to the question of whether institutional critique has become so embedded in museums and galleries that it has become instrumentalised – meaning it is flattened, coercive and without agency (Thompson 2013: 115). Artists, scholars and practitioners today disagree on the issue of when, and even if, institutional critique died (Bryan-Wilson 2003: 92). Referring to projects of institutional critique from the 1990s, art historian Miwon Kwon (2002: 47–50) remarks that they function as mere commodities of the museum. ‘They can easily become extensions of the museum’s own self-promotional apparatus, while the artist becomes a commodity with a special purchase on “criticality”’. ‘What they provide now, rather than *produce*, are aesthetic, often ‘critical-artistic’, services.

Indeed, the display of works representative of institutional critique within universal survey museums might be seen as evidence of such a decline. For instance, critic Karen Archey (2012) asserts that the Metropolitan Museum of Art 2012 exhibition ‘Spies in the House of Art’, a modest display of video and photography of artists associated with institutional critique including Louise Lawler, Thomas Struth, Candida Hofer and Andrea Fraser, ‘illustrates how thoroughly conversations surrounding institutional critique have become neutralized’. Curator of the exhibition Douglas Eklund thinks otherwise, however, as reflected by his cautious approach towards the project; ‘I was hoping to stop a few people who might otherwise have wandered through the museum in an unquestioning way’, Eklund (2012) states.

Eklund’s most transgressive tactic for the project was to situate Fraser’s work, a video of her watershed 1989 performance piece *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, not in the temporary exhibition space with the other objects, but in one of the permanent collection galleries hung with nineteenth-century academic French paintings. In *Museum Highlights*, performed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Fraser enacts the role of fictional museum docent Jane Castleton but with a script of the artist’s own

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

making; Fraser created the script from a collage of texts she carefully compiled (Fraser 2005b) which, together, evoke universal survey museums' self-affirming narratives that emphasise connoisseurship and canon formation. As Fraser performs the work, the dissonance between the (lyrical) speech and (prosaic) actions of Castleton becomes increasingly acute, for she points out museum 'objects' that are clearly not canonical, including a guard's stool, the coat rooms and the toilets.

For the Met exhibition, Eklund installed the video of *Museum Highlights* (Plate 2) just below Alexandre Cabanel's *The Birth of Venus* (1863) a work that the curator and artist imagined Jane Castleton would have admired (Eklund 2012); the video, when the sound emerged from speakers, powerfully interrupted the museum's unspoken script championing elitist notions of quality. But, unfortunately, Eklund wrestled with competing interests and, after a trial period, resorted to channelling the sound through headphones. Eklund (2012) recounts:

The communication of the piece just made me sad. I was so desperate to get it up without headphones. ... But when the galleries are empty, and she's shouting, it was very distracting to people. I felt bad. I felt I was polluting beyond where I wanted to go, the other people's experience of the art. People came to see Cabanel.

Eklund's struggles with the display of Fraser's work demonstrate the very real transgressive threat of institutional critique in some museum contexts today.

Whilst I appreciate the need to be sceptical of the professed radicality of art that has been embraced by those institutions to which the radicality is addressed, from a museum studies perspective I hold that the designation of instrumentalisation unhelpfully reduces the institution to a marketing machine with a set of regulatory motives. It does not acknowledge the diversity of aims and approaches of art organisations (beyond encyclopedic survey museums like the Met), including the impetus to become more socially and ethically responsible. As philosopher Brian Holmes (2009: 58) notes, instrumentality precludes the ability of institutions to change. According to museum director Charles Esche (2012), institutional critique has spawned painful but important moments of self-reflection in museums and galleries which have led to significant shifts in policy and practice.

Moreover, the moniker of instrumentalisation denies the complex and fluid web of influence among the various actors involved in critical practice. Speaking of

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

institutional critique, Bryan-Wilson (2003: 91) maps out this web:

My focus on critical reception ... should not suggest that the vector of influence only runs in one direction, whereby the language of institutional critique is first invented by artists, then picked up by critics, and finally, in a move that some might consider co-optation, mouthed by the institution itself. On the contrary, its syntax continues to evolve in multiple directions and within a complex nest of identifications; ... artist, critic, and curator are not distinct positions. ... And far from the museum system being the endpoint of the interpretive chain, it is also productive, exerting pressures and affording opportunities that artists respond to.

The approach of Chicago contemporary artist Theaster Gates (discussed in depth in Chapter 3), for instance, exemplifies this complex vector of influence. In his projects that regenerate deprived urban communities by transforming neglected housing into community-facing micro art institutions, Gates (2012b) asserts that, rather than engaging in the practice of institutional critique, he is introducing new models of museums and galleries that result in critique of institutions:

My building a house, or rebuilding a house, is not an institutional critique, it is not a politic 'you wouldn't let me in therefore I am gonna do it there,' it's just like in addition to you this other thing should live. What we found is that in a city like Chicago when one builds a new institution, and my little projects are kind of like little institutions, the cultural and thought leaders of the city become really curious about those other institutions. If you do that thing well and you do something that another kind of institution isn't doing, when you put those things together it looks like it is critical, it looks like there is a kind of dialectical system. I like that institutional critique is happening as a byproduct of something that I just believe in.

From his vantage point in 1995, art historian Frazer Ward views new modes of the critique of institutions developing, rather than simply a continuation of the historical trends of institutional critique. 'What is important is not the trajectories taken by individual artists, but how implications in their work may be seen, passed through different theoretical and political matrices, taken up in later work', Ward (1995: 81)

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

notes. Acknowledging the powerful repercussions of the cancelled Hans Haacke show and censored Daniel Buren works in 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (Spector 1993: 253) – which in 2005 prompted the museum to develop a Buren exhibition with a more open, less guarded approach – Chief Curator Nancy Spector (2012) muses, ‘we are students of that [earlier] period.’ Holmes (2009: 58–59) characterises a major strand of the critique of institutions through collectivity and networks and with a new critical reflexivity towards the public sphere.

Indeed, the development of new media art has created opportunities for what might be called a third wave of institutional critique. Academic and new media curator Christiane Paul (2006: 191–193) holds that the collaborative, participatory, networked and variable characteristics of new media art, particularly internet art, have challenged museums to reimagine themselves. Paul (2006: 192) cautions, however, that this influence occurs primarily by implication, not necessarily explicitly as an act of institutional critique:

One could argue that new media art [per se] constitutes a form of Institutional Critique by its very nature, in that it questions the traditional boundaries and structures of the museum and is rooted in multiple contexts outside the institution. However, it would be misguided to assume that new media art intentionally engages in Institutional Critique as a field of artistic practice. Only in the case of Internet art, which exists in its own potentially global exhibition space and does not need an institution to be presented to the public, did Institutional Critique occasionally become an explicit focus of artistic explorations.

Some thinkers argue that, as institutions continue to require critique, artists continue to evolve effective approaches to do so. Amira Gad (2012) notes:

Institutional critique is a discursive practice. There is an important history to institutional critique, but I believe that this history is still being written and is ongoing. At the end of the day institutional critique is still relevant and acts as a reference point for how we exchange ideas, given the complex dynamics among the various agents of the art world.

Artist Carey Young (2012) concurs. She states that the pressing issues within museums today suggest that institutional critique continues to carry resonance:

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

I've heard this view that institutional critique is dead and that's something that does crop up, repeatedly. I subscribe to that view in some ways myself in the sense that we don't need yet another project critiquing an art museum, but at the same time we do need to be looking at those sponsored relationships for example or the museum's role in protecting freedoms or as a form of public space, which is also under great erosion at present. So, these are issues that artists should be defending and discussing and therefore I can see that within a remit of institutional critique.

Like Gad and Young, I hold that institutional critique is more than an artistic movement representative of a particular moment in time, but is, in addition, a mode of interrogating the tangled web of ethical positions among artists, institutions and society and that maintains its contemporary relevance. *Polder Cup* is indicative of this view. Whilst perhaps not a project of institutional critique in the strict art historical sense of that term, it clearly critiques institutions – both cultural and political – with an ethical imperative to rethink relations between museums and their publics and between the wider spectrum of political stakeholder groups paralysed by consensus politics.

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTISTIC PRACTICE

### DEFINING SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICE

*Polder Cup* may function as contemporary institutional critique, but at the same time, it is clearly situated within the domain of socially engaged artistic practice. Over the last two decades, socially engaged artistic practice, also known as social practice and socially engaged practice, has emerged as an artistic strategy that facilitates dialogue, collaboration and reciprocity on issues of urgency to open up possibilities for the construction of new, more socially just relationships (Kester 2004: 8). Like institutional critique, social practice encapsulates many diverse aesthetic and political approaches (S. Jackson 2011: 12–14), but what these approaches share is a commitment to critical inquiry about the performing of social roles. Social scientist Chris Mowles (2008) explains:

We are born into a world where there is already a play going on. The play arises out of a history of social interaction and creates ways of speaking and acting which condition the way that new actors can speak and act. The way we express ourselves, indeed

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

the very way we think about ourselves, is entirely shaped by the play that we join and the actions and speech of others.

Social practice interrupts that play to break down boundaries between institutions and stakeholders and establish new relations based on equality. Social practice encourages participants to write, enact, interrogate and revise new, more ethical scripts about institutions and society that promote mutual understanding. Through performing a radical play about football, for example, *Polder Cup* revises conventional scripts of museum/visitor dynamics and of consensus politics.

Social practice is a performative process which, like institutional critique, has the potential to help museums shed elitist, proprietary modes of thinking and to inspire reconciliations between museums and communities. And, in many ways, socially engaged artistic practice emerged directly from institutional critique. Artist Neil Cummings (2012) remarks:

An institution is constructed through social practices; it's not just a physical building and a collection but also a set of relationships between people. Art that reflects on these relationships and thinks about the conditions that produce it grows logically from institutional critique.

Social practice is distinct from institutional critique, however, in that it is by definition coproductive, part of what performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson (2011: 17–18) charts as a social turn that creates opportunities for community engagement and public agency.

Socially engaged practice rejects idealised notions of the artist as lone genius and instead fosters collaborative working relationships. It draws upon feminist approaches to listening that eschew judgment and instead convey empathy to generate what art historian Grant Kester (2004: 113–116) calls 'solidarity creation, solidarity enhancement and the counter hegemonic'. As artist and museum educator Pablo Helguera (2012) notes:

Social practice raises the stakes in terms of the quality of interaction. Institutional critique is uni-directional – a political statement of an artist. Social practice is not satisfied by the paradigm of the viewer being confronted but instead involves collaboration that leads to action.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

In *Polder Cup*, Lopez thus functions as a facilitator who creates conditions for collaboration; the footballers are the primary agents who invent and enact strategic thinking against the grain.

Social practice also orients itself away from the internal problems of the museum and towards a range of human rights and other global concerns with which museums and galleries have an ethical responsibility to engage. Many of those involved in social practice consciously break from institutional critique by taking an inherently benevolent approach towards public institutions struggling with budget cuts and bureaucracy and working to breathe new life into them.

It is not surprising that, where museum commissions for projects in institutional critique typically arose from curatorial departments, those for projects in socially engaged practice have tended to originate from departments of education, learning and public programming. Mark Allen (2012a) of Los Angeles-based collective Machine Project declares, 'I'm starting to really see the value of the education department as a rogue space. The less high-art economic and cultural value also creates a space of more freedom'. For departments of education, socially engaged practice offers an opportunity to attract new audiences in a sustained way. As former Hammer Museum Director of Academic Programmes Sue Yank (2012), who collaborated with Machine Project, states:

Institutions are really interested in social practice because there's an ongoing crisis in the museum world in terms of changing demographics and audience development; multiple studies have shown that museum audiences are shrinking. I think that's certainly true in our institution and many others. By working with artists, museums hope to reach out to people in ways that the institution by itself is struggling to do. Social practice has become a response.

Because the concerns of social practice extend to the wider public sphere, projects also are commonly commissioned by alternative spaces and public art commissioning agencies and funded through private foundations and arts councils (Kester 2004: 126–129). *Polder Cup* represents such a joint commission between an art space and a public art commissioning agency.

Socially engaged practice is rooted in artistic milestones of the 1960s and 1970s towards the social, such as Joseph Beuys's concept of social sculpture as a means to

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

shape society, a range of community and public art movements in the US and Europe and Guy Debord's ideal of the 'situation', itself inspired by Berthold Brecht, in which criticality emerges from the transformation of audience into participants (Bishop 2006a: 12–13). Social practice is equally shaped by key developments of the 1980s and early 1990s. These include Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2012), first published in 1987, which, inspired by the events of 1968 in France, offers up a theoretical framework for the idea of political action; Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), which emphasises the agency of ordinary people to express themselves; Chicago independent curator Mary Jane Jacob's programme *Culture in Action* (1991–1993), in which artists and community members together created public works from parades to gardens that piloted new possibilities for a participatory public art (Jacob, Brenson and Olson 1995); and AIDS activism which modelled a new kind of collaborative potential (Holmes 2012: 80–81).

Socially engaged artistic practice has a significant but fraught affiliation with relational aesthetics which includes a blurring of boundaries between the two. As defined by critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud (1998: 113), relational aesthetics is 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space'. Emerging primarily from European practitioners ensconced in the Kunsthalle more than the art gallery, relational aesthetics concerns the ethics of relational encounters, particularly those between museums and audiences, as orchestrated by artists in social space (Buskirk 2012: 275–278). Nancy Spector (2008: 16), who curated the 2008–2009 *theanyspacewhatever* exhibition on relational aesthetics at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, explains:

Each of the artists engages with context, but not in the mode of institutional critique. Their goal is less to reframe and subvert the inherent reifying powers of a museum or gallery than to activate their environments, to create slippages between the aestheticizing space of art and the world at large.

Carsten Holler's *Revolving Hotel Room* (Figure 1.4), for instance, for the Guggenheim exhibition offered visitors who booked in advance an experience of an overnight stay at the museum on a bed positioned on a revolving platform. Critic Jerry Saltz (2008), who took up the offer, reported afterwards, amusingly but also with theoretical savvy:

I noticed that I felt refreshed – that the Guggenheim, where I'd been a thousand times, looked utterly new to me. I was in love

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

with the place. The museum had become a cradle of sorts; the environment seemed whole and enveloping. I had the strange feeling of having merged with the structure, like we really had slept together.

At the very least, on the level of bodily experience, Saltz's engagement with *Revolving Hotel Room* provides a glimpse into the potential of relational aesthetics to create conditions for the staging of new and closer relationships between museums and publics.

## THE ETHICS OF PARTICIPATION

Many of those allied with social practice, rather than relational aesthetics, have charged the latter with formalism, insularity and a lack of activism (Schafhausen in Simblist 2011: 30); as Holmes (2012: 75) explains, critics committed to participation within the wider public sphere hold that relational aesthetics remains sequestered in the white cube of the gallery space.



FIGURE 1.4 • Installation view: *theanyspacewhatever*, 2009, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, photograph: David Heald cThe Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, photograph: David Heald cThe Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

Other critics such as Martha Buskirk (2012: 18, 327), harking back to Guy Debord's work on spectacle theory, note the paradox that, whilst the experiential qualities of relational practice works such as Holler's *Revolving Hotel Room* might seem, at first, shockingly inappropriate for the gallery space, a deeper look suggests that such projects epitomise the more commercial aims of the museum sector as an industry in which success is built upon producing spectacular events.

At the same time, the participatory nature of social practice has also generated ethical questions about the power of those directing or facilitating them and the agency of contributors to them. Many project directors/facilitators of socially engaged practice look to Jurgen Habermas's (2007) theory of discourse ethics, first articulated in the 1990s, which holds that conversations foster mutual understanding. Tom Finkelpearl (2013: 4–6), former director of the Queens Museum and currently Commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, for instance, prefers the term 'social cooperation' to 'socially engaged practice', as he argues that the former more effectively encompasses the many levels of artists and publics working together along a wide 'spectrum of activity'. But, as Kester (2004: 108–110) acknowledges, Habermas does not recognise the inequalities of power that exist concerning participation in the public sphere. Indeed, some projects in socially engaged practice do abstract and romanticise notions of audience and tend to lack class consciousness (Blondet 2012). Much of the scholarship on socially engaged practice distinguishes, however, between projects created by artists with participation by publics and projects that are deeply co-creative with contributions and decision-making power distributed equally between artists and collaborators (Kester 2004).

Even so, art historian Claire Bishop (2012: 279) has dismissed projects in socially engaged practice as naive in their claims for emancipatory results: 'Models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society', she warns. Bishop (2006b: 180) also holds that socially engaged practice is instrumentalised – strictly social work – and does not possess the aesthetic and critical rigour of art.

I see Bishop's argument as constructing an artificial dialectic that exceptionalises the history of art as a discipline and denies its museological and moral agency. Shannon Jackson (2011: 16) equally repudiates the charge of instrumentality, cautioning that such arguments provide fodder for political positions that undermine public institutions:

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

If progressive artists and critics unthinkingly echo a routinized language of antiinstitutionalism and anti-statism, we can find ourselves unexpectedly colluding with neoliberal impulses that want to dismantle public institutions of human welfare.

The ethical work of socially engaged practice does not preclude aesthetic and philosophical substance; multi-layered, politically nuanced projects in socially engaged practice draw strength from both ethics and aesthetics to produce possibilities for new understandings among the parties involved. As psycho-social welfare scholar Lynn Froggett and collaborators (2011: 48) establish:

Ethical and aesthetic issues can align when the artwork is adequate to the ethical complexity it takes as its subject matter – that is, when it can contain and make available for reflection ... the conflicts it reveals. ... To the extent that the art refuses to collapse the tensions and holds them symbolically in relation to one another, it performs a reparative function – compensation, perhaps, for the ‘trouble’ it has brought to the fore.

Sometimes, as Curator of Public Engagement at the Hammer Museum at UCLA Allison Agsten (2012a) admits, there is a challenging learning curve for museums and galleries in this work. She asserts that, when first commissioning these types of projects, productive conflict between museum and artists transpired, as the Hammer expected the project to solve institutional problems whereas the artists understood the commission as an opportunity to interrogate the problem. Speaking of an ambitious year-long collaboration with Machine Project, Agsten (2012a) reflects, ‘If this [solving verses interrogating institutional problems] was where the core of the conflict resided, it was also the gray area that propelled some of our most productive conversations and projects’.

From a museological perspective, the social work of social practice is not by definition instrumentalising; the nuances and complexities of *Polder Cup* for both museums and the larger political sphere strongly refute the argument that social practice is merely a didactic and reductive tool but instead underscore its interrogative possibilities.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

## CRITICAL PRACTICE

In its straddling of both institutional critique and socially engaged artistic practice, *Polder Cup* represents the larger spectrum of interventions that rejects as oversimplified a dialectic between them and instead traverses the overlap that exists. Cummings (2012) uses the term 'critical practice' to capture the merging of these approaches, its first word 'critical' referencing the *critique* in institutional *critique*, and its second word 'practice' alluding to the practice of socially engaged artistic *practice*. Critical practice also has a more pedestrian resonance: Cummings (2012) notes that it serves as 'a generic term that suggests thinking about your work in a more reflexive way'.

At Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, where Cummings teaches, 'Critical Practice' designates a particular cluster of artists, researchers, technicians and students (some associated with the art school and others not) in which Cummings is involved that is engaged in cultural production; members contribute to a wiki shaped by a set of open organisational guidelines that fosters transparent, collaborative, distributed and process-based ways of working (Critical Practice 2014). According to Cummings, the open organisational guidelines ([openorganisations.org](http://openorganisations.org) n.d.) are as important to the cluster as is their research, exhibitions, programmes and publications because the guidelines enable the group to situate its own practice within the larger domain of institutional systems. As Cummings (2012) explains, the open organisational guidelines enable the cluster to 'get away from judging an institution as either good or bad and instead to focus on how our practices make those institutions as they make us'. In other words, the guidelines foster self-reflective practice that, not surprisingly, draws from both institutional critique and socially engaged artistic practice.

Like Cummings, I see exploring the convergences between institutional critique and socially engaged artistic practice as more productive to my research than treating them as discrete art historical phenomena. My study is museological rather than art historical; looking at a range of interventions that engage diverse strategies of institutional critique and socially engaged artistic practice under the rubric of critical practice allows me to focus on their contributions to discourse on museum ethics rather than their place within a canon. Some museums and galleries are also calling into question the relevance of these art historical constructs when commissioning projects from artists. Agsten (2012b) of the Hammer Museum remarks:

We talk about our projects in the terms of institutional critique and socially engaged practice and everyone we work with is on some

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

level thinking about those things. But I don't think we're considering those terms when we're doing this work and many of the artists we work with aren't self-defining in that way either. Our program would be really hemmed in by defining it through those terms.

Considering *Polder Cup* and the case studies within the body of this monograph through the lens of critical practice opens up opportunities to examine the complex and shifting relationships between artists, museums and ethics.

## CRITICAL PRACTICE AND THE PROJECT OF RECONCILIATION

### RECONCILIATION IN A MUSEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

My project brings together institutional critique and socially engaged practice through the lens of critical practice in order to examine their impact upon the ongoing project of reconciliation between museums and publics. I appropriate the term 'reconciliation' from peace and reconciliation studies and argue for its relevance to museum ethics. As defined by political scientists Bashir Bashir and Will Kymlicka (2008), reconciliation is a framework for redressing the claims of groups historically oppressed by an environment of exclusion and for forging new pluralistic institutions characterised by shared authority and equality of opportunity to participate. Theologian Jonathan VanAntwerpen (2008: 33) acknowledges that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), truth commissions, academics and journalists together convey 'a profusion of multiple discourses of reconciliation'. I find reconciliation a useful theoretical construct for museum studies. I explore how critical practice can redress exclusions and inequalities inside the museum and out.

Over the last few years, persuasive voices in museum studies literature have made a strong case for museums and galleries to forge new substantive relationships with their publics based on a notion of building agency and shared authority but have also acknowledged the challenges that museums face in doing so. Museum director David Anderson (2012) has argued that museums need to recognise the cultural rights of individuals, as articulated by Article 15 of the United Nations 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, through initiatives that generate effective social participation. Museum studies scholar Richard Sandell and museum practitioner Eithne Nightingale (2012) have examined pivotal projects in developing equality of access and opportunities for participation in museums within the context of a long history of exclusion and oppression. Academics Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh (2012: 99–121) have asserted that the emphasis on canon

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

formation in art museums and galleries has instilled a rationale for prioritising aesthetics over social engagement that must be addressed. And museum consultant Bernadette Lynch (2011) has revealed the difficulties of creating reciprocity in museum/community partnerships, even when museums aim to deconstruct power relations because the language used by museum practitioners is imbued with privilege. In this volume I see such relational work within a larger framework of reconciliation and focus on the unique role that critical practice can play.

Reconciliation requires a commitment to difficult conversations among the parties involved. International relations scholar Ronald Fisher (2001: 28) explains:

Successful reconciliation between alienated groups cannot take place without an adequate degree of genuine dialogue and conflict analysis of a mutual, interactive nature. That is to say, the conditions and outcomes of successful dialogue and conflict analysis lay the groundwork for the reciprocal enactment of the necessary elements of reconciliation: acknowledgements of transgressions, apologies for these, forgiveness of these, and assurances that such acts will not occur in the future. In order for individuals from the mutually aggrieved parties to move toward reconciliation, they must come to understand the other side – its perceptions, cognitions, motives, strategies, and failings – and the history of interaction that escalated and maintained the conflict.

Such conversations facilitating mutual understanding are integral to the reconciliation process for museums and their publics.

In the process of political reconciliation, as peace and conflict studies expert Johan Galtung (2001: 4) notes, typically a third party situated outside of the sphere of conflict, but with enough insider knowledge to intuit the dynamics of mistrust, steps in to help foster the kind of challenging but important dialogue that has the potential to forge new relations between groups. In the process of reconciliation between museums and publics, it is often artists who situate themselves as outsiders but with the insider knowledge to intervene through critical practice. As the artist known as the Vacuum Cleaner (2012) declares, 'Even with the most subversive of intentions if you really want to change institutions you have to engage with them on some level... It's all a spectrum; you're not inside or outside'. In this study I show that critical practice is an effective means of supporting museums to enact reconciliation by redressing exclusions, inequalities and relational frictions.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

I use the term 'reconciliation' not to suggest a facile and fixed moment of rapprochement but instead a process-driven negotiation informed by the critical sensibilities of agonism. Like political theorist Chantal Mouffe, I view reconciliation as a pluralistic and conflicted stance without closure. Mouffe (2005) explains:

The public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation. ... According to the agonistic approach, public spaces are always plural and the agonistic confrontation takes place in a multiplicity of discursive surfaces.

Certainly, not all artistic production that falls under the rubric of critical practice is part of this larger effort towards reconciliation. But the diversity and depth of the projects under the microscope in my study demonstrate that, together, the case studies underscore the value of reconciliation as a process to the artists engaging in critical practice, the art institutions that stage these interventions and the publics who engage with them.

## CRITICAL PRACTICE AS ETHICS

To date, studies on institutional critique have been predominantly theoretical and art historical in approach. Primary contributions to the literature have provided theoretical analysis (Welchman 2006; Raunig and Ray 2009; Drabble and Richter 2011; Richter and Wolfs 2011), survey overviews (McShine 1999; Putnam 2009) and art historical examination of individual artists (Haidu 2010; Peltomaki 2010). In addition, many artists who engage in institutional critique write about their own work and ideas and/or have done extensive published interviews with art historians and art curators on their projects (Alberro and Stimson 1999; Alberro and Stimson 2009). Much of the literature on institutional critique, however, is dense and abstract, leading to an assumption among some museum practitioners that such projects are obtuse and irrelevant to them and their audiences. In fact, much institutional critique has a directness and candour that reflect its roots in conceptual art. The literature also offers a constricted view of the subject area by generally overlooking the museological and ethical implications of institutional critique.

Museological explorations of institutional critique have focused primarily on artist Fred Wilson (Yellis 2009; Globus 2011; Marstine 2012a; 2012b), but demonstrate the significant potential of this scholarly direction to understand how these projects can foster new relationships between museums and communities. Museum director/

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

curator Maria Lind (2011) provides a helpful way forward in her articulation of a 'constructive' institutional critique that functions like a critical friend. One distinctly alternative approach is Claire Robins's (2013) museological study of interventions which considers how they enhance museum learning. She has a particular interest in the use of humour as a pedagogic device and argues that irony creates critical engagements that change the balance of power (2013: 89–118).

Studies of socially engaged artistic practice are generally more accessible than the literature on institutional critique, perhaps shaped by the prioritisation of publics in the projects themselves, though many publications specifically on relational aesthetics are more obtuse. Key introductions to socially engaged practice emphasise the performative and relational qualities of this work over the art historical (Kester 2004; 2011; S. Jackson 2011) and offer up a range of interviews and case studies (Thompson 2012; Finkelpearl 2013). The philosophical approaches of Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) and prolific artist/writer Liam Gillick (2002; 2003; 2009) tend to dominate discussions of relational aesthetics, though major catalogues (Spector 2008) provide a wider art historical reading. The long-standing challenge to the value of relational aesthetics and socially engaged artistic practice by Claire Bishop (2004; 2006b; 2012) also frames the scholarship in this area, questioning the efficacy of work that Bishop characterises as prioritising ethics and the relational over quality and aesthetics. I instead look to philosopher Simon Critchley (in Critchley and Hernandez-Navarro 2013: 29) who asserts, 'I think that artists can be immoral, and perhaps they should be immoral. ... But I don't think that art can be unethical; I think that interesting art is always ethical.' This volume considers artists' deep engagement with ethics as contributing to the quality and impact of critical practice.

Other studies look more broadly at the ethics of commodification of contemporary art. For instance, Martha Buskirk's (2012) ambitious study of the complexities and contradictions in the relationship between the art market and contemporary art practice, including both institutional critique and socially engaged practice, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the ethics of assigning economic value to art, though it does not frame the research within larger ethical concerns.

Another branch of scholarship examines in a quite focused way the ethics of particular genres or subjects of contemporary art. For example, Amanda Boetzkes (2010) considers the relationship between the earth art movement and environmental ethics and Ellen Levy (2011) explores the unprecedented ethical challenges introduced by bio-art and nano-art.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

Whilst not romanticising the artist as the sole conscience of the museum, my goal is to demonstrate the potential of the artist's voice as a driver for ethical change. In his discussion of artists' interventions, Terry Smith (2012: 138) notes how artists leverage both their experiences and their symbolic capital as outsiders to contribute to ethics discourse:

The deep ethical import of all of these approaches pivots on conceiving the artist as in part, fundamentally, an outsider to art's institutions, a stranger in the place ostensibly devoted to his or her unique creativity, a foreign visitor whose otherness is the essence of the entire city.

Though I acknowledge Andrea Fraser's (2006a; 2012b) corrective to the insider/outsider binary which argues that no one can escape the institution and that artists themselves are constituted through institutional structures, I hold that the 'otherness' that Terry Smith identifies helps artists who engage in critical practice to recognise and deconstruct the exclusionary codes of institutions. Maria Lind (2011: 25) recognises the complexity of the convergences between insider and outsider positions:

Although proximity can certainly be compromising it can just as well stimulate a kind of exchange which allows for the system to be challenged. When this is the case the challenge is carried out from a position which is simultaneously outside and inside, both implicated and distant.

These convergences of insider and outsider positions go some way towards fostering reconciliation.

## CRITICAL PRACTICE AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Numerous artists and scholars have questioned the impact of one-off projects to effect sustained organisational change. Even Neil Cummings, himself a producer of one-off projects, admits that some museums and galleries commission interventions in critical practice to enact a temporal flirtation with challenging ideas, but without committing to learning from these interventions and using this learning to transform the organisation. Cummings (2012) remarks, 'Museums and galleries might see the payback in terms of a phenomenal amount of publicity and fantastic visitor figures but the project doesn't touch their core processes or practices so therefore it's fine'.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

On the other hand, interventions can be deeply transformative when there is buy-in across an organisation (Marstine 2012a). Oftentimes, this occurs at pivotal moments for an institution, for instance, on an anniversary of its founding or completion of its building; though some museums capitalise on these moments to pursue purely celebratory initiatives, others utilise them to reflect critically on the past and present and to conceive new possible futures.

For instance, in 2011, to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary, Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol developed a year-long research theme including exhibitions and public programming called *Apparatus*, meaning the complex structures of an organisation or system, specifically, in this context, the structures that produce culture (Trevor 2012). A linchpin of *Apparatus* was Neil Cummings's *Self-Portrait: Arnolfini* (Plate 3), which emerged from Cummings's exploration of institutional practices through the Gallery's archives and through workshops on possible futures that he led with Arnolfini staff. The resulting work, a timeline produced along the staircase walls of the Gallery, mapped out through colour-coded sprites a trajectory of events relating to the art world (turquoise) and to its wider socio-economic (gold) and technological (purple) context, starting with the Bristol riots of 1831 demanding greater representation in Parliament, which took place just behind the current Arnolfini site, to Arnolfini's centenary in 2061 in which the Gallery gains full consciousness of itself as an organisation (Cummings 2011). Cummings (2012) recounts:

It's very difficult for institutions to think into the future. ...  
Everyone's working flat out to make the next exhibition, and when it happens it's gone and then they're thinking about the next exhibition and how to get the funding, the artists, the artefacts and the loans forms, so when you start asking them about what are they planning for five years or fifteen or twenty or thirty they are dazzled. I think that if cultural institutions don't start dreaming of possible futures that these futures will somehow be done to us by others.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of its Frank Lloyd Wright building, the Guggenheim Museum solicited and displayed visionary proposals for interventions in the rotunda from some 200 artists, designers and architects around the world. The resulting salon-style exhibition, *Contemplating the Void: Interventions in the Guggenheim Museum* (Figure 1.5), offered up a discourse that was simultaneously utopian and dystopian. Co-curator David van der Leer explains (2012):

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

What was interesting to see were the ideas surfacing from all camps – ideas of how to cross the space, how to quiet the space down, how to make it a softer space, how to work with a light in the space. It was a very good way for us to reflect upon what we had already done in the space over the last twenty years with large-scale installations and also set a tone for what we could be doing with installations over the coming years. We got a ton of ideas out of this.



FIGURE 1.5 • Installation view: *Contemplating the Void: Interventions in the Guggenheim*, 2010, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, photograph: David Heald ©The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

The advent of the biennial can also prompt critical reflection. As curators Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Ovstebo (2010) assert, whilst biennials are institutions in and of themselves, they can introduce criticality through counter-narratives that challenge canons and the systems that maintain them. For example, discussing Michael Asher's *Open all Day and Night*, for the 2010 Whitney Biennial – in which Asher intervened to keep the biennial open 24 hours a day for three consecutive days, creating a bureaucratic nightmare for the Whitney and a melatonin-altering experience for visitors – biennial co-curator Gary Carrion-Murayari (2012) remarks:

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

It was a tool to understand how the museum operates for him and for us and it was an opportunity for the public to experience the museum in a new way. There's a generosity in that project that the terminology of institutional critique doesn't capture.

Sometimes commitment to transformation through critical practice occurs across a particular city because of certain political, social and economic conditions. Berlin is sometimes mentioned (Mania 2006), but Los Angeles, where artist Robert Fontenot, the subject of a case study in Chapter 2, lives and works, is another case in point. Los Angeles is a contradiction in terms, a place obsessed with fantasy, as fabricated by the entertainment worlds of Hollywood and Disneyland, but equally defined by its cultural vitality, as generated through its racially, ethnically and economically diverse neighbourhoods and record of arts activism (Gonzalez 2012). University programmes in post-studio art and in curatorial studies – such as at California Institute of the Arts where Michael Asher taught for almost 40 years, and at UCLA where Andrea Fraser took up a position in the late 2000s – have helped to create a robust and evolving terrain of critical practice. Agsten (2012b) notes, 'As a newer city, LA is perceived as not having as much tradition and that's morphed into a tradition of resisting tradition. ... The spirit of our city is that we can do things that you couldn't necessarily do somewhere else'. The vast spread of the city has made rent in grittier areas relatively affordable for artist spaces. Hammer Museum former curatorial associate Elizabeth Cline (2012) adds, 'LA is so unique in that most artists do offsite projects. They don't need an institution to make their work public. It's about LA having the space and artists making work for their communities.'

Moreover, particular projects that have defined the LA cultural landscape have resonated strongly for artists and curators involved in critical practice. *Watts Towers* (1921–1954) (Figure 1.6), Simon Rodia's 17 steel, concrete and wire sculptures embedded with found objects and located in the deprived Los Angeles community of Watts, serve as a beacon to the city of the potential social impact of art. According to Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art Rita Gonzalez (2012), Watts Towers 'embody a sense of possibility in a post-riot ravaged landscape in which the towers exist and thrive, particularly because they were made out of trash with one person's hands and very simple tools'. Ed Ruscha's *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (Figure 1.7) (1965–1968), which depicts LACMA, only just founded in the year Ruscha began the painting, with flames and smoke billowing, has long served as a tongue-in-cheek insurrectionist rallying cry for institutional critique. First exhibited at the Irving Blum Gallery in LA in 1968, behind a velvet rope, as

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*



FIGURE 1.6 • Simon Rodia, Watts Towers, Los Angeles, 1921–1954, photo taken by LACMA's Conservation Center, c 2014 Museum Associations/LACMA, by Yosi Pozeilov

if to shield it from an unruly mob, the painting was accompanied by a telegram to the gallery in which Ruscha announced that the fire marshal would be attending the opening (McShine 1999: 190). And the ambitious Getty-funded 2011–2012 project *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA, 1945–1980* (J. Paul Getty Trust 2011), which involved exhibitions, scholarship and public programming at over 60 Southern California institutions and which was some 10 years in the making, prompted practitioners to reflect on the local roots of institutional critique, including the work of feminists and artists of colour (Gonzalez 2012).

Mapping critical practice in Los Angeles reveals a matrix of initiatives, many at small self-organised artists' spaces such as the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the Center for Land Use Interpretation and Machine Project and others at art museums. At LACMA, this is seen in small risk-taking exhibitions of contemporary art in the

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*



FIGURE 1.7 • Ed Ruscha, *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, 1965–1968, oil on canvas, 53 1/2 × 133 1/2 in. (135.9 × 339.1 cm.) Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. 72.252, photography by Cathy Carver

1990s and 2000s, particularly through LACMA Lab (Zellen n.d.), a research and development unit established to pilot new models for audience engagement through commissioning art, which Rita Gonzalez (2012) calls ‘institutional critique without the official label’. More recently, LACMA and the Hammer Museum have focused on socially engaged practice through ambitious artists’ residencies by collectives including Fallen Fruit and Machine Project (Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2011; Agsten 2012a). These projects lay claim to interstitial museum spaces for the public sphere, as they challenge what Jennifer Lieu (2011: 39, 53) calls the ‘operational boundaries’ of museums by interrupting their everyday routines so that new ways of working emerge.

Moreover, beyond any particular project or place, the larger trajectory of critical practice has become so impactful that it has been a key factor in the turn of museums and galleries towards social engagement (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 141–142; Buskirk 2012: 9). Most artists who engage in critical practice do so because they believe in the museum’s capacity to change – and in its capacity to change society. Critical practice undoubtedly serves museums but, rather than constituting a weakness, this helps museums and publics to reconcile in ways that benefit a diverse range of constituencies.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

## RECONCILIATION: WHAT? WHY? HOW?

### POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Reconciliation as a human rights strategy came to the fore when leaders in South Africa established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (1996–1998) as the centrepiece of the transition from a political system of apartheid to democracy. This strategy soon became a model for other countries in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe that were emerging from repressive regimes and civil war to stability and the respect for human rights. As Bashir and Kymlicka explain, in the South African context, reconciliation was understood as a process that would both facilitate a peaceful process of radical political change and provide a kind of transitional justice. More recently, reconciliation has become an important concept for redressing a diversity of historic injustices in western democracies from slavery to the mistreatment of indigenous peoples. In the twenty-first century, reconciliation has become a significant part of negotiating civic accord (Bashir and Kymlicka 2008: 3–4).

Although the TRC was not the first national truth commission, it was particularly impactful because of its wide participation – over 20,000 individuals gave testimony and more than 7,000 others requested amnesty – and because it focused on reconciliation (Murphy 2010: 4–5). Using the Xhosa word *ubuntu*, a relational term suggesting the connectedness of individuals through generosity, cooperation and empathy, archbishop Desmond Tutu led the TRC to hear the stories of survivors of human rights abuse during the apartheid era and to grant amnesty to perpetrators who offered full disclosure and whose actions occurred in a political or military context. President Nelson Mandela served as an exemplar of forgiveness in the name of social harmony (Kruger 2006: 29, 35–36).

There are many ways of approaching reconciliation and, in practice, most reconciliation projects represent a hybrid course of action. Bashir and Kymlicka (2008: 12) argue that reconciliation operates on three distinct but overlapping levels:

First, there is a set of *tools* or *techniques* of reconciliation, which include reparations and compensation, apologies, commemorations and memorials, truth telling initiatives, rehabilitation and amnesties. Second, there is a set of *goals* or *purposes* of reconciliation, which include nation-building, individual and collective healing after trauma, the pursuit of justice in its various forms (retributive, restorative, distributive),

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

the consolidation of the rule of law, and democratization. And third, there are various moral, political, or even religious *theories* of reconciliation that attempt to provide a normative framework for evaluating the tools and goals of reconciliation, which include Christian theologies of forgiveness, human rights ideologies, and secular theories of nationalism or justice. ... Real world projects of reconciliation typically involve a complicated mixing and matching of these various tools, goals, and theories, which defy easy categorization.

In the context of museums and publics, reconciliation, as a complicated mixing and matching of tools, goals and theories, is a useful concept. This is not a literal approach responding directly to a historical record of museums' committing atrocities – though in collecting and caring for objects amassed through atrocities without taking responsibility for their complicity in colonial injustices, museums perpetuate trauma on colonised peoples (Lonetree 2012) and, at the same time, in atoning for past wrongs museums have a significant role to play facilitating reconciliation within the political sphere (Barkan and Karn 2006: 10). My appropriation of the concept is based on theoretical understandings of reconciliation as a means to address a diversity of ethical rifts. As cultural institution studies scholar Michalinos Zembylas (2012: 47) asserts, 'A sustained pedagogical effort for reconciliation offers the potential to reinvent spaces in which similarities and differences may be critically articulated and felt, toward constructing new shared imaginaries.' In my analysis of case studies in the following chapters, I explore how *critical practice* is such an effort towards reconciliation and generates the potential to reinvent *museum* spaces in which similarities and differences are articulated and felt, towards constructing new shared imaginaries.

## MUSEOLOGICAL RECONCILIATION AND PUBLIC AGENCY

Whilst it has long been acknowledged that museums are places people trust in their search for insight (BritainThinks 2013), it has also been demonstrated that substantive gains in cocreation, reciprocity and shared ownership are hard-won (Lynch 2011). Speaking of the museum's place in the larger campaign for human rights – which has developed since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed by the United Nations in 1948 – cultural sector leader Mark O'Neill and museum learning consultant Lois Silverman (2012: xxi) together write that, though museums and galleries have made some progress, to become fully pluralistic

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

institutions characterised by shared authority and equality of opportunity to participate requires a sea change among sector professionals. Charles Esche (in Esche and Borja-Villel 2012) echoes this refrain; he remarks:

In the museum we still erect high barriers of knowledge, expertise, class and taste – people too often come to us seeking confirmation of their prejudices rather than dialogue with the other. We have a lot of work to do here.

To help chart such a sea change the UK Museums Association (MA) (2013) published the policy document 'Museums Change Lives' which sets out a vision for the socially purposeful museum.

David Anderson (2012), president of the MA when 'Museums Change Lives' was drafted and a key figure in the thinking undergirding the document, makes a persuasive argument that cultural rights are ensconced in the larger rights agenda. He asserts that few museums and galleries have pursued a course necessary to realise the cultural rights of citizens and that, because most people have little knowledge of their cultural rights, they have no real capacity to advocate for them. Anderson notes that cultural rights are not simply rights to consume culture but a more active set of rights of diverse publics to participate in culture towards both self-actualisation and the shaping of museums themselves.

Esche places much of the blame for the alienation between museums and publics on neoliberal instrumentalisation of museums as vehicles for economic regeneration. He declares (in Esche and Borja-Villel 2012):

The danger we face is that everything is squeezed through the lens of economy and there is no room for any other value systems. ... The questions we face are how can the museum make more money, how can it bring more visitors, how can it produce more excess. ... We need to challenge the idea that we are only a tourist attraction, something to produce gentrification, city marketing or money at the door.

Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013) come to a similar conclusion in their analysis of art museums, using Tate Britain as a case study. They acknowledge that public engagement at Tate Britain has improved since the 1990s but argue that its modernist approach to display, quantitative approach to audience research and social deficit model of race and class – targeting particular underrepresented demographic

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

groups – inhibits more substantive and sustained audience development. They find that Tate Britain is too steeped in defining audiences as consumers and exhibitions as spectacle to grapple with the fluidity of identity and to foster the kind of public agency that Anderson champions. ‘Western art museums, by embracing the market, while at the same time retaining the discourse of aesthetic modernism, have ignored the challenge of social and cultural difference’, they declare (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 9).

In the chapters that follow I will show that, given this state of semi-paralysis, critical practice can be understood as a gesture towards reconciliation between museums and publics, specifically contributing to public agency. I introduce this notion of gesture not to imply that critical practice has little real impact but, in contrast, to suggest that the interventions that are the subject of this book together convey deep and multi-layered resonances that call for a radical reorientation of museums and galleries to prioritise opportunities for self-actualisation. Gesture is a linchpin of peace and reconciliation studies; the tools of reconciliation that Bashir and Kymlicka identify – reparations, compensation, apologies, commemorations, memorials, truth-telling initiatives, rehabilitation and amnesties – might all be considered as symbolic acts performed to make amends and to repair rifts. In the same way, then, as artist Carey Young (2012) asserts, gesture in critical practice can be conceptualised as productive to museums ‘thinking differently or operating differently or relating differently to their publics ... and this might be effected through discourse around the work, rather than the work itself’. Gestures made through critical practice contribute to a museum ethics discourse concerning the relational.

## MUSEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL PRACTICE

### INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AS INSTITUTIONAL ‘DESIRE’

In 2012, Utrecht-based artist Annette Krauss conducted a series of workshops in London with groups of 15- to 17-year-olds from Quinton Kynaston School and Paddington Academy. Contemporary art space The Showroom commissioned the workshops as part of its *Communal Knowledge* programme of collaborative research and discourse with local communities. Krauss’s aim was to empower the young people to identify, analyse and expose common assumptions and hidden agendas operational at their schools, above and beyond the academic curriculum, in the hopes of sparking activism among the students and the potential for organisational change within their institutions. Krauss chose to hold the workshops at multiple

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

sites, including the schools, The Showroom and the larger public sphere to help the young people understand that their growing ability to generate critique would translate across a variety of institutional settings (The Showroom 2012).

Emboldened through the workshops with new powers of observation, the license to pose questions, and video cameras for documenting their findings, the students uncovered at their schools a troubling web of systems and processes in place to control their thinking and behaviour. Krauss (in Krauss, Pethick and Vishmidt 2010: 253) recounts:

Students learn to compare themselves with others or tolerate unfairness; they learn to anticipate what teachers want to hear or how far they can go in order to access their own interests during their school lives. Authority, dependency, pressure to perform, role models, and standardised thinking are taught and learned, without this necessarily being made explicit or noticed. These other forms of knowledge aren't fixed. We tried to address the realm of communication within school, with its hidden niches and mute practices, and to develop forms of investigation in order to approach these spaces.

In response, the young people staged actions, many of them filmed, to resist and challenge this control (Pethick 2012). For instance, as The Showroom's director Emily Pethick (2012) recounts, at Paddington Academy, a new school where cameras are ubiquitous and security is prioritised, students from the workshops interrogated the Head of Security, asking him, 'What exactly is it you're protecting?' A still from one video captures the spirit of the larger project through the gesture and voice of a student assertively pointing her index finger upward and exclaiming, 'They don't have the right to do that' (Figure 1.8) whilst another student in the foreground captures her on camera. At the conclusion of the project The Showroom exhibited the students' videos in its gallery space.

The project, titled *Hidden Curriculum*, and staged before and since with other art institutions as well, exemplifies contemporary directions in institutional critique. Pethick (2012) exclaims:

It's just so amazing when the young people themselves are asking these really direct questions and thinking about their environments; they're seeing the school as a model of an

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*



FIGURE 1.8 • Annette Krauss, *Hidden Curriculum*, 2012, video still, courtesy the artist and The Showroom

institution and understanding that always in life you have to encounter these institutional structures. For me it makes a really good project in institutional critique because the students themselves, who are the subjects of that system with its rules and its codes of conduct, hold the system to question.

*Hidden Curriculum* explores what Krauss refers to as the 'unlearning' of institutionalised practices (The Showroom 2012).

This concept of unlearning is at the core of institutional critique, whether directed towards schools, museums, or some other institution; it is through processes of unlearning – of challenging the values and systems that institutions naturalise to legitimise and maintain their power structures as well as the larger power structures within society that support those institutions – that more equitable and ethical institutions can be forged. Krauss (in Krauss, Pethick and Vishmidt 2010: 252) explains:

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

[Educational] institutions reinforce deep-seated hierarchies in society. What is, of course, more difficult to describe, or even to inhabit, are those existing processes which perpetuate social orders with their power relations and injustices. *Hidden Curriculum* is an attempt to find points of entry, together with the students, in an attempt to inhabit, or at least address, these processes.

Krauss's use of the term 'unlearning' within a project on education also emphasises the subversive nature of institutional critique, as subversion is an effective means to create conditions for imagining alternative, more socially just futures. Pethick (in Krauss, Pethick and Vishmidt 2010: 251, 258) refers to the individual provocations of the students as 'micro-resistance' and notes that, together, these provocations sparked new possibilities for equality and shared authority in their schools:

While the students were learning, through a period of critical self-reflection, it was also the institution of the school that was learning through the interventions into the school system, and the mixed reactions of the teachers to it, some of whom found it hard to accept the project's attitude of permissiveness.

*Hidden Curriculum* shows that institutional critique continues to have relevance in the twenty-first century; the project illuminates how institutional critique has developed and changed over time – from a concern primarily with art museums to an interest in all kinds of institutions and from a provocation with hesitancy and scepticism towards impact to one in which community agency and the potential for organisational change figure largely. Such transformation is indicative that institutional critique today remains dynamic and responsive, rather than representing a movement from the past.

In its attention to organisational change *Hidden Curriculum* also conveys an underlying belief that institutions can be fair and equitable as well as a desire to see schools live up to this ethical potential. Thus, citing *Hidden Curriculum* as a model, critic Marina Vishmidt (in Krauss, Pethick and Vishmidt 2010: 259) argues that effective critique must acknowledge the positive steps that institutions make in embedding emancipatory policies and practices, as well as their coercive properties. In this context we can see the 'unlearning' of *Hidden Curriculum* as an embrace of new modes of learning and an expression of Dieter Roelstraete's notion of institutional 'desire' (2012a). Speaking of Goshka Macuga (who features in Chapter 4 of this study) and her peers, Roelstraete (2012a) asserts:

She is one of a younger generation of artists who obviously have learned a great deal from institutional critique but are no longer

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

interested in critique for critique's reason – I think these are artists who want to make these various institutions better places.

Maria Hlavajova (2012) expresses a belief in the possibilities of institutions in her recollections of engaging in institutional critique in 1980s Czechoslovakia:

We understood that in order to cohere we needed some sort of structure. So we did establish some kind of proto-institutional systems for us to actually exist. We had mailing lists and we believed in institutions, but we believed we needed to rethink how to institute because this was instituting into a semi-illegal space at the time. But the belief in institutions was there, embracing the possibility it can present for you.

Even the work of Fred Wilson, which in the 1990s was quite polemical (see Chapter 3), has become more poetic and multi-layered, expressing his love of and desires for museums. For instance, in 2012, at the sleek brand-new Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) Art Museum, in Savannah, Georgia, built on the site of an antebellum train depot, Wilson drew from both the museum's famed Walter O. Evans Collection of African-American Art and from Evans's private collection of archival materials of African-American history to construct an installation that spoke to the Museum's future. Comparing the installation to Wilson's 1992 *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society, Evans (2012) declared, 'it's not so much a protest but a welcoming. ... He sees a lot of possibilities here. Institutions are changing and Fred's work has contributed to it'.

Using Savannah grey brick – known to have been made in the antebellum period by enslaved individuals at a local plantation foundry, used to construct the original train depot and prized today for its colour and quality – Wilson created both physical and metaphorical connections between artists and authors, past and present, and the museum and its constituents (Figure 1.9). Diverse geometric formations of brick, from stairs to cubes, led the viewer to pivotal juxtapositions between art and history in the installation. Titled *Life's Links*, after a small sketch of two links in a chain by nineteenth-century artist Robert S. Duncanson in an autograph book that Wilson situated at the centre of the installation, the project anchored the SCAD Museum in the local, specifically local African-American history. Project curator Isolde Brielmaier (2012) explains: '127 enslaved individuals worked at Hermitage Plantation outside Savannah making these bricks. This was significant for Fred. He saw the bricks as having a soul.' Wilson leveraged the concept of links in a chain to reference

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*



FIGURE 1.9 • Fred Wilson, *Life's Link* (detail), 2012, Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of Art, images courtesy SCAD Museum of Art

the realities of slavery as well as a wider array of cultural associations. Wilson (2012a) remarks:

Because Duncanson was an African-American man and even though he was not living in the slave states, the chain link does have this irony that I enjoy too. ... For me it was the links of what I was doing, the links between these individuals over time, links of the art to the documents, and how our life is made of these links.

Ultimately, *Life's Links* is an appeal to the SCAD Museum to ground itself in the past and present truths of local African-American culture and stand as a counterpoint to a sentimentalised, nostalgic ideal of Savannah, formulated by the tourism industry, as capturing the charm and hospitality of the American South. 'You get the sense that there are two Savannahs,' Wilson (2012a) notes. *Life's Links* expresses Roelstraete's notion of institutional desire, the artist's belief in the potential of museums to be socially purposeful.

Wilson's transformation from the polemical to the poetic acknowledges the fact that, since the late twentieth century, the ethics discourse spawned by critical practice has

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

led many museums and galleries to work towards being more equitable. Cultural sociologist Pascal Gielen (2013: 16) notes that the transformation has been dramatic:

If there were to be a third wave of institutional critique nowadays, it could only succeed by making the time-honoured modern values of the art institution its ally. The art institution that was the target of modern and postmodern critique no longer exists. It has been transmuted and eroded to such an extent that it has become unrecognizable when compared to thirty years ago.

Nevertheless, in a Lacanian sense, desire is a quest for what can never be had or a relationship to something that is missing (Lacan 2001). The position of institutional critique as institutional desire maintains a utopian sensibility. And what is desired is a more ethically engaged institution – whether a school, a gallery or something else.

## 'COLLABORATORS HAVE RIGHTS!' MUSEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTISTIC PRACTICE

In 2000, long before the introduction of YouTube, a studio for the production of internet television opened in Coronation Court, Liverpool's oldest tower block of social housing. There, tenants from public housing across the city created online content for and operated their own channel, including camera work, computer operation and studio management, becoming the UK's first online television station (Superflex n.d.; Dempsey 2012). Many of the tenants were elderly and few knew anything about digital technology. But they were hugely concerned about plans for the demolition of 67 public housing towers in Liverpool and the processes of rehousing tenants. The high-rises of Liverpool were built between the 1950s and 1970s to modernise neighbourhoods where substandard 'slum' housing had been cleared; conditions in the towers deteriorated as funds for their upkeep evaporated. Many who lived in the towers, nonetheless, felt a strong sense of belonging that they wanted to preserve: 'Those who live there are passionate about their home ... One of the primary concerns that residents had was to keep the community together' (Superflex n.d.).

The Coronation Court studio was the result of a partnership between the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) – Liverpool's media arts centre – and Liverpool Housing Action Trust (HAT), established in 1993 to take control of the tower blocks from the local authority, reinvest in housing and spark community development (Stanistreet 2006: 22). Together, FACT and HAT commissioned the Danish collective Superflex (Rasmus Nielsen, Bjornstjerne Christiansen and Jakob Fenger) in

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

collaboration with Sean Treadway to launch the studio as a way to open up opportunities for marginalised local communities to gather, converse, gain technological know-how, create programming and develop advocacy skills (Superflex n.d.). Coronation Court was the second in a network of some 30 studios that Superflex founded and collectively titled *Superchannel*.

Led by HAT Community Development Manager Paul Kelly, and funded by HAT, the Liverpool initiative, eventually called *tenantspin*, empowered tower residents to become citizen journalists in a virtual community that facilitated communication in real time among residents and between residents and the wider world (Figure 1.10) (Dempsey 2012). Approximately half of the programming concerned social housing issues, from tenants' rights to urban regeneration, and the other half reflected the wider interests of participants from film reviews to guest interviews with politicians and local celebrities. Some tenants made documentaries about their life in the towers. Participants received training in broadcasting and FACT commissioned artists and writers to collaborate with the group (Stanistreet 2006: 23). It is this sense of agency that defined the project, according to Superflex (n.d.), 'The Superchannel



FIGURE 1.10 • Behind the scenes during a webcast of *tenantspin*, Liverpool, 2002, concept introduced by Superflex, 2001

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

presents residents with a set of new media tools with which to maintain and develop their community links and to influence decision-making about their future'.

Over a 12-year run, *tenantspin* underwent several major transitions in which new groups of participants shaped its course; in 2003 it moved to FACT's new building when it opened in the Ropewalks quarter; in 2005 Arena Housing took over from HAT which closed; also in 2005 the studio moved again, this time to the community centre at Sefton Park tower blocks. What remained consistent throughout was the sense that the project created conditions for emancipatory thought and actions. Remarks by Charles Esche (2001) made at the start of the project ring just as true at its conclusion:

Firstly, by requiring self-expression to be not only tolerated but essential to the activity of the Superchannel, the initiative generates capacities in both individuals and groups of tenants that might otherwise remain undiscovered. Secondly, the fact that the emphasis is on external broadcast rather than internal communication undermines the dependency culture that many old Labour councils cultivated in order to shore up their electoral support. ... Most significantly however, Superchannel can change the image of both the tower block itself and the residents – and a negative image is one of the greatest contributory factors in the tower blocks' twenty-year decline.

Key to this empowerment is the fact that neither FACT nor Superflex tried to control the project; both the arts centre and the artists' collective recognised that if *tenantspin* were really to generate a new sense of community, rather than simply to foster participation, then they had to share power collaboratively with substantial decision-making given over to residents. Dave Beech (2010a: 26–28) of the collaborative Free notes the distinction between participation and collaboration in socially engaged practice:

Is participation always voluntary? Are all participants equal and are they equal with the artist? How can participation involve co-authorship rather than some attenuated and localised content? The rhetoric of participation often conflates participation with collaboration to head off such questions. Collaborators, however, are distinct from participants insofar as they share authorial rights over the artwork that permits them, among other things, to make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work. That is, collaborators have rights that are

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

withheld from participants. ... We simply cannot have a theory of the art of encounter without at the same time rethinking social relations at large. We need a better map. More importantly, though, we need to change the landscape that is being mapped.

As Beech asserts, 'collaborators have rights'; it is through collaborative relationships, such as that piloted by *tenantspin*, that publics gain significant authorial control of a project in socially engaged practice. And it is this sharing of decision-making that has the potential to foster reconciliation. Socially engaged artistic practice that is collaborative, rather than merely participatory, can model for museums and galleries an approach towards their publics founded on respect for the expertise and interests of the individual and providing opportunities to embrace and grow that expertise and interest. It can also point outward, beyond the museum walls, to challenge whether the physical space of the gallery is the most appropriate platform for relational initiatives (Blondet 2012). Socially engaged artistic practice, when collaborative, can provide the map to which Beech is referring and offers institutions the chance to overcome the power inequalities that for too long have defined relations between museums and communities.

In fact, Superflex introduced a radical and subversive approach to unequal power relations between museums and their publics. Curator Barbara Steiner (1999) explains:

Superflex's projects show a changed understanding of artistic praxis. Their starting point is a heterogeneous, complex society. When they assemble not only the project and development team, but also the users, they take into account the specific interests of individual groups, their different opportunities for articulation, their interests and projections. Here, the art institutions and their representatives are not assigned an outstanding role, they simply represent potential partners in cooperation with their own specific interests.

In the case of *tenantspin*, the social housing partners HAT, and later Arena Housing, were seen as expert facilitators who could negotiate the ethical issues of the capacity, safety and wellbeing of potentially vulnerable contributors (Froggett et al. 2011: 60). As FACT's Head of Collaborative Programme Kat Dempsey (2012) remarks of the art centre's relationship with HAT; 'it's almost like we're delivering on a service level for them'. This re-drawing of traditional hierarchies between art institutions and their partners helped shift the balance of power.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

Equally key is that Superflex designed the project for sustainability so that it could continue for many years without further interventions from the artists and until the technology became superfluous. This long-term thinking on the part of Superflex and echoed by FACT and HAT helped tenants to take ownership of the project so that they were collaborators with FACT and HAT, rather than merely participants. Superchannel Programme Manager Alan Dunn (2004: 5–6) explains:

The FACT Collaboration Programme is a commissioning department rather than an interpretive education department . . . Investments in people are crucial. . . The largest issues facing 'tenantspin' (and its programme) have been the tenants' health, their schedules for moving home and their collaborations with architects and landlords.

The long-term nature of the project also helped embed its values within FACT as an institution (Kholeif 2012).

That is not to claim that *tenantspin* developed without conflict but, rather, that when conflict erupted, it was respectful and productive. As the project evaluation states (Froggett et al. 2011: 104):

It was striking that while the organisations [sic] projects reflected (and reproduced) different fields of tension, they did so in most instances with an exceptional spirit of generosity, measurable in terms of time and rewards, and manifest in terms of an open curiosity and reflective self-questioning. There is something inherently 'reparative' in such a stance in the sense that it tends to repair or heal. Its suggestion of concern in allowing others to reveal themselves, rather than imposing views of how they should be, can go a long way to offset the friction involved in any confrontation.

In creating the conditions for agency among the residents of Liverpool's tower blocks, *tenantspin* exemplifies the reparative potential of socially engaged artistic practice to offer up new collaborative relationships between museums and communities. As Beech states, 'collaborators have rights'. And within the museum and gallery context, these rights do not simply concern the micro-level exercise of an artistic or political decision on a particular project; rather, they extend to the macro-level of cultural rights as human rights.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

## CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION: THE MORAL MAZE

When visitors reached the entrance to the summer 1995 exhibition on relational aesthetics 'The Moral Maze', conceived by Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno for the Consortium in Dijon, they encountered an unexpected obstruction. The normally transparent glass double doors that led to the exhibition were roughly whitewashed with house paint as if to signal that the show was closed or in the midst of installation or de-installation (Figure 1.11). Graffiti, specifically the words 'Philippe Idiot', were awkwardly incised into the paint on the right door, suggesting that the galleries were in an unfinished state. The strange sight provoked potential audience members to deliberate: Is the show open? Or is it closed? Is the paint on the double doors a sign not to enter? Or is it a conceptual work of art intended to frame the experience of the exhibition? Indeed, this was a conceptual work by Liam Gillick with the same title, *The Moral Maze*, as the larger project. He appropriated the title from the BBC radio programme of the same name which examines ethical issues underlying weekly news headlines (BBC Radio Four 2014). The graffiti on the door refers to Parreno and was probably etched into the paint as a private joke by Maurizio Cattelan, another artist involved in the project (Gillick 2012). As Gillick (2012) explains, a moral maze is a dilemma made unresolvable by defining it through the kinds of binary oppositions that Derrida (1992) problematises, in this case the binary opposition of inside and outside. Gillick (2012) recounts:

The place was never closed and it was never open. The real tension in that work was about 'Can I come in / Am I really part of this or not part of this?' ... It's not communal really or isolated truly. It's about all those grey areas of strategy, negotiation, compromise.

Gillick's *Moral Maze* provides an apt metaphor for interrogating the insider/outsider tensions of critical practice. The whitewashed doors to the exhibition made everyone who encountered them reflect on whether and how they belong in the art world, even cognoscenti, who might quickly recognise that the doors are a conceptual work of art but who would be excluded from the humour behind Cattelan's graffiti prank. Gillick's acknowledgment of these dilemmas of inside and outside, at heart, serves as an appeal for discourse.

The case studies that follow are gestures towards advancing the kind of ethical discourse that Gillick champions. How can critical practice create conditions for museums and galleries to make their publics feel empowered to be, in the words of Gillick, 'part of this' – the larger project of cultural rights as human rights? And how

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*



FIGURE 1.11 • Liam Gillick, *The Moral Maze*, 1995, installation at Consortium, Dijon

can critical practice help us to understand the museum itself as a social field that permeates the larger world? As Fraser (2006a: 129) suggests, 'Moving from a substantive understanding of "the institution" as specific places, organizations, and individuals to a conception of it as a social field, the question of what is inside and what is outside becomes much more complex'.

Individual artists may only gesture towards transformation. Mark Allen (2012b), of Machine Project, notes: 'we can't change organisational culture but we can make temporary demonstrations of possibilities'. Yet, the larger trajectory of practice suggests that critical practice can gain traction in the moral maze, advancing ethics discourse towards reconciliation between museums and their publics. In the following chapters I analyse case studies in critical practice to demonstrate their contributions to this ethics discourse.

Chapter 2 considers the ways that artists engaged in critical practice explore issues of ethical stewardship of collections. Through analysis of Michael Rakowitz's *Spoils* (2011), Robert Fontenot's *Recycle LACMA* (2009–2010) and Ansuman Biswas's *Manchester Hermit* (Manchester Museum 2009), the chapter shows how critical

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

practice probes contested issues in collections management to foster civic discourse about how an emerging model of shared guardianship could shape museums and galleries in the future. It argues that acknowledging the relational aspects of ethical stewardship – those aspects that bind people together through objects – is a key strand of twenty-first-century museum ethics and central to the project of reconciliation.

In Chapter 3 I examine how critical practice draws upon the continually evolving and still useful concept of hybridity as a methodological approach towards social justice. Through projects by Fred Wilson, Matt Smith and Theaster Gates, I demonstrate how artists' interventions leverage hybridity to help museums make meaningful symbolic reparations towards equality and inclusion. I argue that critical practice engaging hybridity has the capacity to spark the kind of critical, self-reflective thinking essential to organisational change towards equality and social justice; whilst reconciliation is a complex and continual process, hybridity can be an effective concept by which to forge pluralistic institutions characterised by shared authority, reciprocity and mutual trust.

Chapter 4 considers critical practice through which artists interrogate the 'platform' as a device that has the capacity to generate and test out new forms of democracy in the museum and the world. By considering works by Liam Gillick, Goshka Macuga and Jonas Staal, it holds that an ongoing process of negotiating and renegotiating the terms of democracy – for museums and for civil society – is a key strand of critical practice and central to processes of reconciliation between museums and communities. My premise is that inclusivity and participation in and of themselves do not create the conditions for reconciliation between museums and communities and need to be problematised to consider who is being included and on what terms.

Chapter 5 concludes the monograph by looking at how the project of reconciliation, as advanced through critical practice, has become ensconced in particular museums and galleries. It considers gestures of reconciliation, as manifested by the projects in critical practice discussed in the volume, as an expression of both the ethics of care and the agonism of productive conflict. It examines how this notion of reconciliation has been absorbed by the 'discursive' institution, focused on assessing, critiquing, and addressing its power relationships, as modelled by the 'new institutionalism' of the mid-1990s to mid-2000s and further embedded more recently in a range of art museums and galleries which have transformed their policies and practices to facilitate processes of reconciliation.

# CRITICAL PRACTICE AS RECONCILIATION

Excerpted from *Critical Practice*

Critical practice has a unique and impactful role to play in addressing imbalances of power between museums and their publics. By examining projects in critical practice through the lens of reconciliation theory, the following chapters illuminate the potential of these works as drivers of ethical change. The projects may be gestures, but reconciliation theory teaches us that gestures have the capacity to foster the reinvention of spaces in which similarities and differences are articulated and felt towards constructing new shared imaginaries.