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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Public History, National Museums and Transnational History

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Public history encompasses the full range of history-making, from the local level to the national and, arguably, the transnational. While much has been written about the challenges of doing public history at the local level, the impact of globalization on the national level (particularly in national museums) has been examined far less. Globalization challenges both the premises on which national institutions were established and the conventional practice of those public historians working in them. But the need for reconceptualizing national museums is not just compelled by globalization. The concept of a 'national museum' is fundamentally at odds with the theory and practice of public history, with public historians' understanding of the messiness and complexity of history, their knowledge that historical experience does not always obey the national borders that define their work, that the nation is not always the center of human experience and culture.

This article argues that *transnational* history – history that crosses borders, that challenges the privileging of the nation state – constitutes an opportunity for national museums to transcend national identity and the confines of the nation state. Comparative perspectives that look at differences among nations and global or worldwide issues are also important but not the focus here. Nor is this about sub-national experiences—local, state, or regional history. And while some of what follows encompasses multiculturalism, that ideal or challenge is arguably a limited concept that still assumes the primacy of the nation state by focusing on change *within* national borders, rather than re-centering the story on the movement of people *across* borders.

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When geo-political borders define public history, our view of the past is limited—as Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner argue in the introduction to *National Museums: Negotiating Histories*. National museums need to embrace 'different geographics of reference' that 'contest and shape the imagination.'[1]

For national museums, the tension between the nation state frame and transnational experience is not just an intellectual issue – is tied up in their identity as institutions and in their collections. That tension challenges their 'brand,' what their missions are. According to Sir David Wilson, historically there have been at least three types of national museums:[2]

- *Monolithic museums* like the British Museum and the Hermitage, holding large public collections that embrace the world. But in looking beyond the nation to the universal, these museums actually reinforce national identity. As Graeme Davison and others have noted, the great museums of the nineteenth century defined the nation by juxtaposing the 'other,' the latter represented through collections often built through conquest and colonization.[3] According to David Lowenthal, the argument was that 'comparing the fruits of every culture would make British Museum visitors more thoughtful, more benign, more truly British.'[4]
- *Specialist national museums* include, for example, the National Portrait Gallery in London, the Greek National Archaeological Museum and the Australian War Memorial. These 'niche' museums address a piece of the national narrative (as in museums of war) or from a particular perspective (that of a portrait gallery).
- *State museums of national culture*, such as the National Museum of Australia, the German Historical Museum and the National Museum of American History (NMAH), contribute very deliberately to the construction of national identity. In these museums, shaping identity 'has become overt, rather than implied.'[5] Indeed, these museums could be said to 'perform' identity, not only for the nation but to other nations, representing, legitimating, stabilizing national identity.[6]

The last type is the focus of this article, not just because the author worked in one but because it is where the challenge of transnational history is arguably the most salient. More specifically, the focus is on the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (SNMAH), one of nineteen museums currently in the Smithsonian system (two more are in development), each approaching its responsibilities from a different vantage point. The newest Smithsonian museums—the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)—stand apart not so much because they are culturally specific in focus but because they reflect, arguably, a new paradigm for or fourth type of national museum, transnational in scope despite names that suggest narrower agendas.

The NMAI does not confine its focus to Native American tribes or even to the indigenous peoples of the larger North American continent but indeed reaches out across the Western Hemisphere to embrace the indigenous peoples of South America.[7] Even without that larger geopolitical agenda, the history represented at NMAI is inherently multinational and transnational, rooted in the treaties and political acts that established unique (if often ignored) status for Native peoples and nations within what is now the United States. The National Museum of African American History and Culture is the most recent addition to the Smithsonian, exploring through its research, collecting, and exhibitions not just the African American experience in what is now the US but the experience and cultures of the larger African diaspora.[8] It is not coincidental that transnational identity is especially strong for those two museums, museums that collect and interpret the history and culture of those who have been deemed 'other', who have not been in power, who have not been treated as full citizens, whose identities are thus not, as historian Robin Kelley maintains, grounded in that of the nation.[9] This is more than theory. That perspective has been documented in the pioneering study that historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen did on history-making in the United

States, which found that both Native Americans and African Americans identify with the nation and national history at significantly lower rates than do Euro-Americans.[10]

In contrast to those two, the NMAH represents the more traditional paradigm – it is unquestionably a state museum of national culture. David Thelen argues that the discipline of history in the 1960s was defined by the nation state – the Museum of American History (originally named the Museum of History and Technology), born in that same decade, similarly rests on an assumption of the centrality of the nation state, of 'nation-centered narratives.'[11] That frame has basically trapped the museum – the more it assumes the mantle of 'national' museum, the more the public sees 'the nation' as its sole subject and expects stories of American exceptionality, indeed a triumphalist narrative.

Even as NMAH has tried over the decades to explore arguably complicated and contested questions such as 'What has it meant to be an American?', the public has continued to expect simple stories of shared values and experiences. Between the agendas of the new culturally specific museums on the one hand and the public's perception of the civic role of the museum on the other, NMAH too often seems left with only a part of history (that of White America), even as it tries to claim ownership of the whole, of an integrated, interwoven narrative. Thus while *defining* national identity may have been the core purpose for NMAH's establishment nearly sixty years ago, today its role as a museum too often ends up being *defined by* national identity, by external agendas of uncritical patriotism, and not just from the political and cultural right.

But is transnational history really that new a responsibility for national museums such as the Museum of American History or is what is different the *consciousness* of it? Has sorting out 'national' from 'transnational' ever been that simple? What is 'national' history? Is it about nationhood – the genealogy of nation, myths of inevitability and exceptionalism – or something more complicated? Is the clarity of nationhood more in hindsight than as experienced? In other words, has the NMAH been guilty of what sociologist Tony Bennett calls the 'nationing of history' and the 'historicizing of nation'? Has the museum manipulated history to establish a mythic and inevitable national identity?[12] Has American history and culture, as it moves from colony to empire, instead always been inherently transnational? Is there any other way to characterize the history of a place that, until the twentieth century, was not indeed a single nation? In other words, is it really possible to define and do American 'national' history given the complexities of change and growth over time?

The US is not alone in this regard. The history of the world is a complex mix of shifting geopolitical borders, changing national regimes, constant migration and movement and contested cultural power. Have national museums so deliberately 'imagined' nation that they have obscured the reality of the richer history that transcends the national narrative?[13] Have they become so focused on the center that they have lost the perspective from the periphery and beyond? Have they latched on to the idea of national history because, as historian Ian Tyrrell has suggested, a national perspective is easier and safer than the more complicated challenge of weaving together the strands of a complex and contested past?[14] But isn't history fundamentally about more than nation?

Rather than always defaulting to an at best questionable concept of nation, museums like the Museum of American History should engage the public in the richer transnational nature of history and culture. Indeed, they are well positioned to do this because they deal not only in ideas but in objects, the material culture of times and places that did not so easily sort out into 'nation' and 'other.' Museums can make the theoretical real, illuminating how national identity has been constructed from the parts of our many cultures, ideas, institutions. David Thelen provides an example:

> Products that may appear to be American – cars, popular music, neighborhood life – may well be created and assembled by people and institutions they pick up in many places. Of the $10,000 an American consumer paid General Motors [in 1990] for a new Pontiac Le Mans, $3,000 went to South Korea for routine labor and assembly; $2,150 to Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore for

components; $750 to Germany for styling and design engineering; $250 to Britain for advertising and marketing; and $50 to Ireland and Barbados for data processing.[15]

While we may be more conscious now of the global nature of production and commerce that he describes, such activity has long been part of America's complicated history. Consider for a moment an object in NMAH's collections: a porcelain teapot from the 1760s, a rare 'No Stamp Act' teapot, made in England for sale in colonial America to protest English law – an intriguing example of the back and forth, layered intersection of commerce, politics and social customs in the Atlantic world that defies easy notions of national history.[16] Writing about environmental history, Richard White has drawn on the work of French geographer Henri Lefebvre to argue for recognizing complexity and scale in history – local, state, region, nation, world – and the intersections of those scales, pealing them back to see the interconnectedness of history.[17] That 'pealing back' is what *all* museums do or should do, revealing the richer complexity behind the seemingly simple.

Collections are at the heart of what museums do. They are the foundation on which exhibitions and programs are built, so how a museum looks at its collections is critical to the agenda of 'pealing back' the layers of history. The NMAH's collections provide many examples of that interconnectedness that is too often overshadowed by a singular focus on nation. While other museums in different national contexts face different challenges, the NMAH well illustrates the potential that all national museums share in recentering the narrative and recovering the stories obscured by the ascendancy of the national narrative.

America's history of crossing borders dates from well before the Anglo-American relations illustrated by the teapot mentioned above. For centuries before, contact between European (not just English) explorers and settlers and Native Americans had been fundamentally transnational. Moreover, the indigenous people of North America were not simply people inhabiting the land Euro-Americans coveted but autonomous nations with histories and thriving cultures, functioning in a multinational and transnational world long before the arrival of Euro-American settler societies with ambitious expansionist plans. Within NMAH's collections can be found the material culture of that contested relationship, including, for example:

- A copper *tajadero* (Spanish for chopping knife) – a form of money used in central Mexico and parts of Central America, made around 1500, about 20 years before Spain began to colonize Mexico.[18]
- A peace medal from 1801 carried by Lewis and Clark in their western explorations of North America – a figuratively and literally hollow promise of 'Peace and Friendship' from the new American nation to the Native people they encountered.[19]
- From much later (1894), a drawing by a Cheyenne military prisoner depicting one of the bloody battles that was part of the US government's campaign of invasion, relocation and extermination of the tribes of the Great Plains.[20]

While the American Southwest and West were not part of the Atlantic world and not part of 'the nation' until the mid-nineteenth century, they were from the sixteenth century part of the larger transnational community that would later be claimed by the United States. The culture that developed – a flourishing hybrid of Spanish, indigenous and Anglo-American influences – did not end with US annexation. Within the NMAH collections is the material legacy of that long history of encounters:

- A spur, reflecting the riding culture introduced by the Spanish into Mexico during colonization.[21]
- Photographs by Leonard Nadel documenting the Bracero Program that brought guest workers from Mexico to the US from 1956.[22]
- The first frozen margarita machine, Mexican in origin but now part of mainstream American culture.[23]

Each reflects a persistent transnational culture that continues to thrive along the US/Mexican border today, a border that, borrowing language that cultural theorist David Bunn uses in *Museum Frictions* in writing about South Africa, is both hard and soft, both impenetrable and permeable at the same time.[24]

Looking beyond 'the states' of North America to Hawaii and Puerto Rico, the NMAH's collections include more rich and complex borrowings, reflecting histories of colonization, imperialism, and Americanization. From Hawaii:

- A flag from the throne room of Queen Lili'uokalani—originally commissioned by King Kamehameha the Great in 1816 and the official flag of the indigenous kingdom, the independent republic, the US territory and the state.[25]
- A painting of the *City of Tokio*, the ship which brought the first Japanese immigrants to Hawaii in 1885 to work in sugar plantations.[26]
- A Chinese-style abacus owned by Kim Dong Kuen, a Korean who immigrated to Hawaii in 1906.[27]

From Puerto Rico:

- A *bomba* drum, reflecting an Afro-Puerto Rican music tradition that thrives in traditional centers not only in Puerto Rico but also in New York City.[28]
- A *marimbula*, an African-derived folk instrument found across the Caribbean.[29]
- A wooden santo of St James the Moor Slayer, reflecting the transplanting to the Americas of a Spanish conflict between Christians and Muslims.[30]

Consider another figure reflected prominently in the NMAH collections: Celia Cruz, the Queen of Salsa, who defied all attempts at definition. An Afro-Cuban who fled her native land in 1960 after Castro took power, she lived for a time in Mexico and ended up a US citizen. Her music combined Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban and other Latin music traditions with the African influences that were also part of her culture. Indeed her trademark cry of '*Azúcar!' (sugar)* linked the vibrant diversity of Cuban culture to the violence of slavery in its sugar plantations.[31] While she is certainly claimed by the Latino community, might the African American community also have a legitimate claim? How does a museum sort out nativity, language, race and culture in a transnational context increasingly resistant to easy categorization? How does it deal with individuals with multiple cultural identities crossing multiple borders?

But transnational history in national museums must be about more than conflict and colonization or cultural exchanges and borrowings. It must also grapple with troublesome issues such as human trafficking. Human trafficking as a historical activity is embodied in the Atlantic slave trade that linked Africa, Europe and the Americas. The transnational nature of it is reflected in artifacts at NMAH such as:

- A model of the brig *Diligente* – an American-built vessel sailing under English and Portuguese flags in the transatlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century.[32]
- A cast bronze manilla or bracelet, one of many produced by the Portuguese, British, Dutch and French specifically for trade in West Africa, including as barter for enslaved people in West Africa.[33]
- Shackles from Puerto Rico used to restrain enslaved people, representing the history of genocidal violence and physical exploitation across the Americas.[34]

But human trafficking is also a contemporary issue that national museums must address. The NMAH collections include, for example, one of the falsified passports used to smuggle Thai workers into the country,

where they were essentially enslaved until the El Monte sweatshop raid in 1995.[35] Such exploitation is clearly a transnational rather than national story.

Many other examples of crossing borders, both literally and figuratively, abound in the collections:

- A plain trunk that belonged to a Dominican Sister who took it with her as she joined the Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament in France and then traveled to the United States in 1881 to join a Dominican monastery there.[36]
- An acupuncture instrument set from the twentieth century that reflects how the practice has evolved into an East-West hybrid.[37]
- Even a theater mask, created by an Australian designer, based on nineteenth-century Thai ceremonial headgear, for use in a ballet depicting the story of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as part of the Broadway musical *The King and I*.[38]

The examples above are all from the National Museum of American History, but comparable examples can be drawn from the collections of every national museum. While national museums are all limited to some extent by the collections that they have, by the often problematic intellectual agendas of their predecessors, they also have the opportunity and, arguably, the obligation to re-value and re-contextualize their collections, to look at them in new ways, to step beyond national narratives and notions of national exceptionalism.

Of course, transnational history is not without risks and challenges that public historians must grapple with:

- Are national museums prepared to do history that is more complicated, less ordered than neatly defined national history?
- When a museum does so, is it really doing any more than just substituting one narrative for another? Does whatever a national museum presents end up being seen by the public as some form of master narrative? How does a museum yield authority in a more fluid global context?
- When a national museum explores transnational experiences, does it run the risk of a new form of imperialism – with the national museum's narrative appropriating or drowning out the local voice? What is the museum's responsibility to communities?
- How does transnational history fit within the movement to decolonize museums?
- Do transnational perspectives weaken or undermine nation and citizenship? Is a national museum that embraces transnational history still expected to fulfill its founding civic responsibility to the nation and its citizens?
- Is the reality that even geographic proximity and borders have little meaning in our increasingly digital world?

Historian Sven Beckert argues that transnational history is a different 'way of seeing': 'Transnational history focuses on uncovering connectedness across particular political units. Seeing these connections should come just as easily to historians as seeing connections within more familiar frames'. That 'way of seeing' does not come easily to national museums wedded to their responsibilities for fostering national identity.[39] In questioning the privileging of the nation state, transnational history arguably challenges the very purpose of national museums. But it also offers the potential for revaluing collections, for pealing back the layers to expose the complexity hidden by the simple.

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