

Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation

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Editor: Daniel Walkowitz

Lisa Maya Knauer

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Reading an edited collection of articles can be likened to dining out on a tasting menu: you're afforded the opportunity to sample broadly but portions can sometimes be relatively puny. A standard serving, like a monograph, provides bulk whereas essays may fire up your appetite yet fail to satiate your hunger. But since intellectual and gastronomic desires fluctuate, you might opt for volume on certain occasions while craving variety at other times.

As it turns out, many of the 'small plates' on offer in *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation*, edited by Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, are quite satisfying. Others, however, leave you craving more.

The aim of the editors is to explore the impact of worldwide developments on various locales: how have postcolonialism and globalization affected both a sense of national character and resurgent sectarian identities? Walkowitz and Knauer are also interested in the ways in which state endorsement of neoliberal policies has spurred an increased interest in culture, heritage, and place. This can be a blessing, but also a curse: complex phenomena are inevitably simplified, history is adulterated, and memory is commodified for political and economic ends.

Concurrently, partisan groups have increasingly challenged the ways that they have been represented in museums, monuments and memorials, libraries, textbooks and historic places. Even strategic environmental sites can become battlegrounds. But while many historians working within the public sphere have taken significant steps to incorporate previously ignored group narratives into their projects or to tweak skewed ones, Walkowitz and Knauer highlight an often unforeseen cost of such actions: projecting a Kumbaya sense of the world can easily trump bringing up unpleasanties such as colonialism and slavery. The editors are especially concerned that 'professional historians can be remarkably complicit with the initiatives of state and commercial cultural enterprises' (p. 24).

Perhaps the greatest strength of this compilation is how the authors capture the vigorous contestation that can arise between advocates with radically opposed sentiments, allegiances, outlooks and agendas. With the devil generally being in the details, the particulars in these examples reflect the categorical messiness, the fluidity, the complexities, the shifting loyalties, the unpredictability and the undeniably fascinating nature of

such cultural conflicts. The scope of this selection is notably broad, allowing for a comparative exploration of how such battles are waged, won and lost worldwide. But it is a drawback as well: Africa and Asia are represented by just one report respectively, offering thin regional coverage and thereby precluding gaining a more comprehensive sense of what can be at issue in these areas of the world.

Charlotte J. MacDonald does an admirable job of decoding the meaning[s] within the exhibitions, patterns of public usage, and the building that houses the New Zealand National Museum Te Papa [Our Place], and she also locates the evolution of its narrative strategies within a larger social context: Maoris have made significant legal, political and economic gains in recent years, bestowing them with increased power to dictate how they are publicly portrayed. Their representation in Te Papa is not simply a reflection of newly-enlightened curatorial practice, therefore; these people now wield real clout. Moreover, with the disintegration of the British Empire, the identities of non-indigenous ‘others’ –ranging from the Dutch to East Indians to Chinese – are also open to reformulation. In the end, however, MacDonald reckons that a celebration of national pride and inclusiveness has obstructed a confrontation with more challenging questions. ‘Imagination is safer,’ she concludes, ‘and infinitely more popular, than the awkward and argumentative present’ (p. 33).

Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Salber Phillips likewise demonstrate how a shifting social context – what they argue is ‘an important moment of rupture’ regarding ‘the new postcolonial politics of land and nationhood’ (p. 50) – has been reflected in displays at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Past and present now converge in its exhibitions, whereas the building, designed by an architect of indigenous ancestry, supplants Neo-Gothic grandeur with a structure that echoes a vocabulary of traditional native motifs and is consciously integrated into the environment. But as they analyze the interior spaces, Phillips and Phillips reveal how difficult it is to balance historical accuracy with entertainment value, and to represent and honor peoples’ past practices without trapping their contemporary descendants within a sort of museological amber.

Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton report similar processes underway in Australia, where ‘renegotiations of histories’ (p. 73) have meant that ‘progressive museum professionals have in recent years been faced with a politics of reaction’ (p. 85). Here the categories of victim and perpetrator can shift in unexpected and interesting ways. Moreover, embracing multiculturalism runs the danger of transforming sanctified places into cut-rate spiritual destinations: ‘Increasingly the pre-contact [Aboriginal] sites,’ they write, ‘are appropriated as ‘sacred spaces’ for a white culture which seeks to indigenise itself by discovering a spiritual affinity for the land, a form of white Dreaming’ (p. 92). Think of Madonna’s faddish embrace of Kabbalah as a pop culture analogue.

Durba Ghosh argues that by focusing on the thriving global trade between England and Asia before 1840, an important exhibition at the British Library conveniently failed to take up the brutal consequences of colonial rule which ensued. Here the mutual benefits of commerce overshadowed exploitation; an early manifestation of globalization was thereby rendered benign. Richard R. Flores details how an event considered relatively insignificant in its own time can become a highly charged symbol later on, endowed with significance and re-engineered by specific social interests. In his case, it is the Alamo; a 19th-century battle which occurred in South Africa at nearly the same time likewise achieved mythic status (see below). And Daniel Walkowitz examines the Ellis Island Immigration Museum both pre- and post-9/11. He explores the depiction of a range of immigrant experiences, the different pathways to assimilation, and the tensions between developing a narrative of citizenship and national identity while also acknowledging the histories and experiences of discrete groups. (Walkowitz unfortunately missed a superb opportunity to delve more deeply into the dynamics of this place by not citing a controversy that erupted over an exhibition it hosted in 1997: museum officials prohibited the use of the word ‘genocide’ in relation to the early 20th-century massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, and banned certain contemporaneous photographs. Some Jewish spokespeople also objected to the term ‘holocaust’ being ‘usurped’ by others, implying a hierarchy of suffering that could not abide comparable claims.)

Three contributions stand out for both the theoretical breadth and the descriptive depth of their analyses.

Laurent Dubois writes evocatively and insightfully about the incorporation of two neglected champions of liberty into the French *sanctum sanctorum*, the Pantheon, in 1998. Louis Delgrès and Toussaint Louverture were thereby transmogrified from ‘terrorists’ into ‘freedom fighters’. Dubois documents the protracted journey of these men from the periphery to the centre: both geographically (representing the French Caribbean colonies), as well as symbolically (successfully being incorporated into a cherished inner circle of heroes). Dubois combines a detailed historiography as well as an astute appraisal of contemporary French politics with a sensitive interpretation of the micropolitics of the precise placement of their final resting places. He offers an all-too-rare example of a nation confronting its own history of slavery, making an important gesture of reconsideration and recompense, and getting it right. (An interesting contrast can be drawn with the French government’s prolonged resistance to releasing the remains of Sarah Bartmann (also known as the Hottentot Venus) – cheekily defined as part of the country’s ‘patrimony’ – from her shameful entrapment in a French museum; she was eventually repatriated to South Africa, and respectively buried, in 2002.)

Deborah Poole’s account of conflicting visions for Oaxaca’s *zócalo* (central square) reveals how politics and race, culture and place, play out in a Mexican context. Fresh politicians have met resistance to their attempts to redefine what manner of activity is ‘appropriate’ there (increased tourism, sí; mass protests, no), or even which sorts of trees rightfully ‘belong’ (cries of ‘botanical racism’ flavored the debate over indigenous versus imported species (p. 202)). Poole vividly captures the zealotry of struggle and observes, ‘claims to cultural and political distinction are tolerated, and even celebrated, as long as they are not articulated as part of oppositional, contestatory, or class-based political projects’ (p. 207). Her sense of local history is keen; her inclusion of developments through 2008 is noteworthy; and her discussion of a Committee of Authenticity, arbitrating who may participate in an annual pageant, is precisely the sort of homegrown curiosity that one hopes might turn up in research of this type.

And Lisa Maya Knauer’s comparative analysis of the poetics of representation inherent within two Cuban museums as well as a parade pushes beyond the case study approach which most of the other contributors adopt. Her goal is to explore ‘the relationship between public spectacle and ethnographic display’ (p. 285), and her analysis draws upon a long engagement with that country and its various forms of expressive culture. Knauer unpacks the significance of government control of institutions versus oversight by international organizations such as UNESCO; the evolution of attitudes towards African-derived cultural forms; and the incorporation of local expression into the collective sense of national identity. In respect to African-inspired spirituality, she concludes, ‘it had to be transformed from religion into culture and thus into folklore’ (p. 291). As Cuba potentially stands on the brink of sweeping social change, Knauer’s account of how history, race and traditional practices have been packaged and dispensed gains added significance.

Five of the 13 essays in this collection appeared previously in *Radical History Review*. In at least one of them, the author’s failure to revise his selection in light of current developments seriously undercuts its validity. South Africa is undergoing a social and political makeover on the scale that Cuba may soon experience. And yet the bulk of the references used as evidence in Albert Grundlingh’s ‘A cultural conundrum? Old monuments and new regimes: the Voortrekker Monument as symbol of Afrikaner power in a postapartheid South Africa’ (first published in 2001) range from 1988 to 2003 – some of them thereby predating the postapartheid era. In a country that has been experiencing a fundamental and continuous transformation since 1994, this is a serious shortcoming. He quotes one author as having ‘recently’ made an observation (p. 160), for instance, when this particular reference dates from 1994, the first year of democracy!

The result is a chapter that is stale at best, irrelevant at worst. Grundlingh cautions, 'To continue describing the significance of the monument in similar terms as when Afrikaner nationalism was dominant ignores the seismographic shifts in South African society during the past decade' (p. 160). He would do well to heed his own advice. Moreover, co-editors Walkowitz and Knauer mistakenly reference 'the 1930s, at the beginning of the apartheid era' (p. 155), when in fact the much-reviled system of racial oppression was inaugurated by the National Party electoral victory in 1948.

The monument in question memorializes the Battle of Blood River (1838), a key moment in Afrikaner history and ideology when a relatively small band of Voortrekkers [pioneers] routed a much larger party of Zulu warriors. Grundlingh does a good job of explaining how the increased urbanization and embourgeoisement of Afrikaners throughout the second half of the 20th century diluted the meaning of the monument for many of them. But he neglects to mention how the 50th anniversary of the site in 1988 – when celebrants splintered into rival groups – made this dramatically evident (strange, given that he and a co-author analyzed this superbly in an earlier journal article). He is also right to argue that with contemporary Afrikaners enthusiastically jumping onto the consumer bandwagon, the significance of history, monuments and collective memory has correspondingly diminished. The same pertains to other major groups within South Africa as well.

Rumors were rife in 1994 regarding the fate of the monument: it would be demolished, made into a public toilet, or painted pink and turned into a gay disco. Current administrators thus have had to decouple the discredited legacy of Afrikaner racial politics from the group's cultural accomplishments. According to Grundlingh, 'Afrikaners have all but abandoned the monument' (p. 171). But on December 16 – formerly the Day of the Covenant, and now rechristened the Day of Reconciliation – overflow crowds (capacity of 2,500) still jam the place. Hip young people jostle for space with elders dressed in 19th-century garb. The monument thus retains its power, at least on certain occasions and with some constituents, and attracts curious visitors as well.

Museum administrators have broadened the scope and appeal of the site: African languages supplement the wall texts in English and Afrikaans, and black African tour guides have been hired. Moreover, they have made the grounds hospitable to sports and nature enthusiasts, and have launched an ambitious building plan to host Afrikaner-related activities. But Grundlingh neglects these developments. And because his interpretation stops short of the present by several years he makes only a slight reference to Freedom Park, a massive memorial still in development, and positioned on an adjoining hill; together the two sites embody a 'dialogue' between different representations of the past (critics charge, however, that the ANC's contributions to the liberation struggle are privileged at Freedom Park to the diminution of other groups). Had Grundlingh adequately updated his contribution, he would have noted these important matters.

Unlike many of the other articles in this collection, Grundlingh does not offer an extensive reading of the symbolism of this building, a structure which offers an embarrassment of riches in this regard. One of his few descriptive forays reads as follows: 'It was arguably replicated in 1960s buildings such as ... the overwhelming squareness [*sic*] and impenetrable design of the South African Broadcasting Corporation' (pp. 159–160). 'Arguably' is the operative word: comparing the thickset, mausoleum-like, Art Deco-inspired Voortrekker Monument to a soaring modernist rectangle, airily punctuated by rows of windows, is like equating Abbott with Costello. Moreover, he quotes a local politician, cited by a journalist, claiming that 'our black people provided all the labor for building the thing' (p. 169). Rather than interrogate this assertion, however, Grundlingh accepts it at face value. But in this instance a singularly all-white workforce was responsible for the construction of the monument, lest non-white hands sully its sacredness. In sum, this aggregation of omissions, oversights and errors seriously misrepresents both the history and present-day reality of this place. And this is all the more surprising because the author is a historian who was educated, and is based in, South Africa.

As is the case with most collections of essays, this book is a mixed bag; some selections are more successful

than others. In certain instances contributors provide too much detail: Paul Amar's chapter on different schemes to conserve and market Brazil's *favela* [slum] culture swamps the reader with a surfeit of information that makes it difficult to connect all the dots. At the other extreme, O. Hugo Benavides fails to provide sufficient context to understand his debunking of the foundational myth of the modern Ecuadorian state with which generations of school children continue to be indoctrinated.

Many of these researchers share the strategy of reading exhibitions (as well as other cultural phenomena) as texts. While this frequently offers fascinating interpretations, it also commonly results in a great deal of fault finding with the way that displays have turned out. Such investigations strikingly betray an outsider's perspective. There is scant consideration of the challenges and constraints that museum professionals face; analyses focus on outcomes, and not the give-and-take of the curatorial process. (An interesting exception is Anne M. Rademacher's examination of a dispute in Kathmandu over a monument to be erected at an ecologically-strategic site; she describes an ongoing debate about alternative visions of marking territory, thereby revealing how such deliberations unfold.)

At the extreme, some authors seem to attribute motives to curators – hunches which they do not substantiate. And they can even seem priggish at times. Consider Daniel Walkowitz's description of an audio tour at Ellis Island: 'I listened to see if I could detect any influence of the last decade's writing on postcolonialism or whiteness. All I heard in an hour and a half was one specific reference to whiteness' (p. 147). Working curators would likely give a chuckle at such a remark: making complex concepts such as this understandable to the general public, through a single presentation to people who are often distracted, is a daunting task. Moreover, it is complicated by the fact that many visitors are coming in order to learn more about their own family or ethnic group, and are not anticipating receiving a lecture based on trendy academic ideas.

Of course the Ellis Island Immigration Museum need not simply yield to consumer preferences. But at the same time, it must factor in and respect its visitors' backgrounds and interests. Effective curators discover how to balance public expectations with their own professional desires to convey challenging, provocative and even discomfiting ideas. Bending too much to consumer demands can result in superficial, patronizing or triumphalist interpretations. But pushing difficult views or thorny explanations onto an unprepared public, without sensible mediation and interpretation, can be a turn-off. Successful public historians learn how to achieve a satisfactory equilibrium in this regard.

Even with these provisos, however, a reader hungry for insight into the politics of representation on an international scale will find much to chew on in *Contested Histories in Public Spaces*.

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