

Review Article

All together now: Writing, activism, and museum engagement

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Labadi, Sophia. *Museums, Immigrants, and Social Justice*. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2018, hardback £105, pp. x+149.

Message, Kylie. *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge*. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2017, hardback £45, ebook £45, pp. xi+115.

The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge by Kylie Message (2017) and *Museums, Immigrants, and Social Justice* by Sophia Labadi (2018) are two very different recent monographs that address important issues related to museums and social justice. Each is useful in its own way. Message's text, the first in Routledge's *Museums in Focus* series, explores how and why we write about museums, analyzing how these discourses are derived from a lack of their own distinctive methodology and arguing that they nevertheless comprise prime places for protest and engagement with human rights. Labadi's book, on the other hand, focuses more on practice, using four institutions as case studies. While both books are distinguished by their brevity, they are nevertheless dense with material for practitioners, academics, and students.

Even though other authors such as Whitehead *et al.* (2015), Gourévidis (2014), Innocenti (2014), and myself (2017), have published books on museums and immigration, Labadi's volume covers new ground. Basing her work on Amartya Sen's (2007) theory of capability and Martha Nussbaum's discussion of that theory (2003), Labadi argues that museum activism for social justice often fails to include the voices and stories of immigrants. Exhibitions must include multivocal representations of these populations. Moreover, museums must offer programmes that enable immigrants to function more successfully in their new homes. With this in mind, she describes activities offered by the Manchester Museum, the National Gallery of Denmark, Thorvaldsens Museum (also in Copenhagen) and the National Museum of the History of Immigration (NMHI) in Paris. The first three institutions have provided opportunities for language learning and employment, while the last was the site of an occupation in 2010 and 2011 by immigrants seeking the right to work legally in France. Labadi approaches the activities openly and honestly, noting, for instance, that some projects failed to attract their desired audience of refugees and asylum seekers, but instead appealed to well-educated upper middle class immigrants and expatriates who were more familiar with and comfortable in a museum environment. Her analysis of "mechanisms of exclusions" (79) is one of the strongest features of the book, illustrating how well-intentioned museum offerings that do not take into account the full range of difficulties experienced by refugees and asylum seekers (for instance, in finding transportation) may only further marginalize their audiences.

On occasion, Labadi misses opportunities for intersectional investigations that would enhance the value of her book. For instance, she describes how many of the participants in language workshops are female and notes that the classes enhanced the women's confidence. She also outlines the effects of the lack of childcare on women's participation, but does not engage in extended analysis of this feature of the class. Indeed, her definition of language learning in museums is limited to classes, without consideration of other kinds of linguistic

offerings, such as bilingual labels (which the BERI project in the United States found useful in stimulating conversations as well as language learning). The section on the occupation of the NMHI was also somewhat disappointing as it referred to few of the texts already written on the subject, thus covering old ground. Nevertheless, my overall assessment of the book is very positive, because it addresses in concrete terms the ways museums can help immigrants in two areas that create challenges: language learning and finding employment. In these aspects, the book goes well beyond others on museums and migration.

Message's primary contribution is her assessment of the current state of museum studies scholarship, particularly as it brings activist theories and ideas into print: her book, as the first volume in the *Museums in Focus* series,

argue[s] that we must understand political potential as well as the disciplinary limitations and restrictions of museum studies approaches in dealing with social reform movements and actions if we are properly to hold museums accountable for their often stated goals of social justice (31).

How does the field engage with social movements, and to what extent does museum writing itself constitute a form of social activism? Given the rapid burgeoning of books, journals, and reports in the field since the debut of the 'new' museology, such a critical analysis is both necessary and salutary. According to Message, Museum Studies research has grown as an interdiscipline without methodologies of its own, a circumstance that promotes its richness as a field. Engaged museums and writings about museums thus arise in the fertile borderlands between fields, where they can participate in a kind of disobedience – in contrast to direct opposition – to established conventions and rhetorical traditions.

Message insists that exhibitionary institutions benefit from the multivalent nature of their borderwork, as they function both within and outside governmental structures, as well as on the boundaries of other intellectual (and physical) territories. Message takes crisis as a subtheme, 'understood as a defining feature of the contemporary condition' (75). Crisis, or the perception of crisis, spurs museums to political engagement, and she titles a chapter section, 'This is the time when museums go to work' (29), addressing the Trump era.

At the same time, Message argues near the end of the monograph that our scholarship about museums has not been sufficiently self-reflexive or critical. The lack of distinguishing methodologies or guideposts, while liberating, renders evaluation difficult. She argues that we are too easily swayed by the 'ubiquitous' use of the term *crisis* (54) and this affects both museum practice and scholarly dialogue. Adding critique to our collection of methods will render the activist aspect of museum work more successful. Within this context, Message is particularly positive about the role of reviews (such as this article, one might hope), praising 'the unfashionable review's emphasis on critical writing as a process of borderwork that has become increasingly evident as a key element of the disobedient museum concept/process' (66).

Condensing such complex and novel thought is challenging; on occasion, sections of the book are so theoretical that one loses the sense of the urgency of museum and scholarly activism. This perhaps results from the nature of the series, which emphasizes brevity. The brevity is refreshing in an era where communications move at enormous speed; however, it does not allow for extended examples or case studies that might illustrate Message's thought in action.

Many curators complain that activist scholars lack understanding of the difficulties faced by museums in conducting activist work and suggest that writers are ignorant of the real constraints confronted by museums. These two books respond to such critiques, illuminating for readers, whether they are academics or practitioners, the ways in which writing about museums constitutes activist engagement, even as it can help museums bring out the very best in their practices.

References

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