BOOKS

Johansson, Christina & Bevelander Pieter (eds). *Museums in a Time of Migration. Rethinking museums' roles, representations, collections, and collaborations.* Lund: Nordic Academic Press. 2017 (262pp.) ISBN: 978-91-88168-82-5

This volume includes a collection of papers exploring the challenges and opportunities for contemporary museums stemming from engagement with the theme of migration. It includes contributions from journalists, museum directors and academics in a range of disciplinary areas (migration studies, social studies, ethnology, and history). The publication – an outcome of a research project on museums and integration – received funding from the *EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund* (AMIF), and the *Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare* (MIM) at Malmö University.

The volume “seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion about museums’ engagement with migration” (p.10). In addition to the introduction, it includes eleven chapters, grouped in four thematic sections (the role of museums; representations of migration; rethinking collections; collaboration and inclusion). The introduction provides some definitions and fundamentals about migration, and develops a reflection on how the social roles of museums have changed since the 1980s, as the theme of migration has been gradually approached through engagement with memory, identity, and intangible cultural heritage in museums. In a more analytical mode, in the introduction the editors identify emerging trends (such as a shift from ignoring migration to a focus on cultural interaction in

museums), as well as persistent issues (such as not paying enough attention to social friction and inequalities, or the tendency to downplay the importance of contemporary collecting in visualizing and materializing migration). The introduction also sets the volume initiative within the broader context of a Swedish government project for a new museum of democracy and migration in Malmö. It is refreshing to see an academic research project, such as the one behind this volume, directly linked to – and hopefully also impacting upon – museum practice and policy-making.

The volume opens with a chapter by Peggy Levitt “Creating National and Global Citizens”. Levitt raises the very pertinent question of whether museums are creating global citizens (p.33). The chapter provides a compelling picture of different positions and views on activism in museums, as well as different “diversity management regimes” across various cities and cultural contexts around the world, such as Sweden, Boston (USA) and Qatar.

In chapter 2, David Fleming, director of National Museums Liverpool, takes a bold and clear stance in stating “it is the responsibility of museums to explain migration” (p.59). National Museums Liverpool offer an example of the tension that can sometimes arise between world-class collections speaking of a glorious past, and the struggle to make them relevant to contemporary audiences, and notably source communities. Fleming’s chapter provides an engrossing portrait of Liverpool’s historical role in the colonial and slave trade, but also bears witness to the city’s capacity to develop a critical reflection on that past in its museums – namely the International Slavery Museum, the Museum of Liverpool, and the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

Memory work in post-apartheid Cape Town is the topic of chapter 3 “Memory

168 is our weapon”, by Bonita Bennett. The chapter relates the creation of the District 6 Museum, commemorating life in a Cape Town neighborhood before apartheid (1966). The need to remember is pressing since the rapid process of reconstruction of the neighborhood is rapidly changing – yet another time – the landscape and its memory. But the District 6 Museum is not only the catalyst for the memories of displaced residents, it has also become an instrument of social justice and collective healing, a symbol of post-apartheid South Africa that resonates with both local communities of interest as well as with tourist visitors from all over the world.

Chapter 4 opens the second section of the book, on representations of migration and ethnicity. The chapter, by Maya Povrzanović Frykman, is devoted to “Conceptual Frameworks”. It reflects on the concepts of ethnicity, identity, culture, and diversity in relation to representations of migrants. Through the case studies of Croat migrants to Sweden, the chapter brings nuances to our very idea of migrant communities. Povrzanović Frykman highlights the differences that exist within a migrant ethnic group (notably between different waves of Croat migrants to Sweden) and places these into a broader perspective by suggesting a shift in focus away from the ethnic group and on contrasts and similarities in society that cut across ethnicity or migration. These strategies can be effectively transposed to museums “if we set aside ethnic lens” (p.97) and refocus on transculturality and practices of connection (p.104–5).

“Moving stories. Using life stories to animate migration history” is the title of chapter 5 by Alistair Thomson. The chapter reflects on the use of photography and personal memories as tools to bring the history of migration to life, to make it personal and emotional, and to provide

an alternative account to dry government statistics or sensationalist media debates. Thomson is interested in the *lived experiences* of migration because this kind of accounts, she argues persuasively, can truly engage visitors in museums. The author warns us however, that this material requires curatorial interpretation because it is time- and culture-sensitive. Focusing on two case studies of British migrants to Australia after WWII, Thomson illustrates the value of research, also as part of museum practice, as this unravels multiple stories that might otherwise remain untold – embedded as codes in images, and in between the lines of personal accounts.

Migration viewed from children’s eyes is the theme of chapter 6 “Learning at the museum. School children’s perceptions of a role play about seeking sanctuary” by Christina Johansson. The chapter addresses a relatively familiar theme in migration studies – the tension between the rise of migration globally, and the governments’ attempts to control and regulate it – from an unusual vantage point: that of school children. Johansson draws on the case study of a county museum (Kalmar) with role play, where school children impersonate refugees, take up fictional identities and are confronted with real-life dramatic situations. Here, role play in the museum is not only an effective research method, but it also becomes an immersive museum practice: on one hand, it can yield unique insights into children’s understandings of migration, and on the other, it has the potential to radically change children’s own views of this human condition.

The third section of the book – on museum collections and documentation – opens with chapter 7 “From totality to infinity. Reimagining museum collecting” by Fredrik Svanberg. Drawing on the case of the Swedish History Museum of Stockholm, Svanberg

proposes to reimagine museum collecting as a path to renewal for museums, a way to move beyond narrow museum classifications, which can sometimes obscure the rich meaning trajectories of objects. The chapter raises a challenging question: how can we develop new collection practices and new collection information systems that accommodate for the virtual infinite meanings of museum objects? Svanberg discusses the principles informing collecting (such as selectivity) and reflects on how they actually reveal specific values and understandings of the world. Seen in this light, collecting is recast as meaning-making.

“The making of cultural heritage and ethnicity in the archive” is the theme of chapter 8, jointly authored by Malin Thor Tureby and Jesper Johansson. That archives tell stories about national identity and ethnic borders might be a truism, but the authors bring us to look closer and consider how narratives are collected and archived. Stories should be told not only about but also with ethnic communities. Yet this is seldom the case, as evidenced by the authors’ study of the archives of the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. In response to this issue, the authors suggest ‘participatory archiving’ (p.174) in an attempt to create archives that reflect the cultural diversity of Sweden in the past and today. In 2010 the Swedish Constitution has been amended to include an official acknowledgement that Sweden is a multicultural country. The role of representation of ethnic minorities – though embraced by cultural institutions and supported politically (in the 2010s) – has however been relegated to dedicated cultural poles such as the Swedish Multicultural Centre in Botkirka, Southern Stockholm, thus reproducing a somewhat problematic division of tasks among Swedish cultural institutions.

In chapter 9 (“The future is ours”) Dragan Nikolić focuses on a collaborative project

documenting the refugee crisis in 2015, when more than 160,000 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq sought asylum in Sweden. How can museums document these emergency situations? The Refugee Documentation Project in the area of Malmö – a joint effort of three museums and a university department – included interviews with refugees, volunteers and activists, as well as video documentation and objects collection. The aim was to collect and document the refugee crisis. In so doing, the process raised a number of thorny, yet thought-provoking questions on the ethics of conducting emergency ethnography.

Chapter 10 opens the last section in the book, devoted to collaborative projects. The chapter, authored by Bernadette Lynch, is entitled “Migrants: museums, and tackling the legacies of prejudice”. Lynch brings us to look at the fine-grained dynamics of collaboration and the more or less hidden power relations that may characterize inclusive and collaborative practices. As Lynch puts it (p.227–28) “simple participation does not eliminate a power differential”. Acknowledging this differential and the colonial past of museums and their collections are necessary conditions for social inclusion, argues Lynch. So is countering the undertones of paternalism and infantilization inherent in many collaborative projects. The author also cautions against an excessive focus on migrant narratives of suffering and despair, as they might lead to ‘repackaging misery’ (p.234). A solution to these issues might be what Lynch calls ‘reflective practice’, that is “the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning” (p.235).

The volume closes with a chapter on “Women making herstory” by Parvin Ardalan. The project “Women Making Herstory” was a collaboration of Malmö Museums, Malmö University and womens associations and networks. It aimed to

170 write Swedish history from a women's migrants perspective. The project asked why immigrant women tend to be invisible in historical accounts. Aiming to provide an answer and to write not *about* women but *with* women, the project succeeded in channeling women's stories of migration and in making them heard through publications, seminars and an exhibition at the Malmö Museum, as well as comic strips and various artworks.

Taken together, the chapters of this thematic volume contribute to define an emerging field of research and practice located at the intersection between migration studies and museum studies. The chapters provide valuable insights into recent and innovative academic research, museum projects and museological practices related to migration issues. As such, the volume will be of great interest for academics and museum professionals working on issues related to migration. More broadly, museum studies scholars and students will find in the volume a range of relevant and innovative case studies illustrating the contemporary engagement of museums with social issues, as well as original theoretical and methodological approaches. Beyond academia and museums, the volume may also be of interest to politicians and public officers dealing with migration and cultural policy in the Nordic context and beyond.

*Marzia Varutti, Ph.D., Associate Professor in
Museology and Cultural Heritage
University of Oslo
marzia.varutti@ikos.uio.no*