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Staging Migration – Staging the Nation. Imagining Community at Immigration Museums

Summary

Migration and migration history have become major themes in the global museum landscape. In this article I argue that the establishment of museums of immigration can be seen as an answer to the crisis of collectively shared narratives and the heterogenization of cultural identities. By presenting immigration as the common experience shared by most members of society, museums construct a master narrative of migration and thus contribute to re-visions of a national imagined community. After pointing to a few instances where the construction of an overarching migration narrative causes problems and sketching the ways in which the museums deal with it, I conclude with advocating to overcome the 'methodological nationalism' in museum representations of migration history.

Keywords: Immigration museum; representation; multiculturalism; dissonant heritage; national narratives.

Migration und Migrationsgeschichte sind zu großen Themen der globalen Museumslandschaft geworden. In diesem Beitrag wird die Ansicht vertreten, dass die etablierten Immigrations-Museen als Reaktion auf die Krise kollektiver Narrative und die Heterogenisierung kultureller Identitäten verstanden werden können. Indem sie Immigration als gängige und gemeinsame Erfahrung darstellen, konstruieren sie ein Masternarrativ der Migration und tragen so zu einer Revision der Nation als vorgestellter Gemeinschaft bei. Nach Darstellung einiger Fälle, in denen sich ein solches Narrativ als problematisch erwiesen hat, und nach Skizzierung der Lösungsversuche der Museen, plädiere ich abschließend für eine Abwendung vom ‚methodologischen Nationalismus‘ in musealen Repräsentationen von Migrationsgeschichte.

Keywords: Immigrations-Museum; Repräsentation; Multikulturalismus; dissonante Überlieferung; nationale Narrative.

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Migration and migration history have become major subjects of interest in the global museum landscape. Against the backdrop of the massive movements of people, goods, information and ideas associated with globalization, academic debates about transnational social spaces¹ or traveling cultures² and not least the political and societal tension between a widespread revalorization of cultural diversity on the one hand and enduring xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments on the other, an increasing number of museums have discovered migration history – a theme that until the 1980s was almost absent from museum representations – as an interesting and timely subject for exhibits. The topic, moreover, is not limited to temporary or permanent exhibits of existing museums. Rather, one can observe a growing tendency towards establishing purpose-built museums around issues of migration, and especially immigration. This new type of museum, the immigration museum, as a repository of transient memories and as a stage and arena for the negotiation of belonging and (national) identities in multicultural societies, is at the center of the following discussion.

With a few exceptions, the emergence of immigration museums on the global museum scene dates back no more than two decades. A brief and non-exhaustive overview may illustrate the dynamics of its evolution. The first museum of its kind, the *American Museum of Immigration*, opened its doors in 1972 in the pedestal of New York's Statue of Liberty, after more than twenty years of controversial discussion and stop-go planning, only to be closed again in 1991 shortly after the opening of the neighboring *Ellis Island Immigration Museum*.³ The oldest still existing immigration museum worldwide, the *Migration Museum in Adelaide*, was established in 1986,⁴ followed in 1990 by the opening of the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum*, still the biggest and best-known immigration museum. Not far away, the *Lower East Side Tenement Museum* has been telling immigration history in the context of an old tenement building in Manhattan's famous immigrant neighborhood since 1992.⁵ In the late 1990s, a whole wave of new immigration museums were established: in 1998, the *Immigration Museum* in Melbourne and the *Memorial do Imigrante/Museu da Imigração* in São Paulo were opened to the public,⁶ the *Canadian Immigration Museum Pier 21* in Halifax followed one year later. Finally, the *Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum* near Cape Town was established in 2000⁷ and the *Argentinian Museo Nacional de la Inmigración* in Buenos Aires in 2001.⁸ A similar development in Europe took somewhat longer to gather momentum. For a few years now, debates about establishing immigration museums have been ongoing in several countries. The first and,

1 Pries 1999; Pries 2008.

2 Clifford 1997.

3 Blumberg 1985; Baur 2009, 96–101.

4 Szekeres 2002; Simpson 1996, 64–66.

5 Abram 2005; Baur 2006.

6 Vieira 2007.

7 Witz 2006, 123–129.

8 Ochoa de Eguileor 2005.

thus far, the only existing national museum of immigration in Europe is the *French Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration*, which opened in Paris in 2007.⁹

1 Immigration museums and “dissonant heritage”

The following examination of this new type of museum, along with some of its characteristics and implications, will focus on examples in the United States, Canada and Australia. I will argue that the establishment of distinct, purpose-built museums of immigration in these countries can be seen as a response to the perceived crisis of collectively shared narratives and the increasing heterogeneity of cultural identities. By presenting immigration as *the* common experience shared by most, if not all members of a society, such museums construct a master narrative¹⁰ of migration and thus contribute to re-revisions of a national imagined community.¹¹ In this process, the transnational phenomenon of migration transmutes from a challenge to nation-state thinking into a constitutive part of its narrative (re-)construction.

This line of argument takes its cues from what John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth discuss under the rubric of “heritage dissonance.”¹² The authors highlight the challenge of defining a national identity on the basis of shared history and heritage faced by post-colonial settler societies.¹³ Rather than concluding that these challenges have been overcome, they point to an extensive fragmentation into “heritage identities”, with various groups, themselves internally fragmented, in structural, sometimes latent, sometimes open conflict about interpretations of the past. In this constellation, the traditional founding societies, which tend to dominate national narratives and founding myths, are confronted with claims both from indigenous peoples, who press for the acknowledgement of their own perspective on colonialism and the crimes associated with it and for material compensation, and, at the same time, from later immigrants and their descendants, who want to see their heritage respected and included in the canon of national culture and history. In this situation, references to history tend, as often as not,

9 Green 2007; Stevens 2008; Stevens 2009; see also various articles in *Museum International* 59 (2007), 1–2.

10 Following Jarasch and Sabrow 2002, 16, “master narrative” is understood as a “coherent account of history from a distinct point of view generally oriented towards the nation state that is formative not only within the academic discipline but within public discourse as well” (Translation J. B. – Originally: “eine kohärente, mit einer eindeutigen Perspektive ausgestattete und in der Regel auf den National-

staat ausgerichtete Geschichtsdarstellung, deren Prägekraft nicht nur innerfachlich schulbildend wirkt, sondern öffentliche Dominanz erlangt”).

11 Anderson 1991.

12 Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996.

13 “Settler societies” are defined, following Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995, 3, as “societies in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogeneous society has developed in class, ethnic and racial terms”.

to produce not national unity and social cohesion but cultural tensions and centrifugal tendencies.

The recent development of immigration museums can be seen as a response to this diagnosis and an attempt to mitigate historico-political conflicts. I will try to show that the main trait of existing immigration museums is the presentation of migration history as an overarching and inclusive narrative. Not only are the heterogeneous experiences of migrants from diverse backgrounds incorporated into this narrative, but in a sweeping gesture they are also brought together with the histories of colonial settlers, who are also portrayed as migrants. On the basis of this underlying narrative, the new type of museum serves as an instrument and platform for the harmonization of “dissonant heritages” and thus of public memory. One should emphasize the ambivalent character of this narrative operation: on the one hand, the resulting master narrative of migration is decidedly more inclusive than were earlier versions of imagining and narrating the nation. On the other hand it (re-)produces specific forms of exclusion – not least with regard to indigenous perspectives and through the silencing of a critique of colonization – moreover, it tends to obscure social and political issues.

I will explicate this argument in the following by looking at three museums of immigration: the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* in New York City, the *Canadian Museum Pier 21* in Halifax and the *Immigration Museum* in Melbourne.¹⁴ In close readings of some of their displays, I will focus less on differences and singularities of the individual institutions, and more on common features that I identify, in accordance with my main line of argument, as structural principles of the immigration museum. Lastly, in order to prevent this particular perspective from becoming too hermetic, I will focus on irritations and contradictions to the representation of a master narrative of migration in these museums.

2 Three cases

The *Ellis Island Immigration Museum*, opened in 1990, is by far the biggest immigration museum worldwide. Located in the meticulously restored main building of the former U.S. immigration station on an island right next to the Statue of Liberty, its exhibits spread over 9000 m². Today, the museum receives almost 2 million visitors annually.¹⁵ The museum has a long history prior to its opening proper. In 1954, the Immigration

14 For detailed case studies of all three museums, the politics of their production and the poetics of their permanent exhibitions, see Baur 2009. Research for this article was carried out mainly in 2005/06. Some

parts of the museum exhibitions have since been changed.

15 <http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/ellis-island-history> (visited on 21/02/2017).

and Naturalization Service closed the immigration station that had operated on Ellis Island since 1892, and the buildings began to rapidly deteriorate. In 1965, President Johnson added Ellis Island to the Statue of Liberty National Monument, which is run by the U.S. National Park Service, but early plans notwithstanding almost another twenty years would pass before the museum project gathered steam. The successful initiative to turn the former immigration station into a museum developed in the context of the centenary of the Statue of Liberty in 1986. In terms of funding, as well as the public use of history, the project was in many respects symptomatic of the Reagan administration's agenda. On the one hand, reflecting a neoliberal approach to cultural policy, it was the first public museum project in the U.S. to be realized entirely without public funding. Costs for the restoration of the building and the creation of an interpretative program, ultimately totaling approximately \$150 million, were covered solely by private donations and corporate sponsors.¹⁶ On the other hand, at least in Reagan's reading, the new museum was intended to appeal to the pride of established ethnic groups, focusing on individual achievements and including a tendency to romanticize Ellis Island. At the same time, this specific reading of immigration history suggested:

That contemporary immigrants and African Americans should rely on themselves, and implied their depressed situation was a temporary phenomenon. In time, blacks, Asians, and Hispanics too would move to the suburbs. And if they did not, the record of prior immigrant success would prove their failure to be a matter of insufficient grit and determination.¹⁷

The rhetoric of its political initiators notwithstanding, the actual exhibits were planned and realized by curators and historians who were committed to telling a more critical story of immigration and tried to counter the use of immigration history at Ellis Island for patriotic purposes. The fact that many different actors with differing agendas influenced the creation of the museum led Luke Desforges and Joanne Maddern¹⁸ to describe Ellis Island as a "multivocal and fragmented heritage landscape." The permanent exhibits of the museum mostly tell the history of Ellis Island and immigration to the United States from late nineteenth to early twentieth century. One part of the exhibit, tellingly titled *The Peopling of America*, however, addresses a wider history of migrations to the United States from pre-colonization to the present day.¹⁹

Pier 21, Canada's Immigration Museum was opened to the public in 1999. Like the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum*, *Pier 21* is located in a building that once housed a former immigration station, though in its case not one on an island, but on the southern fringe of Halifax harbor, situated between railroad tracks and industrial facilities. 'Canada's Ellis

16 Holland 1993; Baur 2008.

17 Wallace 1996, 58.

18 Desforges and Maddern 2004, 453.

19 Chermayeff 1991; Welz 2000; Baur 2009, 79–198.

Island', as it is routinely called by the media and the museum itself, is hardly comparable with its famous precursor in terms of its size. It contains only a fraction of that institution's exhibition space, and visitor statistics do not rise much above 50 000 each year. The original initiative to open a museum of immigration at the site can be traced back to the former director of Nova Scotia's immigration office, whose idea was followed up by a local philanthropist. The museum was realized with financial support from the Canadian government and a public fundraising campaign and is run by the private *Pier 21 Society*. In 2009, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the intention to designate *Pier 21* as a national museum (*The National Museum of Immigration*).²⁰ The permanent exhibit *The Immigration Experience*, divided into multiple sections, follows the path of the immigrants during *Pier 21*'s time as an active immigration station from 1928-1971. The displays are dominated by three iconic design elements: a ship (symbolizing the voyage to Canada), a train (for the voyage through Canada) and finally the immigration station building itself, which is further emphasized within the exhibit by a model of the facility and the replication of an immigration station waiting room, which includes the desk of an immigration officer. The museum, which overall presents a nostalgic and romanticized version of immigration history almost completely bereft of thorny issues like exclusivist immigration policy or societal racism,²¹ is currently hoping to expand both physically and thematically, in order to include a more comprehensive history of migrations to Canada in its representations, extending beyond the current narrow perspective on the historical phase from 1928 to 1971.²²

The *Immigration Museum* in Melbourne opened in 1998 and houses its exhibits in the nineteenth-century building of the Old Customs House in downtown Melbourne. In this instance, the plan to establish a museum did not, as in the two other cases, develop around a historic building closely associated with immigration. Rather, the *Immigration Museum* in Melbourne emerged from a re-orientation of *Museum Victoria*, a state-owned multidisciplinary museum complex with roots dating back to two of the earliest museums in Australia. Under the influence of new social history and the policy of multiculturalism in the 1980s, the institution began to collect objects related to Australia's and Victoria's immigration history. In the mid-1990s, backed by then Premier of Victoria Jeff Kennett in the context of ambitions to distinguish Melbourne as Australia's capital of culture, after much debate the decision was taken to raise the exhibit's profile by showing these collections in a separate building. Since then, the *Immigration Museum* has operated as a branch of *Museum Victoria*. The permanent exhibit presents Australian

20 "The Government of Canada officially opened the *Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21*, Canada's sixth national museum, in February 2011, committing approximately \$25 million over five years to upgrade the museum" ([http://www.](http://www.newcanadianmedia.ca/item/20462-halifax-museum-expands-to-celebrate-the-stories-of-canadian-immigrants)

[newcanadianmedia.ca/item/20462-halifax-museum-expands-to-celebrate-the-stories-of-canadian-immigrants](http://www.newcanadianmedia.ca/item/20462-halifax-museum-expands-to-celebrate-the-stories-of-canadian-immigrants) (visited on 21/02/2017)).

21 Walcott 2001.

22 Vukov 2002; Baur 2009, 199-251.

and Victorian immigration history from its nineteenth century beginnings up to the present day, with individual sections reflecting moments of immigrants' journeys (including 'Leavings', 'Getting In' and 'Settlings'). The succession of the respective rooms, however, unlike at *Pier 21*, does not allow for a linear narrative, which, among other things results in a more open and (self-) critical picture. The museum places special emphasis on its cooperation with immigrant communities, not least through community exhibits which are shown in a separate space called *Access Gallery*.²³

3 Imagining community

Differences in their institutional genealogy, organization and funding, location, thematic focus and political agendas aside – aspects which cannot be dealt with in detail here – the three museums do share one essential characteristic: they all focus on the construction and staging of a common or shared experience of immigration. This overarching narrative, which ultimately aims at creating an imagined community of immigrants, becomes tangible within the exhibits not least in form of a particular 'figure of display' (as in 'figure of speech') which I call the 'container'. By this I mean a particular visual metaphor through which differences between individuals or groups are framed, bundled together and dialectically reconciled within a larger whole.²⁴

On Ellis Island and at *Pier 21*, the buildings as such function as 'containers' of this kind. The claim, routinely included in exhibit texts and brochures, that these are the authentic sites through which *the* immigrants passed, serves to ascribe a connective quality to the buildings. Beyond such rhetoric, the figure of a binding and at the same time limiting frame is visually and spatially realized in the Registry Room on Ellis Island, which is the main hall, where the medical and bureaucratic inspections of immigrants used to take place. It is the museum's heart and simultaneously its symbolic shell; the hall has been left empty, yet seems to atmospherically contain all of the individual, disparate histories of the immigrants who passed through it.

'Containers' can also be found on a smaller scale however. One display case in the exhibit *Treasures from Home* on Ellis Island, for instance, assembles a great number of diverse personal objects that immigrants from various times and places brought with them on their journey. Visitors learn little about the individual objects, apart from scant information on their country of origin plus a descriptive title, and sometimes the name

23 Barr 2002; Sebastian 2007; Baur 2009, 253–321.

24 The effect I mean is best described by the German term *aufheben*, namely in the three partly contradictory shadings of the word as pointed to by Hegel:

"to preserve", "to eliminate" and to "lift up". My use of the container metaphor takes its leads from Beck 1997 who critically examines the "container model" of modern nation state thinking.

of the owner and a date. Nothing is revealed about the cultural context in which these objects were originally used, let alone the uses to which they were put in the new country, if or how they kept, lost or changed their meaning in a new environment. On top of that, the arrangement of objects within the case is somewhat bewildering: a violin next to a pillow beater, Russia next to West Guyana, 1880 next to 1924 – a potpourri of oddities, isolated and exotic specimens from other worlds and times. It is not until one steps back from the case and contemplates it as a whole that the display begins to make sense and the meaning becomes clearer. It seems as if the individual objects are actually of little interest. What really matters is the case as a ‘container’ of diversity, within which all of the objects find their place and, moreover, are collectively transformed into a larger whole.

In Melbourne, the museum building does not lend itself convincingly to the metaphor or a ‘container’ of diverse immigration experiences, as it is not an authentic site of immigration. Consequently, the museum provides a substitute in the middle of the permanent exhibit and its narrative: the installation of a stylized ship with reconstructed cabins from three different periods through which visitors can walk. The first lines of the introductory label read: “All immigrants, no matter when they arrived in Victoria, are linked by the common experience of a journey.” Meaning: differences aside, as immigrants ‘we are all in one boat.’ *Museum Pier 21* presents a comparable display: a mock-up of a train car, which gives the impression that it is actually moving as visitors enter it, thanks to simulations of sound and movement, and contains a number of cabins in which videotapes of immigrants talking about their individual experiences are shown. While these stories are presented in separate cabins, they and their narrators are symbolically united in the train car as ‘container,’ which furthermore seems to be steadily carrying all of them in the same direction.

A different form of the staging of a collective experience of migration and an imagined community of immigrants can be identified in the ‘Walls of Honor’ that can be found in all three museums. Differences in size and style notwithstanding, the ‘American Immigrant Wall of Honor’ on Ellis Island, the ‘Sobey Wall of Honour’ at *Pier 21* and the ‘Tribute Garden’ of the *Immigration Museum* in Melbourne, all follow the same pattern. They assemble the names of thousands of immigrants from different times and places on stainless steel plates and out of this variety form a harmonious ensemble.²⁵ In this respect, they share a family resemblance with other memorials, such as Maya Lin’s

25 On Ellis Island and at *Pier 21* the ‘Walls of Honor’ function at the same time as part of the fundraising campaigns for the museums. Everyone who donates 150 US or 250 Canadian dollars, respectively, is entitled to have their names engraved on the walls, be they immigrants, the descendants of immigrants or neither. The installation is thus a weird amalga-

mation of a commodified/democratized memorial and oversized donors plaque. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 181 scathing criticism of the underlying symbolic operation is only too appropriate: “The ease with which one can sign on to the American Immigrant Wall of Honor, however, obscures the very real obstacles to obtaining a visa and green card.”

famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and reflect an overarching trend in modern memorial design. The abstract form that relies solely on the names precludes any of the debates about inclusion or exclusion that routinely ensue when more figurative forms are involved.²⁶ What is more, the memorials fulfill a dual function by presenting the names of individuals: on the one hand, they allude to the individual dimension and experience of migration and to the diversity of cultural backgrounds. The strict order of the alphabetical list, on the other hand, inserts the individual names into a unifying pattern in which these individualities are collectively transformed into a larger whole. Through the memorials and their lists of names, historical immigrants are incorporated into the master narrative and an imagined community of the immigrant nation. Beyond their function as visual metaphors, the memorials display a decidedly performative quality, which to no small degree secures the ongoing actualization of their symbolic meaning. They have become sites of inconspicuous, quiet rituals, repeated on a daily basis, a million times: visitors, often the descendants of immigrants, search the lists of names, and sometimes point to particular entries or even trace them with their fingers. By touching the names, they are not only paying tribute to individual immigrants, usually their own ancestors, they are also getting ‘in touch’ with the nation. The gestures transcend the individual or family dimension, becoming rituals of national belonging.

At the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* and *Pier 21*, the ‘common experience’ of immigration expressed and constructed in these forms of display is literally superimposed with the symbolism of the nation. The permanent exhibit at *Pier 21*, for instance, concludes with a short movie that presents pictures of a large number of apparently culturally diverse Canadians. Their portraits eventually merge into a colorful mosaic which, to the strains of ‘O Canada,’ slowly metamorphoses into the Canadian flag.²⁷ An installation at the center of the final exhibit on Ellis Island, called the ‘Flag of Faces,’ follows a very similar idea: it shows hundreds of portraits representing an ostensibly ‘colorful’ mix, despite the fact that images are black-and-white. When visitors walk by, however, the multiplicity of individual faces dissolves into the Stars and Stripes of the American flag. ‘Unity in diversity,’ ‘E pluribus unum’ – these representations are perfect metaphors of a neatly ordered and harmonious multicultural nation.

26 See for example the controversy about the statues of soldiers and nurses that were added to the original wall of names at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Sturken 1997, 66–70).

27 See Lechte and Bottomley 1993, 36 for criticism of such standard versions of visualizing multiculturalism (referring to the Australian context): “In many of the official representations of the multi-

cultural, a collection of faces – often of children – beams out at the viewer. These faces have all the features of the stereotype that common sense will use to refer each one to a particular cultural/racial grouping.” An image of cultural diversity then originates quasi cumulatively from a multitude of individual faces/identities envisioned as pure and visibly identifiable.

Through these kinds of displays, all three museums work at constructing and establishing a national master narrative of migration. Immigration is presented as the one shared and uniting experience. Such a narrative, to be sure, is explicitly directed against older forms of imagining the nation, against visions of cultural homogeneity or (Anglo-) conformity. The diversity of individuals and groups is openly acknowledged and underlined. The focus, however, is almost completely on cultural diversity, with other forms of societal differences, be they along lines of class, race²⁸ or political agenda, or the result of social or gender inequality, disappearing from view, giving rise to a noticeable culturalization of social issues.²⁹ ‘Heritage dissonances’ and the potentially centrifugal tendencies within multicultural societies – or, rather, the centrifugal tendencies and conflicts in late modern societies, which tend to appear in cultural disguise under conditions of multiculturalism – are at once both framed and contained. Thus the potential for de-centering and de-stabilizing the concept of nation inherent in the transnational phenomenon of migration is turned into its opposite and made useful for the regeneration and revitalization of nation-state thinking.

4 Complications

It would be misleading, however, to assume that a national master narrative of migration could be staged without additional qualifications or opposition. I will, therefore, point to a few instances where the construction of an overarching and all-encompassing migration narrative causes problems and briefly depict the ways in which the museums deal with these.

The first issue is a potential tension between the historic site at which and around which the history of immigration is told and the intended narrative itself. *Pier 21* may serve as a good example: the building of the former immigration station in Halifax harbor, which serves both to house the museum and as its narrative starting and focal point, is closely associated with a particular phase of immigration to Canada, namely the time between 1928 and 1971, when the immigration station was in active use. Focusing on this particular phase means that the museum can tell only a partial story and represent only one specific chapter of Canada’s migration history. One of the premises of national master narratives, however, is exactly that these narratives are able to transcend such limitations and aspire to some kind of generality in order to incorporate a maximum

28 For a sharp distinction between ethnicity/cultural diversity and race see Forest 2002. Stratton and Ang 1998 argue that race – which the displays tend to displace by ethnicity – constitutes the inherent “sign

of fracture” that forecloses the construction of harmonious national identities in settler societies by reference to colonial violence and trauma.

29 Kaschuba 1995.

of historic periods, individual experiences and social groups. The museum responds to this peculiar situation with a rhetorical sleight of hand. The gulf between the partial character of the place and the claim that the museum narrative incorporates everyone is bridged by the rhetorical figure of synecdoche. Museum brochures about the expansion of the museum declare:

When you step through the doors of Pier 21 you do not simply walk in the footsteps of the one million people who passed through this landmark between 1928 and 1971 – you also experience the emotions and feelings of every immigrant to this country, whether their journey brought them here 300 years ago or as recently as last week.³⁰

Thus *Pier 21* is represented as standing *pars pro toto* for immigration to Canada as a whole. It is depicted as the nucleus of an immigration experience that is no longer confined to a particular phase or specific historical circumstances, but taken as universally valid within the national frame. The emotions and ‘first steps’ that are put on display in order to be re-enacted by the visitors no longer involve only the small group of people who actually passed through the building, but instead evoke a transhistorical universal immigrant. In this way, immigration to Canada that occurred or occurs at other times or places is written into the narrative of *Pier 21*, and concentrated, as it were, at this one place. The implications of this rhetorical operation are far-reaching. Highly disparate historical movements of people are brought together to form a harmonious whole. What is more, a positive light is also shed in this context on the colonization of North America, which is depicted as but one of many forms of welcome immigration.

A similar phenomenon can be observed at the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum*. Writing about the narrative presented by the museum, which she compares to those of other sites associated with immigration history, such as the famous Plymouth Rock, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly contends:

Sites long associated with a discrete historical experience and an exclusive set of participants, whether Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock or immigrants coming through Ellis Islands, compete for the status of definitive master narrative. How shall the founding of the nation be told? Which site can be more inclusive, which is to say, more ‘democratic’? [...] Ellis Island, in a slick taxonomic move, has absorbed Plimoth. The rock is just another port of entry for just another group of immigrants.³¹

30 Pier 21 Media Kit, 2005, unpublished museum document of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 (<https://www.pier21.ca/>).

31 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 200.

By virtue of its sheer size, its status of a de-facto national museum of immigration, and the expansion of the exhibit narrative far beyond the history of Ellis Island proper, the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* encompasses and subsumes not only the vast variety of different migration histories, but also the different places connected with them. In doing so, it produces not just a historical, but a structural narrative of immigrants coming through ‘one door’ – a narrative that, in turn, fuels the desire for a clear-cut, easily controllable border, which in present-day xenophobic discourse is said to be constantly under threat.³²

It is not particularly surprising that a symbolic and historico-political operation of this kind does not always meet with unanimous consent. As an illustration of the conflicts that can arise – and thus a second complication associated with the construction and staging of a national master narrative of migration – I shall focus here on voices from the African American community in the context of the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* project. On the occasion of the centenary of the Statue of Liberty in July 1986 – when planning for the nearby *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* had reached its most intense stage – various representatives of that community expressed reservations concerning an all-inclusive narrative of immigration. Historian John Hope Franklin, for instance, programmatically distanced himself from an ‘imagined community’ of immigrants, asserting: “It’s a celebration for immigrants and that has nothing to do with me. I’m interested in it as an event, but I don’t feel involved in it.”³³ Such explicit indifference towards a history unrelated to one’s own, however, in many cases tipped into outspoken criticism. Along these lines, Atlanta’s then mayor Andrew Young voiced the widespread concern that an emphasis on the immigration narrative would displace the history of the slave trade and the experience of slavery, cornerstones of African American identity, and thus tend to cause public awareness of them to fade: “No one in the black community is really excited about the Statue of Liberty. We came here on slave ships, not via Ellis Island.”³⁴ A form of at least passive resistance against the subsumption and silencing of the very different migration heritage of African Americans, i.e. the slave trade, under a national master narrative of immigration at a site coded dominantly white and European can be detected in the very unenthusiastic response from African Americans to the repeated calls to lend or donate objects to the museum. To offset the meagerness of the donations and tell a broadly inclusive story despite the lack of response, the museum curators had no choice but to scatter the few objects relating to non-Europeans they did receive throughout the exhibits in order to achieve a maximum of visible diversity. This practice can be identified, for instance, in an exhibit called *Family Album* in which

32 See Baur 2007 for a more extensive discussion of images and imaginations of a ‘good’ and ‘clear-cut’ border as produced at the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* and *Pier 21*.

33 Smothers 1986, on 30 June 1986, *The New York Times*: A1.

34 Vecoli 1994, 68.

numerous photographs of immigrants are displayed. When one visitor wrote to the museum asking why the pictures of a Caribbean father and his daughter were presented not next to each other, but on opposite sides of the hall, the project manager scribbled an illuminating internal note: “I don’t know the specific photograph, but would not find it hard to believe that Meta-Form [the external curators, J.B.] may have stretched things a bit for the purpose of being inclusive rather than exclusive.”³⁵

Finally, a third complication of a national master narrative of migration in settler societies stems from the difficult relationship between such narratives and the histories and perspectives of the indigenous part of the population, or – as Ann Curthoys³⁶ has described it in the Australian context – the “uneasy conversation” between “the multicultural and the indigenous.” The problem is evident: indigenous peoples, whether Aborigines or Native Americans, are by definition non-immigrants, and they cannot be reinterpreted as such – particularly in view of their legitimate political and material claims, for example for the restitution of land – although there have been attempts to do exactly that through references to prehistoric migrations.³⁷ Here, the integrative potential of the migration narrative, no matter how inclusive it may attempt to be, clearly reaches its limit. While a majority of the American, Canadian and Australian society can be narratively absorbed under the sign of the ‘universal immigrant,’ the role of the indigenous groups and individuals are systematically written out of the national community in such narratives. Indigenous peoples always remain the Other in a master narrative of migration, the constitutive outside of the immigrant nation. What is more, in contrast to indigenous perspectives, a largely affirmative master narrative of migration ultimately places even the colonization of North America and Australia, as a form of early immigration, in a positive light.

There are very different ways in which the three museums respond to this kind of challenge: *Museum Pier 21* completely excludes any reference whatsoever to indigenous perspectives and experiences, which though it may be consistent with the museum’s narrow focus on the twentieth century, is certainly not in line with the much more comprehensive claim to transhistorical relevance, which I discussed earlier. For its part, the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* acknowledges the fact that for Native Americans “contact with Europeans brought disease, warfare, removal to reservations, and destruction of the traditional ways of life.” However, these crimes are framed and overwritten by a generally positive narrative of immigration in the larger context of the exhibit. As part

35 Gary Roth to Diana Pardue, 16/08/1991, Ellis Island Archives, Cadwallader/Roth court Hearings, Box 3.

36 Curthoys 2000.

37 Attempts to redefine indigenous peoples as Ur-migrants and thus eligible for incorporation into a long history of immigration have routinely met

with rejection and protest by indigenous groups. For an example from the Australian context, namely Australia’s Bicentenary in 1988 when such conflicts over interpretation erupted, see Cochrane and Goodman 1992.

of the ‘pageant of immigration’, celebrated by the introductory text and the museum at large, it is the colonizers, and not the traumata of the colonized, that form the basis of the tradition. The *Immigration Museum* in Melbourne is the only one of the three museums to include references to the history and perspectives of indigenous people in various parts of its permanent exhibit, thus establishing the image of complex histories of contact and conflict. By occasionally presenting two different or opposing points of view, the museum at least hints at the fact that the celebrated master narrative of migration is but one specifically positioned version of national history.

5 Conclusion: narrating migration – narrating the nation?

Immigration museums are laboratories for the narrative (self) portrayal of multicultural societies and productive fields for the study of (national) identity work under conditions of cultural diversity. The trend towards the establishment of such museums is an important and overdue thematic expansion of the museum landscape. The emergence of this new type of museum signals the opening of museums for a wider spectrum of histories, people and groups (‘from below’). Immigration museums put the experiences and memories of migrants center stage – aspects that have long been marginalized even in the classic immigrant countries. As such they prominently acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity and their widespread formation may be welcomed as an impulse to further democratize museum representations.

In the analysis of three existing immigration museums in the United States, Canada and Australia, however, I have tried to point out a tendency that I see as problematic or at least ambivalent. On the basis of the three case studies, one can reach the conclusion that immigration museums tend to confine the history and movement of migration within a national frame. What is more, by constructing and staging a national master narrative of migration within their displays in their effort to manage and contain ‘heritage dissonances’, the transnational energies and memories of migration are made useful for the re-centering and stabilization of the concept of nation. Such re-visions of the ‘imagined community’ may be more inclusive and multicultural than earlier versions oriented towards cultural homogeneity,³⁸ but they nevertheless produce, as I have argued, specific exclusions. Moreover, as in any kind of consensus nationalism, they also tend to promote the hegemonic cover-up of social inequalities and conflicts. To abandon – in view of the transnational phenomenon of migration – the exhibits’ “methodological nationalism”³⁹ and to liberate the museums’ representation of migration history from its confining frame would be an important and worthwhile step forward.

38 Stratton and Ang 1998.

39 Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002.

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