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Reviewed by

**Ann McGrath**Moirra G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: Routledge, 2001)

In defending its refusal to lend the Elgin marbles to Athens for the Olympics, the British Museum recently adopted the position that they are the better custodians because Greece lets its treasures crumble. The Museum argues that it has always been an institution not just of Britain but of the world. While not denying that preservation responsibilities are at the centre of the keeper and curator's traditional duties, the British Museum's highly publicised stance would seem to reassert the old models upon which such major institutions were founded. Cultural property is universal, to be made available for all to see, and sculptures of pagan gods are to be cherished and displayed in their own temples.

Colonial, imperial and a range of other legacies shape representations in both history-writing and museums. In the post-colonial era, we often imagine that the singular epic narratives of race and nation have been smashed like pagan idols. Communities run effective campaigns; laws change; museums implement strategies yet the bones of contention remain — certain to outlast us all.

In *Making Representations*, the revised paperback edition of an important book that first appeared in 1996, Moirra G. Simpson surveys how museums around the world have responded to the challenges of a post-colonial political and intellectual era. Diverse communities demand to be involved in the ownership of their own cultural property — whether this be its material or narrative dimensions.

While Simpson's admirably international approach focuses upon examples from nations like Canada, Australia and the United States, it tends to homogenise, disguising differences both subtle and profound. Her collate-and-synthesise style often sidesteps probing analysis and she rarely provides her own professional judgement. When Simpson reports on the Chicago Field Museum's decision to stand by a diorama that documented a Skiri Pawnee practice of female sacrifice, we learn that critics complained it was unsuitable for children, racist and sexist. The museum's response was that, just as they would not censor offensive aspects of European societies such as African slavery, they would not censor offensive practices by other societies.

History is not a level playing field and the more complex issues need to be further unravelled. After all, while some museum visitors are over-protective about minority representations, others are offended if they receive much attention at all. In the market-driven politics of the new museums, we are left wondering whether saving face is a deeper urge than strong intellectual or ethical commitment. Rather than prodding for a deeper exploration of the underlying cultural and education legacies that prompt consumers to react in various ways, most audience evaluations conducted by museums measure appeal and 'satisfaction'.

We need to explore how institutions reach decisions about what they consider the 'correct' ethical position? Curators and museum Directors have to select what they show and in that process, they may agree to 'challenge' rather than merely please the public. Yet it would be problematic for a curator to present something known to be accurate, in the knowledge that a sensitive minority group will find it deeply offensive or politically damaging. Ethical imperatives and the desire to redress historical imbalances may therefore become greater priorities than the 'objectivity' argued for in the above case. No clear answers apply. History's reactive present is tied up in its reactive past.

The awareness and responsiveness to audience shifts the criteria of 'success' from those that academic research scholars value. As with universities, museums need to get people through the door and they must teach them something before they go out again. While negative reactions are more likely to create free publicity, a museum would

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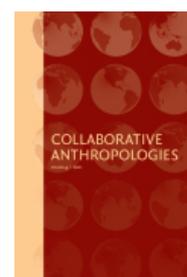
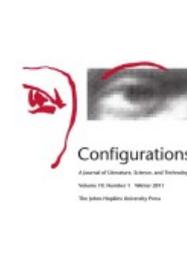
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hardly welcome a boycott. Fearing reputations and essential future funding, museums can also be overly sensitive to criticism from certain quarters. Given this, an absence of protest from minorities might be applauded as a measure of ‘success’, yet this can become a potentially self-serving and even silencing device rather than a vehicle of representation.

Despite such complexities, historians have much to learn from museum practice. Today’s museums consider themselves there for everyone. They recognise and embrace the imperative of wide community participation and use market testing to ascertain audience reactions. Museums generally welcome debate as proof of their role as a public forum; controversy demonstrates they have drawn attention to and added value to historical understandings.

The most surprising aspect of this generally useful book, therefore, is that Simpson treats museology as a separate island of historical and even post-colonial practice. This suggests that the museum world does not see itself as an allied form of historical practice. Just as disturbingly, it suggests that historians may hardly be sticking their heads through museum doors to see what’s going on. In Simpson’s reading, museology and history are not sisters or even cousins. Yet despite differences within historical constituencies, museums share the same post-colonial controversies and dilemmas as academic historians. In order to enrich our post-colonial conversations, we must talk in dialogue not only between community and institution, but among relevant practices and disciplines.

Museums continue to represent epics of humanity and monuments to a redefined nation and empire. From some institutions in this old centre of imperialism, the world beyond has become a place of potential loss rather than gain. For many institutions elsewhere, especially in colonised nations, the meaning of nation and of empire has been forever changed. The relative willingness of settler-nations to present representations is a response to effective lobby groups and to the wider community desire for a congruent national identity to match a broadened polity.

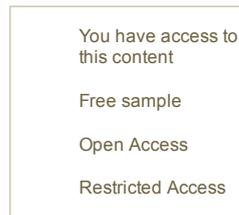
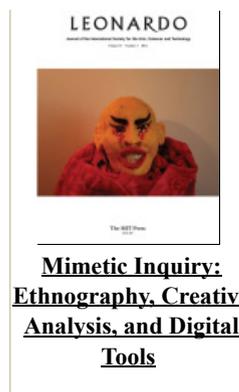
While a museum’s community consultations empower minorities to present their own histories, this approach then calls for exhibitions that achieve a complex balance between respectful renderings and professional ‘objectivity’. In taking criticism and radical protest seriously, museum exhibitions may provide a better medium with better possibilities than written histories for presenting diverse viewpoints, controversy and debate.

In seeing their audience as embodied, with visceral appetites and five senses that enjoy stimulation, museologists open oversized doors to valuable historical rooms. The techniques of historical representation — those involving the body and the senses reactions to the tangible and the three-dimensional — need to be addressed by both sectors.

Whether the doors be open or shut, historians should venture in. Our concerns with ‘the body’ must go beyond mere theorising; we should explore the tangible realities of a spatial and tactile past navigated by embodied humans who experienced rich and changing emotional relations with the material and symbolic world. We can explore the speaking artefacts, the post-colonial fragments of voices — the hand-made objects, cherished possessions, the images, symbols, the stories in cloth, ink, paint and spoken voice. Perhaps we can visit some museum of the future that features an exhibition on the post-colonial story of how historians, museologists and communities collaborated to explore the the 3D vision, texture and feel of a shared, albeit conflictual, past.

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