

BLACKWELL

COMPANIONS IN CULTURAL STUDIES

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This series aims to provide theoretically ambitious but accessible volumes devoted to the major fields and subfields within cultural studies, whether as single disciplines (film studies) inspired and reconfigured by interventionist cultural studies approaches, or from broad interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives (gender studies, race and ethnic studies, postcolonial studies). Each volume sets out to ground and orientate the student through a broad range of specially commissioned articles and also to provide the more experienced scholar and teacher with a convenient and comprehensive overview of the latest trends and critical directions. An overarching *Companion to Cultural Studies* will map the territory as a whole.

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# A Companion to Museum Studies

Edited by  
Sharon Macdonald

challenging; and to attempt to evoke more critical engagement, rather than less, from the diversified audience.

In the final chapter in this *Companion to Museum Studies*, Charles Saumarez Smith, Director of the National Gallery in London, also offers alternatives to a future of more and more distraction. He addresses certain ideas about the direction of cultural transformations and the way forward to the future that have become taken for granted by many of those responsible for museum policy. In particular, he considers the assumptions that objects will decrease in their significance relative to technology, which will inevitably come to occupy an increasingly major place in museums, positively transforming the museum experience; and that commerce and culture will become increasingly intertwined, the museum becoming less and less distinguishable from other spaces of contemporary culture, such as the shopping mall, as described by Prior. However, rather than accepting these as inexorable results of the course of globalization and postmodernity, and of what the public really wants, Saumarez Smith argues for recognizing the continuing importance of “the real,” the distinctiveness of the museum, and of calm rather than distracted looking. Museums, in his future vision, should build upon these aspects; and should operate on principles other than just that of securing the largest possible visitor volume.

Saumarez Smith’s call is not, however, for a single way forward, for a shared or unified vision of the future for museums. Rather, it is for an acceptance of multiple ways of doing things – of diverse museum futures. Equally, it is not an argument for “anything goes.” Too often, he observes, discussion of the future is undertaken without sufficient grounding – like navigating without a map and compass.

My hope, as editor of this *Companion to Museum Studies*, is that this volume can act as such a map and compass in reviewing the current state of, and possible future directions for, museums. By charting the territory of contemporary museum studies, this *Companion* seeks to be a real companion in providing potential directions for contemporary and future museum studies and museum practice.

## Incivilities in Civil(-ized) Places: “Culture Wars” in Comparative Perspective

Steven C. Dubin

Shortly before the decades-old Cold War underwent a complete meltdown, a new term burst into the consciousness of Americans: “culture wars.” The phrase surfaced in the media in the late 1980s. Its subsequent entry into academic debate is generally attributed to sociologist James Hunter (1991), and it was propelled into national political discourse when Patrick Buchanan rallied the 1992 Republican National Convention to an urgent “war for the nation’s soul.” Thereafter, “culture wars” broadly penetrated popular dialogue.

“Culture wars” refer to the impassioned confrontations between groups within the same society, polarized over so-called hot button issues falling broadly within the realms of race and ethnicity; the body, sexuality, and sexual orientation; identity politics; religion; and patriotism and national identity. James Hunter defines “culture wars” as public conflict based upon incompatible worldviews regarding moral authority, or what he differentiates as “*the impulse toward orthodoxy*” from “*the impulse toward progressivism*” (Hunter 1991: 42–3, emphasis in original). The first position derives meaning from “*an external, definable, and transcendent authority*,” whereas the contrary stance relies upon “*the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*” (1991: 44–5, emphasis in original). For the orthodox, God is the arbiter of right and wrong; for the progressive, it is the individual.

Superseding traditional cleavages based upon religious differences between Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, and challenging materialist theories of conflict, “culture wars” reflect a more secularized and pluralistic American society. The tension between the ideal types of orthodoxy and progressivism cuts across spiritual and class lines, so that orthodox and progressive Jews, for example, could have less in common on certain issues than orthodox Jews and evangelical Protestants.

The resulting controversies have been particularly noticeable within specific venues and regarding certain social goods. Chief among them are museums, monuments, and heritage spots. These locales become *sites of persuasion*: memory and meaning are created at these nodes, and this is where social representations are constructed and public knowledge is produced. Conflict and negotiation habitually occur at sites of persuasion such as museums, manifest in revival, or reawakening dormant beliefs and values; in reaffirmation, asserting the importance of particular principles and standards; in recommitment, directing energies toward communal goals; in reclamation, asserting ownership over objects or knowledge that has been forbidden or denied; in repatriation, procuring what was seized by outsiders in the past; in recuperation, reinscribing personal narratives that have been suppressed or erased; in resanctification, restoring what has been profaned; and in reconciliation, developing new relationships between the past, the present, and alternative visions of the future.

The titles and subtitles of some of the most widely discussed books published on this subject during the 1990s increased the public's sense of impending crisis and ratcheted up the intensity of their emotions. Such charged rhetoric included "struggle" (Hunter 1991), "illiberal" (D'Souza 1992), "disuniting" (Schlesinger 1992), "ailing" (Hughes 1994), "wracked" (Gitlin 1995), "dispatches from the front" (Green et al. 1996), "betrayal" (Kors and Silvergate 1998), the cleverly dubbed "loose canons" (Gates 1992), and – the most self-dramatizing – "before the shooting begins" (Hunter 1994). Leaving aside the issue of how correctly these writers reflected what was actually going on, their discursive style undoubtedly heightened the general feeling of alarm.

### Why Do Culture Wars Occur?

Culture wars are an epiphenomenon of social change, as well as political shifts and realignments, both nationally and globally. However, once they commence, culture wars develop in directions that their instigators, actors, and audiences cannot necessarily anticipate. In the case of the United States, a number of factors triggered the culture wars that originated in the late 1980s. Internationally, the fall of communism deprived Americans of a familiar, external enemy. The eclipse of the "evil empire" – a concept that had parsed the world into black and white – forced Americans to redraw their symbolic boundaries for the first time in nearly four decades.

In addition, activists galvanized various civil rights movements from the 1950s onward and produced an altered social landscape in the United States. African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, Hispanics, and others demanded community empowerment, and to become fully enfranchised citizens. The increased strength and visibility of those who were "previously disadvantaged" initiated intense struggles between those losing power or reaching for it, those exercising or resisting it. In other words, while some people aim to dismantle certain cultural barricades, others fervently defend them.

A reallocation of power has occurred to some degree, eroding the monopoly once held by established groups. It is not accidental that virtually every skirmish of the

culture wars within the art world was set off by work created by these former outsiders, marking these as contests over status and class (see Gans 1974). Moreover, many museums now boast curators who represent previously marginalized groups; such membership typically brings new perspectives and sympathies into play. And the intellectual orientation of this new generation of curators has generally been shaped by fresh academic theories such as feminism, postmodernism, the new social history, queer theory, and critical race theory. That leads to broaching subjects that were previously unexplored, as well as re-examining taken-for-granted assumptions and established museological conventions and methodologies.

As a general principle, culture wars are more likely to break out at times when there is a high degree of communal fragmentation and polarization, and widespread civic malaise and low communal morale (Dubin 1992: 38). The moral crusaders who have spearheaded these battles may represent either the political left or right. For regardless of their political orientation, they are ideologues who support a single interpretation of a work of art, an exhibition, or any other cultural expression, extract a few elements out of context to press their case, are often self-righteous and paternalistic, and overestimate the power that any cultural element can exert over people's behavior (Dubin 1994).

### Why Do Museums Become Battlegrounds?

Museums are a primary way that a society represents itself: to its own members, and to the larger world. Exhibitions *solidify* culture, science, history, identity, and worldviews. There is a great deal at stake here. Museums commonly present the *real thing*: art, objects, and artifacts that bear the aura of the authentic. They endow the ideas within any exhibition with tangibility and weight.

Museums have become more democratic. As a result, more publics vie for their space, subject them to more careful oversight, and may even contest museum authority. It is increasingly clear that museums are politicized spaces, where all sorts of dramas can be played out. In Duncan Cameron's familiar formulation (1972), museums are increasingly forums, not temples (see also Karp and Lavine 1991). Museums must answer to a variety of stakeholders, and have become enmeshed in a web of funding sources, any of which can threaten to tighten the purse strings if they take offence at what is shown. Museums are thus potentially subject to a wide variety of conflicts of interest and constraints.

Exhibitions have shifted from being object-driven to being idea-driven. Today, the stories that are told in museums do not simply derive from the material that is displayed; it is more likely that a narrative is composed *incorporating* objects to illustrate particular ideas. And once you enter the realm of narrative and interpretation, there is more for audiences to challenge. People today increasingly wish to tell their own stories, rather than have others interpret their experiences for them. Debates over who is authorized to speak for whom, and about what, have created a sometimes disquieting and sometimes exhilarating dialogue over the politics of representation. One person's lexicon of translation and analysis may be another person's lexicon of anguish.

In the case of art museums, many contemporary artists relish smudging the line between what Mary Douglas (1970) calls “natural categories,” how every society arranges basic experiences and understandings into binary oppositions. Artists have compressed categories; borderlines have become more permeable and crossings more frequent (Garber 1992); conflation and “transgression” have become increasingly valorized (Dubin 2001). Masculine and feminine, sacred and profane, public and private are now realms to interrogate, not automatically to assent to. But while soiling tidy notions may delight the artist, it can engender a great deal of dis-ease amongst the general public.

Artists were a primary target when the culture wars first erupted. They were vulnerable because many of them held personally marginal statuses, and many worked within relatively new disciplines (such as performance art) that could not offer institutional shelter. But that focus shifted as the 1990s proceeded, pushing museums of all types – art, history, natural history, cultural history, and so on – into the spotlight.

### Does the Model Pass Muster?

As the millennium approached, it became as much a commonplace to acknowledge the culture wars as it was to deny their existence. Even as the concept has become popularly entrenched, critics have attacked it on both theoretical and methodological grounds. Some academics have argued that the term, as James Hunter defined it, was overly broad, that it provoked overheated rhetoric, and that Americans do not feel split by most social issues. Williams (1997), for example, dismisses the concept as a “popular myth.” The various studies he collected (a) fail to substantiate Hunter’s thesis of a bipolar political division in the US, and (b) determine that many issues that Hunter frames as either/or propositions are in fact both/and choices in the public’s mind. And Brint takes Hunter’s own point that 60 percent of Americans hold moderate positions to ask: “Can one have a proper war when two-thirds of the army are noncombatants?” (1992: 439). In an important study, DiMaggio et al. (1996) analyzed two decades of American public opinion survey data and also failed to uncover evidence of a mounting polarization of attitudes. And Alan Wolfe (1998) likewise dismisses the notion of an increased polarization of attitudes, based upon interviews conducted with American suburbanites which unearthed a shared sense of morality that bridges almost all racial, cultural, and gender differences.

James Hunter dismisses these objections by arguing (a) that it is reductionistic to “equate . . . culture with the aggregated attitudes of autonomous individuals,” and (b) “public discourse is more polarized than Americans themselves” (Hunter 1996b: 246–7). The second point is important because it recognizes that the culture wars are a vital energy source for particular interests: they generate good news copy and exciting sound bites, plump up individual reputations, inflate organizational membership rosters, and confer the illusion of substantial support and moral authority onto particular spokespeople and their groups.

Contemporary cultural conflicts do not require rock-hard divisions between worldviews to exist. After all, individuals are notoriously difficult to pigeonhole

because they often bear contradictory impulses; political progressives can be cultural conservatives, as Karl Marx’s own predilections demonstrate. Actual clashes depend upon both the exploitation of people’s fears by politicians, ideologues, or the media, and the successful mobilization of public support for or against some specific contentious issue. Once marshaled, and their energy expended, individuals may return to a variety of social positions and belief systems, only to be potentially reassembled in different alliances, over diverse matters, at some future moment.

Many writers argue that museums and the material that they display transmit as well as validate ideologies (see Berger 1977; Bennett 1995), and that those who control them determine both the way in which a society perceives itself and is perceived by others (Duncan 1991). While this has been particularly true in the past, this chapter examines how different groups have challenged dominant discourses for a variety of reasons, with museums providing the battleground.

Below, I first discuss some major American controversies, and then analyze examples from post-apartheid South Africa. This comparative material expands the power and range of the culture wars concept. South Africa is a country in the making. As such, examining the development and implementation of alternative models of cultural action, presentation, and reconstruction in museums offers an important line of vision into the processes of social change since the first democratic elections were held there in 1994.

### The Battle Within

*Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900 to 1968* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1969) is perhaps the most explosive exhibition in American history. Although predating the emergence of the culture wars, it provided a template for the spate of comparable controversies that erupted in quick succession some two decades later (see Dubin 2000a). *Harlem on My Mind* brought the life of a teeming ghetto to the venerable halls of one of the nation’s oldest and wealthiest museums. Appearing during a time of intense inter-ethnic conflict in New York City, and when basic social institutions were being questioned, this exhibition challenged both racial and aesthetic hierarchies.

As one of the first multimedia shows ever mounted – featuring greatly enlarged photographs and sound, but not fine art – *Harlem on My Mind* incurred the wrath of formalist art critics and traditional patrons. Moreover, some blacks were angered because they felt that the exhibition was paternalistic; black artists, in particular, felt snubbed because painting was excluded. Segments of the Jewish community were enraged that the catalogue contained what they felt to be anti-Semitic sentiments, and some Irish and Puerto Ricans also took offence at how the text represented them. Even the right-wing John Birch Society was infuriated because W. E. B. Du Bois, whom it reviled as a communist, was included in the show.

Tensions ran high, and the exhibition garnered headlines for months. Black artists repeatedly picketed the museum; unknown vandals damaged ten paintings in the museum’s collection; and, on one particularly notable day, nearly a thousand boisterous protesters marched and shouted in front of the building, the various

delegations separated by an edgy police contingent. It was an unprecedented event.

It was also prophetic: its counterpart in the “modern era” of cultural wars in American museums was launched by a similar reaction to *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* (National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC, 1991). The motivation for this exhibition was to reconsider a large body of art that had long been considered heroic, authentic, documentary representations of America’s shared tradition. The curators aimed to strip away the layers of myth that had shrouded this work. Drawing upon the scholarship of the so-called “new historians of the American West,” who examine previously ignored issues of gender, race, and power in this region, and armed with academic theories such as deconstructionism, Marxism, feminism, and psychoanalysis, they explored the artists’ motivations for creating such works, and the complex relationships they maintained with their patrons and audiences. The curators wished to highlight what had been glossed over in depicting the European settlement of the West: the displacement of native peoples, the suppression of their cultures, and the exploitation of natural resources.

But some politicians and members of the public were not willing to let go of cherished ideas and images. This called for a showdown. These sentiments were bolstered by the surge of patriotism generated by the outbreak of the first Gulf War, shortly before the opening of the exhibition. A few outraged members of Congress threatened to withdraw funds from the museum, a branch of the Smithsonian. Bowing to criticism from media pundits and visitors who had registered their dissatisfaction in comment books, the curators modified about ten of fifty-five wall labels that raised hackles.

This conflict represented a confrontation between a reinvigorated “victory culture” and a “culture of dissent” that had developed in the 1960s (Engelhardt 1994), and demonstrated that patriotism was not dead in a postmodernist world. “Generational” conflict of this sort, whether based strictly on age, or ideological allegiance, surfaced again in the prolonged debate over *The Last Act: The Atom Bomb and the End of World War II* (National Air and Space Museum, 1994–5), which intended to analyze the decision to use the atom bomb (dropped by the fighter plane the *Enola Gay*) and its repercussions (see also chapters 7 and 30).

The concerns raised over “balance” in the case of the *Enola Gay*, arose too during the controversy over *Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York* (Museum of the City of New York, 1996). The history of New York City is, in many respects, the history of the Irish: this ethnic group has played a long and pivotal role in the city’s development. But, to reiterate, power ebbs and flows: one hundred years ago, one in four New Yorkers was of Irish ancestry; this has dipped to merely 7 percent today. And reputations slide too: the annual bid of the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization to be included in the St Patrick’s Day Parade has been rebuffed repeatedly, blotching the public profile of the Irish community in many people’s eyes.

Many of those who criticized the planning and execution of *Gaelic Gotham* believed it was important to celebrate the past, in order to reinvigorate the diminished Irish influence in New York. If there is a central lesson to be learned from the battle to control the show, it is that communities are multi-faceted and speak in many

voices, and that “leaders” may be self-appointed or represent only a small segment of the community. It is difficult for a museum to decide who deserves a hearing, and how much weight their opinion bears. Was the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY)’s role to be a passive one, simply providing a place for one part of a community to display its distinctive vision of history? Or was the role of these grassroots members merely advisory, as MCNY’s staff moved to the business of translating concepts into effective displays?

Advocates of a dismissed Irish-American guest curator made headlines with accusations of financial malfeasance on MCNY’s part, politicians threatened punitive action against the museum and the National Endowment for the Humanities (the major funder), and some lenders withdrew their property from display. What started as a contractual dispute mushroomed into a debate over intellectual property, the relation between a museum and its audiences, who is entitled to tell the story of a particular group and what is included or excluded from the narrative, and where to draw the line between community consultation and actual participation in the business of the museum. By the time an abridged *Gaelic Gotham* opened, it drew more yawns than praise or anger. The vigor of the pre-exhibition debate had dissipated into bruised egos and lessons learned – on the part of all the parties involved.

And, finally, the controversy sparked by *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (Brooklyn Museum of Art [BMA], 1999) had the ring of familiarity to it, echoing the drama of its predecessors. The foil was the painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, by Chris Ofili, an English-born artist with a Nigerian heritage. On one side, the main combatants included New York City’s Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and other local politicians, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, and working- and middle-class Catholics; on the other, artists, the American Civil Liberties Union, and generally hip, politically concerned people. At issue was the depiction of Mary as a black woman, and with a clump of elephant dung representing one of her breasts. One faction viewed the painting as “blasphemous” and “perverted”; the other saw it as a reflection of the artist’s ethnic and religious traditions and a question of freedom of expression (Ofili, like the mayor, is a Catholic).

Large street demonstrations occurred, reflecting both positions. An over-zealous, elderly protester threw white paint onto the canvas. And the media had a field day: a mayor, who was expected to throw his hat into a difficult political race, garnered daily headlines, as he sought to rein the museum in, constrict its financial lifeline, or even close it down should the BMA’s directors refuse to remove the offending painting. In a basic respect, this was a classic “pseudo event,” conjured up and diligently fostered by the media (see Dubin 2000a).

Ancillary issues were raised: BMA’s complicity in “Sensation”-alizing the show, for example, and questionable ethical and financial relationships between the museum, the owner of the collection, and private dealers and galleries. Months later, and after each side had expended millions of dollars on legal fees, they reached an impasse: the courts did not allow the city to pursue any claims against the BMA, and the museum opted to absorb the financial losses it was forced to incur in its own defense and not to pursue its fight against the mayor. And what was the fate of the painting? It remained part of the exhibition throughout its scheduled run.

## The Battle Abroad

Africa has been ignored as a site of culture wars, except as a reference point: on occasion the brutal ethnic and religious conflicts in numerous countries on that continent are held up as models of a *genuine* clash of traditions (see Hunter 1996a: 246). To address this deficiency, I cite a number of controversies regarding South African museums as evidence that the culture wars concept has relevance beyond the American experience (see also chapters 11 and 12).

Precisely because the present South African government has promoted a doctrine of reconciliation regarding the past, and a policy of non-racialism regarding the present and future, museums have become a prime location to translate new principles into reality. The version of the culture wars concept most relevant to the South African experience is one set down by James Hunter himself: conflict between “a world view that seeks to maintain . . . normative ideals and social institutions” and “a world view that seeks its transformation” (1996a: 244).

### “A benchmark exhibition”

Just as *Harlem on My Mind* provided a template for controversies that have enveloped contemporary exhibitions in American museums, one particularly divisive exhibition offers significant insight into concerns that preoccupy South Africans: *Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture*, curated by University of Cape Town art professor Pippa Skotnes (South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 1996). *Miscast* brought to the fore issues of cultural ownership: who has the right to speak for whom? Can a person from one group legitimately represent the experiences of another? *Miscast* also highlighted the shortcomings of time-honored cultural institutions by addressing questions that these places had largely ignored, and by examining lives that they had long overlooked or narrowly pigeon-holed. *Miscast* also forced many people to expand their thinking about what museums are, and what they might become. And it had tangible consequences for the people whose heritage it presented: the exhibition became the focal point for Khoisan<sup>1</sup> individuals holding divergent points of view to solidify and affirm a precolonial identity, and contemplate future political action such as pressing land claims.

The most well-known (and infamous) permanent museum display in South Africa has been the so-called Bushman (or San) diorama at the South African Museum in Cape Town, portraying the original inhabitants of Southern Africa (to be discussed more fully below). *Miscast* contested it in fundamental ways. Whereas the diorama was a static depiction, *Miscast* was dynamic: it incorporated multiple perspectives, involved a variety of media and sensory experiences, and required the audience to interact with its various components. Whilst the diorama disregarded the reprehensible treatment accorded the Bushmen by European settlers and their descendants – it was legal to hunt and kill them well into the twentieth century (see Gordon 1992) – *Miscast* interrogated that history. And, significantly, *Miscast* was presented in the National (Art) Gallery, not at the nearby South African Museum, thus troubling entrenched notions of where nature and culture “belong.”

On approaching one of the three interconnected rooms of *Miscast*, visitors were confronted with a floor entirely “carpeted” with enlarged, laminated reproductions of newspaper articles, official documents, and photographs of Bushmen. Like it or not, anyone entering this space was forced to trample upon these native faces. All thus became complicit with oppressing the Bushmen, and many people were deeply dismayed by this. Resin casts of body parts, as well as fiberglass models of “trophy heads,” dominated other areas. And cabinets of scientific paraphernalia from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – locating the Khoisan as specimens – shared space with contemporary photos of the Khoisan, examples of their material culture, and copies of rock art. Skotnes thereby presented these people as both object and subject. But as pertinent as *Miscast* was to a period of investigation and reflection (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was commencing its hearings), it was rocked by controversy.

Certain critics challenged the legitimacy of Skotnes, a woman of European origins, exploring this social terrain. In their opinion, she did not have the requisite innate empathic powers to do so (see Skotnes 2001). Others objected to the fact that the display of the body casts in this public manner violated the Khoisan taboo against men and women jointly viewing human nudity. These responses simultaneously highlight the politics of representation and the politics of reception; in other words, the point where curatorial vision collides head on with audience understandings and reactions. *Miscast* and the responses it garnered raised increasingly familiar questions of cultural ownership and cultural spokespersonship.

### Return of the “natives”

The moving and protracted saga of the Khoikhoi woman Saartje (or “Sarah”) Bartmann provides a meaningful bridge between museum practices in the past and actions in the present. Sarah Bartmann was born in 1789, and in 1810 she was living in Cape Town, apparently working as either a slave or a servant. Here Bartmann agreed to a British ship doctor’s proposition to accompany him to London. His intention? She would be exhibited as a physical anomaly, the “Hottentot Venus,” in Britain, and later on in Ireland and France.

A common attribute of Khoikhoi women is steatopygia, or hefty, protruding buttocks, which stirred an enormous degree of curiosity in Europeans. Bartmann was displayed from Piccadilly to high-society gatherings, generating amazement as well as contempt, attraction as well as revulsion. Some voyeurs considered her to be the “missing link”; to others she represented a thrilling zone of forbidden sexuality. Bartmann was only in her mid-twenties when she died in France in 1815. Thereupon the legendary anatomist Georges Cuvier dissected her body and made a plaster cast of it. He also preserved her brain and genitalia in glass containers. Astonishingly, these remained on public display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until the 1970s or 1980s.

Bartmann’s remains were finally repatriated to South Africa in 2002 after Khoisan groups intensely lobbied government officials in both South Africa and France. Sarah Bartmann now embodies the enduring abuse and oppression of women, and the racist, colonial mindset that nearly annihilated the indigenous peoples of Southern

Africa. For Jean Burgess, a member of Khoisan royalty who opened the bottles that had held Bartmann's remains and wrapped them for appropriate burial, their return was a compelling event: "[T]here was this pain carried over from generation to generation . . . it is a spiritual pain that I personally could never comprehend until I touched Sarah Bartmann's remains. This woman's spirit could not rest . . . her return to most Khoisan women had such a big spiritual effect, it was the beginning of a process of decolonizing of spirituality" (author interview with Jean Burgess in Grahamstown, July 2, 2003).

Khoisan leaders nixed a proposal to bury her in Cape Town's Company Gardens, a lush trace of the Dutch East India Company's early dominion over this region. She was buried instead atop a hillside just outside the little town of Hankey, nearby her presumed birthplace. Local Khoisan hope to construct their own museum in Hankey, reflecting *their* perspective on Bartmann and themselves. From Africa to Australia to North America, aboriginal groups demand that the other (largely unnamed) Sarah Bartmanns be de-accessioned from museums and universities (see, for example, Thomas 2000). Once-routine museum practices now cause offense and extreme distress. At the moment, native knowledge and desires are challenging the expertise and authority of scientists and museum curators.

### The post-apartheid museum

Since 1994, South African museum curators, artists, politicians, educators, and others have endorsed different means of "nation-building" – the catchphrase used to denote the construction of a "Rainbow Nation." Each approach advocates a distinctive stance toward the past and to what degree it should be eradicated or amalgamated. Their respective proponents have produced a wide range of responses to refashion this society, from obliteration through transformation to new construction.

One complex and significant example concerns the changing fortunes of the aforementioned Bushman exhibition in Cape Town's South African Museum (SAM, the country's oldest). Its fate reflects the fluctuations of public sentiment toward images and representation. Generations of school children (and particularly whites) have adored this diorama, which features life casts made during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Scientists at the time were anxious to document the "Bushman" (San) and "Hottentot" (Khoikhoi) before they completely disappeared.

Until the 1960s, SAM was a broad-spectrum museum. In order to alleviate expanding storage and exhibition pressures, the South African Cultural History Museum was established in the nearby Slave Lodge (first built in 1679, name restored after 1998). In the course of this restructuring, the Bushmen stayed put: the diorama remained with "natural" history, whereas material reflecting the classical, European, and Asian experience was separated out and transferred.

Some people believe that this demeans Bushmen by "equating" them with animals, and locks them into an ahistorical and apolitical unreality that ignores their actual harsh fate. According to SAM curator Patricia Davison, "[T]hat the ideological implications of the move could go relatively unnoticed at the time, and later become relatively transparent, is an example both of the naturalizing capacity of ideology and of its inherent tendency to become acutely obvious" (Davison 1990: 161).

Others, however, think that it substantiates the San claim as first peoples of Southern Africa.

Negative voices have intensified in recent years. SAM personnel responded by incorporating this dissent into the display itself: the museum posted text that summarized contemporary debates so that viewers could understand the variety of reactions that the diorama evoked. SAM supplemented this by displaying copies of news articles, information concerning the making of the casts, as well as providing a social history of the people who were depicted. Until 2001, this approach created the sense of a continuing discussion (although the degree to which the public actually engaged with this material is questionable). But then SAM shut down the diorama in April of that year. In official parlance, it was "archived and sealed from public view."

The closure decision followed the radical restructuring in 2000 of fifteen local museums and sites into Iziko Museums of Cape Town. The first chief executive officer of Iziko decided to consign this exhibition to the dustbin of history, erase all the controversy, and eradicate the Khoisan yet again. He characterized this as a dramatic gesture to demonstrate that the museums were changing; it was met with cheers as well as denunciation.

In language strikingly similar to that adopted by some critics of *Miscast*, certain Khoisan applauded the decision, arguing that the diorama was "vulgar": "The Khoisan are shown as animals to Europeans and their children, who laugh at the depiction," one leader remarked (*Saturday Cape Argus*, March 31–April 1, 2001). At the same time, representatives of other indigenous peoples asked if the diorama could be transferred to them. A representative of the Xu! and Khwe San groups declared: "A museum must be created in our own ownership so that things that happened in the past can be preserved, even the wrong things. We want the public to see how it was" (*Cape Times*, March 30, 2001).

A new chief executive officer was appointed in 2003, one who is proud of his Khoisan descent. His approach is more open-ended: he is polling various indigenous groups with the possibility that a revamped exhibition incorporating the original casts can be developed. A recent SAM poster trumpets that this is the place where "Nature Meets Culture." Such language dissolves the partition between natural history and cultural history, and neutralizes the drawn-out debate over this division.

A second major strategy that South African museums and other sites of persuasion have adopted to respond to changing social conditions has been to convert places of pain or deceit into settings for candid learning, reflection, leisure, or profit-making. But one potential pitfall is to debase or undermine the original significance of an experience by packaging it with a tourist bent. For example, the Slave Lodge, until recently the cultural history branch of Cape Town's South African Museum, is being transformed. The impetus is a significant archaeological rediscovery made in 1998: investigators located the steps leading to the slave cellar, and unearthed hundreds of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artifacts.

Prior to 1998, no reference was made to the system of slavery that literally propped up both the local economy and this specific edifice. Only now is that history being dealt with: the site will become a museum devoted to slavery. According to Iziko chief executive officer, Jatti Bredekamp (interviewed by the author in Cape Town on June 11, 2003), the objects on display will resonate with the voices of the

slaves as well as the slaveholders. But the gravity of the subject could be subverted should the proposal by a Cape Town-based historian win favor: "Many of the features of the Lodge could be celebrated in a courtyard restaurant, the stones of which were laid by slaves," he suggests. "Authentic food and wine from that period could be served by waitrons in period dress . . . This restaurant could be a great money spinner for the museum" (Shell 1999: 52). When profit is the driving force, history rapidly becomes farce. The boundaries between genuine homage and camp would become quite blurred in this instance.

But when the motivation to re-examine the past stems from other intentions, the results can be gripping. An example of refashioning a place of notoriety into its antithesis is what has happened on Robben Island. Situated in Cape Town's Table Bay, Robben Island has been a place of banishment for lepers, the mentally ill, and prisoners of war. But by far, those who have been exiled to Robben Island have been men deemed to be criminal for resisting various regimes: the rule of the Dutch, the British, or the apartheid government. Over the years, Robben Island has held disobedient slaves, Xhosa chiefs and rebels, dissident Muslims, and innumerable members of the African National Congress, among others. Robben Island was also "home" to Nelson Mandela for eighteen of the twenty-seven years he was incarcerated as a political prisoner. The last such inmates were released from the island in 1991. The keys were handed over to ex-prisoners in 1997, literally putting the inmates in charge of the institution. The buildings and grounds of Robben Island have been converted into an open-air museum, with an emphasis upon the experiential.

It becomes clear to anyone who disembarks from the half-hour ferry ride onto Robben Island that this is not a museum in the traditional sense. Instead of unnamed curatorial authority shaping the visitor's experience, everyone who comes here is steered through the buildings and grounds by ex-prisoners, each of whom may tell a somewhat different story. These former inmates explain the daily routine, the degradations and the oppression, but also point out how prisoners united to educate one another and to sketch out plans for a non-racial South Africa. The prominence accorded to the experiential, however, can sometimes border on the bizarre. At one point administrators proposed renting out cells overnight for the "prison experience" (Rassool 2000: 113).

Robben Island has not completely shaken its controversial reputation. Ex-prisoners have repeatedly clashed with administrators, accusing them of financial mismanagement, corruption, and even fraud. At one point they locked themselves in their old cells and conducted a hunger strike, a powerful evocation of the past. And various parties have leveled charges of racism regarding personnel matters, highlighting feelings of preferential treatment and inequality at the museum. Transforming a place so imbued with pain and bigotry into an exemplar of reconciliation is obviously a process fraught with mis-steps and setbacks.

Apartheid was the proverbial elephant in the South African lounge that was repeatedly disregarded or talked around. But the emancipatory events culminating in 1994's open election created a broad-based desire in South Africans to excavate what George Orwell dubbed "memory holes," dredge up the buried contents, and

then insure that the public could witness what was once hidden away. Innovative new museums are a prime spot to do just that.

That is the *raison d'être* of the Apartheid Museum (located between Johannesburg and the sprawling black township of Soweto), which opened its doors in 2001. The museum is adjacent to Gold Reef City, built upon the grounds of a defunct gold mine; it is an amusement park cum casino cum theme park. The Apartheid Museum directly owes its existence to this carnivalesque space: the developers were required to "give something back to the community" in order to receive their gaming license. And those men, Solly and Abe Krok, have a checkered local reputation. An enraged letter-to-the-editor writer angrily noted: "A great deal of New SA amnesia is at work in the euphoric reception accorded the newly opened Apartheid Museum . . . Has it been forgotten that under apartheid, the museum's 'angels,' the Krok brothers, peddled pernicious skin-lightening products?" The writer wonders: "Is the Apartheid Museum an atonement for the defunct Twins Pharmaceutical's past collusion in propping up apartheid's hierarchy of colour?" (*Business Day [SA]* December 10, 2001).

In spite of this questionable genesis from gaming profits, the museum is notable in many respects. Visitors are shunted straight away through either of two passageways, recreating the capriciousness of apartheid's racial classification system. Once inside, dozens of video screens bring apartheid to life, as do maps, news clippings, wall-sized photographs, and the seemingly endless lists of apartheid legislation. And there is an unnerving space where over one hundred closely clustered nooses are suspended from the ceiling; each represents one of the political prisoners hanged by the apartheid regime (fig. 29.1).

One of the two partners of the firm that designed the museum describes it as "emotional architecture," representing the "horrible sublime" – it is beautiful *and* dangerous, it both attracts and repels. He states, moreover, that because it is dense with material, and takes a long time to negotiate, "The museum people I think probably say they're no spaces to deal with museum fatigue, but the point is to actually make a strong mark. It's not about comfort, it's about discomfort" (author interview with Jeremy Rose in Johannesburg, December 9, 2003).

There have been criticisms of what the museum presents. A public debate has raged over the relative absence of attention to the anti-apartheid activities of white liberals such as Helen Suzman. Moreover, because of the inclusion of the history of white settlement in Johannesburg, as well as Southern Africa's precolonial history, the actual focus of the museum is somewhat indistinct. And indigenous groups such as the Khoisan feel that they have been slighted in this sweeping survey; some Afrikaners have disliked the portrayal of their group; and a disgruntled visitor once stormed out, declaring the place to be full of "communist propaganda."

Finally, the District Six Museum in Cape Town also addresses a significant historical void. Located just north-east of Cape Town's city center, District Six once boasted a cosmopolitan mix of Coloureds (mixed race), blacks, Indians, Malays, Jews, and a sprinkling of people of varied European descent. Many locals believe that the soul of the area prefigured today's much-touted concept of a "Rainbow Nation," a non-racialist South Africa. The District was methodically flattened, starting in 1966,





**Figure 29.1** The Apartheid Museum, South Africa. Reproduced courtesy of the Apartheid Museum, South Africa.

by order of the Group Areas Act (GAA), one of the most despised components of the apartheid system. The GAA granted the government the right to declare neighborhoods to be the exclusive domain of particular racial groups. By the early 1980s, estimates place the number of residents removed at between 55,000 and 65,000.

District Six is dreamily recalled through a veil that accentuates the live-and-let-live attitude of the place, its sense of harmony, tolerance, equality, personal security, and *helpmekaar* or sharing. As Linda Fortune, a former resident and a District Six Museum staff member puts it: “What have we got left? . . . [P]eople tend to romanticize about District Six, we don’t want to think about the pain. We don’t want to think about the suffering, only the juicy bits, the sweet memories” (author interview with Linda Fortune in Cape Town, June 10, 2003). What is much less often addressed is the gangsterism and dire poverty that also affected many of the inhabitants there. Another staff member revealed that she once compiled a pamphlet describing the vibrant combination of people in the area, and mentioned prostitutes

as one of many local types. But a fellow employee “got furious.” She explains: “He said, ‘No, no, no. We didn’t have those sorts of people working in District Six’” (author interview with Haajirah Esau in Cape Town, June 12, 2003). This pervasive romanticizing provides a challenge for any museum engaging with the subject.

Museums in South Africa have awakened from the nightmare of apartheid at long last. Many (if not all) of them have committed considerable time, effort, and expense to rid their exhibitions of the ideological baggage of colonialist and apartheid-era dogma, and realign them in accord with the more humanitarian principles that now underpin this society. This transformation has unfolded with varying degrees of success over the past decade. As Kevin Cole of the East London Museum notes: “[T]he trouble is, we never thought about the gaps [before]; where are the gaps? So we need to elicit inputs from people who could raise the questions or point out the gaps . . . It is a whole different thought process now” (author interview in East London, SA, July 7, 2003).

## Conclusion

One final anecdote captures the tentative stage of reconciliation that characterizes South Africa today. At the site of the so-called Battle of Blood River of 1838, where Voortrekkers (Boer pioneers) defeated their Zulu foes, a private museum commemorates the engagement with a decided bent toward the point of view of those soon-to-be settlers. More recently, the national Department of Arts and Culture has constructed a museum highlighting the Zulu perspective, just across the Ncome River from it, and debate has raged over the markedly discordant estimated body counts that each museum presents. Tourists wishing to visit both places must currently drive a roundabout road connecting the two. A proposed bridge would allow people to walk conveniently from one bank to the other. Although funding exists to complete this simple project, the opposing sides have remained just that, facing off one another like their ancestors did over 150 years ago. These advocates, equipped with their dual perspectives, have not yet figured out how to meet one another half way, to their mutual benefit.

Daily life in contemporary South Africa vacillates between exhilaration and frustration, hope and cynicism, confidence and anxiety. This society has been reborn, but it has not yet matured. South African museums, and the controversies that have emerged in them, have become a microcosm of this labile state of affairs. As we have seen, strikingly similar events also have occurred in American museums. In both fledgling and established democracies, the concept of culture wars offers a persuasive instrument with which to analyze such public conflicts. What seems certain is that museums will continue to be sites of such conflicts.

## Note

- 1 “Khoisan” is a widely used yet disputed term. It reflects a linguistic amalgamation of “Khoi” or “Khoikhoi” (Hottentot) pastoralists/herders with “San” (Bushman) hunters.

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