Review Article
Museum studies: borderwork, genealogy, revolution

Simon J. Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (eds), *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, paper £25.99, pp. v+385.

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Introduction

I started reading *Museum Revolutions* at the end of the university teaching term, as I was wrapping up tasks associated with a graduate course that familiarizes students with the techniques scholars use to design and undertake empirical and theoretical research.[1] The course challenges students to rehearse and evaluate a range of interdisciplinary approaches to humanities research (from the perspectives of critical literary theory, anthropology, art history, law, archaeology and environmental studies, museum and cultural studies, history and criminology). Students come from a diverse range of fields although most are interested in exploring what this pluralistic and polyglot thing called interdisciplinary research is and how it might be adopted into their own research design and projects. Interdisciplinarity is about combining and adapting existing methods to develop new or alternative approaches to our research problems and questions, which may themselves be new or old. Being interdisciplinary is not about casually incorporating elements 'pick and mix' style, and it requires engaging with a field in a way that is discursively defensible. An interdisciplinary researcher is cognizant of the practices of multiple fields and can confidently employ certain tools, strategies and approaches on the grounds that they are best suited to their subject matter or because they might provide a way in which to extend or challenge the normalized boundaries of the discipline with which the researcher primarily identifies and to which they seek to contribute. The impulse to conduct interdisciplinary research occurs for many reasons. One compelling motivation is provided by historian and anthropologist Greg Dening, who recognized that interdisciplinary work can lead to new ways of understanding past events and peoples.[2] Despite sharing some similarities with Foucault's attention to genealogy, Dening promoted a 'reflective' approach to scholarly activity (whereby individual researchers adopt a self-conscious and empirical approach to their own scholarly activity) and expressed caution about theoretically-informed 'reflexive' approaches that aim to create challenging critiques of generalized disciplinary paradigms. Unpacking his motivations for a different kind of history-work, Dening explained:

> I wanted to write history of the encounters between intruding settler societies and native first peoples in Oceania, the Australian-Pacific region. I wanted to see what the strangers saw from their ships or their forts or their camps or their mission stations. More importantly, I wanted to see what they didn't see. For that I thought I needed a reading skill that I didn't have. It was anthropology, I thought. I didn't want to become an anthropologist. I wanted the skills of an anthropologist to translate and hear the silences of another culture. … I never really wanted to contribute to the discourse of anthropology. I did want to contribute to the discourse of history. (Dening 2000: 211)

In this review I move from the metaphor of the encounter to explore the concept of borderwork, and then to the consequent idea that disciplinary borders (like the museums that are often identified as contact zones) are constantly involved in processes of change, albeit at varying speeds and rates. I continue to be inspired by the work of scholars who seek primarily to make

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a contribution to fields other than museum studies, and I integrate discussion of some of these researchers here for the reason that reviews and edited volumes, especially those based on conferences – as is the case with *Museum Revolutions* – provide a context in which disciplinary trends, frameworks and practices should be critically engaged with and assessed. My interest in disciplinary borderwork has been extended by *Museum Revolutions,* which, in many chapters, seeks to consider issues raised 'in relation to the study of the history and theory of museums and disciplinarity' (Whitehead 2007: 48). In the final part of this review I make the point that the idea of (a reflective and reflexive) 'revolution' can be as relevant for the contextual field of study as it is for the museums which are subject – albeit increasingly as collaborating partners – to analysis. This position is shared by the editors of *Museum Revolutions*, who claim in the publisher's blurb: 'While change has been on the museum professional's agenda for twenty years, this book is the first to reveal its complexity and frame it in the context of contemporary museum studies'.

Borderwork

Prescribed readings for the graduate course discussed in the opening section of this review include a book review by Dening about interdisciplinary 'encounters' and a working paper by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern concerning boundary disciplines. These texts have a particular resonance because museums are likewise about encounters, exchanges, and the establishment and maintenance, as well as transgression, of boundaries. An editorial by critical theorist Lauren Berlant has also been influential for the way it probes the 'case' – that is the standard unit in law, medicine, psychoanalysis, the humanities, the sciences, and popular culture – to ask what makes a case ordinary, easily dealt with, or forgettable? What makes some but not all cases effective as challenges to the way ordinary life or institutional systems usually proceed? Critically, Berlant (2007) explains that as a genre, the case 'hovers about the singular, the general, and the normative' but can also incite an opening, an altered way of feeling things out, of falling out of line (Berlant 2007: 664). All the readings prescribed for the course represent interdisciplinary humanities research as a kind of borderwork that occurs at the edges of disciplines, at the point of friction or messy intersection between discursive and materialist investigations, and at the place where dialogue between academics, professionals and the public may occur. The correspondences that have emerged between the readings as a result of class discussions have created new ways of thinking about ongoing questions that I find myself returning to frequently in my own scholarly work. In particular, they have led to questions about whether museum studies might function as a 'boundary discipline' and to the demand that relationships between museum studies and disciplines including history, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies be further scrutinized in order to simultaneously identify and analyze the contingent historical conditions of those fields. The questions also point to the necessity of undertaking a reflective *and* reflexive re-assessment of the disciplinary orientation as well as the apparatus and practices of museum studies, which might produce new ways to rethink the complex relationships between culture and society.

        Given these interests, I was pleased to come across Christopher Whitehead's essay in *Museum Revolutions,* which models one way in which this reassessment might occur. Whitehead examines the emergence of art history and disciplinarity in the nineteenth century in the context of the professional decision-making processes occurring at the time. He addresses the contingent historical conditions in which the equivocal relationship between museum practice and the knowledges evoked by museums as public cultural institutions emerged. The essay aims to re-evaluate the relationship between museum theory and practice, and seeks to destabilize the dialectical tension existing between an art history that is 'not satisfactorily reduced to being the "theory" to the museum's "practice"' – and a museum that rejects any conceptualization of the institution as simply an 'exemplification or application of art history' (Donald Preziosi 2006: 50-1 in Whitehead 2007: 48). In line with his objective to 'push boundaries', Whitehead's approach is 'to understand what museums collect and display and why and how they do so as a form of boundary work' (Whitehead 2007: 55).

        In contrast to Whitehead, who, like Beth Lord in her contribution to *Museum Revolutions* (which I discuss in the next section), takes the museum as his primary object of study, my

interest here is in the discourse of contemporary museum studies (or the new museology) (also see Message 2006). I am concerned to examine what it might mean to suggest that museum studies functions as what I will, following Strathern, call a 'boundary discipline'. Strathern draws from Corynne McSherry's proposition that a boundary object 'holds different meanings in different social worlds, yet is imbued with enough shared meaning to facilitate its translation across those worlds' (McSherry 2001: 69 cited in Strathern 2004: 45). This description is analogous to the discourse of reciprocity and continual renegotiation through which James Clifford, following Mary-Louise Pratt, characterizes the museum as a contact zone. Clifford suggests that the museum's embodiment of this concept can lead to the 'more democratic' transgression of borders (Clifford 1997: 204). Both the concepts of the contact zone and the boundary object centralize language and debate as a kind of mediation and/or transaction across disciplinary or other divides and propose that a distinctive social character can emerge within the space. It is notable that Pratt's use of the contact zone concept also developed through a study of linguistics, particularly pidgin and creole languages (Kratz and Karp 2006: 27, fn 1). These concepts may similarly be invoked in different ways and through multiple pedagogical contexts. Neither presupposes that the borders they establish will function as enclosures. Speaking about further possible applications of the theme in language that accords with the new museology's account of changes over this period, Strathern (2007) says:

> The contemporary intensification of debate over the relationship between knowledge and the public good, and how creativity can be pressed into productive use (for the nation reconceived as an economy), is coming to characterize a rather different kind of university from that which occupied most of the twentieth century. We might look for new boundary objects. Are *disciplines* being re-created as boundary objects of a kind? (Strathern 2007: 664)

Genealogy

The changes in public culture and institutions discussed by Strathern in terms of universities have likewise contributed to the desire to create a 'different' kind of museum that is aligned with and informed by a museum studies that promotes reflective and reflexive practice (as also documented by various examples throughout the book under review). This practice is often associated with Foucault's rationale and hypothesis for moving from 'traditional' to 'effective' – that is localized and contingent – depictions where history is understood as 'an ongoing effort (or process) to make, unmake and remake relations, structures and unity (on top of differences)' (Grossberg 2006: 4; Foucault 1977). Beth Lord's essay in *Museum Revolutions* explores the impetus for employing a reflective, 'effective' genealogical approach in relation to museum exhibitions that reproduce the aesthetic (object-based) versus anthropological (narrative-driven) dichotomy. Following Foucault, Lord asserts that this oppositional logic can be destabilized if it is recognized that:

> The historical object is no longer a tool of memory, but a way of developing and opening up what makes us what we are. In this way, history becomes genealogy. We no longer treat the past as a total object that is other than us, but that which is contained in multiple, changing ways in what we are. We can understand our present in a new way, through opening up new historical series as its conditions of possibility. (Lord 2007: 365)

Although she is concerned in this instance with the material museum object, Lord's call for relational thinking can also be applied to the 'object' conceived as museum studies. Her attention to genealogy as a methodology (rather than as an outcome) means that her essay illustrates the sometimes causal intersections that can occur between borderwork, genealogy and revolution. 'How will museums think about the relations between objects, concepts and history in the twenty-first century?' she asks before responding with her proposition that 'a new way to think about how the object is related to concepts' is needed (Lord 2007: 355, 356).

Lord's inquiry has clear implications for the discourse of museum studies as well as the museum profession. It is globally and widely apparent that museums developed in the last

twenty years or so – themselves conscious of the challenges, constraints and possibilities outlined by this and other chapters – are endeavoring to produce relational and 'effective' approaches toward collections management, exhibition development and museum design, and that they are as such also contributing to the ongoing development of the discipline (as also explored in the context of Whitehead's historical study). This interplay is evident, for example, in relation to founding director, Richard West's contention that the National Museum of the American Indian would be a 'radically different' and increasingly democratic museum (West 2000: 7). We can also see it in Clifford's response to the Musée du Quai Branly, published soon after the museum opened in Paris in 2006, in which he suggests that the museum may 'present intriguing possibilities for something different' (Clifford 2007: 14). Acknowledging the impact that ideas associated with new museology, which moved into the mainstream in the 1990s, may have had on the architectural design and development of rhetoric employed by Quai Branly, Clifford proposes that 'the possibility of using the [architectural] boxes to create alternative, even critical or reflexive spaces holds potential for a less-totalizing museography' (Clifford *2007: 14).*

Despite the indications of ongoing transformation in museum practice and scholarship, and also despite museum studies' recent origins, its inherent and acknowledged interdisciplinarity, and our tendency as scholars to fetishize the contact zone concept proposed by Pratt and popularized by Clifford, museum studies has not found itself discussed in terms of its potential to function as a boundary discipline (noted also by Whitehead 2007: 55). This is also despite the interest expressed by academics from other disciplines keen to probe the intersections and allegiances between their own 'core' practices and the more marginal museum studies to appropriate (and in some cases challenge) its techniques. Evidence of this traffic of ideas between disciplines is widespread, although as my sample shows, museum studies is generally positioned as a relational rather than primary referent.[3] For example, in a review article called 'Anthropology and the new museology', Susan Applegate Krouse asks 'Is the new museology a theoretical orientation or a methodological orientation? … Whether we focus on theory or methodology, the new museology represents a particularly anthropological approach to museum work' (Krouse 2006: 170). In another review article, 'Museology as Cultural Studies', anthropologist Eric Gable suggests that museum studies aligns most closely with cultural studies in that the goal of cultural studies is 'not only to bring into conscious awareness the extent of misrepresentation that occurs, but also to create representational space for silenced voices to be heard' (Gable 2009: 51). The observation appears to hide slight disappointment on the part of the reviewer, who approached the text with a single question in mind: 'does anthropology still have anything to contribute to this burgeoning field?' (Gable 2009: 51). Identifying museum studies as a sub-category of cultural studies, Simon During asserts: 'In many of the most exciting research areas of the last few years – the study of museums is a good example – historians, literary critics, anthropologists, and geographers collaborate and compete with minimal disciplinary or methodological differences apparent' (During 1993: 25). The historian's perspective is provided by Randolph Starn who more cautiously claims: 'Museums and history are close kin, each with proprietary claims on gathering and interpreting materials from the past. By assembling objects outside everyday time and space, all museums are in some sense historical' (Starn 2005: np).

This academic context leads to questions about the ways that contemporary museum studies represents its engagement with other disciplines. How does the discipline of museum studies negotiate the widespread interest in its subject matter and the methods and techniques it uses to investigate and convey meaning? How does it understand and address its status as an interdisciplinary field of research, as a boundary discipline? Although *Museum Revolutions* does not use the boundary discipline terminology that I am proposing here, the diversity of its contents means that it occupies various border zones spanning present and past, theory and practice, culture and society. It is also the case that the contributors demonstrate various attempts to model the exchanges and transactions that occur between different kinds of institutions as well as between institutions, publics and communities. They demonstrate that museums are exemplary sites for interdisciplinary dialogues that both draw from, and contribute to, a number of fields, as well as to the frameworks and debates that characterize museum studies itself – notably between discursive or text-based and empirical or materialist approaches. In many cases the essays within the text expertly occupy and investigate these sites, their

contested meanings and the mythologies that have often worked to isolate the experience of marginalized peoples.

Revolution

The approach taken by the editors of *Museum Revolutions* has been to draw a loose connection between discrete, independently developed essays and an overriding observation that museums and revolutions characteristically share a commitment to reinvention and redefinition (at least at the level of intent). In addition to exploring the cultural politics of museums, the volume acknowledges the contribution that museums make to political culture. Although there is a certain convenience to this approach, it is also an appropriate way to bring case studies from diverse national and local contexts into dialogue without attempting to homogenize or hybridize them. Through its thoughtful and expansive range of 28 previously unpublished essays and an impressive geographical spread – 31 contributors from countries including Australia, Cameroon, England, France, India, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Taiwan and the United States – *Museum Revolutions* navigates between and across the intellectual developments, empirical work and the wider 'grass roots' postcolonial politics that characterize museums in a post-colonial and multicultural contemporary world where modernist conceptions of the singular nation-state are increasingly challenged. Without identifying themselves as culture warrior participants in the ongoing process of reinvention and redefinition that can come to represent museum (and other) revolutions, the editors state their aim to present an encounter with the past but to do so in a way that is critical rather than complicit with the enterprise of Western modernity:

> Revolution here then is a process which objectifies a set of values and an imagined past, and then follows a future that in some ways is oppositional and new. Or to put it another way, the museum sees two possible futures, one that reflects the present trajectory and one that can be obtained by reinvention. One needs to understand that this is in many respects a managing of myths, as neither past nor future are neutral or factual; both are political. (Knell, MacLeod and Watson 2007: xix)

Although the notion of genealogy may be incommensurate with the idea of revolution as it is usually conceived, my discussion of Lord's essay in particular has attempted to show that the new museology's attention to reflective and reflexive scholarship influences the way in which this genealogy is produced. As already indicated, reflexive genealogy focuses on the intersections between past and present practice and can lead to both revisions in applied professional practice and new contributions to the discipline of museum studies. This is important in terms of the latter (and in the context of this review) because the purpose and value of anthologies of essays collected according to a key issue of disciplinary interest is, I suggest, threefold. First, they should privilege exceptional 'cases' that offer evidence to support or motivate a larger social, structural or disciplinary challenge (revolution?) as Berlant (2007) outlines. Second, they should demonstrate new methods for approaching and shaping research problems and questions (giving us the reading skills that we don't have) (Dening 2000 1998; Foucault 1977). Finally, they should probe the intersections between the central discipline of contributors and other disciplines in order to develop those fields further (Strathern 2004). Whitehead might argue that this action requires starting from the understanding that 'disciplinarity is the means by which ensembles of diverse parts are brought into particular types of knowledge relations with each other' (Whitehead 2006: 57 quoting Messer-Davidow *et al.* 1993: 3). Either way, this is the 'borderwork' that I have suggested occurs within other disciplines (at least to a degree, see above), and which Dening also advocates. *Museum Revolutions* largely succeeds in this complex endeavour. Reflexive genealogies are presented in a number of essays in the book, most notably in the early contributions by Knell and by Whitehead, who employs the term 'boundary work' in his analysis of the complexities characterizing the dialectical relationship between the art museum and the discipline of art history. The book's second section, 'Changing places, changing people' offers a number of especially strong 'cases' that show how borderwork might be conducted from the point of view of museum studies. The first section of the book, 'Manifestos and their implementation' pays particular attention to addressing ways concepts of

'change and invention' might be extended to influence a discussion of disciplinary revolution (Knell, MacLeod and Watson 2007: xx), a theme that is reiterated throughout the book at various points and strongly book-ended in its final chapters.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this review by returning to Dening's recommendations, and bring his voice more directly into this conversation about *Museum Revolutions*, which I have argued has the potential to instigate discussion and debate about the contribution that the theme of borderwork might make to museum studies. Dening reminds us of the scope and potential of processes of reflexive change, and of the impact these approaches have had on his own discipline of history as well as on his individual research activity. He reminds us that revolutions occur in many registers, that they can be large or small, collective or individual, and that they can have different objects and exchanges in their line of sight. Revolutions influence the way we think, explain and write about things as much as they alter the terms and conditions of the experience itself:

> I make no secret that I want to change the world in my history-writing. In small ways – make it laugh, make it cry, make it serious for a moment, stop the dumbing down, spoil the mythologizers' day. But in bigger ways, too. I can't give life to the dead, but I can give them a voice. I can't give justice to the victims, but I can shake the living out of their moral lethargy to change the things in the present that are the consequences of the past. (Dening 2000: 216)

Notes

[1]   The course, *Interdisciplinary Humanities Research: Methods, Theories and Skills,* is co-convened by Dr Carolyn Strange and myself, at the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University.

[2]   Dening (1998: 170) sought to model ways that historians might transgress the normative boundaries of their topical histories. 'I cannot cope with an anthropology of natives and history of strangers', he explained, 'I have ambitions to an anthrohistory of them both'.

[3]   These relationships have less frequently been explored from the point of view of museum studies but for exceptions see Macdonald 2006 and Mason 2006. The present review is also a preliminary attempt to engage in discussion about interdisciplinary relationships from the point of view of museum studies.

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