

Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities

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Many social theorists have suggested that we are currently living in a period in which the identities of the past are becoming increasingly irrelevant and in which new identities, and new identity formations, are being created. The major identity colossus forged in the nineteenth century, and subsequently spread over much of the globe – nation-state identity – has been the subject of particular debate; and theorists have attempted to identify alternative, post-national (in the sense of post-nation-statist) identity constructions. The proliferation of museums in the nineteenth century was undoubtedly closely bound up with the formation and solidification of nation-states in, and subsequently beyond, Western Europe. A crucial question for museums today concerns their role in a world in which nation-statist identities are being challenged. Are they too inextricably entangled in 'old' forms of identity to be able to express 'new' ones?

How and why museums are able to act as manifestations of identity or sites for the contestation of identities requires a 'denaturalizing' of the concept of 'identity'. That is, we need to be able to see our notions of particular identities, including 'national identity', not as universal but as historically and culturally specific. What is entailed in even 'thinking' and 'doing' 'the nation' or 'the public'? And what role have museums played in such 'thinking' and 'doing'? What is it about museums that makes them suitable – and sometimes not so suitable – for certain identity 'work'?

The article proceeds as follows. I begin with a brief outline of the identity work of the nineteenth-century museum and with a focus on the articulation of 'the nation-state' and 'the public'. My concern here is with the relationship between the museum as a cultural form with particular technologies of representation, and with the kinds of identities that this form helped not only to express but also to constitute. The second part of the article turns to arguments by social theorists that many former identities are in the process of radical transformation, of fragmentation and disembedding and considers their implications for museums. If the nation-state and the kind of 'public' with which it was associated are on the brink of obsolescence, then what future is there for museums? Are museums perhaps too intimately linked up with material- and place-rooted, homogeneous and bounded, conceptions of identity to be able to address some of the emerging identity dilemmas of the 'second modern age' or 'late modernity'?¹ Of course, this account of identity transformation may be wrong or exaggerated, and there are social theorists who would argue thus.² Rather than address this problem directly, however, what I suggest here is that museums – because of their longstanding and central roles in the articulation of identity – are significant sites in which to examine such claims. In the third part of the article I discuss one example of an attempt to articulate a post-national, trans-cultural identity complex. The final

part of the article draws upon this to reconsider the potential of museums for articulating new, postnational and transcultural identities in late modernity or the second modern age.

Nation, Museum, Public

The emergence of the nation-state, the public, and the public museum in the late eighteenth century, were intimately bound together. The French Revolution of 1789, regarded as a key moment in the dawn of the nation-state era in Western Europe, was a revolution of 'the people' which saw the replacement of an aristocratic order with a new more horizontal and democratic conception of a collectivity of equals. As such, the opening up of the formerly princely collections was an eloquent symbolic assertion of the new ideals of *'égalité, fraternité et liberté'*. That which was private and aristocratic was made public and 'of the people'; the special, exclusive sphere of the elite was breached and opened up to the scrutiny of those who had previously been denied access to such treasures. This was a moment for 'culturing' the public: for bringing 'culture', in the sense of 'high culture', to the masses and, more importantly, for attempting to constitute a public. That is, it was also a symbolic attempt to generate a 'public' – a self-identifying collectivity in which members would have equal rights, a sense of loyalty to one another, and freedom from previous tyrannies and exclusions.

Of course, this is not to say that the attempt fully worked. And, of course, attempts to culture the public were not made in quite the same ways or on the same time-scales in all those countries that became nation-states. However, as Benedict Anderson (1983) has argued for the idea of the nation-state, and as Carol Duncan has argued more specifically for the case of the Louvre (the original princely collection that was opened up in 1789) (1995: 32), these became 'models' which were widely exported around Europe and later much of the rest of the globe. There they were recast within more local histories, politics and aesthetics. This global localization (or 'glocalization')³ produced heterogeneity of the museum form and public culture across space.⁴ Even within any museum there were also competing agendas and contradictions. For

example, the newly publicly revealed works of art, such as those at the Louvre, could themselves be the means of differential 'culturing' – social distinction – which would threaten the fragile conception of *égalité*. And the notion of *fraternité* – brotherhood – indicated a gendered exclusion which feminist theorists have suggested was deeply ingrained in, and perhaps even partially constitutive of, the idea of 'the public' itself (Yuval-Davis 1997). National identities and national publics were also defined through difference from other nations and ethnic groups – the new world picture was one of discrete, spatially-mapped, bounded difference, something which could prove difficult for those who, according to this picture, were 'out of place' (such as migrants) or who found their values and cultural attributes depicted as less advanced or morally worthy than those of the 'home team'.

Identity Work

So, what was it about museums that made them appropriate agencies for culturing 'the public' and for 'thinking' nation-states? As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, thinking of oneself as a member of a national public – envisaged like a large 'team', 'family' or 'community' but made up of thousands or millions of people most of whom one would never meet – entailed a particular feat of the imagination (1983). It involved projecting sentiments of belonging and brotherhood way beyond those of direct experience, but only up to a specified 'edge' – the boundary of the national community. As individual identification with the nation-state and the numerous unknown 'brothers' could not rest on experienced *social* relations it had instead to be *cultural* – a matter of shared knowledge and practice, of representation, ritual and symbolism. Moreover, the nation-state, born of popular revolution and proclaiming equality and freedom, required that individuals would see themselves not just as passive objects of the means of social regulation but as willing and 'free' participant members. Nation-states were not to 'contain masses' but were to be made up of 'a public' of 'citizens'. This is why the harnessing of state and nation was so crucial for it brought together regulation and sentiments of belonging. It infused order with affect; it made rather contingent territorial

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Museums, along with other public institutions, were an expressive site and agency of some of these new ways of thinking and of public culturing. Of course, not all museums operated in quite the same ways (there were differences, for example, between art galleries and industrial museums, between national and provincial institutions). And, of course, their public culturing was not always successful. It is nevertheless useful to outline some of the features that made them 'good' for identity work and which led to what is surely rather a remarkable proliferation.

The anthropologist Richard Handler (1988) has argued that the idea of 'having a culture' has become crucial to nationalist and politicized ethnic discourse: it is taken as a mark of being a *bona fide* 'people' who should also have rights of at least some degree of self-governance. Although this idea has become globally assumed, it is itself historically and culturally specific. It is based on a notion that the philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) calls 'expressive individuation': the idea not just that each national identity is different from the next, but that this distinctiveness is deep-seated and that we have a kind of 'calling' to express it. Taylor is in fact writing of personal identity but he notes that national identity was conceptualized by analogy (1989: 376). For nations, culture is their means of such expression: it is the outward sign of distinctive 'inner depths'. Museums, already established as sites for the bringing together of significant 'culture objects', were readily appropriated as 'national' expressions of identity, and of the linked idea of 'having a history' – the collective equivalent of personal memory. This did not necessarily mean that all that was on show had necessarily to be 'of the nation', though 'national' artefacts and art works were an important strand. Just 'having a museum' was itself a performative utterance of having an identity,³ and this formula was 'pirated' or replicated at other levels of local governance, most notably in the civic museums which burgeoned in the nineteenth century.

The possession of artefacts from other cultures was itself important for such artefacts were, for colonialist nations, also signs of the capacity to gather and master beyond national boundaries. As such, they were claims of the capacity to know and to govern; signs too for

the visitors that theirs was a nation, or a locality, that also played on the global stage.⁶ As various studies have shown, the representation of discrete cultures in exhibitions was an effective way of representing the idea that cultural difference was 'cased in', that traversing space meant encountering a succession of separate, if sometimes related, cultures (e.g. Coombes 1994; Jenkins 1994; Lidchi 1997). This was often put to more specific work in highlighting the cultural, technological or moral superiority of the 'home team' through contrast with others. The historical progression was one strategy here – articulating spatial variation with an evolutionary temporality – to implicitly, and sometimes not so implicitly, locate the spatially distant in former, less advanced, times.

Museums, then, were capable of articulating two temporal narratives: one, a distinctive national trajectory⁷ and, two, the nation as final triumphant stage of successive progression. That museums could present both of these simultaneously, through specific artefacts and the sequences into which they were arranged, was part of their technological magic. Moreover, they could also accommodate a third:⁸ the immemorial. Museum buildings, especially in the nineteenth century, often hark back to classical designs, thus implying age and continuity through time. The materiality of museums as buildings, coupled with the materiality of their collections, is also important for what Handler calls the 'objectification' of culture (1988: 14). This, he explains, turns culture and identity into 'a thing: a natural object or entity made up of objects or entities' (1988: 14), and 'Westerners believe that a thing ... presents itself unambiguously to human subjects who can ... apprehend the thing as it really is' (ibid.). Objects or materials, in other words, seem straightforward and factual – 'real'. Presenting culture and identity in this way – which museums do so well and with all the apparatus of provenance and expert knowledge – naturalizes them, makes them seem mere matters of fact.

Objects are also readily conceptualized as *property* or as possessions.⁹ This notion too is central to Western conceptions of identity – a notion of selves as owners (which C.B. Macpherson (1962) argued emerged in the seventeenth century). In museums, not only could 'possessive individualism' be expressed on a collective scale, there could also be a 'sanctification' of property and goods – a removal of them from the world of

commerce that could reassure that 'things' need not be just economic capital.¹⁰ Museums, in other words, could stand as monuments to the idea of distinctive identity as in part manifested by a collection of objects which, while they might have been acquired through processes of trade, were now symbolically removed from that sphere.

The visual and spatial features of museums also have implications for conceptions of identity. Here too museums offered up a range – though not an infinite set – of possibilities. Particularly important among the 'ways of seeing' suggested by the museum is what Timothy Mitchell (borrowing from Heidegger) calls the 'world as picture' or 'world as exhibition'. This 'way of seeing' crystallized in the nineteenth century (Mitchell 1988: 18–23).¹¹ It entailed a detachment of the viewer – thinking of themselves as outside or above that which was represented. This was coupled with the idea that there was an "imaginary structure" that exists before and apart from something called "external reality" (1988: 21) and that it was possible to find external viewing positions from which the world would appear as ordered and complete. This created the idea of a privileged, objective view point from which 'structures of meaning' (ibid.) might be evident. Mitchell writes in this regard of the search at tourist sites for the correct location (generally an elevated height) from which to achieve a 'panorama', of plans and maps ('birds-eye views'), and of the viewing platforms that museums and great exhibitions so often incorporated.¹² Many nineteenth-century museums also had central atria, surrounded by viewing galleries, and the galleries themselves tended to be designed so as to provide a long, clear, well-ordered vista. Such a 'world as exhibition' gaze, as exhibitions exemplified and offered up, Mitchell argues, was crucial to modern Western notions of objectivity and reality – notions which meant being able to think of properly informed looking as a 'separation from an external object-world ... mediated by a non-material plan or structure' (1988: 21).

Given that in museums such 'objective vision' was mostly directed to such depictions of relatively compartmentalized 'worlds' or to representations of 'difference' (see especially Dias 1998), this way of seeing also helped 'objectify' national identities and cultural/racial/gendered differences. Racial typologies,

series and evolutionary trajectories, for example, could be 'seen' in the museum. This helped constitute such schemata as realities. The organizing techniques of the museum were thus regarded as reflections of 'underlying realities' which were assumed to be inherent in the 'facts' presented by the artefacts on display (ibid.). No doubt this quest for 'objective vision' was also coupled with other ways of seeing. In a period in which visualism was becoming increasingly prioritized over other senses and increasingly bound up with modern conceptions of reality and truth (ibid.), there would, of course, have also remained alternative 'ways of seeing', such as the direct 'witnessing' of holy relics (which played into museums' authority) and the individualized aesthetic gaze (which may have helped garner individual affect, see below). Just as the variety and internal contradictions of institutions within the public sphere were a potential source of agency and dynamic, so too was the possibility of alternative ways of seeing within the museum. Its ability to incorporate diverse and even cross-cutting ways of seeing could be a strength of the museological form in identity work.

Having noted some features of museums relevant to the articulation of nation-statist identities, I should emphasize that museums were not only concerned with 'the public' and nation-state identity. Not all museums were nation-statist or even national; though I suggest that even where they were not, the model of identity articulated by national museums played into the more localized identities being constituted and displayed. Thus, metropolitan areas generally sought to establish museums on very similar lines to those of national museums, each city thus effectively claiming for itself an identity – and a type of mastery – analogous to that of the national museum. At the same time, however, metropolitan museums were not merely small-scale nationals – they also had their own concerns and institutional dynamics. Likewise with other forms of museums, such as museums of local history or, in Germany, Heimat museums, there was an important relationship with national identity. As Alon Confino argues with respect to the 'mania' for creating museums of Heimat in Germany between 1890 and 1918 – crucial years for the formation of German national identity – this was neither simply an escape from issues of national identity nor just national

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identity writ small. Instead, 'the Heimat museum phenomenon ... articulated, based on a metaphor of whole and parts, the relationship between the locality and the nation, between hundreds of divergent local histories and one single national history' (Confino 1997: 136). Because museums had come to be regarded as symbols of having an identity, to have a Heimat museum 'symbolized the worthiness of one's local past and, conversely, to be a locality with no Heimat museum was perceived almost as an admission to having no significant history' (ibid.: 140). At the same time, however, local museums could presumably articulate other kinds of identities, such as those of local community, inter-community divisions, and direct kinship or familiarity with the individuals displayed there. This was one dimension of local viewing of museums in the Scottish Hebrides where I carried out fieldwork (Macdonald 1997).¹³ Likewise, within any museum – national or local – the degree of emphasis and priority accorded 'the public', and just how 'the public' was envisaged, would have varied from case to case, depending on matters such as the particular passions and backgrounds of some trustees and individual curators, the internecine struggles between different departments within museums and their different priorities which might also include conservation, connoisseurship, and research. This kind of complexity should be neither dismissed nor used as a justification for avoiding analysis.¹⁴ It exists, not instead of, but alongside, the larger-scale identity work of museums; and it is generated in part by the openness of museum artefacts and exhibitionary technologies to alternative (but not infinite) interpretations.

New Identities? New Public?

Public museums, then, were from their beginnings embroiled in the attempt to culture a public and encourage people to imagine and experience themselves as members of an ordered but nevertheless sentimentalized nation-state. They invited people to conceptualize a sense of national or racial difference from others; and to experience their own worlds as relatively and reassuringly governed ones. They helped to convey senses of both stability and progress. They helped to instantiate a 'scientific', 'objective' way of

seeing – a gaze which could 'forget' its own positionedness. They helped to think identities as bounded and coherent.

All of these kinds of ideas have, however, been questioned since the nineteenth-century attempt to establish them. For example, Habermas (1989) and others in the Frankfurt School (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer 1979), argue that the expansion of the mass media and consumerism have led to the demise of the democratic 'public sphere'. The public sphere is becoming debased and de-cultured – subsuming itself to trivia and a more superficial notion of 'staging' – and it is becoming differentiated into diverse interest groups with little sense of a larger community. A less negative perspective suggests that there is indeed a differentiation within the public sphere (though that we ever really achieved an inclusive public culture is questioned) but that this is a welcoming opening up, an ability of previously marginal or excluded voices to be heard. The journal *Public Culture*, for example, started in 1988 by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, seeks to 'reclaim' the idea of 'public culture' in just this multicultural and indeed transnational way (Robbins 1994: xxiii). Alongside this suggested growth of cacophony in the public sphere, there has been critique of the idea of objective vision, of evolutionary and other 'grand' narratives from burgeoning new areas of theory (especially standpoint, feminist, post-colonial and queer). These have sought to unsettle the notion of the privileged vantage point from which subjectivity would be obliterated and underlying realities could be discerned. Instead, they have turned the gaze back upon the supposedly objective to explore its unstated assumptions and cultural-political positioning; and they have argued for theorizing which acknowledges and seeks to reflect upon subjectivity and standpoint rather than pretends their irrelevance.

Amidst all this the nation-state looks like it might be in particular trouble in the second modern age. Threatened from within by the emergence of powerful separatist interest groups, ethnonationalisms, regionalisms and various new age movements; and from without by more transnational powers such as global corporations and supra-national organizations; its ability both to claim the affection of its members and to govern them effectively has been questioned.

Whether those existing nation-states, formed at least partly through invented traditions and state institutions such as museums, can effectively act as focuses for identity if they no longer have such a significant political and economic role is also questioned. Some theorists have suggested that those nation-states formed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a kind of identity-fiction, constructed by state fiat. What we are seeing now with the emergence of ethnonationalisms, according to this argument, is a 'return of the repressed' – the expression of sub-nation-state, or 'national', identities which have been insufficiently recognized in the nation-state system (e.g. Smith 1995). Also threatening the validity of the territorialized nation-state is increased global movement and migration, as workers move between countries and continents, and as new communication technologies enable the development and maintenance of non-territorialized identities (e.g. Castells 1997).

More generally, with increased global movement and with modern telecommunications (bringing 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1989)), it has been suggested that the very nature of 'identity' is being transformed. Anthony Giddens, for example, argues that identities are becoming 'disembedded' from locality and from the traditional frameworks not just of nation and ethnicity but also of class and kinship (e.g. Giddens 1990, 1991). Increasingly, he suggests, we can reflexively make up our own identities. (However, he agrees with the point, well expressed by Arjun Appadurai, that 'while we can make our identities, we cannot do so exactly as we please' (Appadurai 1996: 170). Thus individuals, in a process which Beck refers to as '*Individualisierung*', are increasingly called upon to make decisions about their own lives, both in relation to major matters (e.g. what kind of job to aim for) and more apparently banal ones (e.g. the style of clothing to wear). 'Who to be?' (Giddens 1991) is a question which makes sense today in a way which it would not have done for those living in previous times. Taking these points still further, it has also been suggested that the identity model set out earlier in this chapter – a model of identity as relatively coherent and bounded, and as expressive of 'inner depths' – is being displaced. Rather than thinking of identities as having clear edges and as trying to point out what is persistent or

coherent about them across time or space, we will come to think of them more as endlessly in the process of creation – as defined not so much by a bounded sense of 'difference' but the endlessly deferred Derridean 'différance' – or as 'travelling' (Clifford 1997). In her study of players of internet fantasy games, MUDS (multi-user dungeons), Sherry Turkle suggests that this is already happening with individual identities, the MUDS players conceptualizing their own identities as 'decentred', 'multiple' and 'fluid' (1997). A similar phenomenon is hypothesized at the level of *cultural identity*, 'hybridity' being one of the 'watchwords' here (e.g. Werbner and Modood 1997). Again, the suggestion is that centred, singular identity constructions are being superseded by identities predicated on cultural mixing and crossover, on intercultural traffic rather than boundary demarcation. How widespread such conceptualizations are or will become is at present an open question.

Museums, precisely because they have been so implicated in identity work and because of their more particular articulations with the kind of identities that are argued to be under threat, are significant sites in which to examine some of the claims of identity transformation. If nineteenth-century style identities are indeed being displaced, we might expect that museums as institutions would become redundant or, perhaps, that they would become museums of themselves – sites at which to look back upon a disappearing order. Alternatively (or additionally), we might expect to see transformations within museums as they attempt to address and express 'new' identities. The latter, I suggest, is certainly one strand within contemporary museum developments. It is not, of course, the only one and any full picture would entail a mapping of the various strands and their geographical and institutional distributions. For example, while museums in some metropolitan and cosmopolitan centres may be engaging with 'new' identity possibilities, there are certainly others where museums are deployed in the articulation of bounded national identity. And avant-garde art museums may more readily engage with post-modern identity theorizing than, say, heritage or industrial sites. This is not to say that the avant-garde have somehow 'got it right' – theirs may be simply one strand, perhaps a fairly minority one, within the overall complex.

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Below I discuss an example of an exhibition which addresses questions of identity in ways which articulate with some of the particular identity problematics raised in a globalizing locality, replete with migrants, fluid and multiple identities. There have been many examples in recent years of innovative new exhibitions, perhaps involving groups who were previously excluded or only presented in others' terms, or attempting to reflect upon the processes of collecting and exhibiting. My argument is neither that the example I discuss – the Transcultural Galleries at Cartwright Hall, Bradford, England – is unique in the approach it takes, nor that it is simply representative of a broader movement. Rather, it is an example of how the identity potentialities of the museum can be put to new use; and, as such, it is an example of the continued life of the museum and an illustration of the (limited) flexibility of the exhibitionary form.

Representing Transcultural Identities

Bradford is a city with a substantial proportion of its population from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and a place where racial tensions have sometimes run high and, occasionally, riot. It was here that a copy of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was first burned in Britain, an act which brought Bradford rather forcibly to global attention as a site of cultural and religious passion and fundamentalism. In a city where cultural- and identity- politics are a particularly delicate and important matter, then, the museum exhibition discussed constitutes an example of some rather interesting, and perhaps prescient, exhibitionary re-presentations of identity.

The Transcultural Galleries at Cartwright Hall were opened to the public in 1997. On display were artefacts from what was claimed to be 'the first non-colonial collection of its kind in the country' (Poovaya Smith 1998: 112), a collection which had been begun in 1986. The timing and the location of this collecting strategy and the 'experiment' in museological representation that resulted from it are significant. During the 1960s and 1970s, Bradford had developed a substantial population from South Asia – approximately 81,000 out of a total of 484,000 by the early 1990s. During the 1970s racial tensions grew,

partly in relation to growing unemployment;¹⁵ and the early 1980s saw race riots in various British cities and a flourishing of reports on 'race-relations'. The collecting and display policies of museums, and their funding, were one of the areas to which attention was paid in an attempt to address cultural provision for, and the perception of, the non-white population in Britain.

In Bradford, a curator, Nima Poovaya Smith, was appointed in 1986 with the remit of building up, and displaying, a collection of art from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. The collection and displays were to be based at Cartwright Hall, a purpose-built public art gallery in a Baroque style building set in a public park, which had opened in 1904. Much of Cartwright Hall's internal space and exhibitions are fairly typical of a nineteenth-century public museum as described in the first part of this chapter; and most of the art on display is European, with a strong emphasis on British work (including art with a local and regional emphasis). At this time, South Asians rarely visited the museum and one of the tasks of the new curator was to try to change this state of affairs. This concern was itself a reflection of recognition of the symbolic role of museums in expressing (even imagined) community identity. In this case, the attempt was to articulate a *plural, multicultural*, identity.

It should be noted that this was not simply a matter of dealing with two 'communities': 'English' and 'South Asian', or 'white' and 'non-white'. Within the 'white' population, Bradford has a history of immigration beginning with the Irish who came from the 1820s and the Germans, Poles, Ukrainians and Italians who followed them. Among the 'non-white' population, the great majority is from South Asia, though there are also significant minorities from Africa and the Caribbean. But even among those from South Asia, there are significant differences in the areas and countries from which people come (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), as well as differences of religion (Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs) and language (Hindi, Urdu, Bangladeshi, Gujarati). If we also acknowledge the differences of generation – especially between those born overseas and those born in Britain – it is clear that the situation was indeed 'kaleidoscopic' as the new curator described it. It also raised potential problems for the curator in deciding

just what to collect and who, within which 'communities', to consult.

One danger, identified by some who have written on multi-cultural policies (e.g. Werbner 1997: 15), is that difference could be 'fixed' or 'museumised' by the identification of discrete communities and traditions. Rather than try to represent distinct communities, however, Poovaya Smith sought to express the fluidity of cultural boundaries and identities. In doing so, she drew on her reading of post-colonial critical discourse theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak (1998: 112). At the same time, she sought to consult with South Asians in Bradford and to mount a series of temporary exhibitions on topics which it was hoped would engage local, especially though not exclusively South Asian, interest. These included exhibitions on gold and silver, Islamic calligraphy and textiles (especially *saris* – items of clothing worn by women in many areas of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and also in Bradford). Interestingly, these subjects, developed in consultation with people of South Asian descent in Bradford, used a variety of media and broached the usual distinction between fine art and craft.¹⁶ Most importantly, the temporary exhibitions succeeded in bringing South Asian visitors to Cartwright Hall in considerable new numbers (Poovaya Smith 1991: 126).

So, what strategies did Poovaya Smith use to try to express 'transcultural identity'? First, there were the areas of collection. These included the themes of some of the temporary exhibitions and were subject-matters which cut across territorial boundaries. Thus, gold and silver, for example, are not only the chosen media for many skilful artists across much of South Asia (rather than just certain countries), they also have symbolic and social significance across a wide area. Moreover, these materials have skill associations and cultural significances which stretch across to West Yorkshire and other sites beyond South Asia. Islamic calligraphy also provided an opportunity to explore a subject which, while of especial interest to Muslims in Bradford, also stretched across a wide geographical territory, drawing its examples not only from South Asia but also from the Middle East. The collecting strategy is, however, even more encompassing than this, for Poovaya Smith also decided to include works by some British artists not of South Asian origin who

have been influenced by South Asian styles. So, for example, jewellery by Clarissa Mitchell and Roger Barnes was included in the original exhibition on gold. This was, however, objected to by some members of the 'South Asian community' in Bradford on the grounds that these artists 'were exploiting the subcontinent for their own ends' (Poovaya Smith 1991: 126). Poovaya Smith's view, however, was that the work of these artists 'did not so much imitate Indian jewellery so much as let the influence of India itself impress itself upon their work, often in highly original ways' (1991: 126). Her decision, therefore, was to ignore this criticism: 'The voices of the community are important voices but they do not necessarily always embody a God-like infallibility or collective wisdom' (*ibid.*). In doing so, she privileged her 'transcultural' vision over that which, from this perspective, 'indicated a certain narrowness of vision and prejudice' (*ibid.*). This was not the only area of potential dissent. In the exhibition on gold, Poovaya Smith hoped to include commentary on the 'pernicious' elements of dowry which sometimes result in 'dowry deaths' where a bride's family is unable to pay the sums, generally in the form of gold jewellery, demanded by a groom's family. She consulted a group of people from 'the community' who were all very much in favour of this idea, though they did not want this to be the only dimension of the subject discussed. However, these selected 'community representatives' were all under 35 years old and had grown up in Britain. An exhibition in Leicester on a similar theme received a very different response when older members of 'the South Asian community' were consulted. There 'the community' argued that anything which might cast a negative light on South Asian cultural practices should not be displayed in a museum (see Poovaya Smith 1991: 122–5). What we see here is not just the potential problem of different perspectives within so-called 'communities', but also different perspectives on the role of museums in the representation of identity.

In attempting to cut across geographical and traditional 'community' identities, the exhibitions in the Transcultural Galleries do nevertheless employ the idea of *locality* in relation to Bradford or West Yorkshire itself. Again, however, this is done not so much to 'museumise' a clear-cut identity as to highlight the

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plural nature of the locality and to explore the theme from multiple perspectives. (The slippage between referring to the locality as 'Bradford' and as 'West Yorkshire' is itself indicative of the fact that locality is not precisely demarcated.) Thus, while the exhibition contains a substantial proportion of work either from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent or by artists who self-identify at least partly with this region, many, though by no means all of these people are also from Bradford. Moreover, the galleries also contain works by artists from West Yorkshire, such as David Hockney, who have no South Asian connections; and there are various other items, such as a Japanese suit of armour, whose only 'Bradfordness' lies in the fact that it was originally purchased by a Bradford philanthropist. The theme of locality is also explored through various commissioned works where artists were asked to reflect on either the city of Bradford or Cartwright Hall and its collections themselves. Such works include Lubna Chowdhary's miniature mysticized sculptures of Bradford buildings; Fahmida Shah's cryptic and surprising depiction of a motorbike (which was part of a temporary exhibition at Cartwright Hall) as an artistic reflection on Cartwright Hall; and Mah Rana's contemporary jewellery, with titles such as 'I never promised you a rose garden', which provide elegant ironic commentaries on South Indian marriage pendants.¹⁷

The ways in which both 'South Asia' and 'locality' are evoked, then, are multi-perspectival and plural. In the galleries there is no attempt to arrange artefacts in terms of separate cultures; and nor is there a historical narrative. This, however, is not to say that it is all totally disorganized. Certainly, there is not the same strong sense of order – and the kind of open vista of gallery space that proclaims its organizedness to you as you walk in – that you find in many traditional galleries, and elsewhere in Cartwright Hall itself. Instead, the exhibition presents itself to the visitor in pieces at a time; one rounds corners and sees more but never an overall view. You cannot but be aware that you are seeing it now from this angle, now from that. There is little sense here of an objectively positioned viewer. Perspective here depends on standpoint.

There is organization, however. Rather than this working by a logic of distinction and taxonomic categories, the logic is one of *connection*. This is a word

which Nima Poovaya Smith repeats many times as she explains the displays. Of course, connection has always been one of the logics employed in exhibitions, and Kevin Hetherington (1997) has written interestingly of what he calls 'the will to connect' in relation to museums and their analysis. What we have here, however, is not a notion of connection as somehow 'bringing out' some underlying reality (a perspective which the historian John Pickstone (1994) refers to as 'diagnostic' or – taking his use from nineteenth-century museums – 'museological') but of connection as serendipitous, suggestive, and sometimes witty and ironic. The connections made are not supposed as in any way inevitable but it is hoped that they will spark reflection and a sense of the vigour of these kind of 'contacts' (Clifford 1997). 'Connection' is conceptualized as movement, as process, as creative agency. Moreover, the nature of the 'connections' varies in the galleries. For example, one set of exhibits are all on the theme of water: David Hockney's painting *Le Plongeur*; another painting, reflecting on the Hockney, Howard Hodgkin's *David's Pool*, and Saleem Arif's sculptural *Vessel of Vitality*. Another set of exhibits, encased together, is connected by similarities in their visual form. The marriage pendants and the artistic reflections on them are presented together. Islamic calligraphy – not only on paper and parchment but also engraved onto chairs or embroidered in textiles – is exhibited in one area of the gallery; though as with other areas this leads fairly seamlessly into its neighbours, and exhibits are juxtaposed so that they can be perceived within various sets of possible connections. The aesthetic logics themselves, then, are plural, like the nature of the identities that the Galleries try to evoke. To attempt to represent transcultural identities, then, entails not simply a reorientation of texture or a change of content, but disruption to many of the conventional forms of exhibitionary display.

Discussion

Articulating postnational, transcultural or 'hybrid' identity is a difficult matter. As some commentators have discussed, it easily runs the risk of unwittingly 'freezing' identities, precisely contrary to its ambitions.

That some of these commentators have dubbed this a danger of 'museumising' the identities and cultures on display (Friedman 1995: 82; Werbner 1997: 15) signals, perhaps, that museums may face a particular dilemma in this regard. One problem that has been identified is that the notion of 'hybridity' (as with related conceptions, such as 'syncretic' or 'creole' identities) seems to presuppose pre-existing 'pure' or 'non-creolized' cultures, a view which most anthropologists would dispute (Friedman 1996; Caglar 1997). A second, related, problem is a tendency to privilege 'ethnic' or 'national' identity (e.g. 'South Asian'), even if this is conceptualized as 'hyphenated' (e.g. 'Anglo-Indian', 'German-Turkish') and to equate this with 'culture', thus again setting 'hybrid' or 'fluid' identities against an implicit 'pure' identity and conceptualizing the non-homogeneous as inherently 'potentially conflictual' (Caglar 1997: 176).

Moreover, escaping from geographical definitions and 'the trope of community', and the 'taken-for-granted isomorphism of culture, place and people' (Caglar 1997: 174) that these tend to conjure up, is methodologically difficult. How can hybrid and transcultural identities be represented without falling into these traps? Ayse Caglar's own suggestion, in her insightful discussion of these problems, is to focus on 'person-object relations as these exist in space and time' (1997: 180). Thus, rather than beginning with 'a community' or a geographical area, her methodological suggestion is to begin with objects and then, '[b]y plotting the networks of interconnected practices surrounding objects, and the sentiments, desires and images these practices evoke, we can avoid the need to define collectivities in advance' (ibid.).¹⁸ The Transcultural Galleries at Cartwright Hall seem to exemplify this starting point well. The objects exhibited, rather than any particular geographical or ethnic categories, are clearly the starting point and main content of the exhibition. Moreover, by having rather little text in the exhibition (for the most part there are only short labels giving the artist's name, the title of the work and its date), it is able to circumvent for the most part geographical or ethnic descriptions. Categories such as 'Islamic calligraphy' are an exception here rather than the rule. In this respect the exhibition medium has a clear advantage over, say, a written account in that it can privilege objects and

do away with linguistic categorization almost entirely. In doing so, however, it forgoes the second stage of Caglar's methodological process: the plotting of the social and cultural networks in which the objects are more usually employed. Objects are largely left 'to speak for themselves'. While this may be an appropriate strategy for art works which can be seen (controversially) as a more calculated attempt to speak directly to the viewer, it means that the biographical contexts of much that is displayed – the lives, worlds and histories of which they were part, the contexts which give meaning to the objects – are given much less shrift than their formal, 'artistic' qualities. At least one commentator on the Transcultural Galleries found the labelling 'predictable' and remarked that the approach was 'not innovative' at this level (Lovelace 1997: 22). As this commentator also noted, however, this problem was one that was being well countered by the employment of a linked CD-ROM in the exhibition which includes quotes (e.g. by the artists involved), video footage of various artefacts being demonstrated in use, and – perhaps most innovatively – videos of visitor discussion groups making various thematic links between works on display (ibid.).

What we see with the Transcultural Galleries at Cartwright Hall, then, is that the museum medium is well capable of articulating postnational, transcultural identities. This, however, is an art exhibition. Perhaps to articulate such identities in a history museum or in a national museum would be more difficult: the writing of such accounts would have to be still further 'against the grain' of expectations of such museums and of their subject matter. Trying to create historical accounts that eschew national or ethnic narratives as well as causal or progressive trajectories is undoubtedly a difficult task; and one that needs to be tackled through aesthetic strategies, as we have seen here, as well as through content. Another question which we need to ask of an exhibition such as that discussed here is how far the conception of identity that it attempts to articulate is shared by those whose locality is represented in the museum – and whether they necessarily see the museum as a place for articulating identity in this way. Certainly the resistance to having the work of Indian-influenced British artists in the collection is one instance of an identity-conception

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at odds with that of the curator. More generally, some commentators have questioned just how widespread are conceptions of identities as fluid, hybrid, transcultural and postnational. Pnina Werbner, for example, claims that 'The hollow claims of the new intellectuals to be voices from the margins are exposed ... by global trends towards ethnicisation: the real voices from the margins want no truck with hybridity. The reality is one of fragmentation and ghettoisation, of ethnic primordialism in the face of a weakened nation-state' (1997: 12). Undoubtedly, a museological experiment in the representation of transnational identity has many counterparts in museums established in other locations whose aim is precisely to try to articulate the kind of bounded identity model, replete with autonomous and progressive history, that the Transcultural Galleries try to disrupt. That such identity articulations exist alongside, and even in superabundance to, attempts to represent postnational and transcultural identities is not, perhaps, surprising given that, as James Clifford observes: '[I]n a global context where collective identity is increasingly represented by having a culture (a distinctive way of life, tradition, form of art, or craft) museums make sense' (1997: 218).

That they are capable of making other kinds of sense too is, however, a central theme of my argument. What we have seen is that museums are capable of being put to work in the expression of other kinds of identities than the national, homogeneous and bounded. That museums might be suitable for this kind of identity work too is not, perhaps, surprising in retrospect because, of course, they have long been 'contact zones' as James Clifford (1997: ch.7) puts it, rather than quite as publicly disciplining or penitential as some of those working in them might have intended (see Bennett 1995). They have long made connections between continents and between times; and their objects have always had the capacity to evade the classifications and narratives into which they were written. Museums have always had – to varying extents – a good deal of serendipity, of the kind of fuzzy logic that means that there will be objects in the collections that can be readily re-presented into new, perhaps more connective, displays. If the public museum was intended in part to imagine into being particular kinds of identities, it did not always succeed.

In some ways, it is perhaps this *failure* of the nineteenth-century museum project as much as its success that means that museums have life, and potential, left in them yet.

Notes

- 1 These are terms used to describe a phase of modernity, sometimes said to have begun in the 1960s, termed 'second modern age'. These terms were coined partly in contradistinction to the use of the term 'post-modernity', which attempted to characterize some of the same apparent changes, in order to highlight that rather than 'modernity' being over, these changes should be largely regarded as a continuation of the modern project. The term 'second modern age' is used especially by Ulrich Beck (e.g. 1998) and 'late modernity' (or 'high modernity') by Anthony Giddens (e.g. 1990). For discussion between these two and Scott Lash, which helps highlight some of the overlap and difference between them, see Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994.
- 2 For some relevant debate see, for example, Beck 1998, Held et al. 1999, Scott 1997.
- 3 Roland Robertson has popularized this word in sociology. As he says the term seems to have arisen in Japan, to become 'one of the main marketing buzzwords of the 1990s' (Robertson 1992: 174).
- 4 See Prössler 1996 and 2000. Some of the available studies of this include: Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992; Clifford 1997, esp. ch. 5; Fuller 1992; Ucko 1994; Weitchen 1992.
- 5 The concept of 'performative utterance' is from the ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin (1962). A performative utterance is one which accomplishes that which it states, e.g. 'I promise'. More recently, this notion of performative has been taken up, particularly with reference to gender, by Judith Butler (1997). As with Austin, her emphasis is upon linguistic performatives. Importantly, however, museums and exhibitions were also *material performatives*. That is, their very physical presence performed national and civic identity and pride. The 'performative' dimension of museums can also be understood in what is the more common usage of the term – as a site for staging, spectatorship and enactment. It is in this sense that Maurice Roche emphasizes the 'performative dimension' of great exhibitions, arguing that Tony Bennett's emphasis on 'the exhibitionary complex' needs to be accompanied by analytical attention to the 'performance complex' (2000: 37–40).

- 6 It is remarkable that even fairly small nineteenth-century British cities exhibited people from other cultures. For example, at the opening of Bradford's Cartwright Hall (discussed below) in 1904 a group of Somalis was displayed in a reconstructed village (Poovaya Smith 1998: 111). For an excellent discussion of issues involved in the exhibition of people see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, especially part 1.
- 7 There has been a good deal of study of the outburst of nationalist history and tradition 'invention' produced in the nineteenth century, e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.
- 8 This is not necessarily an exhaustive list. Benedict Anderson has argued that being able to 'think' the nation entailed a notion of what he calls, following Walter Benjamin, 'homogeneous empty time' – i.e. the idea that the many other invisible members of the national family who, although located elsewhere in space, are at the same time as us. This apperception entails the development of nationally coordinated clocks and calendars. It is witnessed, he suggests, in the structure of novels which, for the first time, began to be organized in terms of concurrent but intersecting plots in which the word 'meanwhile ...' was crucial. It might be argued that such a notion was also evident in the structuring of museums internally – their many similarly shaped rooms all inviting the idea of others being 'meanwhile' in an adjacent but invisible space.
- 9 This is often made explicit on the labels of artefacts – their owners, and especially their donors, being listed. For a discussion of issues of materiality and identity in archaeology, incorporating discussion of notions of possession, see Hides 1997.
- 10 See Appadurai (1986) for general relevant discussion; and also Wernick (1997) for a discussion of this process during the 'life-history' of Rubens' *Adoration of the Magi*.
- 11 The term 'objective' came into vogue for characterising [a particular] combination of detachment and close attentiveness' (Mitchell 1988: 19) in the mid nineteenth century. 'The word denoted the modern sense of detachment, both physical and conceptual, of the self from the object-world – the detachment epitomised ... in the visitor to an exhibition. At the same time, the word suggested a passive curiosity, of the kind organisers of exhibitions hoped to evoke in those who visited them ... The objective attitude of the exhibition visitor ... seemed to suggest not only the true nature of the modern individual, but the model of behaviour for the modern political subject' (1988: 20).
- 12 The Eiffel Tower, built for the 1889 Paris Exposition, is a particularly famous example.
- 13 James Clifford makes a similar point in his discussion of Northwest coast museums in Canada (1997: ch. 5.)
- 14 Ethnographic research which I have carried out on the making of an exhibition in the Science Museum, London, is intended to provide an illustration of the detailed working out of some of these issues into the finished exhibition and as appropriated by visitors (Macdonald 2002). To take another example, Gordon Fyfe's work on art institutions provides just the kind of historically sensitive and detailed account, coupled with fine-grained sociological theorizing, that is, I think, especially needed here (1996, 1998, 2000).
- 15 Eighty per cent of textile jobs were lost in Bradford between 1961 and 1991 (Lewis 1997: 130).
- 16 The distinction between art and craft has often been mapped on to distinctions between 'European' and 'non-European', and 'male-produced' and 'female-produced'. Moreover, 'crafts' have been more likely to be displayed in museums of folklife and ethnography, where individual authorship is effaced, and 'art' in art galleries where the individual creativity is fetishized.
- 17 The high proportion of female South Asian artists in the exhibition is in part a response by the curator to claims by various others that there are few such artists (see Poovaya Smith 1991).
- 18 This is an approach which is also advocated in actor-network theory – though not for this specific reason. See, for a classic account of this approach, Latour 1987; and for more recent commentary see Law and Hassard 1999.

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