

EDITED BY
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CHALLENGING HISTORY IN THE MUSEUM

International Perspectives

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Challenging History in the Museum

International Perspectives

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Introduction

Challenging History in the Museum

Jenny Kidd

Museums have always challenged visitors, tasking them with acknowledging and understanding artefacts, ideas and values that were previously unknown to them, perhaps in ways that are unfamiliar or unexpected. There is nothing contentious about that. But they have challenged them in other ways also; requiring them to perform identities they may be uncomfortable with (even that of ‘the visitor’), to locate themselves and their communities within (or perhaps in opposition to) politically charged and ideologically loaded displays and to accept the authoritative and legitimised version of the events of their lives, and often the lives of their ancestors, as played out in the public spaces of these institutions. Evidently the latter kinds of challenge are more complex: difficult to anticipate and to set the parameters for, unwieldy, and ethically loaded. We are only beginning to understand their ramifications in relation to the global museums sector.

This book arises from such challenges. It seeks to explore the justifiable and tangible anguish from both museums and their users¹ about how best to navigate this difficult and contested terrain: one that is, for both parties, political, territorial and intensely personal.

Certain heritages or histories can of course be perceived as challenging by virtue of their subject matter alone, the agendas they reveal, the political debates they feed into and stem from, the emotions that they engage and the lack of any sense of ‘resolution’ to be found in their exploration or perhaps exploitation. Such heritages often make exclusion, domination, conflict, territorial struggle, genocide, imprisonment and survival visible, and as such they ask uncomfortable questions about our humanity and inhumanity, legacy, apology, ownership, voice, repatriation, classification, memorialisation, memory and forgetting. These are indeed histories that challenge, and we might note that they are ubiquitous.

We might also note that foregrounded in heritage ‘work’ of this nature is a tendency to do things differently, to challenge the conventional narrative of ‘history’ itself. Approaches to difficult histories often involve interpretation from different perspectives, revealing hidden, sidelined and forgotten artefacts of culture (and

1 I use the word ‘users’ with intent here to encourage us to think about how we understand the various constituencies of the museum – on-site, online, visitor, audience, user, participant, collaborator. The discourse and the ground we work on are shifting beneath our feet.

even of our social life and behaviours), and expose the process of history ‘making’ as inherently biased and at its worst, bigoted. In this context, histories are asked to intersect with human rights, social justice and conflict resolution agendas and asked to ‘do’ something quite contrary and in a way that is exoteric.² Here, it is the history itself that is being challenged: a fact that has been explored and articulated in literature from across the academy.³

But lest we forget, the visitor also challenges the museum, and, increasingly so, has an eloquent, considered, powerful and (crucially) visible voice with which to call it to account. We see that increasingly visitors might challenge the very institutions that ‘give’ them history. This is good news for those of us who are interested in democratising cultural institutions and creating and empowering citizens, but continues to be a profound and provocative realisation for many museum professionals and heritage scholars. However, let us not get carried away here. We remain a long way from any inclusivist and open ideal and from any common understanding of why and on what grounds such a thing should be desirable.⁴

There are then at least three ways in which we might understand ‘challenging history’, and it will be seen that these insights, in various permutations and combinations, inform the discussions in this book.

We use this term ‘challenging history’ then to honour a number of differing agendas. It is a term that the collaborating editors of this book have been using since 2009, yet it continues to be precarious. It is a useful shorthand term, but perhaps misleads colleagues into thinking that we see ourselves as competent, or even able, to capture (or perhaps contain?) the challenge of history within a succinct and tidy definition. We have always maintained that that is impracticable and undesirable, potentially divesting individuals and institutions of engagement in a serious and ongoing conversation about what might be serious and ongoing concerns within their own contexts.

As such, there exists no accepted, or even common, terminology in use here. A literature search reveals different ways of categorising such work: the themes are ‘challenging’, ‘difficult’, ‘emotive’, ‘sensitive’, ‘contested’, ‘disturbing’ and even ‘unsavoury’; they are ‘histories’, ‘issues’, ‘heritages’ and ‘legacies’. Fiona

2 Such as through the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience initiative or as part of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (see Orange and Carter 2012).

3 In education (Cole and Barsalou 2006; Historical Association 2007; Weinland and Bennett 1984), history (Morris-Suzuki 2005; Walkowitz and Knauer 2009; Winter 2006), memory studies (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999; Crane 2000; Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Huyssen 2003), museums, heritage and tourism studies (Black 2012; Kidd, 2011c; MacDonald 2009; Ross 2004; Sandell 2007; Silverman 2010; Simpson 2006; Smith 2006; Thaler 2008; Tyson 2008; Uzzell 1989; Witcomb 2003), identity studies (Lidchi 1997; Weedon 2004) and performance studies (Jackson and Kidd 2011).

4 See Lynch, Chapter 6, and Gunn and Ward, Chapter 9, this volume.

Cameron and Lynda Kelly, in one of the most comprehensive appraisals of this field to date,⁵ refer to these as ‘hot topics’, ‘taboo subjects, revisionist histories and political issues’ (Cameron and Kelly 2010: 1). This is a helpful and succinct definition but perhaps belies an assumption that such topics might eventually cool, abate or become subject to control. Kelly and Cameron’s text deals in large part with science museums, with Emlyn Koster saying in one of the contributions looking at such institutions:

Public opinion around a hot topic can be visualised as a bell curve, or possibly a bimodal curve, that morphs over the time span of controversy, from left skewed to right skewed, ultimately to flatten out as acceptance grows, and often ultimately to disappear. (Koster 2010: 86)

This might be the case with issues like smoking in public or the wearing of seat belts (two examples used by Koster), but I have noted elsewhere that this is clearly less the case with religion, contested place or coming to terms with genocide: some of the knottier heritages being dealt with in social history museums, war museums, at memorials or in sites of continuing conflict (Kidd 2013). And so the editors have committed here to the concept of ‘challenging history’, seeing it as a perpetual, rebellious and provocative call to arms, full of the potential to disrupt and to transform.

Some Context

History museums have a responsibility to bear witness to the past, however difficult that past may be. (Kavanagh 2002: 116)

Since the advent of the new museology movement in the 1970s, heritage itself has become a contested site, seen as subjective and subjectifying, incoherent, multiple and (of course) ‘difficult’. Histories have, according to Walkowitz and Knauer, been ‘destabilized’ if not ‘discredited’ (2009: 4). Museums have become live sites of struggle, through and in which groups and individuals have questioned authority, authenticity, ownership, voice, absence and silence. This is a far cry from the modern public museum which, since the seventeenth century, had ‘disseminated knowledge through purposeful collecting and display strategies’ with ‘the concept of “right” at their core’ (Orange and Carter 2012).⁶

In response, museum ‘making’ has become a creative meeting point for both those collective memories that are traditionally celebrated in cultural institutions

5 In *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums* Lynda Kelly and Fiona Cameron bring together a range of case studies and authors, some of which represent different geographical and institutional constituencies from those represented here.

6 See also Drago, Introduction to Part 1, this volume.

such as museums or heritage sites but also the personal memories of those who increasingly opt to volunteer them. The museum is then (and indeed always was) a site of identity construction as opposed to merely a site for exploration of identities 'past'. As Coser demonstrates, 'it is, of course individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past' (1992: 22). Museum visitors thus not only construct their own identities but re-cast the past in light of those identities.

Heritage then is increasingly recognised as performative: 'Exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create' (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 3). This of course is a reminder that we are in the business of playing roles: as professional history 'makers', as visitors and, in an increasing number of instances, as both (see also Smith 2006). These (principally unconscious) performances are repeated daily across the globe in contexts which define themselves through their relationship with heritage, but of course our understanding of the past (and what is challenging about it) is informed by the performance of heritage being played out across other media also. It is helpful to be reminded that we do not consume museum 'texts' (exhibitions, artefacts, projects, websites) in isolation. They are in dialogue with a range of other cultural representations that are themselves partial and political.

The relationship between the museum's role as an arbiter of collective memory and as an active constituent in the making and re-making of individual identities renders ambiguous any sense of an objective past, especially when it comes to heritages that challenge in the ways outlined above. There has consequently been an increasing recognition of history as itself a fiction,⁷ not 'existing' in the world, but in fact created (and created unevenly). A case in point is the way material heritage is made: 'Simply put, museums turn things into objects' (Henning 2006: 7; but see also Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Smith, 2006; Vergo 1989). It is recognised that the institution (literally, spatially, institutionally) also bears witness to a potentially infinite complex of visitor narratives and interpretations (to extend Gaynor Kavanagh's conceptualisation above).

For the museum professionals I have worked with in my research, the role of 'witness' involves daily embodiment and navigation of a complex internal paradox, a double witnessing necessitating navigation of individual identity on the one hand, and professional and institutional identity on the other (Kidd 2011a). Such identities of course, may not always be in alignment, especially when working with heritages that are perceived as sensitive. Museum professionals' internal struggles are difficult to articulate and seldom called forth for consideration and acknowledgement within museum contexts. It seems that despite recent

7 In fact history and memory are increasingly blurred.

recognition of museum visitors as multifarious, complex and unpredictable, we have neglected the fact that museum staff are all of those things also.⁸

Given such gravity and complexity, we might ask why it continues to be important to ‘challenge’ history in the ways outlined above. For Eva Hoffman, it remains an act of psycho-social responsibility:

Surely if we are to understand the legacy of the Holocaust, and other disturbing pasts, we must stand in an investigative relationship to memory; we must acknowledge our distance – both generational and cultural – from the events which we’re trying to comprehend. But it seems to me that if we are to deepen our comprehension, we need also to use that distance to try to see aspects of the past that may not have been perceptible at other moments and from other perspectives. (Hoffman 2000: 9)

In this view, moving towards understanding and comprehension of the past is a crucial ongoing (and endless) endeavour: one that is inseparable from the present within which we seek to comprehend. Indeed, every present demands such a re-appraisal of the past. It is an ethical responsibility, but also Hoffman asserts, an ‘obligation’ (2000: 8).

As complex and fragmented as heritage might be, it is, lest we forget, charged with doing very real work in the world through its institutional forms and educative functions: formal and informal, lifelong and curriculum-based. Through these learning opportunities also, the constructed nature of heritage is increasingly being recognised and even addressed.

For all of the above reasons, the challenge in ‘challenging history’ is made all the more evident. If heritage is a construction, who has constructed it? Whose voices are heard? And whose are consigned to silence? How are challenging histories ‘made available’ to visitors? And are they available to staff? Can it be too early to work with such a heritage? Or indeed, too late? And, perhaps crucially, are the controversies that might cause us to falter a matter of fact or mere perception?

Challenging History

In 2009, the ‘Challenging History’ network was set up to make a case and to provide a space for increased intellectual, ethical and professional consideration of the issues raised above.⁹ Since that time, there have been numerous seminars,

8 Yet simultaneously, there is concern about the homogeneity of the museums workforce, in the UK at least. It is seen to be lacking in diversity: educationally, socially, culturally and with regards to ethnicity. This is evidenced in Davies and Shaw 2008; Cultural Leadership n.d.

9 Challenging History was designed to draw upon the experiences of the Imperial War Museums’ ‘Their Past Your Future’ InSite programme and started as a partnership project