

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 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

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.

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).

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 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)

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

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.

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 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

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

⁷ In fact history and memory are increasingly blurred.

consideration and acknowledgement within museum contexts. It seems that despite recent 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, conferences, meetings, fieldtrips and discussions, which have informed the look and feel of this book.

Those discussions have been detailed elsewhere (Kidd 2009, 2011a, 2013), but it is perhaps fruitful to note a number of ongoing concerns that emerge from the group’s work in consideration of challenging histories.

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 between Historic Royal Palaces Tower of London, Imperial War Museums, MLA London and City University London funded through the MLA TPYF phase 2 grants programme, supported by Big Lottery. Latest partners, projects and outputs can be found at <www.challenginghistorynetwork.wordpress.com>.

Challenging Institutional Contexts

The heritage professionals we have worked with (in the UK and beyond) often view ‘museum culture’ as permissive of only certain kinds of enquiry and as operating in a manner that can frustrate attempts to do things differently. Perceptions of such a culture can lead to institutional inertia and feelings of disempowerment, rendering museum staff reluctant to take risks or to challenge the norms of their institutions. So, within a museum, the sense of authority, mission and purpose which staff operate with can itself be limiting, and this perception can be amplified by pressures from stakeholders (including community groups).

One theme that arises continually in the network’s discussions is that of sustainability. Just what might a sustainable approach to an institution’s challenging histories look like? How might it be bargained for? And protected? This issue can be particularly frustrating, especially when the visibility and perceived relevance of a topic can fluctuate in line with the wider political and social agenda. All too often work with ‘hot topics’ is confined to particular interest groups or, at worst, notable diary entries.¹⁰ We might note that this book is published in 2014, the centenary of the outbreak of World War One, and the subject of a vast number of global commemorative activities.

In consideration of such practical and contextual issues of museums’ operation, Fiona Cameron has called for increased ‘collective individualism’ (Cameron and Kelly 2010: 65), as a rejoinder to historical processes of ‘organised irresponsibility’ (Beck 1999). That is, rather than disavowing responsibility at an organisational, political or business level, we might envisage a scenario where all of those who work in an institution are, with regard to their individual specialisms and roles, rendered responsible for the ‘burden’ of decision-making as pertaining to work with challenging histories. They become implicated in its relative success or failure and ‘organised irresponsibility’ is potentially undone. In that mix, risk, choice and ethical consideration might infuse and inform dialogues at all levels of the museum (Cameron and Kelly 2010).

But institutional challenge also manifests itself at the level of everyday practicalities and limitations. Not least in discussions about museum spaces. Programmes founded in difficult and sensitive heritages might have varying requirements from other curatorial or education initiatives, needing to make room for silence or equally for heated outpourings. There is a need to think creatively and sensitively about visitors’ transitions between the relative safety of the real world and a programme about a challenging history (or perhaps the converse is true). How the various layers of a site allow for such affordances remains problematic.

Challenging Definitions of Learning

Heritage institutions contribute variously to a number of educative endeavours: to increase knowledge about the past; to aid in the understanding and construction of identity; to transform our relationships with our landscape, communities and ‘nation’; and, with any luck, to make us ‘good citizens’, increasingly, enmeshed within talk of ‘social justice’.¹¹

But, in projects that seek to engage with difficult and sensitive heritages, questions arise about what a successful learning programme should achieve. What are the ethics of ‘teaching’? For some, tangible learning outcomes are a must (that is, ones measured by the museum and not

¹⁰ A trend that has recently been investigated by members of the Challenging History network (and others) as part of the AHRC funded Significance of the Centenary research network led by Joanne Sayner at the University of Birmingham (2013).

¹¹ Which is not to say that museums uniformly accept and/or feel comfortable with these agendas.

by the visitor). For others, it is enough for visitors to be given the opportunity to think and feel: just to 'be' within the space and place of the institution. Thinking about what can realistically be achieved in learning programmes emerges as crucial, as does articulating the particular understanding of learning that might be appropriate for a project: factual, emotional, social, political, ethical, material, embodied, experiential, perspectival or indeed any combination of these.

For some, nothing less than transformative experience is good enough, yet assuming that transformation is an achievable result of such programmes can be intensely problematic, not least because impact is notoriously difficult to articulate and measure. Challenging history, as we have seen, involves working with heritages that are complex and/or contested and where, in many cases, 'changing opinion' may not be possible or even desirable. For example, whilst slavery and the racism that underpinned it are taken in 2013 as being noxious and wholly unacceptable, other projects may have to work with heritages where there is no such conviction in terms of underpinning sensibility or consensus. The view rather relies on an overarching narrative that can be agreed upon and enacted through programmes, a view of rationality, objectivity and 'truth' that needs disrupting again and again through useful but disconcerting ontological reminders.

Challenging Visitors

Fiona Cameron's research has shown that many museum visitors are open to reflection on challenging topics and feel it is a museum's duty to engage with them (2003, 2006). However, we have seen in our work with heritage professionals a perception of most visitors as fairly traditional in their outlook and unadventurous in their consumption of 'Other' heritages. As a consequence, work with difficult heritages is often confined to non-traditional audiences.

However, those audiences can often emerge as rather *too* challenging in their intensity and in their 'closeness' to the heritage. Debate about ownership and appropriation emerges as a central problematic: who has the 'right' to 'deal with' a subject matter, and who might museum staff need to go to in order to legitimise the work or 'ask permission' to do it?

In this sense, it seems true that, as Ruth Abram (one of the founders of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience) has noted, 'there is, in the museum profession, a certain fear of the public' (2002: 133). That fear is rooted in questions about authority, legitimacy and perhaps even guilt, which are amplified through a perception of isolation from the 'core' practice and function of an institution.

The Museum as a Site of Complex Interactivity

My own research into museums' use of digital media is concerned with the ways in which digital technologies can frustrate, and sometimes even become, forms of museological power (see Kidd 2011b, 2013). I have noted elsewhere that the colonisation of the online environment by museums has been pacey and as a result, at times, ill-considered, and museums' uses of interactive technologies on site have also had their limitations.¹² The assumption inherent in the way that we continue to articulate the value of digital technologies for museums holds that they might be a means for eliciting community, democracy and engagement, even empowerment. There is a hope that they might, in their very apparentness, re-frame or re-present the museum

¹² For a review of literature outlining current thinking about interactive technologies on site, see Kidd, Ntalla and Lyons 2011.

as a forum, an open public meeting place where all voices are equal and all ideas also. Digital media (and social media especially) have re-invigorated debate about the ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997), being touted as the great panacea, a remedy for museological ills. Yet the end-goals of such practice remain unclear, as do the parameters within which their success or failure will be determined. Curiously, as Adair, Feline and Koloski noted, participatory work and public curation ‘demand not less but more from history museums and their expert staffs’ (2011: 12). There has been an increase in literature in recent years which seeks to explore the reality of the contribution such media can make,¹³ and we might cite work on ‘virtual repatriation’ as being particularly interesting (Hennessy 2009; Simpson 2006), but the role of new media in debates about difficult and sensitive heritages in particular is relatively unexplored (although see Cameron and Kelly 2010 for a start).

The language of digital possibility is also beginning to bleed into other museum operations. It is now common to talk about co-production and co-curation, crowdsourcing and gamification with ease, and some abandon, in other realms of museums practice. But to what end? There is a commodification of community happening and an exaltation of participatory processes in and of themselves that we would do well do question.

We might ask: How does the online experience extend, complement or even replace the ‘offline’ museum? How might the use of social media inform current debate about ethics and responsibility in the re-presentation of heritage? How can participants’ contributions be valued? What challenges must be overcome before those currently defined as ‘user’, ‘visitor’ or ‘audience’ can demonstrate more sophisticated forms of agency? And crucially, is the challenge such media present to the authority of the museum one that the project of history can bear?

Structure of this Book

This book is divided into four parts, each with an introduction written by one of the editorial team. Each editor provides an introduction to the chapters and to the themes contained therein, using their own experiences of the sector to navigate the issues. This has been a collaborative project from the start, and it was always our intention to present a range of voices, viewpoints, discourses and knowledges side-by-side. To this end, a number of case-study chapters have been included, which take as their specific focus the work of institutions that might otherwise have been neglected in the text. These short case-studies are written from the perspective of the professionals who work at the sharp end of project delivery and are invaluable for the honesty, experience and insight they display. Alongside these are more ‘traditional’ academic chapters, written by a range of scholar-practitioners and practitioner-scholars. We hope you will find the mix to be a valuable and unique insight and our cross-references a helpful means for navigating the themes that they explore.

Given the range of voices, there are however some discordances: with such a subject matter it is inevitable. We have respected these differences in the editorial process, opting where possible to let the nuances of each of those contexts filter through. Language is one ‘challenge’ that we have experienced in that process: how not to stifle the tone, passion and sense of purpose we find in individual voices? In different geographic contexts, there are words, phrases and ideas that are permissible that might not be in others. To ‘censor’ a voice or a viewpoint seems incongruous with the subject matter we are dealing with here, so that squeamishness has been confronted in the numerous editorial meetings we have had.

¹³ See e.g. Parry 2009; Adair, Feline and Koloski 2011; Simon 2010; Tallon and Walker 2008; Henning 2006.

The book draws on work in varied geographical contexts including Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, England, Germany, Japan, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, South Africa, Spain and the United States of America. It is divided into four parts: ‘The Emotional Museum’; ‘Challenging Collaborations’; ‘Ethics, Ownership and Identity’; and ‘“Teaching” Challenging History’. As is always the case with such collections, the split into sections is in some senses arbitrary. For example, many of the chapters in this book tell us something about how we might understand the emotional museum, just as most have something to say about ethical practice. But, in order to give the text a narrative, and to aid navigation by the reader, we have made the split none-the-less.

We have opted for the term ‘museum’ in the title where it serves as a catch-all for heritage institutions and sites that are defined through their role as makers, curators, narrators, educators and arbitrators of history, culture and memory. We are aware that this may seem problematic to some, but there are of course pragmatic reasons for that specificity. In the chapters that follow, we think it is clear what the parameters of individual studies are and, moreover, consider it useful to observe how themes pervade and are apparent throughout the range of sites, heritages and interest groups that constitute our global heritage sector.

Part 1 of this book, curated by Alex Drago, takes as its focus various elements of the heritage encounter that arouse emotion. The ‘emotional museum’, a term used by National Museums Liverpool Director David Fleming (Chapter 1, this volume) is a radical reconceptualisation of the museological mission. It seeks to foreground the emotional work done in heritage interpretation practices, taking ownership of it within institutions, rather than seeing it solely as an ‘outcome’ to be ‘experienced’ by the visitor.

In the Challenging History research more broadly, we have seen great anxiety about the use-value of emotion in learning programmes that work with sensitive histories. Many museum professionals find the balance between empathic engagement and the pursuit of a wider, objective, rational understanding of ‘a past’ a difficult one to strike. If empathy is feeling yourself ‘into the consciousness of another person’ (Wispé 1987), might assuming that perspective limit the wider understandings that can be achieved? In research carried out at Manchester University between 2005 and 2008 (funded by the AHRC), Anthony Jackson and I found that this can indeed be the case. Empathy was evidenced as a powerful emotional tool giving depth of insight – into the lives of individuals especially – that was difficult to achieve through other more formal, cognition-based modes of learning. But we noted that there were narrowing aspects also. Empathy can, in certain circumstances, offer a rather partial ‘monocular’ reading of events, narrowing our vision in a way that we called the ‘empathy paradox’ (Jackson and Kidd 2008). For others, it was an incredibly useful tool for creating ‘empathic unsettlement’ – to use La Capra’s term (2001). The unsettling nature of the empathetic encounter can highlight vividly the very limits of our understanding in ways that can be incredibly fruitful for long-term cognition (see also Williams 2010). Questions about what can and cannot be known, learnt, felt and made sense of, often hang in the air at the end of a heritage encounter that asks us to ‘feel’. Paradoxically then, such an approach can actually prevent over-identification and help us to acknowledge that our understanding of the Other can never be complete. Juliet Steyn says that ‘understanding and comprehension come slowly. Their efforts cannot be short-circuited’ (Chapter 10, this volume) and this realisation is pertinent to any discussion about what we are trying to achieve when inciting emotion. Perhaps ‘empty empathy’ (Kaplin 2011) is as likely an outcome as any if we are over-exposed to representations of trauma. Such encounters might, unless very carefully conceived and executed, cause only

fleeting and transitory feelings of empathy which are replaced by feelings of hopelessness or bland sentimentality in the longer term.

We can only conclude that our understanding of how emotion and empathy work to produce meaning, in the museums context at least, is currently limited and in real need of thorough longitudinal empirical study. Such research might ask questions about whether the ultimate goal of empathic engagement should be knowledge or action; whether such approaches are manipulative, or worse, akin to appropriation; whether we can (and should) empathise with those who perform atrocious acts; how we account for empathy as a learning outcome (and an e-learning outcome also); and whether empathic accuracy matters – what if it turns out our feelings are incongruent with those felt by the other individual? Or if we find our empathy ‘fails’? Exploring such questions may yet give heritage educationalists a lexicon to talk confidently about the one thing they feel they do best but has been the hardest to articulate.

In Part 2, Amy Ryall and four authors pick up on the challenge outlined above about the nature of collaborative and participatory endeavour. Collaboration in itself can of course be a challenging approach, as many of our research participants attest to, and recent research (not least Lynch 2011; Chapter 6, this volume) has revealed its potentials to disempower, contain and trivialise. The role and function of the institution and the individual in those processes are in desperate need of close examination.

This section aims to explore a number of dichotomies that underpin much work in this area: professional knowledge versus local knowledge, morally ‘good’ grassroots participation versus morally ‘bad’ top-down programming, the powerful versus the powerless, ‘the institution’ versus ‘the community’, and activity versus passivity. Assumptions about what constitutes ‘legitimate’, ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ participation are questioned. In current participatory practice it seems, the perceived end (empowerment, openness, democracy) always justifies the means, and this is something we need to think more, and more ethically, about.

Part 3 takes a focused look at issues around ethics, ownership and identity, and how they manifest as discourses about power. As Miranda Stearn attests in her introduction, at stake in all of this is people’s desire for representation and fundamental questions about who has the right to re-present. If representational texts (including exhibitions, artworks, artefacts and the larger museum ‘text’ that is constructed) are one of the ‘central practices that produce culture’ (Hall 1997: 1), then the museum is implicated at every level of meaning-making. Museum representations, rather than simply presenting or mirroring reality, actually help to re-present it, or even create it anew. How the various ‘languages’ of our museums produce ‘meaning’, and what the transcultural implications of those representations might be – how they become ‘commonsense’ – is often overlooked. This is not just a cultural issue but a political one, having implications for how we participate at a civic and community level, as well as how we perform our identities at an individual level.

In light of the discussions in Part 2, we might note that participatory projects increasingly seek to hand the ‘burden’ of representation to (some members of) communities themselves, in the hope that this might result in increased ‘representational adequacy’ (Bennet 1995), but such practices still operate from the normative position of the museum as host and, if need be, arbitrator of the process. They rely also, in many different contexts, on the model of the Western museum, one which carries associations which are inherently problematic for many potential stakeholder groups and visitors (see Marstine 2006, 2011; Walkowitz and Knauer 2009). Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that communities, groups, visitors, societies, publics and constituencies, are heterogeneous and incongruent. As such, rather than thinking about a

museum's public 'it is perhaps more accurate and helpful to conceive of multiple publics with divergent and often competing interests and different stakes in how histories are represented' (Walkowitz and Knauer 2009: 3). An understanding of that can help us to critique the modernist, traditionalist museum as a project of 'nation', as celebratory in tone and unifying in purpose.

It also behoves us to note the relationship between museums and the tourist gaze, sometimes a completely different 'constituency': 'dark' tourists or 'grief' tourists. Here, we might find sites where the 'presentation of death or suffering [is] the *raison d'être*' (Stone 2005: 2). This phenomenon, although not new, has seen 'death in touristic form [as] an increasing feature of the contemporary landscape' (Stone 2005: 3). We might like to think about how we position our programmes alongside, or as contrary to, such offerings, considering the ways in which we articulate difference, asking perhaps uncomfortable questions about whether our work with a challenging history is merely a 'branding exercise' (Cameron and Kelly 2010) or something else entirely.

In Part 4, Samantha Cairns introduces four chapters which help us to explore the ethics of teaching as they relate to challenging histories. Here, our use of the word 'teaching' is intentionally provocative, asking education staff and other readers to evaluate their stance on the extent to which it is possible to frame and anticipate learning in any traditional sense in work with difficult topics. How far, we ask, must educators let go of their understandings of what a 'good' or 'moral' education might look like? Museums can only partly direct the experiential elements of a museum encounter. They can design the exhibits, dictate the formal structure, but they cannot control how the museum will be inhabited and 'felt', and, as such, what and how much learning might take place in programmes.

Being from a media and cultural studies background, I am endlessly fascinated by the ways in which meaning is encoded and decoded in the various cultural texts we consume, including the museum.¹⁴ The process of encoding, the construction of meaning, the formation and manifestation of the museum message, is, of course, potentially frustrated in the moment of reception, as it is decoded by the visitor. That visitor can accept the intended meanings of the museum texts they 'consume', the 'preferred' readings (Hall 1973). Equally, they can negotiate a reading that accepts some but not all of the message as intended by the curator. Alternatively of course, they might (intentionally or otherwise) read it in a completely oppositional fashion.

The encoding–decoding model has informed the work of eminent scholars of culture and museums, such as Sharon MacDonald (1998) and Richard Sandell in his discussion of museum communication (2007), and is worth noting because it raises as yet underexplored questions about how museum visitors decipher, intellectualise and perhaps reject the messages that are offered up for their consumption within museum spaces (online or offline). An exploration of such thematics as they relate to visitors' actual encounters with challenging history is long overdue, and we only begin to scratch the surface here. This is perhaps one of the principal reasons why work with challenging histories is so daunting to museum educators: what people take away from those experiences may be only in part speakable; in many instances it is perhaps profoundly unspeakable. Evaluation of learning programmes that seek to engage in the ways identified in Part 1 of the book is intensely problematic for ethical and operational reasons and due to ongoing uncertainty about how and whether 'learning' accounts for such encounters and the memories they forge.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall's groundbreaking work on encoding/decoding was first published in 1973.

These four sections, 18 chapters, nearly 100,00 words make a unique and timely contribution to our understandings of challenge, difficulty, sensitivity and contestation in museums work.

This is a book about the ways in which common ground can be found even in the most unlikely of places. It is a book about what is at stake when such commonality cannot be found.¹⁵ It is a testament to risks taken and the difficult journeys that heritage institutions have knowingly embarked on in order to explore meaning with the communities of interest that they serve. It is also a call for a renewed research agenda and dialogue about what it means to seek social justice and transformative experience as outcomes of heritage work, about how likely sustainability in our approach to our difficult past might be, about who 'owns' the outcomes of participatory endeavour and what their use-value is as they are institutionalised, and about how we understand and articulate success – and indeed failure – in heritage interpretation programmes and curation that seeks to engage visitors with our most difficult, but arguably most important, heritages. This book is an attempt to further that dialogue and to begin to close the gulf in understanding and expectation between the differing communities who give of themselves in ways personal and professional in the pursuit of comprehension.

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¹⁵ Museums have not always got the balance right here. We know that to be true from a range of high profile incidents such as, most famously perhaps, the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC in 1995, which caused great controversy. For a creative exploration, see Gallagher n.d.

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