IV

BOOKS

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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Care-ful Participation in Museums

A review of *The Museum as a Space of Social Care* by Nuala Morse.

The activist, radical, or socially just museum:[1] the discipline of museum studies has a tradition of aiming to push (the idea of) a conservative institution into a progressive, just, and relevant mold that stands in close connection to society. As the world grapples with multiple crises, the museum's relevance depends on multiple perspectives and internal change. Climate crises and their global and local impacts have brought forward ideas of how museums might positively contribute to change in society, all the while working to decrease their own environmental footprint.[2] Healthcare crises, brought about by neoliberal and austerity politics, have fostered new connections among cultural and health institutions.[3] Racial justice crises have provided new urgency for museums to critically examine their contribution to historical and current injustices.[4] In the meantime, museum practitioners in Northern America have successfully begun to organize themselves into unions, fighting injustices as they find themselves in exploitative positions.[5] As the COVID-19 pandemic further changed the world drastically over the last one and half years, discussions on the museum institution's relevance will take new directions.

Published in the middle of these crises, *The Museum as a Space of Social Care* at once provides us with theory and vocabulary that will prove helpful during the coming years. In the book, Nuala Morse provides close insight behind the scenes at the Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM), following the tradition of Sharon Macdonald's museum ethnography (2002). More specifically, Morse provides an account of the institutional and emotional lives of the outreach team of the UK-based institution. The monograph mostly uses data generated as part of her PhD project, placing it within a theoretical framework she developed over the following years (Morse 2020; Morse and Munro 2018). Staying close to this empirical data, she shows us museum professionals connecting with people outside the institution through community engagement efforts, framed as a practice of social care.

Morse refrains from sweeping statements about the social role and responsibility of a museum to society, and provides instead a close reading of relational practices that together can be interpreted as representing how museums can be social. Upon reading her monograph, we found that Morse is largely successful in building an argument that community engagement is about care, and we are inspired and convinced by her way of turning her empirical study into a theoretical argument for a logic of care in museum spaces. Her argument is largely based on practice and the voices of practitioners. As a result, the book is not about the museum institution and its place in

and relevance to society, but rather about the inner workings of a specific museum in building relations with others and becoming a space of social care.

Grounding her argument in professionals' practices, Morse convincingly discusses not only what should happen in museums, but also what is already taking place right now. She takes on the critique Helen Graham (2012) voiced about research on museum participatory practices being stuck in a critique-contest impasse and shows what is possible if we focus in on practice. Doing so, she presents an honest account of museum staff and their work without passing judgment, using their words to build a case for critically examining the institution and discussing community engagement in a way that is both very specific and can be applied on a wider scale.

We write this review as four PhD students collaborating in a research project about participatory memory practices.[6] With an interest in how those practices take place in museums, our own research informs much of our argumentation. Throughout the review, we at times directly reflect on our own empirical studies, as well as share some of our discussion with other PhD students and with Morse about her research.[7]

The Museum as a Space of Social Care spans seven chapters divided into four parts. Morse first sets up the academic context in which she conducts her study and frames her argument; then she discusses the experiences of her informants—community engagement workers—in parts two and three, using an institutional and emotional lens respectively; and finally, she brings together the argument built throughout the book: community engagement is about the practice of care. Her argument presents the possibility of a new type of logic from which to approach museum work: a logic of care. Morse works with a perspective on care she takes from anthropology, mostly building on Annemarie Mol's work (2002, 2008), and refers to feminist and geographic research by drawing on ideas such as landscapes and geographies of care (Conradson 2003; Milligan and Wiles 2010), affective labor (Hardt 1999), and ethics of care (Tronto 1993; Held 2006). The review takes the following structure: first, we discuss the way Morse moves beyond writing about good or bad participation, by successfully setting up the argument and staying close to her informants' experiences and language. Then, we examine the ways in which Morse frames her argument in relation to theories of space and care. Finally, we investigate the proposed connection between practices, ethics, and logic of care in order to look at her ability to move beyond the case study example.

Beyond Good and Bad Participation

Morse offers a new perspective on the debate about participatory museum practice by outlining two different approaches: the logic of contribution and the logic of care. Part I, "The Participatory Turn in Museums," is dedicated to developing this division in reference to the existing body of literature. She provides a sound literature review, which we recommend for researchers and practitioners to get an overview of the current discourse. Following the "problem of engagement," Morse delineates a conflict between the democratizing promise and persistent inequalities in participatory practices. She rightly points out that arguing a good/bad dichotomy leads to a dilemma in which more participation would be needed to solve the problem of participation. Instead of aiming for this ideal, Morse invites us to change the perspective and focus on the underlying logics of participation. Reviewing ideas that have shaped theories of engagement in museums, such as James Clifford's "contact zone" (1997) or Sherry Arnstein's "ladder of participation" (1969), she identifies center/periphery and choice/control dynamics that are most frequently brought up in describing how community engagement can change the museum institution. Morse summarizes this argumentation as a logic of contribution, in which community engagement and other participatory practices are envisioned to benefit the museum.

Morse presents this logic in order to develop a counter proposal throughout the book, by re-framing participation within a logic of care that is contextual, specific, and relational. Proposing some community engagement as practicing care while recognizing the overlap with contributory projects in museum spaces, Morse offers a nuanced and fruitful way of looking at participation.

At times, we long for an explicit perspective of the author to tell us what her opinion is. As Morse aims to make her point more tangible by giving examples of "care-ful" community engagement, she tends to be skewed towards telling a positive story. However, the moment that one difficult example is brought up—the challenge of creating a safe and welcoming space in a workshop located in a drug and alcohol misuse support center where participation was part of a court order—the relational and situational complexity of community engagement becomes strikingly clear. Intrinsic motivation is often assumed in participatory projects, but when this starting point changes due to obligatory presence or, in the case of one of our research projects, because for the paid participants this is a job, the relationships change.[8] Since Morse approaches care as relational, the practices connected to such different dynamics will diverge too. More counter examples might have strengthened the argument or at least tested how the logic of care holds up in this light.

In Part II, "The Institutional Life of Community Engagement Workers," and Part III, "The Emotional Life of Community Engagement Workers," Morse introduces her empirical findings to discuss community engagement and how this work is understood and experienced by museum practitioners themselves. She brings in Sara Ahmed's (2012) work on the language of diversity to emphasize that, despite the museum's dedication to community engagement work reflected in the mission statement, outreach staff is insufficiently supported to put this commitment into action. Building on Ahmed's ideas, Morse draws on direct citations to construct her argument, by which she puts the museum staff and the language they used to describe their views at the forefront. In doing so, she presents diverging perspectives from community engagement workers and curators without criticizing either position. Her nuanced reflections reveal a great sense of care for the people involved and the words used to assess the materials, while at the same time they make it harder for the reader to keep track of the main thesis. The argument should be strengthened by describing the roles of the staff rather than using their names or pseudonyms before quoting them; with the high number of quotes—sometimes referring to several staff members or to a staff member without mentioning their role in the institution—it is often hard to follow. In working towards a conclusion and further questions to explore, Morse does clarify which perspectives most prominently affect community engagement work within the institution.

The book provides a very detailed account of community engagement work from a professional perspective; this focus allows Morse to thoroughly consider the notion of care within museum practice and how this is or might be understood by people working at the TWAM (and other museums). With a commitment to applying a logic of care to these practices, however, it is interesting that Morse has chosen to solely bring in professional accounts and has not extended her scope to include views from (former) participants. In one of our own research projects,[9] which focuses on how museums have worked with forced migrants over the past few years, we find that these perspectives are necessary for a balanced review of the work. It helps to understand what potential participants need, expect, and find relevant or exciting, as well as what has bothered them about the processes. The perspective of participants on these and similar processes can hence be a valuable addition to Morse's work on museum practices that start from an ethics of care.

Space and care

The concept of space is imperative in supporting Morse's ideas regarding participation as underpinned by an ethics of care. We were convinced by her use of space as distance for building her argument on outlining the museum's binary logic of center versus periphery. These concepts and the perceived distance between them, even their boundaries, supported her definition of a contributory museum, and in doing so, revealed how the work of museum staff operating on the periphery can be de-legitimized by the center (the museum institution). Further, Morse employs a lens of distance and proximity to argue that care can happen in both close and distant contexts through, for example, both community engagement and curation. Through this lens, Morse also usefully expands our conception of participation by considering the importance of the quality of relationships across participants and staff.

In particular, Morse suggests that closeness can be cultivated by staff's dedication to being present in communities, which is intricately intertwined with their ability to listen. This moves the conception of participation away from the tug and pull of power in participation to a deep attunement to participants' interests and needs. Finally, the concept of space is also raised in her analysis of TWAM's welcoming, inclusive, and safe spaces, and what those encompass. Morse describes how staff's practices of care shape or create these spaces through an ongoing process, including practices of using humor and anecdotes, safeguarding vulnerable participants, and being attentive to participants. One spatial element of Morse's argument that she does not make explicit is that the difficult and complex elements of participation she analyzes are all voiced inwards, into the institution. As a result, we get a rich understanding of the museum as an organization but miss a critical discussion of the museum as a space in relation to other institutions, and the perceived conflicts or difficult elements of participation outside of the museum organization, particularly from participants' perspectives.

However, Morse does indicate the potential for future research on care as expanding beyond the museum to different spaces and different people involved in care practices. Along these lines, Morse discusses an ethics of care that goes beyond TWAM, affecting the larger museum sector and alternative spaces by engaging with existing literature, rather than finding examples from her empirical work. Her discussion would have been made stronger by explicitly connecting the practices observed at TWAM to ethical guidelines that apply internationally and nationally to museum spaces and to ongoing discussions around ethics in museums. In particular, for one of our research projects,[10] we are excited to consider how Morse's ideas regarding the co-production of care can be useful for understanding and even envisioning future museum social media practices. When it comes to social media, the intersection, or co-location, of the museum and the capitalistic platforms of social media in cultivating participation can create a complicated terrain within which institutions may be able to pursue and carve out caring relationships.

The Beginning of a Care-ful Museology?

One of the strongest aspects of the book is that it introduces a new logic that can actively address and shape museum practices. By outlining the problematic aspects of the logic of contribution, it becomes clearer what thinking through a logic of care could mean for museum practices and research going forward. At the end of the book, we are invited to think about the broader implications of applying Morse's concept to museology and beyond. We find the book has great potential to spark thoughts in many related fields, such as cultural anthropology, heritage studies, memory studies, as well as in museum work and digital museum practice. One of our research projects looks at creative reuse of digital museum collections,[11] for which Morse's notion of a

"network of care" is particularly relevant; it resonates with the concept of the commons[12] and Open GLAM.[13] Understanding the dictum "sharing is caring,"[14] not only through the lens of licensing collections but also considering care and ethics around reuse, could increase the social significance of digital cultural heritage in the future.

A logic of care may also be useful for critically considering how museums or other institutions can step into activism by "caring-with" to challenge larger social issues. In this regard, Morse points to the importance of paying close attention to participants within their social context, through attentiveness. Her book fits nicely within recent calls for museums to challenge social issues by devoting energy and effort to listening to and caring for participants and their needs (Chynoweth et al. 2021; Janes and Sandell 2019; Graham 2020). Moreover, Morse draws attention to the work done within and from institutions and how this work can be understood differently across one institution. The perspectives she brings in from her empirical research shed light on the practical limitations and possibilities within cultural institutions. In doing so, she reconsiders a question that has been central to museums and researchers for several years now: how can we do participation right? Within institutions that remain conservative despite their aims to be more relevant amidst the many crises, this question and Morse's answers have become most significant.

The book offers a theoretical concept that is deeply rooted in and developed from practice. As such, it can serve as a stepping-stone for future research, and as a helpful guide to changing practices on the ground. The book proves a valuable resource for PhD students who wish to find an overview on participatory work and community engagement, or those who seek to apply a different lens to museum practice. A book discussion with Nuala Morse and other PhD students on this work revealed that it resonates with many different fields and can function as a guide to addressing the dilemmas we come across. Where the book reaches its limits, Morse opens up possibilities for further research and sparks ideas for what should be considered in the study of museum practices. At the same time, the book is particularly significant for the position, role, and importance of community engagement workers; we speak from our own experiences when we say that it manages to make practitioners feel heard.

With this book, Morse highlights the importance of community engagement work as part of museums' practices. She offers a new framework through which we can rethink the work that is done in museums and consider future steps museums can take to become more progressive and more relevant institutions. Whilst Morse hints at how this framework can be applied to other areas of museum work and indeed other spaces, further work and research must pursue its use in challenging urgent crises, including societal, racial, environmental, and political issues. Doing so could mark the next steps for museums in becoming progressive and more relevant as institutions.

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▪ NOTES

1. Recent examples of such proposals can be found in: Chynoweth et al. 2020; Janes and Sandell 2019; Sternfeld 2018.
2. See, for example, Fiona Cameron's recent (2019) and upcoming work (2021).
3. For example, Nuala Morse has previously written in collaboration with Helen Chatterjee and others about developing a "Museum Engagement Observation Tool" for people with dementia (2018), and in collaboration with Linda Thomson, Zoe Brown, and Helen Chatterjee about the effects of museum engagement in mental health and addiction recovery programs (2015).
4. We think, for example, of Margareta van Oswold's work on the "troubling colonial legacies" of museums in the case of provenance research (2020).
5. Minju Bae tells the story of educators organizing at New York's Tenement Museum (2020), one of several museums that recently formed labor unions.
6. The POEM research project develops concepts, strategies, and media infrastructures for envisioning socially inclusive potential futures of European Societies through culture. Our research specifically focuses on participatory practices of memory institutions. The project is funded under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 764859. More information can be found at https://www.poem-horizon.eu.
7. On 28 May 2021, we organized an online discussion about Morse's book. We thank the author and attendees for the inspiring reflections on the implications of the book and the relation to our own research projects.
8. Project by Inge Zwart: https://poem-horizon.eu/people/inge-zwart.
9. Project by Susanne Boersma: https://poem-horizon.eu/people/susanne-boersma.
10. Project by Cassandra Kist: https://poem-horizon.eu/people/cassandra-kist.
11. Project by Franziska Mucha: https://poem-horizon.eu/people/franziska-mucha.
12. For a broader discussion, see, for example, Massimo de Angelis and Stavros Stavrides' interview on the commons (2010).
13. Open GLAM is an acronym for open galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, and represents a global network of practitioners who push for open licensing of digital cultural heritage.
14. See, for example, the anthology edited by Merete Sanderhoff (2014).

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