



Museum and Migration: An Introduction

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Abstract: This is a co-editors' introduction to the Fall 2011 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, entitled "Contesting Memory: Museumizations of Migration in Comparative Global Context," including papers that were presented at a conference on "Museums and Migration" held on June 25-26, 2010, at the Maison des Science de l'Homme (MSH) in Paris. The co-editors were able to organize this event thanks to the support of MSH Director and President of the International Sociological Association, Michel Wieviorka. The focus of the present collection is on questions of representation and social agency of both migrants and museum officials. The purpose is to explore in a comparative perspective the complex and conflictive articulation between how migrants are represented by themselves and by museum institutions. The topic of migrants as social actors is one of the key issues explored in this collection. Migrants are not passive toward their lives and representations. They are social agents actively involved in their communities and socially vigilant of the way they are treated, perceived and represented by the host society. They produce also their own narratives and representations that are many times in conflict with Western hegemonic perceptions of their cultures and identities. Their strong presence in global cities and metropolitan societies today confronts the dominant society with issues of racial/ethnic discrimination and historical memory otherwise ignored by the hegemonic views in the mainstream of Western societies. Museums dealing with the history of slavery, the history of migration and the colonial history emerged as spaces of contestation. Moreover, the term "migrant" itself has been contested by "minority" groups that happen to have a long colonial history in the metropolitan society and are today formal metropolitan citizens born and raised in the metropolises but still perceived as "foreigners" and "immigrants."

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son des Science de l'Homme (MSH) in Paris. We were able to organize this event thanks to the support of MSH Director and President of the International Sociological Association, Michel Wieviorka. He encour-

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aged us from the beginning to organize an international conference on this topic. This publication is the result of his strong support to our project for which we are very grateful.

When we started to organize this event, we were surprised by the fact that there is not much done in academic circles on this topic. There is an industry of publications about migration and another industry about museums. What we found was a scarcity on publications that link the two topics. Although there are some seminal works in the field of Museum Studies and in the field of International Migration, there is not much done in terms of research, publications and events related to the link between migration and museums. This collection is the first one of its kind presenting a broad comparative perspective on museums and migration. It focuses fundamentally on Europe but includes articles on Australia and the USA as well. Most of the contributors are specialist on international migration.

The focus of the present collection is on questions of representation and social agency of both migrants and museum officials. We want to explore in a comparative perspective the complex and conflictive articulation between how migrants are represented by themselves and by museum institutions. The topic of migrants as social actors is one of the key issues explored in this collection. Migrants are not passive toward their lives and representations. They are social agents actively involved in their communities and socially vigilant of the way they are treated, perceived and represented by the host society. They produce also their own narratives and representations that are many times in conflict with Western hegemonic perceptions of their cultures and identities. Their strong presence in global cities and metropolitan societies today confronts the dominant society with issues of racial/ethnic discrimination and historical memory

otherwise ignored by the hegemonic views in the mainstream of Western societies. Museums dealing with the history of slavery, the history of migration and the colonial history emerged as spaces of contestation. Moreover, the term "migrant" itself has been contested by "minority" groups that happen to have a long colonial history in the metropolitan society and are today formal metropolitan citizens born and raised in the metropolises but still perceived as "foreigners" and "immigrants."

Questions of "national" identity are inevitable in these debates. Who belongs and who does not belong are crucial questions and the boundaries defining them are related to the foundational myths of the "nation" as well as problems of racism.

As part of the challenges posed to national identity by migration, Andrea Meza Torres does a comparison between Paris and Berlin in terms of what she calls the "museumization of migration." She compares two migration museums: the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration in Paris and the experience of migrant representation in Berlin. Her article documents how both locations served to link with the immigrant communities and to "stage a transformed revival of the colonial heritage." She addresses issues of representation of migrants in relation to each country's national identity.

Similarly, Lia P. Rodrigues analyzes the Danish Immigration Museum (DIM) in relation to Danish national identity discourses. Her article shows the blind spots and forgetfulness of Danish national identity. The DIM itself is a space that highlights this historical amnesia. Colonial subjects and some immigrants of color are not represented in the museum. History of Danish colonialism and present racialized subjects inside Denmark form parts of what Rodrigues calls Nordic amnesia linked to questions of racism.

Cristina Castellano also looks at the

way the US national identity is constructed in relation to ethnic/minority groups. She explores Chicago as a laboratory of diverse museums built by the ethnic/racial communities themselves from Asian, Mexican and African origins. Contrary to other countries, the United States has a tradition of national museums co-existing with small community museums. Her article discusses how these small community museums, built by ethnic communities whose origins are elsewhere, relate in contradictory and complex ways to the representation of the US as an imagined nation. We see here the strategies developed by the communities of color to negotiate the complexities of incorporation to the metropolitan society. At the same time she shows the limits of community self-representation in their own museums. While Castellano acknowledges the community museums in the US as a “political practice of free representation in institutions...,” she goes on to note that “this does not guarantee a real social change in the ways of seeing practiced by people in every day life; this does not change the racial prejudices” in the metropolitan societies (p. 47).

An important dimension in studies of museums and migration is the role of the media in the representation of migrants. Estela Rodriguez’s article analyzes the Cultural Heritage designs in Europe in relation to media representations and takes as a case study the city of Barcelona. She criticizes the myths of cultural hegemony and whitening of European cultural heritage. Rodriguez states that “...immigrants, who have lived among us for decades, receive scant attention from the media, which often associate them with situations of criminality, underdevelopment or subalternity, reinforcing the cultural imaginaries that negatively affect our perception of other cultures” (p. 50). These negative representations are constitutive of the way immigrants are perceived in European societies. She ends her article with an analysis

of the Forum Universal de las Culturas organized by the city of Barcelona in 2004 and Catalonia’s History of Immigration Museum where she deals with questions of education and interculturality.

As a promising note, the works of Ilham Boumankhar on Australia and of Véronique Bragard on Belgium emphasize positive aspects in the museum representation of migrants. Boumankhar examines the concept of immigration in Australia using as a case study of the Immigration Museum in Melbourne. She shows the role of the museum and its link to immigrant communities, showing the interaction and social agency of both. She uses this case study to show positive aspects that could serve as an example to other countries. Based on a survey of the visitors and interviews to Museum officials, Boumankhar offers a fascinating empirical research.

Véronique Bragard’s important intervention in this collection is on Belgium’s colonial history and its representation in the old colonial Tervuren Museum’s exhibition “Independence 50 ans d’indépendance racontés par des Congolais.” After looking at the history of Congolese migration to Belgium, she looks at the denial of Belgium’s colonial past and the conflictive relationship with Congolese diaspora in Belgium today. Then she moves on to discuss in detail the exhibition and characterizes it as an important step in Belgium’s recognition of its colonial past.

Further, we can see the search for justice and the active role of racial/ethnic communities in building museums in the work of Artwell Cain and Stephen Small. Artwell Cain documents the conflictive and problematic representation of African Diaspora in European Museums. His article reveals the active role of African Diasporic communities in The Netherlands as social actors in building a museum that does justice to its heritage and memory while confronts stereotypes and racism.

Finally, Stephen Small analyzes the

links between colonialism, Black migration and Museums in the United Kingdom. In particular he looks at the role played by Black agency in the formation of the slavery museum in Liverpool. He ends his article with the following statement that reflects the spirit of this volume and that should be taken seriously by analysts in the fields of international migration and museum studies:

Because museums are racialized institutions; because they continue to house so many precious and sacred artifacts that were stolen or illegitimately acquired; because they are one institution among many in which contestations over grand narratives of national history occur; because museums about Black people arose primarily because of multiple patterns of migration; and because they reflect issues of access to resources, of power and inequality, then the link between museums and migration must remain an important issue of concern to social analysts. (pp. 125-126)

This volume should be of interest in several fields of scholarship such as social sciences, history, museum studies, international migration and postcolonial studies. We hope it will contribute to the decolonization of memory, knowledge and metropolitan spaces.