

Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display.* Peggy Levitt. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. 244 pp.

Reviewed by Thomas F. Gieryn

Sociologist Peggy Levitt has published influential books and articles about immigration, transnational communities, and global citizenship, and now she examines one particular site where these issues are played out: museums. What role should museums play in a world where one in seven people is an international or internal migrant? Can museums make citizens feel as much at home and valued in their ancestral nation, city, or neighborhood as in the fluid network flows of people, ideas, goods, power, and money stretching across borders all over the globe? These tough questions call for a special methodology up to the task, a kind of multi-sited ethnography that uses materials from diverse museums on three continents to expose their differences and occasional similarities (without pursuing facile generalizations about “all” museums, but at the same time without digging too deeply into the unique features that mark each of them). Levitt draws deeply from the insights and aspirations of one hundred eighty-five curators, directors and educators who work in museums for the fine arts, history, ethnography, and “constituencies” (like El Museo del Barrio in Manhattan) located in Scandinavia (Sweden and Denmark), in East Coast America (Boston and New York), and in emerging Asia (Singapore and Qatar). But each case-museum really has a double location: one in a nation and city, another in the world.

Levitt’s focus is on the practices of these museums, as evidenced in the special and permanent exhibitions they mount, the artifacts assembled, the interpretive narrations provided, and the messages designed to be conveyed. These practices are arrayed along an arc from cosmopolitan to nationalism: from an open, respectful and critical engagement with people who are different to a celebration of what makes this country or this city and its culture and inhabitants special. Cosmopolitan-nationalism is not really a dichotomy but a continuum, and Levitt’s challenge is to show how—in distinctive ways—each museum reconciles its unavoidable locality with its equally unavoidable globality. The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg explicitly seeks to create global Swedes while the more insular National Museum of Denmark draws upon the art and artifacts of the world to create a deeper sense of Danishness—although both Scandinavian institutions struggle to represent honestly their own internal demographic diversity created by migration. Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts and the Brooklyn Museum in New York both recently reinstalled their American collections, but to different effect: Boston is primarily about “how outside influences changed what is within, not about what that means for looking out” (51), while Brooklyn seeks to connect with people in the diverse neighborhoods that surround the museum while situating the mosaic of the borough amid the world beyond. Singapore and Qatar are both building museums to express and extend their growing significance on the global economic and political stage, and in particular “to attract new businesses and create the citizens it needs to get the job done” (93). Museums in each Asian country selectively borrow from cosmopolitan values in fashioning a national identity—respecting ethnic differences is apparent, extending human rights to all is not.

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The analytic power of Levitt's book lies in her careful sifting of the forces that steer these museums toward cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and at the same time toward a convergence of similar practices visible in some respects but not in others. The *sine qua non* of a museum (these days) is an alluring shop, Saturday morning outreach activities and, in the galleries, juxtaposing contemporary works and artifacts aside those from distant times and places. It would be hyperbolic to call this "standardization," but a detectable convergence in museum practices results from the churn of museum professionals who share standards and define just what constitutes a "legitimate" museum, reinforced by governance organizations like the International Committee on Museums. My impression is that Levitt finds these homogenizing forces overwhelmed by countervailing pressures that keep each museum on its own particular path toward some distinctive blend of local and cosmopolitan. The immediate cultural armature of city or neighborhood does much to shape the vernacular cosmopolitanism that goes on exhibit, for example, the sources of a museum's funding (public, patrons and turnstile), the local "diversity management" regime that defines the meaning and rights of recently-arriving groups, the stage of this country in the nation-building process, and the perceived specialized niche of a museum in the ecology of cultural institutions around the corner and around the world.

Levitt is certain about two things. First, no museum can escape from the challenge (and opportunities) of creating citizens: even the museum curator who sees his or her role as "just" collecting, preserving, and presenting in the spirit of political or ethical neutrality is steering how visitors will see themselves (and others). Second, museums "have no choice but to bet on cosmopolitanism's promise:" the "world's floating tribe" (142) is reality, and the question before us—and before museums—is which values we shall use to make sense of it all.

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