

The Postcolonial Museum: The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History.* Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona, and Michaela Quadraro (eds). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014. 254 pp.

Reviewed by Martin Segger

The Postcolonial Museum is a compilation of papers delivered at the academic conference *The Postcolonial Museum: The Pressures of Memory, the Bodies of History* held at the *Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'* in 2013. Sandwiched between an extensive introduction and a briefer afterward by the editorial team, the eighteen chapters are divided up into five topics: Global Migrations; Transcultural Heritage; Artistic Incursions in Space and Time; Disorienting the Museum; Representation and Beyond; and Future Memories, Alternative Archives.

This is not scientific museology. The shared methodology is rather a series of philosophical musings, or “critiques” to use the author’s terminology, keyed to illustrative cases of mainly art and ethnology exhibition installations set against a background of philosophical, film, and literary references, for the most part European sourced. There are some case instances from the Americas, Africa, India, and south Asia. Of the twenty-five contributors fifteen are academics, ten are students, one is a filmmaker. Only two admit some curatorial experience.

The editors’ claim the objective of the text is “to propose a critical re-evaluation of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that question the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought” (xix). The editors’ opening chapter explores some of the implications of this perspective when examining “post-colonial” themes within modern art, literature, popular music, and exhibitions. They focus particularly on the experience of ex-colonial minorities where “the challenge of the post-colonial approach to contemporary society is to question the historiographical narrative as told from within the parameters of a univocal point of view” (2). For instance, a Palestinian artist creates a photographic installation drawn from thousands of books seized from Palestinian homes and institutions by Israel in 1948.

A sampling of the chapters indicates how the power of the dominant (i.e. colonizer’s) narrative subverts the voice of the dominated (i.e. colonized), and the various means by which the narrative has been challenged. One chapter tells the story of how ten years of conceptual development by a team of European intellectuals for a non-artifact museum in the French “post-colony” of Reunion Island in the South Pacific came to grief. Obviously the project sponsors ultimately rejected their proposed central thesis: “the accumulation of objects destined to celebrate the wealth of a nation belonged to an economy of predation, looting of defeated peoples or exploiting the riches of others” (25). Another chapter reviews recent attempts to reposition the display of ethnology collections by laying aside traditional western academic disciplines and their methodological structures. Cases cited included major institutions in Stockholm, Paris, Vienna, Gothenburg, Tervaren, and elsewhere.

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So could *The Postcolonial Museum* be positioned as a go-to text for contemporary practitioners in the developed and developing museum world? Unfortunately not. The essential problem is the rhetorical model of European intellectual post-modernism in which the discussions are imbedded. The Marxist economic well springs of this enterprise have long been discredited, although the point of view remains as is revealed by the editors: “It (globalization)...was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and exasperated defense of property, spread globally by capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West” (1).

The requisite pantheon post-modernist references (Said, Derrida, Foucault, Benjamin, and others) are the domain of a small intellectual elite. And along with that the reader must wade through the dense and convoluted academic jargon. For example, one chapter opens as follows:

The Minister of Propaganda of the Gulmoher Republic, a fluid network hub of Bengali artists, vehemently denies any constitutional doxa. He invoked a Deuzian trope, “faciality,” and likened any formal rigidity, notion of hexes or ideological allegiance to a facialized re-enactment, inscribed on colonial a grid. [75]

The editors claim that the inspiration behind this volume is the writings of Joseph-Achille Mbembe, the well-known political scientist and philosopher at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, in particular his seminal work *On the Post Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Mbembe however rejects the “post-colonist” label. None of the chapter contributors cite Mbembe, but they would do well to emulate his clarity of thought and prose.

Museologist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000, 19) puts the issue more succinctly when commenting on the power of museums in the modern world “the power to name, to represent common sense, to create official versions, to represent the social world, to represent the past”. Museum professionals struggle with these challenges everyday within an ever evolving, but clearly articulated, international ethical framework. This text will do little to assist those travails.

Reference Cited

Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. 2000. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.

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